

## 24 - All is Well?

“Told...you...” It was a battle won, but at quite an exhausting cost. Even still, there was a sense of victory running through her fingertips that burned just a little stronger than her repeated panting.

“You’re not wrong there,” Joyce gave her hand a bit of a squeeze, and although she was taking a few breaths herself, she wasn’t nearly as winded as the shorter girl. Both were probably thankful to be walking again, but to what degree is where they differed. The question whether Joyce allowed herself to be caught was...neither here nor there. Needless to say, it’s always fun to root for your favorite team.

While the hold of a responsible partner kept her tethered, Emily took the time to shift her gaze from side to side.. “Are we even more lost, now?”

Emily wouldn’t have seen it, but Joyce was keeping a confident look on her face. “Funnily enough, I think I have a pretty good idea of where we are...” All it took were a few distinct landmarks to figure out where they were.. “They shouldn’t be much further ahead. And also, I’m sure they won’t,” she felt a sudden need to cushion her assurances, “but I’ll make sure they don’t try to ask you about anything...”

Emily had almost forgotten her fabricated excuse; the bathroom. God, they’d already taken so long, they might just think she didn’t make it... Anyway, whatever going to the bathroom might entail, it didn’t reasonably cover up 40 minutes of disappearance...

“Joyce?”

“What’s up?”

“I...I think I wanna go back to letting go, today.”

She didn’t come to a full-on stop, but she slowed her pace to get a better look at Emily.

“Let go...how?” Her last word came with a bit more uncertainty. It wasn’t a total tone of confusion, but rather confirmation.

“Like...like how we talked about it in the car.”

She took a quiet breath as she collected her thoughts. “Emily, looking back on it, I think what I said was a poor choice of words.”

The rhythm of her sandal wedges hitting the ground picked up a bit as her face appeared directly by Joyce's side. "What do you mean?"

"Because it sounded like I was telling you to flip a switch, or, loosen a valve to let a little part of your other self out..."

"I mean, it sorta made sense..." Emily awkwardly rubbed her other arm.

"Maybe, but I don't think it's so appropriate to say right now. You were so out of it at that point, I guess I was trying to suggest anything that might put you in a better mindset. Knowing what I do now, I shouldn't have forced something like that on you, or given you the idea." She looked remorsefully to Emily. "As you can see, I'm not so good at flipping switches..."

Emily's lips murmured, trying to tease the right words out of herself. "So, then let's just stop using switches?"

The metaphor was one layer too deep, which is why it somewhat went over Joyce's head.

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"Didn't you say it? It's hard for you to try and be someone, then force yourself to be something else entirely. So..." there was about to be a dreadful amount of hypocrisy, hence the pause, "...maybe we should stop trying to be two different people. I guess turning valves is sort of a good way to think about it..." her well of wisdom was finally starting to turn up dry. "I don't know... It sounded better in my head, I guess... Never mind."

How the tables have turned. Just after they'd hopped out of the pan, were they really looking to go into the fire? "...Maybe that's not a bad way to look at things. But are you sure?" Joyce's voice hadn't seemed to find its confidence yet. "That doesn't sound too different from how I've been acting..." Truthfully, she never really felt like she was playing two different roles. Day-in and day-out, it was either being a caretaker, or otherwise suppressing a significant part of herself. It felt like cheating to forcibly change the rules to a field that suited herself. Why should Emily incessantly need to adapt?

"I was sort of thinking that..." Slowly she leaned into Joyce's side, just enough to feel her touch. "I thought it might be easier for you this way..." Another squeeze. "Would it?"

The only reply Emily got was a kiss on the cheek, feeling awfully warm and fuzzy, for some reason...

“This way not everything has to be totally off-limits...you know?” Emily was clearly on a streak, and a silly part of her cheered to keep it going. “In a way, I don’t think things will change so much either, but at least now we both know how to keep the other in check.”

Joyce merely smirked at her. “Are you trying to get another kiss?”

Emily balled her fists, skimming them across her dress awkwardly. “N-no...”

“Oh...” Joyce said almost disappointingly. “And to think I had another one ready, too...”

The cat hungrily eyed the dangling fish, as Emily wordlessly stared at her. The glimmer in her eyes was obvious, as Joyce laughed right before giving her another peck on the lips.

“But, if we stop using ‘switches,’ does that mean we’re just Joyce and Emily, then?” It felt weird, saying her own name in first person. Also, given it was Emily’s idea, it was a little humorous how she was asking Joyce for answers.

Though, whatever it was that Emily said, it had Joyce looking at her almost incredulously. “Heaven’s no!” she scoffed. Emily was a bit taken aback. “Just when I get you to start calling me Mommy, you think you can weasel out so easily?”

“*Joyce!*” Emily silently warned, seeming incredibly self-conscious. “What if people hear you? And wait, what? Didn’t you say I could call you whatever when we’re...*like that?*”

“I changed my mind,” she spoke with an exaggerated puff from her chest and an impatient ‘hmmf.’ “Now you only get to call me Mommy in our alone time.”

This was likely a problem worthy of Emily’s full attention, but she spent the better part of hers checking for onlookers. “F-fine! Just stop saying it out loud! Please!”

Joyce wasn’t budging though, still keeping just as stubborn. “Promise me you’ll keep calling me that, then.”

“Okay! Okay! I promise! I didn’t...” her panicked flare was quickly replaced with an awkward shuffle. “It’s not like I wanted to stop, either...” she grew quiet as she pouted, looking away. “Is that better?”

“Yes, it is...” she tried to hide her smirk, concocting her next plan of action. “But...it’s not good enough.”

Dumbfounded, Emily desperately searched for a motive; a clue hiding in Joyce’s eyes. “Is-is this payback for what I said earlier?”

