

35 - Little Miss Summers

A bell?

A tracking chip?

Abandon all the fantasies and just use a child leash as she jokingly intended?

A flurry of thoughts raced through her mind. She barely even stopped for the many faces that tried to steal her attention as she left the dance hall. Up until then it had been such an excruciating balance of maintaining her persona while trying to stuff away the sheer panic of trying to find her little girl the entire time!

She'd been having the occasional drink just to portray the image that she was socializing and mingling, yet none of the alcohol in her system seemed to do anything to calm her nerves. She would have normally been a slight bit buzzed by now after all the refills she'd had, yet there was none of that. A mere pittance of water scarcely did anything to stop a raging fire. She wasn't mad, she was simply anxious and worried. How couldn't she be? She'd convinced her number one responsibility to embark with her on a gauntlet of social intimidation. She promised her number one responsibility that she would care for her every step of the way. She promised her number one responsibility that she'd keep a close watch on her all night, implying that their hands would never leave each other.

Did Emily wander off on her own? When did she even leave the party? What if she'd been gone somewhere else the entire night and it was only by chance that she was found in the lobby?

The long elevator ride in isolation gave her time to silently reflect on all the absolutely horrible, terrible possibilities that offered so little excuses for Joyce's actions and inability. Her four faint reflections on every wall shared in the madness as she ran a hand through her hair. Why did this bother her so much? Emily is an adult. She was, she knew that... But in her heart, much like her failed promises tonight, they were only words.

Every time Joyce told herself that she'd do better, it only seemed to hurt that much more when she inevitably went back on it by somehow messing up, if not worse, just as horribly...

Had she been too lenient? She knew Emily wasn't holding her hand at the banquet table...She made the conscious decision to let her roam close by. She decided herself to take her attention off her for just a measly minute...!

It was the strangest battle Joyce had seemed to encounter in her mind. For once, if for what felt like a rational moment, was the side of herself that chose to believe in Emily as an adult and her girlfriend...wrong? The Mommy in her never would have let Emily stray no more than an inch. The Mommy in her would have kept a firm hold on her hand. The Mommy in her would have made her keep her phone so she could reach her if need be! She didn't even have a room key to get back to the room if she wanted! But...that was so Emily would stay nearby, but...

An audible groan of frustration left her lips as Joyce seemed to be splitting hairs. It was all so...confusing. So tiring... At every turn when she even began to think of Emily as somehow liable, it only routed back to her own incompetence.

Emily's going to do unpredictable things. The unexpected is going to happen. It's my job to expect these things, and it's my job to keep a hold on her...

All the steam leaving her ears from tired and strained thought made the lobby feel like a shivering draft in comparison once the doors finally opened. Of course, the water fountain and glass windows may have affected that as well, somewhat.

She was about to become manic when her eyes couldn't immediately find Emily. Now not having to deal with the business dinner and its patrons, she was ready to storm the front desk immediately and demand a building-wide search.

But thankfully it did not come to that. "Ms. Summers!" A distant call echoed across the marbled floor through the gushing water fountain.

Joyce spun her head and briskly walked around the fountain.

It was indescribable once she saw her. A thousand little knots that cascaded from her mind to her heart and stomach all seemed to loosen without friction and drown herself in relief.

She half-ran as best as her heels allowed over to the pair. The words she'd say didn't even come to mind as the distance closed. It was a bit sad to say, but Sheila had only just started to become more than an afterthought. After the phone call all she could seem to register was that Emily had been found. It didn't matter who did it because the ends certainly justified the means, which is why she couldn't have cared less about what those means were.

"Emily?" Joyce raised the pitch of her voice as the tone softened into a delicate comfort. All the inner rage and confusion had all been swept aside so easily. Seeing the one she loved the most had so profoundly shut down anything in her mind that could have been toxic to her little girl.

She didn't see her girlfriend in that split second. She saw what validated all the things in her warped, yet honest mind.

"I think she's asleep right now..." Sheila explained in a lowered voice, still dealing with Emily's head resting on her shoulder. Though, the tone of her voice still implied the slight awkward out-of-place feeling she had. She was used to working with one person only, not physically dealing with their companions, too.

And make no mistake in assuming that Joyce wasn't acutely aware of their postures. Emily was indeed asleep on Sheila's shoulder. Another person's shoulder, and not Joyce's. But even for her that was being irrational. She killed the unhinged jealousy with swiftness and stayed focused. Sheila had undoubtedly been a godsend.

Yet with the last of her tunnel vision she came forward until a mere foot's length kept both groups apart, to which Joyce bent over just to ensure that she was there in the flesh. Sheila continued to watch, or seem like she wasn't as her boss so brazenly kissed her companion squarely on the forehead. While it did come off as intimate, though. Parental...?

"Thank you..." Joyce sighed, finding with each second she could see Emily right in front of her that all was right again. Could this be used as justification for a bonus?

It was too rare to be called commonplace, which is why a unicorn was likely prancing around in Sheila's head right then. Already a few years she had given to this woman, Joyce Summers, and the anomaly that'd been puppeting her for the past chunk of time was right before her. Being in such an informal situation after a night of dining with her boyfriend and returning to a luxurious hotel; it was the perfect combination to make even Sheila's tight-lipped nature crack in just the slightest. She was teeming with curiosity.

