

### 43 - The Hand that Feeds You

One pair of eyes just barely reigned above the other. Joyce quietly watched her secretary, contemplating pensively just what she was supposed to say. How she was supposed to think. Sheila's pupils could barely rise to the challenge, falling far below their mark and weighed by sheer guilt she could only find herself realizing now.

Courtesy of the executive floor, not even the sounds of countless employees and office workers could save either one from the deafening silence. With a floor left only to a small handful of people, nothing could save either one from this inevitable clash.

"...Sheila," Joyce started, yet the air was already running thin in her lungs, "...I... I want to hear it from you. Tell me: what happened the other night?"

The sleeves on Sheila's blazer amassed wrinkles like they were bacterial colonies against her sides. Her shoulders were perched and contracted, so stiff that she could barely even rub one trembling hand with the other in her lap. To call it just fear would be a gross misrepresentation of all the cacophony going on inside the woman's head and heart right then. It couldn't be understated just how dazed she still was by the delayed remorse and regret of her actions, and only after being hit with pressure was she able to admit to any of it.

And yet despite cracking under the pressure brought unto herself, Sheila's chin aimed for the floor evened out once her head literally rose to the challenge. Her shoulders broadened with a breath from her nostrils, and she blinked.

*It doesn't matter what I do now... I have to tell her. I have to tell her everything...*

And so she started by saying after a quiet nod, "Ms. Summers, I... The other night when you were gone on a trip, I went to your house to get a file from your computer... I was a little bit surprised to see Emily," *Little Ms. Summers*, "but after making sure it was okay with her, I went to your office..." A short pause ensued, either to let her honesty and loyalty soak in, or just so both Sheila *and* Joyce could prepare themselves.

"But on the way, I..." she brushed her temple with a finger, like it might somehow subside the shame and embarrassment, "I noticed that a...door was open."

"Did you think it was my office?" Joyce found the strength to stay straight-laced, holding her elbows. But deep down, under the hood, beyond the statuesque face of discipline and wrath, there lay the tiniest cracks, hoping for something.

*Take it.*

*Tell me it was a mistake.*

*Give me something...!*

Sheila gestured her head, only in the totally wrong direction. Rather than up and down, she swept from side to side, plagued with a look of shame. Whether it be her conviction as a person or her contractual obligation, not even under the weight of her career dying in real time would she falter.

“...No...I knew it wasn’t your office. And...I knew that I shouldn’t, and it was wrong of me... But I did anyway.” With whatever dignity she had left, the least she owed to herself and her boss was trying to save at least the rest of that.

But from Joyce’s perspective she was burning through her words faster than she could think them up. She *knew* what she was doing? She *chose* to snoop through things she had no business with? She didn’t know whether to turn up the heat or try not to cry. How could Sheila be putting her in a position like this?!

The displeasure wasn’t being kept so subtly anymore as Joyce combed her hair for a moment, losing focus on her target while she asked, “Wh...what did you think you were walking into?”

What did she think? Sheila went quiet, not from the shame, but for a true moment of introspection. It was entirely a selfish decision, but between it being for pure self-satisfaction in the name of curiosity or something more deliberate, well, she struggled to determine which.

Her actions weren’t noble and they were certainly underhanded. She undoubtedly took advantage of her boss’ generosity and abused it for the sake of herself, to whatever end that might be. She not only put herself in a compromising position, yet so inconsiderately hooked a chain around her employer and their partner in the process. All for what? Just to know for certain who the diapers were for?

“I...I wasn’t sure.”

Joyce flapped her lashes and her expression froze. *Didn’t know? Didn’t know why she was doing something that she wasn’t supposed to?*

“Y-you...so you did it anyway...?”

From poor Joyce's point of view, all of Sheila's expressions were on the fritz today, because only now was she nodding when she was supposed to have been shaking instead. Quietly, and trying to do so calmly, Joyce's hand underneath the desk continually flexed itself, fingers flinging in and out from her fist, trying to wring just whatever oozing discomfort was sifting through herself.

"I...once I went into the nursery, I—" and her sorrowful look shriveled into paralyzed apology the moment Ms. Summers looked practically ready to shoot lasers from her eyes. "Th-the *room*," Sheila meekly censored herself, "I..." and with her pride on the line as at least an honest person, the sky-high office was starting to feel warm with the heat localized around the secretary's cheeks.

Before the words could even leave her mouth her vision was dropping, just beneath her boss' eyes and taking comfort somewhere at the nose. "...I was excited." The truth had started to spill, yet hardly any of the emotional rewards were hitting, which was hopefully just a delayed reaction. Sheila's lips were starting to implode as for the first time in ever she was learning what it was like to be on the legitimate receiving end of her boss.

This wasn't like any other time in experiencing the byproduct of someone else impacting her boss. This wasn't residual anger or an upset influenced by some other factor that Sheila's job was to decipher on her own. It was the first time she could readily identify the cause and had no way of dodging the crossfire, all because she was the root, cause and epicenter of it.

*Excited?* Excited. Was it fair to say how real this couldn't have been? How imaginary that it might be, for a trusted employee who has been loyal for so long, taken care of so greatly, paid so well, to suddenly run amok so strangely?

