

47 - Lunch

“Pins should go...” One turn. Two turns. Negative half a turn, and she found the bin. “There.”

Sifting through the little things was obviously the biggest problem. In trying to sort and clean through Amy’s workspace, it gave the clueless girl an awful lot of insight into the job of a seamstress, and possibly someone that just lacked organization. To the best of Emily’s knowledge Amy didn’t own a dog, but if she did, a rainbow-colored husky could have very well been the breed.

Stringy strands of different colored thread were just about everywhere. God forbid her understanding of the craft was far too shallow, Emily stuck the miscellaneous of the miscellaneous in a different bin conveniently located right next to the waste basket.

There were random buttons that seemed missing from a pair or set, but unlike socks at least they had enough individual character to possibly be deemed worthwhile. Hence why Emily had a separate tub just for that, too.

After the initial mess was gone, to the untrained eye at a distance, you’d might think Amy’s display room was actually clean. Far from it, however, once you took a fine-toothed comb to it. Or specifically once you had Emily on her hands and knees looking underneath the couch.

“How does this get down here...?” She looked down at a spool still thick with unused thread and added it to the rest of the pile. Accumulated messes meant over time the most bizarre things could wind up in the most random places. And as Emily walked around in her thin and flimsy socks, she was hoping dearly that with each logistical failure she found that Amy was at least professional enough to never leave a sewing needle out on the floor...

Only halfway through the cleaning though did a simple yet strange thought pop into her head.

When was the last time I saw a mess...?

It was a broad question to ask with likely a thousand different ways to shoot it down, but thankfully in just the company of herself (and Ashes), she only had to deal with a biased critic.

Just about nothing ever seemed to spiral out of control, as of late. When blankets, sheets and comforters got rustled, nine times out of ten Joyce had them straightened out at some point in the day. Emily helped too, but management seemed to be very strict about her doing much of anything other than recreational activities. Such as...playing with toys, or getting handsy with her mommy.

But even the toys. Re-learning how to enjoy handheld things that weren't electronic, or at least didn't have a digital screen was embarrassingly a novel concept for the modern-age girl. She'd play with Pip, drag him around from one room to another in the apartment, sometimes bring a bottle with her too, but also forget it in other places. Sometimes she may have forgotten Pip too...

Emily could leave small messes quite often, but Joyce moved like the wind in her wake to take care of it. And to repeat, it wasn't like this for a lack of trying. Emily was discouraged from helping clean up. From cleaning up her toys, cleaning her own face, or...actually, on the topic of...not clean, even her own diapers...

Maybe that was it? Joyce just liked cleaning? Did that explain why she wanted to be a mommy?

And while Emily missed the mark on her thought exercise, she petted her assistant who had yet to contribute anything to the effort other than meows and demands for more affection. Who would ever want someone like that?

Emily kept petting the cat anyways, possibly just so she didn't read into the thought too much.

"I wonder what her actual workshop room is like upstairs..." Emily mused, nearly straddling the top of the same couch Ashes was resting on. Then she stroked his fur some more, getting a tad bit distracted. "I wonder if we'd ever get a pet...?" Maybe. Maybe not. Emily wasn't even sure how Joyce felt about pets, though if personal experience was any indication of anything, she sure was good at taking care of stuff...

I wouldn't want her being the only person who takes care of them, though...

Case and point, Emily was certainly a good pet petter. A single finger for chin scratches could make Ashes pur like an engine.

But maybe Joyce didn't want a pet? After all, she essentially had one already. A bubbly, blushing, embarrassed pet that helped out on rare occasion.

I'm not a pet...

"Emily? You down there?"

And she may have sprung off the furniture in a totally not cat-like fashion.

“Y-yeah!” the startled employee called up to the banister.

The wooden steps whispered tiny creaks and squeaks with each foot dropping by a level. Amy was hunched over, leaning her head into the room with pure awe and an open smile.

“Woow! Look at this place!” her head kept turning until it finally ended on Emily with her hands sandwiched between her legs. “It’s almost like I never even touched it!” And while Emily smiled appreciatively, Amy had no qualms in laughing at her own expense. “You did such a great job!” Amy said it again, and it was another pleasant tickle for the girl.

“Thank you...but uhm, I still need to organize a few more things...and I didn’t fully check over—”

“Oh, that’s fine, it’s fine! You don’t need to do that now,” she shrugged it off. “I wasn’t keeping track of the time; it’s just about time for lunch, isn’t it? Wanna come upstairs and eat?”

Was it really that time already? Sure enough, a glance at her phone was indicating a time just shy of noon. Time really did fly by...

“Er...” Amy interrupted with an exaggerated worry, “*Please* come upstairs and eat?” Then her eyes darted around, looking for the bugs or plants that were assuredly listening in on their most secret of conversations. In a not so whisper she said, “Joyce said I should make sure you’re free soon to call her...”