"Ms. Summers...Is this your friend?"

An unprovoked question from Sheila was unusual, enough for Joyce to recognize that despite the heat of the moment. But beyond that, a question was a question. "Yes...but also my...girlfriend." Sheila apart from Emily was her closest confidant. Stating something like that to someone she trusted every ounce of the inner workings of her career with could make even the mighty Joyce stumble, even if just a little.

Sheila only nodded as she glanced back down at the girl against her shoulder.

Girlfriend.

It was embarrassing to admit, yet Sheila hadn't completely considered it. Well, maybe a little, but not a girl as a lover. Had her pride as the all-knowing been hurt? Nevertheless, the small number of threads left unaccounted for in her head were already beginning to weave...

Finally, enough of her adrenaline had been spent for there to be room for rationality and self-awareness. "Wait, where's your boyfriend?" Joyce asked as she glanced from shoulder to shoulder.

"He's..." Sheila started to say, though for some reason she started to pick up on the sleeping girl's breathing right beside her. "Waiting for me upstairs. I wanted to help Emily before I went up, though I didn't know who she was before..."

"Thank you again, Sheila...so much." Joyce repeated as she sat on the other end of the bench, wasting no time in the delicate shift of Emily's head from Sheila's shoulder to hers. Alcohol. She certainly smelled of it. Why had she been drinking? Joyce knew she was feeling anxious about tonight, but she also knew there wouldn't be a snowball's chance in hell that she'd drink on her own. "I'm so sorry to hold you up like this; I went and lost her at the dinner and have been looking for her since..."

"Ms. Summers, it's no issue at all," Sheila said quite candidly. After all, she'd been so gracious as to pay for her hotel room. To Sheila in her own exaggerated mind, that warranted at least her life in return. "How long have you two been at the party?" She asked in a somewhat informal way. "If I remember, they tend to go on for a while..."

"A few hours..." Joyce answered with a sorrowful look. It was only in retrospect now that time seemed like a factor for anything. Of course Emily was out cold. Even if the alcohol wasn't part of the equation, she knew she would have been dealing with a sleepy girl by now. "They always start late and end late..." She sighed as she stroked the top of Emily's head. "Any other normal night and she'd be in bed by now..." And needless to say, bed was where she was headed next.

"Were you able to meet with all the people you wanted to?" Sheila asked. As much as her boss disliked these events, their importance couldn't be ignored. Networking was always the hidden objective, yet always the most important.

"Y...not completely." Joyce came to admit. She nearly put on airs as she looked down at Emily but slowly stopped herself once she remembered that it was only her secretary listening. "I may have been a little...dismissive. I've been looking for Emily all night..." She rested her cheek on the top of Emily's head. "Thank you for helping me with my computers, by the way. That software works very well."

“Of course.” Sheila responded simply, though couldn’t help but glance at Emily, starting to re-interpret the original reason her boss had given her for it...

What’s more, the party still had a little bit longer to go, yet Joyce wouldn’t be in attendance for it. Obviously not when she needed to put a certain somebody to bed.

“Uhm...Ms. Summers?” Sheila politely interrupted her thoughts, getting Joyce to look over. “If you’d like, I can take Emily back to your room for you? So you can go back to the party?”

The look of remorse on Joyce’s face was near immediate. “Sheila, you’re here with your boyfriend, I couldn’t do that to you...”

“It’s no issue,” Sheila shook her head. “I can tell Greg that you had something important come up. He’ll understand. Work comes first, Ms. Summers.”

As headstrong as Joyce could be around Sheila in spite of her own dutiful stubbornness, it suddenly felt like something exploitative was between them now. Something Sheila was using to her full advantage.

“You still need to speak to some people, don’t you?” Sheila doubled down. “If it’s for the sake of the company, you can’t skip out early on these sorts of things, Ms. Summers...”

“I know, I know...” Joyce reluctantly sighed. Sheila tended to be right about these things. Always about these things. Yet unfortunately, drunk little girls past their bedtimes aren’t exactly known for getting themselves to bed on their own. By the time she gets Emily settled down in her pajamas, the last thing she’d want to do is leave her... It was undoubtedly a wonderful thing to stress over the woes of being a doting mommy, yet also a slightly inconvenient thing at times...

“Ms. Summers,” Sheila said clearly once more, “Please let me do this for you? You’ve already given me and my boyfriend a wonderful night. This is the least I could do for you?”

“This isn’t a work-related issue though, Sheila...” Joyce tried to reason.

“It isn’t?” Sheila contradicted. “Ms. Summers, if Emily is taken care of, that gives you the time to go back to the party, doesn’t it?” Maybe Sheila was off the rails for being so forward, yet as the synapses in her mind sparked, she felt more daring to assume what she had been hypothesizing from the start. “If her well-being affects your mood and performance at the office, I’d say that this is work-related.” Of course, she wasn’t looking to become another person’s secretary, however. “I mean to say that if I have the opportunity to help you, Ms. Summers, I’ll choose to.”

