

## 28 - Game Over

“Let me go check your bathroom.”

Mary walked into Joyce’s bathroom, already spotting the first thing she needed on the counter: handsoap. She turned on the faucet to get the cold water running, now looking for something to fill it with.

“Well, paper cups aren’t going to work...” she murmured, turning to the closet, finding nothing more than a box of cup refills, towels, amenities and nothing else that was useful.

Next came the cabinets. Nothing in the top two on either side of the mirror, so the bottom ones were next... Though, when she got on her knees, she saw something peculiar in the bin underneath the counter.

It was white - well, mostly white. It looked a bit yellow and discolored... She could see fringes of light green around the edges, and it had a bit of a smell to it. It was large and took up the entire base of the trash bin. Then, the more Mary stared at it, the more suspicion she had. No...it couldn’t be.

A mother of many years, disasters and disgusting situations, reaching into a trash bin was the least of her worries. The only thing to be afraid of was touching a used needle, and she hardly expected to find something like that here.

When she did pull it out, there was a brief moment of surprise, mainly because Mary wasn’t fully expecting to find what a mere inkling of herself thought it might be. Holding it from the top, the crotch of the diaper unfolded with a weighty slump. A wet diaper.

It was covered in designs. Barney? No...it was Sesame Street, if she remembered right... Apart from being used, she smiled a little. The diaper did look cute, in a nostalgic sort of way. Designs had really progressed since the days when she was an active mom... Regardless, the diaper was large. Larger than a normal-sized baby would wear.

Was...was this Emily’s? Naturally, it was the first connection she would make. Then she sighed, realizing that this was probably another “secret” she wasn’t supposed to find.

Well, there was no helping it now. The discovery hardly phased Mary, because after all, she wasn’t going to tell anyone. But, if Joyce did want to keep it a secret and handle it properly, the

least she should know is that a diaper shouldn't go in the trash bin. After all, the smell would fester otherwise.

Standing back up, she carried the diaper with her into the next room, casual on all fronts. If she didn't make a big deal out of it, hopefully her daughter would feel the same way...

But she didn't stop to consider what Emily might think. She didn't consider Emily at all, namely because she didn't expect to find her in the room to begin with. So, you might imagine why such a calm and collected woman up until thus far since her introduction, could be so more-than slightly surprised by the sight of her.

"O...oh! E-Emily," Mary spoke, the only one even remotely composed enough to make words. Did she not hear her come in over the noise of the sink? Joyce and Emily were caught in headlights, still staring at the glaring contraband hanging from Mary's hand.

She said her name from shock, but Emily could feel the accusatory blows wallop her over the head. Her stomach churned.

"...Th-that's, th..." Emily's lips were moving but the words wouldn't come out like she wanted. Her tongue didn't want to listen either, scaring her into thinking she might choke on it. Sheer panic was written all over her face and the best she could do was look to Joyce for help. "Uh...uhm..." She was starting to feel like a wobbly foundation as her legs trembled.

Joyce was just as frazzled as Emily. Was she supposed to be angry? Upset? Worried for Emily? Writhing with guilt, because she let her mother into the bathroom to begin with? Only seeing the diaper now made it obvious how it may have been seen in the bathroom, but does that mean it was her fault to not expect her mom up and grabbing a diaper out of the trash for who in the hell knows what reason?! When would the divine punishments end?

For that small sum of seconds a suffocating silence filled the room like a potent stench, and thankfully that wasn't coming from the diaper. Instead, all they could seem to wade through was the dense muck known as sheer awkwardness, uncertainty and embarrassment.

"Joyce," Mary said again, garnering both of their attention, "it's okay, you don't need to keep beating around the bush. I think I understand now."

"Y-you," Joyce nervously gulped, "you do?" Please, let there be some minute, miniscule speck of hope left in this vast and deep pit of misfortune. Anything to let her mom miss the mark even in

the slightest. Just having to stand here like this hit both Joyce and Emily somewhere sensitive, an extremely raw place that was being scorched under the beating sun.

Mary's last three words were too much for Emily. While Joyce may have been ousted for being the puppetmaster, it was a bittersweet complement to Mary holding a diaper that Emily wet last night.

Maybe for Joyce in the shadows, but right now it was Emily's reputation on the line, exposed to a person so crucial to the wellbeing of her relationship with Joyce, and that very crucial and very fragile piece of information scared her in a way that not even a horror movie could. She was living a nightmare right now and it was starting to show.

