

41 - Eat your Veggies

“Hon?” She called from her vanity, fussing just to make sure that every hair fell in line. Anything less than perfection was sure to leave a bad look on the company. Professionals needed to have standards, after all.

A male voice carried over from the other end of the quaint apartment. “Yeah?”

A gust of breath left her mouth, sending her last few hairs askew yet again. She knew that tone in his voice. The ‘I’m playing games right now but totally listening, but not actually’ voice. Fine.

She stood from the bench, deciding to solve whatever was left in her hair in the car. A brisk walk in heels had her peeking her head in the living room shortly enough. And unsurprisingly the TV was in use; broadcasting screams, explosions and gunshots of a much more brutal world.

“Is this one that you can pause?” she asked while she watched, hardly understanding a single thing going on. Video games never were her strong suit. She grew up alongside them with her cousins, sure, but it was the kind of media she coexisted with rather than mingled with. Though, she did remember that one about managing a team of cute little monsters to be kind of interesting...

“Nope,” her fiance said without turning his head, swiveling away with his thumbs at the sticks on his controller. “But~!” But? His girlfriend watched him do something, which involved a change of pace in the game. It suddenly looked like they were back at some kind of menu. No more flashes and booms; blood and gore.

Finally though she earned his attention. “But I can always quit?” he grinned.

“I’m that special to you, huh?” she grinned right back.

“Of course you are!” he puffed out his chest all manly-like. Then his head scanned her from head to toe. Not only because he was smitten with herself and her looks, but also because, “Ah, need to go out for work?”

“Uh-huh,” she spoke with indifference. “It’s important and Ms. Summers isn’t available to do it herself right now.”

“Sheil, can’t it wait until the weekday?” Greg sighed not from selfishness, but the upset of having to see his girlfriend take up her own time on a weekend. “She wouldn’t mind it getting done on a Monday, right?”

“Maybe,” almost certainly, she could imagine getting it done on a Monday. “But I have to go to her house directly. It’s something she left on her work computer.”

Greg finally rose from the couch, sharing the doorway with her as they touched foreheads. “Okay...”

And just from his look alone, Sheila knew what he was thinking. “Stop. Don’t think that. Ms. Summers is good to me, Greg. Good to *us*.”

“I know, I know,” he quietly hushed. “Still doesn’t mean I like seeing you have to do this stuff on a weekend?”

“It’s because I want to,” Sheila kissed him. Want to, yes, but certainly a soft ‘need to’ as well. Work undone that was sitting around at such an opportune moment was simply irresistible bait to the woman. Leaving an empty chair halfway pushed out from the table, leaving the curtains only partly closed or partly open on a sunny or rainy day. Letting the dishwasher clean all your utensils when you could just do it three times as fast.

Yet Greg wasn’t the fiance for nothing, narrowing her thoughts down immediately. “I think it’s because you *think* you need to.”

Sheila pursed her lips, quiet for a moment. “Maybe.”

“Just maybe, huh?” he chuckled. “Whatever, I won’t stop you. And yes, your boss does sound like a good person. Just remember that you matter to me too, you know?”

“And you matter just as much to me.”

Another kiss.

“Can you make plans tonight?” Sheila looked hopeful. “I don’t wanna leave you here without anything to do. And maybe if I finish up early I can come and join you?”

Greg thought for a minute. “Actually, Kevin and a few others were planning to meet at a bar a little down the street tonight for drinks? We could join them?”

Sheila exhaled with a smile. Good. Boyfriend taken care of. “Good. Go join them. Send me the address too. I’ll see if I can make it once I’m done?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

WOOF!

Startled, Sheila looked around in a slight panic, face to face with a panting tongue lazily hanging out of their third roommate’s face. Wagging tail and all.

Crouching down, Sheila frowned at the dog. “Look at you!” her voice fell into coos and chuckles. “Woosa cutie scaring me like that? Who? Who?” she ran her hands through his golden fur, taking in all his furry softness before it was time to go.

“Baxter should be fine for the night,” Greg took to stroking the dog as well. “Won’t be long.”

“I hope not?” Sheila laughed, “unless the plan was to get blackout drunk and make it an overnight stay at the bar?”

Baxter barked again.

“Shhh!” Sheila playfully stuck a finger up. “Don’t talk like that!” she accused her boyfriend. “He understands more than you think?”

Defensively, his hands were raised. “I didn’t say anything! That was you!”

Maybe, but Sheila dodged the blame, standing back up. “Okay, sounds like we’ve got a plan?”

“That we do!”

WOOF!

Collectively this time the couple shushed him. It hardly did a thing to damper the pep in his step and the wag in his tail.

“Oh–” a thought struck Greg and the smile left his face. “Uhm, one other thing.”

A brow was raised. “Yes...?”

“You...might be hearing from my mom again tomorrow.”

“What?” Sheila gasped tiredly and Greg tried not to flinch. “Again? We just talked last week though?”

“I know, I know...” he sighed. “She’s just restless, babe. I promise, it’ll stop soon.”

“I hope so...” Sheila frowned. She knew it, and Greg knew. They were both okay with it and preferred it. But even so, Sheila still said it aloud. “I don’t want a baby, Greg. I like what we have,” she brushed her hand against their dog. “This is enough.”

“And I feel the same way?” Greg spoke like his conviction had been called into question. “My mom wants to be a grandmother, that’s all.” Calling that ‘just it’ was definitely a bit of an underestimation. Parents trying to append “grand” to the title were a scarily driven bunch. Greg’s mom included.

Too much hustle and bustle. Not a fan of the high-maintenance with all the non-verbalness. Maybe someday Ms. Summers was a bit nonverbal herself with her moods, but maybe Sheila accepted it because it was already her job. And, she did like Ms. Summers. Who could like a baby? Maybe if she could skip to the speaking-and-listening phase...

There wasn’t a single family gathering or event nowadays that didn’t involve bringing the talk of having kids up. Subtle nods or direct questioning, depending on how much she had to drink that evening.

“Maybe we shouldn’t get married,” Sheila openly mused, “just so we can keep using that as an excuse?”

“Maybe it would be,” Greg chuckled, “but I think I can take a little harassment from my mom if it means we get to share the same last name?”

They touched hands.

“Okay, fine,” she grinned from ear to ear. “I think I can too. But anyway, wanna come see me off?”

