

19 - One Last Gift

“Why aren’t you getting ready for bed, too?” Emily always felt weird about not being dressed the same as everyone else. It felt like she was unprepared for something, and she hated the idea of being different.

“Because,” Joyce patted Emily down, making sure the diaper was nice and snug under the sleeper, “I still need to clean up a bit tonight so it’s easier in the morning.” Emily wasn’t pleased with the answer, but she was focusing heavily on the soft fleece she was encased in. It was the perfect combination; a heated body from a hot bath being embraced by cool clothing into an even chillier apartment. She loved the feeling, but she still felt the desire to be dressed like Joyce. It really did drive the point home that she was a kid being sent off to bed early...

“But I can help though.” Volunteering herself, and not waiting for an answer, Emily started walking to the kitchen. Of course she stopped though, as a hand had taken hold of her wrist. Sheepishly, she turned back to the tutting Joyce.

“Didn’t we just get finished kissing your last boo-boo?”

“...Yeah, but...” As if the answer were there, Emily’s eyes scanned the floor.

“You already helped me clean up the water, and you apologized. Everything is forgiven.”

“Then why do I have to go to sleep early? I wanna go to bed when you do.”

“It’s not a punishment, hon, and why are you so hung up on this? It’s never stopped you from turning in early before?” As if the prophecy were inevitable, Emily would always meet her maker on the couch late at night. A princess carry to bed would ensue, then Joyce would finish up her own nightly routine.

“You know what I mean.” Emily teasingly grumbled.

Joyce moved closer to Emily, and with both hands grabbed the bundle of fabric attached to the sleeper behind her neck. It was drawn up and over her head, clearly a hood, only that two fluffy, triangular ears sprouted from it. Joyce’s eyes practically sparkled as she admired the sight, and even Emily’s feigned grumpiness did nothing to affect it.

“So adorable...”

Not really noticing the hood to begin with, Emily couldn't feel any extra weight, but she knew something was on the hood. Aimless and without a real destination in mind, her hands traced the surface of it, then found the items which has Joyce gushing so much.

"You gave me cat ears?" Emily exclaimed, blushing as she said so.

"No, *Amy* did," Joyce corrected, but seemed no less happy. "And she did a wonderful job!" She knew what it'd look like, but actually seeing it on Emily took it to a whole other level! The outfit sat on her body perfectly, and seeing the slight bulge from her crotch, and admiring how the fabric stretched over the diaper, the V-cut in her legs being more of a U, just to accommodate the kind of wearer that needed a little extra protection. The way it all teased the infancy trapped inside of it was nearly too much for Joyce to handle. If she had hugged Emily right then and there, she would probably suffer from sensory overload!

"Well..." Emily spoke as she mindlessly bent the corners of the ears, "The stuff she's made so far feels nice..."

"Isn't it?" Joyce enthusiastically agreed. "And they all make you look ten times more adorable!"

The last comment had Emily a bit more flustered, so she tried to focus more on the craftsmanship rather than the appearance.

"We'll need to thank her properly, though."

Emily nodded her head in silent agreement. She'd never had someone go to such lengths for her, apart from Joyce, of course. That being said, Joyce need only throw money at a problem to find a solution. Well, not completely. Joyce was a hard worker of course, and everything thus far was absolute proof of that, but Amy in her own regard was fearsome as well. Everything she had done was by hand and of pure imagination. Emily's clothes were the very essence of her thoughts. It was once more the idea of ownership by another person, and it reinforced the idea of cushiness.

"And you know, I think I know a great way we can do that."

"How?" Emily was all ears to express her gratitude, considering she had four of them now.

"She really wanted to see how these fit you, you know?"

Emily could feel herself becoming a ghost as she pieced the lead-in to Joyce's hint.

“You mean I have to wear these in front of her?” The panic was obvious.

Joyce wanted to try and calm her nerves, but she didn’t right away. “No, you don’t have to, but I think Amy would really appreciate it.”

“How come, though?” The idea of revealing herself to anyone else was an immediate turnoff. She could already feel the mood turning sour.

“Whenever you do something for someone else, or make something, don’t you want to know what they think?”

“I...I guess.” When was the last time she made something for someone though?

“Remember this morning? When you colored that picture for me?”

Oh, right.

Emily nodded her head, feeling no need for further explanation. Even she couldn’t deny the silly pride she felt over such a simple feat. Still, it made Joyce beyond happy, and that’s what Emily yearned for... So, maybe Amy was hoping for the same sort of thing?

“But...” Even with that in mind, it still didn’t make it an easy pill to swallow. “But it’s embarrassing!”

“Didn’t I already tell you there’s nothing to feel ashamed about?” She stroked Emily’s cheek. “Besides...” Joyce suddenly seemed a bit more remorseful. “She does already know about this...” Her face gave no real indication of anything, but Emily knew it was the whole dynamic she was referring to. “The last thing is for her to see it with her own eyes?” Partly, considering she already knew what the clothes looked like, and what she was supposed to account for... Joyce’s eyes observed the diaper bulge for a few moments.

Emily still didn’t answer, and she really didn’t want to right now. She wanted to show Amy her appreciation, but she didn’t want to betray her own privacy either. Even a forceful push by Joyce seemed more scary than exciting right now.

“All I want you to do for now is think about it, okay?” Joyce planted a kiss on her forehead.

“Whatever your answer might be, we won’t mention it at least until my parents are gone.”

“Mhm...” Emily spoke as her mind drifted, unfortunately back to the topic of sleep. Thankfully it was down a different avenue though. “Wait, where are your parents gonna be sleeping tomorrow?”

“In the guest room,” Joyce answered simply.

“Guest room? Isn’t that where I sleep?” Of course it wouldn’t happen, but Emily couldn’t help but imagine herself sharing a bed with two other people...

“Sorry, they’ll need to borrow it for a couple nights?”

“That’s fine. The couch is comfy anyways,” Emily chipperly giggled, secretly happy to have the massive cushions all to herself. Joyce’s chuckle though for some reason stopped Emily’s fantasies. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. You just go with the flow, huh?”

“I guess. I mean, it’s your house and your parents, after all.”

“Wrong. It’s *our* home,” wrapping an arm around Emily’s waist, she let a small meep escape her as she was pulled close. “Besides, you’re *much* too precious to be using the couch.”

