

42 - Bathtime Blues

Hear the knob! Ready for the pounce! Plant your feet and—!

“Welcome hom—!” Emily shouted with a cheer as she started to soar, yet the train barreling through the doorway had caught her completely and expectedly. She couldn’t finish her signature line because her face was currently being smothered into her girlfriend’s shoulder.

“Awwwhhh! My sweet baby girl!” Joyce cooed and rocked, shaking her all over as her hips turned one way then the other. “I missed you *so much! So-so-so much!*”

A refreshing gasp of air entered Emily’s lungs once her face was released. “Home!” she finished her line, “At least let me finish!”

With Joyce’s burst of emotional Amazonian strength, she supported Emily in her arms long enough to knock the door shut with her backside before putting her back on her feet. Standing from the slate entrance she gave Emily another tight hug, propped up on the wooden floor.

“Didja miss me?” Emily giggled.

“Did she miss me?” Joyce scoffed with a gasp right before another smothering affection. With some distance between their lips she doubled down again. “*Yes*, I missed you!” And yet all her excitement and love was just a front. “I...I’m sorry I took so long to get back to you last night...”

“And I said last night that it was fine...” Emily leaned out on her ledge to pat Joyce’s head with a grin. “But you didn’t tell me much...” She made a sly face. “So? What happened? Anything fun? Crazy?”

Joyce pulled her suitcase up and into the home. “It was...interesting.”

“Ouuuu~!” Emily ‘ahhed’ all the way to the bedroom, poking Joyce’s jacket all the way. “Crazy kind of interesting? What’d you see? Did Carol do anything? What was the place like?”

“It was...normal. Carol was fine, though we sort of split up for most of it...”

Normal? Something like that?

The enthusiasm had been killed some. “Oh, was it? Uhm...so what was it like?”

“Lots of people at a restaurant sort of place... Name tags. Conversations...boring stuff.”

A sideways glance had been earned. Her sales pitch clearly wasn't very dazzling.

Emily hopped on the edge of the bed, swinging her legs by the unzipped luggage. “Y’know, when you weren’t telling me much last night, I figured you were saving it for once you got home...”

“I would tell you if something meaningful happened,” Joyce chuckled, dismissively. “It was actually just like one of my normal business dinners...” So it’s a very good thing Emily didn’t go...

“...Okay.”

With a shirt hanging from her hands, Joyce looked at her expectantly, hiding her own guilt. “You don’t believe me?”

“No...?” Emily tilted her head. “Just gotta feeling.”

“A feeling?”

“Uh-huh,” Emily nodded. Maybe she was starting to read minds like Joyce, too? “You can tell me, you know?”

“Tell you about what?” Tell her about Isabelle...

“Something happened,” Emily pointed her finger accusingly, “I know it.”

“...Nothing happened. More importantly, what time did you get to bed last night? I called you pretty late, you know?”

“No!” a whine escaped the excited girl, “You can’t do that! Answer my question first!”

“And are you dodging mine?” Joyce flipped the script. “Times. I want them.”

“A little before midnight– there! Now answer my–!”

But Joyce’s eyebrows were already ascending at an incredible speed. As high as could be before Emily had a snowball’s chance in hell of finishing her pseudo-big girl defense.

“A little before midnight? *This* is why I don’t leave you home alone...” Joyce sighed with a face held in her hand. “After how hard I’ve worked to get you on a sleep schedule...”

“I was on one before and it was *one* time!” It wasn’t even a school night!

“And one is enough to make you excited into trying for two,” Joyce tutted, putting away the last of her clothes. “Early bedtime tonight. Both of us.”

“Then you do it by yourself!” Emily deflected, clearly not likened to the idea of going down with the ship.

“What? It’s my first night back and you don’t want to snuggle together?”

“Urgh!” Emily grit her teeth, doing her best to shoulder the blow to her heart. Damn! No cuddles without Joyce...? “I’ll...snuggle, but I’m staying up after.” And just for good measure, “but I’ll go to sleep at our normal time...”

“Once I fall asleep you’ll be free to go,” Joyce smiled amicably.

Sure. Go stay up late if you think you can wiggle out of my arms tonight...!

With the crooked deal having been made, their walk and talk continued over to the closet.

“Oh, that’s right; Sheila stopped by last night, didn’t she?” It was a very brief conversation last night over the phone. There was difficulty in trying to talk to Emily just to hear her voice without spilling her own situation over.

And with a surge of vividly embarrassing and truthfully joyful memories, Emily nodded simply, “Yeah, she did.” Apparently Sheila must’ve contacted Joyce at some point. Good to know it was planned, at least the file part. Dinner though...?

“Uh-huh,” Joyce wheeled the empty case back in its place, “I’m sorry I didn’t know any sooner to tell you. She’s usually in and out, but I should’ve told you to expect someone... I take it that she was quick, right?”

“...Yeah.”

Emily may have been lucky earlier having a ‘feeling,’ but Joyce with her feelings stacked on top of keen intuition struck much more confidently.

