

46 - First day on the Job

“And you’re not forgetting anything?” Joyce warned her one last time. They stood on the final frontier; the point of no return.

“No, I’m not...” Emily tried not to sound pensive, folding her hands in her lap. Why was she nervous? Ugh, it’s because Joyce was making her nervous!

“Did you bring your phone? I wanna call you at lunch.” Joyce explained, then blurted out right after, “–But don’t think that means you can’t call me any sooner, okay?”

“Joyce, aren’t you overreacting?”

“Overreacting?” Had she not been sitting, Joyce would’ve taken a step back in shock. “Emily, it’s your *first* day! I want to make sure you have everything you need!”

“And I do...” Emily puffed her cheek as she glanced at her side. Her arm and wrist were covered by sleek and puffy coat material. Pastel blue, because even in her everyday wardrobe now the colors were getting more and more livelier.

One second she was hearing the cars and traffic nearby, but the next was a loud zipper traveling up her front.

“*Joyce!* Stop!”

“It’s gonna be cold, Emily! Don’t you wanna stay warm?”

“You’re worrying too much...!” Emily pouted, but even she couldn’t deny the humor, especially when Joyce could get so “serious” like this. “The door is right *there!*” And she leaned out from her seat just to let her finger travel across Joyce’s lap and out the window, right on the other side of the sidewalk.

Joyce turned her head to follow, showing her face again with a much more conflicted expression. “W-well...what if the wind gets really strong once you get out?”

And all Emily did was sigh as she pulled down the zipper enough to free her face. “It’s not gonna be that bad...”

“Urgh...I know,” Joyce grumbled, too disappointed with how the world worked and how little she could do (but of course, doing so “little” was a personal assessment by Joyce). Then with a hopeful smile, she asked, “Did you wanna bring Pip with you?”

Instantly Emily’s head whipped and spun on a swivel, taking a second for the same motion to reach the ends of her hair. She turned and latched her hands on the corner of her seat like a gargoyle perching on the edge of a building.

“*Joyce!* You didn’t actually bring him!” Emily cried in nothing short of embarrassment. Her first guess was to look in the back seats where contraband and stowaways were the easiest to hide, but thankfully they were empty.

“Th...that one was a joke,” Joyce gave it up quickly, though she tried not to giggle with a hand covering her face. “Does that mean you would’ve wanted me to?”

“*No,*” Emily pouted, “it doesn’t.” Then she settled back into her seat. The car was parked and wouldn’t be going anywhere. Not until Emily got out. “...Now you’re making me nervous...”

A comforting hand dropped on her thigh. “Don’t be...it’s just the mommy in me?” Joyce gave her an apologetic look, but all Emily could see was the emptiness in her partner’s eyes. There was no mommy hiding inside of her because it was already out and about, worn on her sleeve like a badge. She’d already taken out all the tools from her shed and was tinkering with her little project like always. “You’re gonna do great. You’re gonna have fun, and then you’re gonna tell me *all* about it tonight. Understood?”

“Mhm...” Emily nodded, tightening her grip and filling the car with a crinkle.

And quite surprisingly, the noise almost made Joyce wince.

It was far from the crinkles she liked to hear. While it came from her little girl’s lap, she was unfortunately out of diapers today and back to playing pretend grownup. The crinkle coming from her lap was a folded paper bag filled with only the finest cuisine to tide Emily over at lunch time. The crude, last-minute solution they had to use because Emily *refused* to bring anything else.

“You know...” Joyce side-eyed the paper bag in her lap and hands, “we can still pick out a nice lunch box after work today?”

“I said I didn’t need one...!” Emily groaned right back, remembering the “argument” they already had about this multiple times already. Frankly, bringing homemade lunch to work was

somewhat of a novel concept to the girl. More often than not it'd been finding someplace nearby to eat outside the office; a time that felt like a millennia ago.

“Why? Do you think it’s embarrassing?” Joyce was quick to the point when she asked.

“N...yes. A little...” Emily admitted bashfully.

The last time she had a lunch box was when she was in elementary school. The only association she had was from being in the fourth grade with a small meal prepared the night before by her mom. She remembered the zippered lid, the ice packs her dad always kept in the freezer, and the slight bit of condensation that always lined the pouch when she opened it up.

Since Emily was putting herself out on a limb, it was one of the few times when Joyce didn't completely devour her. “Em, adults use them all the time? They make ones without designs on them, you know?” And Joyce was hating herself every second for suggesting it. A lunch box *without* a cute look to it? *If only Emily had a favorite cartoon...!* Dreams were often easily forgotten, but even with a slight blur Joyce could recall the “Day-One Daycare” dream. Such a good one, too. If only this Emily could be just as excited about it... But that was the challenge, and of course the real Emily was always the best.

