



Thawing the CEO

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Can she thaw the frosty heart of her Ice Queen boss?

Single mom, Emma Williams starts work as an assistant for the famously frosty Ice Queen Vivian Sterling- CEO of Sterling Enterprises.

Vivian is difficult, demanding and hard to please.

Emma finds herself more and more drawn in to wanting to please her.

Will Emma's warmth and kindness get through to her and thaw the Ice Queen?

Emma senses a chemistry between them that is way more than boss/employee.

What happens if they cross that line?

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Vivian

“I’m heading out. You all have fun.”

“Come on, Ice Queen,” Jane teased. “Join us—have some fun for once.”

Vivian Sterling just laughed. “Maybe next time. You guys enjoy yourselves.”

A couple of her employees laughed along with her. Everyone knew that Vivian wouldn’t be joining them the next time. She was flattered that they liked her enough to keep trying to include her. Most people would jump at a chance to socialize during work time without their boss present—to be able to complain and gossip without her watching.

However, Vivian had worked for years to foster an environment where complaints were brought directly to her, and she did everything within her power to resolve them quickly. Happy employees meant a well-run business, and Vivian ran a fantastic business.

Vivian went home with a familiar sinking feeling in her stomach. This was the worst time of day—coming home alone, knowing that it was a full twelve hours before she could get up and start getting ready for work again.

She was almost at the elevator when Jane caught up with her.

“Vivian, wait.”

Vivian braced herself for more attempts to convince her to join the party, but thankfully that wasn't what was on Jane's mind. “You didn't take any cake.” Jane handed her a napkin with a generous slice of chocolate cake wrapped inside. “You went to all the effort of having the bakery make such a fantastic cake for us. The least you can do is enjoy some of it.”

Jane did have a good point. She wasn't going to risk staying for the party but taking a slice of cake home seemed safe enough.

“Thanks, Jane.” Vivian took the cake, holding it carefully so that she didn't squash it. “You go enjoy the party now—you deserve it.”

“So do you. I know it was a team effort, but we never would have landed that investor if not for your leadership. If you're not going to join us, I hope you'll at least celebrate at home.”

“Don't you worry about me. You just focus on having a good time. You've all worked hard on this deal, and you deserve a break.”

“Thanks, Vivian. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Vivian went to her car, putting the cake on the seat beside her before tossing her purse onto the back seat. She was dreading this evening in particular because she had let everyone finish two hours early to make time for the party. It was only three o'clock.

Fortunately, she had come prepared with a folder of paperwork she could do. It was the kind of thing Jane would usually handle, but Vivian needed to pass the time, and it never hurt to take some of the load off her assistant's hardworking back.

Vivian was greeted at the door by a familiar meow.

“Hello, Smudges. Who’s a pretty kitty? Yes, you are. You are.”

Vivian reached down to pick him up, kissing his little nose as he purred contentedly. She didn’t need people in her life as long as she had Smudges. He was enough to fill the void within her, at least for the most part.

Cats were safer than people. People always came with drama that was bound to reflect back on her business when it blew up. Vivian had seen good businesses fail because their CEOs got emotional or unstable because of personal issues.

She wasn’t going to let that happen to her. Sterling Enterprises was everything to her. She’d built it from the ground up, just like her father had done with his business. Vivian came from a family of entrepreneurs and seemed to have inherited the family talent.

Sacrificing a personal life in favor of her business was a trade-off Vivian willingly made. And if it caused her chest to ache on days like today… Well, she was probably just fighting off some kind of chest infection.

Smudges meowed again, bringing her out of her thoughts.

“Yes, I know you’re hungry. Did you see, I’ve got cake? But none for you. Nope, no cake for Smudges. But I can give you a treat. Do you want a treat, my little boppikin?”

Smudges’ ears perked up. He knew the word treat.

He wriggled to get out of Vivian’s arms. She placed him on the ground before going to the cupboard and getting out one of the tuna-flavored treats.

She watched in satisfaction as Smudges devoured it. He would be licking the bowl for some time, so Vivian used the opportunity to put together a quick dinner. She didn't often have time for anything elaborate. She had lived on takeout for many years until her cholesterol levels went on strike.

Now, she did her best to cook something healthy, though she was limited by time and energy. She often worked late, and the work took a lot out of her.

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Vivian ate her hurried dinner and took the time to savor the cake afterward. The bakery really had done a great job. She made a mental note to leave them a good review. Positive feedback was just as important as constructive criticism, and Vivian made sure to be generous with her compliments when they were deserved.

She took small bites of her cake, wondering what her employees were talking about now. She doubted they were complaining about anything she wasn't actively in the process of solving, but she did wonder idly about the gossip.

Over the years, there had been many rumors about her, about heartbreaks and missed opportunities for love. None of it was true, but that didn't stop the stories from persisting.

Vivian didn't let it bother her. She knew that her choice to avoid all personal entanglements—even friendships—was an unusual one. Others were bound to be curious about it. They didn't understand why she seemed so cold, probably because Vivian had never explained it to anyone. She didn't expect them to understand. It was better just to remain aloof and do her job.

In a recent survey from a local business magazine, Vivian's company had rated as the top choice for employees in the state. Employee satisfaction was reported highly across the board.

Vivian chuckled as she remembered the interview. They had wanted to know how she did it, as though it was some big secret. It really wasn't all that complicated. Offer good wages and benefits. Listen and react accordingly when people were unhappy. Give positive feedback and reward good work.

Her work attendance rates had improved twenty percent when Vivian had opened a small daycare for working parents with kids. The cost of the daycare was more than covered by the extra revenue they brought in without having to account for people being missing from work because they couldn't find or afford babysitters.

Smudges was done with his treat and jumped lightly onto Vivian's lap, purring like a little lawnmower. Vivian stroked him idly, toying with the idea of doing some team-building exercises in the next month.

There was some tension between Ruth and Nathan after an incident with Ruth's files being moved to make more space on one of the computers. Vivian believed Nathan when he said he'd meant to copy and not delete her files, but Ruth was still furious.

Perhaps some team building would do them good. Or maybe she'd get them to sit down with HR and work out their differences.

Vivian grabbed a scrap of paper and started jotting down the potential pros and cons of HR counseling versus team building. She doubted Ruth or Nathan would be impressed if she made them do both, and she didn't want to make them grumpy with her on top of being grumpy with each other.

Vivian drew out the pros and cons as long as she was able to, then sat down to do the paperwork she had brought home with her.

Smudges made things difficult, stretching out all over her papers, but Vivian didn't mind the minor challenge. She did her best to work around him.

Finally, when it was late enough to justify going to bed, Vivian picked up Smudges and plonked him on the end of the bed, where he spent every night, guarding her from the dark.

Vivian slid under the covers and closed her eyes. With the stress of the deal they'd been working on for over a month removed, sleep came easily.

The next day, Vivian went into work feeling energized. With that large investor secured, they were ready to move onto the next phase of her long-term business plan. For the next couple of weeks, they would be focusing on market research and promotion, selling themselves to an even wider base of clients.

Vivian was usually early, but it wasn't unusual for Jane to beat her to work, so she didn't register anything off about seeing her assistant there when she arrived.

The moment Jane saw her, she leaped to her feet. "Vivian! I need to talk to you."

"Of course. Why don't we go into my office?" Jane was looking nervous, which made Vivian nervous in turn. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything is great!" Jane beamed at her, though there was still an undertone of anxiety in her expression. "Brandon proposed!"

Vivian's eyes flicked down to Jane's hand, which was now boasting a sparkling new engagement ring.

"That's amazing, Jane! Congratulations." She knew that Jane and Brandon were pretty serious, despite the distance. She had been happy for Jane when Brandon had taken time off work to fly here from Spain, and she had given her a few extra days off to enjoy her time with him.

"Thanks. The thing is... well, we talked, and we don't want to keep doing the long-distance thing. I'm moving back to Spain with him."

Oh. That was a problem.

“Why not have him move here? I could help out with his moving costs and help get him a job here. I think my dad’s IT guy is retiring—he might be looking for someone new in the near future.”

“We did talk about him moving here. You know how much I love my job here, and it’ll be sad to lose it, but Brandon has his whole family in Spain. I mean, I have family here too, but just my parents, and we’re not that close. He has dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins. His two nieces are only six and he doesn’t want to miss their childhoods. He’s really tight with his family. I can’t ask him to leave them.”

That was unfortunately something Vivian couldn’t get around. She could try to convince Jane to stay, but that wouldn’t be fair. This was what Jane wanted, and Vivian wanted her to be happy.

“I understand. I’ll miss you, Jane. You’ve been an excellent assistant.”

“Thanks. I’ll miss you too, Vivian. I’ll make sure to line up a good replacement before I go.”

“I’d appreciate that. When are you planning on leaving?”

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“I think a month should be enough time to get someone new in place and give them some training.”

“A month is very fair. Thank you.” Vivian’s policy for resignation was two weeks of notice, but she wasn’t surprised that Jane was going the extra mile, making sure she didn’t leave Vivian hanging.

It would be a blow, losing someone like Jane. Good assistants were hard to find, and Jane fit in perfectly with the other employees.

It wasn’t just finding someone good—it was finding someone good who also got along with everyone else Vivian employed. That was tricky and might take some trial and error.

Vivian did her best to focus on her work as usual and not her dismay at having the perfect workspace she had created here disrupted. She didn’t need to worry about sorting a replacement yet. Jane got the advertisements for the position out within hours, and she was busy combing through applications.

There were many of them—Vivian supposed she had that article about employee satisfaction to thank—and finding the gems among the rocks took some skill.

Fortunately, Jane was well up to the task and soon had a folder of five top potential candidates for Vivian to interview.

Vivian didn’t suppose it would be possible to get someone quite as good as Jane, but perhaps with some training, her replacement could learn to equal Jane’s efficiency

and skill. Work ethic was something that couldn't be learned. Finding someone who was willing to put in the work and had the right kind of personality was the most important thing.

You could train in skills if you weren't afraid of hard work, but people who didn't like to work typically didn't change, and neither did non-cooperative personalities generally shift at all.

Jane knew all of this, of course, and picked accordingly. All Vivian had to do was interview the replacements. She wasn't worried about the process, though she was still sad to be losing Jane. The hiring process, however, was something she'd done many times before.

How different could this time be?

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Emma

Emma Williams was nervous. Of course she was nervous. This opportunity seemed almost too good to be true.

She had heard all about Sterling Enterprises—most everyone in the business world had. Emma had been impressed when she'd read that article about employee satisfaction at the company. It sounded like working there would be a dream, and she was quick to put in her application when they had an opening.

She hadn't really expected to land an interview. Her hometown was a small place that no one around here seemed to have heard of. Sure, she had great references, but those were from smaller companies, nothing like the huge corporations of New York.

Emma really wanted this job. She needed this new start. She was ready.

“Mom, I don’t want to go.”

“Lily, we have to go. I have to speak to these people about a job.”

“But I won’t know anyone there!”

“I’m sure you’ll make friends quickly,” Emma soothed. “Besides, it’ll only be for an hour or so. I’ll take you out for ice cream afterward, okay?”

Lily brightened at the thought of ice cream. “Okay. But I want a big one.”

“One big ice cream, coming up.”

Emma had been giving Lily more treats than she usually did lately. She mostly had Lily eating healthily with one or two treats a week, but moving states was always going to be hard, especially when you were eight and worried about fitting in with your peers.

A little extra ice cream to help smooth the transition wasn’t going to kill her. They would get back into a rhythm soon enough.

When Emma had mentioned to the lady who called her about her application—Jane, she remembered—that she would need to find a babysitter for Lily while she was at the interview, Jane had offered to let Lily hang out at the daycare while Emma was busy.

It was summer, and there would be plenty of other kids around Lily’s age for her to talk to. Once school started, the daycare would be mostly infants and toddlers who were too young to go to school yet, but Emma had already enrolled Lily in a school

just a few blocks away from their new apartment.

This place really did sound like a dream. Emma was worried that it was too good to be true, but if that was the case, she would find out soon enough.

She dropped Lily off at the daycare first, hovering long enough to watch a kind-looking woman welcome Lily and set her up with some toys. A girl about Lily's age approached her with a doll and asked if she would like to play dolls.

Lily responded enthusiastically and she soon seemed to forget all about Emma. Lily had always loved dolls and even since she was getting older, her interest hadn't waned. If she got hired here, Emma would try to find out the other girl's name and see if she could arrange a play date.

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She was directed to the sparkling reception area of Sterling Enterprises. The woman at the desk stood up when she saw Emma.

“Emma Williams, right? I’m Jane Marley.”

“Hi, Jane. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks.” She looked good. All of the employees did, actually. Emma didn’t see any signs of weariness or boredom, at least from the brief look she got. Maybe she could talk to some of the staff on the way out and find out if the article was true.

“Right this way. Ms. Sterling is expecting you.”

Jane led Emma to the door of Vivian’s office, knocking once before sticking her head in. “Emma Williams to see you, Vivian.”

“Thank you, Jane. Please send her in.”

Emma swallowed her nerves, trying to put on her best confident smile.

She missed a step as she caught sight of Vivian Sterling, though thankfully managed to right herself before she did anything more than stumble slightly.

Emma knew Vivian Sterling by reputation, but she hadn’t realized how beautiful Vivian would be. Her greying hair was cropped short, a look that suited her and emphasized her dark eyes and thin face. Her gaze was sharp and Emma felt it

scanning her body.

“Welcome, Emma. Please, sit down.”

Emma’s nerves went skyrocketing. Though Vivian was smiling, it didn’t reach her eyes, and her voice was polite but cool.

Had Emma done something to piss her off already? How could she have—she’d only just walked into the room.

“Thank you.” Emma glanced subtly down at herself. She was dressed in her best navy blue pant suit and she knew she looked professional and it brought out the color of her eyes. She knew from her careful examination in the mirror before she left home that her hair and makeup were impeccable. She was ten minutes early for the interview. What else could have caused this attitude from Vivian Sterling?

“Well, I’ve looked at your application, and I must say, I’m impressed. Your previous employers are all very happy with you. Why did you choose to leave a job where you were so well-liked?” She didn’t look impressed.

“I needed a fresh start,” Emma told her honestly. “I’ve always wanted to move to New York, and it was time.”

“I see.” Vivian seemed to be waiting, as though she knew there was more to the story. Emma didn’t often talk about this, but it didn’t hurt like it used to, causing more fondness at the happy memories than pain.

“My wife died six years ago. We were planning to move, but then she got sick. Afterward, I stayed to have the support of family and friends. But I’m stronger, now. I want to follow my dreams, even if Alison can’t follow them with me. I’m going to make her proud.”

Something in Vivian's cold expression softened. "I understand. I see on your application that you have a daughter?"

"Yes, Lily—she's in the daycare now. Jane was kind enough to offer her a place there while I'm talking with you."

"I'm glad she did. I'm not a parent, but I understand the hardships of balancing parenthood and one's professional life. How do you manage as a single mother?"

"Well, it was easier at home. My parents are retired, and they often looked after her for me when she wasn't in school. Now that we've moved, I'm going to investigate some good daycares for when she's not in school."

"What about your professional life? What are your strengths and weaknesses?"

"I'd say my main strength is my organizational skills. I've always been good at putting chaos together in neat little boxes. I guess my biggest weakness is that I'm a slow learner. I can learn, but I have to put twice the time into it that everyone else does."

Emma hoped that admitting this wouldn't hurt her chances but being dishonest wouldn't help her case. If she was upfront about her abilities and challenges, it would make the transition of working with a new employer smoother and much more likely to succeed long term.

Vivian kept questioning her for nearly an hour. Emma was surprised by the direction the interview took. Vivian seemed less interested in her skills than her personality and work values. Emma answered everything honestly until Vivian ran out of questions.

"What about you, Emma? Do you have any questions for me, should your application be successful?"

“Yes.” Emma had been expecting this question and was prepared. “What is the culture like here? What are the people like? I want to fit in, and I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes simply because I don’t know the ins and outs.”

“We’re fairly straightforward here. I encourage employees to bring problems to me before they become unmanageable. Most people here get along just fine, and those who don’t really like each other still manage to maintain a professional relationship. I try to foster an environment that is both productive and business-focused, while not forgetting that everyone here is human and has their own life with their own needs.”

This was really sounding too good to be true. “What would you say the greatest downside of working here is?”

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Vivian thought about it for a moment before answering. “Well, there are couple of things that my employees don’t like. Firstly, I have a strict no-dating-within-the-workplace rule. I know it’s onerous, but I can’t have that kind of drama in my business.

“Also, you will be asked to work overtime during very busy periods. You will be well-compensated for it, but I understand that especially for those people with young children, it can be a hardship. I do run the daycare late during times when we’re all working long hours, but it’s still not the same as being at home with your child.”

Emma could work with that. She had often had to work long hours at her old job. Lily didn’t mind those days so much, because she got to stay up late and watch TV.