“What happened?”

“What?” Emily stammered, avoiding eye contact as she strolled back over to the bed. “Nothing happened...!”

This was certainly weird. Emily was hiding something about Sheila visiting? That didn’t sit right with the mommy in charge at all. Not one bit. “No, spill it. I know something happened.” *And don’t make me check the security cameras...*

“We just talked a little, is all...”

“Talked?” Was talking about anything worth keeping a secret over? “Emily, what happened?” Sheila, of all people? What did she do?

“It’s not even that big of a deal...”

“Which is why you’re gonna tell me?” Ouch. Hands on the hips. It wasn’t looking good for Emily.

“It was just about stuff...”

“Stuff?” *Stuff?* “What kind of stuff?”

“...Secret.”

“No,” Joyce shook her head, “nuh-uh, no secrets.” No secrets from the two people either emotionally or contractually obligated to tell her nothing but the truth. Sheila told the truth if she wanted to keep her job. Emily told the truth if she wanted ice cream or a diaper change. But more importantly, why did anything happen with Sheila at all? Wasn’t she just a go and get it done type? Since when did that change?

“Nope,” Emily shook her head right back, wrists and back on their bed, “not gonna tell.” After all, she swore to secrecy with Sheila...

“Emily...” that expectant motherly tone was starting to flare.

Then the smaller girl made a daring taunt. “What’re you gonna do, not cuddle with me?”

Joyce’s muscles stiffened. Crud.

It would appear that a deadlock had been reached.

“...Why can't you tell me what happened?” Joyce tried to negotiate; something she certainly did not like being made to do.

“Because I promised not to...” Promised not to tell Joyce anything that Sheila said about her. Then some dots started to connect for Emily and the verbiage her girlfriend had been using was reviewed. “Oh, wait! I can tell you what *happened*, but not what we talked about?”

A great sigh and roll of her eyes dropped Joyce right on the bed next to her. “Well start from there, silly.” Goodness, to think this was about to escalate to tickle torture all over just a simple misunderstanding!

“She stayed for dinner,” Emily said quite simply and openly, despite how awkward it actually was at first.

“Dinner?” Joyce cocked an eyebrow. “Sheila did?”

“Yeah,” Emily nodded. “Though...she kinda invited herself to stay...” At one point it had crossed her mind that maybe it was all something that Joyce had put her secretary up to, but the look on her girlfriend's face was telling a different story. “Was she not supposed to?”

“No...not really. She sent me a message about having to get a file from my computer last night, but that was it. So, she stayed for dinner? Sheila did?” The same Sheila that wouldn't even accept a drink from her boss?

Now Emily was propping herself back up. “Wait, so her staying over wasn't your idea?”

Joyce shook her head pensively. “No, it wasn't. That's...really not like her. When did she leave?”

“After she made us dinner...?”

“Sheila made dinner? For you both?” Were they talking about the same person? Sheila had access to their home, yes, but that was strictly for work reasons. What reason was there in staying to have dinner? None of this was sitting well at all.

Uh-oh. Sheila was maybe in trouble... Emily kept most of her thoughts to herself, although she did ask, “Should...should I have said no? I was trying to call you about her being there that whole time...”

“It’s just a little weird is all, I guess. I’ll be talking to her about it tomorrow at work, though. Did...anything weird happen?”

Anything weird other than being made dinner? Anything weird other than accidentally being caught wearing her footie pajamas from the nursery that she wasn’t supposed to? Lord, she hoped Joyce didn’t check those cameras...

“No...we just talked, I guess. It was actually kinda fun...”

Fun? With Sheila? Not that Sheila wasn’t fun or interesting, probably, but Joyce couldn’t speak to any of that. Sheila was a shadow that took notes and made the world bend to her boss’ whims. Not the sociable and friendly face that cooked dinner for people?

“And what’d you two talk about?”

Emily’s mouth clamped shut. Joyce rolled her eyes.

“It was about me, wasn’t it?”

“--*No!*” Emily blurted out, though she couldn’t have sounded less convincing if she tried. Baiting Emily was so easy that it almost made Joyce feel bad.

“Uh-huh?” Joyce nodded with a grin, one that didn’t believe for a single second that it wasn’t about her. “Let me guess; bad stuff?”

While there was the option to stay in denial, Emily hardly had the fortitude to commit to something like that, especially against Joyce. Maybe it was a mind over matter situation, but trying to beat Joyce in a battle of wits simply seemed impossible. The thought of triumph alone was too exhausting to imagine. “No, *good* stuff! Joyce stuff... The stuff you won’t tell me about work!”

“The stuff I don’t talk about because I want to keep that stuff separate, Emily.” Gosh, did Sheila actually talk about her at work? What if she mentioned something about how she can blow up at others? Appear as scary or intimidate others? Emily had no business knowing that. She was supposed to see Joyce as a mother and a lover, not a tyrant! The thought of affecting that persona was legitimately vexing. Did her secretary really just go and ruin all of that?