Greg followed her to the door.

“Though, it is a little funny, you know?”

“What’s funny?” Sheila asked as she slipped on her jacket.

“I mean, you work as a secretary now, and as a kid, didn’t you do a lot of looking after your cousins? You dote on Baxter a lot?”

“Yeah?” And?

“Well, Sheil,” Greg choked down a laugh. “I hate to say it, but I think you’re kind of a natural-born babysitter at heart?”

While it was intended to be a ‘gotcha’ kind of moment, Sheila stuck her finger high with a eureka. “Ah! See?” She came in for one last kiss.

“Babysitter.”

Not a mommy.

And with that, she departed for the Summers’ household.

“Have...have you had your dinner yet?” Sheila asked out on a limb so strandly and shaky from the original tree of reason; the entire basis for why she was even here. Her heart was beating nervously, questioning her words that came off the cuff as soon as they came to mind. It was so wholly uncharacteristic of her, and yet it was a part that she simply did not want to ignore.

“Dinner...?” For once they were on the same wavelength, which was wondering for what reason Sheila was asking something like that.

She said it. She actually said it.

I just asked that...I just asked my boss’ girlfriend that...

“...Right...” Sheila confirmed, though had absolutely zero idea on how to follow up with it.

Dinner? Wasn’t Sheila here for files? Emily wanted to express confusion, yet she remained awkward, lest it was something so four-dimensionally obvious that she was somehow the clueless one.

So she opted for cautious honesty. “Uhh...no...” Her hand wandered to the cuff of her sagging hood. “Joyce usually cooks, and...I was sleeping before you got here...”

She caught her. Red-handed. Sheila had made a gamble and she’d been validated. Justified. Her foot was halfway in the door and the urge to pry it wide open took the momentum.

“Lunch? You had lunch, right?”

Emily blinked. Lunch too? A slight feeling of unease was sprouting in her stomach. Was this second grade already again so soon?

“...I wasn’t all that hungry...?” And *why? Why* was she answering so honestly? Sheila did *Joyce* things, not *Emily* things!

She was mere seconds from leaving, and yet the whole situation hit a stunning reverse when an unbroken chain of eye-contact ensued. In that same moment, Emily silently watched Sheila step away from the door. Back inside.

“And were you planning on making something?”

No? “Yes...?” Was this really her business?

“Like what?” Sheila asked. Momentum. A groove. Slowly, carefully, the rhythm was being found.

“...” Emily told herself that was going to make herself something, though the same was said right around lunch time as well... She quietly looked over at the entrance to the kitchen, like tonight’s meal had been scribed on a piece of paper for her.

What did they even have for food? To make *actual* food? It’d been so long since Emily made herself anything. As much as a deli meat sandwich maybe, but that’s when Joyce was working. Either that or reheating leftovers.

“Emily?” Sheila called. Confidently. Expectantly.

“I...a...a sandwich. I’m not that hungry, so...”

“You’re not that hungry?” Sheila repeated, lacing her words with a feigned surprise, “Even when you didn’t have lunch?” There was no surprise, just doubt.

And in trying to pretend like her face wasn’t feeling warm, Emily’s feet were unconsciously starting to fidget. The cornered girl resorted to her best, strongest and most effective tactic. An unbeatable one, at that.

“...I...I don’t know...”

Sheila quietly nodded.

I won't be going to the bar tonight.

“Can I take a look?” Sheila asked, but her heels were already off and she was stepping back onto the hardwood floor. She was already midway to the kitchen before Emily could stammer something back.

“W-wait! I...really, Sheila I'm fine! So...!”

What did they even keep in the fridge? Suddenly it was a blur. She looked inside it every day. Hell, she looked in it before her afternoon nap! But the moment she was under a magnifying glass and was dealing with a person she was already wary of, caught in an embarrassing outfit, no less, she could hardly even remember if they kept ice cubes in the freezer.

All she knew of right then was what they didn't have. No ice cream. Bleh. Joyce liked to kid, but she also liked to follow up on her rules.

Stupid rules.

They rarely froze their meat; Joyce got it fresh when she was ready for it. They had vegetables, but that was it. She didn't mind stuff like that— Correction, she did mind. A particular prejudice for beets, specifically, but that was a totally separate issue. Back to the thought at hand; what could you do with vegetables alone?

A bottle of wine that Joyce liked was in there too? That hardly made for a dinner, though...

And as much as Emily wanted to ask *why* her girlfriend's secretary was currently snooping through their fridge, she was simply too busy bunching up her footie pajamas trying to muster the courage that could let her actually ask those things. Question the person that Joyce trusted so vehemently. Trusted enough to be their personal diaper procurer.

The secretary went straight for the fridge once her feet crossed the threshold. She stopped only for a moment to admire the page torn out of a coloring book. A small smile escaped her once she saw that. Cute.

Emily absolutely did this.

Sheila's eyes scanned up and down the tidy and clean interior, looking over the assortment of things to work with. No meat. Vegetables. Wine? Sheila could feel Emily's presence behind her and the memories of her at a particular hotel one particular night.

Definitely no drinks tonight.

The fridge was closed and Sheila moved on to the cabinets.

“Sh...Sheila? I...I really appreciate it, but I'm all set...”

“Didn't you say Joyce normally cooked for you?” The committed woman asked with her back to the rest of the room. “It's no trouble, really. I can cook too?”

And Emily couldn't? Well...maybe some questions were better left unanswered. She “cooked” sandwiches confidently. Maybe she wasn't a cook.

An assembler at best.

But that wasn't Sheila's business, and neither was Emily's nursery. And yet, while Emily disillusioned herself into thinking there was still a thin veil protecting her and Joyce's darkest secret, Sheila was busy trying to snip at the last few threads still spacing Emily from the diapers. Busy with that and formulating a dinner.

To Sheila, it simply wasn't her boss' house anymore. It wasn't some silly, boring job to go run after some digital files. The clock had been wound back to a high school Friday night. Her aunt and uncle were on date night and her sweet baby cousins had become her responsibility for the night.

Pasta...?

Sheila held the box of carbs in her hands, contemplating. Spaghetti needed a sauce...

“Emily, does Joyce...?” Then she stopped. Would Emily know?

“Sorry? What was that?”