And yet, strange was precisely the name of the game. Stupefying. Surprising. Bewildering. Never once did Joyce actually consider Sheila's stance on the matter, precisely because it wasn't her business to that degree. But alternatively, it didn't change the fact that Sheila *was* involved. As involved as Joyce had made her since the conception of custom-made diapers...!

And then came another taboo.

"D-does...does Emily know?"

It was a quiet question from Sheila, yet the words came no less quickly to Joyce's ears, scraping her insides like nails on chalk. Another forbidden topic that this time there wasn't any real censorship for. No substitute like there was 'room' for 'nursery.' There may have been Emmy, but god forbid that had to be mentioned too. This was work and Emily had no business in it. She

didn't belong in an office like this, like she was a discussion topic... Not for things like this! It triggered almost a brief reprieve in Joyce's mind, making her remember their discussion last night. She didn't want to associate Emily with this side of her life, now largely for reasons like this.

It was also another reminder of how Sheila apparently shared certain information with Emily over dinner, which in itself was only mildly frustrating, yet they were dealing with far bigger issues.

With a tightened lid on a can of emotions already spewing high-pressure fumes from the cracks starting to form, somehow she kept it together. "No. She doesn't." Yet, it would more than likely be a tough conversation they'd need to have. Just like this one, though probably worse.

Thankfully Sheila was for once consistent with expectations as Joyce watched her nod slightly.

"...Ms. Summers... would it be alright if I explained things?" Not as an excuse, because Sheila was more than certain of her faults. But at least as a way to offer insight to her boss with just how much of a mess Sheila's mind was.

"Yes." *Yes! Please! Explain something!* Give her something to work with! A-an excuse, a miraculous illness that somehow makes you prone to wandering into rooms...! Alcohol? Drugs? Some kind of delirium pill that makes your body someone else's and your mind no longer your own? Anything that had by this point a less than zero percent chance of being used, yet a point of fiction Joyce hoped for nonetheless.

"Ever since you had me put in that order under an ex-chairman's name..." her spiel slowed down, just to let her boss' fury catch up, lest she might be saying something too explicitly. But she hadn't, so she continued. "Ever since that point, I've... Been thinking." Thinking. So long. So much. So many questions. Yet not a single person to talk to about it. Not a single soul she would *ever* share with other than herself. It was her *job* to be a walking bag of corporate secrets, and now that meant interpersonal ones too, apparently. Deep, dark secrets, more than likely, yet just the fragments of them.

"It...it's not my place, and I know not to ask questions, so I never have and I never would, but...that doesn't stop me from wondering, I suppose..." Even admitting to her own human nature felt shameful. She was supposed to be perfect and infallible, precisely because her boss wasn't. Curiosity was far too *human* for someone like Sheila. She was a pillar and thus had no business leaning out to anything but what was being directly supported above her. Yet she did lean, and it was with eye-opening relief that the power structure hadn't collapsed completely because of it.

After clearing her throat, Sheila continued. “Ms. Summers, if...I’m being honest,” because that’s all she could be, “there have been many points lately where you’ve seemed more...affected by things than usual.” And now she was criticizing her boss? When would she be saved by a killing smite for such insolence? “We’ve even had some indirect discussions about ‘friends’ or subjects...”

And as Sheila explained purely from a place of self-explanation, Joyce tried to keep her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth afloat

“So with all due respect, I consider it my job to help balance your work...as well as understand at least some of your issues... –B-but, that doesn’t excuse what I did!” she quickly interrupted herself. “I-I just mean that I’ve become invested as far as things go with your moods and circumstances...I...I figured for a while now that there was someone in your life, though I guess I didn’t realize the specifics until that night at the hotel...” And above the literal conversation, Joyce was trying to chase away the dread of that night while Sheila shooed away the fluffy feelings she was starting to get.

Thankfully Joyce’s leg was soft, otherwise she wouldn’t be able to hear the guilty party over the sound of her finger rapidly tapping something that could be much harder and much louder. But yes, *that* night.

The night Sheila effectively babysat Emily, and action that *Joyce* condoned.

“Ever since I offered that night to watch Emily until you got back, I...haven’t been able to stop thinking about your relationship because...” her voice briefly departed into the void.

“I...because I’m used to staying on top of things... Somewhere along the way, I...I think I somehow convinced myself that better understanding your relationship with Emily might somehow help me do my job with you...”

At least outwardly, it was a calm and quiet collection and intake of testimony and thought for Joyce. Piecing together whatever she could to make sense of Sheila. But as she was beginning to understand it, Sheila was predisposed to wanting to know things; a partial control freak. How eerily familiar that sounded, but what it didn’t excuse was simplifying her boss’ deepest secret into a personal factoid meant to affect performance and work ethic...!

As the thoughts fell into place Sheila could barely seem to sit still. Squirming and wiggling in just the slightest ways, shifting pupils that panned from left to right just as they started to settle on something or anything.

“So...” Joyce blinked, just as simply as the explanation for all this apparently and supposedly was. “You...you were curious?” Curiosity may not have killed the cat, but it sure did put careers at risk, apparently.

With a moral compass that at least still knew how to point north, Sheila bobbed her head, nodding. “I’ve been for a while now, and it’s *no* excuse for what I’ve done... I’m happy and grateful you’ve decided to rely on me so many times for personal matters, even things partially related to work, but I feel that it’s finally put me in a position where I’ve made a careless and selfish mistake...”