Joyce wore a contemplative look as she fussed over the details in her mind. Obviously Sheila could be trusted, but...what if something went wrong? What if Emily woke up and wanted Joyce, but instead found some stranger in the hotel room? What if something went wrong and Joyce had to come back anyway? She packed pajamas, but what if Sheila accidentally picked the wrong ones? Emily always likes the silk pair over the... Wait...what if Emily had a *nightmare*?

No. Absolutely not. There were too many pitfalls, too many chances for failure. It wasn't possible. It wasn't reasonable.

"Ms. Summers," Sheila stared at her clearly. "I promise, Emily is in good hands." She even smiled a small bit. In the back of her mind was a wild voice screaming cheers of eureka as her thesis had finally been proven; her research and discoveries hadn't been for naught. The look on her face of deep, troubled thought was all too familiar. It was the same look she had whenever there was a bad day in the office, or when there was a seemingly "out of the blue" conversation she might have with her boss. The same atmosphere for when there was an inexplicably "off" mood her boss may have been having. It most certainly was the final piece that completed the full picture Sheila had come to have such an in-depth understanding of. Tonight she had begun to understand another integral part about her boss. If her work was her craft, she would say that she was determined to perfect it. As her eyes fell on Emily, she saw it as her determination to see Ms. Summer's troubles and worries taken care of so that she could perform at her best. Besides, it was just taking her girlfriend back to the hotel room?

Joyce was quiet for only a moment longer as she exhaled all her hesitations and sat up straight. Maybe she was being silly. She was extremely reluctant to ever delegate things as important as this to anyone. No, not even that. This'd be the first of its kind. At almost any other time she would say no. Yet it was Sheila who was offering, who had already done so much for the two without a single question already...

"Okay..." Joyce sighed as she handed her room key to Sheila who accepted without a single remark, only with her typical dutiful look. "It's not a lot, but just make sure you do a couple things when you get her back to the hotel room, okay? As long as you don't mind..."

"Of course not, Ms. Summers." Sheila nodded. After all, she'd helped her boyfriend after a rough night in bed before. Strip them and send them off.

"Then, as long as you don't mind, just a couple things... If you could get her undressed once you get back to the bedroom. Just leave her dress hanging on something and I'll take care of it in the morning. I left her pajamas in the top right drawer of the dresser; she gets stuffy in the other set, so make sure she gets the silk pair. I think she left her phone on the bed at some point, so if you

could find it and leave it on the nightstand in case she wants to call me... Oh, and make sure she gets Pip--her...it's a gift I gave her. A stuffed toy sort of thing. She...likes having it with her in our bed. I...I think that's everything." A small smile crept on her face as the words seemed to flow right out of her. "Thank you again, Sheila, I really appreciate this."

There was a moment of pause from Sheila's end, seemingly overloaded by the long-winded explanation, yet her boss smiled so simply as if it were all second nature. "U..." She cleared her throat. "Understood. I'll make sure she gets everything she needs." Sheila couldn't help but wonder, how high maintenance was this girl? "I'll be waiting to let you back in your room."

"Thank you, Sheila. Truly." Joyce gave her a look of complete gratitude before her eyes focused back on Emily. "Would you be able to give me just a minute though? It'd give you time to explain to your boyfriend how I'm tying you up..." She said apologetically.

"It's no issue at all," Sheila said once more as she stood from the bench. Joyce watched as she strolled to the other end of the lobby before turning back.

"Emily..." Joyce softly coaxed as she rocked her shoulder.

Maybe the rhythm in her breath had changed, but still asleep.

"Emily..." She raised her voice a little, clearly having to fight more than just tiredness this time around.

A frustrated groan left her mouth as she started to move her head. Once her eyes opened they squinted into paper-thin slits, assaulted by the blinding light from above.

"Come on, babygirl, time to wake up. You can't sleep here."

"Joyce...?" Emily asked lazily, groping the body right next to her. It did feel like her...

"Joyce...!"

"Yes, hello to you too," Joyce kissed her on the forehead. She was all smiles and relieved to be reunited, but that didn't mean all was forgiven. "Can you tell me why I found you all the way down here? Why weren't you at the party where I've been looking for you all night?"

Joyce started the unfair sport as the girl with dwindled energy was still expected to play. "I *did* wait...!" Emily started to raise her voice with a tired whine. She answered to the sentence she heard in her mind, extrapolated and re-interpreted from the chunks she was actually picking up on. "I sat with Hank and Rebecca all night...!"

“Who are Hank and Rebecca?” Joyce asked rightfully so. Did she meet people at the business dinner? Did they take her out somewhere drinking? She could already feel the sense of anger; running off with her special girl after being expressly told to stay where she could be seen.

The simple follow-up was a level too critical for Emily’s impaired mind to process. “I...I dunno...rich people?” She whimpered as she tried opening her eyes yet again, yet found so much more solace in hiding them in the dark of Joyce’s side. “Rebecca was a bitch...” Somehow that came out clearly despite the mumbling.

Joyce normally would have cracked a grin, yet she was still concerned. All was well in the end, but she still had yet to solve the crime and the motive. Just as much though, she also started to realize Emily was in no capacity to explain herself, much less tie her own shoes it felt like. There wasn’t much merit in a scolding if they weren’t going to truly understand it...