“I can live with that. I’m used to working long hours, and I understand about not dating in the workplace. My old job didn’t have that policy, and there were a few nasty incidents. I’m not looking to date, anyway. Looking after Lily is my sole personal focus.”

“That’s good to hear. Right, I think that’s just about everything. I really like your application, more than any of the other candidates I’ve interviewed, but before we go ahead with anything more, you should meet the rest of the team. I’ll want all of their feedback before making a final decision on hiring.”

“That’s an unusual way to go about it.”

“I want to make sure that the new person fits in. That’s one of the most important factors here. We all need to be able to work together as a team. That and a good

strong work ethic are things that any new employee needs to come with. Everything else can be taught.”

“You may have to be patient with me. Like I said, I’m a slow learner.”

“I can be patient. There’s nothing wrong with taking things slow. Now, are you ready to meet the others?”

“Of course. I would love to.”

Emma was surprised when, after introducing her to everyone, Vivian left them alone to talk and mingle. It gave her the chance to talk freely to the other employees, without their boss watching over them.

“So, what’s it like here? Really?” Emma asked the friendly accounts lady—Ruth, she thought she remembered her name was.

“Oh, it’s amazing; I love working here. The salaries are really competitive and the benefits are great. But that’s all on paper. What isn’t written down is that the environment here is better than anything I’ve ever worked in before.”

“Vivian makes her choices carefully,” Jane added. “That’s why you’re here talking to us. She wants everyone here to get along and be happy, and she’s not afraid to put her money where her mouth is.”

“She really isn’t.” Nathan was the head of PR, if Emma was remembering correctly from the introductions. “My house burned down a couple of years ago in a freak fire. Vivian personally paid for me to stay in a hotel near work the entire time it was being rebuilt and even offered me trauma counseling, which helped a lot.”

“It just seems too good to be true. There have to be some disadvantages of working

here.”

“Well, Vivian expects a lot of us. She gives us all the support and understanding we need, but in return, she requires our best effort. We’re expected to work hard and put in our all. It’s exhausting some days but satisfying at the same time.”

A couple of people nodded in agreement to Jane’s words.

“What about you, Emma? I see on your application that you moved here from a small town. Why such a big change?”

Emma explained her reasoning, and quickly became involved in a long discussion with Nathan. It seemed that it was Nathan’s daughter who was playing with Lily right now. Nathan seemed lovely, and Emma would feel totally comfortable sending Lily over to his place to play with Miriam, if that’s what Lily wanted.

Lunchtime came, and Jane invited Emma to come down to the cafeteria with them. Vivian didn’t join them for lunch.

“Oh, she always eats in her office,” Jane explained.

“I don’t think she likes me much,” Emma admitted. “She seemed... I don’t know. Cold.”

Ruth shook her head. “Don’t let that bother you. She’s like that with everyone. Vivian doesn’t really like anyone. We call her the Ice Queen—ice around her heart, you know.”

“Doesn’t sound like the best kind of person to work for.”

“No, don’t let her attitude put you off. Vivian doesn’t do personal connections, but

she knows how to be a good boss—a really good one—one who shows consideration and understanding for her employees’ struggles. I don’t know if she does that because deep down she does care or simply because she knows that’s how to ensure her business does well, but either way, the results are the same.”

Emma wondered about that. Could anyone really want to distance themselves from all personal relationships, even something as simple as comradery between colleagues?

“Did something happen to her?”

“Not that any of us know about. I mean, some of us have theories, but those are just thoughts without any real evidence.” Jane shrugged. “Who knows why she wants to be so removed from everyone else? It certainly doesn’t interfere with her work, and none of us really has the right to comment on her personal life.”

Emma supposed that was true enough, but she was still intrigued. She couldn’t believe that anyone really wanted to isolate themselves to that extent. There had to be a reason. She imagined how lonely life for Vivian must be, denying herself even the most basic of human connections.

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If she was hired here, Emma resolved to make it her mission to melt that ice around Vivian's heart.

3

Vivian

Vivian watched as Emma Williams interacted with the rest of the office staff for a few minutes before retreating to her office, giving them space. She would wait for official feedback from everyone, but so far, she liked what she saw.

Emma seemed to get along well with everyone. She had a sunny personality that threatened to break through the cold walls Vivian had built around herself. That was unnerving, but Vivian wasn't going to let her personal feelings interfere with making the best decision for her business.

She glanced back at Emma once more before closing the office door. Vivian didn't do relationships but if she did, Emma was exactly her type. She enjoyed looking at Emma Williams and she hoped that that wouldn't become a problem,

Emma was curvy and Vivian enjoyed letting her gaze run over Emma's body. The curve of her breasts and hips in the navy pant suit were very pleasing on the eye. Emma's hair was thick black curls, her skin smooth and brown and her smile was dazzling and warm. She seemed so happy and lighthearted as she chatted to everyone; it felt like a breath of fresh air. Vivian was already weighing the pros and cons of different offers in her head, wondering which kinds of benefits would entice Emma the most.

Assuming she got the all-clear from the rest of her team, she was going to offer Emma the job. Emma was by far the most suitable of the candidates Vivian had interviewed. Vivian's only worry was that Emma had only worked in much smaller businesses before, so the sheer volume of work might be overwhelming at first.

However, Emma seemed eager to learn and willing to embrace the challenge, which was the most important thing. The rest would follow with training and mentorship. Jane still had two weeks, which should be plenty of time to give Emma a good start, and Vivian could coach her on the rest of what needed to be done.

Vivian took lunch in her office, as usual. Once everyone started filtering back into the main workspace, Vivian went down to join them. "Emma, would you mind going to the waiting area, please? I need to discuss your potential fit with everyone here."

"Of course. Do you mind if I check on Lily in daycare?"

"Not at all—you go ahead. I'll have Jane fetch you when we're done here."

Vivian waited until Emma was out of earshot before turning to her team. "Well? What do you all think of her?"

"I think she'll be a great fit. I like her." Nathan was very introverted and didn't connect well with many people, which meant his recommendation carried a lot of weight.

"Yeah, she seems great," Ruth added. "I'd be very happy to work with her."

"I asked her a few technical questions over lunch, and she aced those. It might take her some time to adjust to a bigger work environment, but she seems resilient and determined. I'm sure she can do it."

Vivian nodded seriously. Jane's recommendation was the one that she would take into the highest account, since it was Jane's job that Emma would be doing. "Does anyone have any objections to me hiring her?"

All around, people shook their heads.

"Okay, then I'm going to offer her the job."

"Already?" Jane raised an eyebrow. "Not even a second interview?"

"I don't think I need one. I think I've got a good idea of who she is and what she's capable of."

It was unlike Vivian not to do a second interview. She was usually more thorough, but Emma was so open about everything that it hadn't been difficult to understand her strengths and weaknesses.

"Then I say go ahead."

"Yeah, Jane is right. Hire her. I think she'll do really well here."

Vivian smiled at Nathan, grateful for his input. "Alright, then. I'll tell her. Jane, would you mind asking her to step back into my office?"

When Emma arrived, she looked almost as nervous as she had the first time stepping into Vivian's office and Vivian couldn't help but find it endearing. Her big brown eyes looked anxious. Vivian was sure that those nerves would fade with time. Emma was understandably anxious about hearing feedback from an important job interview.

Vivian didn't keep her in suspense. "I've got good news, Emma. The job is yours. Can you start tomorrow?"

“Oh! That’s wonderful. I didn’t expect you to come to a decision so quickly. Yes, I’d love to start tomorrow. Would it be alright if I keep bringing Lily to daycare until school starts?”

“Yes, of course—daycare is open to all employees, you included. We just need to decide on terms, and then I’ll have our lawyers draw up the contract for signing tomorrow morning.”

The discussion of salary and benefits didn’t take long. Vivian knew that her salaries and benefits were competitive, and Emma clearly did too, because she had no desire to haggle. She gave Vivian a bright smile as they wrapped up the discussion. “I’m so glad to be working for you, Vivian. I’m sure we’ll end up great friends.” She exuded warmth.

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Vivian didn't comment on that last part but she felt it was a strange thing to say. "You will be a valued employee at Sterling Enterprises, and I'll do everything I can to make sure you're happy here."

Emma left, throwing a glowing smile over her shoulder at Vivian as she left. Did she have to be so attractive and nice? She evoked feelings in Vivian that she hadn't had to battle with for quite some time.

She had long ago decided that sex wasn't worth the drama. Even one-night stands were not entirely free of complications. As much as Vivian had enjoyed the sex she'd had, she had learned to live without it, along with the lack of human companionship.

Emma Williams was awakening something within her that threatened to break that boundary. Just thinking of her made Vivian wonder if her breasts were as big and round as they looked under that button-up blouse she'd been wearing. Vivian wished that Emma could have left just a few more buttons undone, given her a little bit of a better look...

Of course, that was an entirely inappropriate thought to have about her newest employee. If Vivian did decide to change her mind on the sex things, she certainly couldn't do it with Emma, not when Emma may feel compelled to say yes for the sake of her job.

She couldn't help imagining it, though.

No. Nope, she was not going down that road. Emma was off limits. She would simply have to deal with that.

Perhaps even worse than her blatant sexiness, Emma seemed like a truly wonderful person. Vivian was sorely tempted to get to know her better outside of a work setting, something she hadn't felt the stirrings of with anyone in many years now.

That was what was truly dangerous. She could resist the workplace sex—Vivian was no predator—but the longing for simple friendship? That was harder to ignore. She reminded herself sternly of all the reasons she did this. She didn't know why Emma threatened her walls in this way, but she would simply have to harden herself against Emma's bright presence.

It wasn't like she could avoid her—they would be working closely from now on. Vivian would simply have to learn to become immune. It was a skill she had perfected with most people. She just had to do the same thing with Emma.

Really, how hard could it be?

"Come in," Vivian called to a knock on her door. As she suspected, it was Emma. This was Emma's first day on her own, Jane having left for Spain the previous evening, after a spectacular farewell party at work. Emma had understandably had a lot of questions. It sometimes took a little longer to explain things to her, but once she understood something, Emma didn't forget it.

She may call herself a slow learner, probably because of the extra explaining she required, but the fact that she retained what she had learned, therefore not necessitating that it be explained again, more than made up for it. She was actually one of the quicker learners Vivian had taught, all things considered, and Vivian told her that.

She was surprised to see Emma carrying a tray loaded with food. "Did you lose your way to the cafeteria?"

Vivian was already pulling out a spare copy of the map Jane had given Emma, but Emma shook her head.

“No, I just came from there. I just thought I’d bring us lunch.”

Vivian gaped stupidly at her. “What?”

“Lunch. You know. Food. To eat.”

Vivian was still staring. Why would Emma bring her food when she could be hanging out with any number of friendly and welcoming colleagues in the cafeteria?

“Um. Thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

“Come on, Vivian, you do want to disprove the rumor that you’re actually a vampire, don’t you?”

“There is no such rumor!” Vivian spluttered indignantly.

Emma laughed. “No, there’s not, but now you have me wondering. I think you’d better get eating and prove my worst fears false.”

It was difficult not to go along with her. She was just so bubbly and nice, trying to make her cold, indifferent boss laugh for who knew what reason.

“Thank you for the food. You can just leave it here.”

“Yeah, right. I made the effort to bring it here, the least you can do is share it with me.”

Vivian stared in amazement as Emma bounced over and sat down opposite her,

putting the plate of food between them and popping a grape into her mouth.

Vivian was so stunned that she couldn't even summon the presence of mind to tell Emma to get out of her office. She had never encountered anyone who simply refused to accept her cold attitude and refusal to participate in social activities.

“Are you sure you're not a vampire?” Emma teased.

“Vampire this,” Vivian muttered, grabbing a chocolate chip muffin and taking a huge bite out of it. Now that she'd started, it seemed silly to send Emma away. She was hungry, and Emma had brought a wide selection of food.

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“Are you getting along okay with everyone in the office? You’re not here hiding from anyone, are you?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Stop worrying, Vivian. Everyone is great. I’ve been getting along really well with everyone here—except you. We’ve been working together for two weeks now, and I feel like I barely know you. Tell me something about yourself.”

Vivian desperately tried to fortify her crumbling internal defenses. “We shouldn’t talk about personal matters during work time.”

“So come out with me,” Emma said at once. “Let me take you to dinner. We can talk all we want then.”

Was Emma asking her out on a date? It certainly seemed like it. The thought sent a warm shiver through Vivian’s spine. No one had ever asked her on a date before—she wasn’t exactly what you’d call approachable.

“I think that’s a bad idea. I’m your boss.”

“Oh yes, I forgot about the no dating rule. I’m not looking to date. Come out with me as friends?”

She was relentless, wasn’t she? Vivian might be annoyed if she didn’t find it so attractive. “I don’t form personal relationships at work.”

“Why not?”

No one had ever bothered to ask her that before. Vivian knew that she should be kicking Emma out of her office along with her tray of food, but she somehow found herself answering instead.

“It’s too messy. I’m not doing that to my business, or my employees. As CEO, I need to keep a clear head and not get involved in any interpersonal drama.”

“That’s a load of crap.”

Vivian blinked at Emma. “Excuse me?”

“So you’re scared of intimacy—I get it. You don’t want to get hurt. I disagree with the decision, but it’s your decision. Don’t try to pretend it’s a business decision, though. Plenty of CEOs have friends and do just fine.”

Vivian wanted to be angry with Emma for speaking to her like that, but she was too curious to be angry right now. Was Emma right? Was this more about Vivian’s personal fear of getting hurt than the business? If she was just using her business as an excuse to avoid making herself vulnerable, that would shatter Vivian’s entire worldview.

She repeated her own internal argument to Emma. “I’ve seen good businesses go down because their CEOs allowed their emotions to get in the way of running a business.”

Emma shrugged, unimpressed. “So don’t allow your emotions to get in the way, then. That doesn’t mean not having emotions. You’re a person, not a business robot, Vivian.”

Vivian couldn’t help but chuckle at the image. Business robot. Yeah, that’s kind of what she was.

“You know, you could get in huge trouble talking to your boss like this.”

“Not when she knows I’m right.”

“I do not!”

“Then why haven’t you kicked me out of your office yet?”

Vivian wished she knew the answer to that question. “I’m hungry, and you have food,” she defended, taking another bite of the muffin for emphasis.

“Well, at least we can put those vampire rumors to rest.”

“Emma! You said there were no rumors!”

Emma laughed. “Don’t worry, you’re okay there. But there are rumors about you—about your romantic past.”

“Don’t I know it,” Vivian muttered, ignoring Emma’s bright-eyed look of curiosity.

She should keep quiet. She shouldn’t give in to her desire to know more about Emma, but Emma was right there, so open and friendly, filling a void inside Vivian that she hadn’t even realized was there.

“How is Lily doing? Is she adjusting well?”

Emma’s face fell a little. “She’s struggling. It’s hard to make new friends when you’re the new kid and everyone else already knows each other. She’ll figure it out, though. We both will.”

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Vivian hated that she'd marred Emma's sunny expression and sought to rectify the situation. "What about you? What do you do when you're not working?"

"Mostly parenting stuff. I don't have time for a lot else. Lily and I are both kind of holding onto each other. It's a big change for both of us. Though I really need to cut back on the ice cream runs—for both our sakes."

Vivian laughed. "Yeah, you wouldn't want her bouncing off the walls too often from sugar highs."

"Exactly. It's all fine and good when I'm on a sugar high too, but I crash faster than she does, and then I struggle. She's like a high spider monkey."

Vivian snorted at the image. "Now that's something I'd like to see."

"So come out for ice cream with us. You know all the secret gems in the city, I'd bet."

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope." Emma grinned at her. "You're not as indifferent as you outwardly appear, I'd bet my job on it."

She was betting her job on it. Emma didn't know Vivian well enough yet to realize that Vivian wouldn't fire her simply because she was personally annoyed with her. Emma was risking a lot, just to try to be social with her withdrawn boss.

“I am not coming out for ice cream with you. I’m your boss. This is a professional relationship.”

Emma shrugged, seemingly undeterred. “Suit yourself. Did you know that Nathan and Lindsey are getting pretty serious?”

“Oh, I didn’t know he was dating.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Well, that figures. If you don’t spend time with anyone, how will you learn all the juiciest gossip?”

“I have no interest in juicy gossip. If Nathan has a problem, he will come to me.”

“If it’s a problem you can help him solve, sure, but if he just needs to vent to someone, he’s going to be doing that with his colleagues. You never find out anything if everyone only thinks of you as an emergency option.”

“I am only an emergency option. I’m not... I’m not good at people stuff,” Vivian admitted.

“Bullshit. You don’t get to be a CEO responsible for so many happy employees without being good at people stuff.”

“I’m good at business-related people stuff. But personal stuff? No thanks. Save it for someone more qualified.”

“You don’t need qualifications to be human.”

“Being human is hardly all that’s required to interact socially in a competent manner.”