“No, it’s punishment for running off.” Joyce waited a second to see her reaction, and was thankful she didn’t seem too bothered by it... The moment still felt lighthearted, and she knew to strike while the iron was hot. “Which is why...” she pretended to think; consulting her imaginary chalkboard of devious punishments and consequences. “Kiss me.”

“Kiss you? That’s it?” The regret came immediately after. It was as if Emily were *asking* for the consequences to be worse, and she only realized that just now. “No--I mean, okay, a kiss, right?”

Joyce couldn’t hide her Cheshire grin. “Good point, that does seem a little too easy, doesn’t it? “ She tapped her chin, pondering the depths of her own mischief. “Then...for every second you were gone! I want that in kisses.”

“Wh-what? But...that’s...” She paused to think, actually trying to tackle the insurmountable math that it’d take to figure that out. Though, quickly abandoning that. “That’s a lot of kisses!”

“Yes, it is.” Finally, the demoness had flashed her true intentions. Trapped in her clutches, Emily had no choice but to pay the piper... Truthfully, she was trying not to giggle herself.

“Can...” trying not to laugh, she tried her hardest to play the damsel in distress. “Can I pay it in... \*pfff\* ...in installments?”

“Installments?” Joyce couldn’t keep up the act, as she started laughing. “I guess that’s the only sensible way, huh? Okay, though I’m sorry to say that interest rates are awfully high...”

Emily gulped. “How high?”

“Twenty.”

“Twenty a week?!” It was a lot...but at least she could manage...

Instead of a simple response, Joyce looked sympathetic instead. “A week? Oh, honey...” She leaned in close for a teasing whisper. “Twenty *a day*.” Emily’s imaginary hopes were shattered.

Like that, a simple loan of a mere few thousand kisses had just been tacked on with a heavy catch. How could she afford something like that? All of her emotionally financial dreams had now become dust in the wind.

A leisurely stroll down Snuggle Street? No free love left to pay the toll. Maybe a cushy break at the Cuddle Cafe? And pay with what credit? Maybe at least enjoy herself in the Frolicking Fields? Oh, right. Not when the Bank of JS had seized all of her love and assets. She herself had become an asset, and was now sitting in the purse strings of her owner.

“Feel free to pay at your own pace,” Joyce chuckled, continuing the act of the big bad banker. “Just keep in mind until your balance is cleared, though,” she already gave the flustered, yet excited Emily another kiss on the lips. “Those lips belong to *me*, and *me* alone!”

Emily winced, looking at her with quite the troubled look, whilst Joyce reigned with her oppressive rule. Yet, all it took was another spurt from Emily’s mouth, and the moment was shattered and the pair were both equally laughing just as hard.

“What even was that?”

“I don’t know, you’re the one who said one kiss wasn’t enough!”

“You’re the one giving out punishments!”

Joyce wiped a happy tear from her eye. “...I’m glad we’re not fighting anymore.”

“Me too.”

“Well jeez! There you two are!” The voice was loud enough to not only hear, but break their mutual gaze from each other and draw to the person in question.

“Hey mom,” Joyce giggled as best as she could, trying to play off what was surely to follow. “Sorry, we got a little sidetracked...”

Mary was already on her feet, clearly waiting for them, meanwhile Frank politely waved, still content with his seat on the bench.

“You know, when you ran after Emily, I figured you were trying to make sure she didn’t get lost on her way back from the bathroom? Maybe we should keep you both on a leash...” Joyce and

Emily seemed equally as awkward, trying to situate themselves on a blurry line set between guilt and awkwardness.

“Hon, can’t you see?” Frank chuckled from behind, and Mary turned to him, though her body language suggested that she wasn’t going to appreciate what he had to say. “Remember when we said they could have some alone time, if they wanted? I think this was their way of...you know...?”

“No! That was not it!” Strangely enough, it came from both Joyce and Emily in unison. They even gave each other a weird look for a second.

“S-sorry!” Emily was faster, suddenly blurting. Everyone looked at her. “I...after I used the uhm, bathroom,” her face was starting to feel warm. “I...I saw the petting zoo, and I might have gone it for a few minutes...” The way she acted so embarrassed was honestly impressive to Joyce. That is, if only she knew the emotions weren’t fabricated... What came as an unfortunate afterthought though was using up the Petting Zoo as an excuse. So much for going there, now. “Joyce kept trying to get me to leave, but I wanted to keep petting them... So please don’t be mad at her.”

At first, all Emily could hear were passing crowds and the distant screeches of monkeys, but soon enough came a pair of laughter.

Was it something she said?

Frank was the first to speak. “Emily, don’t worry about it, trust me. My wife tends to be a little impatient, at times..”

After giving her husband an offended look, she looked to Emily with a much warmer expression. “Frank is right, at least somewhat, Emily. I’m not mad at you two,” she chuckled. “Did I seem that intimidating? I’m sorry. And we did both figure you two might’ve taken some personal time, and I guess you sort of did...” she chuckled, leaving Emily and Joyce in an awkward spot.

“Now I know it’s been a rocky start,” with a small groan, Frank pushed himself onto his feet and off the bench. “But what do ya guys say we start seeing some more animals? Though, I gotta say,” he started thickening his voice into that of a poor Australian accent. “This wild bench here is mighty docile, ain’t it?” He looked at all three women, fishing for approving glances. Mary stayed blank-faced, Joyce sort of grinned, but Emily was covering her mouth, leaking with giggles.

“Alright, Frank Irwin, let’s get a move on,” Mary ushered with a creased look, but quickly loosened up. “What’s the nearest spot from here?”

“I think it’s the bear exhibit right down that path...” Frank kept looking from the map to the real-life road. “What do you say we give it a try?”