“I know they do, I’m just being...weird. I haven’t used one since I was a kid, so...yeah.”

“Mhm,” Joyce nodded understandingly, though that didn't make her look at the paper bag with any less disdain. It was like a personal stain on her record as a mother. As Emily's *mommy*. The looks she would get. The stares. The judgment. Her ability to care for her baby would be called into question, and the anxiety would eat the woman away because she would doubt herself too... Just like she was doubting herself now.

Be forceful? Buy her one anyway? Then Emily would be upset...but how upset? The kind that she'd easily forgive and forget? Ugh! Balancing the grownup and toddler inside Emily was always so difficult... Though, only with time had she been slowly nurturing and caring for that smaller voice inside her partner's head. Ironically, the baby in Emily's brain was growing up. That was always exciting to think about. Little by little, slowly but surely, another side of Emily was becoming more and more prominent.

But again, Joyce wasn't malicious, nor was she cunning with any ill-intent. It was all a natural progression with just a little guidance... This was all a product from mutual hard work, and to even have these “difficult” discussions and think that these sorts of things were just a testament to what things were like now. Every day was a gift, and every exhaustion, crying fit, problem, trial or tribulation was only possible because they'd come so far.

And so much further they could go...

And by the time Joyce was done appreciating the moment, her lips were pulling back from Emily's. "Don't be so self-conscious, okay?"

The energy had clearly shifted, now after a kiss Emily could see the soft and tender look on her girlfriend's face. Something clearly must have struck a chord for her, and that always tempered Emily awfully fast. "I know...thank you."

"No, thank you," Joyce smiled, and it finally gave her the strength to undo her seatbelt. "Can I give you a hug on the sidewalk?" And yet she didn't feel the need to ask for permission to kiss.

That contradiction didn't go over Emily's head and she burst out laughing. "*That's* what you ask permission for? Yes, you can."

A few seconds later both women were by the car, embracing each other like it was the last time they'd see each other again.

"...Shouldn't you hurry?" Emily worriedly asked, pressed against her partner's bosom. "I feel bad you're going in late today..."

"Emily," Joyce scoffed, rolling her eyes. "This is *obviously* more important than that." And on a similar note that she would not be sharing, Joyce shuddered when it crossed her mind.

Knowing Sheila a bit better now... She'd likely even understand...

"Have fun today, okay?" Joyce reminded her, and Emily didn't look too pleased to hear the encouragement.

"It's *work*, Joyce, I'm not here to play!" Emily stressed, but even she had her initial doubts. She just wanted it to be what she'd been searching for this whole time. But by the fact of how supportive Joyce was being right now, the truth was obvious. Joyce was clear already that she didn't like Emily's relationship with work, or at least in searching for it. If they found a medium that made Emily feel productive and put Joyce at ease, maybe it wasn't actual work at all. But then again, maybe it wasn't an actual job that Emily needed...

Regardless, this was temporary, and Emily in the back of her mind was still coaching herself to keep pumping out applications. Without a doubt she would be going right back to it. Even if Joyce felt differently...

“Okay, then how about this: have a good day?”

“Mmm... Okay, that one works,” Emily nodded with approval, and Joyce laughed, hugging her tighter.

“You know, I could always just pay you to be my pretty office decoration?”

“Yeah, but then I’d have to live in your office all the time?”

“Emily, I own the company...I’m allowed to take things from my office back home.”

“But what if you forgot me one time?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“But what if you did?”

“I wouldn’t because I won’t forget.”

“But what if—!”

“Okay,” Joyce in a much more stand-offish attitude lightly shoved Emily back like she was leftover lunch, and Emily couldn’t stop giggling. “Nuh-uh. I’m done with you. Go! Shoo!”

And despite the laughing, Joyce played the part of the disinterested by crossing her arms and turning the other cheek. It’s exactly why she was nearly thrown off balance when Emily collided with her again.

“Sorry!” Emily giggled, squeezing her all over again. “Wanted one last hug.”

Joyce hugged back, but finally let her go. “Okay, and for real this time: have a good day!” She gave her a small wave while watching her charge walk just a short distance over to the brick steps of a familiar store.

“Bye!” Emily waved again, opening up the door with a jingling bell.

“Tell Amy I said hi!”

Then the door closed and Emily was gone.

Finally alone, the goosebumps and the butterflies were sprouting in full force. If she didn't get back in the car, poor Joyce would've been pacing.

Her first day...her first day...!

Joyce's lips quivered, tightening her grip on the wheel with no clear sense of self. It wasn't like daycare, unfortunately, but how couldn't she be proud...?! Emily. *Her* Emily was starting her first day of work!