“Well, no wonder you’re no good at it if that’s how you think about it. It’s not about being competent, it’s about being yourself.”

“I am myself. This, what you see, is who I am.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Emma mused pensively. “I think there’s more to you... and I’m going to unravel it.” She glanced at her watch. “Anyway, lunch is over. See you, Vivian.”

“See you.” Vivian stared after Emma as she left.

What the hell was that?

Emma had been... nice. Nicer than Vivian deserved. Her head spun with the various things Emma had said. No one had ever been so unabashedly straight with her, not letting her position of power hold them back. She wondered if Emma might have a point about—

No. Vivian was not going to go down that very dangerous road. Her life worked fine, and she was perfectly happy with it. Nothing was going to change, no matter what crazy ideas Emma got into her head.

One little ice cream trip with Emma and Lily probably wouldn’t hurt...

Vivian slammed the door shut on that thought right away, wondering whether hiring Emma had been a good idea after all. This was more complicated than she’d thought it would be.

Vivian didn’t get much work done for the rest of the day. She was too distracted, going over her conversation with Emma in her head. It had been years since she’d had so much social interaction. As infuriating as parts of it had been, she had liked

the whole thing a lot more than she should have.

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Vivian stayed late to try to make up for the tasks she failed to complete during the day. Her stomach started growling, but she ignored it. She would eat soon enough. She just wanted to finish this report for a group of their investors.

“Knock, knock.” She looked up to see Emma holding a brown paper bag.

“Hi, Emma. What do you need?”

“Probably the same thing as you do—food.”

Vivian glanced at the clock to see that it was already seven. “What are you still doing here? I told you, you don’t need to work late just because I do. I always work late, and I don’t want to keep you away from Lily.”

“Actually, she went home with Nathan and Miriam. They’re doing a sleepover.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good, then.”

“Anyway, you should eat. You look starving.”

“It can wait,” Vivian murmured.

“Yeah, but I have food right here. May as well eat it when it’s hot.”

Once again, Emma took a seat uninvited across from Vivian. She opened the bag to reveal burgers and fries. They smelled delicious and Vivian was hungry. She reluctantly took a burger and bit into it.

“What’s the catch to all this? You know that if you need something, you can just ask.”

“I just want to get to know you better, Vivian. I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

Perhaps she was foolish to believe her, but Vivian found that she did. “Why me? There are plenty of other people here—ones much friendlier and more approachable than I am, I might add. Why not make friends with them.”

“Oh, I am. I just want to be friends with you too.”

Vivian sighed. “We’ve been through this, Emma. I don’t do friends.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just eat your fries and tell me about your favorite movies.”

Vivian mentally examined the question as she ate a few fries. Surely, it couldn’t hurt to tell Emma that. It was an innocent enough question. It wasn’t going to lead anywhere Vivian didn’t want it to. She just needed to keep this situation under control. She could do that. Right?

Vivian could not, in fact, keep the situation under control. Lunches with Emma quickly became a routine. Dinners less so, because Emma had to get home to Lily, but on the occasions when they both happened to be working late, Emma brought Vivian supper too.

Vivian had long ago stopped trying to protest these visits. She looked forward to them more than anything else in her day.

“So, how is Lily doing?”

Emma grimaced. “She was crying again today. I’m considering moving her over to

Miriam's school, just so that they can be together. She hasn't really made any other friends."

"Traffic is a problem, though, right?"

"Yeah, it would mean half an hour of traffic to get her to school and another half hour to get back here. I'm not sure if I can make that work."

"If you need to come in later, we could arrange that."

Emma looked up at her from over her chicken noodles. "But everyone works the same hours. Surely, it wouldn't work to have me an hour later than the rest of the office."

"I've been thinking about it ever since you mentioned the travel issues, and I believe we could make it work. I usually stay late anyway, so there wouldn't be a problem with our hours not intersecting there. As for the mornings, I reckon I can survive an hour without you. Why don't we try the modified hours for a few weeks, and if it works, you can go ahead and move Lily."

"Seriously? That would be amazing! I can't believe you're even considering it."

"Something you should know about me—if you have a problem and it's within my power to solve, you'd be best off bringing it to me. I can't promise to solve it every time, but I can certainly try."

"Nathan said something to that effect, but I didn't realize quite how accommodating you'd be."

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Vivian shrugged. "Happy employees make for a well-run business."

"I think it's more than that. I think you actually care."

This wasn't a line of conversation Vivian was comfortable with, so she decided to change the subject. "Do you think Lily will have a better time adjusting at a different school?"

"I think she will. This one just doesn't seem to be a good fit for her. I hate seeing her unhappy."

"You're a good mother, Emma."

Emma blushed. "Thanks. I just wish Alison was still here to share all this parenting with me. It is tough, on my own."

"You still love her." That much was evident in the way Emma said her name.

"I do. Absolutely. I think I will always love her and miss her desperately, but at the same time, I have to be open to a different future than we imagined. She'd want me to be happy, I know that. I haven't dated- I still am so lost in grief sometimes, but before she went, she made me promise that I wouldn't give up on love."

Vivian wished she had Emma's strength. She couldn't even imagine loving someone, only to have them die, and still be willing to try again.

Emma's eyes were thoughtful as she looked at Vivian from over her noodles.

Vivian tried to lighten the atmosphere. “So, have you found anyone your interested in yet? Some beautiful woman to come home to after a long day at work?” She couldn’t help her curiosity into Emma’s personal life. Some of Emma’s curls were escaping from her bun and they looked so beautiful framing her lovely face that Vivian’s heart ached.

“Yes, I’ve found someone. I don’t think she’s interested in me, though.”

Emma glanced up at Vivian from under her thick black eyelashes. The look was intensely loaded and she was suddenly shy and Vivian knew suddenly who she was talking about.

Vivian knew that she should change the subject again. It was the safest path by far. But she found that she couldn’t let Emma keep believing that her interest wasn’t returned, not when it was so untrue.

“I think you’d be surprised.” Her voice came out as little more than a whisper, but she was sure that Emma heard it.

What on earth am I doing?

Emma looked up at her, and her beauty had Vivian’s breath catching in her throat. She moved as though in a daze, coming around the desk. A voice in the back of her head was screaming at her to stop this madness, but it was becoming softer and easier to ignore by the moment.

Emma’s lips were slightly parted as she looked up at Vivian. Vivian took Emma’s soft hands and pulled her to her feet. Emma came willingly, stepping close to Vivian, so that her soft warm breasts pressed almost against Vivian’s body.

“Don’t ever think that the interest is unreturned,” Vivian said softly. “I just... I can’t,

Emma. I'm your boss. It's too messy. I can't risk my business like that."

"I think you can," Emma breathed. She put a hand on Vivian's cheek and it felt electrifying. "Tell me if you want me to stop," she whispered.

She started leaning in. Vivian knew that she could end this at any moment. All she needed to say was one little word, and Emma would retreat—hurt, perhaps, but it would be better, for both of them.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

She didn't want to stop, though. Vivian's eyes were drawn to Emma's full lips. As she felt Emma's breath ghost across her cheek, Vivian's mind disconnected from her body and her eyes slipped shut.

Emma's lips pressed against hers, firm and soft at the same time. Vivian's body reacted without her brain's permission. Her lips started kissing Emma back, sweet and hot and everything she'd ever wanted.

This was not a good idea... and she didn't care.

4

Emma

Emma had experienced plenty of kisses before, but nothing like this. Vivian's kiss was tentative at first but became surer by the moment. Emma moaned softly and linked her hands behind Vivian's neck, drawing her closer.

She slipped her tongue into Vivian's mouth. Vivian easily accepted her, exploring with her own tongue in return. She tasted delicious, like coffee and something

uniquely Vivian. Vivian entwined herself closely with Emma until Emma was unsure whose arms and whose breath was whose.

Emma pushed Vivian back until she bumped up against the desk.

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At Emma's wordless urging, Vivian sat on the edge of the desk as they kissed passionately. All thoughts were driven from Emma's mind—all thoughts except those revolving around how good Vivian's tongue and hands felt.

Emma wanted more of Vivian. She wanted to taste her. She broke away from the kiss for a moment to push Vivian's skirt up around her waist. Her panties were an unwanted barrier between Emma and what she truly wanted.

"Emma... fuck..." Vivian was seriously flustered, but Emma knew she wanted her. She needed this. She needed to loosen up.

"Lift your ass, please," Emma knelt and looked up at her with her most seductive gaze. "I want to please you, more than anything."

Vivian looked in two minds for just a second before she used her arms to push herself up just enough for Emma to pull her panties down. She got them off and tossed them to the side before using her hands to urge Vivian's knees wider open.

Vivian was breathing quickly as she braced herself with her hands behind her on the desk. Emma ran a hand through Vivian's wet folds, from her entrance up to her clitoris. Vivian cried out at the contact, her hips jerking forward into Emma's touch.

Vivian was so wet and so wanting. Emma knew she was going to enjoy this.

Emma smiled in anticipation, dropping down so that her mouth was level with Vivian's pussy. She ran her tongue slowly over Vivian's clit, adding just a little bit of pressure with the tip at the end. The effect was exactly what she had hoped. Vivian

used one hand to grab the back of Emma's head and push her closer, mashing Emma's face into her clit.

It was exactly where Emma wanted to be. She licked slowly at first, but Vivian's desperate little whimpers enflamed her, urging her faster.

Vivian braced her feet on the desk, spreading her legs as wide as they would go, leaning back on the one hand still behind her. It couldn't be a comfortable position, but Vivian didn't seem to care.

"Oh fuck. Emma, your tongue... I'm gonna come... Oh! Yes, Emma, YES!"

Vivian's thighs clenched tightly and her pussy gushed as she came hard on Emma's tongue. It was sweet bliss, exactly what Emma wanted. She kept licking as Vivian shivered her way through her orgasm, finally falling back on the desk, gasping for breath.

Emma stood up, feeling extremely pleased with herself.

"Oh no you don't. You get yourself over this desk."

Vivian's sudden tone of stern command went straight to Emma's clit. She let Vivian maneuver her so that she was bent forward over the desk, her ass to Vivian.

Vivian wasted no time in pulling Emma's pants and panties down around her ankles.

She used two fingers to tease around Emma's entrance before hesitating. "Do you want this, Emma?"

What the fuck kind of question was that? Of course she wanted this. Emma thought

she had been exceedingly clear on that.

“I want you, Vivian. Need you, now. Please, give me your fingers.”

Vivian didn't hesitate again. She slid two fingers slowly into Emma's waiting pussy. Emma groaned and thrust back against her. Vivian began pushing her fingers slowly in and out and she rocked back and forth with increasing urgency.

“Faster,” Emma begged. “Please, Vivian.”

Fuck, this feels so good.

Her clit was pressed against the edge of the desk and combined with the motions of Vivian's fingers inside her, Emma knew it wouldn't be long before she found her release.

She lost herself in the slick sound of Vivian's fingers moving in and out of her.

Then Vivian twisted her fingers inward, finding Emma's G-spot in a single unerring movement.

Emma clapped a hand over her own mouth to muffle her scream as she came.

The shocks of pleasure emanating from her pussy radiated through her whole body, leaving her limp in their wake.

She must have zoned out for a moment, because the next thing she knew, she was draped loosely over the desk and Vivian was pulling her fingers out. Emma managed to gather her limbs underneath herself and turned to Vivian. She pulled her in for one last kiss, but Vivian took a step back before their lips could meet and Emma felt the distance between them suddenly growing again.

“Emma... we shouldn’t...”

“You’re right,” Emma sighed. “We both need to get back to work. That was fantastic, Vivian.” Fantastic didn’t even begin to cover it. The way that Vivian made her feel was crazy. The way that Vivian made Emma so desperate to please was like nothing she had felt before. She felt guilty for thinking it- as though she had betrayed Alison- but it was the best sex she’d ever had, and Emma was eager for more. However, they were at work. They should at least try to act like professionals. There would be plenty of time later...

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She got dressed and winked at Vivian, who was still standing in the center of the room with her arms at her sides. She looked shellshocked.

Uncertainty crept into Emma's mind. It had been good for her. She had thought Vivian was enjoying herself, but what if she hadn't been?

"Vivian? Did you... Was that good?"

Vivian's eyes focused on her. "It was... well, it was fucking life-changing, Emma. The things you can do with your tongue..."

Emma grinned. That was exactly what she needed to hear. "Me too. Anyway, I'd best get back to work. See you later."

She left, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she went to her desk.

This was more than she had hoped for at this stage, even in her most optimistic fantasies. She had hoped that Vivian would start to warm toward her. Emma hadn't imagined that she would thaw to this extent so quickly, but she was more than pleased about it. She was absolutely delighted.

Her mind was already racing ahead, wondering if Vivian would come on a date with her. Was it too soon to ask? Maybe Vivian needed some time to process the sex first. They could talk more tonight. Lily had picked the perfect night to ask for a sleepover with Miriam. Emma and Vivian could talk after work and figure things out.

Emma didn't see Vivian for the rest of the day, which was odd. They usually worked

closely together, but whenever Emma went to Vivian's office to check something or the other, Vivian either wasn't there, or had the door closed, which she did only when she was busy and couldn't be disturbed.

She responded readily enough to Emma's emails, though, so Emma was able to get through her work well enough.

At five o'clock, Emma hurried down the street to Vivian's favorite takeout place and ordered her and Vivian's usuals. She went back to Vivian's office door and knocked.

There was no answer.

"Vivian?"

No reply.

Emma hesitantly opened the door. The office was empty, the desk in perfect order. No one was here.

Emma frowned. Since when had Vivian ever not worked late?

She dialed Vivian's number and waited as it rang. Just when Emma had started to think that Vivian wasn't going to pick up, she finally did.

"Hello, Emma."

Emma was taken aback by her voice. It was cool and remote, even more so than it had been on her first day here.

"Hi, Vivian. Where are you? I brought us dinner."

“I’m so sorry, Emma. I should have told you. I left work early. I’m at home now.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I could bring the food to you. What’s your address?”

“I’m afraid I’ve already eaten. I’m tired and I think I’m going to get an early night. I’m sorry for the inconvenience. I’ll see you tomorrow, Emma.”

With that, Vivian hung up.

Emma stared at her phone screen.

What was going on? Did Vivian regret what they had done? She had certainly seemed to enjoy it at the time. Perhaps she’d changed her mind.

Emma needed to talk to her. She was sure they could work this out. This thing between them was new and fragile, but Emma felt sure that given time and care, it could grow into something truly beautiful.

So, the next day, she got in early and waited outside Vivian’s office. Vivian had to come in here eventually. Emma was her assistant, and Vivian couldn’t avoid her forever.

Sure enough, Vivian arrived at her office twenty minutes later. Her face became guarded the moment she saw Emma.

“Emma, did you need something?”

“Yes, actually. I want to talk to you.”

Something akin to fear flashed across Vivian’s face, but she quickly composed herself and nodded. “Come in.”

Emma sat down opposite Vivian, who took a few sheets of paper out of a drawer and handed them to her. “I have the forms for you to lay a complaint with HR here. If you should decide on legal action, I will, of course, settle with you for any amount you want. Rest assured that your job here is safe no matter which course of action you decide on. If you do decide to stay, know that I will never abuse my power like that again. I feel utterly sick with myself. I am the worst—”

“Vivian, stop!” Emma’s mind was reeling, trying to wrap her head around what Vivian was saying. The words were all in English, but they made no sense. “What are you talking about?”

Vivian frowned at her. “I’m talking about what happened yesterday.”

Emma frantically went over the encounter in her mind, trying to pinpoint where Vivian had abused her power. She was coming up blank.

“Vivian, what exactly do you think happened yesterday?”

Vivian closed her eyes. She looked like she might throw up. “I did what I swore to myself I’d never do,” she said in a low voice. “I used my position of power over one of my employees to exploit and abuse them. I have no excuse. I will entirely support whatever course of action you choose to take.”

“What are you talking about? When did you ever abuse your power? You never threatened my job, or even hinted at it. At no point did I feel like I had to have sex with you because you’re my boss. I wanted it, Vivian. I wanted you. I still do. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Vivian was gaping at her as though Emma had just grown another head. “B-but I’m your boss! It’s wrong!”

“It’s only wrong if I didn’t really want you, which isn’t the case, you ninny. Not stop being silly and kiss me.”

Vivian backed away from Emma as though Emma was advancing on her with a knife. “No!”

Emma stared at her. “What’s the problem now? I’ve told you; you’re not coercing me in any way. So unless you didn’t actually enjoy it as much as you thought you did at the time...”

“That’s not it,” Vivian said quickly. “That was... It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life, Emma. But it was still a mistake. It can’t happen again.”

“May I ask why not?”

“No,” Vivian said flatly. “Now, unless you have changed your mind about filing that case, I think we both have work to do.”

Emma did her best not to glare at Vivian. She knew that no one owed her an explanation about why they didn’t want to have sex with her, but it still hurt to be dismissed so sharply.