“Huh? Where would I sleep, then?” Back in bed with the parents? Ugh? Why did she keep thinking that? She giggled to herself.

Joyce raised a brow.

“With me, of course?”

“...Huh?”

They stared at each other, equally confused as the other. Something snapped though, as Emily blushed harder and harder.

“S-sleep with you? You mean in your bed?” Sharing a bed with Joyce? The more she thought about it, it made sense, but, but was she really going to? Why not skip the nerves and die from anxiety already? She hadn’t once considered the possibility of sleeping with her, but that didn’t mean it was a bad thing...

“Well duh, silly.” The way she treated it so nonchalantly had Emily feeling giddy. It was yet another factor that felt seemingly out of her control, as her fate was dealt by a dealer who moved to the beat of their own drum. She was a pebble caught in the tide, hopeless to fight against it.

“But I really don’t mind the couch?”

“Do you not want to sleep with me?” Joyce didn’t look offended, but that didn’t make Emily worry any less.

“No!” Emily suddenly blurted, nearly covering her mouth from the sheer shock over her own reaction. “N-no, I just mean, I didn’t want to impose...”

Joyce’s mouth slightly trembled, then grew into a smirk as she laughed, further unsettling Emily as she embarrassed herself.

“Impose? C’mere, you...” A tight squeeze refreshed the mood, and Emily felt somewhat at peace again. Smiling contently, Joyce briefly patted Emily’s bottom. “Besides, doesn’t it make sense that we would share a bed by now? We are dating, after all.”

“I guess so...” It certainly felt like Joyce was milking that title for all it was worth... Not that Emily minded, yet it was a thrilling observation. The reminder of girlfriend and girlfriend though made Emily’s heart flutter as she squeezed Joyce back.

“Oh! I almost forgot one last thing,” Joyce spaced themselves a little bit for a better look at each other. She slightly bent her knees to get closer to eye level.

“What is it?”

“Do you want milk or juice for bed?”

Emily’s curious look sunk to a frown, and Joyce grinned, expecting a reaction such as that.

“You know, for a little kitty that loves her naps, you really don’t like being told to go to sleep?”

“Then you go to sleep, too!” It wasn’t the act of going to sleep, but the issue of being the only one doing it. “I feel like I’m missing out if I’m the only one...”

“Trust me, you don’t miss much. Maybe a party, some clubbing, robbing a bank, and a few movies,” Joyce teased, “but other than that I’m not far behind you.”

“Then why can’t I go to sleep when you do?”

“Because it doesn’t work like that.” The answer felt awfully fitting for a mommy figure, and it annoyed Emily to no end. It was a real tradeoff to the cuddles and playing all day. It was her first time in this role being told so, but she knew for a fact she hated bedtime...

“And why doesn’t it?” Emily countered, crossing her arms.

“Because Mommy says so.”

Almost immediately Emily’s arms slumped to her sides, clearly looking inconvenienced by the law that’d just been imposed. She saw no end in sight that involved her victory, and they were most definitely in the end game by now. Her personal reign was the setting sun, while Joyce’s powers transcended time itself, reaching to the far ends of the Earth, and as deep as its core.

“It’s not fair,” Emily pouted. And to be honest, it was partly genuine.

“You’re making it very hard to give you your last treat, you know?”

“Is it me getting to stay up later?”

“So you don’t want it?”

Actions speaking louder than words, with a huff and a puff, Emily sulkily marched off to the nursery while Joyce kept down a laugh the whole way.

“Come on pouty pants, milk or juice?”

“I’m not pouting, though!” She probably was, but the small voice inside of her was telling her to be rebellious right now, and she liked the idea. The helpless struggle seemed entertaining for some reason.

Joyce gave her the ‘Oh, really?’ kind of look.

The irrational part of her was longing for Pip now. At least then it’d be two against one. “...Milk, please.”

“I’ll be right back.”

With bare feet on the much softer floor, Emily briefly meandered around the room until she laid eyes on the giant teddy bear. Mr. Bear, the one that failed to save her from the tickle attacks... Emily eyed him like a comrade that'd betrayed her in the war. Still, she was clearly the bigger person, willing to bury the hatchet as she came to her knees and fell on him with a soft and squishy hug. No real reason compelled her to do it, but she just felt like it. Her entire universe right now was surrounded in soft and loving things, and all she had to do was throw herself in a random direction, and comfort would follow.

A pressure in her bladder became an issue though, as her eyes opened to the unpleasant feel of its knocking. Trying her best to brace herself, Mr. Bear felt the brunt of Emily's physical frustrations as she held onto something while she squeezed it out. The small stream came, and she felt the warmth in her pants, though she wasn't enthusiastic about it. Thankfully it wasn't enough for her to cry over anymore, and she tried focusing on the hugs again.

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"Emmy? Sweetie? You awake?"

With a sudden breath, Emily opened her eyes and could feel the slight nudges to her shoulder. Turning her head, she could see it was Joyce who had a bottle in hand. Did she...did she doze off? Caught red-handed doing the exact thing she said she didn't want to do obviously made Emily angry with herself. Lazing about after a nice bath always did that to her, especially if she didn't manage to fall asleep in the bath to begin with.

With no real part of her body in mind, she muttered inside her head, *traitor...*

Instead of teasing her for it though, Joyce smiled warmly as she helped her up.

"So I see you and Mr. Bear were catching up, huh?"

Interpreting it as simply lounging, Emily nodded her head.

"Well, Mr. Bear seems like he's ready for beddy-bye too.," Joyce assuredly noted, looking over to the inanimate, giant stuffed animal.

“No, he’s still wide awake, actually,” Emily randomly retorted, suddenly feeling the need to flex her imaginary doctorate in bear whispering.

“Is that what he said?” As if to confirm her suspicions, Joyce leaned her ear closer to the bears nose, nodding her head occasionally.

“Mhmm...uh-huh. Is that so?” With every response to the imaginary speech she nodded and murmured assurances. Joyce turned back to Emily. “Mr. Bear said that even if he is wide awake, he knows it’s important to sleep early when you have a big day tomorrow.”

Emily wanted to say she misheard him, but knew what the ultimate endgame would be. Joyce was an expert at speaking stuffed bear, after all...

“Mr. Bear said I shouldn’t have to go to sleep until Mommy does...” Emily mumbled as Joyce led her over to the crib.