So it was indulging just a selfish urge. Joyce sighed as her hand covered her face.

“How much?”

“S...sorry?”

“How much of it? How much did you see?”

“...All of it...to my knowledge.”

*Everything.* The diapers. The changing table. The pail. The crib. The giant stuffed bear.

“...The closet?”

Another solemn nod from Sheila.

The clothes. But then again, Emily was the one greeting her at the door in footie pajamas...

Emily greeted her. Dressed like that. Just like at the hotel, Joyce *approved* Sheila to take her girlfriend up and get her ready for bed. She told her to behave. To listen. She gave Sheila *instructions* on how to handle her adult girlfriend. She even gave the name of her stuffed animal...

While a ball of guilt and shame sat across her desk, the blame and frustration was starting to feel sorely misplaced, at least somewhat.

Sheila, under orders, was made to put in an order for adult, babyish diapers. While she may not tell anyone else, it wasn’t feasibly possible to make her not talk to herself? And when Emily was sad, Joyce sure was. Depending on the situation, maybe she was mad, even. Regardless, they were all uncharacteristic moods and mannerisms *she* brought into the office. What’s more, Joyce

had already involved Sheila in a litoney of nondescript, “hypothetical,” conversations that certainly didn’t take a college degree to deduce. She even made her orchestrate a meeting with a *baby* furniture company...!

And then the other night. Christ, how could this only be hitting her now, right in the midst of condemning her employee?! Sheila certainly did something she wasn’t supposed to, but if not for complete negligence from chiefly Joyce, and possibly a small bit from Emily following that (who was also just as preventable), there never would have been a chance for any of this to happen.

The nursery stayed locked up for a reason, yet one early flight and a dirty diaper in need of discarding was enough to make the mommy forget how to close up shop. Consequently that meant giving Emily a chance to misbehave, and that also meant the same for anyone curious enough to walk right by a half-open door that should’ve been shut...!

Giving the guilty culprit a second glance, the self-disgust couldn’t be any more evident within the judge at hand.

This was hardly a form of justice at this point. Sheila needn’t say anything else and it all would have been more than enough for Joyce to see the straight hypocrisy and foolishness; the absurdity for thinking all of this could be exclusively one person’s fault. Or at the very least, just to see how much of it was really with herself.

Sheila continuing to be fed small bite-sized pieces of information about Joyce and Emily’s personal lives that somehow involved diapers, cribs, clothing and caretaking was of no fault of her own. She listened and consumed, but she did her job nonetheless. She was involved because it was her job to be, and expecting her not to react to any of that in some way was moronic. She’s *human!*

This was no isolated incident. It was all continuous gaslighting and Joyce forgot to turn off the stove. With Sheila sitting in her own wallow, too ashamed to look her boss in the eyes, it was ironically just another case of her secretary doing what she did best. Shouldering the responsibility.

Of course she was curious. Of course she had questions. It was Amy all over again. Constantly and consistently their secret had been dangled over her like a carrot and stick, just baiting Sheila into wanting to know more. It was Joyce HR would have a field day with. Yet thank goodness for independently contracted workers...

Nevertheless, this was nothing but unjust discipline.

This was plain entrapment.

And with only more doubt caving in on her, that cleared the overhead for plenty more questions and misdirections. Was it really so weird anymore that Sheila stayed after the fact to make Emily dinner? She watched Emily once already while Joyce was away, so maybe she misunderstood it as a silent order from her boss? An expectation now after the business dinner?

“Ms. Summers...?” Sheila gently nudged the spotlight back on Joyce, already sounding hesitant to disrupt the woman’s inner monologue. “You have my word: I have not and will not tell anyone about this...no matter what happens. I’m fully prepared to accept the consequences...” Whatever they may be. Regardless of how she felt. The gap in power and status was simply too mighty and too great for the guilty party to even conceive that somehow maybe the fault wasn’t just with themselves.

“Sheila,” Joyce’s eyes wandered the office for a moment before finally making direct contact with Sheila’s. “The door to the...room,” she had seen it herself from the footage, but trauma and worry were great agents for fast-acting amnesia, “was it open?”

“Yes...” Sheila offered a half-nod, finally bonding with the glue that stuck her to the seat. So open, though. Open and enticing. Tempting.

A noise left Joyce’s mouth as she exhaled, witness to the final nail in the coffin.

“Sheila...after hearing your side of things and considering my own actions...” and just maybe, slightly Emily’s too... “I think I’ve put you in a position with...unfair expectations.” Her mouth had gone sideways as her front from earlier was starting to feel far less than called for.

“No, please, Ms. Summers. What I did was wrong, no matter the context. I just wanted to explain myself so I could—”

“--No, Sheila,” Sheila’s words went limp the moment Joyce sliced between them. “I’m not saying at all that what you did wasn’t wrong. Make no mistake. You went into my home without me being there and specifically snooped somewhere that officially you had no reason to be. You have my permission to come and go as you need to, but you know that’s specifically related to work only. I’m still upset, Sheila...but I think I may have been treating this a bit too harshly...”

It was probably only a definitive statement that Sheila was still on the hook as the main reason for why the woman didn’t try to say anything back to Joyce. Call her a glutton for punishment, but her conscience could rest lighter than it’d just been feeling with some form of atonement.