She took a deep breath through her nose, trying to compose herself. “Alright. I have

those reports for you on my desk. Let me just get them.”

Emma used the short walk to her desk and back to Vivian’s office to wrench her head back into a working place. She could deal with all the personal drama later. Right now, she needed to get to work.

She was able to lose herself in work for the rest of the day. Things were always busy in the office, which was a nice distraction.

Emma walked past Vivian’s office after the day was over, hopeful to be able to talk to her again. Maybe after working hours, Vivian would be more amiable to having a personal conversation.

No such luck. Vivian was gone, as were a number of her papers. She must be continuing with work at home. Emma felt horrible about chasing Vivian out of her own office, as she was sure that she was the reason Vivian had chosen to go home rather than stay here.

Emma went home dejected. She had thought that Vivian was warming toward her, but it looked like all the progress she had made had merely been a prelude to an even icier relationship. She understood why everyone called Vivian the Ice Queen. Emma thought that she’d been melting Vivian’s walls, but now she’d gotten too close and burned herself on the cold, hard surface.

Well, she could be professional about this. She still loved her job, and Vivian had made it clear that this didn’t affect their working relationship in any way.

There were plenty of other women out there. Emma would simply have to move on.

She had a feeling, though, that this time, moving on would be harder than she hoped.

Vivian

“Good morning, Vivian!” Emma bounced into the room, her usual sunny self. “I brought you some coffee.”

“I told you, Emma, you don’t have to keep bringing me coffee. It’s not your job.”

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“I saw that you rushed right past the coffee stand today for that early phone conference. Admit it, I’m a lifesaver.”

Why is she so good to me?

“You’re a lifesaver,” Vivian admitted reluctantly, smiling despite herself. She would kill for a cup of coffee right now. Fortunately for her, Emma handed the cup over quickly, smirking as Vivian gulped down a few sips, sighing in bliss. How Emma had figured out her favorite order was beyond her, but she was grateful for it.

“Here is the analysis you requested. Did you want to give me the meeting notes to annotate?”

“Please.” The meeting had been long and boring, and Vivian wasn’t interested in dwelling on its notes any longer than she had to. “Thanks, Emma.”

“Sure thing!” Emma said brightly. She left, throwing a smile over her shoulder.

Why did she have to be so irresistible? It wasn’t fair. Vivian hated that she’d hurt Emma. She sometimes saw a shadow of pain surface amidst Emma’s usual cheerfulness, a shadow that hadn’t been there before Vivian had fucked everything up—literally.

However, it was best this way. She knew that she had nothing to give to someone like Emma. She wasn’t fit for a relationship at all. She couldn’t commit to giving her all into a relationship, and Emma deserved someone who could love her wholeheartedly, more than their business and career.

Vivian had good reasons to stay away from others emotionally; reasons she was having to remind herself of more and more often lately.

It was better this way. She and Emma would get over this brief infatuation. It wasn't like she'd have to give up Emma entirely—Emma was her assistant, after all, and they would still see each other plenty.

A few minutes later, Emma knocked again, appearing troubled. "Vivian?"

"Yes, Emma?"

"I just got a call from Lily's school. She's got a temperature and they want to send her home. I've already made some calls, but no one seems to be available to babysit for the day."

Vivian would have loved to offer Lily a place at the company daycare, but like Lily's school, they had a strict no-sick-kids policy. It was for everyone's protection. She really needed Emma's help today, what with gearing up for a new big business deal, but of course, Emma's family was more important.

"You're welcome to take the day off, Emma."

"But I can't leave you today! You need me."

Vivian couldn't argue with that. An idea occurred to her, something she wouldn't offer any other employee, but this was Emma.

"Bring her here, then. We'll put her in one of the unused conference rooms so that she doesn't spread whatever she has around the office, and you can check on her throughout the day. We could use the one with the TV in it so that she has something to watch."

“Really? That would be amazing! Are you sure, though?”

“Of course I am. Go get her—I’d love to meet her.”

Emma gave Vivian a brilliant smile, the kind of smile that lit up the room around her. “Thanks, Vivian! I’ll see you soon.”

Vivian’s work meant that she lost track of time easily, so it seemed like mere minutes later when Emma was knocking on the door again, followed by a child who looked like her in miniature.

“Lily, say hello to Vivian, my boss.”

“Hello,” Lily said brightly. She turned to Emma. “You’re right, Mom, she is pretty.”

Poor Emma went bright red and started stammering apologies, but Vivian just laughed. “Thanks for the compliment—from both of you. It’s very nice to meet you, Lily. I’ve got a room with a TV - we have set up a sofa for you. Do you require anything else.”

“Ice cream?” Lily asked hopefully.

“Nice try, girl.” Emma patted her on the shoulder. “You get ice cream on the weekend, like usual.”

“But I’m sick!” Lily pouted.

“All the more reason to boost your immune system with some nice healthy fruits and vegetables. You get to spend the entire day watching TV; that’s your sympathy treat for being sick—no screen time limit.”

Lily looked slightly mollified by this and allowed Emma to lead her away.

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Vivian kept an eye on Lily as the day went on, passing by the glass walls of the conference room more than strictly necessary. The poor girl looked miserable, even wrapped in a blanket in front of the TV. Vivian didn't have much experience with children, but she wanted to cheer Lily up. Emma came to check in on Lily several times, but she was really busy with work and didn't have much time to spare.

Vivian didn't have much time to spare, either, but she managed to postpone a few tasks for the next day. She knocked on the door and entered.

"Lily, how are you doing?"

"I don't feel good," Lily mumbled.

"I know." Vivian sat down on the couch next to her. "Being sick is really tough. It messes with your brain as well as your body."

Lily nodded, frowning.

Vivian tried to take her mind off how awful she felt. "Do you enjoy school?"

That got a spark of enthusiasm from her. "Yes! I get to be in a class with Miriam and her friends. They're all really nice."

"That's great." Every accommodation Vivian had had to make for Emma to come to work later was worth it, seeing Lily's smile, a perfect image of her mother's. "What about the work? What's your favorite subject?"

“I like math. But not the weird math. Math that makes sense.”

Vivian had to laugh at that. “Which parts make sense?”

“The financial math section. Why would you even do any of all the other stuff?”

That also had Vivian chuckling. “So, you’d like to go into that field when you’re older?”

Lily nodded. “I’m going to be an accountant!”

“That’s a great field to be in. Would you like me to show you some of what our accountants do?”

“Yes, please!”

Vivian didn’t know all the intricacies of accounting, but she knew enough to show Lily some of the basics that a child would be able to grasp. Lily seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Would you like to help out in our accounting department? I’m sure James could use the help.”

Lily’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Absolutely. I would pay you, of course.”

Her eyes went even wider. “Yes, please!”

Vivian stopped by Emma’s desk to check this course of action with her before going down to accounting and bringing James up to meet Lily.

Lily jabbered questions at him while James set her up with a large pile of transactions that needed to be stacked in order of price. Lily took to it with a vengeance, her little brow furrowed in concentration as she worked.

Vivian realized that the day was slipping away from her and forced herself to get back to work, but she kept checking in on Lily every now and then. Lily seemed to have forgotten all about feeling unwell as she worked.

When the day ended, Emma stopped by Vivian's office. "Thanks again for letting Lily stay here for the day. I hope she wasn't too much trouble—I saw she had you and James running back and forth for nearly an hour."

"She wasn't any trouble at all. I'm sure James appreciates not having to sort all those statements by hand."

"She definitely appreciated the distraction. I certainly didn't expect to see her so happy by the end of the day."

"You're welcome to bring her back at any time."

"Thanks so much, Vivian. I'd better get her home—I want her to have an early night. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Emma."

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Vivian stared absently at the closed door long after Emma left. Meeting Lily had been such a treat. She'd never interacted much with children, but she found that she'd loved spending time with Lily.

It made Vivian wonder how different things might have been for her if she'd decided to have children. Of course, that path was off the table for her. If personal relationships would mess with her career, that was nothing compared to the chaos a child would cause.

Emma seemed to manage it really well, but Vivian couldn't take the risk that everyone in her business would suffer if she made such a life-changing choice.

As glad as she was to have met Lily, the encounter made her heart ache even more than it had been before. Vivian caught a brief glimpse of a future that she knew she could never have; her and Emma taking Lily out for ice cream before coming home and putting her to bed, then making love together in their room.

Vivian forcibly shoved the enticing image out of her mind.

That was not the life she had chosen. It simply wasn't to be.

6

Emma

“And she let me see the company accounts! They have so much money, Mom! Vivian said that it's usual for a good business to run in those numbers. Is that true?”

“It is for some, but Vivian is being modest. Her business is so much more successful than most.”

“She’s so nice,” Lily gushed. “And her cat is so cute! Please can I go meet him, please, Mom?”

Emma stared at Lily in bemusement. For the last three days, she hadn’t been able to talk about anything except Vivian. Vivian had clearly made quite an impression—and from the sounds of it, she had been a lot warmer with Lily than she had been with any of the adults in the office, even Emma.

It gave Emma hope to know that there was a small chink in Vivian’s armor. Perhaps there would still be a way to get through to her. Emma wondered if Vivian would like to take Lily out for ice cream together. Lily had asked for that at least six times now.

“We’ll see. Not everyone is comfortable with people they don’t know that well in their homes.”

“So maybe we can get to know her better... with an ice cream trip?” Lily asked hopefully.

Emma laughed. “You’re too smart for me, and you don’t give up, do you?”

“Never give up. It’s what you taught me.”

“I’m beginning to regret it,” Emma muttered, but she couldn’t help grinning. “Now come on, you’ve got homework to do.”

To her great surprise, Lily squealed in excitement—a first when it came to homework. “Mom, I’ve got a project! We have to do a business report, and my teacher said we could shadow someone if we liked. Can I shadow Vivian, please,

Mom? Please?”

It took all of Emma’s restraint not to roll her eyes. How did the subject keep coming back to Vivian?

“I don’t know if she’d want that,” Emma hedged. She hated to disappoint Lily, but she also didn’t want Vivian to have to spend an entire day with her daughter when she was supposed to be working.

“But you can ask, right?”

She really didn’t give up. Emma supposed there was no harm in asking. Vivian was assertive enough to say no if it wasn’t something she wanted. “I’ll ask. When is the project due?”

“Not until next quarter.”

That at least left Emma some time to find the right moment to ask Vivian. “I’ve got that business trip I told you about coming up this weekend—when you’ll be staying over at Miriam’s place. I’ll see if I can ask Vivian when we’re back from that.”

“But why can’t you ask her now?”

“Because she’s busy and stressed right now. If you really want something, sometimes you have to wait for the right moment to ask for it, the moment when people are more likely to say yes.”

Lily nodded seriously, and Emma had a feeling she was going to regret teaching this to her. Sometimes, Lily was too smart for her own good.

“What?”

“I’m so sorry, ma’am. I see now looking at your email that you reserved two rooms. I think it must have gotten lost in translation somewhere. I’m afraid the room you booked is the only one we have available. This is our busy season.”

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“That’s entirely unacceptable! I know that this is your busy season, which is why I booked three months in advance. We’re not going to be able to find rooms anywhere else!”

Vivian looked ready to bite the unfortunate receptionist’s head off. Emma knew that in a few minutes, Vivian would calm down and act more rationally, but her anger was understandable. Emma was pissed too, but she had an easier time containing it. Raising a child taught you tolerance or killed you.

“Vivian, it’s fine,” Emma murmured, seeking to hasten the calming down process. “I don’t mind sharing.”

Vivian closed her eyes for a moment before nodding. “Alright. And you—I expect a discount.”

“You’ll have it, ma’am.”

Vivian gave the receptionist one last glowering look before grabbing her suitcase from the porter and wheeling it through the sparking lobby, muttering under her breath about incompetence.

When they got to the room, Emma gulped. Of course, the room had only one bed. She’d only ever been in hotel rooms with two beds, but that was because she booked family rooms for herself and Lily. Vivian had no reason to book a room with two beds when she was booking two rooms.

Vivian narrowed her eyes at the bed, as though it had personally offended her. “I’ll

take the floor.”

“That’s not necessary, Vivian. The bed is big enough; I’m sure we can both keep to our sides.”

Vivian flushed. “I’m not sure if that’s the best idea.”

“Do you realize how uncomfortable it is to sleep on the floor?”

“I suppose you have a point. But you don’t need to do this just because I’m your boss. I wouldn’t mind—”

“I know, Vivian. This isn’t to impress you as my boss. This is because I don’t want my friend having to sleep on a hard, wooden floor and then be distracted by a sore neck the whole day tomorrow when she’s meant to be concentrating.”

Vivian stared at her for a few moments, as though lost in thought. “Okay, then. Do you want the shower first?”

It was late and they were both tired from the flight. “That’s okay, you take it. I’ve got some emails to respond to.”

“You work too hard, Emma.”

“Well, that’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Touché.”

Emma tried her best not to look when Vivian came out of the bathroom, wrapped only in a towel. She really did try, but she failed spectacularly. Vivian looked so beautiful, fresh and flushed from her shower. Emma’s gaze ran over her collarbone

and down... She looked so kissable that Emma had to turn her eyes away before she lost control completely and gave in to the urge.

She fled into the bathroom before she could do something she'd regret. Emma got changed into her pajamas in the bathroom before going back to the main room, where Vivian was already in bed. She tried her best to ignore her nerves as she slipped under the covers, lying as close to the edge as possible.

"Goodnight, Vivian."

"Goodnight, Emma."

Vivian turned off the lights and went quiet. It had been a tiring day, and it wasn't long before Emma fell into a deep sleep. Her last reassuring thought was that the bed really was huge. She was sure she and Vivian were able to stick to their sides.

Emma and Vivian could not, in fact, stick to their sides.

Emma woke up warmer and more comfortable than she could remember being in a long time. Her warm pillow gently rose and fell to the pleasant thumping sound from beneath it.

Wait.

Emma's eyes flew open and she stiffened in horror. She was sleeping with her head on Vivian's chest. Not only that, but Vivian's arms were wrapped around her.

Shit.

This was a bad idea. She should have let Vivian sleep on the floor or volunteered to do so herself. This was going to make things awkward as fuck.

Her best shot was to try to extract herself before Vivian woke up. If she could manage that, Vivian would never need to know that this had happened. It would all be fine.

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Emma started trying to wiggle out of the compromising position they were in, but it was difficult given how closely together they were entwined. She realized that their legs were entangled as well and trying to get out was like trying to solve a complicated puzzle where the pieces might wake up and have start having a meltdown at any moment.

She was sure that Vivian would freak out if she woke up in this position. She was so strict about her boundaries...

Vivian's arms tightened in her sleep as Emma tried to ease out of them. Well, that was just great. Couldn't Vivian work with her here, just a little? Clearly, she was much less reserved asleep than she was when awake.

Emma tried to duck under the circle of Vivian's arms, but it was one movement too many.

Vivian yawned and opened her eyes.

She looked straight at Emma for several moments before Emma saw it click in her eyes.

Vivian quickly pulled back, her face going bright red. "I'm so sorry, Emma! I—"

"It's not just on you, Vivian. I also promised to keep to my side of the bed, and I clearly failed at it too. Let's not make a big deal of this?"

"I'll sleep on the floor tonight," Vivian promised.

“We can take turns,” Emma offered. “You do tonight. I’ll do tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Emma was sure that she was quite as red as Vivian as the two of them got dressed, bumping awkwardly against each other in the bathroom as they moved past each other to get to the basin.

Emma got changed in the bathroom while Vivian dressed in the main room. It was easier like that, especially given how they had woken up. No need to make things any weirder than they already were right now.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes as they made their way to the elevator. Vivian eventually brought up their upcoming meeting, and Emma seized on the subject gladly. They were meeting with a big potential investor, who was somewhat reclusive, thus the need to go and meet him in his home.

Vivian didn’t generally do house calls, but if she could get Dr. Bradson as a client, it would be worth all the hassle.

The subject of work carried them all throughout the taxi ride to Dr. Bradson’s house, and Emma could almost forget the awkwardness from earlier.

Dr. Bradson’s butler welcomed them into his mansion, escorting them to an elaborate lounge decorated with orange and purple satin drapes that clashed spectacularly.

“Ah, welcome.” Dr. Bradson bowed to them but didn’t shake either of their hands. “I have some tea for you—my own blend. You will like it, I think.”

“Thank you, Doctor Bradson.”

“Please, call me Elijah. Now, sit, sit!”

Vivian and Emma sat down and took their tea. Vivian took a sip, and it was only the self-control learned in meetings such as this that prevented her from spitting it right back out. Vivian could see Emma struggling not to gag out of the corner of her eye. Vivian cast an eye down at the tea. It looked inoffensive—slightly brownish water, steaming a little. It tasted like a mixture between sour milk and rotten eggs.