“Well *I* thought it was really cool stuff...” Emily put on an exaggerated sulk. “I’m glad to know that I’m not the only one you get upset with...”

Joyce spun her head and Emily raised her giggling hands defensively. “*Relax!* If anything, it really just sounds like you’re the same way at work as you are here?”

Joyce was reluctant to leave it at that, but hopeful that’s where Emily’s conclusions actually stuck. “...Maybe a little,” she sighed, “but I don’t tell you that stuff for a reason, Emily. I don’t want to be a businesswoman to you. I want to be your girlfriend...” When things had first started Joyce’s wealth alone was already a straining force on their relationship. Now that they were finally somewhere to get beyond that, the thought of trying to add any more turmoil to the mix just felt wrong.

“And you *still* are, Joyce...” Emily draped her arms up and over Joyce’s shoulders. “I like hearing about your work? I guess I got excited because Sheila told me something that you wouldn’t... Don’t get angry at her.”

Joyce was certainly feeling something for her trusted confidant. “Okay. We’ll leave it at that. Thank you for being honest with me,” even if it had taken a little tooth pulling. “So, more importantly, what did you two have for dinner?”

“Oh...uhm, pasta and a salad?”

“As good as my cooking, though?” And suddenly whether it was friend or foe, secretary or stranger, treatment for Emily was always an ongoing competition.

“No, not as good,” Emily assured, though more so to stroke her partner’s ego. And come to think of it, Joyce definitely won by a landslide. After all, Sheila had made the rookie mistake of using *beets* of all things. Good thing Emily was skilled in making it look like she was eating them. A thought crossed the girl’s mind to request that the vegetable be blacklisted right then, but knowing Joyce... Well, as of late, telling Joyce the things that she did *not* like always seemed to somehow make them that much more common in her life.

Yucky vegetables would not be discussed on this day. Redacted.

And as great of a sight as Joyce was to look at, Emily happened to look back down at her suitcase and notice the shopping bag inside of it. Just as she started to move for it, Joyce smoothly pushed it away.

“No, not yet,” Joyce teased, and Emily frowned.

“What? Did you get me a souvenir or something?”

“Sort of? Guess you’re gonna have to wait and find out, huh?”

“Or...you could just let me see now?”

Joyce rose from the bed, standing with Emily’s legs around her waist. She taunted ever so lovingly right back, “Or you can wait until it’s time to show you?” Then she made a loud sniff. “Hmm...Emily, did you take a shower while I was gone yesterday?”

“Oh come *on!* Stop exaggerating! I was too busy!”

“Too busy napping and having dinner made for you by *my* secretary?”

“W-well...” Emily didn’t need much time to think as she was carried down the hall. “Yeah. You wouldn’t get it. It was a ‘had to be there’ sort of thing...”

With the flick of a switch the spacious bathroom was on and the lights were living. “That so? Well, what do you say to a nice scrub-a-dub in the tub so I can get you nice and squeaky clean?”

And Emily answered right back with her own obnoxious sniffing. “I’d say you need a bath too, missy.”

“Oh,” Joyce scoffed with a laugh, “I *know* I smell fine! You’re just jealous I’m not on a bathtime schedule, is that it?”

“Say whatever you want,” Emily with a nasally pitch shrugged as she pinched her nose. “I’d just hate for everyone to think how stinky you are tomorrow!”

Joyce sat Emily on the step beside the rim of the tub before rolling up her sleeve to turn on the faucet. “No, I guess I probably do need a bath now that your stinky-ness is rubbing off on me, huh?”

“Sorry Joyce, I think that’s just you~!” Emily called after her girlfriend who disappeared from the bathroom. Not a minute later and she was back with a familiar shopping bag from a suitcase that’d been punched out of Emily’s reach.

“New fancy towels?” Emily mused. “Oh! Conditioner? I actually wanted to try some new stuff that I saw on TV the other day!” Joyce always did know just how to surprise her!

“Close!” Joyce giggled excitedly with the bag in her lap. “I got a couple things, actually...!”

“Well don’t make me wait!” Emily crawled over to peer inside, but Joyce already pulled out the first thing. A tall bottle of many words and a large logo of a shiny soap bubble. Not what she was quite expecting.

“Ta-da!” Joyce cheered, and not a second later she was gingerly pouring the bottle into the filling bath.

“Wait, bubble bath soap?” Emily asked as she watched the tiniest bubbles already starting to form. Maybe not what she was quite expecting, but fair enough...

“I saw some at the airport! As soon as I saw it, I *knew* we had to get some!” Finally making good on a promise that’d been a long time coming, it felt good to realize just a couple more desires.

It went without saying that Emily couldn’t remember the last time she’d mingled with bubbles in a bath since ever, nor if a memory even existed with them. So while she wasn’t quite excited to receive the gift, it was a souvenir nonetheless that clearly made Joyce happy. Wrapping her arms around Joyce, Emily smiled.