“What you said is true,” Joyce admitted, trying to hide her own guilt now. “I’ve involved you in a lot of things that I’ve never let you in on fully. Not once have you ever asked me about any of the things I ask of you, but still you do so diligently and exceptionally.” *Tone down the praise a little, Joyce...we ARE supposed to be reprimanding her...*

“It’s ultimately because of me that you’ve been exposed to stuff like this. And...if I’m being a bit more realistic,” and honesty was so hard to abide by, right now, “I’m sure you have gotten your own ideas about what’s going on...” And just for a moment, only the distant hum of the building’s vents were talking. Just like how Sheila resolved herself to finally sit still, she didn’t dare try to cut her boss off or jump in any more than she already had. Whether in good or bad graces, Ms. Summers was simply someone not to be interrupted.

But with every pause or deliberate kind of speech, Joyce tried to hide the quirks, kinks and chinks in the innerworkings of her mind while she tried to navigate this. How was she supposed to stay firm without mentioning diapers, cribs, or any of the red flag words when it had *everything* to do with what Sheila had done?

That wasn’t to say Sheila wasn’t picking up on any of this. From her seasoned perspective, the awkward balance in her boss’ voice, the tilted expression, furrowed brow and constant lulls of silence were all a testament to how much of a screw-up she’d caused. Disciplining Sheila wasn’t just weird because it hadn’t happened since ever; it was difficult because it felt so inappropriate. And yet it did. But it didn’t.

Yet the thoughts were interrupted when Joyce finally clasped her hands, finding what she believed were hopefully the correct words to immediately skip to.

“Sheila, I’m upset and a little angry right now, but it doesn’t change how much you’ve done for me...and that I expect you to continue doing.”

And what didn’t go unheard by the woman was an implication of the future. *Continuing* to provide for her boss. She couldn’t hide the jump in her eyebrows.

“What you did was wrong and unacceptable, but bearing in mind just how much you’ve been involved with already...” sorry, Emily...! “This...isn’t the farthest thing from what I’ve already put you through.” Quite close, actually. Just put everything together in one place and there you have it. There Sheila legitimately had it.

*No. This can’t be right. I...snooped! I peeked in on her privacy! On Emily’s! I’m the lowest of the low. I took advantage of Emily in a difficult situation. I...she can’t...! She can’t just forgive me...!*

“But Sheila,” Joyce shifted and her voice became far more severe. “You’re one of my best employees and I want you to know just how important you are to me and this company.” While leaving it at that may have misconstrued it as praise... “For the exact same reason, you need to know how difficult of a position you’re putting me in having to talk to you like this. I’m largely upset in part with how I even found out about all this to begin with!”

“Yes...” Sheila remorsefully agreed, nodding with her eyes at the desk again.

Finally with her words carrying her criticism to somewhere much more objective and separated from the problematic content, confidence was starting to come with the vocabulary now as well.

“You’re my secretary Sheila because of how well you do for me *and* for your honesty and transparency. That part does not come and go as you choose.”

She nodded again. It was a total and whole-hearted agreement. It was the exact kind of pressure and scolding that she needed and wanted. Ms. Summers was a generous woman, so to somehow land back in her good graces unscathed after all of this would’ve been a punishment in itself.

The flame was low but the pressure stayed unrelenting. Joyce channeled the best attitude she could; reminiscent of a stern talking-to with a girl sneaking ice cream when she wasn’t supposed to, only now tailored for someone that didn’t spend half their time in diapers.

“I can maybe understand what you were thinking, Sheila, but that *doesn’t* excuse your actions. Despite everything I’ve asked of you, it still stands that you abused a privilege I gave you.” At the very least Joyce didn’t feel the need to remind her of her contractual obligation to maintain secrecy. It was an unfortunate instance of Sheila finally slipping up, but it didn’t change the fact that she was a smart person.

“From now on there won’t be *any* home visits unless I’m contacted and I approve it beforehand. Do I make myself clear?”

Without hesitation Sheila agreed on a visual and audible front. “Yes.”

“Good. And on that same train of thought: *anything* that you do at my home needs to be approved from now on. By me and no one else. Understood?”

*Dinner...she must be referring to that...* Another heat of the moment type of situation that Sheila was currently being trained to feel adverse to. While it felt far less damning to have been caught in that situation, that lack of outright guilt made room for embarrassment. “Yes...”

“These are all new rules moving forward, and this is me trying to be cognizant of the fact that I’ve involved you in a lot of ways that’ve left room for misinterpretation or mistakes.” And while it didn’t quite sound like one, Joyce said it anyway, “You have my apology for that.”

It was bittersweet to everything she had just said before it, and would certainly feel so after, but Sheila wishing to right her legitimate wrongs wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

“There will be a punishment for this, Sheila, but I’m going to need time to think of a fair one.” After all, terminating her right-hand woman felt like more of a punishment to herself, which after exposing Sheila to so much felt almost proper. If only it wasn’t a paradox that still punished Sheila the worst. Thankfully for both parties, firing wasn’t even remotely on the table, much less the same room.