“Delicious, hm? My own blend. It’ll take the toxins right out of your body.”

“Delicious,” Vivian agreed weakly.

Emma set her tea down, looking like she was about to throw up. “I’m actually not a tea person, but I was grateful to be able to try your own recipe.”

“Aha, aha, your wife is smarter than you, I think.

Vivian choked on her sip of tea, but Elijah wasn’t done talking.

“You think I don’t see you don’t like my tea? Smart woman. Honest. I like that.”

“Emma... Emma’s not my wife,” she gasped as soon as she had her breath back.

“Not yet, hm? Do you have a date? I can bring flowers for you—my own breed, from my garden.”

Vivian spluttered incoherent denials, but Emma cut smoothly across her.

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“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. I’m Vivian’s assistant. The two of us aren’t together.”

Elijah surveyed her from under his eyebrows for a few moments. “Oh,” he looked surprised, “Hmmm.”

Vivian didn’t want to offend him, but she did not like the direction this conversation was heading. She’d been prepared to deal with business questions, not assumptions about her personal life. He certainly was eccentric, more so than she had realized.

“Elijah, I’d like to go over some graphs with you, if that’s okay with you, to show you what we could do with your money in a year, five, and even ten years if you choose to invest in us.”

Elijah waved a hand. “No, no, graphs aren’t necessary. I did not ask you here to show me what I can already find online. I know you are good at your job—that much was easy to see from very little research. More important is who I’m investing in. The character and drive of those running the company. So, tell me, Vivian, who are you?”

Vivian was flummoxed. She’d never had an interview like this. What could she really say? That she lived alone and avoided all personal connections? That was hardly going to sway Elijah into investing with them, but she wasn’t going to lie to get his money, either.

There were several moments of silence before Emma’s voice cut in.

“Ever since I have known Vivian, she has been one of the most compassionate

employers I've ever worked for. She goes above and beyond to help the people who work for her grow and develop. Everyone in the office knows that if they have a problem—and not just work-related problems—they can go to Vivian, and she will move heaven and earth to help them.”

“She holds us all to high standards, making sure we work to our fullest potential, but she also knows that no one is capable of giving their full effort one hundred percent of the time. She values honesty, loyalty and hard work, and she leads those values by example. She is calm under pressure and doesn't let emotion get in the way of leading a good company.”

“She could perhaps have furthered her business more by resorting to underhanded tactics, like many in the corporate world do, but Vivian would never do that. She is someone I am proud to work for, and if the time comes when I am looking for somewhere to invest my money, I wouldn't hesitate in choosing Vivian and Sterling Enterprises.”

To her intense mortification, Vivian found herself fighting back tears. To know that Emma thought so highly of her... Well, it meant more to her than she could explain in words.

“Ha! Yes, good, very good! Such a glowing recommendation from an employee! Yes, excellent. And she is truthful, too. I can see it in her eyes. The eyes always give away a lie.”

Vivian held her breath, wondering if Emma's speech could do what the carefully prepared graphs and business plans she'd brought with her couldn't.

“Very well. I will invest with you—the full amount we discussed.”

Vivian felt an incredulous smile unfolding on her face. “You won't regret it, Elijah, I

can promise you that.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Now, I will let Annika finalize the details with you—she takes care of my books. Now shoo, off with you. It’s time for me to check on my mushrooms.”

Vivian and Emma graciously allowed themselves to be shooed off the property.

As soon as they were in the car, Emma started giggling. “That was the strangest meeting I’ve ever been to.”

Vivian couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Me too. That was some speech—you’re certainly getting one hell of a bonus when that money comes through.”

“I meant every word.”

Vivian’s face went pink in the most adorable blush. “Thanks, Emma. You should know that I appreciate you every bit as much as you appreciate me. You’re an incredible assistant. You bring light and joy to the whole office. Everyone is always happier with you around.”

Emma wondered if Vivian was including herself in that assessment but didn’t ask. “We still have three more days at the hotel,” she pointed out. They had both expected the negotiations with Elijah to take longer. “Do you have any other business here, or would you like me to change our flights and send us home early?”

“Well, I was actually thinking that after such a successful deal, we both deserve a bit of a break. What do you think about staying here for those few days, maybe seeing what the city has to offer? Of course, if you’d rather get home to Lily earlier, that’ll be fine, too. It’s up to you.”

Emma thought about this briefly. She missed Lily, of course, but she knew that her daughter would not be happy to be pulled away from her multi-day sleepover with Miriam early. And if she was being honest with herself, she really wanted to spend more time with Vivian.

The thought of getting to know her outside of a work setting was enticing. Emma was surprised Vivian had even offered it—this wasn't her usual style. She was probably riding a high after their meeting, just like Emma was. Once Vivian settled back into her normal mindset, this opportunity would probably never come again.

“Let's stay. It's been ages since I've had a real holiday. The hotel has a hot tub.” She didn't know how well this idea would go down, but to her surprise, Vivian smiled.

“I love hot tubs, though it's been ages since I was in one. Let's check it out when we get back?”

“Perfect.”

They arrived at the hotel shortly and took turns changing into their swimsuits in the bathroom. They both wrapped themselves in fluffy white towels before making their way down to the pool level.

Emma was surprised but pleased to see that the hot tub was empty. She sneaked yet another peek at Vivian's body. Emma pretended to look out of the window at the view for a moment so that Vivian would get in first, giving Emma a perfect look at lean body and surprisingly shapely ass. Vivian's bright red swimsuit complemented her skin tone perfectly, and the V neck gave Emma a good view of her cleavage.

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Emma slid into the hot tub on the other side of Vivian, trying her best not to ogle too obviously at her. It was difficult given that Vivian was clearly fighting the same battle. Her eyes flicked constantly down to Emma's cleavage and thighs before going back to the window. Emma's heartrate was abnormally fast given that all she was doing was sitting in a tub.

She wondered how Vivian would react if Emma kissed her right now. As much as she wanted to, Vivian had made herself clear. She didn't want Emma, and Emma wasn't going to force herself on someone who didn't want her.

As obvious as it was that Vivian was attracted to her too, attraction wasn't enough. You needed willingness from both parties, and they didn't have that.

"Tell me more about Lily."

Emma was glad to have conversation to distract her from her racing thoughts. "Well, she's quite taken with you. You must have made quite an impression."

Vivian raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah. I didn't know you were so good with kids."

"I didn't either."

This seemed as good a time as any to ask. "Actually, speaking of Lily, I wanted to ask you a favor. She's doing a school project and needs to shadow someone in business. She's been begging me to ask you if she can shadow you."

“Oh! I would have thought she’d want to shadow someone in accounting.”

“I did ask her about that, but she was adamant that she wants you. I don’t think she quite understands that it’s more about getting to know how the job works than watching someone you admire work. I tried to explain it to her, but she’s got her heart set on shadowing you.”

“If that’s what she wants, then I’m sure I can accommodate her. We’ll have to plan which day she comes in—nothing too busy, as I’d want to be able to pay attention to her. We can take a look at the company calendar together and brainstorm dates.”

If Emma had wanted to kiss Vivian before, it was nothing compared to how she felt now. She contemplated lunging across the tub and capturing Vivian’s lips with hers. Emma closed her eyes for a moment, shutting the temptation out of sight.

“Thank you.” She opened her eyes, forcing herself to meet Vivian’s gaze and not deviate to her body. “I really appreciate that, and I know Lily will as well.”

“It’s a pleasure. I really like Lily. How is she doing at school?”

“Really great! She’s fully integrated into Miriam’s friend group now. They were having a pool party at Savannah’s house just last week. She’s enjoying the schoolwork as well. She’s top in her class for math.”

Emma was practically glowing with pride at the teacher’s last report. While Lily had initially had trouble, she was settling in beautifully now.

“What about you? Did you ever consider kids?”

Something in Vivian’s face shut down. “No, I never considered it. Did you always know you wanted children?”

“Yeah, ever since I was a child myself. Alison and I were on the same page about it from the start...”

She trailed off, wondering what Alison would think if she could see Emma now. Emma knew that Alison would want her to be happy, but it was still hard. Emma felt guilt, but it had been a long time of grieving now. Maybe it was time to move on. If only she had found someone she wanted to move on with who wanted her too.

Vivian soon brought her out of her thoughts with another question about Lily. Emma loved talking about her daughter, and the time in the hot tub flew by quickly. Vivian offered very little personal information, at first, but as time stretched on and their fingertips started to wrinkle, she began to open up a bit more.

“My whole family is in business. There were a lot of expectations to live up to growing up. I wasn’t pressured to go into the field, but I was always expected to be excellent at whatever I did.”

“Well, you certainly lived up to that expectation.”

“Thanks, Emma. I’m not really close with my family anymore, but I still love them, of course.”

“Why aren’t you close?”

Vivian hesitated for a moment. “I distanced myself from... well, from everyone... when I was starting up my business. I didn’t want anything to interfere with building my dream.”

“And yet now that you’ve built it, you’re still distanced.”

Vivian shrugged. “It’s better this way.”

“Why?”

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Vivian hesitated again, but it seemed she had opened up enough. “We should get out of this hot tub before we turn into prunes.”

Emma laughed, glancing at her fingers. “Yeah, I guess so.”

They spent the rest of the day planning what they wanted to do for the next few days. Vivian wanted to go bowling, and there was a local painting class that Emma wanted to try out.

She was so busy planning fun activities with Vivian that she even forgot to be nervous about what would happen at bedtime.

However, those nerves returned in full force when Victoria suggested they get ready for bed. Emma wondered if Vivian had been serious about sleeping on the floor. What if she hadn’t?

It seemed Vivian had been serious, because she pulled one of the blankets from the bed and wrapped herself up in it, so that she was lying on one side with the other side curled around her like a sleeping bag.

“Wake me up if it’s too uncomfortable. We can always switch.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. Goodnight, Emma.”

“Goodnight.”

Emma was tired from a long day, but she couldn’t fall asleep. She was too busy

listening to Vivian toss and turn on the floor. Vivian was obviously uncomfortable. Emma didn't like it. The more she listened, the more antsy she got, until she had absolutely no chance of falling asleep.

She could tell Vivian that they should switch places, but she doubted Vivian would accept that. She wasn't one to push her suffering onto others.

"Come here, Vivian."

"No, I'm fine, Emma. I volunteered to take the first turn on the floor. I'll get used to it."

"Really, there's no need for one of us to sleep on the floor. Come on, get into bed. I'm sure we'll keep to our own sides this time."

Vivian hesitated for a moment before sighing. "This floor feels like it's made of concrete," she grumbled as she got up with a groan. She climbed into bed as far away from Emma as possible. "Goodnight. Again."

"Goodnight, Vivian."

Emma's body probably knew better than to get itself into such an embarrassing entanglement two nights in a row. Surely, her body wouldn't betray her in that way.

As it turned out, Emma's body did not know better, and was perfectly willing to betray her.

She woke up the next morning, once more intertwined with Vivian. This time, Vivian's head was resting on Emma's shoulder and her arm was thrown across Emma's torso. Their legs were slotted like puzzle pieces, one on top of the other.

Fuck. Again.

Why couldn't it have been Vivian to wake up first? Emma clearly sucked at wriggling out of these situations, but she had to try. She didn't even manage to free one leg before Vivian stirred.

"Emma—oh! Shit, again. I'm so sorry, Emma."

"Not your fault," Emma sighed. "I was the one who said we could handle sleeping in the same bed together. Obviously, we can't."

Vivian laughed. "No, I guess not."

Emma laughed too, and then both of them were chuckling heartily, shaking the bed slightly with their mirth.

Vivian looked so beautiful when she laughed. Their laughter died out as they simply stared into each other's eyes. Emma got lost in the intensity of it. She saw the decision in Vivian's rich dark brown eyes and let her own eyes flutter shut.

Vivian's lips met Emma's in a soft kiss. Emma kissed her back, exploring Vivian's lips, aware that at any moment, Vivian could panic and pull back.

However, she didn't. Vivian put a hand behind Emma's neck and tilted her head up to deepen the kiss.

Emma moaned and made good use of their tangled legs by simply rolling them over, ending with her on top, straddling Vivian's hips.

They didn't stop kissing throughout the movement and continued with increased fervor as Emma ground herself enthusiastically onto Vivian, spreading her legs so

that her clit was getting perfect pressure against Vivian's stomach.

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She reached her own hand behind her and snuck it inside Vivian's panties that were already wet, inching her way to the spot she wanted. She could tell that she had it right when Vivian moaned loudly, breaking away from their kiss to gasp for air.

Emma sat up and began to rub Vivian's clitoris as she ground her own clit against Vivian's body. Emma rocked back and forth with increasing urgency.

She was already thinking of what she wanted to do to Vivian next when Vivian suddenly stiffened and cried out, her hands grabbing Emma's hips and moving her at a harder and faster pace.

Emma let Vivian move her however she wanted as she rode out her orgasm. Vivian looked so beautiful when she came, covered in a light sheen of sweat with all her muscles flexing under her skin.

She finally went limp, looking up at Emma with red cheeks. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I had meant to last longer..."

Emma leaned forward to kiss her. "No need to apologize. That was so hot. I love to see you lose control like that."

"Let me fuck you now."

Oh fuck, Emma hadn't been expecting the shiver of desire Vivian's commanding voice sent through her.

"Yes, please."

She pulled her pyjamas off and lay back and spread her legs, hoping Vivian wouldn't make her wait long. Vivian stripped off her own nightshirt and immediately moved between Emma's legs.

Fuck, she looks so sexy.

Emma's eyes ran over Vivian's small pert breasts and her toned body. Mostly it was the look of hunger in Vivian's dark eyes that was driving Emma crazy.

Vivian dove right in without hesitation, sliding first one, then two fingers inside Emma's waiting pussy.

Emma felt her walls clenching around Vivian's fingers as Vivian quickly started thrusting in and out.

Mmmm. This is what I needed.

"Faster," Emma panted. Nothing had felt this divine since... well, since the last time Vivian's fingers were inside her.

Vivian went faster. There was no teasing, no hesitation. She had come hard and fast and seemed determined to give Emma the same high.

That wouldn't be difficult. She could feel her G spot coming alive with the exquisite pleasure inside of her. Emma was already hurtling toward the edge as Vivian added another finger inside of her and then all it took was Vivian's thumb to press on her clit and she was gone. She arched into Vivian's fingers as the world whited out with pleasure.

She could feel Vivian's fingers acutely on and in her, seeming to reach all through her body, sending waves of pleasure with them.

Emma lost track of time. When the orgasm finally faded, she was vaguely aware of Vivian removing her fingers and sitting back.

Emma knew that she needed to act quickly before Vivian's mind caught up with her body.

"Vivian, listen to me." She took Vivian's hand in hers, squeezing it and waiting for their eyes to meet.

"This isn't a mistake. We have something special here—I know you can feel it too."

Vivian didn't deny it. "That doesn't change anything."

"Why not?" Emma decided to put all her cards on the table. "Come out with me. Let's go on a date. I can't promise it'll work out, but if we don't try, we'll never know. We should give this a real shot. If we don't, it'll just be another regret at a lost opportunity."

Vivian's expression was torn as she cut her gaze away from Emma. "I can't."

"Do you mind telling me why not?"

"I told you; I distanced myself from people when I started my business. Even though I'm established now and no longer a startup, that just means it's even more important. It's more than just my dreams on the line now. People depend on me—everyone from clients, to employees, to charities we donate to, to other businesses we have agreements with. I can't fuck this up."

"And you think having personal relationships—even friendships—would do that?"

"I think I can't take the risk."

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“I don’t understand,” Emma admitted. “Did you learn this from your parents? Does the rest of your family take the same view?”

“No. They’re actually rather concerned about how I’ve isolated myself, but I’m fine. They don’t need to worry about anything.”

“Neither do you. You must know that of all the successful businesses in the world, almost all of them have CEOs with personal relationships—romantic relationships as well as friendships.”

“I know... but I still think it’s too risky.”

“Is that thought really based on fact? Or is it just an irrational fear? You think it’s risky, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of businesses doing well without their leaders holding themselves back in this way.”

Vivian pursed her lips. “I see your point... but there’s still a chance it could ruin everything, especially if I was with an employee.”

“There’s a chance the stock market could crash tomorrow. There’s a chance that some maniac could decide to fire nukes tomorrow and the business falls apart amidst the resulting war. There is always a chance that things will go wrong, but there is also always a chance they will go right. Is your happiness really not worth taking that chance?”

“Who said I’m unhappy?”

“Well, are you?”

Vivian bit her lip. “I’m not... unhappy, exactly.”

“But you’re lonely?” Emma guessed.

Vivian nodded. “I... Well, you make a good argument, Emma. Let’s... Let’s try, then. But don’t be upset if I decide it’s actually not something I can do. I’m still very unsure about this...”

Emma squeezed Vivian’s hand again. “I understand. We can navigate this together. Both of us have insecurities and fears, but everyone does. Like you say, you might change your mind—or I might—but the least we can do is try.”