“O-oh,” Emily stammered back, remembering what Joyce had asked her to do earlier that morning. Call her during lunch. They talked about that in the car, so... “W-wait, Joyce told you that?”

“You work for a very strict union, Emily! Now scooch!” Amy paced around surprise and shock personified and was the caboose kicking the locomotive into motion. Then like an afterthought, showing affectionate disinterest like her partner in crime did the same for her, she glanced back at Ashes. “Oh, and I suppose you’ve earned a break too, freeloader.” And after a dramatic stretch the cat hopped from its pedestal to the floor.

“Do...do you always talk to him like that?” Emily half-stumbled up the steps, watching for the cat that assuredly followed.

“Do I sound crazy?” Amy laughed as she brought up the rear. “It’s either that or I start talking to my mannequins, but at least Ashes is alive!”

Then with reluctant honesty, each word from Emily was another step down the slope of decibels, flattening out into an almost muted whisper. “No, I mean...I...kind of do it...too...”

“Hm? Oh yeah? Who’s your sound board?”

“Huh? I guess it’d be...–! It’s Ashes! I mean, I was doing the same thing with Ashes...” Was it really lying if she bounced from one truth to another? Poor Pip. If only the world was ready for their relationship.

It was on the straight and narrow from then on to the second story, watching the door ahead like nothing mattered. Just as Emily crossed the threshold a light brush on her back sent her through.

“One chickling...” Amy sang, then hung by the doorway, waiting for the last soldier to scurry in, “Two...” Then with a soft click the door was closed. “Okay. Lunch time,” she clapped her hands and departed for the kitchen. “Oh, if you’d prefer to watch something while you eat, feel free to turn on the TV. *After* you call Joyce?” and Amy gave her the kind of look any expectant mother might. Thank goodness she was just an employer, though.

And before the phone could touch Emily’s ear Ashes was meowing, ever so impatiently at his owner.

“Shut it, I’m working on it!” the proprietor complained all the way to the pantry.

One buzz...

Two buzz–

And not a third. Instead Emily had the misfortune of dialing the wrong number out of her contacts list. Rather than her mommy elsewhere in the city, sitting in her skyscraper office ready to eat right around the same time, it was instead a prim, prip and posh female fellow warmly receiving the other end of the line. “And to whom is this that I have the utmost pleasure of speaking with?”

But alas, there was no danger afoot, as Emily was well-trained in the art of stranger danger.

“Sorry, wrong number!”

“Wait–” Too late. Bye-bye.

“Wasn’t Joyce?” Amy asked on the trip back with a large bag of pet food in her arms.

“Nope,” Emily shook her head and swung her legs off the bar stool. “It was.”

“It was?” she cocked her head up over the pouring bag. “So then why’d you...?”

Then Emily’s hands got the jitters, but not from nerves this time; technological vibrations. The phone had to have been cursed. There was simply no other explanation. Radioactive? Haunted? Those kinds of bomb defusals weren’t her wheelhouse, so with caution she held out the phone far away and made for a blind swipe with her finger on the screen.

“*Emily Sen!*” A stern tone erupted from the speakers, and even without the mode in effect Amy had heard enough to laugh.

“Emily, you didn’t!” Amy as a new spectator was equal parts shocked and amused, and having a supporter made the culprit grin sheepishly herself.

“Joyce? Hello?” she choked down a laugh.

“Did you just hang up on me, missy?” Joyce, a woman that when she sneezed wiped her nose with millions and could make the world move on a whim, had finally met her match; a tricky little girl who thought herself apparently untouchable just because they weren’t in the same room.

“NoOOo...” Emily exaggerated, just as poorly as Joyce did her impression. “Someone else picked up the phone!”

“That so? Guess that means my voice must’ve been that good!” Certainly. If Joyce didn’t make it as an entrepreneur, at least by Emily’s story time standards she’d be a shoe-in as a voice actress. Come to think of it, Joyce would be great at a lot of different things... “Buut... Next time you hang up on me, you’re gonna make me sad. Understood?”

“Gotcha,” Emily giggled, and her girlfriend was a bit toothy herself on the other end. “Are you on your lunch break now?”

“Getting to the end of it, actually,” Joyce sighed, staring down her digital clock at the corner of her desk like it was evil incarnate.

“Should I have called sooner?”

“No, you called at just the right time,” Joyce opted for a not so honest answer. The last fifteen minutes had actually been spent drawing circles with her finger in her binder, hoping the stars would somehow align before time ran out, and thankfully they did. “So? How’s your first day?”

“It’s been fine, but I can talk about that stuff at home. How’s your day?”

“Boring,” Joyce flatly answered. And very busy. Who knew coming into work late meant a compressed schedule? “And yes, but you can also talk about it now?” Hiding her enthusiasm around Emily was a sport she was more than happy to lose at. “Soo, what have you been doing?”