She suspended the “talk” with a firm kiss on the forehead. “Emily? I still need to go back to the party to talk to some people. You know Sheila? My secretary, the one that called me on the phone for you?”

“Mhmm...” Emily mumbled with a small nod. It was obvious she wasn’t making the small connections yet, which is why Joyce didn’t spare the expense in spelling it out clearly.

“Sheila’s going to take you back up to the room and get you in bed. I’ll be coming back later at night, okay?”

“No.”

“No?”

Emily partly slumped as her head fell into Joyce’s lap and her arms around her waist.

“No...!” Emily’s composure was slipping even further. She was exhausted and drunk and wanted nothing more than to go back and be in bed. But she wanted it with the bells and whistles too. She wanted Joyce with her. She’d become unmovable. Nothing else would make her cave.

“Emily...” Joyce looked down at her sympathetically, but wasn’t feeling swayed. Sheila was right; a dinner like this was important. “You’re going to be asleep before you know it? I’m only going to be another hour or so--”

“No!” She shouted into her dress. The explanation could have been anything and with as much fact and reason as Joyce would have liked. It still would not have mattered, simply because Emily was too far gone to process any of it. “I’ll...I’ll go with you--” She paused for a great, big yawn.

Naturally the look was endearing. A stubborn girl who supposedly wasn’t ready for bed, yet everything but her attitude certainly was. “Weren’t you just asleep though? You just yawned, too? I should have said the party was going to run late, maybe then you wouldn’t have been so tired?” Maybe giving her an excuse could convince her...

“I’m...” She liberally planted her hands on Joyce’s thighs as she propped herself up, squinting her glossy eyes as they begged to be closed once more. “I’m fine now...I can go too.”

Joyce could feel an odd sense of déjà vu. “No, sweetheart. Sheila’s going to take you back up to the room and get you in bed.”

“I don’t need help...I just want you...” Emily selfishly said. It was all Joyce ever wanted to hear, and yet the timing couldn’t have been worse.

While Joyce planned to tote Emily around from the start, seeing her in a state like this would only make her feel cruel. As childish as she was wonderfully being, there had to have been some adult left inside her tired mind to be reasoned with.

“Tell you what,” Joyce caressed her cheek, “If you go back with Sheila to the room and get ready for bed, I promise, cross my heart and hope to die, there’ll be an amazingly delicious parfait waiting for you in the fridge tomorrow.” Maybe it was a cop-out bribing her like this, but she couldn’t stand to see her struggle any longer.

“Already had one...” Emily mumbled.

Well, so much for that.

“We can go now...to the party.” She continued to use Joyce’s lap like an airstrip as she fully erected her torso by pushing off her. Just as she started to stand, the first wobble was evident and the prelude to something much more catastrophic.

Before she could entirely slip and fall Joyce was already supporting her from behind.

“Ah-ah, hang on there just a second,” Joyce said from behind, sitting her down gently back on the bench.

“I just need a second to focus...” Emily whined as she rubbed her eyes.

Joyce was on a knee now in front of her, trying to zero out the culprit. As light as Emily was, Joyce didn't feel comfortable asking her secretary to carry someone else, assuming Sheila could even do it. So to spare anyone the complete awkwardness, Joyce carefully slipped a finger in the divot between Emily's foot and heel, slipping it right off.

A draft of air hit the bottom of her feet as Emily was a few seconds delayed in understanding what was happening. Nevertheless it was a refreshing feeling as the light bondage was removed.

Joyce stood up with Emily's heels hanging from one of her hands. “Okay, let's try that again.” With an arm around Emily's waist she rose once again, still leaning a bit for support, but able to walk again barefoot. “Better?”

“The floor's cold...” Emily pouted.

“Well our suite has heated flooring, you know?” Joyce coaxed. “Come on, Sheila's right over there, let's go see her.”

As they rounded the fountain, Sheila was off by the other end, seemingly admiring one of the large plants. Obviously more than a minute had passed, meaning she'd run out of meaningful things to do. Once she turned over and saw them approaching however she'd given the royal flora not a second longer.

“Okay, Emily, Sheila's going to take you back up to the room now,” Joyce explained patiently and softly.

“Hi there, Emily,” Sheila gave a friendly smile like it was their first introduction. Though, if anyone had been paying attention thus far, one might notice that Ms. Summers got a ‘hello’, whereas Emily was just ‘hi’. Not that she wasn't worthy of respect, yet even to Sheila, Emily's very being seemed to dissolve formality.

“H...-i...” Her reply was so short but prolonged so greatly by her teary yawn.

From Joyce's perspective, it hit her like a sendoff to daycare or leaving her for the night with the babysitter, assuming toddlers wore heels as well. Then again, it'd just been determined Emily couldn't be trusted in them...

Joyce released her from her hold as Emily found her hand now in Sheila's. She really couldn't be trusted to walk on her own.

"I promise I'll be back soon, okay?" Joyce lowered her stance to reach her eyes head on.