Bears weren’t exactly high on Emily’s list of wonderful things to see, but she did ask for this, after all. Not to mention, it would be kind of interesting to see... Leaving Joyce and Mary behind, one foot after the other, she increased her pace a little to catch up with Frank.

“Hey Frank?” Emily asked.

“Hey Emily?” The simple return of her own words was unexpected, which is why she giggled for a second, though tried to regain her composure. “How much did you teach Joyce how to cook?”

“How much?” He blew some air from his mouth, staring a bit into the sky, where he kept all his thoughts. “Well, at least a decade’s worth, I suppose?”

Joyce had said it herself, but to have it be corroborated by the master himself really set things in crippling stone. How could Emily ever hope to compare to her?

“Why?” Frank leaned in, sounding a little panicked. “Don’t tell me she’s gotten rusty, has she?”

“What? N-no! She’s really good at cooking! Really...”

Frank laughed with his booming voice, tussling Emily’s hair. It’s probably not the affection she would have liked, but she still appreciated the thought. “She may not be as good as me, but I do have confidence in her skills. Has she shown you anything in the kitchen yet?”

“Well, sort of,” she could remember it like it was last night. Probably because it was. “Last night we were making stir fry together and she was showing me how she chopped. But like, her hands were like lightning! If I blinked it probably would have been over!” Her genuine fascination got a bit carried away, as Frank started laughing again.

“Joyce did pick up chopping a bit quick. Handling a knife in general, I suppose. Are you interested in cooking, Emily?”

“Um, sort of, I guess you could say...”

“Or is it that you’re interested in Joyce?”

His bold question left Emily flustered, trying to give a suitable answer, though embarrassing herself even further.

“Relax, I thought that might be it anyways.”

“But I still think cooking is really cool!” Quickly, she tried to save face and Frank’s feelings..

“Emily, it’s alright to have other things on your mind” He shortly glanced over his shoulder. “For example, look at my wife,” Emily turned her head to Mary, who was engrossed in her own conversation with Joyce. “Not a single cooking bone in her body! Well, when I first met her. I at least had to teach her the basics...”

“She can’t cook?” Suddenly, Emily felt like she’d found herself a brother in arms.

“No, I wouldn’t say that. She definitely can, but she doesn’t like it nearly as much as I do. She puts on airs when you guys are around, but she does try to take an interest in the things I like, at least for a little bit. So to see something similar in you...I think that’s a good thing.”

Emily tried not to let the compliments get to her head, which is why to keep them at bay she stuffed out another question. “Hey Frank, do you plan on cooking at some point while you guys are here?”

“I said it earlier this morning, right? How do you two expect to have a long-lasting relationship without my famous pancakes?”

How silly she was, forgetting that the foundation to any loving couple was glued together by the sweet, syrupy taste of Frank’s legendary pancakes.

“And also...what food does Joyce like?”

While they carried on with their conversation, Joyce and Mary kept one going between themselves.

“Honestly,” Mary sighed, looking at the tiny girl and tall man walking in front of them. “Every time we meet someone new, they always just *gravitate*,” she emphasized the word with her moving hands, “to your dad!”



Joyce laughed, though she wasn't sure what she was really supposed to say. Acknowledge it as the truth and leave her mom offended, or agree, but shame Emily for not realizing the supposed gem her mother was? Well, she was certainly a gem, though, with its own...peculiar shine.

Even better, she found a compromise. "Well, maybe Hannah was like that at first, but aren't you two really good friends now?"

"Yes...but so is she with your dad..." Now Joyce knew it was okay to laugh. "...What?" Mary was somewhat smiling, too.

"So you wanted Emily all to yourself, is that it?" She went on to speak in a smug voice. "Well sorry, but I'm not giving her away."

Crossing her arms, she looked away from Joyce. "We'll see..."

"But in all seriousness, I think people have an easier time with dad at first because he just seems..." How was she going to put this delicately? "...more approachable."

"What do you mean?" Apparently she stepped on a landmine. "How am I not approachable?"

"It's not that you aren't..." She didn't have a smooth transition ready, nor an actual followup to her words.

"Anyways," clearly the conversation wasn't in Mary's favor, so she sufficed to end it altogether. "So everything went alright?"

"Everything...?" On the surface, Joyce assumed she was referring to the lie they were using, but her sixth sense was telling her that this was ulterior... She kept her voice lowered, just to keep others out of earshot. "I mean, if you're talking about Emily and the bathroom, yes...that worked out."

"...Alright." Joyce didn't like how that sounded. It was as if she knew it was a lie. But how could her mom think it was? Did they give her any reason to suspect? Well, the sudden disappearance might have tipped her off to something a bit more dire...there was no helping that.

"Was the petting zoo at least nice? I can imagine, considering you had to drag her from it," Mary snickered and Joyce slowly joined in her laugh.

“It was,” she tried her best to remember if she even saw what was in the pen. No luck, however, which is why she kept her description awfully vague. “They were all so cute! So tiny...and all their...fur...” As her voice lost its footing, Mary kept laughing as Joyce turned her gaze elsewhere.

“Very descriptive. I’m sure Emily could give me a better idea, though. Did you even go into the pen?”

“Well, no, I was trying to hurry back to you guys...” Clearly it was paranoia, paired with a nervous caution induced by any invasive mother.

“Weren’t feeling up to it?” Mary chuckled. “I appreciate you were thinking of me and your father, but don’t feel like you need to trample on her fun in the process, you know?”

“I do *not* trample on her fun!” You’d think she was offended by the way she stared at her mother.

All they ever had was fun! If she were lying, let there never be another day where the sun might rise again! Then, the last fifteen minutes of her life was factored in. So...maybe “mostly” fun was a better way to describe it...