“I told you,” Joyce laughed as the repetition kept coming around and around. “I’m only going to be up a little longer! And oh, what’s that Mr. Bear?” She leaned back in for another listen. For a second Emily almost got closer to, but then she remembered distance wouldn’t help her hear something that didn’t actually speak... “Mr. Bear also said that he’s gonna make sure you get a good night’s sleep tonight, and he’ll tell me all about it tomorrow.”

Once a traitor, always a traitor... Sleep with one eye open, Mr. Bear. She turned back to Joyce.

The crib side came down, and Emily was helped inside. Given her bottle of milk, the final nail in the coffin was when the side came back up.

“Did you have a good birthday, my princess?”

Gleefully, Emily nodded her head.

“It’s been the best birthday in a long time,” Emily gave a genuine smile, briefly forgetting how she’d been cheated out of a later bedtime. After all, she had the one woman that made all those silly frustrations possible to begin with. “I mean it, Joyce, thank you.”

Standing up so the bars wouldn’t be so much of a hurdle, the two hugged each other one last time, and then Emily planted herself on the mattress, allowing the blankets to be tucked in over her.

Without a word, Joyce walked away from the crib and to the exit. Emily turned to her side, clutching the bottle. Curiously, she gave it a suck, rewarded by the monumental efforts of her jaw with a small spurt of liquid. The lights began to dim, and just before it was complete darkness, they stopped.

Emily slowly breathed as she soaked in the quiet atmosphere, then was disturbed by the sound of moving in the nursery. Turning her head and rolling over, she was surprised to find Joyce was still in here.

“Jo-Mommy, what are you doing?”

Sliding over a rocking chair, which Emily was equally as surprised to have never noticed to begin with, Joyce sat herself beside the crib. “I promised you a treat, didn’t I? You always seem to need some convincing to go to sleep, anyways.”

Emily watched through the bars as Joyce moved to the closet, walking inside and coming out with something in her hands. It was large and rectangular, and had a simple illustration on the front. Emily could just read the title, as she looked at a cartoonish fox standing on its hind legs wave to the reader with a paw.

“Fennis goes to the Fair”

“Fennis goes to the Fair? Is that a storybook?”

Joyce nodded her head, already opening to the first page. “I know a good story can always put a good girl to sleep.”

“I’m not a good girl, though?” Emily joked, obviously trying to tear down Joyce’s logic for no good reason.

“For any baby that tries to say they’re not sleepy, then,” Joyce without taking her eyes from the page snarkily corrected herself, whilst Emily giggled.

Joyce reached her hand through the bars and ruffled Emily’s hair while she laid on her side, sinking into the pillow and mattress. She cleared her throat and started.

“There once was a big, old forest in a big, old valley in a far, far away place.” She went to speak the next line, then Emily stopped her.

“Wait! But where is it, though?”

“Where is what?”

“The valley?”

“Weren’t you listening? It’s in a far away place.”

“Relative to us, though?”

Joyce looked at her with judging eyes, as Emily snickered over getting the exact reaction she wanted.

“In a far, far away place, approximately 1,673.42 miles from Emmy’s crib located in the corner of her nursery, at least thirty floors off the ground, inside her nice big apartment.” She looked over to the girl trying to choke down a giggle fit. “Better?” Happily pleased, Emily nodded her head.

“And in that forest was a small burrow, sitting next to all the homes of every other furry friend and creature. But who lived in the burrow? Mr. James the jaybird lived in the tree, Sammy the snake lived in the log, Rigby the rabbit slept in the wild vegetable garden, and Felix the frog slept in the swamp? So who was it? Why, it was Ferris the Fox, of course!”

Although a simple narrative, Emily listened intently to the sound of Joyce’s voice. The facial expressions she used to match the tones of question, surprise, delight, and simplicity were all so dynamic in their range that Emily barely minded that there might’ve been illustrations she was missing out on. She could already see it in her head; the array of tiny holes throughout the animal community, sealed off by their own specialty made doors, and some even with their own carved out windows. Since when did animals need windows or doors, though? Whatever, Emily didn’t care enough to question.

“Ferris was all curled up in his bed, slumbering away since late last night.”

“Did he go to a party?” Emily interrupted.

“Maybe? Or maybe he just had a long day at work? Anyways, Ferris slept and slept, but with a start opened his eyes big and wide, shouting at the top of his lungs,” then in a nasally voice turned up an extra octave, Joyce imitated the fox’s shout, “Today’s the day! The fair is here! The fair is here!” Her imaginative voice had Emily laughing once again.

“That’s not how a fox is supposed to sound!”

“Oh? And you do know how they’re supposed to?”

“No, but they probably don’t sound like that.”

“Are you going to keep interrupting?”

Emily between her giggles tried to apologize, and Joyce equally as happy herself continued. In a regular voice she read on. “Ferris bounced from one end of his bed and to the other, excited to have a fun day at the fair. It only came once a year, and Ferris was looking forward to everything he would do there. The fair travelled far and wide and came from the far, far away ocean. There were games, rides, food, and much more. He was especially excited for all the fish he would get to eat.” Passively, both thought to themselves, do foxes even eat fish? Then again, if there was a line to be drawn, why did the talking fox get behind it? “Rushing to get the morning started, he said while brushing his teeth, ‘I can’t wait to eat lots of candy, ride the rollercoaster and play lots of games and win lots of prizes!’”

“Wait!”

Joyce looked over to her, mildly annoyed. As annoyed as a mommy could be with her baby.

“Could you...could you go back to doing the voice?” Emily seemed a bit more sheepish this time.

“Not another peep, understood?”

Emily nodded her head.

Back to the nasally voice, Joyce repeated Ferris’ line again. Emily gleefully listened, happy to hear the voice she’d just criticized return.

The simple story went on like so, and Joyce further introduced a range of dynamic voices as more and more characters were introduced. She didn’t openly say it, but James the jaybird was her favorite voice. The deep voice she used for it reminded her of how Joyce described her dad: ‘booming’. Again, it was simple, but that made Emily no less engaged as she heard the tale. She couldn’t remember a time when she was read to like this. Maybe decades ago, but not really ever until now. There was something vibrant and wonderful that Joyce added to it by hearing it from

her mouth; something that made Emily feel so fuzzy on the inside, as if to make the story digestible for someone as small as her it had to be expressed in silly voices and sounds.