Emily gave her a dissatisfied nod. She'd already forgotten her resolve to remain, or discarded it like a fleeting thought. The squint in her eyes was more than just tiredness; mild dissatisfaction. She still wanted to go to the party with Joyce, whether she realistically could or not. But it was out of her hands, literally in Sheila's.

Joyce's hands came down on Emily's shoulders as her lips came up to her forehead. "I love you very much," Joyce said. "Sleep well for me, got it?"

"Love you tooh..." Maybe she was in over her head. Maybe some rest was the better option.

Joyce soaked up as much of Emily's appearance as she could. One last time she leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, but did say quietly, but loud enough for all three women to hear, "Be good for Sheila, okay?" Maybe it could be called unwarranted, but in the time she had known Emily, she wouldn't put it past her to try at least something a little rebellious just to see her... Solo bedtimes had always been a struggle with her, after all.

The previously called elevator finally opened up, signaling that it was time to part. Sheila in her moment alone must have glanced at the room number, because she brought Emily into the elevator with purpose as she pressed a corresponding button on the panel.

"Bye!" Joyce stood there for as long as the doors stayed open, giving them a small wave from her hand just above her waist. Her send-off smile slumped away in the company of just herself. Of course she wanted to stay. She wanted to be the one to go back with Emily. She'd just gotten her back but had to willfully lose her again? It ached and made her heart throb, but the only treatment she could depend upon was her juggernaut of a secretary...

The ascent was silent amongst the other two, be it that there may not have been a lot to talk about between a fully conscious secretary and her boss' drunk and tired charge. That was Sheila's frame of mind, at least.

Girlfriend. Emily was Joyce's girlfriend. It wasn't difficult to see...but it may have been that Sheila saw more of something else. Maybe she just didn't fully understand the scope of relationships. The soft tone she used, the doting attitude with a delicate touch and always observing her mannerisms and needs. Girlfriend, yes, but...maybe a different title felt more apt.

Ms. Summers is a complete mommy.

Yes. That seemed to be the easier end of the equation.

“You work with Joyce...?” Emily surprisingly asked. She gathered that much even as tired as she was, but to what degree was still fuzzy for her.

“Well, I...I don’t work with her, but I’d say that I work *for* her,” she calmly corrected, leaving the perfect slot of time a younger student might need to catch up with the rest. “I’m responsible for all of Ms.--...Joyce’s meetings and scheduling.” Calling Ms. Summers by her first name felt odd in her mouth, like a foreign taste that simply felt wrong. A bland cracker just shy of stale.

“That sounds nice...You must do a lot of work for her...”

“Enough to keep me busy.” Sheila said back. Her other hand was holding Emily’s heels, keeping her arm bent at a 90 degree angle. It was held that way instead of just drooping by her side almost like a subconscious effort to remind herself of her duties. If energy needed to be spent doing something as obscure as holding up a pair of shoes, that naturally led to questions in the wandering mind which made it impossible to forget what the bigger picture really was. A fun tip she had learned from her work; leave yourself a trail of crumbs should you ever get lost along the way...

Once the doors opened Sheila took the lead in stepping out into the hall. While glancing both ways for the right direction, Emily seemed to know as she started walking one way.

Sheila gently pulled her back however. “Oops, I think it’s the other way...” She started leading them the other direction. Down the hall they went and Sheila carefully scanned the few passing rooms until the number on the door matched the number on the key.

With a quick swipe a digital sound of victory played and they stepped inside.

Sheila was in silent amazement by the sheer size of the suite. She had a general idea of what she’d be walking into, but seeing it in-person always had that profound sort of effect.

“Okay...” Sheila said to herself quietly, summing all the items in her head that Ms. Summers had listed as careful instructions. “Bedtime...” She said once more, though she’d need a minute to get it all ready.

“Emily?” She smiled for her attention, catching her head starting to bob every so often as her eyelids were drooping.

“Hmm...?” Emily murmured back.

“I’m just going to get what I need ready in the bedroom, okay? Do you want to sit on the couch?”

“It’s fine...” Emily yawned as she tried to wave her off. “I can do it...I can get ready for bed. Thank you though...” She finally let go of Sheila’s hand and walked ahead to the bedroom.

Sheila didn’t object, though she followed from behind with an observant eye. She *was* an adult... It only made sense to humor her.

In Emily’s mind, the first thing that made sense was to walk over to her suitcase and get her pajamas. She stopped halfway across the room though, remembering that they’d unpacked them once they got here. Small mistake. Forgivable. Back over to the dresser she went. It was a little difficult to discern how many drawers she was looking at though. The lines were sort of blurred as she fished for the drawer handles, not sure why she had to be feeling around for them rather than just *see* them?

Yet somehow as if the universe had heard her plea, or her body understood her desires, her vision became clearer as the dresser and all its detailed edges and corners came into view. Did she have superpowers?

Sheila instead, was standing right by a dimmer switch that’d been left off.

Emily opened one drawer. Nope. Day clothes. She checked another. Still no, just shirts. The next was socks and underwear, the other was jeans...did she check this one already? Did she check it thoroughly? She was already getting tired of searching. She wanted to sleep, not deal with finding the very things to sleep in!