Emma doubted she’d change her mind, nor that the lingering insecurities about moving on after Alison would stop her from pursuing Vivian, but she didn’t say that now. She was scared to say the wrong thing lest Vivian change her mind.

“You’re right. Let’s try, then. Though... you’ll have to guide me. I’ve never dated before.”

“It’s easy, really. Honestly, the activities we’ll be doing probably won’t change much. We’ll do fun things together—get to know each other a bit better. And of course, if you’re willing, more of this.”

Emma ran her hand down Vivian’s thigh, smiling to herself.

“That sounds easy enough—not to mention pleasant. So, we’re still on for that painting class?”

“Yep. Our first date.” Emma resisted the urge to leap to her feet and whoop in delight

at the thought.

“I should warn you, the last time I tried to paint, a woman on the street saw me carrying my attempt back to the car. I don’t understand everything that she said, but I got the impression she was trying to ward off demons.”

Emma snorted. “You can’t be that bad.”

“Trust me, I can.”

“We’ll see.”

7

Emma

“Itold you so.”

“I didn’t believe you.”

“But you do now.” It wasn’t a question.

“Um. Maybe?” Emma didn’t want to be offensive, but Vivian’s painting was... well, it looked like something out of a horror movie, to be honest. And not in a good way.

“Admit it, you totally do.”

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“Fine, I do. Honestly, I think you need therapy.”

“I wasn’t trying to paint anything creepy or disturbing! It was meant to be a tree!”

“That’s as much a tree as a house cat is a flying pig.”

“Don’t be rude, Emma. What would Lily think?” Vivian’s eyes were sparkling as she tucked the painting under her arm, facing her side so that passersby didn’t see the front of the canvas. Wise of her.

“Do not bring up what Lily would think when around that horror. You had better not show that to her. It’ll give her nightmares for years.”

“Maybe I’ll put it up in the office,” Vivian teased.

“Yeah, right—and have the entire staff quit within a day.”

Vivian chuckled. “I did tell you I was bad.”

“Yes you did. I hope you’re better with a bowling ball than a paint brush.”

“Don’t worry, neither of us will be getting concussions—at least not from me.”

“Good to know.” Emma glanced again at her painting. It was no masterpiece, but she was fairly pleased with it. She’d certainly done a better job of painting a tree than Vivian had.

“So, have you told Lily about the job shadowing yet?”

“Not yet. Actually... I was wondering if you’d want to tell her yourself—maybe over ice cream?” Emma said the few words so fast that she feared they came out garbled. She knew that Vivian had already met Lily, but asking her to go out with her and Emma now that she and Emma had agreed to date was different.

She needn’t have worried. “I’d love to! I know some great ice cream places.”

Emma let out a breath. “That sounds great. Perhaps we can arrange it when we get back?”

“Perfect.”

“Vivian!”

Despite Emma’s warnings not to be too exuberant with Vivian, Lily ran right up to her and threw her arms around Vivian’s waist. Thankfully, Vivian didn’t seem to think this was too much and hugged her back.

“It’s good to see you again, Lily.” Vivian was almost warm for once.

“I told all my friends about you and about getting to spend the day with you! They all think it’s so cool.” Lily was bright with enthusiasm.

Vivian chuckled. “That’s great.” She gestured to the board covered in brightly colored ice cream labels. “What would you like?”

“Chocolate,” Lily said at once.

“Surprise, surprise,” Emma muttered to Vivian, grinning. She had already told Vivian

about Emma's penchant for all things chocolate.

Vivian insisted on paying for the ice cream before leading them to one of the tables.

"Really, Vivian? Pistachio flavor?" Emma smiled.

"Like you get to talk. Strawberry is so common; I'm surprised at you. For such an original person..."

"Have you even tried strawberry ice cream with chocolate-covered raspberries for a topping?"

"No, but—"

"Here." Emma silenced Vivian by putting a spoon of ice cream, complete with a chocolate-covered raspberry, into her open mouth.

Vivian made a face at her, but ate the ice cream anyway. Her expression slowly changed.

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“Okay, I’ll admit you have a point,” she conceded once she had swallowed. “However, it’s only fair that you try mine, too. I must open your eyes to the wonders of pistachio ice cream.”

“Fine, but I warn you, I’m not going to like it.”

Emma took the spoon of ice cream Vivian offered, grimacing as it melted in her mouth. “Ugh. I hate pistachios.”

“I’m dating a weirdo,” Vivian teased.

Emma had already explained to Lily that she and Vivian were dating. Lily had been ecstatic. Emma had wondered if Lily would be upset that she was dating again. However, she had carefully explained that Vivian would in no way be replacing Alison, and that Vivian knew that as well. Lily was fully on board. Lily had no real memories of Alison as she had been too young when she died. It had been so very painful for Emma and she wondered how she had gotten through the years and brought up Lily too. But, she was a positive person and she chose to focus on the joy that she had had with Alison and the wonderful person that Alison had been. Although what had happened was undoubtedly tragic, Emma always spoke positively about Lily’s other mom and showed her photos and told her stories and sometimes it felt as though Alison was still there with them. Even though she wasn’t.

Lily was entirely focused on her ice cream, only looking up once she had finished it. “Vivian, can I come and work shadow you, please? Mom said we could talk about it today.”

“Your mom has already talked to me about it, and I’d be happy to have you job shadow me, Lily.”

It was a good thing Lily’s ice cream was already finished, or it would have caused much more of a mess than it did when Lily upended it as she leaped up and ran around the table to hug Vivian.

Emma watched them, her face hurting from how hard she was smiling.

She thought that this was going to work out just fine.

8

Vivian

Vivian sighed happily as she rolled over in bed, pressing her chest up against Emma’s back. Emma had scoffed when Vivian had suggested putting soundproof panels in her room, but Emma had quickly been converted by the idea of being able to be as loud as they wanted when Vivian stayed over at her place.

The last few weeks had been like something out of someone else’s life—or something out of Vivian’s wildest fantasies, the ones she never really acknowledged, even to herself.

Dating Emma was... incredible. Not only was the sex life changing, but Vivian was quickly coming to love spending time with Emma more than anything else. Lily loved having Vivian around, and the three of them went on frequent outings on weekends.

“We should go to sleep,” Vivian murmured.

“Already there,” Emma mumbled, her hand searching until it found Vivian’s.
“Night, Vivian. I love you.”

Vivian stiffened. She felt Emma stiffen against her as she realized what she’d said.

Emma quickly turned around in Vivian’s arms, her eyes wide and worried. “You don’t have to say it back, Vivian. I’m not going to take it back, because that would be a lie, but I don’t want you to feel any pressure to—”

“I have to go.”

“Vivian, please—let’s talk about this.”

Vivian was already getting out of bed. She felt like the walls were closing in on her. She wanted to run, but where could she go when the walls were those of her own mind?

“I’ll see you at work tomorrow, Emma.” She couldn’t run from her mind, but she could certainly run from the situation.

“No—wait, Vivian—”

Vivian was already dressed. She didn’t immediately see her shoes and decided to abandon them. She all but ran from the house.

Vivian’s heart was beating so fast that she wondered if she was having a heart attack or a panic attack. She stopped the car two blocks away from Emma’s house, trying to even her breathing.

It’s okay, everything is okay, she told herself.

It was a lie, though. Everything was not okay and she knew it. If it had been what Emma thought, then it probably wouldn't be a problem. If Vivian hadn't wanted to say it back, she would simply have accepted Emma's reassurance that she didn't need to and gone to sleep.

The problem was that she did want to say it back, and that scared her.

What the hell had Vivian gotten herself into? She didn't know what she had thought would happen when she'd agreed to start dating Emma. She couldn't recall right now the reasoning that had gotten her to this point.

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All she could focus on was the blinding panic racing through her veins. She couldn't love Emma. She could never be the kind of woman Emma deserved. Emma deserved someone who could love her wholeheartedly and without reservation.

Vivian wasn't that person. She was still too scared about what a relationship would mean for her business. She was too afraid of realizing that she actually didn't want a life partner after all, or that it wasn't working for her for some reason.

There would always be doubts and fears that stopped her from embracing Emma with her whole heart, like Alison had. Emma deserved someone who could marry her and raise Lily with her without hesitation, not someone so caught up in their own mind that they were too paralyzed to say three little words.

Vivian knew she wasn't Alison. Emma had spoken about Alison and Vivian knew she didn't have so many of the qualities Alison had had. She could never be who Emma and Lily needed her to be.

Her phone started ringing. Vivian didn't need to look at the screen to know it was Emma.

She tried to stop her hands shaking for long enough to answer. It would be better to do this now, before she had a chance to convince herself otherwise.

"Emma."

"Vivian! I didn't think you'd answer. Are you home yet? Please, let me come over. We need to talk about this."

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m sorry, Emma, but I can’t do this. We knew from the beginning that it might not work out. Well, it didn’t. I’m done.”

“How can you say that? You may not love me yet, but I know you care for me too, Vivian. This connection we share is special and real. You must know that.”

“This connection has to end.”

“Please, Vivian. I love you.”

Fuck, Emma was crying. Vivian desperately wanted to rush back and comfort her, but she knew she couldn’t. Emma deserved more than such mixed signals.

She clenched her free hand on the steering wheel as she forced out the hardest words she’d ever had to say. “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be with you anymore, Emma. Goodbye.” The lie burned coming out of her mouth, and the acid ate right through her heart, leaving it tattered and mangled.

She heard Emma’s hurt gasp on the other side of the line but didn’t wait for her to speak. Vivian hung up before she could do something stupid—like tell Emma she loved her and beg for forgiveness.

She tossed her phone onto the passenger seat.

The phone didn’t ring again.

9

Emma

Emma was more grateful than ever for the soundproofing as she sobbed, knowing

that Lily wouldn't hear and come to investigate. Then she remembered that it was Vivian who'd had that soundproofing installed and cried even harder.

How could Vivian do this? Yes, Emma had fucked up. She should never have expressed her feelings so soon, knowing that Vivian would likely freak out. It had just slipped out in a moment of contentment... and ruined everything.

While she had known that Vivian would panic, she hadn't anticipated how deep Vivian's fears about relationships truly ran. She had expected to have to spend hours talking Vivian down before they could settle into each other's arms and go to sleep for the night.

Emma hadn't expected this. For Vivian just to leave, without even trying to talk. The fact that she hadn't even tried to work things out hurt almost as much as her leaving in the first place.

Emma had already lost so much in losing Alison. It had taken a lot for her to make herself vulnerable and fall in love again. She couldn't bear that now she was losing Vivian, too. As different as the loss was, it still hurt so much.

Emma had been through breakups before, but nothing that felt like this. She didn't feel like her heart was broken. It was like a large chunk of it was gone, erased, pulled out by a string when Vivian left her. Vivian had that piece of her heart now, and Emma feared that she would never get it back.

She didn't sleep that night. By the time the sun rose, the trashcan was overflowing with tissues and Emma's eyes were red and puffy.

Lily would be up soon. Emma had to get herself under control, for her daughter's sake. Lily would be scared if she saw her mother like this.

Emma closed her eyes, trying to focus on something other than Vivian. She instead thought about Lily's upcoming camping trip with her class at school. There were a few things she needed to buy. She and Vivian had been planning on spending those four days together... and she was back to Vivian again.

Nope. She was not going to start crying again. Emma dragged herself into the shower, turning it on cold, trying to shock the thoughts of Vivian out of her system.

The cold water was so unpleasant that it drove all other thoughts out of her mind, which was exactly what she'd been hoping would happen. When she was out of the shower, determinedly thinking of Lily's camping trip, she put on a thick layer of makeup to try to hide how swollen and red her eyes were.

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She seriously considered calling in sick to work, but in the end decided that there would be no point. She would have to face Vivian eventually and putting it off wouldn't make things any easier for her when she had to do it.

Emma didn't know what to expect when she walked into the office, but she wasn't entirely surprised to find Vivian's office door firmly shut. Well, she could do her job just fine on her own. If Vivian didn't want to see her, then Emma wasn't going to beg for her attention. They could communicate about work matters via email if necessary.

She didn't see Vivian for most of the day, but as the clock neared five, Vivian strode into the open plan office area, heading straight for Emma. She looked immaculate in a black pant suit. She was so strikingly beautiful, with fine cheekbones and deep dark eyes that Emma wanted to lose herself in. Only right now those beautiful eyes were as cold as black stone.

Emma braced herself, not knowing if this was going to be a personal confrontation or a simple work matter.

"Emma, our client is requesting that we move that meeting scheduled for Thursday to tomorrow. Can you check my calendar and reschedule it if possible?"

"Sure thing, Vivian."

Emma should have known better than to think Vivian might want to talk about anything personal. She was in full Ice Queen mode, her gaze cool and remote. It was as though the last few months had never even happened.

Emma's heart squeezed as she watched Vivian walk away to talk to a few other people. The place where the missing piece was ached, but there was nothing she could do about that now. Time healed all wounds, right? Emma had survived so much worse, she knew she could survive this. Things with Vivian would get easier. She had only to wait.

It seemed that time did not heal all wounds.

Three weeks later, the hole in Emma's heart was as empty as ever. Every time she saw Vivian, it felt like a stab in the gut. She thought she was doing a relatively good job at hiding it, but she couldn't hide from herself.

Lily was her only solace. She did her best to focus on her daughter and ignore her own pain. Lily didn't deserve to suffer for Emma's mistakes.

Without Lily's light in her life, Emma didn't know how she would have managed. It was hard, but she needed to keep her life together for Lily's sake, so she soldiered on.

She would face this like she had faced every other challenge—with determination and drive to get through it. She had gotten herself this far and she wasn't going to let this thing with Vivian derail her life.

Lily's voice drew Emma out of her dismal thoughts.

"Mom, why can't we see Vivian anymore?"

The dismal thoughts intensified.

Emma didn't want to lie, but she certainly wasn't going to get into the whole tragic affair.

“Vivian and I had a fight, and we’ve decided not to see each other outside of work.”

“Why not? You told me that if I fight with someone, I should talk to them and try to make things better. Can’t you make them better with Vivian? I miss her.”

Emma grimaced. Nothing tasted quite so bad as having to eat your own words.

“What I told you is true, but it’s not going to work for Vivian and me.”

“Have you tried?”

Emma sighed internally, trying to figure out how to explain this. “Trying isn’t going to help in this situation. Sometimes, there is no way to fix things. It’s an adult thing.”

Lily pouted. “Adult things are stupid.”

“I suppose they are,” Emma conceded. She decided that a distraction was in order. “How about we go out for ice cream?”

“Yes! Ice cream!”

The distraction worked well on both of them. Lily jabbered away about a science project she was doing for school with little prompting from Emma.

When they were home, however, Emma’s thoughts wandered back to the conversation they’d had earlier in the day. What she had said to Lily was true. There was no fixing this and staying around Vivian was only hurting her.

Perhaps it was time to move on.

The thought hurt, but not more than seeing Vivian every day did.

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Though it felt like a stone in her chest, Emma started looking for a different position at other companies.

She didn't have any trouble lining up interviews. She knew that she was good at her job and she had the experience to prove it.

Emma was unenthusiastic, but she was sure that enthusiasm would come. It had to, right?

She felt only a small spark of satisfaction when the company that was her top choice—a huge international makeup brand—got back to her and offered her an interview.

Emma took the day off work, citing a personal matter. Vivian didn't question it, as Emma had been counting on. Vivian took her employees at their word when they said they needed time off and never pried unless the information was volunteered freely.

Emma dressed carefully for the day and practiced her smile in the mirror. It would do no good to arrive at the interview looking miserable.

The office was near Lily's school, which would make things a lot more convenient for her if she did get the job. Even that thought failed to generate much positive emotion within her, but Emma did her best to hold onto the facts and the logical knowledge that that was a good step.

When she arrived at the interview, she was directed to an office on the top floor. It was different from Vivian's, which had many more personal items, making it feel more

homey and less intimidating.

Alex Founder, the CEO, looked up as she came in.

“Emma, I take it? Please come in.”

“Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Founder.”

“Please, call me Alex. I always feel like people are making fun of me when they call me Founder. I’ve heard one too many jokes about being the founder of my own company and living up to my surname.”

He chuckled and Emma offered a weak smile in return. “Alex, then.” She did her best to inject some enthusiasm into her voice, though she wasn’t sure how well she did at it.

“So, tell me a bit more about yourself, Emma.”

Emma had been expecting the question and was prepared for it. “I grew up in a small town three hours from here. I didn’t dislike small-town life, but I always dreamed of moving to a city and taking my career further. My wife died a few years ago, and I felt like I was finally ready to start a new chapter of my life. I moved here with my daughter. We’ve been in the city for several months.”

“You’ve been working at Sterling Enterprises, correct?”

Emma did her best not to grimace. “That’s right.”