“Thank you for the gift!”

“You’re very welcome!” Joyce hugged her right back. “But...! There’s more!”

More than that? Well, come to think of it, the bag did seem a bit bigger than what just a single bottle of soap would call for... Emily’s hands latched on to the plastic bag, stationary for long enough to let Joyce swipe them away, but she didn’t. Interpreting that as consent, Emily looked inside the bag.

There were multiple plastic cubes inside. Plastic packaging, at least. Clear cubes of stuff that had bright colored packaging and labeling trims on all their edges.

Bathtime Blast!

They were certainly not the puzzles she wanted to take into the bath like last time. Emily pulled out one of the cubes and looked at it. It was a generously sized bath toy sitting in both her hands. A spherical puffer fish stared back at her with a cartoonish smile and flimsy fins attached to its ball-like body. Admittedly unsure of how to react, Emily grinned dumbly as she asked what was already obvious, “Bath toys?”

“So no more asking about bringing anything else in the bath, alright?” Joyce said as she dumped the bag of toys on the floor. There were five other cubes just like the one Emily had pulled out. A

shark, an octopus, a clown fish, a turtle, a crab, and a sea urchin? If nothing else, it was admittedly kind of cool that they were all part of a matching set... Joyce always was good at accessorizing.

“You didn’t actually need to get me these, you know?” Emily laughed as she helped with opening the packaging.

“And let your baths stay boring?” Joyce couldn’t have sounded like it was any worse of a turn off. “You don’t *have* to play with them, but from now on if you’re in the bath, so are they.”

With one ceremonious plump after another, each rubber toy splashed with the water as every saltwater creature was made acquainted with its freshwater home. Emily was next pulling off her shirt while Joyce had her pants and underwear sliding off all in the same stroke.

“You’re getting in too,” Emily reminded her by undoing the button on Joyce’s jeans.

And without the strength or will to reverse the process, Joyce undid the zipper next.

“Okay...fine. You win.”

“What? Do you not wanna take a bath with me that badly?”

“Obviously not,” off came her shirt, “but I figured maybe with one less thing to play with you might actually try out your new toys?”

“I’ll play with them...!” Emily groaned with her hands slapping the surface of the soapy water.

“Are you sure they’re souvenirs for me, by the way? Kinda just seems like something *you* want to see me with...”

“And I almost might have agreed with you, had you not been squeezing one of them just now?” Joyce was smiling ear to ear, catching Emily red-handed, or crab-handed specifically, who didn’t even realize just how aimless and distracted her hands were.

Suddenly some of the local aquatic life was soaring across the tub with another splash.

“It’s still a fair question...”

“A question that will remain a mystery,” Joyce sufficed with a pat on Emily’s bare bum. “Now hop in. If we’re quick we can still fit in lunch!” And while managing lunch into such a tight timeframe was a questionable squeeze, somehow two adults and an armful of bath toys into a massive tub was not.

The realization alone was enough to make Emily laugh as she smacked the water again. “It’s kinda like an ocean if you think about it?”

“An ocean that barely has any life in it...” Joyce looked at the spread glumly. The unfortunate drawback to having a big tub was the steep number of toys that’d be needed to fill it. “I should have bought you more...” While she was feeling awfully proud in the store with so many toys, her imagination had clearly sold her bathroom short.

“It’s *fine*,” Emily said, swiping a toy as she scooped right up against Joyce in the water. “You really set the bar so high for yourself in the weirdest ways, ya know...”

“It’s because I care,” Joyce kissed the top of her head, reaching outside the tub for an empty cup. “Besides, what I love about you so much is how you’re always fidgeting with something,” she chuckled, “so I really do think these are great for you.”

Whether it was Pip, a puzzle, a pillow, or Joyce herself, Emily in her bluntest of moments always was busying herself with something, whether she realized it or not. But most importantly, a *justified* reason for babying Emily? Quite simply that put Mommy over the moon, and for Emily it put her head in a weird, cushy space.

Just as a soapy dribble was starting to trickle onto Emily’s head, she started to ask, “So when are you gonna—!” Yet the trickle had grown into something more than that; a full on waterfall over the girl, now with wet hair in her face.

“Sorry? You were saying?”

“When,” Emily draped back her hair like they were curtains, “are you gonna tell me what *actually* happened last night?”

“I already did?”

“No you didn’t. Joyce? We promised? No more lies?”

“...Is it really a lie if I just don’t tell you anything at all...?”

“Yes, it is.”

All Joyce did was take a breath, scooping another soapy helping of water and splashing it all over Emily’s head again.

Joyce was stalling again. Emily grouched, “Hey.”

“We still have to get you clean?” Joyce smiled above her innocently.

“Fine,” Emily huffed, picking herself up and spinning around. She took her time in tugging Joyce’s legs out and positioning them just right to make herself a nice comfy lap to sit in. And just so the pressure stayed strong, Emily sat herself squarely in front of Joyce. Face to face.