“Okay, okay,” Sheila came from behind with a light hand on Emily’s back. “How about you sit down on the bed and get your dress off? I think Ms.--Joyce told me where I can find them.”

Emily did just that without a fight. She wandered over to the bed, tempted to simply slump herself on it, though remembered by just a hanging thread to remove the threads she was currently in.

Sheila assumed she had remembered correctly, singling out the top right drawer that Emily missed. Opening it up was a grey set of pajamas, but looking underneath that was a pair of pastel purple ones. Rubbing the material between her fingers deduced that they were silk.

“Emily? I got your pajamas...” Sheila said as she turned, but found a girl who seemed to struggle with any kind of progress whatsoever. Her torso bent awkwardly as her hands from top and bottom tried to attack the small zipper behind her back, yet she seemed helpless in the attempt to reach it. “Oh...uhm, those can be tricky...” Sheila wasn’t sure what to say to the drunk girl as she came over to help. It slid down with ease and Sheila helped her finish entirely just to avoid potential confusion with even slipping the straps off her shoulders.

Now naked, save for a bra and panties, Emily wanted absolutely more than anything to go to bed.

“Just a little longer...” Sheila coaxed, seeing that Emily really was about to embark on the final frontier.

“I can do it now...” Emily moaned with yet another stretch in her jaw as she made yet another sleepy howl. Her protests that only commanded force in the way of words had only come after considering the fleeting thought that it may be better to stay modest by dressing herself. She was pretty sure Sheila explained who she was to Joyce at some point, but not even Joyce’s coworkers got to see her naked just because.

“Can you?” Sheila humored her as she stopped in her tracks. Emily fell back on her bottom on the bed, holding out her hands for the pajama shorts.

“I just need privacy...” Emily said so clearly, yet didn’t give Sheila even a second to consider whether or not she should actually leave. Emily hadn’t even finished her hollow request by the time she was trying to thread her feet into the leg holes of her shorts. Her depth perception must have been exhausted or the world itself was losing balance, because staring down the holes of her shorts so intently somehow made it so hard to keep her legs straight. She’d lift a foot, delicate and slow, then feel the need to shoot it forward like a dart for absolute precision. After the third time of getting caught on the edge and slingshotting them out of her hands, Sheila was already picking them up.

It seemed they were past the arguing stage of things because Emily didn’t give many words as Sheila knelt down to feed Emily’s feet into the proper leg holes. And as she did so, she was certainly feeling perplexed.

Needing to go back to the office late at night to get a project report, or working overtime just to schedule one of her last-minute meetings. Sheila had explored and ventured her fair share of “bonus” tasks her boss could apologetically ask of her. And under the oath of absolute secrecy, even her request a while back about manufacturing special adult diapers was certainly out of the

ordinary, but it was passable because it was yet another detached request. Dealing with inanimate things that were meant for something else. Something that did not concern Sheila.

“And up we go...” Sheila’s voice smoothly cooed as she forced Emily’s posture to slide the shorts up her legs. Maybe the pajamas were inanimate, but she’d never been told to do something so...hands-on by her boss before. This time the destination was the task itself. She was working with the person themselves now, not the lead-up. The more she thought, the more things were making too much sense. Jumping to conclusions was dangerous, yet the likelihood of everything...

It was like she was in high school again, helping her baby cousins get ready for bed. At least thanks to the disparity in height Emily made for an easy girl to get dressed. Once Emily’s head popped through the neckhole of the shirt, Sheila fussed as much as to readjust her slightly disheveled hair. Maybe it was the perfectionist in her. Maybe it was something else.

“Okay, let’s get you into bed,” Sheila kept a hand on Emily’s back as she steered her over to the edge where she even pulled back the covers for her.

Emily sat on the edge, but she did lay down. “I’m okay now...” She rubbed her eyes. “Thank you...but I’m gonna wait until Joyce comes back.”

Sheila didn’t answer back. She walked around the bed as she sought to complete everything entrusted to her. Not only that, but it gave her a chance to think of how she should respond.

Emily partly watched as she looked around for something, whatever it was. Either way, she did want to crash and sleep so soundly, but something about her would only permit it should Joyce be there for bed too. Waiting in bed was a certain red flag, hence why she was standing up from the bed.

“No, back in bed.” Sheila spoke calmly with a twirl of her fingers, yet her words had no flexibility. Apparently what she’d found was in between both her hands now. Emily quickly realized this too, seeing the womanizer held before her. Pip. The rascal, seemingly shaking around his inanimate, limbless mochi-ball-body for anyone... “I even have your...” What it was exactly couldn’t reach Sheila’s limited imagination, but her resourceful memory filled the gap. “Pip. I have Pip, see? Hop in bed. Joyce will be back later tonight.” Or morning, with how things usually went, but she wasn’t going to torture the poor girl with that.

“I just need coffee or something...” Emily started to walk past her, resolving that Pip was probably in good hands, or that the traitor deserved a traitor’s death for fraternizing with the enemy.

“Emily, no.” Sheila went as far as to grab Emily’s wrist as she was walking away. Obviously she wasn’t going to cross a line, but so far the girl seemed to respond well to verbal instructions padded with a guiding force, be that because of the alcohol or her nature. Regardless, Sheila wasn’t as merciful to not exploit it. “There’s no coffee,” maybe there was, but in the reality Sheila was presenting to her, there certainly wasn’t, “let’s get back in bed?”