The whole way Emily suckled on the bottle, watching Joyce's basic, yet hypnotic movements as she rocked back and forth in the chair. Every now and then Emily would find herself forgetting what happened in the story, simply because she was dozing off. How long was this story, anyways? As if it mattered. She didn't bother asking for a repeat, namely because she'd already thrown a wrench at the gears enough and knew she'd probably doze off again in the middle of a recap.

Between the page turns, Joyce would look over to Emily, clearly seeing how she was practically running on fumes by the time of the climax. Not that it was anything too exciting, considering the title pretty much spoke for itself. There was as much character depth as you'd expect from a daycare bestseller, and the conflict wasn't exactly layered either. No real twists, just a simple experience. That didn't change it was an easy and enjoyable read though.

Not much longer after that, Emily was sound asleep, yet Joyce pressed on with the story. With only a little bit left, she saw the story to the end.

“And after Ferris hung up his brand new fish, and set aside the set of pet oysters he won, he slipped into his own bed, thinking what a wonderful day he'd had. And as the moon started to rise, Ferris started to snore, dreaming about next time when the fair would come, and all the fun things he would do next year.” Marking the end with the close of the book, Joyce looked at the sweetly sleeping girl.

“Goodnight, my princess...” In a hushed voice, Joyce made her final coos as she finally turned off the light, closing the door just slightly behind her. She looked at the time on her phone disappointingly. She knew if she wanted to make some real headway tonight, she'd probably be sleeping in a little later tomorrow... She'd definitely be up before Emily though. Knowing her, that was practically a given. Everything that needed to go into the nursery would have to wait until tomorrow, considering a certain someone was currently sleeping inside of it. She could at least group everything by the door in the meantime. Rolling up her sleeves, she set out to work.

It was strange to be back in panties again, even if she didn't want to admit it. How could it not be strange? Several inches of thickness and absorbency were suddenly gone, and you also suddenly knew what it was like to press your thighs together again. Panties had their unique comforts as

well, though. *As well.* She hated to phrase it like that, because that meant she was admitting to some benefits in wearing diapers, which unfortunately wasn't totally false...

Right now though, she probably did look like a kid that just got her toilet license, considering she was lifting the hem of her sundress right now to see how they looked. No more cartoon characters, and definitely no tapes to keep them attached to her waist. Simple, mature colors and designs; something she was much more familiar with.

“You know you shouldn't be doing that around anyone else other than me, right?” Still holding it up, she looked over to Joyce who was currently carrying a small box of baby items. Putting two and two together a little too late, Emily finally let go of her dress and it fell back into place with a blush.

“I was just looking, that's all...”

“I can imagine it feels a little weird after going for more than 24 hours in diapers. How do you feel?”

“Fine, I guess.” How else was she supposed to feel? Good? Bad? She didn't feel anything. It was just another day, and another outfit at this point.

“By the way, why do I have to wear a dress?” Emily looked down at herself, and then into the nursery mirror a tad bit nervously. “Doesn't it make me look a little immature?”

Joyce paused behind her in front of the mirror, giving the sight a much more satisfied look. “No one said you had to wear it, you know?”

“Then why did you pick it out for me?” Emily slightly swung her hips, watching the loose ends swish to her sways.

“Because I did? In the end, you're the one who put it on!”

“Fine! I'll go put some jeans and a shirt on, then,” with exaggerated marches, something a diaper didn't allow her the liberty of, she walked to what would be her room for only a few more hours.

“But,” Joyce's sudden words halted Emily. “I think looking cute for my parents would do for a really good first impression? Remember? My dad always had a soft spot for me! Don't tell him I said this, but I think he has a soft spot for cute things in general...”

An obvious escape from her true feelings, Emily excused herself with a sharp right down the hall, avoiding the room which would let her reclaim maturity, as well as the nursery that would mean admitting a lack thereof. "...I'll go get the highchair."

Joyce silently giggled, knowing full well what'd just happened. Clearly she liked the dress, and Joyce did too, but only one of them was brave enough to admit it. "Just grab the tray, okay?" Joyce called down the hall. "I'll get the heavier part!"

Unfortunately it wasn't an opportunity for Emily to figure out how the tray unlocked because it'd already been done for her. Something told her that later down the line it would be one of her final regrets. Already she'd been toyed with mercilessly. The tickles and misfire with the pancake already were giving her PTSD. She lifted the white, plastic tray and carried it by her side down the hall.

"Just set it down in the closet against the wall. There's plenty of space in there." The last bit came off as both a positive and a negative. There was the perk of being able to house more baby items, but that also meant a lack of clothes in Emmy's wardrobe. Maybe there would be time to visit Amy this week...

The heavier part came next, both by the help of Joyce and Emily, proving it to be an effective team effort as they disassembled as much as they could to fit it through the door frame.

"Done and done!" Joyce clasped her hands as she briefly admired their handiwork, closing the nursery's closet, and finally the nursery itself. "Are you sure there's nothing you want before I lock up?"

"Actually, you're right! I'm gonna need a few diapers, at least," Emily said with joking exaggeration.

Joyce looked at her for a moment, then was already re-opening the door.

"Wait, wait!"

She looked back.

"I was...kidding..."

"I figured you were," Joyce laughed, and Emily looked at her menacingly.

“...Meanie.”

“You know it’s because I love you, though!” Joyce leaned in for a kiss on her forehead, which Emily did accept, but then finally felt a sense of relief once she heard the twist of the key, and knew for sure that their secret was safe.

“Relieved?”

“Definitely,” Emily sighed. She looked around their immediate surroundings one last time, trying to find any sort of miniscule detail that might betray their efforts to cover up everything entirely. Thankfully Mr. Bear couldn’t cause any more havoc than he already had. He was trapped in a place where his screams would never reach the surface... Emily quickly shook the thought out of her head. Clearly her mindset was still in another place. Taking a note from the blank white door shrouding a rabbit hole of fantasy and fetish, she tried to leave the childishness by the entrance.

“It’ll be fun, okay? Tonight’s gonna be great, and so is the one after that, and then the next one too.”

“Are you gonna be able to get all that time off?”

“Maybe not all of it, but I can definitely finish things up a bit early at the office. Don’t miss me too much, now.”