“Let’s make a deal, Miss *businesswoman*.”

That made the adult narrow her eyes. “Hey.”

“You tell me what happened last night,” Emily started, then squeezed, suddenly surprising herself once a stream of water went flying.

“Ah!” Joyce yelped the moment it just barely hit her eye. “*Emily!*”

Surprised and amazed, Emily looked down at the toy. “I didn’t know they squirted...! Sorry...!” And as apologetic as she was on paper, her giggles made her remorse seem questionable.

Joyce’s answer was another cupful of water over Emily’s head. “Well they do!”

It was a fair rebuttal and Emily was giggling the entire time, all the way up until Joyce finished wiping her face with a towel. “Squirt those the *other* way, please?”

“Sure, sure,” Emily nodded dismissively, sure to break such a fickle rule again shortly, “but back to brass tacks. Tell me what happened, and...” And...something along the lines of making a deal that she had yet to fully think through. A prime reason for why she wasn’t the one wearing the business pants. “And I’ll tell you his name,” Emily held up a face Joyce was already less than fond of. The octopus responsible for sending a stream of water in her face.

“So if I tell you about last night, you’ll tell me about your bath toy?”

“Fair, right?”

Damn it. Yes, it somehow was. “...Fine.”

Emily’s skin rubbed against Joyce’s as she got somehow comfier than she already was.

And just as Joyce was about to start—

“--Wait!” Emily cried, “Hold this first!” She shot first and asked questions later, shoving the octopus toy into Joyce’s hand. “Okay, okay. Ready for real!” And now with her hands free, her imagination was left unhindered to spin and weave many different threads into something purely magical. Grouping clumps of soap bubbles, Emily got to work while she listened.

“--And she just *said* it. Right in the open. She accused me! She...she just asked if I was a mommy on the spot...!”

“Wait, so like, she just *figured* it out?” Emily asked with a wide-eyed expression. “But she just met you?”

“*Yes!*” Joyce flexed her shoulders with an exasperated sigh. A tickle reached her nose though and she was immediately blowing on it.

“Oops, sorry,” Emily wiped her face for her, leaving even more soap behind than what she removed, “my brush isn’t so good...”

“What are you doing up there, anyway?”

“Find out later. So what was her name? Isabelle? I...I guess that’s really weird. She could actually just tell from looking at you?”

“I don’t know...” Joyce sighed again, wanting to sink lower in the water, had she not been balancing a naked Mozart in her lap. “I just...it felt so...violating? Like, who was she to just ask me that? To keep asking?”

“Did you ask her to stop?” As silly as it was, vocally revoking consent was important.

“Yes! W-well...sort of... I told her to stop...I think...” Then came another embarrassing admission. “But I kept answering every time she tried to guess... But wait, why aren’t you upset? Doesn’t that freak you out? That somebody else knows?”

“Aren’t they just a stranger?” Maybe she had gone insane or there were simply too many bubbles on her mind, but Emily was steadfast on the course of simply just listening. It wasn’t often when she got to be Joyce’s complete sounding board, so it was awfully important she make the most of

it. So somehow, miraculously, despite an encounter with someone like Joyce's mom, yes, this wasn't affecting her.

"They are..." Which in itself is an immense relief. It's what probably allowed her to leave the anxiety back in the state she flew from and just needed to deal with whatever residual worries she had now.

"Maybe she was like a kinky whisperer, or something," Emily thought out loud, fussing with Joyce's head some more. "Hey, do you want to be a unicorn or a wizard?"

"Emily." Now wasn't the time for funny hat discussion.

"Okay, I'll choose," Emily continued on. "But no, I guess I'm not really worried... She doesn't know us, and we don't know her? I mean, isn't there some kind of risk involved in going to stuff like that?"

"Sure, I mean yeah, but..."

"I mean, I'll be honest," Emily paused to swipe away the toy shark starting to sneak its way in. Octopi obviously weren't friends with sharks. "I think me not having gone makes it a lot easier to be calm, but I guess I sort of have a broader perspective because of it...?"

"Fair," Joyce nodded carefully, trying not to mess up whatever her little girl was working on up there. Whatever it was, the distinct clearing of bubble-less water around them said that she was using quite a bit of material.

"Did you only go because Carol invited you?" Emily asked a bit more seriously. "The other day when we were in bed and we were talking before you left. You were sort of joking about that babysitter stuff, weren't you?"

Joyce didn't answer readily, so Emily tacked on some more.

"...Did...did you want to get found out?"

A dribble from the faucet plopped into the water.

"No. No. Definitely not. No! No, this stuff is a secret. It stays between us. I don't want anyone to find out!" No one more than who needs to, at least! "It's private, Emily, I promise. I wouldn't do that. I went because of Carol. Sure, I was a little curious, but really, it was only for that. *Just* that. Seriously."

And it was one of those rare moments where not only did Emily get to look down on her partner, literally, but in that same circumstance it was another opportunity to see her rock look so flustered.