"Awwh, Emily, honey," Mary spoke to her with a sympathetic smile, setting the diaper down and walking over to her. Why was she? What was she doing? Was she going to ridicule her? Berate her? Slap her? Why wouldn't she? After all, she'd just been discovered to be a grown woman that likes acting like a full-on baby for her girlfriend. How could she not find it weird? She'd never look at Emily the same way again. She'd tell Frank and then he'd harbor the same doubts and disgust. Everything she'd worked so hard to build with Joyce and her parents would be ruined. Everything was ruined. Nothing would be left...!

She suddenly hiccuped, feeling the tears rolling down her hot cheeks. Why did she have to cry so much? It was one crying fit after another! Then, she braced herself for what Mary might do or say, but in all honest truth, she was ready to collapse at the mere drop of a single syllable. However, instead she was thrown off her mental balance once Mary wrapped her arms around her.

Emily expected to be touched, but not as softly as this. She was planning for a hand to the face, not arms around her torso. "It's okay, sweetheart," Mary soothed, much to Joyce and Emily's stunned surprise, rubbing her hand up and down her back. She leaned back to get a better look at Emily, daring enough to wipe away one of her tears. "There's no need to be embarrassed, okay?"

The soothing was strange and unexpected, but Emily was still desperate to throw her off the trail, off the scent. They had one golden rule for the parent's visit, and it'd just been shattered.

"P-please, it's not what y-you think...! It's just...or it's...!" Why? Why couldn't she think of anything? But, above all else, in the face of fetishism and kinkdom, why was Mary *hugging* Emily, of all things?

“Emily, I know you’re upset that I found out, but I don’t want you to think that I’d *ever* use it against you. There’s no shame in what you can’t help, sweetie.”

*No shame in...?* Joyce kept looking on, just as confused, and only as an afterthought did Emily slightly pan her eyes over to Joyce.

“M-mom...?” Joyce started to speak, and it did get her attention, but it was abundantly clear who was in control of the situation.

“Here, would you feel better if you got to be next to Joyce?” She loosened the hug and gestured to her daughter. Emily was still distraught, but right beside terror sat a growing confusion as to *what* Mary might know. This was bad, most certainly, but neither Emily nor Joyce knew *how* bad.

Above all else, Mary’s reaction seemed...awfully tame. But aside from that, she did speak to Emily’s tendencies, because she did want to be with Joyce right now. More than anything. She gave her strength and shelter, and there was a raging storm right now.

So, like a child following a mother’s gentle suggestions, Emily did leave Mary, not even caring how it looked when she wrapped her arms around Joyce, nuzzling her head into her chest as her legs finally gave out. She needed this, otherwise she might really lose her mind. Though, she continued to vent through tears.

Emily was ruined, and Joyce felt just about the same, but even under all the stress and disaster she couldn’t seem to collapse with Emily right beside her. She wanted to soothe her, tell her everything was going to be alright, but she wasn’t prepared to outright lie to her. Her partner. Her little girl.

Joyce hugged her back, but she still kept looking at her mom. She tried to think of something that might dissuade her, but she had that look in her eyes, a look of pure determination. Nothing Joyce would say could change her mind. It really was over. She knew.

The trio sat on the bed, which was where Mary dropped a bombshell.

“Emily, it’s okay if you need to wear diapers sometimes. I don’t think anything bad about you because of it.”

Joyce looked down at Emily, feeling her grip grow tighter and her cheeks still crimson. She was definitely going to need a minute. Much more than a minute. Meanwhile, Joyce had to fully digest what her mother just said.

“Wh-what?” Joyce asked.

“Joyce, I had some ideas after everything I’ve seen, but you can’t tell me I’m wrong after what I saw in the bin,” she said, reaching over, thoughtfully rubbing Emily’s shoulder. Did...did she have the right?

That stung. Meaning, her mom had been suspecting something was up since the start? She didn’t even fully understand what her mom *thought* she knew. All she could think of now was that her mom didn’t know the full truth, thankfully enough, but on the flipside was painting her perception of Emily into a dangerous corner.

“Please...it’s not what you think...” Emily mumbled past the tears and hugs,

“Emmy, sweetheart,” did...did she just use her pet name? “It’s okay, you don’t have to pretend now.”

“Mom...what are you talking about?”

“What? Joyce, could we stop with the secrets?” Mary didn’t lose that look in her eyes; determined to pull back the curtain that was only hanging by just a few more threads. “I didn’t think much at first, but I started to see the signs, you know.”

“S-signs?” Emily whimpered.

“Oh, please don’t be mad, Emily,” Mary spoke apologetically, sounding more compassionate to her than Joyce could ever imagine for herself. Maybe she really did have a soft spot for Emily... The biggest thing to notice though was how it wasn’t a total outrage right now. No one was blowing up, so...Joyce couldn’t help but think there was something amiss. The way her mom talked, it wasn’t what Joyce would expect. It was almost as if she thought something else?