All Sheila did was smile.

“Sorry, nevermind!”

One more cupboard later and there was in fact a can of sauce.

The silly and ignorant Emily told herself that Sheila was just doing prep to set the girl up for the rest of the night. You know, what a secretary would do. Set up meetings, set up schedules and appointments. Set up the beginnings of dinner...

But one pot of heating water later and Emily was having serious doubts. Things had clearly gone beyond what should and should not have been condoned, yet only after the damage had been done was Emily finally finding the will to speak and confront.

“Sheila...?”

On a dime Sheila’s head was turned. “What’s wrong?” What wrong, *hon*? Damn! She nearly just said that? *Honey? Sweetie...?* No, she probably shouldn’t say that, she shouldn’t. She wouldn’t...

Was this water boiling already? It was starting to feel a little hot...

Emily interrupted the woman’s thoughts. “You don’t have to make me anything... I appreciate it, but I’m all set...really.”

And yet Sheila casually shrugged, searching for a can opener.

Crap.

Sheila had already sunk her fangs into this and her hold was getting stronger by the second. Every moment of uninterrupted authority was another ounce added to a crushing case of justification. Poor Emily simply didn’t have the strength to fight this woman off from her own convictions and conclusions.

With a utensil resting in her hand, Sheila looked at the girl from across the kitchen. “I’m here, Emily, I might as well? Besides, you’d get your PJ’s dirty if you tried cooking like that...” And her comment made Emily’s eyes wander down.

But finally, something to work with! The moment she opened herself up for an attack, Emily’s heart skipped a beat. The pot calling the kettle black, as they say? It was an off-moment to be feeling it, but maybe a piece of Joyce’s wit had finally rubbed off onto her...!

With an inkling of inexplicable trepidation, one adult said to the other, “But...you’re dressed too?”

Sheila paused and Emily did her best not to smile.

Easy! Victory! Sheila's empire of logic was failing and everything she assumed and insisted on was now but a fallacy, all because the silly secretary had made the critical error of wearing a formal office jacket to a home visit. She wouldn't dare risk sauce on her work attire!

Why Emily felt an almost competitive nature, or the unspoken idea that she somehow needed to "earn" her freedom or independence from this woman was absolutely beyond her. And yet, if either of them could read each other's minds, they'd understand quite quickly just how many unspoken assumptions and vulnerable feelings were influencing the other.

And while the corners of Emily's mouth were ready to jump with glee, two cinderblocks of blind ignorance came crashing down on them.

"Thank you for reminding me," Sheila chuckled, making a show of her appreciative smile. Off came the jacket that Emily foolishly thought to be the linchpin that'd do her in, dressing down to just her sweater that certainly could afford a battle scar or two from a war on tomato-saucy terror. She disrobed just as easily as Emily could have changed into something else. Something that Sheila couldn't have just used the same exact reasoning against.

Just like that, the self-invited woman was back to taking charge. Clueless now with what to do, Emily quickly disappeared from the room, phone slipping out of her pajama pocket.

Joyce...pick up!

"So if you're not comfortable with it," Carol steered them up a short set of brick-laid stairs, "There's nothing wrong with using a fake first name or anything like that, you know?"

"There isn't?" Joyce gave her friend a weird look. "I can't say I've ever gone under an alias or anything before," she chuckled. Well, maybe a retired chairman on paper, once or twice...

Carol shrugged. "I don't bother with it anymore, but I was a little cautious at first. This sphere of business is a bit more... 'underground,' I guess. You don't hear much about it publicly for a reason. Just want to be mindful of... you know," Carol looked her up and down, like Joyce's fortune was stored in her looks.

“Thank you for warning me,” Joyce smiled, reaching the front of the restaurant. It did look busy inside, yet a quite obvious sign still called it out as reserved. This many people came for something like this? But now that they were here and Joyce knew it was real, she was feeling something like the kind of nerves Emily got whenever she was meeting new people.

“And...also,” she stole another glance at the people inside. “Should I...erm, *prepare* myself for anything?”

“Pre...pare?” Carol didn’t share the same thought, hence her confusion.

Darn. Did she really have to say it? “Like...stuff? People showing things...? Or...wearing stuff?” Stuff that wasn’t normal clothes?

Carol’s eyes widened. “Oh!” she laughed aloud, patting Joyce’s just slightly flustered shoulder. “No! No! Not at all, I promise! This is *strictly* about networking. *Nothing* like that is allowed here. Definitely not.”

More than anything, it was a relief to hear. By now, it was safe to say Joyce was hardly a stranger to the ideas of diapers, bottles, cribs, and playpens. Rather, a beneficiary, even, as long as it somehow involved Emily. That all being said, Joyce in her own estranged bubble that she trapped Emily in with her somehow had virtually no understanding or concept of other kinks or “niche” interests. While it could be argued she was hypocritical or ignorant to have no interest or hold reservations for anything else, that’s simply how it was. But maybe that could stand to change.

Inside the restaurant they finally went, shifting from crickets playing under the night sky and to a bustling crowd of appetizers and conversations.

Joyce’s eyes immediately wandered to spot the crowd. Size it up. See who she was dealing with.

It was a formal kind of event, but not overly formal. Casual, just maybe. Needless to say, her first thought was probably if she brought Emily. Dress her in something that had stripes or a little bit of color. Stripes played up the mood and color magnified her eyes. Anything to bring out a little something in her.

“Joyce?” Carol tugged on her arm, ending the daydream. She discreetly pointed nearby. “We need to go sign in.”

“Oh, right!” Joyce apologetically chuckled. “Sorry! Just people-watching.”

“Sizing everybody up?” Carol asked as they walked up to a receptionist podium. But Joyce didn’t get a chance to answer before a new conversation began.

“Hi there!” The man behind the desk gave a small wave before picking up a weighty pen. “Who am I signing in for?”

“Carol Baker?” Carol, clearly not adverse to the idea of using her own name, offered. “And this is my plus-one.” Carol then raised her brows, leaning in at the entrepreneur with a grin. “Her name is...?”

“Joyce,” Joyce decided, bold and brave enough to wear her wallet on her sleeve rather than hide away. Besides, if there was any merit to this and something *did* actually go somewhere, moving on from a fake name was certainly an awkward foot to start on.