Emily stuck her tongue out mockingly, and Joyce only laughed as they moved into the guest room.

“Alright, the final, final thing we need to do is move your clothes.” Joyce had already opened one of the drawers.

“Are you sure there’s enough space for me in your room?” Emily didn’t sound especially overconfident anymore. “What if my clothes don’t fit?”

“Trust me, they will. It forced me to toss a few things that I haven’t touched in years, anyways. Honestly, I don’t even know how some of it survived when I first moved here.” She took a moment to consider her personal mishaps, then doubled down on the task at hand.

Between the two of them, it only took a handful of trips with a handful of clothes between each of them. Since her visit to Jack’s, her wardrobe had returned to not only its original size, but also took on the addition of Joyce’s plentiful generosity, near doubling what she had. There was a fine

line between what you could see was hers, and what was a gift from Joyce. All you needed to do was look at the info tags or the logos on some of the clothing. The price was certainly telling enough.

“Actually, now that I think about it, I’ve never been in your room before?” Stepping inside for the first time, Emily was treated to the final room of the apartment she had yet to see.

“Well, it’s not much, but it’s mine I suppose.”

“Not much?” Emily silently muttered, taking in the wonderful sight. It was just about as big as the ‘guest room,’ if not bigger, and had a relatively similar setup. The theme in here was more along the lines of light grays accented by purples, especially evident in the comforter, and also in the blinds. Her room didn’t have a balcony, but instead made up for it in a small stretch of window reaching from the floor to the ceiling which covered the span of the bed. It allowed a breathtaking view out into the city and onto the street, and though it didn’t seem like much right now, it surely must have been magical at night.

She had her own closet, dresser, and although much smaller, still a personal bathroom. A tv was mounted to the wall on the opposite side of the room, and on either side of the bed was a nightstand. The bed was just as big as the one she’d been sleeping in, and there seemed to be a few more extra pillows to boot! Wait, of all things, why did *that* excite her?

“Think you’ll manage with me in here for a few nights?”

Emily responded by faceplanting into the bed. The give and slight bounce to her collision was naturally the only way you can truly test the worth of a mattress, and resoundingly satisfied, she said with a muffled voice, “Yes, I think this is acceptable!” She felt the remnants of last night on her cheek as it nuzzled into the comforter, brushing her hand across the cool material and feeling the slight fuzz of tiny, miniscule fibres sticking outwards.

“Well it’s not time for bed yet,” Joyce finished sorting both of their piles and was just about to pull Emily back up, though she managed herself. “A few more trips ought to do it.”

The pair went back and forth, and forth and back, only now Emily helped with the sorting rather than taking so much stock in Joyce’s bed. Along the way, she kept admiring all the smaller details of the room, slowly digesting what made Joyce into the person she was, or at least defined her character. From the walls, to the floor, though maybe those parts weren’t so telling... How she arranged her room and decorated her smaller bits was a bit more of a story. A stand was placed underneath the tv, providing some relief to the empty space that would’ve been there.

Knick knacks decorated the top of it with a few photos of scenery, a strange, metallic sphere that seemed slightly bigger than Emily's hand, and a couple of books neatly stacked on one another.

"Emily?"

"Huh?" She turned her head to Joyce and the dresser, noting there was still a small amount of clothes left.

"I think I may have lied about space... I guess I didn't realize you had so many clothes." She then looked at her judgmentally. "Are you sure you don't have a shopping problem?"

Emily's eye nearly twitched. "Gee, I wonder who got me so many."

"Obviously yourself," Joyce with a 'huff' continued to play into the joke, which Emily found just as funny as slightly annoying. They both very well knew who was the reason for her massively expanded wardrobe, and the thought of trying to shift the credibility onto Emily was a huge no-no.

"Well, it's not like I'll need everything, right?" While Emily openly spoke, she did a slight twirl from heel to heel, pivoting from foot to foot as she neared the fullbody window closer and closer.

"No, I think what we have is plenty, too. I'll just slip these into the nursery then." It must have been a pile Emily threw together, because Joyce didn't recognize it, and Emily admittedly gave up on folding by the end of it. A few shirts covered the lot of items, but considering where it was going it's not like they needed to be tidied.

Just as Joyce was locking up the nursery for the last and final time, Emily drifted into the hall.

"And you're positive they won't find out?"

"Absolutely, whole-heartedly, one-hundred percentu...ally!" The sudden devolvement in her speech naturally had Emily shifting gears, far too busy to worry over things when there was stuff too funny not to smile over. And the reassurance was definitely needed, but it still didn't feel like enough.

"Where are we gonna put the key though?" Emily started to look nervous again. "What if they ask about what's inside the room?"

The much calmer and collected one then said, “We just tell them it’s meant for storage. It originally was, you know? I mean, it always worked on you?”

Stupidity then followed on Emily’s part, realizing that she was in fact practical enough to believe that. It probably was storage at one point, but Emily couldn’t say with confidence as to when it stopped being that. Regardless, even if it didn’t make sense, some part of her wanted to believe that Joyce’s parents wouldn’t be satisfied by such a simple answer. They’d crave details, asking, “Oh, but Joyce? How could it possibly be for just storage? Whatever could there be inside of it that you’d need to lock away? Why, if I didn’t know any better, this would clearly be the perfect setup for a nursery; obviously meant for Emily! It makes too much-” She nearly hit her head off the wall trying to drop the stupid notion. And why did she give their voices an accent inside her head? Such an oddball... Did her parents even have an accent? Probably as much as Joyce did, which was none, but then again, things like that tend to become watered down the further you fall from the tree.

A slow, pulsing beep could be heard from down the hall. Emily jumped, not because she was scared, but because she’d never heard that noise once before. Her heart started to beat uncomfortably, because even if she didn’t know what it meant, her body had a foreboding guess as to what it meant. Joyce looked more confused than anything, but that only lasted for a second when awkward surprise and confusion took its place.

“Well it’s a good thing we finished up early...” Joyce said, taking her turn to be relieved. She checked her phone then with a slightly urgent pace walked past Emily and down the hall. “Ugh, for once can’t my mom get a time right?”

If there was any room left for doubt, Joyce’s complaint was the final sign.

“Wait! You mean they’re outside right now?”