Need?

Necessity?

She talked about the diapers like Emily *had* to wear them, which she didn’t. So, then...?

“I guess what got me thinking was when we were first at the zoo. When Emily disappeared and you went after her, well, I thought it may have been something else when you said it was bathroom-related, Joyce, but...seeing everything now, I guess it really was.”

Joyce had to take a mental pause, taking stock of the many possessions she held in this house. She had to think, did she own a gun? Because if she did, she had every intention to shoot herself in the foot with it, considering what her mom just said. What was supposed to be a small lie to cover their relationship troubles had done the exact opposite of helping them. It only made her mom more suspicious of Emily, and Joyce never stopped to consider once how that might affect the future.

“The next time was when we got home last night. Joyce, Emily, I promise I wasn’t snooping, but when I was walking down the hall to our room, well...the bathroom door was open.”

She could feel it. The knife sticking into her. It was her fault for not closing the door. She could have prevented this. All that paranoia she’d been trying to shake off, it had been a sign. A warning.

“...” Emily had gone mute. Everything was slowly beginning to unravel, their poor facade they used to hide away the truth for the sake of Joyce’s parents and themselves, but even then they couldn’t manage that!

“It’s okay if you need help sometimes; I don’t mean to make fun of you at all, Emily,” and while she assured the girl, Emily felt herself growing smaller and smaller. Did they keep any rocks in here? She was just about ready to crawl under one and die. “I promise I didn’t look; I kept walking as soon as I saw.” Yet, nevertheless, she saw. Joyce standing in front of Emily while she used the toilet. Like she needed to be supervised. Holding a stuffed animal, no less. And if we were being technical, stuffed mochi, but this was hardly the time for technicalities.

“Then I happened to wake up last night because of the thunder...” Joyce knew exactly what she was getting at, but Emily didn’t, which is why a whole new sinking feeling struck her.

Emily may have been all out of sorts, but she wasn’t stupid. Mary wouldn’t need to speak any further and the message would have been crystal clear. Painfully clear. What Joyce thought of her mom, Emily was finally starting to understand... Yet, why did she have to learn in such a damaging way?

All these secrets, every little moment of vulnerability Emily had shared with Joyce, cuddling with her and being so defenseless, even when at her worst... Emily had come to appreciate having someone sitting right behind her, looking thoughtfully over her shoulder. But beyond even that...an even larger shadow loomed over them both.

With Joyce, having her eyes over your shoulder was too pleasant for words. It was a wonderful and warm atmosphere you could just lose yourself to. But with Mary...it felt more akin to a hunt than simple serenity.

“Y-you...you saw?” Finally, Emily spoke, but hardly did she have the courage to tear her eyes away from Joyce’s body. She may have had the strength to speak, but even then her words were shotty at best.

“I did,” Mary responded calmly, “but it’s okay, sweetheart, it’s nothing I never had to deal with before.”

Well, that made everything better then, didn’t it? Fat chance. Sure, it may have been normal to Mary, a seasoned mother, but not to Emily, a 27-year old adult who just peed herself over a little thunder.

Joyce looked at her mother, incredulous. She’d never had to deal with her in such a strange and compromising way, but with how things were going, should she expect any less? No one but her had the audacity and boldness to navigate through a conversation as difficult as this. A conversation she had no right in starting to begin with.

“M-mom... What...” she already sighed, needing to take a breath. This was too much.

“What...what are you even trying to say? What’s your point?” Joyce had buckled at first, but maybe knowing that it wasn’t a total gameover gave her some confidence. That, and even if she might be a poor excuse for it, she was what stood between Emily and her mother.

“I want to say that you two don’t need to be walking on eggshells around me,” she paused.

“Well, maybe be a bit more discreet around your dad, but apart from that, let’s call it a girl’s secret?” she smiled, whilst Joyce stared and Emily stopped her shaking just to process what she said.

“E-Em...” Joyce looked to be fighting herself tooth and nail on the words she was going to use. Emily wasn’t going to like it, she was sure of it, but Joyce was willing to pay the consequences if it meant damage control. What her mom thought she knew about Emily was a notion that would never change. Unfortunately, once she makes up her mind it’s hard to reverse. In other words, the

only way things could progress were if her mom found out it wasn't some medical condition and in fact something much more deliberate... This was all bad, but the razor-thin silver lining was her mom at least taking it in a supportive light. If she knew the diapers were just for fun...

"Emily's condition..." she held her tongue, almost waiting for Emily to react. Thankfully she didn't, because it was already taking plenty enough energy just to get this half-baked facade out of her mouth. She couldn't remember the last time she struggled with lying so much. How long had she been doing business? Well, then again, she never lied per se, but instead...employed all the right rhetoric...