“But the last and final thing I’m going to say Sheila is this: no more secrets. If something happens, you tell me. No matter what. Whether you think it was a mistake or you expect me to get upset or angry, it’s *still* your job to tell me.” Then came her last and deepest cut. “The *first* person I should hear about my secretary overstaying her welcome at my house is *you*, Sheila. *Not* my girlfriend. One of the biggest, if not most important things that I expect from you Sheila is *honesty* and *transparency*. One last time. Do I make myself clear?”

Sheila’s answer wasn’t immediate, and the delay wasn’t spurred from hesitation. She didn’t dare disagree on a single point, all in part to her selfless attitude and moral compass. Her boss was right in every sense and she had every right to say what she said. Finally digesting the full weight of her words, Sheila opened her mouth.

“Y...Yes, Ma’am. I promise. No more secrets. This won’t *ever* happen again.”

The discipline all things considered went down easy, and that made Joyce sigh, easing back just slightly into her chair.

“Good. Another important thing is I don’t want this to affect how you do your work, Sheila.” Mostly. “Do as you have been doing and I don’t expect this to happen again.”

“Of course.” Sheila was hardly a woman of faith, but the sun seemed to be shining just right on her that hour. If not her boss herself, clearly someone was keeping an eye out... But with the bulk of the branding already behind her, that made what did linger feel much more prominent in Sheila’s mind.

*Honesty.*

Being truthful. Truthful about all of it. Sitting there, seeing Ms. Summers seem glad to be past a situation she herself clearly didn't like, that alone put Sheila's head in a discomfoting place to know that the stones could settle more than this and she had yet to do so.

And asking for things to proceed as normal was an easier thing said than done. Neither one probably felt as comfortable as they were putting on, especially Joyce. The shell shock from doing something she had never hoped to was still just starting to set in and she could tell from the way Sheila was back to fidgeting that she was clearly taking it all in as well.

But that was that and the past was in the past.

"But okay, we'll leave it at that," Joyce decided with her best business smile. "Sorry to take up your time, Sheila. Would you mind seeing if there's anything that I'll still be able to make it to?"

"Yes..." Sheila nodded, but she wasn't moving from her chair. Her eyes were someplace else, staring off at something far beyond the four walls of Joyce's office. "M...Ms. Summers? I...I would like to start being honest now, if that's okay..."

And just as they'd surfaced from the turmoil, a hand was pulling them right back in. The light and airy atmosphere that Joyce imagined was starting to come back dried up instantly the moment another towel of dread was cast on them. Most importantly: what in the hell could Sheila possibly have to share now? Joyce the mighty mommy could hardly be put for a scare, so twice now in a single sitting was quite the problem.

"Yes...?" Joyce cautiously accepted, though her irrational side was wishing she hadn't.

"I...I was curious." Sheila stated. Quite clearly with an unavoidable look.

Ah, yes, restating the facts. Smart, Sheila! After all, Joyce's memory was a bit hazy at times, so there wasn't anything like having a post-meeting reminder, that way she could—

"A-and I'm...*still* curious..."

*Come again?*

While her eyes moved, Joyce's plastered smile did exactly as it was constructed to and nothing else. A perfect mask for the jarring disbelief from what she was starting to hear.

*Still? Still curious? A-about...*

“When I...after I saw what I saw...I got the file from your office, and I...had the chance to talk with Emily a little. It...it reminded me of taking her back to your hotel room... And *I’m* the one that insisted on making her dinner... She wasn’t sure, but I insisted and did it anyway... I *wanted* to stay and do that because I...guess I wanted to feel like it was at the hotel again...”

But that was hardly even scraping at the truth. The identifiable truth that Sheila *knew*, yet was too afraid to say, but her pride didn’t allow for secrets. Especially not now. Her honesty was demanded and *owed*. Whether it sounded weird or perverse; disgusting or rage-inducing, it needed to be said and the air needed to be cleared. Otherwise, it was all bound to fester and grow to yet another bursting point, one Sheila imagined that would be far less forgiving than this time.

Slowly, Sheila brought a hand to her chest like a structural beam that gave her support. “Ms. Summers...I *liked* taking care of someone... O...of Emily.”

And from Joyce’s corner, her reaction certainly did change.

Not one blink this time, but two!

And by no means did it stop Sheila’s guilty admission, as she went on to explain, “I...I don’t know why I feel like that, but...I guess it makes me feel similar to how I feel working for you... Satisfaction? But...I also see it as an extension of my work that I do for you. I don’t know if that’s me just trying to justify a different kind of feeling, but I had fun... It was fun getting to make her dinner...I had fun getting to talk to her about you and work...” But it wasn’t the same kind of fun she had with Greg, her fiance.

With him it was lovely, romantic and so many other positive words from the nearest, biggest dictionary. But with Emily? Light, airy, pure and fun was all she felt. It put her in a different place. It wasn’t like caring for her dog, or helping direct her boss. It hit all those same veins, but the satisfaction was far too unique. And after seeing the diapers, the stuffed animals, footie pajamas, and even the affection her boss had for Emily... Wasn’t this just babysitting?

“I...I liked it a lot, Ms. Summers... Not romantically. In any way whatsoever, but...it made me feel almost like a...caretaker...or something.” Probably more than twenty minutes ago they had gone well past a point of what’d be considered workplace appropriate, hence the shades of red intensifying on the secretary’s face. She was coming to a revelation at the same time she was broadcasting it to her boss. To someone she shared a work relationship with, yet gushing out such personal and intimate details.