“What animals did they have there, anyways?”

It was an obvious pitfall like this that was a testament to the weakness of their lies. Both Joyce and Emily had managed to paint in broad strokes, but all it took was a fine eye to see there were no details...

Unfortunately only Emily knew the real answer, which is why Joyce improvised on the spot. “Uhm...pigs. Piglets. Baby ones?”

Mary laughed, and Joyce was quietly tensing up. “Why do you say it like that?”

“Like--like what?” Her words came a little rushed. Why was it always so difficult to keep a level head around her mom?

“Like you’re not sure? Were they special, or something?” Her presence was starting to feel on the suffocating side, which is why Joyce allowed herself a few inches of real-life and mental distance.

“No...just...normal piglets...”

“Okay, okay, I’m prodding, I apologize.” She wasn’t, but she was, for all the reasons Joyce couldn’t disclose. “I’ll let you off the hook, but you need to promise me one thing first.”

Promises.

Joyce had simultaneously made and accumulated a mountain of them, and quite frankly, she was growing tired of accidentally crushing such delicate, precious jewels.

Joyce didn’t directly answer, rather substituting for a look that told she was all ears, though somewhat reluctant.

Mary’s voice started off lowered, which was most certainly not a good sign. If it was anything but regular, that meant a change in tone; a change from what Joyce had just gotten used to. “Promise you’re going to take her to the petting zoo for *real*?” She smirked, namely because Joyce looked all but complacent, largely dumbstruck by her mother’s twist.

*Keep calm. Pretending like she knows everything...she always does this!*

With the best feigned confidence she could muster, which wasn’t impressive, especially when there was a momentary draw between her actual words and open mouth, she said, “Wh...what do you mean? I just got finished saying we went?”

Again, it was another self-acclaimed omnipotent look, one that easily contradicted Joyce’s fabricated front. Then, she dangled her true bait. “If you don’t take her, then Frank and I will~!”

Rather than feeling brushed to the side, a small flare erupted from Joyce instead.

“Ugh! Why can’t you let me just keep *one* secret from you?” She’d already abandoned her dying struggle to keep a secret that was bound to be revealed; like now.

“Sorry, sweetheart, that just means you need to be better at keeping them!” The distance between them and Emily and Frank had become large enough to speak so freely like this. Mary chuckled while Joyce tried to limit just how much she was seething.

“It’s *our* business! Can’t you just leave it be?” Really! Did the concept of privacy truly not get through to her mother? Who was she kidding...of course it didn’t. She had 32 years of experience to support that claim.

Mary stayed quiet as Joyce stared daggers into her, though after enough time her harsh look dampened into aggravation, annoyance, and soon a solemn, troubled one.

“Joyce, I’m not going to ask about any more than I think I already know,” she placed a hand on her closer shoulder. “All I think right now is that there was some trouble in paradise, I’m guessing?” She looked to be waiting for confirmation.

Joyce answered in a slight mumble. “...maybe...”

“Then you shouldn’t be making sacrifices for the sake of appearances, you know?”

“I know,” Joyce spoke painfully, hating to feel the same reminder twice. The only reminding it motioned towards was Joyce’s unending tendency to screw things up.

“I’m going to assume you’ve patched things over for the most part, which is why you need to work on forgetting what had you two at odds in the first place. Having fun is a good way to do that?”

She knew it was and had every intention to chase it. Despite her mother’s invasion, a second opinion in favor of her company wasn’t totally unwelcome...

Before Joyce could give a reply, they had caught up to Frank and Emily, who were staring into the thick glass pane which separated them from the big furry beast on the inside.

Frank’s figure was a dead give away, but not so much Emily, given all the other people that were here. It was hard to see...definitely harder. Almost as if...as if she weren’t even there?

*Not again.* She seriously couldn’t be up to mischief again, could she?

“E-Emily?” Awkwardly, Joyce turned her head both ways, fishing for a response from anywhere. Though she was least expecting it to come from Frank.

“Huh?” A black-haired head leaned out from the two tall and iron poles that her dad called his own legs. “Did you call me?”

The first reaction was immediate relief, and the second was an amused smirk, seeing her dad somehow made the perfect screen for Emily’s whereabouts.

“Yes, I thought you might have ran off again, but I guess my dad was stealing you this time?”

“Caught me red-handed!” Frank sighed, holding his hands to display the imaginary evidence.

“While you two chatterboxes were taking your time, Emily and I decided we’d go and see what this zoo business is all about! I’m sure you can back me up on that, Emily?”

She looked a little surprised to be mentioned at first, but quickly formed into a confident look as she nodded. “What can I say?” ...what could she say? By chance, Joyce happened to be the first thing she saw. “Joyce needs me to get around anywhere. I think she *does* need a leash.” Everyone but Joyce was laughing, who was instead thinking of all the ways she could enact her own forms of teasing in a much more intimate space...

“So are there bears behind here?” Trying to shrug it off, Joyce walked a bit closer, happening the situate herself behind Emily who’d turned back to the glass as well.

“I hope so...” Emily passively added. “I couldn’t *bear* to see them out here with us...” She looked to Joyce as if she needed confirmation, then cracked smirk, making it obvious she was making another silly joke.

Instead of laughing, Joyce looked to Frank. “Dad, your humor is funny every once in a while, but could you please leave Emily out of it?” Defensively Joyce placed her hands on Emily’s shoulders. “You guys had 5 minutes together! What have you been teaching her?”

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” Emily looked up again, this time not so humorously anymore.

Joyce merely looked at her with a feigned worry. “Oh, you poor thing...”

“Yeah, what do you mean? I’ve only been teaching her the best stuff I know!”