*Condition?* Emily had pulled her face out of Joyce's torso, daring enough to give a gradual turn towards Mary. She looked sympathetic, but it unfortunately only added to Emily's confusion, anger and regret. It was like putting a fire out that you started, but expecting credit for it. There's no merit in solving the problems you caused. But anyways, what was Joyce even saying? Was she actually going along with it? Her image had already plummeted, and Mary would probably never dissociate the girl from diapers. The world around them was falling apart and their ship was sinking and all Emily could do was cling onto Joyce for dear life, but now even that was starting to seem doubtful.

"Her...condition is something private, Mom." How to fix this was beyond her, but she could at least salvage what was left; dig a foothold before things slipped too far.

"And it will stay private," Mary agreed with a small smile. Joyce knew that look. It was the personal respect she held for herself whenever her deductive work felt validated. It was like telling herself what a good job she'd done solving this mystery... Joyce going along with this only fed into her delusion. "I won't tell a soul."

Joyce was ready to fire back that her knowing made it not private, but she hesitated, feeling she held just as much blame as her mother... All she did was follow the crumb trail and Joyce was the one who made it.

"I...I think it would be best if we dropped the topic here. I don't think anyone here is comfortable talking about it, and I know for a fact that Emily doesn't want to." Please. Please listen.

"I understand," Mary nodded, though still looking happy behind her compassionate face. Joyce knew exactly why and she was trying not to boil over. This happened all the time. Even if you try to shut her out after she breaks the door down, it won't matter much to her. After all, she got to know what was behind it. It wasn't a secret to her anymore and she became that much more all-knowing.



“I’ll be back. I, uhm, need a second with Emily,” she helped the girl onto her feet and they stood up. Her eyes looked a little puffy from the tears, and she couldn’t bear to look Mary in the eye.

“Oh! Well, if you need the bathroom...” she spoke in a lowered voice, as if there were other people trying to sniff out this secret, “You can use the one in here.”

It took a second, but Joyce finally realized what her mom was insinuating. This just looked like another ‘bathroom break’ to her.

“I’ll be back,” Joyce said again, speaking much more plainly, coming off a bit cold. There was no doubt Joyce was expecting more questions from her, and seeing as she was part to blame for this mess, she’d rather that she was the one having to face them and not Emily. She didn’t deserve the shame, prying or overbearing nature of her mother. Her mom did have her good qualities, but this was a time when none of them seemed to come through.

She led Emily by the hand to the hallway bathroom then made sure that it was closed this time. Then she locked it out of paranoia.

Emily looked distraught. She was distraught. They were away from Mary, but she felt no less exposed. She knew Joyce had her reasons, but she couldn’t begin to fathom what those reasons might be. Why did she go along with something like that?

“Why did you say I have a c-condition?” She nearly started tearing up again, settling for just a troubled hiccup.

“First...is it okay if I hug you?” Joyce sounded cautious, mainly because she didn’t feel like she had the right to comfort Emily anymore. She was supposed to only bring her good feelings and experiences, but instead she brought total disaster. Her mom.

Emily quite flung herself at Joyce wrapping her arms around her. Even if there was some animosity felt for Joyce, needing an emotional crutch far-trumped playing the blame game.

“I might be upset,” Emily mumbled into her shirt, “but I’m gonna be even sadder if you start feeling awkward around me.” The fabrics to her shirt stretched a little bit tighter. “I’m scared that your mom found stuff out, but I also don’t understand why she said all that stuff... Why did you say that stuff?” For so many unexpected twists and turns, she was at a loss. Not even Joyce matched her mental playbook.

“Y...yeah,” she hugged Emily back, tighter. “I...really wasn’t expecting a reaction like that. What I said was because I thought I could stop it from getting any worse... I think she really does believe you have a, uhm, weakened bladder, or something...”

Hearing Joyce say it had her feeling hot again, and not in a good way.

“Your mom must think I’m a total freak,” Emily hiccupped, squeezing her hands tighter. Self-loathing as she was, there was also aggravation, too. “But why did she have to snoop around so much? I get it that there were signs, but...b-but...” She felt terrible for thinking poorly of Joyce’s mom, but she had to be justified at least somewhat, right?

“Emily,” Joyce pressed her forehead, “you’re not a freak. The only thing that’s freaky about you is your sleeping habits.” She let it sit for a moment, hoping to stir something even close to a smile. It didn’t, but hopefully it did something. “More importantly, it feels good to know someone else finally understands how much I can hate my mom at times...”

“But I don’t--!”