And like that, curiosity had certainly killed the cat. Good thing Joyce wasn't one though, so save for her mind she wasn't in any way seriously harmed.

*Sh...Sheila...of all people...?*

And as shocked as Joyce was, that didn't stop the smile on Sheila's face. While one was still recovering from the emotional and mental shrapnel, the other could finally breathe with a weight lifted off her shoulders.

*C...caretaker...? B-babysitter?* Joyce looked slightly up. *Sheila...?!*

"I'm...sorry about that, Ms. Summers," Sheila pressed her lips, looking apologetically happy, of all things. Yet even now she didn't fear the retaliation of being fired. After all, Ms. Summers was a person of her word? "Would...would you like to discuss anything else?"

And now with the shoe certainly on the other foot, the boss could hardly answer to her secretary from so far below.

"N...no. Not...right now..." Joyce wanted to at least stand and send her off, but the thought of managing on her two legs was daunting just to think of right then. Curiosity was peculiar, but not unexpected. But *liking* it...? A single word, yet an entire metric ton of *so* many things to unpack. What did *like* even mean? Like... Emily's kind of *like*? *Joyce's*? Ah! No! She stifled and smothered a scream.

With a hand finally rising and plummeting to the top of her desk, she calmly waved.

"You...you're dismissed..." Christ, was termination *actually* off the table? Sheila was great, but shock was an awfully powerful thing...

Miraculously energy had been passed from the scolding to the scolded. Sheila was the one at fault, and yet she was the only one better for it.

With a laptop clutched against her chest, Sheila smiled with her departure for the door. Needless to say, nothing of anything seemed to have gone according to expectations.

"Ms. Summers?" Sheila called, halfway through the door.

"Yes?"

"One other thing that I learned...uhm... I wasn't sure if you knew..."

At this point, Joyce was ready to stop her right then and there. Leave the surprises for another day, just so she had the strength left to focus on the rest of her day. But reluctantly, she didn't and allowed Sheila to speak.

"About Emily..."

*Wait. No. Stop. Stop. Stopstopstopstop!*

"I..." and Sheila. The same Sheila Joyce had known for years to be a near-robotic, well-oiled machine for work and little else, made a noise from her mouth. A noise that wasn't words, a grunt, sigh or annoyance. A laugh. A chuckle. *Humor?*

Her mouth closed reflexively, but a puff of air came out with a small chuckle.

"I don't think Emily likes beets very much..." Even now Sheila could see the remains of her dinner plate. All the red, yellow and greens had gone, but the one thing that looked just as prominent from the start was a plate full of purple magenta. While child rearing wasn't what she went to school for, experience still served as a wonderful tool when it came to diagnosing a picky eater, and that she believed Emily was.

*...Doesn't like beets.*

And thankfully, before Joyce could respond, her office door was shut and she was all alone again. Whether she believed it or not, objectively, Sheila had been disciplined. Yet with a whole can of worms opened because of it.

*...Beets...*

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Later that evening, Joyce felt distracted, to say the least.

So busy wandering in her own mind that she could barely even focus. In the pursuit of trying to make heads and tails of what happened with her discussion with Sheila, the world around her and the work before her was totally secondary to the shock that she was still trying to process.

*Sheila liked it. She liked taking care of Emily? But what does that say about all the baby stuff? Did she approve of that too? How the hell am I supposed to work around her, now? Do we NEED to talk about this again? I have to work with her on a daily basis...so what now? She was smiling! Sheila!*

*What's the next step? Do I ask her more questions? T...try to find out more? Do...do I tell-!*

“Oof...” a quiet sigh followed by a warm squelch came from player number two once she announced her arrival. Her second announcement really, as Joyce was too busy on her computer to notice them enter the office.

Before Joyce knew it, there Emily was, straddling her thigh with her eyes on the computer screen. Only after a few seconds of silence did Emily tilt her head back with a curious grin, dropping the hair hanging on her ear.

“Whatcha working on?”

While it had yet to be said, it was obvious Joyce had been spacing out, to which all she could give was her own smile, albeit a bit more embarrassed.

“Just...catching up on some work I didn't get done today,” Joyce explained while she pulled a certain somebody's T-shirt out of the back of their diaper. “Very clever, by the way.”

“What? How?” Poor Emily. Lying just wasn't part of her skillset.

Stooping her head forward, sinking her eyelids and raising her eyebrows, Joyce coyly remarked, “The fact that you're telling me you have a diaper that needs changing?”

And like Joyce's leg really was a horsie, Emily squeezed her own together just to hang tight with a bashful look. “No...it's...not that wet...”

“Uh-huh,” Joyce dismissed and ended it with a kiss. “Think you can hang tight for a little longer? I wanna finish this report I'm working on.”

“Can I watch? Oh! Wait!” and Emily half-waddled off with Joyce leaning out of her chair just to watch her rear slip past the door. Not much later and she came back, not with a phone in hand but instead a puzzle cube.

“Ah- no, in my lap, please. No horsey rides tonight,” Joyce corrected and directed with a laugh, finding things a bit more comfortable this way. Thankfully there wasn't much longer for her work. Emily was small, but Joyce wasn't super strong...