“Well, hon, your ‘best stuff’ isn’t exactly comedy gold...” Mary said in a low voice.

“The only thing about Dad that you can trust are his cooking skills. Anything else and he’s a bad role model...”

“I can’t believe you two are double-teaming me!”

The distance between Emily and Frank was widened as both Joyce and Mary occupied the spots closest to him, getting in his face jokingly.

“That’s because we need to save Emily while she’s still pure! You’re too dangerous to be left with others, hon.”

Frank, dumbfounded, merely looked past them and to the smirking, albeit confused Emily, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Alright, alright...the matrons of the Summers have spoken! How about we stop making a scene and do some spectating then?”

After a few chuckles and laughs, all four were aligned along the display, though to save space Emily was positioned in front of Joyce.

“I think he’s sleeping...”

“Wouldn’t they go to their cave if they planned to sleep?”

“I dunno, maybe Zoo bears work differently...”

“You never know,” Mary chimed in. “Kind of like how your dad works differently when he’s in the kitchen?”

“...She has a point.” Surprisingly, it was Frank to say it.

“Wait! I think he’s getting up!”

“Is he?” Emily stared, pressing her palms against the glass; something for balance, given how pressed she was.

“No...” Joyce sounded a little disappointed since she just sounded a false alarm. “I think he’s just rolling over...”

“I wonder how soft his fur would be? Maybe bears could be trained into being big, giant pillows?” Mary joked, whilst Emily and Joyce silently envisioned a large furry friend stationed in the corner of her nursery.

“Time for the next stop?” Joyce was already backing away.

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“Alright, I think we need a breather...” Frank slowed the group to a stop. It’d already been a few hours since they got there, and true to Emily’s demands, it’d been a non-stop safari from site to site. Only now did she realize that it was probably taking its toll on the older two.

After enough birds, monkeys, giraffes, elephants, snakes, bears, turtles, tortoises and more, even Joyce and Emily were still feeling slightly less than 100%.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t even think to ask...” Emily remorsefully spoke. “Do you want us to sit down?”

“I think Mary and I will take you up on that,” the husband and wife sat themselves on a conveniently nearby bench. “Why don’t you two go see a few more spots while we recuperate?”

“Are you sure?” Joyce didn’t feel great about intentionally leaving her parents behind. They were here to visit, after all. “We don’t mind sitting with you guys.”

“Now you’re just making us feel old,” Mary waved them off with a ‘shoo’. “Even better, we’ll find us a place to eat while you two are about,” Mary gave a sigh as she finally sat down. “But don’t do anything *too* fun without us, got it?”

“We’ll try our best, but no guarantees...” Joyce’s eyes drifted over to Emily, who had a sudden smirk as she agreed to the lighthearted promise.

Both pairs waved each other off, as Emily and Joyce once more found themselves alone but with a much cleaner consciousness this time.

“Where are we gonna go next?” Once again, Emily knew how to ask questions, but never to answer them. That part was Joyce’s job, of course.

“You haven’t forgot the whole reason for all of this, did you?”

“No...? I don’t think so.”

“Then you should already know where we’re going.”

“...The petting zoo?”

“Oh, make no mistake, we’re definitely going after this,” she needed at least *one* picture of Emily in the pen... “But that’s not where we’re going first.” Being just as cryptic as usual, Emily kept swinging their hands, trying to get an answer.

“Come on...what is it?”

“I’m surprised you forgot so quickly!”

“No I didn’t!” Emily dove for the playfully defensive strategy. “I just...need a reminder, that’s all.”

Joyce merely ‘pffted’ settling for a kiss on Emily’s forehead instead. “What was that animal again? The one you tried to look up on the internet, but I said it’d ruin the real-life experience?”

Emily did remember this, and suddenly all the sly comments Joyce was making earlier this morning, and it was all from the root of two simple words.

“Sea Otters!”

“Bingo~!” Joyce cheered, and they had just about arrived at the same time.

Behind the barriers was a large pool of water, minus the patches of land along the sides and a small island in the center. All about the habitat however were a family of furry sea otters going about their day.

“I knew I knew what they looked like!” Emily confidently boasted.

“So you have seen them before?” As if to praise her little scholar, Joyce gave her a small scratch on the scalp.

“From some show, I think. But look at how long their tails are!” Emily marveled at the long and thick appendages, trailing behind them as they coasted in the water. “And there’s so many whiskers!” It was a weird fascination, and Emily wasn’t really sure why she found it so enjoyable, but there was some fuzzy feeling to it, she couldn’t help but laugh.

The only thing that interrupted her was a pair of arms wrapping around her, squeezing her close. It didn’t take long to realize Joyce was the culprit.



“What did I do this time?” Emily looked at Joyce for a brief moment, trying to show she was an invested listener, though quickly spun back to the animal display, hoping she didn’t miss anything too adorable...

“Nothing, I guess,” Joyce snickered. “I just like seeing you like this.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know? Engaged, maybe? You look like you don’t have anything on your mind; you’re focusing on the moment in the present. I hope I get to see that from you more.”

“Is it because that’s what Emmy would do...?” Emily debated whether to hold her tongue or not, but she tried her best to remember that honesty should be prioritized over preservation.

Joyce was silent for a moment, then spoke. “...It’s what I hope Emily would do, and by extension, yes, Emmy. No matter what state you’re in Emily, there’s always going to be the same qualities I love to see in you, and this is one of them. So even when we’re like this, I suppose I still like to see that innocence in you... Is...is that okay?”

“Even if it weren’t, it’s not like that’s something we can change, right?”

Before Joyce could try and go for a rebuttal, Emily kept going.

“But it is okay. Like I said, I don’t want things to feel awkward for us. We’re just going to...feel things out as we go. Besides, I like feeling this way too, you know? I don’t do it just for you...”