Emily took the chance to swab some bubbles on the tip of her nose, to which Joyce partly sneezed.

“Emily...!”

“Sorry, I don’t get to do stuff like this often!”

Emily was thinking something, and Joyce was too. Joyce was thinking what she thought Emily was, and all that remained was for the baby in charge to say it herself.

“I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself,” Emily casually chatted as she moved on to the final detailing of her masterpiece.

“No, I *am* being honest.” Joyce proclaimed. “This stuff is private, Emily.”

“So why did you let her keep asking you?” Emily drilled, and Joyce winced, for once not from the soap.

“--Because she wouldn’t stop pressuring me!”

“But you could’ve walked away?”

“She had us sitting!”

Emily’s mouth tucked itself behind her cheek. A poor excuse for even Emily’s standards, and Joyce was avoiding eye contact.

“Can I try guessing?”

Now the one acting all demure and vulnerable, Joyce pouted, “You’re gonna even if I tell you not to...”

“I think you *did* want someone to know. Since talking to me the night before, or maybe even earlier than that, since Carol told us about this whole thing. I think you wanted to meet somebody that knows this kind of stuff. Someone that gets what being a mommy is like.”

“...You’re upset with me, aren’t you?”

“...Kind of,” Emily admitted, “but I guess also not so much. Joyce, I don’t know how much you actually talk to other people about this kind of stuff.” After all, half the mystery and wonder of getting an entire tailored nursery was not knowing nearly anything about what went into getting it all put together. “But you know yourself best, and all I can do is guess, so... My guess is that you wanted something out of this. You wanted to find something close to what we do... What we have together?”

Amazing what a different perspective on things could do for a person.

A fearful voice spoke, “And...and if I said you were right...?”

“Then I’d want ice cream,” Emily declared, “no exceptions. That, and I think you must’ve been scared because you actually got what you wanted? I think I’d probably stop breathing if I was there in that moment... But anyway, you got what you wanted and it scared you? I dunno why, but that’s my guess.”

“It was scary...like– If she could just guess so easily, what’s stopping anyone else from figuring it out?”

“Maybe she knew how to guess because of the kind of event it was,” Emily shrugged. “I guess I’m upset because you tried taking things to the next level without actually telling me, Joyce... But since it was with a stranger, it doesn’t bother me so much...”

“I...I don’t know what I was thinking... I don’t even know what I wanted. Is it weird? Ever since Carol told us about it at their house...I’ve been thinking constantly...there has to be more to this, right?” They weren’t the only two in the world? Adult baby furniture existed online for a reason. Giant pacifiers, big baby bottles. Stylized diapers for adults. “I...I wanted to find something that maybe we didn’t have yet...”

“Maybe you sorta did, but I think you kinda ran from it,” Emily finally dropped her hands.

“Okay, I’m done, but no looking until we get out of the bath!”

“I need to wash my hair, Emily...”

“Then do it after you finish washing me!”

“Fine, you win,” Joyce gave up easily with a smile, finding her cup again. “Thank you for picking at my brain...”

“Thanks for not exposing us,” Emily giggled, then turned her head. “W-wait! I’m kidding! It’s a joke!”

A douse of water was promptly dumped on her head. No more lip from Emily after that. Sensitive topics were strategically avoided for the remainder of bath time after that. A little bit later and Joyce’s upper half was leaning out of the tub as she tried to squint at the mirror.

“Is...is it a unicorn horn?” A very thick and stubby one, it seemed.

“Half-right!” Emily beamed with pride. “A horn *and* a hat! You didn’t choose so I gave you both!”

“Well,” Joyce turned her head every which way like she was modeling a summer-season set of fashion, “very chique, but a bit out of style, I think... Can Mommy wash it off now?”

“At least compliment it!” Emily groaned, “and yes, you can.”

Right before giving herself a shower of water, Joyce kissed Emily on the lips. “Thank you for such a pretty hat...horn hat.”

And while Joyce took some time to clean herself, Emily casually piddle-paddled around the tub.

“Ah! Wait?” Joyce called from her spot. Emily looked over and Joyce was holding up the toy octopus. “We had a deal, didn’t we? What’s his name?”

“Oh. Uhh...Inky.” Obviously. Then she gave Joyce a toothy grin. “Cuz he squirts?”

After pursing her lips, suddenly a thin stream of assault was firing across the tub.

“Ah! Joyce! Mercy! Mommy! Stop!”

Bath time didn’t last much longer.

And later as Joyce was drying them both off, a new and uncomfortable subject had arisen.

“Oh, and speaking of all that misbehavior in the tub, that reminds me,” Joyce rubbed Emily’s head with a towel. “I think I may have made a slight mistake before leaving for the airport...”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. I don’t think you noticed, surely, but I forgot to lock the nursery shut...”

Uh-oh. Play dumb, Emily. “R-really? That’s unlike you...”

“Yes, it really is. I know you didn’t unlock it because I kept the key with me. Unless you’ve been learning how to pick locks?”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Emily crudely joked, secretly glad for keeping her act so well together.