“We can’t say for sure, I mean, it may not even be them... But if I had to guess...” Emily followed her into the shoe area in front of the entrance, and could see her looking into a small console attached to the wall.

Joyce pressed her finger to a button and spoke clearly. “Charles? You’re a bit early, aren’t you?”

Emily could hear his voice play back through the intercom.

“I understand Ms. Summers, but I suppose their plane landed early. They’re waiting in the car right now. Should I send them up?”

“Landed early,” Joyce lightly mocked. “It’s like honesty’s the last thing on her mind...” Rolling her eyes, she pressed down on the button again. “You can send them up now, unless you feel like driving in a circle for a few hours?”

“I...can do that, if you wish?”

“No, no,” as if he could read her face through the one-way display, Joyce shook her head. “Sorry, just a bad joke. Thank you already for the time you’ve given me today on your day off. Please, just unload their bags, let them inside and send them up. Again, I can’t appreciate this enough.”

“No problem at all. Have a good weekend, Ms. Summers!”

“Thanks Charles, you too.”

Joyce finally turned from the console and moved over to Emily, suddenly hugging her by the waist.

“Not that I mind, but, why are you hugging me?”

“No reason,” she looked down at her and smiled. “Just felt like it.”

“Aren’t they here really early though?”

“Yes,” she said begrudgingly. “They are.”

“You don’t sound very happy to see them?”

“No! No, it’s not that,” she sighed. “I am happy. It’s just one of my mom’s habits, that’s all. To be honest I should have been expecting this. 1 o’clock in her world is probably landing at 11 and meandering for a few more. Clearly she didn’t feel like doing the second part...”

“Is being early a bad thing?”

“Being early is perfectly fine in my book, only when we can afford to lose that kind of time. If they showed up any earlier I probably wouldn’t have been joking when I said that to Charles.” Her hand brushed the outer part of her pants, feeling the slight bump that matched the outline of the key.

As the minutes ticked away, and the inevitable was finally arriving on their doorstep, Emily was feeling the need for a hug too. No matter how many times she told herself that there was no reason to be nervous, of course she'd drum up a thousand reasons that existed purely for shock factor.

A pair of faint, yet growing voices could be heard from the outside hall.

“Are you sure it's this floor? I could have sworn he said the 27th.” They sounded headstrong in their own opinion, even if it was wrong. The kind of captain that'd go down with their ship.

“Hon, he said apartment 3702, not the 27th floor. Which one is it though?” The voice was deep, with the slightest tinge of age to it.

“Odds are on the right, even on the left. Just wait, we're gonna knock on a complete stranger's door! We should call Joyce and double check the number.”

“Something tells me she won't be happy about how early we are...”

Meanwhile, Joyce gave Emily a stare that said everything, as she walked over to the door, slowly turning the knob. Before the female voice could respond, Joyce stuck her head in the crack of the door, too small for Emily to see through as she kept her distance, well inside the apartment. She could see Joyce turn her head from left to right though.

“Honey, you're right!” The male voice exclaimed. “There's one of her neighbors! I told you we were being too loud!”

“What do you mean?” the voice shot back defensively. “Oh...” the heat in her voice seemed to tone down as if she were turning to a different speaker. Probably Joyce. “I'm very sorry about my husband... Joyce!” as if they'd just seen her now, they spoke in a delightful surprise.

“Hey mom, hey dad!” Joyce greeted them excitedly. “But in all seriousness, we probably should get inside before mom gets too loud...”

“What do you mean too loud? You should tell that to your father. That man has a set of chords on him that make a drum sound like a high-pitched squeal...” the funny banter started to die down as the voices came closer, and Emily could slowly see the door open, as two more figures were introduced. “Anyways, give me a hug, you! It's been too long!”

Joyce's hand fell off the door as she was suddenly taken in for a hug by someone other than Emily. Someone actually Joyce's exact height. Just when her face was briefly over Joyce's shoulder, Emily could see her faded, yet still clearly blonde hair and older face still a close neighbor to when it was once youthful. Her face looked incredibly similar to Joyce's! Well, considering things genetically, it was actually the opposite, but it didn't detract from how they certainly looked related. Emily was so busy seeing what her mom looked like, she didn't even realize when she was looking back at Emily. Her eyes seemed to have a frightening sparkle in them, and Emily could already feel the woman's desire to smother her. When they ended their hug, surprisingly, she didn't pounce for Emily, thankfully, and instead waited for her husband, Joyce's dad to have his turn.

If Emily thought Joyce and her mom were tall, she was sorely mistaken. Add half another head to the gap Emily already had with the two other women, and there would be Joyce's dad. His shortly cut hair looked as if it were struggling between trying to be black or brown, as the pair had struck a compromise on simply really dark brown. Lighter hairs were checkered throughout, and the thin shade of facial hair wrapped around the lower end of his face looked salt and peppered too. From Emily's perspective it looked as if Joyce had finally met her match in terms of height, but what did that say then about Emily's predicament? Now she felt even more vertically challenged.

"How've you been, kiddo?"

"I've been good, dad!" She happily hugged him back. "How about you?"

"Meh, you know me. Same old same old."

"Mom told me you're still doing cooking events?"

"Course I am! Just because I'm retired doesn't mean I stopped being a chef!" Joyce chipperly agreed as they finally let each other go. His figure now in full view was as lean as a man his age could be. Though his metabolism was probably on its tail end of a healthy life well-lived, he certainly didn't seem to take it for granted, minus a little bit of leniency for dad bod, of course. He had a duffle bag slung over his shoulder, along with a pair of sizeable suitcases by his side.

Joyce glanced over to her mom, who looked to be ready to burst, and she knew exactly why. While Emily was still silent with her apprehensive observations, even Joyce's dad gave her a glance and a smile, but he probably kept his true self reserved out of respect. His wife was probably a little too overzealous right now to consider that.

“Now mom, you need to promise me that you’re not going to bite,” Joyce said jokingly, but also, not so jokingly...

She looked over to Joyce with a frown. “Really? You think I travelled to the other side of the country just to eat your girlfriend?” She brushed her shoulders as if the insult had left a mark. “Maybe a nibble or two, at least...”

“Emily,” Joyce was finally the first to call to her, forcing the personal reminder that she indeed, was able to speak. She looked to Joyce with a sense of alertness, as Joyce gestured one hand to her dad, and the other two her mom. “Meet my parents!”