“Why the move? I know Vivian Sterling by reputation and it’s not very often that her employees choose to leave. She certainly makes for a competitive employer.”

Emma had expected this question too, but that didn't make answering it much easier. "There were some personal issues between me and Vivian. You're right in that she's a great employer, but we simply weren't a good match. I bear her no ill will, and I've appreciated my time working for her, but I think it's time for me to move on. I'll take what experience I gained with her gratefully and apply the skills I've learned to my new job."

The rest of the questions were easier. Alex asked about her experience, strengths and weaknesses. He seemed happy with her answers, and Emma's enthusiasm rose a bit. The interview took about half an hour, and at the end of it, Alex produced a sheath of papers.

"Well, I have to say I'm impressed, both with your interview and with your resume and supporting documents. I'd like to offer you the job."

Emma hadn't been expecting that. This was what she wanted, but now that the time was so unexpectedly upon her, she balked. She quickly tried to order her scrambled thoughts.

"I've got a few other interviews lined up. You are my top choice, but I've already committed to those interviews, and I want to keep that commitment. Can I get back to you in a few days?"

"Of course. I respect your desire to keep your word. Can I expect to hear back from you by the end of the week?"

"Definitely. I'll be in touch."

"Thanks, Emma."

"Thank you, Alex. I hope to see you soon."

“You can count on it.”

Emma saw herself out of the building, feeling thoroughly downcast. She had exactly what she wanted, but it had failed to make her happy. Perhaps happiness would come, but for now, all she felt was dread.

She had been putting this off for too long. It was time.

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Vivian was in her office, as usual. Her expression became guarded when Emma walked in, but her voice was perfectly polite. “Emma, how can I help you?”

“May I sit down?”

Emma clutched the sheet of paper she was holding in sweaty hands.

“Of course.”

Emma sat down and steeled herself. She put the piece of paper on Vivian’s desk. “I would like to hand in my resignation.”

Shock and something else Emma couldn’t quite read rippled across Vivian’s face before she quickly composed her expression behind walls of ice.

“I see. Are you unhappy here, Emma? Is there anything I can do to fix it?”

Emma shook her head, her eyes on the corner of the desk. “No, there isn’t anything. There’s nothing wrong with the workplace environment. This is one of the best places I’ve ever worked at. It’s just too hard, after everything...”

Emma hoped that Vivian wouldn’t make her explain further, and Vivian quickly made that hope a reality.

“I see. I’ll be sorry to see you go, Emma, but I wish you all the best. I will give you excellent references for wherever you apply next.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Emma bit her lip, trying to hold back tears. Some small part of her had been hoping that Vivian would try to convince her to stay. Honestly, it wouldn’t have taken that much convincing. While she knew that Vivian was simply trying to respect her boundaries, she was still hurt. This was yet another instance in which Vivian simply didn’t want to fight for her.

It only confirmed the decision Emma had already made.

“Thank you, Vivian. I’ll do my two week’s notice, of course, and I can help with finding you a new assistant.”

“I appreciate that, but it won’t be necessary. I don’t want you to stay here if you’re unhappy, Emma. You’re free to leave when you wish. I’ll be fine for now, and I can find a new assistant in my own time.”

Vivian’s words felt like a punch to the gut. Emma knew how much extra work it would be for Vivian to be without a personal assistant while she went through the vetting process of finding someone new. Did Vivian really want her gone so badly that she would put herself through such an ordeal just to have Emma gone sooner?

Maybe Vivian had been hoping Emma would resign. She wouldn’t fire her, of course, not when Emma hadn’t done anything wrong, but judging by Vivian’s response to her resignation, it seemed like her decision was more of a blessing to Vivian than an inconvenience.

She needed to get out of here before she started crying. “Thanks, Vivian. I wish you all the best in the future.”

This was the last time she’d ever see her. Emma looked once more into Vivian’s dark haunted eyes for a long moment before the urge to cry became too much and she had to flee the room.

She grabbed her bag, making the decision to leave the rest of her stuff. She could buy new stationery and files. Emma managed to make it to the car before the tears came. She blinked constantly as she drove home, trying to clear her vision.

Thankfully, it was still a few hours before she had to pick Lily up from school, so she had time to compose herself.

Emma made herself a cup of tea, trying to get her tears under control. This was a good thing, she told herself. It was exactly what she wanted. She and Vivian had ended things on good terms, and she had the job she had been aiming for.

She typed out a quick email to Alex, telling him she accepted his offer. Emma sipped on her tea, trying desperately to think of anything other than Vivian.

Alex's response, about ten minutes later, did a good job of distracting her. He was enthusiastic and wanted her to start on Monday.

The thought of working for someone else made Emma feel vaguely ill, but she knew that throwing herself into a new project would be good for her.

This chapter in her life was closed. She was glad that she'd be working for a man this time around. There was no chance of her falling in love with him. Emma didn't think she could take any more heartache.

10

Vivian

Vivian stared at the closed door. She was still in shock. She'd done a good job of holding it together in front of Emma, but internally, she felt like she was falling apart.

She should probably have been prepared for this. Of course, Emma would want to leave after how Vivian had treated her. However, Vivian had stuck her head in the sand, choosing to believe that Emma would keep working for her, and she was paying for it now.

Emma's lovely big brown eyes looking at her hopefully had nearly broken her.

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She felt like she had whiplash. It would probably have been better if she'd taken Emma's offer to work through her two weeks' notice. That way, Vivian would have had some processing time and been able to figure out a proper way to say goodbye. However, she wasn't going to keep Emma here when she wanted to leave purely for Vivian's selfish wish to have more time.

Vivian clutched the edge of the desk, trying to ground herself. She couldn't let herself fall apart. This is exactly why she hadn't wanted any personal entanglements in the first place.

Vivian cursed herself for thinking that getting involved with Emma was a good idea.

It was bad enough losing the woman she loved. It was bad enough having her heart broken.

Now, she was losing Emma altogether. It shouldn't have made a difference. It wasn't like she and Emma were even friends at the moment—Vivian had seen to that.

It still hurt. Why did it hurt so much?

Every day for three weeks, Vivian had dragged herself out of bed when she wanted nothing more than to stay at home and wallow in her own misery. She had thought she was handling things.

Right now, she did not feel like she was handling anything. She felt like she was spiraling into an abyss and there was nothing she could do to pull herself back.

Vivian needed help.

She already had the number saved in her phone. She'd been toying with calling for days now, but she was afraid. She was afraid of what she would have to face if she went down this path... but nothing could be worse than feeling like she did now.

Barb Skye was supposed to be one of the best psychologists in the city. Broken hearts weren't all that uncommon. Surely, she would be able to fix Vivian.

She placed the call and hung up three times before finally coming up with the resolve to speak to Barb's receptionist.

"Hello, Dr. Skye's' office, you're speaking to Dawn."

"Um. Hi. I'd like to book an appointment with Dr. Skye, please."

"Of course. Are you a new patient?"

"Yes, I am."

"And your name is?"

"Vivian Sterling."

"We have an appointment next Thursday at ten o'clock. Would that suit you, Vivian?"

"That would be perfect, thank you."

Vivian answered a few more logistical questions before hanging up and putting the appointment into her calendar. She saved it simply as appointment. She didn't need

her employees seeing an appointment with a psychologist and starting to catch on to the fact that Vivian was thoroughly falling apart.

She should start finding a new assistant. Life without one would be entirely unmanageable. Despite knowing that it was now an urgent issue, due to her own decision to let Emma go before finding someone else, Vivian felt little motivation to do it.

If she couldn't have Emma, she wasn't sure she wanted anyone. This, of course, was incredibly stupid. The risk of making business decisions with her heart rather than her head was exactly why Vivian avoided this kind of mess in the first place.

She spent the next two days frantically busy, trying to do two jobs at the same time. Several people offered to start the process of advertising for a new assistant, but Vivian turned them all down, insisting she would get to it when she was ready.

Right now, she wasn't ready.

Being so busy that she was barely on her feet by the time she got home did one good thing—it distracted her from her nerves for her appointment on Thursday.

Those nerves returned in full force, however, as Vivian drove to the appointment and settled herself in the waiting room after giving her details to the receptionist. She had never been to therapy before, and she was more than a little anxious.

Vivian didn't know what kinds of things Dr. Skye would pull from her and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted the inside of her head to be examined. However, she couldn't deny that she wasn't coping and professional help seemed like the most logical option.

“Vivian?”

Vivian reminded herself that she had faced far more challenging and hostile situations than a single therapist who wanted to help her. She stood up and faced Dr. Skye. “That’s right.”

“You can come in.”

Dr. Skye was around Vivian’s age with a jaunty grey bob and eyes that glittered as though she was always on the verge of smiling. It was perhaps inappropriate for a therapist, Vivian thought for a second, but she couldn’t deny that Dr. Skye looked warm and empathic and perhaps her glittering eyes were one thing that helped people open up to her.

Vivian perched on the edge of the seat, her eyes flicking from Dr. Skye back down to the floor.

“So, Vivian, tell me what brought you here.”

“I... um. Well, I’m not doing so well.”

“Can you elaborate on that?”

Vivian didn’t want to spill her guts to a complete stranger, but wasn’t that why she was here?

“I left my girlfriend. It was a horrible mistake and I’m not coping particularly well with it.”

“What exactly do you mean by not coping?”

Vivian shrugged. “You know. Struggling to get out of bed. Struggling to focus on work. Crying a lot. Thinking about her constantly and berating myself for my

behavior. I'm sure you've heard all this before from a dozen other patients."

"It sounds like you don't think much of yourself for struggling in the way you are."

"No, I don't—this is entirely my fault. I've made my bed, and now I have to lie in it."

"Then why are you here?" Dr. Skye took fixed her glittering gaze on Vivian and raised her eyebrows in expectation of a response.

Dr. Skye had her there. "I guess that even if I know I deserve it, I'm not managing. Every day, getting out of bed and going about my daily life like everything is okay just feels like a huge weight on my chest. I don't know how long I can keep doing this for."

"I understand. That's what I'm here to help with. Why did you leave your girlfriend?"

"Because I'm a fucking idiot, that's why."

"That's not an answer, Vivian. That's an evasion. Why did you leave her?"

Dr. Skye was clearly here to bust her ass. As was probably what she needed.

Vivian sighed, reminding herself that if she wasn't going to be honest then she may as well not be here.

"She told me she loves me. I completely freaked out and ran."

"Why did you freak out?"

"I was hesitant about getting into the relationship from the start. I never wanted to fall in love, but somehow, I did. She is just so lovely and kind and warm. And, well, so

beautiful. She has the most beautiful smile. I've never really been in anything like this before. When she said I love you... well, it made me realize I feel the same, and that thought terrified me."

"What scares you about it?"

"Love isn't a controlled entity. If you can't control it, then it can wreak havoc in your life, including your career. My business is important to me and I don't want to mess it up."

"Is it more important to you than your girlfriend?"

Vivian opened her mouth to say yes, but the word wouldn't come out. It felt too much like a lie. "I don't know. What I do know is that she deserves much, much better than someone who can never give her their whole heart. She has a daughter too who is incredible. Her wife died. She needs a lot. They both do. They both deserve the world and it terrifies me that I can't even give my whole heart. I don't know how to."

"Do you think you can't give your whole heart? Or are you just afraid to?" Dr. Skye wasn't backing off.

"Afraid, I guess. But if I'm too afraid to do it, then isn't that the same thing?"

"Fears can be overcome. That's something we can work on here. Intimacy issues aren't all that uncommon, and I feel confident that we'll be able to improve on the issue if you choose to work on it."

"So, you think I should work on my issues and then go back to her? See if she'll take me back?"

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“That’s for you to decide. This is your space, Vivian. If you don’t want to work on something or do something, I’m not going to try to force you. Do you think your intimacy issues are something worth trying to resolve?”

Vivian considered this. On the one hand, if she really could untangle this mess in her head, she might have a chance of being with Emma again, she had been so very happy with Emma—if Emma would take her back, that is. On the other hand...

“I don’t know who I’d be. Won’t I be a completely different person if I change such a fundamental part of myself? Would I even know myself?”

“No amount of therapy can magically turn you into a different person. Change, if it happens, comes slowly. You wouldn’t be a different person. You would simply be evolving into a slightly different version of yourself. A better version of yourself, some might argue.”

Vivian took another minute to consider this. This Dr. Barb Skye seemed full of wisdom. Maybe she could help Vivian. “Yes. I would like to work on my intimacy issues.”

“Okay.” Dr. Skye smiled warmly. “Then why don’t you tell me more about your childhood? Did anything in your upbringing lead you to believe that you were unable to rely on other people?”

Vivian had been expecting questions about her past and had those answers prepared. It wasn’t like she had anything particularly interesting to say. She’d always had a supportive family, and she doubted they were the cause of her issues. She didn’t have

anything at all to say on the matter of friends and relationships, other than talking about her time with Emma.

That was going to be difficult, but Vivian had come here for help, and she was going to cooperate as fully as she was able to.

Okay, Vivian. Let's do this.

So she started from the beginning, telling Dr. Skye her life's story.

As had been her norm for the past two months, Vivian went to get ice cream after therapy and sat in the park to eat it. Ice cream reminded her of Emma and Lily, and always brought a smile to her face, even if it was a bittersweet memory.

She was headed to her favorite bench, focused mostly on licking the drips of the melting ice cream before they could fall onto her hand.

"Mom! Mom! Look!"

Vivian looked up. That voice was familiar.

Sure enough, it was Lily, and Lily was running straight toward Vivian.

Vivian had just enough time to lay her bowl of ice cream down on the bench before Lily barreled into her, wrapping her arms tightly around Vivian's waist.

"You're here! I missed you so much," Lily sounded tearful, and Vivian hugged her back automatically. "I missed you, too." Vivian said and she meant it deeply. She felt tears forming in her eyes as Lily's big brown eyes stared into her soul.

"Will you make up with my Mom, please? What I would really like is if you could be

my mom, too? Then I could have two mom's again?" Lily was earnest and Vivian didn't know what to say. She wanted nothing more than to take care of them both. She looked over Lily's shoulder.

Sure enough, Emma was hurrying over to them, her face bright red.

"Lily, don't run off like that! You scared me."

"Sorry, Mom."

A passing man snorted, casting the three of them a disgusted look.

Anger immediately flared in Vivian's stomach. "Do you have a problem?"

"No, no problem at all. I just feel sorry for all children who have to grow up in broken households. Children should have two parents who love each other."

Vivian's hands clenched at her sides. She lifted one arm to point at Emma. "I love this woman more than anyone else in the world! She's the love of my life, and Lily is lucky to have both of us."

"Two women can't love each other. It's not natural."

"Yeah? Well, why don't you come over here and do something about it?" Vivian challenged.

She had taken self defense classes. She got someone in to run them regularly for the female staff in the office, as well as any men who wanted to join in, and she participated too. If he so much as looked like he was going to try anything, Vivian would have him flat on his back and regretting ever crossing her.

The man examined the commitment in her eyes for a few moments before giving the three of them another filthy look and stalking off. Vivian met Emma's shocked gaze. Only now did she realize what she had said.

"Did you mean that?" Emma whispered.

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Perhaps two months ago, Vivian would have fled, like she did that fateful night. She was different now, though. She had been working to untangle her intimacy issues with Dr. Skye. Vivian now understood that her objection to relationships was purely from her own fear of not having control. The business issue was an excuse she had used for too long. She was trying to face her fear and overcome it.

“I did. Please, Emma, can we talk?”

Vivian had always meant to do this, though perhaps not quite so soon. She didn’t know if she was ready, but she did know that if she threw this chance away, she might never get another one.

“Yeah, okay. Lily, why don’t you go and play in the playground over there?”

“But I want to spend more time with Vivian! I miss her.”

“You can spend time with her later, I promise. Vivian and I just need to have some adult talk.”

“Fine. But you promise?”

“I promise. Go on, now.”

Vivian tossed her now completely melted ice cream in the trash and sat down on the bench opposite Emma. She held out her hand and was surprised but grateful when Emma took it.

“Emma... there’s so much I want to say to you. I know I don’t deserve your time. I treated you horribly, and I have no excuse for that. I’m trying to change, though. I come to this park and have ice cream because it reminds me of you and Lily. And, well, I love you both. Please. Will you hear me out? If after this you never want to see me again, I’ll respect that. I’ll go to a different park and you’ll never need to worry about hearing from me again.”

Emma nodded warily. “I’ll hear you out, Vivian.”

“First, I need to apologize. Emma, I don’t think there are enough words to express how truly, deeply sorry I am for how I treated you. When you told me that you loved me, it should have been a special moment, but I ruined it all. I was afraid, but that was no excuse. I should have fought for you, worked through my fears with you, but instead I let the best thing I’ve ever had slip through my fingers.”

“When you left, I realized that what I was doing wasn’t working and I sought help. I’ve been seeing a therapist for the past two months, working through my issues. I wouldn’t call myself cured, but I’m certainly working on being a better version of myself, that is for sure.”