“Last name?” he then asked, and Joyce hesitated.

“S’,” Carol jumped right in, finishing for her. Apparently it was of no issue, because moments later they both had their own name cards.

“Thanks for that...” Joyce muttered, adjusting how the card looked on herself as she walked.

“Of course!” Carol chuckled, taking the lead back to the main area. Though, quite not so tactfully she added, “Oh! But, maybe as a thanks, say if...I don’t know...you find something that might be worth investing in?” Dollar signs flashed in her eyes. “Don’t forget about who brought ya here?”

Cute. Not quite Emily cute, but cute. Joyce smiled regardless.

“Yes, I will most certainly remember...” she chuckled. “So...what’s the best way to do this?”

“Well first,” Carol paused as she finally started to survey the crowd herself, “Ah! Let’s go meet *him!*”

Him?

After navigating an aisle carved by the backs of people standing in circles and chatty cliques that were forming, Carol tapped on the back of a broad-shouldered individual.

Just as he turned, the first person he saw was Joyce, then noticed Carol just a few inches below.

“Oh! Carol!”

“Logan!”

The pair hugged just briefly before separating.

“Ah— One second?” he apologized, turning back to his group. “Sorry, I’ll be back later to discuss! I just need to catch up with someone.” Waving as he left, Joyce, Carol and now Logan in accompaniment found an empty booth by the side.

“First, this is my friend Joyce,” Carol warmly introduced and Joyce just smiled. “She’s not new to business, but as far as things like what goes on here, that’s a bit different.”

Logan nodded as he listened, scratching his black void of close-shaven beard for just a moment. “Uh-huh? Well, first,” Logan stretched his hand across the table, giving Joyce a firm, yet reasonable shake. “Joyce, thank you so much for coming. I know that it can sometimes be a little strange or intimidating attending stuff like this. So first and foremost I want to assure you: it is *just* business. All talk, nothing else.”

“Don’t worry,” Carol cut in, “I made sure to tell her that.”

Another trained laugh left Joyce’s mouth, holding a hand to her mouth. “Jeez, you’re making me sound like I’m just in it for the money...!” And everyone laughed, but then an internal panic started to rise.

Wait, what if they were just in it for the money...? Did that mean she just outed herself as someone supposedly in it for the kinks, too?!

“I—” she stammered, “I mean, I guess I’d be lying if I said that investing wasn’t my main interest...”

Logan held out a hand, as if to halt her words of self-doubt. “No, no, really, I understand. Carol’s the same way.”

“I am,” Carol gingerly included.

“I just don’t want you or anyone new to things like these feeling nervous. Everyone has their reasons for associating with this, just like with anything else. Even if you *were* here just for the potential profits, which hey— money is money, I completely understand. That being said, any

kind of capital to help business or services related to what these circles have an interest in is always welcome.”

In other words, not a single investor had to actually like the kink they were helping pay for. Profit was profit and nothing else had to come of it. A truly blind investment, but by no means was it unheard of. After all, Joyce could hardly imagine that every shareholder of a dying movie theater chain believed in the actual product just as much as their primary hope of just turning a personal, baseless and speculative profit.

“Well, thank you for assuring me,” Joyce nodded appreciatively, trying not to let her eyes wander. All this red-tape talk was starting to make her admittedly curious. “So...how do I know who...uhm...has an idea?” As far as she could tell, Joyce saw no difference between either the givers or receivers. Her scenes that were few and far between nowadays were the kinds that rented out properties and had designated stands and displays. All she could see here were handshakes and business cards.

“I was hoping there’d be some kind of system like that by now...” Carol passively added, implying this apparently wasn’t an unpopular opinion.

Logan could only half-grin apologetically. “Okay, I think you might be in the same boat as Carol, here. *But*, hopefully you might be a bit more receptive than her, Joyce?”

“Bold of you to talk about me like I’m not sitting right here?” she frowned at him. Joyce watched with a tinge of amusement.

Logan’s face didn’t have much to offer in the give-a-fudge department. “Sorry, Carol! You started it!”

“Well,” Carol was scooting her way to the edge of the booth, “I suppose I shall make it *so*. Joyce, I’m going to get a drink and start meandering, alright? If you spot me, feel free to be my shadow!”

“Will do!” Joyce saw her off, now just with Logan.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how’d you two meet?” Logan watched his friend disappear before sitting up straight again.

“Oh, uhm...through her husband, actually. Nothing big!” Yes, through her husband, which was through their daughter, which was through Emily’s misadventure at the zoo... Not complicated in even the slightest.

“Awesome, that’s, er, great,” he suddenly laughed, and Joyce did too. Anything more than that would’ve been forcing the man to make up comments and lies that had no basis about her. Carol was a friend, sure, but Logan’s extent didn’t go a whole lot farther than that.

“So...I’m just supposed to socialize?” Joyce tried summarizing, finding the job easy enough, albeit a little aimless.

Taking in a breath and finally exhaling with an admission, “Yeah...okay, I know, I get it. First-timers can find it a little hard talking to people, especially about kink stuff.” Kink. The first time Joyce heard that word this entire night. Suddenly it felt real. Suddenly it was more than just indirect references and a nondescript socializing dinner. The dynamics were astronomically different from the norm now. She wasn’t speculating just businesses, but *kinks*. Weird, wacky and odd kinks. Things people did for sexual pleasure and she was throwing money at it?

“Nervous?” Logan smirked, kind enough to get a read of the booth.

Joyce’s hands were together, stroking her knuckles. It wasn’t the best look, but without having her girlfriend around and not needing to be unwaveringly brave, her face slumped.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Eh, a little? Getting through the front door is pretty impressive though.”

“How about flying across the country?”

“No kidding?”

“Yep. Carol and I are from the same state.”

“Oh, well, I guess when you put it that way it should’ve been obvious!” he laughed. “But actually, hey?” Logan stood from the booth waiting by the table on his feet. “Since you’ve been so graciously abandoned by your friend, and I have to be a good host, why don’t I get you started with some people?”

Joyce nodded, though her tinge of trepidation she forgot to leave with Emily was tingling. “With other investors? Or...”

“So another thing,” Logan smiled over the forgotten talking point, “Part of why we don’t have any visual labels is because as much as there are investors and idea-havers here, my hope is to really push forward a collaborative style of relationship.”