School plays were the worst. Productions centered around amateur students who either had the ambition but not the skill, or the kids without a single interest or acting bone in their body. Weeks would be spent preparing for such an important showcase; a culmination of practice, repetition, presentation, and skill, even if there was little to begin with. She could see herself on stage right now, dressed in the farmer’s overalls, facing an expectant audience, waiting for her cue to speak. And it had come, but the words wouldn’t.

Weeks. Countless hours spent each and every day trying to remember and recite something that was so simple and so basic. Trained on a never-ending loop, just so that in a moment like this, you need only turn over a few stones to find the words carved into your skull. But of course, in a stereotypical fashion she would forget. Mr. Pig would never be told to get back into his pen, and Mrs. Forrs wouldn’t scold her for being such a mean farmer.

Her mouth moved slightly, but no sound came from it. Her array of social skills suddenly fell apart, and the sheer shock of the situation was enough to crumble her very foundation of human interaction. She scoured throughout her head for something intelligible to do or say; anything that would signify a proper greeting! God, why was she freezing up? Think! Think!

Quickly, she took one of her hands into the other placing them in front of herself. Then what surprised everyone in the room, though especially Emily and Joyce, was when from the waist up she bent forward at a 45 degree angle.

Whilst Joyce was thinking to herself, *sh...she bowed...?*

“N-nice to meet you!” She spoke in a slightly rushed voice, realizing the mistake later than she could correct it. “My name is Emily...” Obviously falling back on her most primitive form of basic introductions, she nearly added her last name too. What was she doing?!

She almost didn't stand up straight, because surely then they'd see her face was as bright as a tomato. It was already a shaky start, but she'd certainly ruined her chances at mutual respect with this blunder. A deadly silence seeped into the room, and just a second elapsed was plenty lethal enough.

"Oooh. So formal!" Joyce's mom suddenly said in fascination, finally taking the attention off of Emily's shoulders as all heads turned to her.

Emily nearly laughed at her own insanity. *She's pitying me...*

The only male in the room cleared his throat, "Definitely!" He gave a pleasant smile. "But Emily, really," he chuckled. "We're not that special, but we appreciate your hospitality."

Emily slowly raised her head, still feeling the warmth radiate from her cheeks. Apparently it wasn't as damaged as she thought, because the overwhelming dread of judgement and ridicule hadn't fallen over her.

Although it started as a trickle, Emily could feel a sense of self flowing back to her as her vocabulary and rationale expanded to what it should be.

"S...sorry about that," trying not to sound nervous, she laughed. "It's a bad habit of mine. My mom is Japanese, so uh, she used to have me formally greet our Japanese side of the family."

"Don't sweat it," he smiled once again, oddly making Emily feel a slight bit calmer. "Thank you again for your respect!"

"You never bowed to me when we first met..." Joyce said in a brief, jokingly pouty voice, obviously trying to lighten the mood. It definitely worked though, because Emily couldn't help but giggle.

"Oh, I can't wait anymore!" Joyce's mom suddenly exploded in a small burst of frustration, as her flats rushed across the floor and closed the gap between her and Emily in mere moments. Her arms wrapped around Emily in whole, her arms included. Trapped in the cocoon known as Joyce's mom's arms, she felt herself squeezed all over. "Emmy it's so great to finally meet you! You're the most adorable thing I've ever seen!"

E..Emmy?

Emily slightly leaned her head past the woman and looked at Joyce with worried eyes. Worried for an endless list of reasons, the first on the list being the sudden physical affection she was now being given.

“Ah, hon,” her husband thankfully came to Emily’s rescue, tapping her on the shoulder.

“Mom!” Joyce near-hissed, much less reserved than her dad. “You can’t just smother her like that!”

Her mom finally relented, as Emily could feel some air getting back into her lungs. At least now she knew where Joyce got her affectionate side from...

She looked as if she only acknowledged Emily’s presence right then, as she apologized in a much more relaxed tone. “I’m very sorry about that Emmy, but I’ve been waiting quite a bit to do that... You know how it can be.” No, she didn’t, at least she thought, but her mom spoke as if the feeling justified her actions.

“You know we got lucky when Hannah decided to stick with our son after meeting you,” her husband joked, but given the depth of his voice, he almost sounded serious.

“Oh quit it, you! She’ll really start to think I’m some sort of creep or something,” she looked back to Emily as reassurance. “I promise, I’m not.” Clearly meant as a joke, Emily still nodded as if it were crucial information.

“By the way, Mom,” Joyce finally interjected. “Why are you calling her Emmy? Her name is Emily.”

“What do you mean?” She looked over to Joyce as if she were in the wrong. “I heard you call her that over the phone?”

All three relevant female figures in the room then remembered the night in question that Emily was sick and wandered into the kitchen.

“Didn’t I tell you that you misheard me? It’s Emily.”

“Fine, fine, but what’s the harm in a nickname? If you won’t say it, then I will. I think it’s cute,” she turned back to Emily. “You don’t mind the name, do you hon?”

Emily didn't know if she was genuinely being asked or coerced into a binding contract. Just as she was going to look over to the visibly annoyed Joyce for help, the wife's retainer once again reeled her in.

"Mary, you need to give Emily some space to breathe. I think she's about to be shell-shocked if you keep the pressure like this."

Clearly she didn't like to be told 'no,' but she did seem to listen to reason as she let the topic go. "Sorry about that, Emily. She tends to get excited when meeting new people."

"Don't worry about it!" Emily gave the best smile she could; a few blocks down from a totally genuine one, considering how mixed her emotions were right now. Everything was either of positivity or pure confusion. And no offense to Joyce's mom, but Emily was currently favoring the dad right about now... "I've been looking forward to meeting you guys as well." That comment had both parents smiling.

"And *you*," Joyce accusedly notioned to her mom, who looked back with confusion over the tone. "Do you know what time it is right now?"

"What? Maybe a half-past twelve? Noon at most?"

"It's a few minutes past eleven!"

Quietly, Joyce's dad moved on over to Emily's side, making her look like a middle schooler at best. "This can happen every now and then..." he explained to Emily in a hushed voice, who quietly nodded, listening on as well.

"Isn't that good? So we're an hour early? That means we can do more stuff today!"