“Emily,” her hands ran down her partner’s shoulders. “It’s okay to be mad at my mom. I know I am right now... Or my dad,” she added as an afterthought, “but I can’t imagine he’d ever pull a stunt like this... Just because they’re my family doesn’t mean they get a free pass for being a crappy person. You’re allowed to feel how you want to, but if you feel like being the compassionate one, I’ll just be angry for us both.”

“Can...can we take any of this back?” Emily shakily spoke. The gravity was starting to set in again. Her eyes were starting to water again. “W-what’s gonna happen, Joyce?”

She didn’t know what was going to. “Nothing bad is going to happen, don’t worry,” she kissed her as assurance, both for Emily and herself. “I know it sounds bad, what I’m going to say, but please hear me out... Maybe in a way, it’s a good thing she found out...”

Yeah, it definitely sounded bad to Emily. “Wh-what?”

“As you can see, my mom snoops a lot,” she tried to smile a little, but it didn’t do much for the mood. If she couldn’t even convince Emily, there was little reason to think why it might work on herself. “But for our sake, if I can say anything to make you feel better, I’ve never known her to let a secret get out... She definitely likes to know things, but she doesn’t let that kind of information spread. I’m sorry for letting this happen, Emily. I really did betray you...”

“Stop blaming yourself,” Emily spoke clearly, finally hitting a cue she recognized. “We’re a team,” she sniffled, “so we both messed up together.” Even if, objectively speaking, this hit Emily harder than it did Joyce. “A lot of those things she mentioned that she saw was stuff I’m responsible for... Like at the zoo, I was the one who ran off, and despite that you tried to cover for me. It’s not your fault if an excuse you had to make for me doesn’t work.”

“Thank you,” Joyce could feel herself breathe a little. There’s a lot she can handle, but in coming to be together with Emily, she’d learned that just about the one soft spot she really had was Emily. On all other fronts she can withstand almost anything, but if the one person she loved the most, the person she kept so safely tucked away inside her armor and right next to her beating heart were to lash out, it would be beyond painful.

“But,” she hated ‘buts’, particularly only a fan of Emily’s that was spelled with two t’s, “I wanted a second alone with you because my mom is going to ask questions. She’ll say she’ll drop it, but whenever we’re alone I’m sure she’s going to want to ask things. I’ll do my absolute best to make sure you *never* have to deal with that, but I can’t say the same for myself.”

“...So are we really going with this?” Emily laced her fingers awkwardly. “Is she going to really think I sometimes have to wear...diapers?”

Why did she have to look like that? Words were one thing, but tone, expression, body language and atmosphere told a completely different story. Even if she spoke with only reluctance, everything about this felt so terribly wrong. Was she putting up a front for Joyce? Just so she didn’t feel even worse about herself?

“I...I think we have to. Because, after all, I think this might be better than her knowing the full truth...”

Solemnly, Emily nodded. That was true.

“So, I’m looking for your permission,” Joyce took Emily’s hands into hers. “If she asks me questions, is it okay if I ad-lib things? I don’t expect it to affect you, but I want permission to speak on your behalf. About your...condition,” she said the last part with air quotes.

“...mhm...” meekly, she nodded.

“Please,” Joyce came to be at eye-level with her, “what can I do to make you smile?” It was a foolish question. Emily had said Joyce was the one who understood her the most, so why

couldn't Joyce do something as simple as making her happy? Maybe she couldn't because she knew the truth, something her own pride was keeping her from seeing.

Emily exhaled a little, fading into a weak smile. "I don't suppose you know how to turn back time?"

Joyce pulled her closer, murmuring, "I'm so sorry..." There would be a great deal of things to talk about after all this was over. If their relationship survived for that long...

"It's okay..." really, it wasn't, but to say anything right now meant Joyce would hog all the guilt to herself, and the idea of that made Emily ache more than the thought of her own predicament. "All I can really hope for though is that your mom doesn't think too badly of me..."

"It might sound strange, but I don't really think that was her reaction..." Not even disgust, really, considering the woman could so nonchalantly carry a used adult diaper designed for kids like it was her handbag. "I can't even begin to fathom what really goes on in that woman's head, but if she's bold enough to do what she did back there, she definitely doesn't hold anything against you."

Words didn't speak so loudly as actions did, hence why Emily wasn't feeling much more optimistic. And if it weren't bad enough, there was something else she didn't consider, now knowing the things Mary had seen. "W...wait. If your mom saw what happened last night, then did she see my..." her gaze started to drift to the floor, "...Pip?"