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Joyce said matter-of-factly. “...Thank you for being so patient with me.”

Emily thought for a moment to spew her own endless list of gratitude, but that would’ve gotten them nowhere. Already they perfectly understood how much one cherished the other, and the next steps they needed to take was to better identify, accommodate and embraced the unique kind of relationship they had.

“Wait,” Emily called back to the sea otters. Curiously, she laughed. “What’s that one doing?”

“Which one?”

“Those two in the water?”

Swimming on its back, an otter drifted across the water as sitting right atop its stomach was an even smaller sea otter, cozily resting on the other's body as the larger one kicked its webbed feet.

"D'awwwh, they look so cute!" Emily couldn't take her eyes off the pair, watching the much smaller one give its face a small rub with its furry, proportionally large paws.

"That must be a mother and her pup?" Joyce said as she watched with a smile.

"Can the baby not swim yet?"

"It probably can float, at least," Joyce answered without too much confidence, given she wasn't an expert on sea otters... "But it's not unusual for mothers to do something like that. For any species, really."

"What?" Emily chuckled, "letting their babies ride on their stomachs?"

"No, you little jokester, I mean keeping their babies close. Either that or they leave them in a safe place."

"It makes sense, I guess..." Emily passively spoke as she continued to watch.

"You know though, sea otters aren't the only animals that do that? Lay their babies on their stomachs?"

The spectacle was finally over, and Emily finally gave her full attention to Joyce. "Really? What other species?"

Emily didn't know why, but there was a strange tension in the air when Joyce said it.

"Humans."

"H-humans? Really?" It probably wasn't what Joyce was getting at, but Emily's imagination immediately jumped to a human swimming across the water...

"Sort of. It's a thing mothers can do with their newborns. If they may need some extra help getting to sleep, a mother might set them on her chest to feel her heartbeat. I think it has something to do with memories of the womb..."

"J...Joyce? Would it be alright if I asked you a personal question?"

“Huh? No, I don’t really mind? What is it?”

“If you’ve always wanted a baby so badly...why didn’t you ever adopt?” She wasn’t going to suggest having an actual baby, given she rooted for the same team...

“That’s...” she twiddled her thumbs, looking at something beside Emily than actually her. “It’s complicated. Not the kind of complicated that I don’t want to answer your question, but the kind where even I’m not 100% myself... All I can say for certain right now is that I’m happy to be with you Emily, and there is nothing that I’d rather more. So to politely dodge your question, could I take a rain check? I’ll answer when I’ve thought of a good explanation.”

“Oh, I mean,” Emily blushed awkwardly. “It’s not like you need to answer... I’m sorry for making things weird.”

“It’s alright, you didn’t.” All it took was another gentle hand to reestablish the mood. She took a deep breath then spoke with a bit more volume and clarity. “So, how about we drop by the petting zoo before heading back? I bet you’ve been dying to get in there...!”

Sheepishly Emily rubbed her shoulder, trying to look anything but tempted by the sweet offer. “W-well, I’m not in *that* much of a rush...”

“Come on, don’t lie to me. Don’t you wanna go and feed some baby piglets?”

It was more lovable sweet-talk, but the last word was what caught Emily off guard, and she gave Joyce a confused look. “Baby piglets?” The sudden question threw Joyce for a loop too, who realized that from the start her assumption of the piglets was nothing more than that. An assumption.

“Wait, is that what you thought was there?” Finding it hard not to, Emily broke into a laugh. “The petting zoo has goats, not pigs!”

“Hey, I tried my best...”

“Or maybe you just think tiny goats look like piglets?” Emily giggled.

Joyce gave a slight laugh, but it wasn’t a normal one, which is why Emily finally went quiet. It was a...a smug laugh?

“What’s wrong? Why did you stop laughing?” Joyce raised her brow, leaning in close.

“No...reason?”

What was unexpected was Joyce giving Emily a kiss on the lips, and as she pulled away, she left a chilling warning behind. “Don’t forget in whose bed you’re sleeping tonight, missy!” Only now did the earlier seeds of regret start to bloom.

“Can we go to the petting zoo now...?”

“Of course! Let’s go see some baby... Hmm...Emily, I can’t help but seem to have forgotten? What where they again?”

Puffing out her cheeks, she bawled her fists as Emily tried her best to sound sincere. “I didn’t mean to tease you...”

Joyce laughed again, only this time it sounded much more genuine, or at least from a positive place. “Sorry, I think it took that a bit too far.”

Emily’s response was to stick out her tongue. “Meanie...” But just as quick as she was to look annoyed, she was then pulling on Joyce’s hand with two of her own. “Come onnnn! Let’s go already!”

“Okay, okay!” Joyce pretended to relent. “You’re awfully high-maintenance, you know that?”

“Yet you’re stuck with me!” She giggled as they finally set into motion.

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“Are you gonna come in with me?” The destination was already in sight, the fenced pen built out of a sizable barn-themed house which likely stored the tiny animals during their days away from such busy jobs.

“How else am I supposed to get a picture of you with them?” Joyce figured it was a given, not to mention she was secretly trying to ensure Emily wouldn’t feel self-conscious. Not that she should have any reason to, but given Emily’s track record, it was nice to have insurance.

Joyce paid for their tickets as they stepped inside, and there, all the tiny pig--goats, were trotting around happily and making very strange, yet goat-like noises. There had to have been about 12 of them, and great deal were already occupied with other human visitors.

Finally Emily knew what Jackie had the sweet liberty of experiencing! Such tiny little friends that only know how to be themselves and let the cuteness naturally ensue!

And as Emily marvelled at them all, despite being in the same space as them, she didn't move from her spot.