“But I’m just...” Emily found herself explaining her actions, but the well of wisdom dried up for a couple reasons. First and foremost was a slight surreal feeling. Why did she need to explain herself, a grown adult, to another adult about why she didn’t need to go to bed yet? Second, why did the louder voice in her head simply want her to fold and obey?

Sheila up until now indirectly communicated to the intoxicated and tired Emily that she was a neutral, orderly type. She wasn’t seeing that so much anymore as she stared up at the woman. Maybe it was only for a brief flash, yet she felt the spark of a stern Joyce. One that had a no-nonsense kind of attitude when it came to naps and bedtime. Joyce had the cushy words, coos and delicate touch that made the bitter pill that much sweeter. None of those luxuries were here now as Sheila’s look commanded obedience.

Before Sheila could say anything else or Emily could start shuffling awkwardly, she instinctively started to retreat back to bed, tail tucked behind her legs as she carried an odd sense of defeat under her belt.

Was this a good time to praise her? Sheila wondered for just a brief moment. Maybe she was getting too immersed into the situation. She did gingerly tuck Pip by Emily’s side though before she drew up the covers. The last step was to leave Emily with her phone so she could call Joyce, but with a recently made escape-attempt to the couch in mind, she made the judgment call to come back in later after she was asleep to leave the phone.

“Do you want any water before I shut off the lights?” Sheila asked. It wasn’t part of the original instruction set, but dehydration after excessive drinking was a fair concern.

“...Sure.” Emily decided as she rose up from the bed.

“No, you stay in bed,” Sheila caught her before her legs came out from under the covers. “I’ll get you a glass. Stay put.”

It was like a pecking order. Sheila found herself whimsically thinking as she started to search for a glass, then thought better of herself by checking for a bottle of water in the fridge. Joyce--Ms.

Summers, sat at the top, naturally. Then there was Sheila as her right hand, followed beneath her by Emily, Little Miss Summers, affectionately patted on the head by the left hand.

Maybe the wine from her dinner with Greg had her fantasizing like this. She was her boss' girlfriend, not her child, even if the subtle things she did notice meant anything at all.

“Do you want the cap off?” Sheila found herself asking, yet was already untwisting the top for her. She waited patiently as Emily sipped from the bottle, taking it back before she could set it on the nightstand. All precautionary. She just got her ready for bed and wasn't looking to prolong the process by drying water out of anything.

“Thanks, Sheila...” Emily murmured as her eyes continued to droop. She wanted to sit up, but the child in her warned that it might only end in Sheila scolding her to lay back down. It was all baseless conjecture, yet both Emily and Sheila in their opposing positions found themselves confused whether to envision each other one way or another. Just an adult, or just a child? Just a secretary, or just a babysitter? Neither answer was completely true, but both were acting in a way that did imply one over the other. Sheila continued to babysit while Emily let herself be sat upon.

“You're welcome.” She turned the lights off next with the only source of light being the faint sky through the hotel window. She hung by the doorway, saying, “I'll be here until Joyce comes back, so if you need anything I'll be in the room outside, okay?”

“Mhmm...” Emily turned the other way, always mesmerized by how simply turning the other cheek to your pillow could make a world of difference in maximizing your comfort levels. She'd already long forgotten about rebellion, now making amends with Pip as he lay snuggled against her chest.

Considered a job past the bulk of its difficulties, Sheila closed the door as silently as she could, turning back into the more illuminated living space as she found herself on the couch. Being in a dress she didn't feel too comfortable getting comfortable, especially in her boss' hotel room. Maybe in that regard Emily in her brief little fantasy wasn't as low as she'd thought in the hierarchy. Joyce's left hand? It made sense in a way, considering you never hear about the left-hand man as opposed to the right. She never did hear the specifics about her boss' homelife, only the generalizations and “hypotheticals” that would occasionally pop up.

A mostly quiet hour and a half did ensue, leaving even Sheila feeling a bit sleepy. She could only hope that her boyfriend wasn't waiting for her. This all in itself was a surprise sort of sprung on her, but thankfully she did make it clear beforehand that something like this could happen.

Buzzing beside her was her phone, picking it up and seeing that it was her boss.

“Hello? Ms. Summers?” Sheila answered.

“Sheila? I’m outside the room. Could you let me in?”

Hanging up she rounded the couch and over to the door. Looking through the peephole confirmed as the voice on the line had told her. Once she opened it up Joyce on the other side let out a small sigh of relief as her shoulders hung dramatically low.

“Finally, it’s over... I would have knocked, but I didn’t want to give Emily an excuse to wake up.” She didn’t hesitate in half-kicking off her heels. “I know how those things can run so long, but I guess my body sort of forgets if they’re too few and far between...”

“Did you get to speak to everyone you wanted to?” Sheila asked, hanging by the doorway still. She was always available, but even she wanted to go back to her room.

“Yes, I did... Thank you again so much for not only finding Emily, but taking her back up here for me.” Then, by a slip of the tongue she accidentally asked, “Was she good for you?”