Joyce was at a loss. Blow after blow seemed to strike Emily, and all she could do was watch. But she couldn't lie to her. If it meant preserving a surprise or the excitement, then maybe a white lie went a long way, but a lie like this would be crude and damaging. For all the fuck-ups Joyce had caused this visit, she owed it to Emily to be as transparent as possible, even if it made things worse.

"Yes, she did..." even Joyce hesitated, seeing Emily's expression worsen just a little more. "But...she already knew about it..."

"What?" That perked Emily's look, straight into Joyce's eyes. It was a look of confusion and Joyce could feel herself becoming physically ill. "How? How did she know? Did you tell her?" Even if she didn't mean it, her words sounded accusatory and they struck Joyce like bullets.

She didn't tell her, but in trying not to she pretty much did. "N-no! I...when, when they first came into the house and you went back to the room, my mom saw Pip on the couch... I tried to say it was mine," yeah, tried with a lowercase 't'. "But...I wasn't so great at convincing her."

Emily didn't give much of a response, adding to the deafening atmosphere that tortured Joyce. It was starting to feel so eerily similar to her days of isolation. Her days without Emily, shaking her heart as it did the tears in her eyes.

"You know, as bad as Jack was...I can't remember going through this much when I met his parents..."

Joyce creased her brows, ridden with guilt. Why wouldn't she be regretting their relationship by now? She was looking down so low she could barely even see Emily's feet, already blurred by her tears.

As if the atmosphere couldn't have been any worse, a meek sigh from Emily's passing breath soured things just a little more. Even the smallest form of rejection from her was more than Joyce could handle.

"Fine, I admit it," and then, Joyce felt something lean into her. "I...I'm not happy with your mom right now... Actually, no, I am mad at her." Even if Joyce was busy looking at the floor, with Emily hugging her, looking right up, it was impossible for their eyes not to meet. "Not you. So don't cry, okay?"

The mood had changed on a dime, when of all people having to deal with the most stress, it was Emily shining a toothy smile up at Joyce.

"You promise you're not mad at me...? Y-you have every right to be, though?"

"Even if I do," Emily paused to sniff away her own teary residue, "I can't expect you to be perfect at handling everything, even if you tell me to butt out~..." she looked at her suspiciously, funnily enough making Joyce look flustered. "And about Pip -- I can't really get so worked up over that, considering she would've found out last night if not earlier... Even still, what's finding out I have a stuffed toy if she already thinks I have to wear...you know..."

"I..." She told herself she could handle this, but whenever Emily confronted her, none of that bravado, calculated thought, or composure ever seemed to exist. "I'm sorr--" but before she could finish her somber resolve, Emily pushed a finger against her lips.

“New rule, as decreed by the Emily Magistrate,” she spoke in a wonderfully exaggerated posh manner, “that under any circumstances is Joyce to apologize to me, it shall be one kiss deducted from the debt which I owe--no, ten kisses!” Then her serious look transitioned into something a bit more goofy. “Or something, like that?”

Joyce then had a look of pure adoration for her. “Thank you. I promise I’m going to do better.”

“At least for something like this, I don’t want you to promise me anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because then you’ll start holding yourself to a standard, which is fine, I think, but I don’t wanna ever have to feel critical about you. I never will, so if you’re gonna set the bar for yourself, don’t tell me about it. Just knowing you want to be better is enough for me.”

“Did...did Michael tell you that?”

Emily scoffed. “Rude! I can come up with cool things to say on my own too, you know?” Of course, she can’t imagine it’d be articulated in a very wisdom-like way...

She stared at the perplexing girl for a little bit longer, until finally the tears had subsided and she laughed a little. “Thank you. You’ve taught me another important lesson.”

“Well, I’ve definitely learned a lot about myself...and relationships in general, since being with you...” she smushed her thumbs together, “I’ve done a lot of things I’d never imagine myself doing. And to think, finding out I’m attracted to more than just men is only the vanilla tip to a very, uhm, metro...politan iceberg. Yeah, like that.”

Joyce seemed on-board with her words, up until the tail end, reasoning why her brow was cocked.

“W-well, they can’t always be cool...” Emily mumbled under her own embarrassed breath.

The horrible stench from earlier had dissipated and all that was left was a refreshing gust blowing through Joyce’s lungs and heart. Laughing some more, she squeezed Emily in a brief hug.

Though, if only paradise could continue on forever. There was a gentle knock on the locked door.

“Joyce? Emily?” They were in high spirits, but even Mary was enough to ground them. Emily could see the look on Joyce’s face transition to agitation, but thankfully it was directed rather than self-loathing. And really, even in Emily’s perspective this was getting to be too much...

Standing up, Joyce walked over to the door, leaning close beside it. “Yes?” she answered back.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was...well...’okay’. It’s been a little bit...”