“Cleaning, sorta,” Emily shrugged, even if the gesture didn’t quite translate over the phone. “Amy said she was gonna have me help her with what she really needed later, so it’s probably gonna be after lunch. You know that room she took us to? Behind the front desk? She’s having me organize that.”

“Well that’s nice of you to do!” Joyce beamed, and Emily as appreciative as she was, embarrassingly side-stepped the comment.

“I mean, I guess, but she’s paying me…”

“True,” Joyce admitted, “but still doesn’t mean I can’t be proud of you!”

“Oh, and Ashes was downstairs with me too, so I had some company.” Very unhelpful company.

“Well that’s nice; I think he plays favorites with Amy, though. She always says that he tries to give her the cold shoulder when someone he likes shows up,” she laughed, thinking of all the times he’d be nuzzled right against her leg, purring so sweetly.

“He’s a nice cat, though,” Emily started to spin in her seat. “But really, is today just boring?”

Her partner’s lips popped from the other end. “Unfortunately, it just is! More importantly though,” seemingly important, Joyce’s tone lowered an octave and the matronly might became heavy. “And Emily Sen, do not lie to me, understood?”

Emily knew that voice. That horrible, worrywart-inducing voice. Instantly it was a moment of self-reflection. The girl’s mind raced from cabinet to cabinet inside her head, searching for the one, itty-bitty piece of incrimination; something she had done to warrant the scolding she was just about to get. But she couldn’t think of anything and the search was fruitless. What could she want?

“Did you climb up on anything today?”

And suddenly her big ball of panic popped like a balloon. “Joyce!” Emily whined, losing her composure with her back to the stage, leaving Amy to quietly watch with a speculating grin. “Wh-what are you talking about?!”

“Is that your way of telling me you do?”

“No! I didn’t!” she cried into the phone, cognizant enough to process the embarrassment, but not to remember who was listening in on her pout. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t!”

“Oh yes it absolutely does. Emily, I said I didn’t want you climbing in the kitchen before, didn’t I?”

“Y—!” she was about to agree, but for once she could see the tripwire lying in wait. “That...that was different! That was when I...” Finally, her memory kicked in and her audience was acknowledged. Her rage sputtered out into a quiet ember as she whispered into the phone, “*I thought that was different...?*” Hopefully it wasn’t vague enough, coupled with that the only real secret they ever tried to keep had to do with diapers. Joyce made rules during baby time, so seeing them flare up during grownup days was certainly alarming.

“Emily, no.” And Joyce leaned out from her seat, looking for a silhouette that wasn’t there on the other side of her foggy glass door. It’d become an opportune moment so she rose from her chair, pacing around the office. “Rules like that are to keep you safe and from getting hurt. No diapers is no excuse to put yourself in dangerous situations. Do I make myself clear?”

Were they really doing this now? Emily tried to stay inconspicuous, turning her head just slightly to see if Amy was hopefully distracted. She saw a phone in her hand and her eyes on it. *Perfect!* Amy was distracted.

“Joyce...” she started up again, wary of her words, and jealous that by the sound of it Joyce didn’t have to be. “I’m fine, okay? I don’t need those kinds of rules when I’m like...this...”

And it was the pushback. The tiny, itty-bitty retaliations that tickled Joyce so sweetly. Danger was danger and her fear was real, but discussions like these always made her giddy. How couldn’t mothers not love it when their kids throw a tantrum? The indignance, the back-talking, and rebellion. It was a chance for their kid to make their opposition clear, and by the same token it was the perfect moment for the parent to make a crushing, iron-willed teaching moment.

“Emily?” Joyce’s voice was patient, but the expectation for a response was thick and heavy. And while she waited with her loving intensity, she peeked outside her office one last time, making sure there was absolute secrecy.

And Emily, with her sixth sense finally active and detecting the shitstorm she just waltzed herself into, delicately slipped off the stool and nervously walked herself away to Amy’s couch.

“Yes...?”

It’s too fun getting to come up with this stuff... “Who wears the big girl pants?”

Big girl...? And let it be Emily’s one and only allowed moment of weakness, but her eyes as if needing a second opinion other than her own sanity slowly glanced down at herself. “Me...?”

“Nuh-uh. Try again.”

“Us...both?”

“Halfway there!” Joyce praised the answer, yet patronizingly beckoned for more. “Come on, sweetie, who?”

“...You?”

“Ah-huh, that’s right. *Mommy* wears the big girl pants, and that means Mommy makes the decisions. And because I do, you need to understand that I don’t make those decisions lightly, okay?”

“Joyce...” Emily leaned from side to side, dearly hoping that Amy was really invested in something interesting on her phone... Emily in a hushed voice tried to rush the conversation along, “Can’t we talk about this later? I get it, okay? I understand...”