“Ah...Emily?”

Snapping out of her hypnotic state, she finally came to. “Huh? What is it?”

“Do you...you know,” Joyce smirked. “Want to go and pet one?”

“I mean..yeah...but wouldn't it be better if one came to me? I don't wanna be rude...”

“Rude? To the goats?” She had no intention to tease Emily, but her logic was both a mix of silliness and adorable.

“Hi there!” A voice interrupted the two, which belonged to one of the zoo workers stationed inside the pen. She adjusted her hat with the zoo's logo on the front and straightened her ponytail feeding through the back. “Do you two want me to bring one over to you?”

Emily didn't know how to react, which is why Joyce took the initiative. “Yes, please!”

“Alright then, let me see which one I can steal for you...” She turned to all the scurrying goats, then without a second longer she found her mark. “Ah! I know the perfect one!” She quickly singled out who she was looking for, as all the other pygmy goats scurried away as she walked across the ground. In a quick gesture she'd swooped a goat into the air, bundled in her arms as she set it near Emily and Joyce.

“This one's name is Rutherford,” the worker encouraged them to either crouch or to get on their knees. Emily to protect her dress did the former.

“Wow...he's awfully tiny, isn't he?” Joyce curiously stroked her hand along his spine, feeling the wavy white and gray fur. “But he's so soft! Emily, have you felt it yet?”

She was looking awfully reserved, clearly one to be content from the sidelines, but of course she wanted to participate...

She was slow, but Emily eventually did reach her hand out, and her eyes practically glimmered once she felt it. "He's sooo soft!" Rutherford, truly he was a walking cushion.

"Definitely one of the biggest compliments these guys get around here," the worker found a chance to pet him too. Though the goat kept hopping around, yet constantly gravitating around the trio.

"Hey, Joyce! Look at him hop!" Despite there being little to no elevation change in the ground, apparently idle action was like lava to poor Rutherford, because he kept hopping from his hind legs to his front, twisting and turning as he made his pygmy noises.

"Yeah, they all have quite a bit of energy, but I'd definitely consider this guy one of the more gentle ones."

"Hey Rutherford, here boy!" Emily happily cooed to him, already too transfixed on the ball of fur to give much regard to outside voices.

"Now do you let people feed them?" Joyce asked, though she kept giving Emily a quick glance every now and then. Seeing her playing with cute things...it always did something to the heartstrings for Joyce.

"Yep! We do, though we do charge a little extra..." Of course the added mention of further purchase was awkward for the girl, but not nearly as much as Joyce. Instead, she responded with a small handbag.

Smiling, she asked, "How much?"

Somehow both Emily and Rutherford managed to keep themselves entertained with each other, as Emily kept spinning on her crouched feet just to keep up with his energy. Whenever there was an opening, Emily would sneak in a stroke to his fur, which further enticed the goat to be that much more tricky.

"I'm gonna get you! Yes I am!" She intentionally lagged behind, just to make the game that much more thrilling. The only thing that would bring it to an end though was the worker's polite interruption.

“Excuse me? Sorry to interrupt, but I brought a small gift for you?” Whatever it was, she had it pooled in her hands, and Emily awkwardly cupped hers to receive. And so, a shower of brown pellets rained from above as they piled in her palms. Why was she giving her goat food? And then it clicked.

“Wait...did my girlfriend put you up to this?” She was suddenly looking for Joyce, who happened to be a slight ways behind the worker, holding her all too familiar handbag in front of her.

The worker cocked a curious smile. “Girlfrie...?” Then she quickly came to, nodding her head. “Yep! Alright, Rutherford! Chow time!” She clapped her hands, and the tiny goat immediately looked over to her, then Emily, seeing she held something much more promising than just an empty gesture.

The worker had quite literally flipped a metaphorical switch. Suddenly, he wasn’t dancing around and playing games. No, he had a mission, and Emily was either an obstacle or benefactor to that. Immediately he trotted to the front of Emily, eagerly trying to get at the food.

“Whoa! Easy there, you can have some, just be gentle!” Emily tried her best to warn him, but of course the English language wasn’t exactly a deterrent to a pygmy goat and his empty stomach.

She nearly lost her balance when Rutherford had enough audacity to even plant his tiny front hooves on Emily’s knees which was shrouded by her dress.

“Wait! No! Bad boy! Here, just be gentle!” Quickly she lowered her hands, trying to coax the goat off of her, who immediately started to munch in her hands. Finally she’d calmed the fearsome beast, and she could not contently watch him eat away.

Then it only got worse.

The next one had a pair of tiny, floppy ears. It made a small ‘baaa’ as it scurried over, rushedly knocking its acquaintance, Rutherford, stuffing its face into a slot intended for only one. Emily wobbled from the sudden intrusion, but she managed.

Then...there was a third.

Black all over, likely the cousin of Cerberus, it crawled from the chilling depths, otherwise known as the other side of the petting pen and struck like a glutton.

Three faces kept attacking the pile which sat in her hands, and as adorable as it was, Emily was quickly becoming overwhelmed.

“Wow, they must really like you, huh?” The same attendant chuckled, watching close by. Emily nervously laughed, knowing that was an outright lie. They didn’t like who she was, but rather much preferred what she had.

“Oops! Look out! Here comes Bolt!” And to his name’s credit, he struck like lightning. Piercing right between Rutherford and Cerberus Jr, he overshot his momentum and angle as his face crashed into the pile of food, knocking Emily over with a yelp and scattering tiny brown pellets everywhere on the ground and herself.

The scene of chaos had Emily giggling all over though as their tiny bodies partly stood all over her, trying to bite away at the pieces caught in the folds of her dress. Though, she did jump a little when she suddenly felt one of their heads searching for food between her legs.