“Isn’t paying someone to make them more money collaboration enough already?” she chuckled.

“Yes, very true. But, stuff like this is usually at least a…” He paused for something eloquent. “-- an inherent passion to the originator? People on some level *do* care about what they want to produce or do here, Joyce. After all, a passionate project tends to pay!”

That it did, and thinking on a cute diaper bum she got to fondle last night, the return on investment didn’t always have to be in cash…

“Okay, sure. You win,” Joyce sighed giddily with some wind beneath her sails. “Since Carol ditched me, I think I’ll take you up on introducing me to someone?”

And with an exaggerated bow, Logan signaled for her to follow.

“It would be my utmost pleasure!”

“Emily! It’s ready!” A distant voice called and Emily shuddered from the floor of her room. Same place she was when it was time for the dentist. She was laying against Joyce’s side, fuzzy feet against the bottom of their tall window while she tried to get some kind of response from her girlfriend. Absolutely nothing. What gives? Busy, probably, but that was no excuse for going quiet…!

Emily huffed, looking at the doorway. If *she* was the one not responding, it’d end probably in a legitimate spanking, now that Joyce was apparently into that. But also apparently Emily couldn’t *not* be into spankings. Well, she could, but that’d probably only make Joyce like it more.

Mommies like effective discipline.

And right now Joyce was above every law in the universe. The one that included keeping communications.

“Emily?” Sheila called again, whisked away by her own mood of giddy fun. Greg had long since been texted that she’d be running late. After all, her work “still needed to be taken care of.”

A plate of dinner was awaiting her boss' special someone and the mood couldn't have felt better despite her flurry of emotions. Of course Sheila still had her reservations; about what she was doing. And yet, with each little reveal or small mention and mishap at work, they were all little droplets into a big bucket of pent-up frustration. Frustration she didn't even know she had until tonight. Until she caught little miss Summers in the cutest pajamas she'd ever seen.

"C...Coming...!" A faint voice reached her from the other end of the apartment.

What was keeping her? Sheila brushed the spoon of a clean ladle resting in her hand. After a few padded shuffles Emily emerged, for some reason half-expecting her highchair to magically be there. Thank goodness it wasn't, otherwise she'd be having hospital food for the night after her heart attack.

It wasn't Joyce there to receive her, but a close branch that had quite the similar arsenal. The way she stood. The way she smiled. Down to the very way she even had the chair already pulled out for her...

Everything now seemed to put the girl on high alert. What's worse, Emily felt the need to scrutinize anywhere for potentially a baby bottle or a bib. But she knew she was being silly... Sheila may know about the diapers, but that was it. She likely assumed Emily wasn't wearing them, and she definitely didn't know about the nursery. She was safe. Protected. Sheila didn't know. She knew nothing.

Nothing but beets.

Her hand on the top of the chair held her back the moment she saw it. Staring long and hard at the plate of green spinach leaves, slices of tomato, onion and feta, there and all throughout were monsters from the purple, soily deep all throughout.

"Something wrong?" Sheila asked, standing right now to her. She was looking down at her handiwork now. Did it look bad, or something?

Putting on her bravest look, Emily sunk into the chair. "N...no...No. It's nothing..." Despite never having asked for it, Emily smiled somewhat appreciatively. "Thank you for dinner?" The pasta *did* look good, and had the salad been one specific ingredient short, it would have gone from putrid to perfect.

It was gratitude and that's all Sheila wanted. She smiled cheerily before she walked away. "Of course! You're very welcome."

It was one trip to the stove and counter later before Sheila was sitting a chair's width away from her at the table.

“Do you mind if I eat with you? I was going to see my fiance after I left, my boyfriend, but he got a little wrapped up in something. I hope you don't mind me imposing and all like this...”

I know what fiance means... “No, that's fine. Sorry you're stuck with me and not Joyce?” After all, they actually had a dynamic. Sheila and Emily? There was something, but it certainly wasn't business.

Sheila waved dismissively. “Don't worry about that. Joyce and I...well,” her eyes wandered above for a second, “She's my boss, so I don't like stuff like that so much. Or...I guess it makes me feel a little uncomfortable.”

“Keep your distance?” Emily ate a forkful of pasta.

She *was* going to eat a forkful, then Sheila piped up.

“Ah-ah! Emily? Uhm, maybe you'd want to take off the pajamas first?”

Just as she was starting to forget, her substitute-Joyce had reminded her.

“Oh...” And embarrassingly, Emily set her fork down. Standing back up she hovered to the edge of the kitchen. “S-sorry...let me go change real quick...”

“Sorry I didn't think to remind you,” Sheila included apologetically. She'd have to be better about that next time.

Next time?

A few minutes later Emily had returned in the best adult-looking pants and shirt she could find. Sheila quietly observed with an inexplicable feeling of disappointment, but left it at that. It was almost as if they were equals now.

And thankfully for Emily she was feeling some confidence now, having shed her skin and emerged as a blossoming, super-mature butterfly. “Sorry about that... So you were saying? You prefer keeping it work-related around Joyce?”

“Uh-huh,” Sheila nodded, taking a bite. “It might sound weird, but I think I just work better when I know what I’m fully dealing with. I know it might be unusual, but I like clearly defined roles?”

Ew. Weird. Did Sheila put *deja vu* in the sauce? But more importantly, no wonder Sheila was held in high regard. She was just like Joyce.

“No, I get that,” Emily mumbled partway through a mouthful of food. After swallowing, “So like, it’s tough to be friends with your boss!”

“Exactly!” Sheila immediately lit up. “That’s exactly it. I like Joyce and I think she’s a very capable person, and that’s why I want to do whatever I can to help her.” She took a second to quietly observe Emily who glanced down at her food. Helping her boss in any way. Even if it meant holding down the fort at home.

“Well, I guess just from when we’ve talked, Joyce does have a lot of nice things to say about you,” Emily added, and tactfully retracted all the sensitive backdoor-bits.

“That makes me happy to hear,” Sheila smiled appreciatively. Maybe she really was appreciated if the boss was bragging to her dau—

Girlfriend.

Sheila’s smile didn’t falter as the mental struggle ensued.

The conversation was sobering, enough to help Emily forget whatever weird funk she was feeling since Sheila got here. Enough to make her curious.