And an emotionally frustrated whine took the sound of her car's silent ignition.

"Today better go by quick...!"

Emily waited long enough to turn and look out the front store display to see that Joyce had left. It was silly, but the absence hit her with a strange sense of loneliness, like she really had just been dropped off for the day.

A whole day away from home, without Joyce, and in a not so familiar place with a fresh face that likely had more than the bare minimum expectations Joyce always kept for her. But those same standards were being kept with Emily and held against Amy, who was characteristically not at the front of her own business.

"Amy?" Emily called out somewhat quietly. What if she had someone with her in the back of the store? That's what she did for all of her clients, right? Joyce was one of hers...and come to think of it, Emily was too. Though, she didn't quite handle any of the actual business that had to do with herself.

She turned her head around, almost expecting a scare to sneak up on her, but there wasn't anything. This was feeling eerily similar like the first time Joyce brought her here, only now it was just Emily to figure out the mystery.

Should I call Joyce...?

Wait! What?! What was she thinking? Why did Joyce have to fix her problems? Who even said there was one? It was just an assumption; one that Emily out of reflex didn't even try to solve herself.

Awkwardly, she walked behind the front desk, almost expecting some kind of alarm to go off, but either Amy wasn't paying for upkeep on her security system, or it was all just part of Emily's imagination. Either way, the only noise was from her own footsteps and bagged lunch slipping deeper into the domain. And just in case if the universe still needed justification for her bold behavior, the girl muttered quietly, "I *do* work here after all..." Sort of, at least.

The questionable employee peeked inside the workshop, dressing and display room. The sofas were empty, a nearby table with pins, threads and tiny cushions looked busy, but ultimately unattended. The multi-tiered stage surrounded by mirrors had no doll to debut clothes, and frankly the store was feeling quite empty.

"How does she just leave this place unlocked...?" Emily found herself making comments again, mindlessly tidying a small pile of sketch papers. It was a messy workshop, but Emily could only guess that there was a method to the madness. She peered up and around at the wood panel ceilings, only then seeing the one truly spotless place in the room that she herself sure wasn't one to talk.

Emily made messes too, only that she had a mommy to clean them up for her.

"Amy?" Emily called with another sigh, finally making for the stairs up to her apartment.

Keeping her manners first, she knocked on the front door, waiting patiently by its side. Then...she knocked again. And...again.

"Come on..." with a tinge of impatience, Emily went for the handle and turned. And all forms of security and privacy be damned, this door had been left unlocked too.

It was the same, cleanly and modest industrial apartment she remembered from the first time. The same couch where she waited for Joyce and Amy to talk business downstairs...

But finally, after wandering from the entrance, through the store and finally to the proprietor's very home, Emily was finally greeted.

The uncertainty fizzled a tiny bit and her frown perked into a cute smile. With a sparkle in her eyes, Emily cooed out, "Ashes!"

Obviously it wasn't Amy, and obviously Emily would have to keep searching, but that didn't change that she was suddenly catching up with an old friend.

The black ball of fur was patrolling on the square of countertop in the open kitchen, meowing as his pursuit was instant. His gait was sly and smooth and despite the speed his paws moved with grace! From off the counter he hit a chair, and from the chair and onto the floor. With no more jumps needing to be taken, the cat wasted no time in strutting right on over to the girl.

Emily dropped to her feet, already pleased to be remembered so fondly. Even in her jeans she could feel his body brush against her legs, clearly working hard to cast a new coat of cat on her to reclaim ownership. Joyce just couldn't win...

"Did you miss me?" She giggled as she held out her hand and Ashes walked right through it from head to tail, arching his back just to feel it brush his body all over. He purred while she pet, and the reunion was sweet and refreshing. "Ashes, do you know where Amy is?" Yes, it was silly to ask a cat that sort of thing, but it was even sillier to think your stuffed animals could be as jealous as your girlfriend. Ashes didn't speak human tongue, but at least he was something animate and sentient.

But instead of a verbal answer, the only thing Emily got was a wiggle from his tail. Though, while Ashes didn't have anything to say, now when she stopped for a second, Emily could hear a distant noise... Like a rhythmic repetition.

"It's not my fault if she didn't meet me at the entrance, right?" Emily asked Ashes, and thank goodness the silence didn't mean no.

After one last pet Emily rose to her feet and that sent Ashes pacing circles around her like a shark in the water. Though once she started moving, suddenly he had become her personal escort, taking to her side the whole trip down the hallway, venturing closer to the mysterious noise.

She stopped short of a seemingly normal, inconspicuous door. But alas, if her personal secrets taught her anything, that meant anything seemingly normal could lead to the farthest things from it.

So instead she knocked this time.