“Emma, I love you. I’m in love with you and I want you back. If you can forgive me and give me another chance, I swear I’ll never stop fighting to be better for you, to be the woman you deserve. Please, Emma, will you take me back?”

11

Emma

This was the last thing Emma had expected. She had been planning on taking Lily out to play at a park they didn’t usually go to for a nice change. She had envisioned chatting with the other parents while she watched their kids play.

She had not counted on finding Vivian here, much less Lily's reaction. Lily asked about Vivian constantly, but Emma hadn't realized that Lily saw her as her second mom. They hadn't even been together all that long, but Vivian had clearly stolen Lily's heart as thoroughly as she had Lily's.

Vivian was saying everything Emma had dreamed in her wildest fantasies, but now that those dreams were actually becoming a reality, Emma hesitated to take what was right in front of her.

She didn't know if she could trust Vivian again. She stared into Vivian's dark eyes, remembering everything—the good and the bad. Emma could see nothing but sincerity, love, and burning hope in Vivian's gaze this time.

“You didn't just hurt me, Vivian. You hurt Lily, too. If we do this, we do it all the way. You heard her earlier. She sees you as her second mom. Lily and I are a package deal. Are you really up for raising a child with me? It's a lot of responsibility, and you have your business to think about—”

“Fuck my business. I want you, Emma—you and Lily. Yes, my business is important to me, but if I had to make a choice, I would choose you and Lily in a heartbeat. Losing you both has taught me that much. I love Lily as if she was my own daughter, and I would be proud to raise her with you, as a family.”

Emma felt tears brimming in her eyes. There was really only one answer—the one she had yearned to give from the moment Vivian first declared her love aloud for everyone to hear.

“Yes. Yes, Vivian, I forgive you. I want you back, too. Let's try again. We'll have to do it properly, though. If Lily is going to be yours too, she deserves to have both of her parents living together.”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Yes, I am.” It was a test. Emma expected Vivian to balk, but instead, Vivian gave her a wide smile.

“I’ll have my first suitcase packed tonight.”

Vivian squeezed Emma’s hand; her eyes brighter than Emma had ever seen them. She wasn’t sure who moved first, but the next thing she knew, they were leaning into each other, bringing their lips together in a kiss. It was sweet and chaste, a mere promise of what was to come, but it still sent tingles all through Emma’s body.

“Ew, gross! Stop it.”

Emma chuckled as she and Vivian pulled apart to see a thoroughly unimpressed Lily looking at them.

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“Sorry, sweetheart. But you’ll have to get used to seeing some kissing, because Vivian and I are going to be doing a lot of that from now on.”

Lily’s face brightened. “You’re not fighting anymore?”

“We’re not,” Emma confirmed. “Lily, how would you feel about Vivian coming to live with us?”

Neither of them could distinguish many words behind Lily’s squeals of excitement, but Emma and Vivian both got the idea.

“We should go out and celebrate.” Emma gestured to the trashcan. “It seems I owe you some new ice cream.”

“I won’t say no to that.”

Lily was so ecstatic that Emma felt like she might soon have to hold her down to stop her bouncing all the way down the park path—except she would do a poor job at it, because she was very close to floating away on the cloud of her own happiness.

Vivian convinced Emma and Lily to get dinner at a nearby Italian place; Lily only agreed when Vivian assured her that ice cream was on the dessert menu. Emma and Vivian held hands as they walked inside and sat next to each other, opposite Lily.

“There’s one other thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Emma couldn’t help the note of wariness in her own voice. As much as

she wanted this, it would take time to fully rebuild old bridges.

“It’s not a requirement at all,” Vivian said quickly. “And if you’re happy where you are, then you should by all means stay there... but I would love it if you could consider coming to work for me again.”

That took Emma off guard. “What about your current assistant?”

Vivian blushed. “I never got around to replacing you.”

“Vivian! You must have been working yourself sick.”

“I know, I know. Dr. Skye- my new therapist- has been on my case about it. I just wasn’t ready to let you go.”

Emma considered this. Truth be told, she would love to work with Vivian again. Alex was very nice, and Emma did enjoy her job with him, but his offices had never felt like a second home in the way Vivian’s had.

“I’ll have to talk to Alex. I’ll need to make sure I’m leaving him with someone good—I wouldn’t feel right about leaving so soon after being hired if I didn’t make sure I had a good replacement lined up. But yes, Vivian. Once I have the logistics sorted, I would love to come and work for you again.”

They kissed once more, longer and slower than before.

Lily heaved a put-upon sigh but didn’t interrupt. After a few seconds, Vivian and Emma parted.

“Right.” Vivian opened the menu right to the back, to the desserts page. “Let’s see what our ice cream options are for after dinner, shall we?”

“You promise you’ll be here tomorrow?”

“I promise,” Vivian assured Lily for the eleventh time. “We already stopped by my place to pack an overnight bag, remember? I’m not going anywhere tonight, and I’ll pack a bigger suitcase after work tomorrow.”

“Pinkie promise?”

“Pinkie promise.” Vivian hooked her finger with Lily’s, which seemed to satisfy her. She yawned.

“Bedtime for you.” Vivian kissed her forehead. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Lily.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.” Emma ran a hand down Lily’s cheek, but Lily didn’t seem to notice. She was already drifting off.

“You must be tired, too. It’s been a long day.”

Vivian was eyeing her in a way that Emma liked very much. “Actually, I don’t think I had enough dessert at the restaurant.”

“Really? Feeling greedy tonight, are you?”

“Very. It’s been a long time.”

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“It has.” Emma took Vivian’s hand and led her through to the bedroom. They closed the door and moved close to one another. Vivian rested her hands on Emma’s waist, and Emma looped her arms around Vivian’s neck.

“Kiss me,” Emma breathed.

And oh, did Vivian kiss her. The kiss stole the breath from Emma’s lungs, and just when she thought she might expire from lack of oxygen, Vivian breathed life back into her. Emma kissed Vivian like she was drowning and Vivian was air. Vivian kissed Emma like she was starving and Emma was an elaborate buffet.

Emma moaned as her body set itself alight from the inside. She needed Vivian, and she needed her now. Kissing wasn’t enough. She had to feel Vivian inside her to know that this was real.

“Vivian. I want you.”

“I’m yours. Whatever you want.”

Emma knew what she had been wanting and fantasizing about before when they were together. Something she really wanted and had wanted for a long time. She wasn’t sure if Vivian would go for it, but she was going to ask anyway.

“I want your whole hand inside me,” Emma whispered in her ear. “I want you to fist me.”

She heard Vivian swallow, as though unsure.

“Are you sure, Emma? I don’t want to hurt you. It isn’t something I’ve done before.”

“We’ll go slow,” Emma promised. “You’re not going to hurt me, Vivian. I’ll show you each step of the way. You build up gradually and use a lot of lube. You position your hand like this,” Emma shaped her hand into a duck bill, tucking her thumb into her palm and narrowing her knuckles. “See how it makes it easier?”

Emma looked up at her with her biggest puppy dog eyes. “I trust you,” she said.

Vivian met her eyes and smiled at her. “It sounds filthy. But.. I like it. Ok, let’s go for it. I’ll get the lube. You guide me.”

“Let’s get undressed. If we’re doing this, I’m going to make sure you’re so wet that between that and the lube and the magic hand position, it will be easy.”

“Trust me, wetness is not going to be a problem. I’m so turned on by you,” Emma growled.

Emma’s panties were already soaked and becoming more so by the second.

“Well, perhaps I should test that statement.”

“Yes, please.”

Emma stripped her clothes off, debating between getting them off as quickly as possible versus watching the alluring sight of Vivian removing her own clothing.

She opted for speed in the end. Her body was already making urgent demands of her, and it didn’t sound like Vivian was in hurry here.

“Lie back.”

Emma eagerly did as Vivian suggested, spreading her legs. Vivian gave her a long, slow lick. The feeling of Vivian's tongue running over her most sensitive parts had Emma arching up on the bed, desperate for more.

"Yes, just like that, Vivian."

To her dismay, Vivian moved up from her pussy, but that dismay ended quickly when she started pressing kisses to Emma's breasts.

"You are very wet... but I think you can do better."

"I can't! I need you now, Vivian."

Vivian merely hummed as she took one of Emma's nipples into her mouth. She wasn't playing fair. She knew how crazy it made Emma when her nipples were sucked. Emma reached a hand down to touch her clit while Vivian licked and sucked, soon driving her into a complete frenzy.

She could easily come right now, but Emma wanted to wait. She wanted to come with Vivian's whole hand inside her. She wanted to feel filled and stretched and owned by Vivian.

Emma regretfully removed her fingers from her clit, waiting for this sweet torture to be taken to the next level. She closed her eyes, relishing in the delicious sensations Vivian's tongue brought forth.

Emma didn't know how long Vivian kept her on the edge, but at some point, she brought a hand to Emma's thigh, caressing gently before moving to slide two fingers into Emma's waiting pussy.

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Emma didn't think she'd ever been this wet before. Vivian added lube and started pumping her fingers slowly in and out, twisting them perfectly on each outward motion so that she was brushing against Emma's G-spot.

"Vivian... I want your hand in me before I come. You're cutting it very, very close."

"You want to come just like that, hm?"

"So much," Emma breathed. "But I want your fist more."

"I want that too."

"Then hurry up!"

Vivian chuckled and obliged Emma with another two fingers. They filled her up perfectly, causing Emma's back to arch off the bed in pleasure at the sensation.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes! I want all of you."

Very slowly, Vivian tucked her thumb and began to push inside Emma.

"Are you ok?" she whispered and Emma's eyes were fixed on Vivian's. She trusted her totally. Emma nodded.

Emma could feel herself stretching as Vivian's knuckles pushed inside her. It was

slightly uncomfortable now, but not painful. She felt her body begin to relax and accept Vivian's hand.

"Yes, yes, yes, further!" Emma chanted, canting her hips forward slightly, giving Vivian better access.

Vivian kept pushing, ever so slowly, her knuckles pressing hard into Emma.

It was a little painful, and Emma was considering telling Vivian to stop, but the next moment, Vivian's knuckles breached the tightest part of her pussy, and Emma felt herself clenching around Vivian's wrist. She was filled entirely and she felt absolute pleasure flooding her whole body.

It had been many years since she had done this most intimate act. It was something she could only do when she totally loved and trusted someone. And it gave her more pleasure than anything else in the world. She felt pleasure flooding through her veins like the most beautiful drug in the world. She felt herself floating away on it.

"Fuck," she breathed. "Move your hand a bit, Vivian. Please."

Vivian slowly started moving her hand. Emma felt almost unbearably full, and it was the most delicious sensation she had ever experienced.

"Keep going." She was so close to exploding, but she wanted to feel more of this before she did. "Harder, please, Vivian. You don't need to be so careful—you're not hurting me."

Vivian took Emma at her word and went a bit harder. Pushing in and out of her. Emma saw a kaleidoscope of colors flash across her vision as her whole body felt owned by Vivian.

“Oh fuck, yes! YES,” she heard herself calling out.

Emma had been planning on touching her clitoris to finish herself off, but it turned out that she didn't need it. She felt herself clench wildly around Vivian's hand as she came harder than she had ever come in her life.

The orgasm roared through her, leaving Emma as little more than a puddle of satisfaction in its wake. It was the biggest orgasm she could remember having possibly ever. She was vaguely aware of Vivian slowly and carefully withdrawing her fist. She ached at the loss of it. Part of her had wanted to keep Vivian's hand inside of her forever.

Emma rolled over into Vivian's arms. She was still dizzy from her orgasm, but not enough that she didn't want to bring Vivian as much pleasure as Vivian had brought her.

“How do you want me, Vivian?”

“Any way. Every way. I just want you, Emma.”

That wasn't particularly helpful, but Emma still remembered what Vivian liked. She spread Vivian's legs and knelt between them. She dipped her head and started licking Vivian's clit, so lightly that the touch was barely there.

Fuck, I missed the taste of her.

Emma absorbed herself in the act of licking Vivian.

Vivian gasped and spread her legs wider, giving Emma better access. It had been a while since they were together, but Emma still remembered how to read Vivian. She knew the difference between delicious-torture frustration and this-isn't-fun-anymore

frustration.

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Vivian started to edge toward the latter sooner than Emma would have expected. She could tell by the way Vivian's legs started to tremble and how she clenched her toes into the sheet.

She quickly gave Vivian a firmer pressure with her tongue. It didn't take much. Less than a minute later, Vivian was tensing and quivering under Emma, crying out as she came. She shuddered through an orgasm longer than any Emma had ever seen her have before finally going limp.

Emma folded herself back into Vivian's arms. Their legs were tangled together and somewhere along the line, they had lost one of the pillows on the double bed—it was now lying on the floor, well out of reach. Emma let Vivian have the remaining pillow and rested her head on Vivian's shoulder instead.

"I love you," Emma murmured.

She tensed for a moment, hit by the sudden fear that history was going to repeat itself.

She needn't have worried.

"Love you too." Vivian kissed her cheek. "Goodnight, Emma."

Emma let out a long breath. "Goodnight, Vivian."

They fell asleep together that night. It was the first night of the rest of their lives together.

Epilogue

Vivian

“Ruby, we really do need to go.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. You’re always cranky at work if you don’t get your special time with your wife. You know, it’s a good thing you rescinded that rule about no office romance.”

Vivian felt herself going red, but Emma merely rolled her eyes. “Laugh it up, Ruby. I don’t see you getting any.”

Ruby spluttered over her glass of champagne. “You’d best watch out, Emma. I was Vivian’s personal assistant first. Maybe I’ll decide that I want to work for her exclusively.”

“If it doesn’t work out with you helping both of us, I’ll be happy to get my own assistant.”

Ruby pouted. “You’re no fun.”

“Well, I’ve just been promoted to vice CEO of Sterling Enterprises. It’s a big job. Perhaps I’ll need to focus more on work and less on entertaining you people.”

There were chuckles all around. Almost everyone in the office was here, as well as all of Emma and Vivian’s other friends, most of whom were parents at Lily’s school.

Everyone had wanted to be here at the celebration party for Emma’s promotion.

“Come on. Let’s go home.” Vivian’s soft murmur was for Emma alone. Emma took

her hand and squeezed it gently before disengaging.

“Goodnight, everyone! We’ll see you on Monday.”

There was a chorus of goodbyes, after which Vivian and Emma were free to leave.

Lily had dozed off watching TV. Vivian wanted to carry her to bed, but Lily had recently been protesting to such treatment, insisting that she wasn’t a child anymore. She was set to start high school next week.

“Lily. You can’t sleep here, sweetheart, you’ll hurt your neck. Time to go to bed.”
Vivian shook her gently.

Lily yawned and opened her eyes blearily. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi. It’s time for bed.”

Lily nodded without protest, only half awake. She wandered through to her bedroom and closed the door.

“Well, that was easy,” Emma commented. “She always goes to bed easier when it’s you asking.”

“Yeah, but she always does her homework easier when it’s you asking.”

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“It’s because you’re too easily distracted. You let her draw you into business talk, and by the time dinner is ready, she doesn’t have anything done.”

“Guilty,” Vivian chuckled. “I guess it’s a good thing that she has both of us, then.”

“Yeah, it is.”

Vivian had legally adopted Lily two years ago. She and Emma were now equally her mothers in the eyes of the law as well as the eyes of their family and friends. Vivian and Emma made sure to honour Alison at every chance they got. Vivian in no way wanted to replace Alison or minimise her as Lily’s mom, she just wanted to take care of Emma and Lily.

“It’s late. We should get to bed. We promised to take Lily shopping tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Vivian pulled Emma in for a quick kiss before heading to their bedroom. They were both too tired from a good but long evening to do anything more than exchange a few kisses before they folded into each other’s arms.

“I’m proud of you, Mrs. Sterling.”

“You’re the one who promoted me.”

“Because you earned it. You’ve taken on more and more responsibility over the years. In practice, you already were vice CEO. All I did was put a name to it.”

“Well, I’m proud of you, too.”

“For recognizing your brilliance?”

Emma snorted. “Sure, that too, but mostly, I’m proud of the woman you’ve become. Remember when I met you? The Ice Queen? Who would ever have guessed what a warm, loving woman you’d evolve into, surrounded by people who care for you and who you care for in equal measure?”

“You did.”

“I only hoped. You made that hope a reality.”

“Remember that day? When you agreed to try again? I promised then that I’d never stop trying to be the kind of woman who deserves you.”

“You have always deserved me.”

“Perhaps not in the past, but I think I do a fairly good job at it now.”

“Agree to disagree on the past, my love.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go to sleep, Emma.”

Emma laughed softly. “Goodnight, Vivian.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Emma Sterling. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Vivian had been wrong before. She didn’t need her career to be happy. She just needed Emma and Lily. Her career was the delicious chocolate icing on top of the cake, but she had everything she truly needed right here.