“Oh!” An eager feeling suddenly hit her. Her leg excitedly swung under the table. “So what’s Joyce like at work?” A very good question indeed. Something she could probably never get straight from the source’s mouth. A working Joyce to Emily was like talking about a unicorn. By big mama’s doctrine, a Joyce away from home simply did not exist. All she got to know was the motherly and girlfriendy one.

“At work?” Like always? Sheila pondered, only just remembering how intimate her boss had been with Emily that one night. “Well... She’s definitely passionate about her work. I’ve had a few late nights just trying to get her to leave her office.”

A surprised giggle erupted across the table. “What? Really?” Joyce *choosing* to stay late? Impossible!

“That was a little while back though,” Sheila lightly chuckled. A bit before Emily, most likely. “People at the company have a lot of respect for her,” she continued. “Though...” What were the best words to use... The most appropriate ones to use in front of her boss’ number one confidant. “Joyce can be very...strong-willed?”

“*Right!?*” Emily damn well near slapped the table in excitement. A mutual understanding! Sheila looked slightly taken aback, hence Emily quickly simmering herself down. “S-sorry...!” she couldn’t help but giggle. “I just... That’s *exactly* how Joyce is when she’s home!” Maybe work and home with her were one and the same?

Immediately her mind was racing to share an example. And oh so many to choose from! Like...oh! That one time Joyce supervised her the whole time while they cooked? Or...ah! The other times when she forces her to wait in the bathroom until she’s done drying off? Or maybe when she’s fidgeting on the changing table! No scary movies without a diaper on?

Well, Emily’s frantic mind paused for that one. Not quite a rule yet. The Supreme Joyce was probably still deliberating on whether that one was constitutional or not. Not quite ratified yet, but Emily had a hopeful hunch.

Aside from that one though, so many examples! So...so many...and she couldn’t share any at all... Not one.

Sheila raised her brows, waiting for more to follow, but by the look on her face, clearly there was more she did not want to tell. Throwing her a bone, Sheila said, “So you wanted to know what else, right? Mmm... Well, hmm... If I share this, do you promise not to tell her?”

Emily blinked. A secret? A secret about *Joyce*? If it weren’t for the food in her mouth Emily would have been smiling from ear to ear. Forget everything she held against Sheila; this woman was pure gold! Vigorously she nodded.

Sheila pursed her lips, choking down an elated feeling just to see the girl so giddy. If only she had the authority to wipe that small smudge of sauce on her mouth...! “Alright... Well, recently, Joyce was having a bit of a...bad day.”

The one audience member gasped aloud. “Like she was angry?” Joyce? Angry? She could be slightly cranky or moody, but that was the worst Emily *ever* got to see!

After a momentary thought and a calculated admission, Sheila nodded, “Yes, I guess you *could* say she was. But, maybe more like upset? Anyway– I usually take down notes for her in

meetings that she has to go to. There was a presenter for a product revision and Joyce was being...uncooperative.”

It was as clear as day just how many eggshells Sheila was walking on, trained to be obedient even when her boss wasn't actively around. Yet despite her subtle choice of words and active filtering, Emily could see through all of it and was eating it up so eagerly. As eager as she was to ignore her beet-ridden salad.

“And I...” Sheila cracked a sudden grin, trying to hide it with her hand and fork, “I probably shouldn't, but I guess it was a little funny...”

“What? What was?” Emily pestered with a baited breath.

“The presenter...Joyce sort of...snapped at him.”

“No way!” Emily laughed at the poor unknown employee's expense, too busy envisioning Joyce in such a hostile manner. The humor only came because it sounded so unlike her and so very much all the same. Maybe the joy though came from getting to hear about Joyce's wrath and not being on the receiving end of it for once. Luckily for Emily, she wasn't the one caught lying this time...!

And what was never considered in the girl's fanatical mind was the world of difference that laid in consequences. Joe Schmoe was risking his entire career getting in Joyce's way. Emily was in danger of thirty minutes with her nose facing the corner.

“Sometimes Joyce needs a little bit of talking too...” Sheila quietly laughed. “But ninety-five percent of the time, she's probably one of the best people you could imagine working with.”

“That's good though,” Emily smiled, stowing away her devilish grin. Oh how much fun it would be to taunt Joyce with all of this. Barring what she was explicitly ordered not to share, of course...!

“And also,” Sheila pointed with her fork, “Is something wrong with the salad?”

“Hm?” Emily smiled innocently, daring not to look where she pointed. Her plate of pasta was near-finished, and yet her splendid garden of greens right beside it hadn't been harvested one bit.

“Your salad? You haven't touched it...?”

Finally Emily did acknowledge it, dancing her fork around precariously. Carefully. Deliberately. Right until she had just the right serving. Just the right stuff with none of the poison sitting on her plate... Success!

Emily popped a forkful of spinach, tomato, feta and onion into her mouth. It was pretty good actually.

She smiled, almost forgetting her manners and flashing an empty mouth. “Nothing’s wrong? I just...like eating stuff in order? Kinda weird, but I guess that’s just what I do...?”

Good lie, Emily! Actually!

“Oh, alright. Sorry about that, I hope I didn’t make that weird?” She hoped she hadn’t, as a fully-stocked adult nursery was still a long ways away from calling anything before that weird.

Emily’s head was casually swinging each way. “Not at all!” And just to try and prove it, Emily took another filtered bite from her salad. “So?” her eyes lit up again, “Can you tell me any more stories about Joyce? I wanna know more!”

It was another fuzzy tickle in Sheila’s brain, and maybe her heart, but she laughed in tune with the pleasant feeling.

“Another one? Okay...let me think...”

“Todd, right?” Joyce’s rehearsed smile came out to play, “Thank you for taking a second to chat with me! I’m wishing you the best!” Wishing him the best? For a store that specializes in selling whips and collars? Joyce didn’t get it, but she was coming to respect it. The pair parted ways, each drifting into their own pool of the crowd.

Each conversation was enlightening, to say the least. Cages meant for chastity, leatherworks, latex fashion, “rent-a-puppy,” which was most certainly *not* a puppy, and the like. Ball gag designs like they were fashion statements and phone cases, platform heels so high with stiletto heels so sharp— tall enough to actually make Emily look like a big girl. It was nothing Joyce could have ever imagined as legitimate ideas, and yet she was astonished to see them as plausible, given context and explanation from the “idea-havers,” as Logan put it.