"An *hour*?!" Joyce raised her voice, just like her mom, "You told me the plane was going to land at *one*! Do you know how lucky you are that Charles was there early?"

"And we were very generous with his tip," her mother said contently. "I really don't see the issue. Everything worked out, didn't it?"

Normally Joyce wouldn't have been happy to hear that Charles was tipped. She paid him more than enough to not be tipped by the people he drives. When it involved working with her mother though, Joyce unfortunately felt that it was appropriate.

“This time, it did,” Joyce bitterly remarked. Probably a perk to their mother-daughter bond was how expressive they could be with the other and not fear hurting the other’s feelings. Emily watched in mild fascination, finally seeing their exchanges in the flesh rather than over the phone. “We *just* finished clearing out a room for you guys, you know? I was ready to have him make you guys circle the block until we were ready to send you guys up.” She looked over to her dad. “No offense, dad.”

“None taken.”

Both parties seemed to be calming down, as in the end what was done was done, and everything *did* work out by the end of it all. With one last sigh the pair hugged again.

“We’ve only seen the entrance, but your new apartment looks very nice, by the way!” Mary (Joyce’s mom) said, even with just a view of the lowered slate floor meant for shoes, and the slightest sliver of the living room on one end and the kitchen on the other in the hallway.

“We get by,” Joyce said simply, finally rolling in their suitcases, feeling slightly sheepish about just only closing the door now after all that turmoil... Hopefully she wouldn’t get a noise complaint... “How was the flight?”

“Nothing too bad. Your dad managed to get a good deal for business class,” her husband took a moment to look particularly proud, causing Emily by his side to involuntarily smirk. “Nothing too bad.”

“Well that’s good. I wouldn’t have minded getting you guys tickets, you know? That way I could, you know, actually figure out for when you’d be coming?” Obviously she wasn’t totally okay with the early arrival bit. Maybe not so much that, but decades of random disregards for a schedule or date had her simply predisposed to be strict with her mother.

“We appreciate the offer dear, but you’ve helped us more than enough. We always had a secure retirement, you just helped us make it a bit more...lavish?”

“And you said they’re always like that?” Emily looked up to Joyce’s dad.

“One minute it could be like that, and the next right back to a fight...”

“They sound like sisters...”

“Who knows?”

The two laughed, and with the volume of the dad's voice, Joyce and Mary couldn't help but notice.

"Seems like they're getting along," Mary passively said to Joyce, pleased with the sight. Joyce looked back to her with a smirk. "Something tells me though you two might not come so easily."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" She looked to Joyce questioningly, but then they shared a laugh too. What they understood as sarcasm and genuine flame and fire was something only years of parenting and daughtering could realize. People like Emily and Joyce's dad could only observe and take notes as they try to decipher a bond that transcended common sense.

"So one last time," Joyce turned back to Emily. "Emily, meet my parents, Mary and Frank. Mom, dad, meet Emily."

All three exchanged greetings one last time, though without the formal bow from Emily this time.

"Feel free to call me Mom, though!" Mary added with a smile, whilst the other two apart from Emily gave her suggestive stares.

"Do you guys want to see your room?" Joyce broke the tension unbeknownst to her mom. "I can give you the tour once you're unpacked."

"That sounds like a good place to start," her dad agreed. "Let me just get our..."

"Oh! Your bags," Emily suddenly trying to be helpful hopped onto the slate floor with her bare feet, taking one of the suitcases with both hands. It came nearly up to her waist and even on wheels when she tried to move it the weight was beyond evident. It was heavy, but she wasn't going to call it quits after already offering.

"Emm-ily, you might want to let Frank take that one. I'm not the lightest packer..." Joyce's mom with a sudden sense of concern almost intercepted the girl as she maneuvered the case.

Emily almost grunted as she moved it. The woman definitely didn't pack light, but again, Emily didn't want to waste her gesture. "No, really! It's fine. I've got it." She wheeled it over to the greatest challenge: the tiny ledge separating the shoe area, and the raised wooden floor where only socks and bare feet could roam. It was minor, of course, but when considering Emily's physical strength coupled with a heavy suitcase, it wasn't too far from a recipe for disaster...

“Emily, why don’t you let my dad get that?” Joyce like her mother wasn’t feeling too enthusiastic about the challenge either. She knew her heart was in the right place, but still...

“All I need to do is...” Certainly struggling, she brought it up to the ledge, trying desperately to lift the ten ton tank on wheels, wooden floor slightly hung over the slate floor, and the front wheels were getting caught on it. She turned her back to the case as she tried to pull it forward.

Someone other than Emily finally took action though, as Frank got behind the suitcase, giving the bottom a slight lift and a push for Emily’s sake. It definitely cleared the gap, with the whole system had so much momentum combined, she hadn’t seen the sudden boost in speed coming as she quickly let go of the suitcase and stumbled forward, slipping on the smooth floor. It was close to being a repeat of last night, only that her hands caught the floor before her nose did.

“Emily!” Two voices in unison spoke with urgency as Joyce and Mary were both by her side.

“Are you alright?” Joyce was the first to ask.

Clearly embarrassed, she nodded her head, almost immediately regretting her determination to be helpful. “Yeah, didn’t hit my nose this time?” She spoke as if it were a silver lining, and Joyce chuckled while Mary still looked concerned.

“What does she mean ‘this time’? Oh, and Emmy hon, you might want to fix your dress...”

Emily spun her head behind her, and suddenly realized why it suddenly felt slightly cooler on the upper parts of her thighs. With the bottom half of her sundress thrown about because of her own antics, her pantied bottom was on display for everyone to see. Before she could herself, Mary fixed it for her; an even worse fate than fixing it herself.

Trying not to look at her, namely because of how hard she was blushing, Emily muttered a thank you.

“Just let my husband take the bags from here on out, okay? You’ve got gusto though,” she chuckled, “I’ll give ya that.”

Gusto unfortunately didn’t feel very appropriate for how she was feeling right now, as she could feel herself desperately wanting to shrink into nothingness and vanish. Not only had she messed up her greeting, but she just flashed Joyce’s parents as well! She’d much rather be caught in

panties than the alternative, though... Still, those 'mature' designs she was talking about earlier quickly started to feel only so when compared to her diapers.

Why?

Why did she have to be wearing the ones with the stripes?!