Sitting up straight, Joyce rested her chin on Emily's shoulder while she tried to focus, now taking in her co-pilot as a lovely little ball of white noise. Well, white noise only for so long.

“Can I ask a question?”

“Hmm?” Joyce hummed while she rubbed her cheek with her own.

“Did you talk to Sheila today?”

While there wasn't any piano for music to suddenly stop, Joyce's typing certainly did. Only after remembering to act natural did she resume.

“I...did. It wasn't exactly fun...” Joyce sighed, “I've never had to have a 'talk' with Sheila before, so it was a bit much for us both...” But so, so much more for Joyce. And she knew without a doubt it would be *so* much for Emily. Not to mention it was edging on a line so dangerously close to what Emily's superstition was fearful of from the start. Sheila knowing and *telling* other people. In spite of everything, Joyce still believed in Sheila's discretion, even if she was now seeing a side of her that she could never even fathom.

“...Do you not wanna talk about it?”

Quite frankly, Joyce had enough of everything for one day. She didn't want the stress of conversations and breaking things down for others, especially Emily. There would be no secrets, but that didn't mean there couldn't be a clause for how long it took to reveal said information. “...To be honest, no...not really. But I promise, I'll tell you about it later. It's a lot to unpack, but I think we'll be fine. Trust me?” Once she could process it herself and lastly dilute it into something safer for Emily, *then* she could know.

And as a pleasant surprise, Joyce earned herself the loveliest kiss on the cheek.

“Kay. *Mommy*,” Emily giggled.

A content noise left Joyce as she rested her head completely now, still managing to finish the last few sentences she had to.

“You seem kinda tired,” Emily remarked, though too busy looking at her puzzle in-hand rather than the screen or her partner.

“Could you tell I'm lying if I said that I wasn't?”

“Yeah,” Emily said thoughtlessly, sounding like she missed the tone of Joyce's banter entirely.

“Mm. Well, maybe a little... But don't worry; not tired enough that I can't change a diaper or two.”

“I can do it myself, you know...?” Anything to alleviate Joyce's stress and workload?

“And saying silly stuff like that is what keeps you in your wet diapers five minutes longer.” A bold, but expected taunt. By now Emily should know the kind of bear she was poking...

And as her own form of retaliation, Emily gyrated her hips, wiggling in place just to rub it in. Though...maybe it sounded better in her head. All Joyce got was a frictionless massage from a plastic butt sliding around in her lap. Emily got to become more acquainted with her spongy seat...

“Oh? Is that your way of asking for *ten* more minutes?”

“N...no...”

“Emily, I appreciate the offer, but I'm not that tired. I'll *never* be too tired when it comes to taking care of you. Got it?”

“I figured you'd say something like that... Can I at least help make dinner?”

“Only if I can get another picture of you in your apron?”

“...No diapers though, right?”

“Sure.” *Maybe when her back is turned, though...* “But how was your day? Good?”

“Sorta. Same old same old, but I did my chores.”

“Good job,” Joyce spoke with genuine praise. Even if it wasn't much, especially for an adult, that didn't change the pride Joyce loved to indulge herself with. Emily could brush her teeth and it'd still be cause for celebration.

It needn't be mentioned, but talking about Emily's days always forced the association with *why* she had so much free time to begin with. Now with the unspoken topic on the table, Joyce, of all people, decided to broach it. That being said, not in the way Emily was sorely expecting.

“So...? Did you ever decide to give Amy a call?”

Suddenly Emily looked coincidentally busy trying to pull two interlinked wooden pieces apart. “Uh...no...not yet. I...haven’t decided.”

“You can’t decide on something if you don’t know what to expect yet?” Call Joyce crazy, but she was somehow the *most* receptive to Emily hearing out Amy’s offer. For work! Why, though? Maybe at least in Joyce’s eyes it didn’t strike her as traditional work.

She wasn’t expecting the same nine-to-five that she lost Emily to every day of the week. Not the same kind of workload, stress or unavailability. Not only that, but she had expectations and direct connections to Emily’s boss this way. It was a safe and reliable way to keep Emily busy, and while she’d never say it out loud, it was a way for Joyce to...supervise?

“I...know... But is it even going to be actual work? I wanna....do work-work, Joyce...” Emily said as she tinkered with a logic puzzle. The more time went on and on the farther her memories of doing actual work drifted away. The more she relaxed and lazed around, the more out of touch with being a working, contributing adult she felt herself becoming.

Call it a judgmental attitude, but working for Amy didn’t seem very official... In Emily’s eyes it was almost like going over to a neighbor’s house to help with stuff like raking or packing boxes. What kind of work could Amy possibly have for her? Modeling? How was she supposed to model for tailored outfits? She certainly wasn’t good at sewing either. Correction, she had never even *touched* a needle and thread.

Half of it was downplaying the opportunity, and the other half was downplaying herself. Inadequate skills for a job that probably wouldn’t even be a job. So many thoughts that involved so many doubts, all allowed to collect and permeate and not a single phone call had been made.

“Work is *work*, Emily. Calling Amy doesn’t mean you have to commit to anything? Besides, it might help you keep busy during the day?” *And give me back all the household responsibilities...*

“Mhm...” Emily nodded anxiously. She pulled at her puzzle a bit harder. “It would be nice to be a bit busier again...”