“No, I didn’t even notice. Be glad Sheila didn’t either.”

“Even if she did, I doubt she’d snoop,” Joyce continued casually, and froze her hands the moment she had them over Emily’s arms. “But...you wouldn’t believe the weirdest thing that I saw?”

“What’s that?”

“This cute little foot peeking from underneath our bed! In fact, I *just* saw it when I went to get your bath toys from my suitcase!”

A cold sweat hit the girl.

“Uh...huh?”

“Uh-huh,” Joyce nodded to herself, continuing to dry a frightened Emily. Now that her therapy was done she felt free and unchained to use and assert her dominance yet again, and how wonderfully sweet of Emily to give her the opportunity to boot. “It was a cute, fuzzy blue foot, actually! A furry one! Almost like...a pair of footie pajamas we keep in your nursery?”

Shit! When Sheila had her undress, it was a mad dash back to the bedroom just to get it off. It was trying to reason with herself that she’d go stash it back in the nursery once Sheila left...! Then once she did, Joyce had called and...well, she forgot. The next morning? She still forgot! “...You left it unlocked, so I guessed—”

“--So you guessed?” Joyce leaned in close and over just to show Emily her look of feigned disbelief. “You thought because Mommy left your nursery open, you were allowed in there by yourself?”

“Y...yeah...?” Suddenly she wasn’t so good at keeping her act together anymore.

“Hmm...” Joyce hummed thoughtfully, radiating on Emily’s skin like a lingering panic.

“W-we both did some stuff we probably shouldn’t have?”

“Sort of, but I think where we differ is you *know* you’re not supposed to do what you did.” Joyce tapped her shoulder thoughtfully, making the girl flinch.

“I...I’m sorry?”

“And I’m sorry for giving you the chance to misbehave,” Joyce said solemnly. “So because it’s partially my fault, I’ll let you off easy tonight.”

Thank goodness. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. So, you’ll be going to bed. Early. After you’re diapered and we have dinner tonight.”

“*That* early?” Emily openly cried. “Joyce! Please!”

“Don’t *Joyce* me! You made your choice, Emily, and now you have to live with the consequences. Would it make you feel any better if I still went and got that ice cream?”

“Really?” And suddenly things were right as rain again, until at least the dairy treat ran out later that night.

“Yes, but we’re diapering you first before we take the car ride.” That had her pouting. “No pouting, either. Be happy I’m letting you off with just that...” she warned.

Ice cream secured, but at what cost?

“Here are today’s notes for the next meeting, ma’am,” Sheila handed off a manila envelope, to which Joyce accepted.

“Thank you,” Joyce took them, though promptly set them to the side. And just as Sheila was about to leave, “Oh, Sheila? Could you stay for just a second?”

Joyce was always good at sounding how she wanted to, but herself like every other person had far less skill at hiding any sort of undertone or ulterior feelings. Needless to say, Sheila could tell something was up, and unfortunately she had a confident feeling for what it was. But she stayed calm anyway.

“Yes?”

“Have a seat, please,” Joyce smiled, waiting for her secretary to park herself, right in front of her boss. It was quiet for a moment, save for the stare Joyce was giving her employee. Innocent, somewhat, but the hidden messages were far too strong for Sheila not to recognize and bear some kind of pressure.

Maybe it was facing her consequences in real time that was suddenly taking the woman off her high, or maybe it was the well-needed reality check that she was about to get. A further word had yet to be spoken, nor a direct reference to just a couple nights prior needed be said for Sheila to already feel a steady stream of oncoming regret.

She crossed a line. Big time. A very dangerous line. A line that separated a very private life from what Sheila had been so carefully and selectively allowed to aid and assist in.

For just a second, it was quiet enough to hear a pin hit the floor.

“Were you able to get what you needed from my house?” *And are you ready to tell me what else you did while you were there?*

“...Yes.” *No.*

“It didn’t take you long, did it?” *Which was longer: using my computer or using my stove?*

“No...” *Putting together the salad probably took longer...*

Joyce rested her hands on her desk, nodding thoughtfully, though not quite hearing what she was expecting. This was an issue. A big issue. A lack of honesty. A lack of loyalty? As far as Joyce knew, it wasn’t even a red flag, necessarily. Sure, she was treating this like an interrogation, but it’s not like her secretary had committed a crime. But it was certainly weird. Was there some kind of misunderstanding?

Meanwhile, in Sheila’s mind:

She knows. Ms. Summers knows. Did Emily tell her? Tell her everything? Did she see me snooping in her nursery? Did she say all the things I said about her? Crap...crud...shit.

While Joyce was devising the best way to tease her employee, Sheila was already formulating a new resume.

It wouldn't be the first time Sheila had cared for Emily, given that Joyce was coerced into letting her take Emily off to bed during that business dinner. For Sheila to do anything like that of her own accord though was...interesting. Harmless? But weird.