And all she got in response was more syrup and sugar, making her feel smaller and smaller with each passing syllable. “I know you do, baby, but I also know that sometimes you need reminders?” Maybe she didn’t, but Joyce certainly needed recharges like this. Who was this really for? “But, okay, I think I’ve made my point. But Emily, who makes the rules?”

Every question was like pulling a tooth, assuming the feeling was hardstuck and difficult, but erupted in a euphoric feeling. So probably not quite like pulling a tooth...

“...You do...”

“Mhm,” and by the tone of her hum, Emily could practically hear the solemn, motherly nod happening at the same time. “And who’s job is it to follow them?”

“...Mine...” They were in separate rooms and separate buildings, but even that sense of distance didn’t seem to add any more slack to the emotional and mental harness Joyce had her strapped in.

“Good. Very good!” Joyce beamed, then chuckled, as if the harbinger to announce that all was well and peppy again. “Okay, go eat your lunch now, alright? And make sure to have a good rest of your day!”

If it was within the means of being a Mommy, Joyce was scarily adept at flipping her mood switches. Emily was still trying to come off the headspace she’d just been forced into, but was stable enough to close out the conversation.

“Okay...” Emily exhaled quietly, “Mhm. You too.”

“And Emily?”

Oh no. More? “Yeah?”

And then a quiet hum started, growing and growing in noise and joy as Joyce made a happy cheer. All courtesy of a private office on an executive floor.

“Mommy loves you *soooo* much!”

“J-Joyce, are you actually at work?” Emily couldn’t hide the concern given how liberal her partner was being. Was there really no one around to hear this?

And all Joyce did was laugh.

“Yes, would you believe it, I am! Now I’ll say it again since you didn’t say anything back; Mommy loves you!”

And just like the first, Emily was glad she was sitting to hear it. The mantra made her legs weak with joy. To consider how warped she was to be so happy over such a little thing had a hand to her head like she was ready to catch the loose parts ready to fall out of her ear.

“I love you too...”

“Mwah!” Joyce kissed into the speaker. “Bye-bye!”

And they hung up.

It was like returning to another dimension once she put down the phone. Emily looked around the open apartment like she’d forgotten where she was. Another second gave her time to remember that it wasn’t her home. She was working, with Amy, and it was time for lunch. The atmosphere was cooling down and she had a look to keep up. A persona to maintain. Something with a semblance of maturity and composure just long enough until Joyce came and picked her...–

“Emily?” Amy made a small wave from the kitchen. “Still want lunch?”

“Y-yes, please,” and Emily with a half-broken mind was back on her feet and rushing over.

“Sorry about that...”

“Sorry about what?” Amy chuckled and motioned for Emily to sit. “Thank goodness you called Joyce; she probably would’ve thought that I was slave-driving you, or something. You really have no clue how scary she can be–!” then with a self-disgusted gasp Amy clamped down on her own mouth. “See!?” she giggled, setting Emily’s bagged lunch down. “I *told* you stuff like that was gonna slip! And I hereby use my unlimited ‘Please don’t tell her I said that’ pass for the first time!”

“Okay, okay, sure,” Emily laughed right back and finally went into her lunch.

“So, she make you anything good?”

“Don’t know,” didn’t know what it was, but knew it’d probably be good, “she made it early this morning so I didn’t get to see.”

“Gosh, she keeps everything a secret, doesn’t she?” and Amy watched for the reveal, perching her chin on her knuckles.

Until the secret was no more. Before her was a hearty spread. A ripe banana, a cup of yogurt, sandwich, and a thermos. Though, when she wrapped her digits around the metal it didn’t feel warm. A drink?

“Oh wow, that looks good, huh?” Amy remarked as she turned away. “Here, lemme get you a plate to eat that on...”

“That’s fine, you don’t need to...” Emily insisted as she shuffled her lunch around, finding even a small stack of complimentary napkins as well. On top of a plastic spoon, Joyce really did think of everything...

“Emily, quit being such a stranger!” Amy chuckled with a firm quip, and dishware clattered until a wide black saucer was placed in front of the girl. “And also, keeps crumbs off the counter.”

Finally though she bit the bullet and ceased her complaining. “Thank you,” Emily settled and set her food on a new foundation. “I’ll make sure to wash it when I’m done.”

“And you shall do no such thing,” Amy’s eyes rolled with a smirk. “Either *I’m* gonna clean it, or my dishwasher will, and you are neither of those things,” she enunciated with a fat finger.

“You’re gonna eat, enjoy yourself, chat with me a little, then we’re gonna go downstairs, work some more, and chit-chat the whole time. Do I make myself clear?”

The talking-to was swift and unexpected, leaving Emily in a daze that felt eerily nostalgic from just minutes prior. For a moment she was back to being in an obedient and attentive place, but only after Amy cocked her head did Emily snap out of it.

“O-okay, yeah... Thank you,” Emily finally accepted with a smile, then slightly sunk her head while she fumbled with the top of the cyan thermos.