"Amy?" Emily called as she knocked, waiting for an answer. Nothing, but the noise was certainly behind this door. She looked down at Ashes who was already looking up at her, giving the feline friend a "what gives?" kind of face.

“It’s not my fault if she’s not gonna listen...! Amy!” Emily raised her voice, knocking louder again. And finally, something changed. The noise a second later had stopped, then finally she heard naked feet moving across the floor. Closer and closer...right until—!

The door swung open and Emily reflexively took a step back, face to face with her person that she was supposed to meet.

“Oh, Emily!” Amy blinked then smiled. Her hair was pulled back into a bun with a pair of headphones resting around her neck. She smiled, but then frowned as her eyes looked like they were trying to see her own thoughts. “Wait...oh, wait,” she looked up and down, recalling where they were and where they were meeting right then. “Oh shoot! What time is it? Agh...! Sorry! Really sorry! I was supposed to be waiting for you downstairs!”

“Uhm...it’s okay, I just...wasn’t sure if I should come up here or not.”

“No, no!” Amy waved her off dismissively. “It’s good that you did. I usually listen to music while I work... Sorry I didn’t hear you knock at all. Uhm...” she pursed her lips as with her body taking up the doorway, she peered back into the room behind her. “Think you could give me a sec?” she gave an apologetic smile. “I’ve got uh...top secret stuff. Just lemme go hide it, kay?”

“K...ay...?” Emily repeated, and her own awkwardness didn’t impact Amy’s delight.

“Thanks! See Ashes already found you!” she laughed, then shut the door again.

Both pets standing in the hallway exchanged another wordless look with each other. But turning on her shoe, Emily with her escort walked back down the hall. It may have been making use of an expired offer, but Emily sat down on Amy’s couch with a stiff posture, holding her hands on her knees while she waited. With enough space between her backside and the couch, it left ample room for Ashes like any other cat to make surgical and affectionate movements by creeping behind her just to sit on her right side.

“Why do you like me so much...?” Emily wondered with a grin, petting the cat some more.

At least with Joyce Emily could try and ask her questions, even if she didn’t always fully understand the answer. Maybe the magic in that mystery made it all seem unconditional. Fitting for a mommy, but perplexing for a cat she’d only met on a few occasions. An affinity for pets, perhaps?

“Sorry, sorry!” Amy returned with the same energy Emily always seemed to know her for. She was short of her headphones and just in some loose pants and a long sleeve shirt. “Were you waiting long? Not just now, but like,” she twirled her finger in the air, “since you got here?”

“No...not too long,” Emily shook her head. “Do you really keep all your doors unlocked though?”

“No, not usually!” Amy pleaded for mercy as she excused herself to the kitchen. “I knew you were coming, so I left things unlocked just in case...” she explained over the noise of her fridge filling a glass with water. “I know, it’s bad. I’m scrambled enough to forget to keep track of the time, but reasonable enough to keep from having you locked out... So...?” She shifted her tone and hung her head over the window looking into both rooms. “How’ve ya been?”

“I’ve been...good,” Emily answered, though in a very delicate manner. She was brave enough to have done what she did when she called Amy the first time, dressing in Joyce’s clothes, but she sure didn’t want to share it. In fact, it felt like there was a whole lot of her life that was just off limits to conversation topics now. Every talking point now somehow involved her in diapers with Joyce... Maybe if she just skirted some of the unnecessary details...

“Hmm?” Amy hummed curiously, but kept a knowing look on her face. “Yeah? That’s good. How about Joyce? Has she been busy or are you two up to stuff regularly?”

Stuff? What did she mean by stuff? Was she implying...? Or was it just a normal kind of “stuff?”

“She’s been...good. U-us too, yeah. Yeah...”

“Would it be easier if I talked about myself?” Amy politely asked, and as shameful as it was, Emily had an appreciative look. So right after laughing, Amy took the lead. “I always seem to be working on something! But it’s the good kind of busy. Lots of different things people want, so, you know, gets the creative juices flowing and stuff.”

Emily found herself asking, “Do you take breaks?”

“Sometimes!” Amy groaned with a stretch leaning from side to side. “I take the usual holidays off, but other times I might take an unscheduled sorta thing. Can’t say I go far though,” she pointed her finger right at Emily, or rather, the animal right next to her. “Got my hands full with that little guy.”

Emily nodded, petting the cat again.

“Thanks again so much for agreeing to help me out, by the way! Having the occasional assistant is a *huge* help for me,” and then she caught Emily right before she could interject, “--even if that assistant can’t sew!”

“Yeah, of course,” Emily smiled, but the awkwardness didn’t subside.