“Yes, everything is fine. We’ll be out soon.” Joyce looked about ready to strangle something.

“Alright then. If, uhm...” it was the beginning of a gesture Joyce had no intention in humoring.

“It’s alright. We’ll be out soon.”

Emily, meanwhile, remained where she was, as confused as ever by her partner’s mother. Internally, Emily wondered why she could feel such strongly opposing emotions at the same time? Sympathy and Anger, somehow co-existing by living on their side of the fence. She meant well, but that doesn’t excuse all the doors she kicks down to achieve it.

“She really thinks I have bladder issues...” she lowly spoke and wallowed in disbelief. They’d just shared a few good moments, but reality was catching up fast. Even now, to Mary, being in here probably looked like another one of those “moments” to her.

“But, I guess it could be worse...” Yet even still, how was she supposed to face her? There was still that terrible feeling of vulnerability...

“Don’t worry, I’ll talk to her,” Joyce comforted, walking back from the door. “Just a little longer then she’ll be out of our hair.” She would’ve said ‘they’, but that would be rude to her dad. Unlike his wife, Frank wasn’t bad company. “I can’t imagine you even want to look at my mom now,” Joyce certainly didn’t. “So, how about I tackle her while you go hang out with my dad?”

“Alright,” Emily shrugged. Nothing against Frank, truly, but interacting with people seemed so stressful right now. She’d just been script-casted as the pants-pisser and it was already taking a lot not to collapse over that. Funny, considering peeing a diaper was once enough to put her to tears. Despite the recent tears, maybe she really was taking this in stride. That, or it was shock.

She wasn’t exactly eager about getting back on her feet, walking to the door. Yes, their secret wasn’t out, but something dangerously close to it was. Play their cards wrong, it’d stand to be even worse than it already was right now.

“Do you feel okay?” Joyce asked. Joyce sure wasn’t, and she didn’t expect Emily to be much different, yet she still felt compelled to check.

“No, but I’ll be better once this is all over... You?”

“I couldn’t put it any better than you already have.”

“...It just doesn’t feel real... We’ve been...exposed, in a way, but maybe we’re not totally panicking because it’s sort of like limbo...”

And with an even greater sigh, by the touch of Emily’s finger the toilet erupted with a swirling and plummeting flush. Joyce, though, looked at her questioningly for a second, considering neither of them actually “used” the bathroom.

“Gotta make it believable, I guess.” Emily shrugged.

“I hate to say it, but that’s honestly not a bad idea...”

The pair stepped back into the hall, a bit cautious as to what might jump out at them, but thankfully there was no surprise ambush waiting.

“I’ll go...finish up with my mom, then how about we find some way to get out of the house? Take our minds off of this?”

Emily agreed. This house was starting to feel more suffocating by the second. Every footprint she left behind felt incriminating somehow. If they didn’t think they were on thin ice before, they sure as hell were now.

Emily walked to the right, back into the living room whereas Joyce took the left, into the dragon’s den.

And there she was, Ground Zero herself sitting on the bed, waiting for someone to come back. That someone was Joyce.

“Is Emily alright?” Mary asked, and to her credit, she did sound concerned. Her mother wasn’t a monster by intention, which made dealing with her so much harder. It was like punishing a puppy that didn’t know any better. But only puppies got a free pass; not grown dogs.



“No, she isn’t, but hopefully some time will help. You really crossed a line, mom.”

“Is...is she mad at me?” It was almost amazing how this hit her only in retrospect.

“You’d need to ask her, but if I were in her shoes, I know I’d be. I get you were trying to help, mom, but don’t you understand how embarrassing it can be to have someone find out your deepest secret?”

“I wasn’t planning to see her when I pulled her diaper out of the bath--”

“You shouldn’t have been doing that to begin with,” Joyce sharply cut her off. “What were you even thinking?” There was a whole secondary argument to her even finding the diaper to begin with, but that fell short on account of Joyce’s own fault and her shortened time to argue with her mother.

“Since we were cleaning up, when I saw the diaper I thought I could help show you how to get rid of those properly. You can’t let them sit in an open bin or else it’s going to--”

“Smell. Yes, I know. It was only temporary. Can we go back to cleaning the carpet now?”

Mary stood up and brought them over to Joyce’s bedside where a sponge and bucket of foamy water sat.

“It’s a couple things mixed with warm, soapy water. Just use the sponge to wet the carpet a bit and it’ll start to come out.” Despite Mary explaining it, she looked as if she were going to do the actual cleaning herself, however Joyce was simply faster. She was on her knees and grabbed the sponge, soaking it and touching the floor without hesitation.

“...So where do you throw them away normally?”