“Good,” Amy didn’t seem deterred, then made the short trip back to the island where her food was. “So was Joyce on lunch too?”

“Yeah, I think so,” the girl with her dedicated sandwich container said as she pried off the lid. “I think she was busy, though...all because she took me here today.”

“Well if she is, I highly doubt she’d be surprised,” Amy shrugged. “She knew what she was getting into, Emily. Obviously you matter more than a tighter schedule?”

It felt awfully narcissistic to agree to a comment about herself, so Emily didn’t say much of anything to that. Instead she was reflecting on all the ways she’d been a bother today. Making Joyce get up earlier than usual just to make her lunch, making her even more busy at work just to drive her around, and effectively killing whatever attempt Amy made at trying to be friendly simply because she couldn’t disassociate from all the baby brain Joyce was infecting her with.

“Amy? Uhm...sorry, by the way...”

“Sorry for what?”

Here she was, apologizing for something she couldn't even put into exact words. And yet, Amy undoubtedly knew it, and obviously Emily too, and yet the girl had hardly the courage or want to mention any of it in specifics.

"Just being..." her hands had fallen into her lap where her thumbs could mingle. "Reserved, and stuff? I'm just..." she sighed, "I'm being weird."

"Yeah, you are," Amy agreed, shoving Ashes off the counter and from her food at the same time. Cue the annoyed meow, and promptly ignored. "But it's not like I wasn't expecting that," she chuckled. "Emily, I'm not gonna force you to talk about anything, but it's the baby stuff, right?"

Again, her words were like ripping off a bandage, and to that point Emily nearly flinched. But slowly, she nodded remorsefully.

"I just want you to know it's not like a taboo or anything, with me. If you'd like though I could be honest with you. Joyce pays for it, but I'm still kind of your seamstress, and all..." She let that sink in, staring Emily in the eyes, then sinking down to her lower half hiding on the other side of the counter. "Emily, need I remind you that the day we met I was taking your measurements when you were in a diaper?"

And what was thought to be a national secret was apparently public information. Emily's eyes were as wide as her plate with a frightened gasp.

"Y-you knew?!"

"Your clothes fit, don't they?" And Amy watched with a hand on the counter as Emily couldn't keep her mouth closed, slowly slipping out of reality.

She knew that Amy *knew* about the diapers. It was obvious. She could have found out a million different ways, and yet...but...!

"Emily, you-hou? Hey?" A pat on the shoulder was what roped the girl back in. "I know about the diapers. I know about the clothes, because hey, I made them? The nursery," possibly because somebody admitted to it... "and how much Joyce cares about you, too. I'm not saying this stuff to hold anything over your head, hon, but I'm trying to make a point that there's no real secret between us?"

"B-but..." But what? But nothing! She *knew*. Obviously. Of course. The reserved attitude, the anxiousness, all of it today had just been formality, especially with how forthcoming Amy had

been. She was standing at the halfway point since the day started, patiently waiting for Emily to finally open up about what she already had an understanding of. It was just being polite and maintaining formality.

“Look, we’re friends, aren’t we?” Amy stood back with her hands still glued on the marble top, smiling warmly.

Friends? Wasn’t she friends with Joyce, though? Kids weren’t friends with their mommy’s...— Lord, how bad *was* Emily? More aptly, wasn’t it weird to be friends with your girlfriend’s commissioned seamstress? Sure, maybe, but wasn’t it also weird for them to know about the diapers you wore, the nursery you had, and all the big baby clothes you needed too? Absolutely. Relatively speaking, friendship was the lowest in the pecking order. By monumental magnitudes.

“No?” Amy grinned, letting enough silence go by. “We’re not?”

“We are!” Emily stammered, then quickly settled herself back in. “I just...how can you talk about it so easily?”

“Because I am who I am?” Amy gave another clueless shrug. “Emily, I *love* making clothes for you. The cute ones, specifically,” she pointedly corrected. “If you asked me why, all I’d say is because I like cute things? I don’t know? Making them for an adult is just a...really cute juxtaposition,” she pinched her chin while she thought about it. “Point is, I like it, and that’s all there is to it. You wear diapers,” and Emily really did flinch that time, “and that’s also all there is to it, too? There’s a reason, I’m sure, but I don’t care, and you don’t need to either. I hope that I’ve made it clear already, but just so there’s no misunderstandings: Emily, you’re into baby stuff and that’s fine. I am too. So let’s not put up any walls around us because you’re nervous about spilling any secrets, okay? So who is it you talk to other than Ashes? Who, a stuffed animal?”

“N-no!”

“Ah! See?” Amy accused her with a finger, “No lying,” with a playful finger she sliced her own neck. “Who is it?”

And finally with her back against a wall, Emily bit her lip and made a nervous leap of faith. “...P...Pip. It’s Pip.”