“Right?” While a traditional job Joyce was certainly not in favor of, she could always get behind filling up Emily’s day. “And just so I can be your number *one* supporter, I’ll go ahead and let Amy know that you’ll call her Monday morning.”

“Wh-what?” Emily spun her head, nearly smacking Joyce on the nose. “No! Don’t! I’ll call her!” *When I’m ready!*

“And it’s already been well-over a couple weeks. You had your chance, Emily, but now I’m gonna help.”

“*Don’t...!*” Emily upped her whine with an annoyed rub on Joyce’s leg.

“You’ll be thanking me later~,” Joyce gave her another kiss right before sliding her off and standing up. “Now if you drop it, I won’t make you wait another five minutes and I’ll change you right now?”

And Emily’s lips did a dance as her mouth opened, but only whimpers and grunts came out instead. “N...nnn....not fair...”

“It’s because I love you,” Joyce chuckled, draping herself over Emily like she was a jacket. “Now, ready to go get changed?”

“...Yes.”

“Good.”

With that discussion unfortunately ended, one short trip later to the nursery and Joyce was on her second wind with how she moved about her station like she was working a kitchen. Emily was her sweet and tasty morsel, the powder and wipes were her tools and ingredients, and lastly the diaper served as just the most breathtaking, adorable garnish she’d ever laid her eyes on.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you,” Emily spoke over the loud diaper tapes. “I got a call from Michael today.”

“Really now?” Joyce did look curious, partly because she usually expected to be the first one they reached out to. Then again, she *had* been particularly busy today... When did she last check her phone?

“Carol was trying to reach you about something. I dunno what though... Maybe it was about that kink-vestment thing?”

“Kink-vestment?” Joyce looked taken aback, and that only made Emily giggle.

“Came up with that one on my own. Good, right?”

And suddenly a speckle of white powder was on Emily’s nose.

“Silly. Very silly,” Joyce grinned, wiping her nose off with a wet wipe. “But okay, thank you for letting me know.”

“Oh!” Emily openly eureka’d as she took Joyce’s hands and was lifted up and off the table. “How about you call her and I get dinner started? Please? I’ll just get the pots and ingredients out, and stuff!” In other words, no knives and chopping, no stoves and boiling, no ovens and hot flames, no nothing without Joyce’s supervision. Baby rules could be weird, but Emily wasn’t willing to die on that hill today.

“...Okay, fine. Yes, you can,” Joyce agreed and Emily tried not to squeal with delight. It wasn’t often she won ‘debates’ like that. But what could she say? A new diaper simply felt like shedding her skin. She was fresh and newly rejuvenated. A new day and a new Emily. Stronger than ever before! “Now scoot,” she signaled the start by swatting a padded behind. “I brought back some chicken and vegetables today. Think you can get those out?”

“Can do!”

“Thank you, and no running, please!” Joyce called after a crinkling blur.

Doubling back to her office Joyce found her phone, and sure enough there was a missed call from Carol. About what, though, Joyce wasn’t sure. By the time she came into the kitchen and at the island the number was dialing.

“Right there...” Joyce instructed in a whisper, pointing Emily’s destinations out as she appeared with all the right things in hand. “We need spices...—oh, don’t worry about those, though. Those cabinets are a bit high; I’ll get them aft— Oh, Carol? Is that you?”

“Hey Joyce! Sorry— I tried reaching you earlier. I think I called at a bad time though.”

“No, no...sorry, it’s just been a busy day. Is everything alright?”

“Hm? Of course! Michael and Jackie are good. If Emily’s there, tell her I said ‘hi’!”

Dropping the phone to her shoulder, Joyce mimicked a handsy wave at Emily. “Carol says ‘hi’.”

“Hi!” Emily grunted right back, dropping a chair beside the counter with her bum sticking out.

But before Joyce continued the conversation, she was right on her feet, one-handedly sliding Emily off the chair and carrying it back to the table. In a lowered whisper she looked awfully stern. “I *said* leave the spices to me, got it? No high places.”

And Emily, who was well aware of how much she was trying to push her luck, relented with a sigh, trying instead to find anything closer to the ground that she may have missed.

“Sorry...” Joyce had the phone back up to her ear, though half her attention had gone to watching her charge like a hawk now. “Emily says ‘hi’ too. So what’s going on?”

“Well first, *I’m* sorry that whole event I took you to didn’t really seem to work out. I figured I’d try anyway...”

“No, no, thank you for inviting me in the first place! If nothing else, it was pretty...eye-opening?” That being said, after a particular thing that happened there, she wasn’t going to be keen on asking for another invitation in the future...

“Well, I’m not going to go into a whole lot, but I feel like there was something about that night you didn’t tell me...?”

“S...sorry?”

“You remember Logan, right? The host of the event?”

“Yes...” Joyce said with half her head in the game. The other was ordering her body to grab a glass above Emily that she was trying to reach for, just before she could start to get any ideas. After a tender rub on her head Joyce was sitting back down. “Y-yeah, I remember? What about him?”

“Well, he said someone came to him after the event and they were asking for you? Something about wanting to apologize?”

And a name had yet to be said, but Joyce was already squeezing her phone. “Uh...huh?”

“Do you know anyone named Isabelle?”