Does she even really need my help? This isn’t even a job-job...it’s just to keep me busy... Did Joyce ask her to do this? Was this all some big plan just to get me out of the house?

“Oh!” Amy stammered, and Emily blinked back in surprise. “What’re you still doing with your jacket on?” She walked over immediately, beckoning with her hands as a sign for Emily to disrobe. “Be comfy, okay? Not like there’s a dress code, or anything...” and suddenly a second set of hands was taking the jacket off her, and Emily watched her deposit it on one of the few hooks still empty by the door. “Shoes too!” she barked without even needing to turn, and with a jolt Emily was already fidgeting with her laces.

Apparently Amy put the “Fuck that!” in formal.

“Is this your lunch?” Amy was already picking the bag up off the floor.

“W-wait, I can get that!” Emily reached for the bag, but she was too late. Maybe if she could’ve kept her mouth shut it wouldn’t have happened, but the urgency must have compelled Amy to look. She lifted the bag just a bit higher, softening her look once she saw it.

“D’awh...!” Amy fawned at the seemingly normal paper bag, then kept leaning out just to see the look on poor bashful Emily’s face. “Did Joyce write this? Does she always do stuff like this?”

“N-no...” It wasn’t even the right word, but for lack of a better one given how embarrassed Emily was suddenly feeling, Joyce had exacted her revenge on being denied a dedicated lunch box for her girl.

“How else are we gonna know which lunch is yours?” Joyce said in a not so distant memory.

“Guess we’ll know which is yours,” Amy chuckled, and Emily wanted to go back into hiding.

On the front of her bag, illustrated in thick black marker was a large heart with Emily’s name, all in big capital letters scribbled right on it.

Maybe I should have just turned the bag inside out...

“Does it need to be refrigerated?” Amy asked as she was already taking it away.

“Yes please... Only if you have the space...?”

“Yes, I have the space! Emily, don’t be so stiff! Can I get you something to drink? Sit back on the couch some more!”

“Sorry...” Emily muttered as she did as she was told and “got comfortable.”

“Don’t apologize either,” Amy said as she shut the fridge door. “So how’d you get here?”

“Joyce dropped me off... I feel bad because she’s going in late today because of me.” An alternative could have easily been worked out, especially just either from taking the train or a bus; something Emily in a pre-Joyce era wasn’t a stranger to. This wasn’t even considering being a burden to Joyce’s chauffeur.

“Well I think she wouldn’t have if it would’ve actually been a problem, Emily,” Amy said as she forced a glass of water into Emily’s hands.

And having an unfortunate track record with open cups on sofas, Emily was quick to stand up with her drink, wandering over to one of the bar stools.

“You don’t work on weekends, do you?” Emily asked after sipping her water.

“Mmm...well,” Amy’s eyes started to dramatically drift, “If it tends to be something fun, I can sort of be a slave to it... It’s kinda like a fifty-fifty.”

“Is it okay for me to ask what you were working on in there?” Emily pointed past her shoulder and at the door just a little bit further down the hall.

“Sure, you can ask,” Amy smiled, then smirked, “but that doesn’t mean I have to answer? Top secret is top secret, unfortunately. More importantly, it’s still a bit early, isn’t it? Did you have breakfast already?” she pulled back and turned in place, surveying her kitchen like it was her first time seeing it. “We...have...stuff. Mm, yeah. We have stuff if you’re hungry. Want anything?”

“No, that’s fine,” Emily politely refused. “Uhm...Joyce already made me something.”

“Oh yeah? Is she a good cook?”

“Yeah, she’s honestly really good... She’s really amazing at everything she does, it feels like.” In spite of her flaws, those felt like the only pesky little technicalities that kept her girlfriend from seeming like genuine perfection. Maybe that was just the love talking, though.

“Oh,” Amy suddenly scoffed, and Emily gave her a weird look. “Hm? Oh! No, definitely, Joyce is an awesome person. Buuut...” Amy started, then pursed her lips. “Actually, never mind!”

Emily raised an eyebrow. “What? But what?” She was a gullible and innocent type of girl, hence why she could be baited so easily. Well, that may have been describing her to an extreme, but Joyce had certainly gaslighted her into being one.

“Truth be told,” Amy laughed apologetically, “Joyce already gave me a preemptive talking to... Something about not telling you details about her.”

“*What?* She didn’t!” Emily suddenly retorted, and her boss giggled.

“She did, I swear!” Amy said, and while she didn’t know, the whole reason for the restriction was all in part to Emily’s curiosity and Sheila’s unexpectedly loose lips. “So sorry, nothing specific about the J-word.”

“Really?” Emily asked again, but was already frowning. There wasn’t anything against Amy, of course, but it’d become yet another interaction filled with redactions by someone not even present to be censoring things live.