It was supposed to be a gateway into a relaxed discussion, yet Amy drilled further like it was an interrogation. “What animal are they? Do they stay at home?”

“He’s...not an animal. He’s stuffed mochi. And yes, he stays at home.”

“Mhm?” Amy nodded attentively. “Wait,” she had a double take, “Mochi? What’s that?”

“It’s like a dessert, so it’s not really an animal...”

“Do you play with him?”

“Not...not completely...”

“But a little?”

“No, not a little.”

“Not a lot?”

“No, not a lot.” Emily shook her head skeptically. Didn’t they start with that?

“Well what do you do with him?”

“I dunno? I just...bring him into other rooms, and stuff.” Why did she even want to know?

“Here,” and in the midst of the questionnaire, Amy had Emily’s yogurt in her hand, peeling off the foily top. “Have that while we talk.” And Emily, the demure and domesticated, actually accepted it. “So you take him with you around the house? That sounds like playing to me?”

“How? I just...use him like a pillow, and stuff.”

“So cuddles?” Amy clarified, like she was about to pull out a dictionary. “Sorry, Em,” she gave her a hopeless look, “sounds like playing to me.”

“Wh-what does it matter if I play with him, or not?”

“That’s the whole point,” Amy frowned right before grinning, “it doesn’t.”

It didn’t matter who or what Emily played with. It didn’t matter what she did, what she wore or how she acted. Amy was clear from the start that she didn’t care to the point of foregoing all judgment completely. She made it clear that she was interested and willing to bounce back on any kind of conversation, as long as Emily was brave enough to pull out what Amy already knew. So many obstacles and so many gymnastics over a pointless chase.

“Emily,” Amy sighed with a hand against the nearby beam, “you’re kinda putting me on the spot here? Can’t I just chat with my friend, or am I gonna have to be bored and keep to myself all day?” Then she turned the pressure up just a little more. “Still wanna know about the nursery...!” Amy sang, and Emily was either on the brink of shutting down or blowing up completely. She needed a heaping helping of yogurt to deliberate.

“That strawberry?” Amy peered over the chunks of red hiding in the creamy white.

“Yeah...think so...” Emily murmured from her seat. It was their constant sidesteps and casual shifts into much tamer topics that kept throwing the girl off. She couldn’t code switch like Amy could. Amy was a sewing machine, rapidly and vigorously tying together all topics entirely; until there was no more distinction and separation between casual and confidential. The entire day was just a melting pot of emotions and ideas. Casual was exactly that, even if it meant the weather or Emily’s latest punishment.

She swallowed her treat, and Amy was already fussing with removing a banana from its peel.

“Do...do you really wanna know?”

But first, with a naked fruit in her hand, Amy asked, “Want me to cut this up?”

Damn it. Another juggle in topics. Every swap was like a lossy translation. Every switch meant some kind of steam was lost. She had to be secretive and guarded, but not when it came to things as mundane as her own lunch. She couldn’t keep going from sharp to dull without slowly averaging out in between. What kind of mind games was this woman playing? “N-no...”

“Okay,” and the woman took the trash with her. “And yeah, Emily, I’ve asked like twice now! Tell me what’s up! Or don’t? But if you don’t then we’re gonna need to find something else to talk about because I don’t wanna just hear my voice all day.”

More yogurt was consumed and so was some of her banana. Perfectly ripe. Soft, but not too soft and with just the right amount of firmness... Joyce probably wasn’t that methodical, but even in times like these Emily couldn’t help but think about her. This was her chance, wasn’t it? Someone to talk to? To vent? Joyce was always her number one confidant, but even with her, especially with how intimate they were– with *this*, she for lack of a better explanation was too close to the crime...

“Well it’s...it’s not even that big of a deal...”

“Ugh, perfect then!” Amy slapped her counter, “that means you can tell me! The more you make me wait, the more curious I get! Right, Ashes?” Amy barked at her pet with a sharp pivot on her neck, and on command with impeccable comedic timing, the cat meowed right back. “Oh! He actually meowed!” Amy laughed in a moment of self-surprise. “But I swear, I’m not a crazy cat lady or anything!”

Even Emily in her mental muck, stuck at a crossroads found it in herself to smile and even giggle. Her toes were anxiously pressing against the wooden panel underneath the counter and her bare elbows hung off the edge, but all those adrenaline-fueled sensations were starting to drop as the tempo relaxed and her guard was being disarmed.

So she wiped the corner of her mouth and finally and truly surrendered herself. “...So do you remember how I mentioned about Joyce going to an investor thing...?”

“Yes,” Amy nodded attentively, but didn’t spare another second in interrupting. “Actually, wait!” she held out a stopping finger. “Let me make some coffee real quick?”

And like a cold splash of water Emily was halted on the tracks. “Oh, uh, sure. Actually...could I have some too?”