It was all with a grain of salt, considering the whole point was to sell yourself and your project, but the bias was lessened if it meant Joyce was actually seeing it herself. Bizarre, sure, but there really was a market for all of this.

Markets that weren't quite speaking to Joyce. She mixed and she mingled, learning quite a bit about the other side of life and what went on behind the public door. Fascinating, yes, but personally interested? Not as much.

None of it clicked. None of it had her jumping for joy, pouring out the cash or personally wanting to see any of it come to fruition. She wished them all the best, certainly, but she was indifferent to being a part of any of it. She was a bad liar, saying that it was all about the money. It was, but that in itself was just a pretense. A pretense for what she didn't even know herself. *Something*. Something that spoke to her. Her emotions.

Without skipping around in figures of speech, Joyce was made of money. She was set for life, and by extension so too was Emily. The only stake she had in a race like this was personal interest. An interest that wasn't being pegged quite yet. And maybe not at all.

And in her thoughts she accidentally touched shoulders with another person. After bumping the bronze shoulder, Joyce apologized on reflex.

“Sorry about that! I’m sorry– I’m barely looking where I’m going!”

“No-no! Stop!” the stranger laughed back with her black headful of curls bobbing with her chuckle. “Gosh, I’ve gone so many times around this place already, I should have some better awareness!”

They both laughed, but they didn't move on.

“I *think* I may have seen your face around here a few times?” the young woman scrutinized with a playful eye, then looked at her nametag, “Ah! Joyce! Joyce S!”

“The one and only,” Joyce smirked, then looked directly across at hers. “Isabelle...Barros?”

“So nice to meet you!” Isabelle stuck her hand out and Joyce returned the gesture. “I don't want to sound too excited, but I really was hoping to get a chance to speak with you?”

“Who? Me?”

“No,” she commented, pointing her finger somewhere random. “The other Joyce! Yes, you!” Isabelle, clearly in her stride without a drink in her system and simply pure lovability and energy laughed. “You’re not busy, are you? Can I take up some of your time?”

Clearly she had no other takers, especially when Joyce was the one approaching people all night. Carol was probably still busy networking as well. Likely laying the groundwork for a small fortune.

“Sure?” Joyce shrugged, allowing herself to be led by the shoulder. Not often someone as forward and as tall as her would do that. The best anyone could do to get her to follow was a padded tush leading her by the hand.

“Sorry, I hope you don’t mind sitting?” Isabelle apologized, wiping her forehead with a slightly exaggerated sigh. “It feels like I’ve been running in circles all night.”

“Oh yeah? Trying to find investors?” And Joyce with her subtle guess figured that she was being pegged as another “customer” right then.

“Did I give myself away so soon?” She smirked, then chuckled. She seemed unapologetic, but it wasn’t a turnoff. “But yes,” she admitted with a sigh, yet still looking just as lively as she might have had she not been on an investor’s losing streak all night. “Has anyone brought anything up yet that’s interesting to you?”

A sigh of pausing to think weighed over Joyce’s mind. “Well...I guess the one about robotic tails that...uhm...go in the back was interesting...?” Joyce did her best to explain in censored terms, but the look on her face was obvious and Isabelle was already laughing.

“So it’s not your cup of tea, I take it? That’s alright. The way Logan puts it, if you’ve met him: it wouldn’t be quite the passion if everyone had such an interest in it?”

Already trying to bleach her imagination with other thoughts, Joyce nodded with a chuckle. Now she was about to get it dirty all over again, most likely.

“Okay, you have the floor,” or the table, “what are you here to promote?”

Isabelle reared her head back with playful offense. “Don’t make me out to be some kind of villain!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Joyce chuckled, almost genuinely, “I just don’t want you to have to take up any more time than you need to?”

A curious tilt came from the curly-haired head. “Oh? You say that like you already know what I’m going to talk about?”

Joyce shrugged, feeling her prospects of the night already dwindling. “True, I don’t, but... Well, nothing I guess has quite piqued my interest here just yet.”

“Not even if I wanted to show you *my* tail?”

The comment was brazen and bold, and not but a second later Joyce was blushing uncomfortably. Isabelle was all pearly whites and laughter then.

“O-Okay...” Joyce stammered, looking somewhat professional again. “I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions... So what do you have?”

“Não-não!” she tutted with energy, stalling precisely because she seemed so in the moment, trying to savor every bit of it. “I’m not as heartless as you might think I am! Tell me first! Why are you here tonight?”

“Why am I here?” Since when did a potential investor have to give *their* life story? But she didn’t object. “I...came because a friend invited me.”

“So you came because you were only invited?”

“No...well, yes, sort of.”

Isabelle nodded, but her curious and discerning look just wouldn’t leave.

“So you came to something like this *just* for a friend?”

“...Yes?”

She expected it to end at that. However,

“I don’t believe you.”

“Sorry?” Didn’t believe her? For coming for just a friend?

“You have a look, Joyce?”

A look? Didn't everyone have a *look*? After all, people needed faces, and faces did looking all the time?

"I..." and yet she knew exactly what the woman meant. "I don't know what you mean...?"

"*That!*" she pointed with a noise of joy and Joyce shuffled uncomfortably. "That look! The look when you're hiding something!"

"I don't have anything to hide..."

"You're right, you don't? So why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Was this therapy or a business proposal? Had it been any other person she'd be walking away right now. But she was sitting. Damn, Isabelle was crafty. But in reality, Joyce didn't know why she was still sitting there. Maybe not to cause a scene?

"I'm here to invest..."

"Invest in what, though? Not animal tails?"

"Yes, not animal tails..." Yet another unpleasant reminder.

"Ou- I'm bothering you, I can see that," Isabelle apologized, per se, but her face did not falter nor did her determination change. "I'm not trying to be a life coach or anything- I just mean to start off on the right foot?"

"Well..." Joyce with nothing but mixed feelings sighed, "it doesn't seem like it's going very well..."

Yet her less than enthused comment had no effect. "Maybe not?" the stranger admitted, laughing without a care.

At this point their small discussion was feeling like an interrogation session. No wonder this woman wasn't getting any bites, and this shark too had no intentions either.