“Really,” Amy confirmed, “really...ish.”

“-ish?” Emily squinted just so she could read better in between the lines.

“-ish as in: keep chatting me up and yeah I’ll probably let something slip,” Amy shrugged like it was something simply inevitable.

Emily was certainly here to work and get things done, but she’d be lying if she said that Amy’s casual approach wasn’t comforting. All the same though, it was wearing down any sense of officiality that this got together may have had.

Shifting topics, Emily asked, “So if I’m gonna help clean up, you mean your workshop downstairs?”

“The workshop? Oh, the studio?” Amy clarified. “That sounds like a great idea, actually! Would it work for you if I showed you what you could sort downstairs, then I come back up here to finish some work?”

“Top secret stuff?”

“Super top secret,” Amy nodded affirmatively like her life depended on it. “Don’t worry though, once I finish up what I need to on an order, I’ll come down and work with ya. Makes it easier to chat that way. You can give me dirt on Joyce while you’re at it, too.”

“You want me to give up secrets on Joyce?”

“Of course! Just because I’m not supposed to talk about her, doesn’t mean you can’t? Unless...did she give you a gag order too?”

“No, she didn’t,” Emily grinned, suddenly learning just all the mischief Amy seemed to have. “But actually, would you rather I waited to start...? I don’t wanna take your workspace from you.” Was it the reason why she was working out of a room in her apartment this morning? Because she planned on Emily coming over?

“You’re not taking up my workspace, though?” The confusion wasn’t exclusive, but soon it was once Amy struck something inside her head. “Actually, guess I never told you or Joyce. Downstairs is kinda just the dressing-slash-studio area. I use that to let clients try their stuff on in-house where I can get feedback pretty quickly. Up here in my apartment is where I *really* get work done. Actually, we took your measurements downstairs that one time, didn’t me?”

“Uh...yeah, we did...” Emily answered much more weakly once the memory hit her in full. It was the first time they had met and all three of them were in the back room. It was the same day Joyce wanted to run some “errands” and that was the last one of the day. Errands were all well and good, however what wasn’t was when Joyce was pushing the envelope on things.

All she remembered about her clothes was that they were snug and one of her first dreaded diapers was hiding underneath... And just seeing Amy from across the kitchen window made her feel squeamish just remembering how close this woman was against her in one of her most vulnerable moments. Her padded rump contributed to those very numbers she’d been measuring and could have skewed her sizes... But they didn’t. They didn’t because she had worn something made by Amy before and it fit her perfectly. In other words, Amy *knew* about the diaper factor, and that was either because Joyce had told her or it was easy enough to determine that herself.

Was it because of that day Amy had started to know? Or was it something else? Coincidence? Bad luck, or calculated plans?

She was peppy, cheery and funny; all the things that made it so difficult to read any kind of ulterior thoughts and feelings. It made Emily want to ask, but she didn't. She couldn't. It was a double-edged sword. Just to satisfy the morbid curiosity she could learn to ignore, she'd be throwing the spotlight on something so touchy all over again.

And when her back was turned, Emily gave Amy another judgmental look. This was the first time with each other alone and she was as lax as could be; like it was just another day with another friend. How could she just *do* that? Unbeknownst to Emily, Joyce often felt conflicted by the same exact things...

"Ready to take a trip downstairs?" Amy asked.

"Sure...oh, I can take care of that?" Emily reached for her own cup as Amy took it away.

"Don't worry, I'm closer, anyway!"

"Okay... Thanks."

"No problem! If there's anything you want, just let me know, okay? Or you can get it yourself, if you're feeling brave," Amy chuckled, and Emily smiled back.

"Wait, what happens if someone comes to the store when you're upstairs?" It was an important question as they were headed down the stairs.

"Mmm, that shouldn't happen. No one's scheduled to come in earlier today. Just in case though, shoot me a text or give me a call, kay? I can take care of it from there. Either way, it shouldn't come to that!"

"Mhm..." and Emily hoped the same. She didn't like the idea of dealing with people on day one, especially in a role that felt as formless as a block of untouched clay. Where was the training? The orientation? She really was just coming over to a friend's house...except without all the experience as friends...and she was getting paid. How much, she had no idea, but nor was she planning on asking. Being paid to stay busy in general right now was technically what she'd been looking for, and given how pseudo supportive Joyce had been, it probably wouldn't end well if Emily outright refused. Not that she wanted to.

“Didn’t you say you needed me to try on some stuff for you?” Emily added as she watched Amy tidy up stray ends of her messes.

“Yyyyes! Yes, I did. That’s actually what I’m gonna bring down later. Oh—” and Amy turned her head to follow something around the room, casting a scowl. “Don’t suppose you mind company?”