“Yyyes...” Amy answered half-heartedly, obviously with her head in a different place, and her eyes on something else. “What’d Joyce pack you in that thermos?”

Emily looked over at the blue metal tube, “Oh right, I forgot...” and she fumbled with the cap and unscrewed the top. It was hard to see, but it certainly wasn’t anything hot.

“Want a cup?” Amy, a lot like Joyce, seemed to shoot while she asked her questions.

“Thanks,” Emily accepted the glass which became the perfect moment for Amy to take the thermos for herself.

“Think it’s wine?” Amy tried to tempt her with an excited look, and Emily gave her a skeptical smirk. “Yeah,” she dropped the suspense, “probably not...”

And out poured into Emily’s cup a familiar amber substance. Juice. Apple, to be specific.

“Apple juice, too?” Amy sounded nothing but impressed. “Jeez, she really does treat you like a royal, huh?” and so did she by screwing the cap back on for Emily. “Alrighty, actually, just chat with me anyways while I make my stuff. I’m listening!”

Apple juice, yogurt, a banana, and a sandwich. A spread fit only for the most kingly of kings, or princy of princesses. While she balanced her intake of all the different sides of her meal, Emily finally opened back up. “So you remember the event I mentioned?”

“Yeah, the one Joyce went to?”

“Mhm. So it was an overnight thing and she had to take a plane early in the morning. And when we...” the first roadblock was always the hardest because it meant covering new ground.

“Whenever we...do our thing, the nursery is open... So when we aren't, Joyce keeps it locked...” As honest as she was being, her voice and volume were hardly up for the challenge. And yet Amy seemed to be hearing it all without issue.

“Do you guys have like a key for it?” Amy asked over the noise of her squirbling coffee machine.

“Yeah, but Joyce has it, and as far as I know there's only one...” Maybe they had two, but Emily didn't even know where Joyce kept the first. On her person at all times? It was bad timing, but a small, mischievous activity was suddenly coming to mind. Now she had a small scavenger hunt she could try and do someday...

“That's a good idea, though. To keep people from accidentally walking in, and everything,” Amy openly thought.

“Yeah,” Emily nodded, though she could imagine a few more reasons why she had a key for it... “But anyway, I think she was in a big rush that morning, because she forgot to lock it.”

“Oh!” Amy gasped, despite hardly knowing the gravity. But she wasn't ignorant to storytelling, which is why she kept looking back excitedly from her coffee pour. “So did you go in? Do you guys have a rule about that sort of thing?”

“W-well...” Emily was certainly good at following rules. Even as a kid, barring her occasional upsets that was fair to expect from any typical child, held them in high regard. She understood the concept of cause and effect; consequences. Breaking rules begets punishments. Simple as that. “Since it was just gonna be me there the whole day...” Why was she looking away? Why were her eyes off to the side? “I may have gone in...”

“*Emily!*” Amy gasped again, and the sound of surprise was almost paralyzing. It sounded like round two with Joyce all over again, except with a totally different vibe. The disappointment and disapproval was all there, but unlike Joyce's cool, tough and teasing love approach, Amy's was lush and uncut. She sounded like an actual...you know. Like little Emily, the sweetest girl she'd

known for the toddler's entire life had just committed a crime so severe, sitting so far above whatever standard or expectation she held her to.

"I-it wasn't even that bad!" Emily cried and an instinctual switch put her on the defensive. "I-I went in because no one would know!" It was round two all over again, as if Amy were Emily's second shot at making a plea to a case that had already been solved and shut.

"Yeah, but I'm guessing she did?" Amy raised an eyebrow, and all it took was the guilty look starting to show for the woman with a mug a coffee to laugh again, shaking her head. "What'd you even go in there for if you're not supposed to?"

"Just for clothes! Those pajamas you made me!"

"One of the onesies?"

"No, the footie ones!"

"Ahh! So you guys keep that stuff in there?" she brought a hand to her chest, "I'm touched!"

"I think it's the only clothing we keep in there..." Emily propped up her head on a knuckle, chewing her bite of sandwich. "It was just a lazy day and Joyce made the mistake, not me! I just wanted to wear something soft!"

"Yeah, but it was supposed to be locked up, right?"

"Yes!" Emily threw out her hands at the sign of a growing comradery. Great! So Amy was seeing it too!

"So you *knew* you weren't supposed to be in there?"

And suddenly the spark had fizzled and Emily's mouth was sagging by the corners. Meanwhile, Amy was giving her an expectant look.

"But she left it unlocked..." the girl tried her line of reasoning again, like the result would somehow be any different.

"Yeah, but it sounds like you knew it wasn't intentional," Amy chuckled. "All I'm hearing is that you broke the rules?"

"Maybe, but doesn't Joyce get in trouble for making a mistake too?"