“In the trash.” It was a less than enthusiastic response.

“...Well, which bin do you use? If it’s not that bathroom one is it the other one? I don’t think that’s a good idea either, since it’s still open...”

How badly Joyce wanted to tell her off. She knew how to clean up. She knew how to handle a used diaper. But she couldn’t be so upfront, otherwise it’d make things worse. Her fuse was already short, so she’d do her best not to light it.

“I use the kitchen garbage. It’s closed and contained so there’s no smell.” Did that satisfy her? She continued to scrub. By now the small stain from earlier was overshadowed by the mass of wet carpet. Now with calmer emotions, she was really starting to hope this home remedy did work...

“Do you always?”

“...Yes?” Why wouldn’t she?

“Well, I guess that should be fine, but have you had any guests over since Emily’s been here? What happens if someone sees it in the trash?”

Every response from Joyce was slow and methodical, simply because she couldn’t prevent another outburst otherwise. Her mom was trying to be helpful, but damn if it wasn’t annoying to have hole after hole be poked into simple lies that meant nothing to begin with!

“W-well...” she sighed, thinking of no easy answer other than resigning themselves to being recluse. “It hasn’t happened, so we’re not worried about it.”

“...But what if it did?”

Joyce plunged the sponge into the bucket with a bit more force.

“How about I take over?” Mary was on her knees, gently taking the sponge from Joyce. With a small huff, she grabbed a towel, rubbing her hands.

Might as well nip it in the bud... “What are you trying to suggest, Mom?”

“All I’m saying is you might want to consider getting a separate trash bin for Emily’s, you know...”

“Mom... Emily’s...condition isn’t as bad as you think. She doesn’t have to wear them often...”

“Really? How often does she wear them?” It wasn’t accusatory, but rather concerningly curious. Yeah, she definitely didn’t think badly of Emily. She was trying too hard than someone who didn’t care would.

The worst was that Joyce was right on the money. Already she’d need to take some of those “creative liberties” Emily allowed her.

“...At the most, t-...two times a week?”

“Only two?” Only? Had she honestly been expecting more?

“Y-yes. Only that much...”

“So is it stress that affects her then?” More than anything Joyce wanted to anticipate her questions, so she could come up with better answers, but she was too frazzled to expect anything. She was working overtime just to keep up with her mother’s pace. If she’d been cleaning at the same time, she didn’t know what might’ve slipped from her mouth...

“Stress? What? What do you mean?”

“It’s not much different from when you were kids, Joyce. Sometimes things can be a little too exciting or stressful. It can affect the body more than we think, so if Emily already has a medical condition, she might be more susceptible to it.”

While Joyce ran a medical company, she wasn’t exactly the all-knowing figure of all medical knowledge, especially her girlfriend’s made-up bladder troubles.

“Are you saying you think you and Dad might be affecting her?” Her mom was certainly a stressor, considering Joyce’d be like a fountain if she had a “condition” too.

“Meeting someone’s parents for the first time can be exciting...and a bit stressful. After all these bathroom trips, it just seemed a little more than once or twice a week, I suppose.”

“W-well, maybe you have been stressing her out a bit...” Nothing like using her mom’s own medicine against her. “Besides, all those trips were just...” yes, extreme liberties were being taken, “just making sure she...made it on time.”

A hand touched Joyce’s knee.

“You’re a very good person, you know? A lot of people wouldn’t be able to get past that in a relationship.”

Ugh, if only she knew. The way she spun her tale, it sounded as if Joyce were doing Emily a favor. When in reality, the opposite couldn’t have been any more true. That, and it was anything but a nuisance if it had been true.

“R-right...” Joyce mumbled.

“So does she change her own diapers?” Out of the pan and into the fire.

“What? What are you--? N-no, she doesn-- I mea--” damnit, damnit! Why couldn’t she keep her tongue in line?! “Yes, she does!”

“I’m sure she can, Joyce,” Mary chuckled, “she’s in her late twenties, so I can imagine she has the practice. But you know there’s no shame in having someone else help too, right? I imagine it’s a lot easier when someone else does the job for her.”

Joyce looked down, crestfallen. She said something again she wasn’t supposed to...

“Honey, I promise, I’d never use something like that against her, or you. It might sound a little strange, but it’s something unique that you two can share?” From Joyce’s mouth, it might sound a little more digestible, but hearing it from her mom, an outsider, now it did feel a little weird. Could they stop talking about this now? Why did she need to know so much?

“...Can I ask you a personal question?” Oh? Did nothing before this count as personal? It truly must be a wonderland in this woman’s head...

“What?”

“Be honest,” Mary chuckled a little, “how did changing her for the first time go?”

“*M-mom!*”