“Hm?” Emily asked but was answered by a purring head rubbing against her again. “Ashes? S-sorry...” She apologized, and her four-pawed friend didn’t seem to mind much when she lifted him, gently holding his hanging body against hers. “I didn’t close the door; do you want me to bring him back up?”

“Believe me, I love him, but he’s always playing with my fabrics! I swear, he does it just because he knows it bothers me...!” and Amy made sure to give her seemingly innocent pet a death stare. “But nah,” she smiled again, “he can stay down here since there’s no customers. If you get tired of him though, just lock him back upstairs. *So*, that means best behavior, got it?” Amy warned her cat, and all Ashes did was meow right back.

With an understanding probably having been reached, Emily set the cat back down, leading him to quietly slip away, always hanging nearby and in sight.

Amy’s gaze followed her pet with the same playful disdain she always seemed to have for him. “Y’know, maybe I can convince you two to babysit him just so I can go on a real vacation...”

“Really?” Emily asked honestly, and Amy laughed.

Amy chuckled, sounding like she wasn’t quite serious until Emily. “Yeah? I’m sure he’d be low maintenance around you two. Whenever Joyce comes by he always wants to play with her.”

“Really? Does Joyce like pets?” It never quite crossed Emily’s mind. They didn’t talk about that much, if at all.

“She seems like it...but, I don’t think she’s super keen on having one permanently.”

“What’d she say?”

“Mmm...I’m gonna leave it at that,” Amy deflected, looking like she was reminiscing on a sweet memory. “However! Joyce likes cute things. That’s your little factoid for the hour.”

“So that means you’re gonna tell me more?”

“That means my head is gonna be on a stake if I tell you too much. Gosh, you really don’t know how scary your girlfriend can be, you know?”

“Yes I do!” Emily quipped back with a laugh. And going for a case and point, Emily started to say, “Like a few weeks ago, Joyce went to this investor thing, and she left the nurs—” and as fast as she fell into the story the realization hit her like a brick wall. Her eyes went wide and the panic was immediate. In her haste to contribute to the conversation and share a story she’d gone out on a limb she wasn’t supposed to.

The room was quiet, and Emily was afraid to look at Amy head on. Did she notice what she was about to say, or was she just confused? Was it obvious that Emily messed up? Was she just going to let it go?

“Yeah? What about your nursery?”

The word was used and a sentence was finished, but it didn’t come from Emily. It didn’t come from Ashes, either. It came from the one other person privy not only to Emily’s diapers, but apparently her nursery now, too. If Amy didn’t know about it before, Emily clearly tipped off to it now.

Emily balled her hand as she crookedly straightened out, glancing up at Amy who looked just as interested and curious like it was any other conversation topic. She wasn’t seething with judgment, strangeness or disgust. Just simple, transparent interest. Like any good listener would be.

“Uh-uhm...nevermind...” Emily retreated with a quiet voice, but the attitude Amy had didn’t shift.

“Okay,” Amy shrugged with a smile, acting like they’d just been talking about the weather, or something equally normal or socially acceptable. Did...did she even realize what she just said? She used the N-word! Nursery! Was that lingo for a workshop or something in the seamstress world, or did she actually know? She had to...she’s seen Emily in a diaper before...!

“Want me to show you the best spots to start?” Amy didn’t skip a beat in asking the next question, moving on like they hadn’t hit a single bump. Carrying the conversation and keeping the rhythm as always.

“Sure...” Emily agreed and followed her over to some shelves in the wall, now coming off as much more self-conscious.

“So...it’s a lot of bits and bobs. Like,” Amy looked around the immediate space. “A lot. You can use these if you want,” she pulled out plastic drawer after drawer, showing and explaining where most stuff once was, and probably should still be.

“And don’t worry about those high shelves...!” Amy groaned as she stretched on her toes, failing to reach as a live example. “I gotta get on a chair for those...” And another fun piece of information that Emily didn’t get to know: Joyce would kill Amy if Emily had to be in a high place...

“So yeah? Just try to piece things out and maybe just sort what seems like they should go together. Anything’s better than what I have now, honestly.”

“Uhm...okay, sure. Yeah, I can do that,” Emily nodded, and Amy smiled appreciatively.

“Great! I’ll try to hurry up and finish upstairs so we can get started on some things down here. Remember: call me if you need me, and kick this guy out if he gets too annoying.”

After one more nod, Emily let Amy leave, focusing herself on the mess Amy had left her to work on.

“Oh, and Emily?”

She turned her head, finding Amy crouched on the final step.