“No issues,” Sheila confirmed, quietly taking in the last question as a mental log. “I did give her some water before bed though since it seemed like she drank a fair amount...”

“Thank you, so-so-so much.” Joyce blinked and rubbed her eyes. “Sheila, please. Everything from tonight, even tomorrow. Please, go out or something with your boyfriend. Buy something nice, go out for lunch; I want to show you how thankful I am. This night was supposed to be a night off for you, but I forced this on you...”

“I’ll...keep it in mind.” Sheila sufficed, a little too tired herself to go through the mandatory back-and-forth before an inevitable compromise. “It’s no issue at all. Whenever you need help I’m always available, Ms. Summers.”

Joyce nodded with a smile. “Okay.” She glanced over at the room key that was thoughtfully left in an obvious place. “You can leave now. I think I’m ready for bed myself...”

“Have a good night, Ms. Summers.” Sheila bid farewell as she closed the door after hearing a final goodbye from her boss.

Now with only two in the suite, Joyce eyed the closed door as she tip-toed over to it, gently turning the handle as she crept inside the dark room.

By the sound of her quiet rise and fall in breaths through her nose, Joyce was delighted to see that Emily was fast asleep, snuggling with Pip, no less. Damn. If only she could take a picture... She wouldn't dare though, not when she was sleeping so peacefully.

In a chair by their suitcases, Joyce watched for just a little longer. Then she shifted her gaze out the window. Then back to Emily...then back outside. But every time she did glance to and fro, her axle would experience friction as she slowed every time to look at something in between. Her suitcase.

One look.

Two looks.

Three.

Certainly Emily was asleep. Certainly.

Naughty was the best way to describe it. Peeking at the presents hidden in the attic before "Santa" came to deliver them. Something like that.

Joyce was slouched over on her knees as she quietly unzipped a small pocket. Stuffed inside was a packet of travel tissues. A welcome companion, but predominantly a decoy and a rouse for this trip.

Joyce was bad and she was completely self-aware. No matter how hard she tried, she never could go completely clean, could she? Dangling from her finger was her little addiction; a fix she couldn't quite kick.

One of Emily's pacifiers.

Her eyes came just above the mattress, fantasizing the dream of "accidentally" leaving it by the girl's mouth and watching her take to it so easily. She softly exhaled with a dreamy smile imagining the thought. Maybe if Emily didn't mind they could make this her next habit...

But of course, no amount of future plans that involved consent excused anything for what happened in the past or now. When Emily left to go use the computer Joyce had been packing like normal, honest to God. But...she just wanted to see the nursery at least once before they left for the night. It'd been her ritual. A night when it wasn't used was like neglecting a puppy. She at least needed to see it in all its glory regularly. So with her alone time she did...

Then, all the thoughts plagued her mind about tonight. All the things that could go wrong for Emily and how she could just become a big ball of stress. That's how she got to thinking about bringing Pip. But what good was a contingency plan if not without a backup one? It was all too convenient in Joyce's mind to *not* bring a pacifier. It was small, easy to hide, and quick to deploy. And if all went well, Emily would never have to know. And she wouldn't. These were the white lies she couldn't rid herself of... But on the other hand, if she were confronted directly about it, of course she'd admit to it. But if Emily never had any suspicions, there'd never be the chance she'd ask?

Her finger playfully flicked at the silicon bulb until she started to yawn herself.

It was unfortunate in its own way that they didn't get to use it tonight... Content with her secret little ritual, Joyce started to undress before joining her girlfriend in bed.

While Joyce toyed with the cute image of Emily having a fixation on pacifiers, she'd blinded herself to the reality before her that wasn't far off from her own imagination. Little by little, Emily already was showing tiny cute dependencies or little habits slowly being drawn out of her and inked on her like permanent tattoos.

All it took was Joyce getting in bed and the slight impression in the mattress for Emily to slide over in her sleep. Maybe her sixth unconscious sense could feel the tinge of body heat Joyce had, but it didn't change that something in the girl decided she wanted to be close to the person next to her.

Despite being so late to bed, Joyce and Emily were now back in their usual posture; head to bosom and arm over the waist. So in spite of all the hiccups and as a bonus to the good moments that they did have, it was unreal to consider a public outing finally a positive experience. No sore feelings or "big" talks that needed to be had in post. Just a wonderful experience overall, with seemingly endless more to come.

Joyce's hand found itself absentmindedly rubbing Emily's bottom, going as far as to sneak underneath her silk shorts and beneath the waistband of her underwear. If she wasn't going to get the feel of crinkly plastic-backed cuteness, she wanted nothing less than the source itself. The panties and big girl clothes were all silly disguises in Joyce's playful mind. Costumes for the big role Emily put on for everyone else. Seeing down in just her birthday suit maintained that everything she wore was superficial. Everything except what Emily wanted Joyce to decide for her. Thicker, more durable clothes. Bright colors, soft pastels, crinkly underpants. Her last few conscious thoughts were spent on all the different outfits she could see Emily in whilst rhythmically stroking her bare bottom.

Both parties feeling content now, Joyce wasn't much longer until she was fast asleep too.