“Ahp!” Amy caught her like Ashes swiped her tongue. “That’s different, though! She made a mistake and you made the choice to do what you did! Gotta say, Em, didn’t think you had that kinda mischief in you...!”

“Yeah well,” Emily puffed out her cheek, “Guess I’ve been getting it from *somebody*.”

And the side remark had Amy in stitches, giggling before and after a sip from her mug. The she asked the million dollar question, “So she obviously found out, right?”

And like it was admitting to a stain on her flawless record, after crossing her legs, un-crossing, then finishing the rest of her yogurt, Emily muttered without eye contact, “Yes...she found out.”

“Well now I gotta ask how? Does she memorize the way she organizes them, or something?”

God forbid, Emily had yet to test the waters like that. If Joyce really was that superhuman then there really would be no secrets to guard from her. No, instead, Joyce as deductive as she was had actually been thrown a very obvious bone by a very clumsy criminal.

“No...I...took it off at one point because someone came over and didn’t want them to see me like that... So I...left it under the bed in the room Joyce and I sleep in.”

“What?” Amy pulled back her head, “Emily, no!” She couldn’t stop laughing. “That’s like borrowing rule number one! Put it back where you found it!”

“She found it under the bed,” and Emily sighed, remembering the consequences that eventually led to her wetting the bed, including her pajamas, “and she wasn’t happy...”

“Learned your lesson, I take it?” The implication of a punishment was clear even without directly asking.

A solemn nod came back.

“Mm. Well, then for both our sakes, let’s not do anything to get you in trouble, huh? Or I guess me, for that matter... Almost done with your lunch?”

“Yeah, and thanks for helping me get it together...”

“Yeah, of course! It’s nice getting to help every now and then. Oh, actually, do you mind if I ask a kinda personal question? Just cuz it’s related to the clothes, and all.”

“Uh, yeah...sure? What is it?” How personal could it be? Emily just got finished explaining the whole nursery debacle and practically felt secondhand scolded because of it.

“When you wore those pajamas, were you in a diaper?”

Bold and unashamed. There was hardly a cloud in Amy’s mind when she asked, and Emily as per usual was taken aback.

“Uh...no...”

“Mhm,” Amy nodded appreciatively, taking down internal R&D notes. “Just wanted to know how the fit felt without them. Any reason why ya didn’t?”

“It fit fine, but...” But what? Was it truly fine to tell Amy whatever she wanted? “We...sort of have a rule about...diapers...”

“Uh-oh, you didn’t go breaking another one, did you?” Amy looked as if she feared for the worst while she nursed the edge of her coffee mug. “Ah, don’t forget about that juice, by the way,” she quietly pointed out the cup that still needed some draining.

“No, not this time.” *Probably because I can’t even imagine how severe the punishment for it would be...* Emily paused to finish her cup of juice. “I’m not...uh...” her fingers started weaving, “I’m not allowed to put on my own diapers...”

And instead of an awkward noise, an offhand comment or general disgust, all Amy did was, “Ahh...” and she nodded. “Yeah, Joyce kinda sounds like a real Mama bear. I’d be wary if I were in your shoes, too... So uhm...actually...how does that rule work?”

How does it work? “I mean...it’s just that I can’t put on a diaper...Joyce said she wants to...be in charge of that stuff.” Not like Emily was looking to assume any of that responsibility, though.

“So even if you asked, Joyce wouldn’t let you put on one?”

“No...probably not.”

And Amy quietly nodded, though for once she wasn’t immediate with a follow up. Like she was thinking.

“Well, uhm, hey, how about we clean up here and move downstairs?” Amy clapped her hands together. “Thanks for being so open with me, but the way,” and she stepped beyond the barrier again by patting Emily on the shoulder. “It’s fun getting to hear stories from you, you know! I take it that you’ve got more for me?”

And in spite of the subject material, Emily’s smile was slowly starting to come back. “If...if you just let me think a little?”

“I think I can manage that,” she agreed herself with a serious nod. “And also, Emily? You’ll do what you think is the smart decision, but please,” she leaned in closer, “don’t break too many rules? I still need Joyce leaving you in one piece if you’re gonna come over and help me out...!”

And all it took was that to get both women laughing. A tense lunch had dissolved and become something far more freeform than Emily could have ever imagined. With far less restraint she somehow managed to actually talk about her own experiences. She *opened up* for once! She got to complain and vent about something so bizarre, and yet Amy listened wholeheartedly, even if she seemed to be a little more in Joyce’s camp... But with no other way to describe it, just having someone like Amy...who knew it could have felt this...good?

“Oh, I can get that, honey,” Amy assured her by taking the empty plate out of her hand. “By the way, don’t forget to bring your juice downstairs!”

And obediently, Emily took the thermos and dropped down to her feet without a comment. After rinsing her hands she was the first one headed for the stairs, giggling a small bit once Ashes was fast to find her and join the carpool.

Hanging out with Amy isn't all that bad...?