“With everything I’ve done with Joyce, I don’t mind chatting about stuff like that?” And just in case there was room for misunderstanding, “Now you’ve got me all curious about the nursery!” she grinned and laughed. “Promise I’m good for venting, so if ya feel like it, chat away!”

Then she left, and Emily stood by herself, feeling her anxieties stalking her from the high shelves out of reach.

“How...” Emily whispered, “how can she just say it so easily...?”

Talking was difficult. Very difficult. Good thing she didn’t have to do that now, though. The only conversation she had to have was one with Ashes, remembering to pet and pamper him and his fur every moment or so while she became engrossed in a therapeutic deep clean.

Working for the woman holding second place in the diaper-spotting contest...

And just as casual about it, apparently...

“Thank you for moving my meetings up, Sheila...” Joyce dropped the passing remark as she walked by her employee’s station and into her office.

“Of course, Ms. Summers,” Sheila answered on her tail with a bundle of papers in hand. “Do you want to hear what you have today?”

“...Sure,” Joyce answered as she took her seat behind the desk.

“There was an earlier brief this morning on adjusting the amount of volume we’re producing for ventilators... After that you were scheduled to take a look at a few internal reports, but that can be done at any point this week...” Sheila rambled and listed, but Joyce was already staring off in space.

“Ms. Summers?”

“H-hm?” Joyce’s head perked up and the finger leaning against her temple fell back on the polished wood. “Yes?”

“Do you need me to repeat any of that?”

“...No. A volume report, right? Just give me some advance before it’s time for that... Is there something I can do from my computer?”

Work was stupid. Make no mistake, Joyce liked it, and sometimes even loved it. She absolutely did, but not as much as she loved Emily. She loved her so much that any new situation for her girlfriend was just secondhand shakes and worries for the supposedly dominant one in the relationship.

Joyce could be fragile when Emily was, and at least to her attentive, snooping secretary the signs were just as obvious.

“Is everything okay, Ms. Summers?” Sheila asked, but naturally a whirlwind of thoughts were going through her head. Not only for whether things were truly fine, but also what might be causing it... For starters, it wasn’t hard to imagine that coming in late today was part of the equation.

“Everything’s fine, it’s just...” *Just...nothing.* “Nevermind.”

There was no change in the look her secretary was giving her, but Joyce knew immediately she had already given the secretary more than enough crumbs to work with. How was she supposed to hide secrets from someone she had to work so closely with? With the person responsible for managing her entire day?

In order to separate Sheila from what she partially slipped herself into, it required Joyce to impede what was her very job. How ironic. How difficult.

And in Sheila’s shoes, she was deep in thought. Crunching numbers and considering alternatives, but every simulation seemed to end in upsetting her boss... Sheila remembered their meeting after her night with Emily quite vividly. It was a clear sign she had crossed a line, both because she overstepped her bounds and her boss had already been pushing her in that direction.

A mutual making of the circumstances, but it was what it was. And Sheila had been forthright and honest to a fault. There would be no more lies, no more secrets or absences of truth, and that started with confessing her interest and love for what happened with Emily. How much fun it was, how nostalgic. It was being just as honest when she also said that she didn’t quite understand why, or to what degree and what she liked particularly. It was shameful, but she wanted more. Another chance to experience what she had yet to fully grasp.

It was a poor analogy, and a bit cheesy, but she needed more experience. More data? A conclusion couldn’t be reached quite yet, but she wanted another chance...

So she looked at her boss quietly, wondering if something like that was even remotely possible anymore.

“Okay,” Sheila nodded, letting it stay at that. “Should I bring you something to drink?”

“Please.”

And Sheila was gone.

And Joyce was working, or at least trying to. Too busy thinking about Emily with a head stuffed full of worries, excitement and thoughts she couldn’t even begin to vent. Like many other times it was distracting, and even if she didn’t vent about it normally, just knowing she had to walk on eggshells around Sheila now was what made it that much more difficult. It was simply knowing that she *couldn’t* talk about it.

But it was for the best... It was separating the spheres that mattered. It wasn't fair to involve Sheila if Joyce was just going to get upset all over again... Lord, she hadn't even told Emily the full extent yet...

So distracting...

So distracting...

But as conflicted as she felt, it didn't stop the passage of time. Like all plans though, most seemed to fall through. She had a chance to call Emily during lunch, but it wasn't long. Of no fault of Sheila's, but a shifted schedule meant less time to eat and less time to chat.

Past the midday, however, what was peculiar was a phone call again from Emily, and so soon?

"Emily?" Joyce answered the phone mid-walk down one of the halls of the building.

"Hi Joyce..."

"What?" Joyce was cradling the phone with both hands. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yeah..." Emily murmured, sounding awfully reserved. "Uhm...can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can?"

"Can...can I wear a diaper?"