Thankfully it didn’t last for much longer, because the same worker that indirectly caused the mayhem along with her coworker diffused the situation by creating some distance between Emily and all the goats.

“Oh my gosh, are you alright, hon?” She helped Emily stand with a frantic hurry, who despite looking worse for wear seemed to be fine. Joyce came right over performing her own kind of checkup.

Oddly enough, it was Joyce that the workers were apologizing to. Emily was included, but her partner was much more at the forefront of things. This was starting to feel like another terrible misunderstanding...

“It’s fine on my end,” Joyce gave a weak laugh, though nudged towards Emily’s direction. “But I think my *girlfriend* should be the one you’re asking?” The slight emphasis on her choice of words had apparently jogged the group’s clarity, clearing up any sort of vagueness that there might have been.

Apparently Emily wasn’t worth the re-issuing of apologies however, because they simply looked to her, waiting for her take on things.

“I’m fine.” Emily said somewhat coldly. It wasn’t necessarily their fault they thought she was younger like everyone else, but it didn’t ease her accumulated annoyance of every encounter.



They excused themselves from the pen, and despite the objective outcome, both women felt quite fulfilled. Emily was still lingering with the feelings of adoration for all those tiny friends. Even Bolt, who was probably the most rambunctious of them all. Meanwhile, under a bit of shade the faint glow of light on Joyce's face was a dead giveaway to her looking at her phone.

She was looking at her newfound treasures; moments of when Emily was happily feeding the goats, and she only smiled wider as her small album of them told quite the story when a new goat would appear in each shot, and finally Emily would be laughing on the ground.

"Thanks for sticking up for me..." meekly, Emily spoke. It was the first time someone other than herself today clearly defined her as an adult, and especially not Joyce's daughter.

"There's no need for that," her voice made the point quite absolute. "It's expected of me. It's what I should have been doing from the start. That's what girlfriends do." ...And mommies...

She wasn't looking directly at Joyce, but she smiled warmly to hear her words.

Letting a gust of air out of her nose, Joyce clasped her hands together. "Alright...I think that's enough zoo for one day."

"Huh? How come?"

"Well, don't you think we've been at it for quite a bit? My mom and dad are already getting tired. You..." quite skeptical, Joyce asked, "you weren't serious when you said *everything*, were you?"

"No, I didn't really mean that, I was just looking for a reason to do something."

"Since we went for brunch that means dinner is going to be coming up eventually. We'll need to think whether we want to cook or go out. But regardless, I really want you home because you need to be changed." Her final reason came as a surprise to the girl.

"Why do I need a chan..." It was too embarrassing to admit Emily thought she was referring to diaper change. Trying to clear her throat and find purchase, she spoke again. "Why do I need to change my clothes?" Sure, maybe the sundress wouldn't have been her first choice, but it wasn't nearly as bad as her small complaints from this morning might have made it.

Joyce looked at her blankly, with a touch of disbelief. "You're making it really hard not to baby you right now, you know that?"

“Just spell it out for me!” The way Joyce was dancing around the true reason, even though she really wasn’t, it made Emily want to act indignant if she was going to be threatened like she needed the extra attention.

Joyce smiled with a sigh as she grabbed a small bunch of Emily’s sundress and lifted it.

“Last time I checked, your pretty dress wasn’t covered in dirt patches and tiny goat hoof prints?”

This time Emily knew she was acting pretty dumbly. Joyce always seemed to catch both the subtle and obvious with her. Now with a new perspective on things, no matter what kind of state they were in, certain dynamics and aspects would always exist throughout their time together.

With Joyce’s help from behind, they managed to get the bulk of the loose dirt off the dress, but much couldn’t be immediately done for other spots.

“But what if I get your car dirty?” Expensive seats never went well with cheap dirt. She wasn’t a scientist, but that seemed like a solid hypothesis.

“Good point. I suppose we’ll just take your dress off and we ride back home?” Emily blinked. She had to ride home half-naked? Technically it was her fault; she coerced Joyce into thinking of a solution, but that didn’t mean Emily wanted this to be the one!

“And actually, I think your shorts got a bit of dirt on them too...” Joyce continued to fret as Emily could feel her play with the back of her dress. “You don’t mind riding in just your panties too, right?”

Emily was starting to look flustered. “Uhm...”

Joyce then gasped, as Emily could feel a finger tug on the back of her bra strap. “Emily! You’re covered in dirt everywhere!” She ‘tsked’ as her mind traveled elsewhere. “I suppose that means no bra either...” finally, Emily was catching on.

“Hey, quit teasing me! I was trying to be considerate!”

“And thank you for that,” she was going for a kiss, but the pouty Emily had already read her mind and stole one for herself. “Cars can be cleaned, just like dirty girls covered in dirt.”

“Cars are more expensive though...” Emily moped.

Quietly, Joyce made an exaggerated sigh in agreeance. “You’re right... Maybe I should just have you walk home then?”

“That does it! No more cuddling for the rest of the week!” Emily crossed her arms, and with steam blowing from her ears she marched onward with Joyce laughing behind the whole way.

Wiping a joyful tear from her eye, Joyce went on to ask, “Okay, how about we both promise to stop joking if you stop being such a worrywart?”

Emily looked back at her with a knitted brow. “Who said I was joking?”

Joyce laughed, though it was much weaker than a few moments ago.

“...Emily, you were kidding, right?” Silence was her answer.

“Emily? Heyyyy, come on...!” Joyce started to whine and jostle Emily’s shoulder, given her cuddles were on the line. “Don’t be mad? Please? I promise I’ll stop! Don’t take away my cuddle rights!”

It truly was a desperate and tense walk back to Frank and Mary’s bench.