"Can I guess?"

"Guess what?" Joyce frowned.

"Your thing? Why you're here?"

Thankfully the crowd was noisy enough to mask the small click of her tongue. “I told you, I’m here for a friend—!”

“Is it bondage?”

Such a daring question which would have had Joyce falling over had she not been sitting.

“N-no! What are you talking about? I don’t have a thing for—”

“Pets? Do you like big puppies and kitties?”

The crease between her brows that sloped up to the ceiling was beginning to form while she tried to look anywhere but the woman’s piercing gaze. “Th-this is ridiculous...” If Joyce could feel this vulnerable and bothered, she could only imagine the puddle of liquid Emily would be under the same kind of duress...!

“Oh?” and like she struck gold, “You *do*? Well, that changes things a bit, but I—”

“*No!*” Joyce stressed in an outburst, enough to actually garner some looks. She didn’t look back, but immediately set her back against the booth seat again, much more quiet now. “I’m not into any of *that*...”

“But something?”

“...But nothing.”

And it was like her words had no effect. Unless it was the true answer, the one Isabelle somehow knew existed deep down in Joyce’s flustered heart, she was only going to keep digging, and Joyce just kept sitting.

Twenty questions somehow ensued.

“Roleplay?”

“No.”

“Another person?”

Emily? She knew?

“N-no.”

“So it is! Then is it—”

“N-no! I said it doesn’t!”

“But you’re saying *it?*” And Joyce’s cold sweat only intensified. How to admit to having a fetish without admitting to it... *Shit!*

Isabelle kept on going, on an un-ending, joyful assault. Curiosity fired from her mouth like a relentless lazer and Joyce’s fragile mind was at the seams with trying to protect her most vulnerable secret.

“So it does involve someone else...” the interrogator passively mused and Joyce was losing her voice.

Then a lightbulb went off. A flash of blinding light that hit before the Brazilian bomb sent her shockwave.

“Are you a...domme?”

Or maybe not. A total miss. Joyce’s inner monologue sighed with relief.

More than happy to answer, with a tinge of confidence she promptly replied, “Nope.”

“Oh wait, you’re new to this, aren’t you? A *gentle* domme?” No sparks were flying yet.

“A mommy?”

The crowd must have screamed in collective horror. All Joyce could hear was the deafening crash. Shattering glass, crumbling brick and groaning mental infrastructure. Fire alarms were sounding and all she could hear was pure chaos with eyes wide as saucers.

Too stunned to move from the shock, her peripherals tried to survey the damage of the restaurant. Yet there wasn’t any. No one was screaming, people were chatting. Windows were whole, lights still worked and there wasn’t a single flame to be seen. No one was the wiser to the absolute mess Joyce was certain she had heard and seen. All for but a flash. All in her mind. Her precious psyche with a hole gaping wide from the fracture this woman had dealt to it. All just to see what was inside.

Her teeth were cemented together yet her lip trembled. Barely anything. Joyce had said nearly nothing and it got her like this. To a point like this...!

She said nothing in return but she didn't need to. Her look of embarrassed surprise told more than enough. She waited for the party-like laughter Isabelle had been touting this entire evening to Joyce and likely others. Her relaxed, go-with-the-flow atmosphere washing through Joyce's confidence and composure like a typhoon.

But with her fist left vulnerable on the table, she felt the jolt of electricity once Isabelle touched it.

She'd been had. Discovered. Found out. Again. Again and again. Her most important secret that could hardly be kept from anyone...!

And in all this time to think to herself, lament and quiver from the reveal; awaiting the ridicule from someone who just simply didn't understand. Someone who couldn't even fathom a modicum of how precious it was, how much it mattered. From a know-it-all that just had to—!

For the first time that night, an honest voice that wasn't doped on energy came from Isabelle. "Sorry, I think I overstepped my bounds a little?" No laughing. None?

Hurriedly Joyce retracted her hand. She was already looking for a way out. Where was Carol?

"Joyce?"

Feeling like her heart was going to pop out of her chest, Joyce looked at the woman one more time, regretfully so. And immediately in spite she spoke.

"*What?* Are you happy? You figured it out. Good for you."

"Joyce— No, I'm sorry, I was a little excited... It's because—"

"No." Finally with enough conscience to leave, Joyce stood from her seat in a moment of confused rage. For a split second she was ready to crumble, had Isabelle been ready to attack. Her loss, now that Joyce's psyche was intact.

Isabelle was standing up in a hurry to catch her, but Joyce was already storming off. She walked with one purpose and one only. Forget waiting for Carol; she was leaving on her own. This was a mistake. A dumb, stupid mistake. What was she thinking? What was she hoping for? Whatever it

was, this certainly wasn't it. All she found was a bunch of weird proposals and a bully to boot. Stupid. So stupid!

Isabelle got as far as halfway before the crowd between them simply did not permit. With an angry text rushed with one hand Joyce descended the steps of a place she would never be seeing again. Christ, an entire fucking state she'd pay the pilot just to not fly over.

Keeping her words simple and prompt, letting Carol know that she left early, it was a brisk, lonely walk along the brick-laid path as she scheduled some kind of ride back to the hotel.

Stupid! So fucking stupid!

And before she stuffed her phone back in her handbag, a new horror swept her over a thousand times over from a mere glance at her screen.

MISSED CALL: EMILY (4)

Multiple missed text messages.

Where r u?

Pick up!!!

need to talk. Please!

im gonna go buy ice cream if you don't text back!!!

Since when? Emily had been trying to reach her this whole time? Forget the restaurant. Forget that woman. This was a whole new grief that swallowed any other issue like an abyss. Forgetting to call Emily. Not texting her back.

A long exhale left her nose, stricken with worry now for what was back at home. A place she wanted to be more than anything now. And she *did* want to call right then; drop everything just to do it. But she was upset. Frustrated. So many complex and difficult emotions she didn't want Emily trying to deal with. Not wanting her to worry.

She would be fine and she knew it, but if it wasn't such a horrible feeling. Barely as an afterthought there was something from Sheila as well. Work, undoubtedly. But she allowed herself to feel selfish on that front just for the night, wanting nothing more than to get back to the hotel, call Emily, then sleep early just to get home even faster.

What a night.

What an experience.

What a mistake.