So with those thoughts in mind, Joyce cracked a grin as she said, "Sheila, I know that--"

"--*I'm sorry!*" It was an immediate, knee-jerk response from the secretary. Her head drooped in just the slightest like her bowing posture could signal any more remorse than just her words could alone.

Joyce rested her hand on the desk, looking a bit awkward. "...You're sorry?"

"I'm sorry." Sheila repeated with much heavier resolve. "I crossed a line that I shouldn't have. It was wrong, disrespectful and a gross misuse of my privileges...!" Was there actual recourse from this? In what way did it end in *just* this career burning down? How in the hell could she secure a living wage if she'd be effectively labeled as a snooper and a sneak? Her boss had to have known, otherwise they wouldn't be having this conversation!

"Sh-Sheila...?" Joyce raised her brow, taken aback by the profuse and sudden apology. Sheila was as humble as a person got, but this was Joyce's first time seeing her apologize like this. Take off Emily's diaper and put a big girl suit on her, and just maybe the feeling right now would be similar. "I'm not mad... I was just--"

"--I have no excuse...! I...I did something I shouldn't have, but I promise I won't tell anyone! I'll honor my NDA, I promise!" Christ, how was she going to explain this to Greg without being able to explain anything at all? Fired for snooping in her boss' apartment and finding out that all the *[REDACTED]* she had made was actually for her boss' girlfriend for her very own *[REDACTED]*?

And because Sheila was so devoted, and Joyce knew that far too well, now the boss was starting to second guess herself. Was there more to this? More than Emily had let on to? More that Sheila had kept from Emily?

And with a final hope, Joyce tested the waters. “Sheila...it’s okay if you stayed to have dinner with Emily...”

She let the words sit. Permeate. Cure or dispel whatever worries her secretary may have been having. Bring back the calm and collected person that she knew and expected her to be. But a sinking feeling simply kept on plummeting as the look on Sheila’s face did not change. The remorse didn’t fade, not because Joyce couldn’t dispel her worries, but because she had yet to hit the nail on the head, and that was slowly becoming apparent.

“Sheila?”

“I’m sorry...!” she apologized unyieldingly once again. “I promise, I have not nor will I ever tell anyone!”

It was suddenly worrying beyond a scope for what Joyce could perceive or imagine. Now her emotions were getting the better of her. Never once had she *ever* seen her strongest link so easily frazzled. If it was enough to make Sheila panic then there wasn’t a single object in the world that could withstand what she could not.

Yet with quiet hesitation, Joyce pulled out her phone, taking herself to a program and a place she thought she’d been given enough honesty and clarity to stay away from. But apparently not. Strolling down memory lane, she opened up the archived footage from just 48 hours prior and started skimming.

Skimming through seeing herself leave for the airport. Skimming through dead silence in the apartment, finding Emily in her footie pajamas that she wasn’t supposed to be in, napping on the couch... Sheila arriving... Sheila heading to the office... Sheila...not heading to the office.... Sheila entering the...the unlocked...

Like her eyes had deceived her, Joyce blinked, rewatching the short snippet one last time, like it was some bizarre crossover she could never in a thousand years expect. This wasn’t real, right? Surely the footage had been Photoshopped? Was the lack of audio corrupted? Was that why the video was leading her astray?

Quietly, shaken and unsure, Joyce set down her phone. Bewildered and beside herself, arriving at a complete and total blank. Sheila, her most trusted and closest employee of countless years, now before her, tail between her legs and with a look of guilt so heavy and so potent that Joyce wished the skyscraper’s windows so high up could actually open.

So many questions. *So* many. So many problems. So very few solutions. Were there any solutions at all? Suspension? Termination? Terminate Sheila? *Sheila? Fired?* Joyce's eyes couldn't stop wandering, and Sheila's wouldn't leave the floor. As Joyce tried to compose herself, Sheila tried to remain as still as possible.

She wasn't curious anymore. She got what she had wanted. Realization. Satisfaction. Discovery and pleasure. All at the cost of flying far too close to the sun. She'd stepped beyond what she was allowed and now it was time to face the immediate consequences. The end of her cushy wage and well-lived career.

"I..." The words were hardly coming to the boss, but her thoughts more or less seemed to stay in tact. This needed to be resolved. Now. Immediately. Get their bearings and figure out just what exactly was going to happen from here. Whether this really constituted a wide-scale issue or could somehow be mitigated into something else. She knew about the diapers, but now the nursery, too? She had to know now. What it was all for; what it all meant. But she couldn't go unpunished, right? She couldn't just be let off the hook for something so inappropriate...!

Joyce closed her mouth for a moment, then opened it once again. "C...Cancel my next meeting." And possibly cancel the entire day. By the end of her sentence Sheila couldn't have been moving any faster than her heels would let her. "Bring your laptop back in here," Joyce added before she could leave.

For the first time in Sheila's working career and personal tenure with Joyce, she was about to receive a disciplinary discussion. A very strange one at that.

It would be a very awkward discussion.