



# The Grump's Assistant

**Author:** *Cameron Hart*

**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** The beastly brute in his dreary corner office is about to get an unexpected ray of sunshine...

Vincent doesn't have time for yet another nameless, faceless assistant to drop the ball, so when his newest hire doesn't show up, he decides to call and give her a piece of his mind.

Juniper just bought a used iPhone from a friend of a friend, when the opportunity of a lifetime rings. All she did is answer. And lie a little bit about who she is. Now, Juniper has a job that actually pays the bills, including her mother's expensive cancer treatments.

When Vincent comes to the rescue of his new assistant, she breaks down his walls with her warmth and sweetness. He's not sure what to do with these foreign emotions, but Juniper soothes the darkness he's carried around for far too long.

These two are night and day, stormy and sunshine, beauty and beast, but their connection defies all logic. Will he still want to keep her after he finds out she lied to get the job?

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**Author's Note:** This book was previously published as part of the Cocky Hero Club library. Some details have been changed and an extra epilogue has been added, but the content remains largely the same.

What to expect from a Cameron Hart book: Curvy heroines, protective alphas, lots of heat, and plenty of sweet. No cheating, safe, guaranteed HEA!

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

1

JUNIPER

“How’d you do for tips tonight?” Gabby asks.

I grab the bills out of my apron pocket, leafing through them and frowning. Fifty bucks. My stomach drops and I get dizzy just thinking about the bills piling up at home. That’s not my coworker’s problem though, so I do what I always do. Paste on a smile and pretend everything is okay.

“Every little bit helps, right?” I say cheerfully as I gather my things from the employee locker room.

Gabby nods and sighs, folding her meager tip money up and shoving it into her purse. “That’s true. Have you heard anything about switching to the morning shift? Tips are way better, especially on the weekends.”

“Not yet, but hopefully soon.” My voice is chipper, but my chest is growing tighter by the second. I put in my request for a shift change weeks ago, but Ron, the owner of Big Ron’s Diner, hasn’t acknowledged it.

I was counting on getting on a new schedule, not only for better tips, but so I can be there for my mom during the night. She’s battling lymphoma, which weakens her immune system, making her vulnerable to all kinds of infections and illnesses. As if cancer in itself isn’t enough.

We're saving up for radiation treatment, but it's going to take years at this rate to get the money we need. I don't know if Mom has that much time.

"You okay?" Gabby's voice and soft hand on my shoulder brings me back into the present. My co-worker puts on a frosty front for most people, but just beneath the surface is a genuine warmth few get to experience. When Gabby cares for someone, she's all in. It just might take a bit to break down those walls.

"Yeah, of course," I say with a smile. "Just tired. You know how these graveyard shifts are."

She nods, but her beautiful emerald eyes see right through me. "Here," she says, taking half of her tip money and shoving it into my hand. "You helped me out with a few of my tables tonight. You deserve it."

"Absolutely not! You need the money just as much as I do."

"Take it," Gabby insists. "We're all just trying to survive out here, yeah? I can't do much, but I can spare twenty bucks. Let me help."

I blink away tears and nod, adding her tip money to my own. "Thank you," I tell her sincerely. "One day you're going to have to let someone help you for a change."

Gabby furrows her brow before putting on her coat. "I don't need any help. I've been fine on my own for years now." She tips her chin up as if to prove she's conquered loneliness once and for all. Just like she saw through me, I can see through the lie she tells herself and others.

"Maybe it's time to raise the bar from finetogood? Maybe evenhappy?"

My friend stares at me, her green eyes shadowed in thought. For one brief moment,

she lets me see her heart. Without speaking a word, I know exactly what she's thinking. Gabby doesn't know what happiness feels like, so how can she hope for something she's never experienced?

As quickly as it appeared, the crack in her armor closes.

"Happy?" she repeats. "I can't afford happiness on this paycheck."

I give her a quick hug, catching her off-guard. "Happiness doesn't have a price tag," I whisper. "It comes from being content with yourself."

Gabby clears her throat and steps away from me, zipping up her coat and shoving her hands in her pockets. She's retreating into herself, away from me, away from people who want good things for her. I wish she'd let more people see her softer side, though I understand the need to wear independence as a shield.

We say our goodbyes and I thank her again for her generosity. Gabby doesn't acknowledge it, of course, but I want her to hear my gratitude all the same.

I step outside, breathing in the early morning air of the city. I take the hair tie out of my hair and let the red curls spring free and fall over my shoulders. Massaging my temples, I inhale a few times, bracing myself for the day ahead.

I just got off an eight-hour shift at Big Ron's Diner, ten p.m. to six a.m. It's a crappy shift, with the diner filled with either drunk people wanting something greasy or truckers looking for a cup of coffee and pie. Neither group tips very well unless you're flirty and skinny. Me? Well, my tips speak for themselves. I'm not flirty, and I'm certainly not skinny.

I want nothing more than to collapse into bed and cocoon myself in blankets, but that will have to wait. Right now, I'm on my way to Brooklyn to meet a friend's cousin's

girlfriend to see if I can buy her phone. This was the only time our schedules lined up to meet.

Being broke in New York City means taking advantage of all the connections you have to get cheap and free things. And right now, I need a phone. Mine went for a swim in the sink one night when I was doing dishes. I've had a burner phone for a few weeks, but I need something permanent, especially since I'll be making appointments and coordinating doctor visits.

I shove down the anxious thoughts, knowing all my problems will still be there later this afternoon when I'm staring up at my ceiling, begging for sleep to come.

Pushing my way through the mob of early morning commuters, I make it to the bus stop just in time to catch a ride to Brooklyn. I'm supposed to meet Jennifer at her favorite bakery, The Mad Batter. We worked out a deal for me to purchase her phone for a hundred dollars, and she'd keep it on her plan until the end of the month so I can deal with the transfer and other things later.

Normally, I'd be skeptical of such an offer, but I know her. Kind of. I mean, I've never met her, but she's connected through the grapevine to other people I know, so that has to mean something, right? God, I hope it's not too good of a deal to be true.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:42 pm*

I arrive at The Mad Batter just after six-thirty. The vibe in here is eclectic and fun, with a checkered floor, a few cuckoo clocks, an assortment of teacups, and mismatched tables and chairs. It's a more refined version of Alice in Wonderland, and I love it.

"I've got another early bird this morning!" the woman behind the counter says by way of greeting. She's absolutely gorgeous with midnight black hair and wide hazel eyes. "Oh, I don't recognize you." A warm, genuine smile spreads across her face. "Welcome to The Mad Batter, I'm the owner, Sienna."

"I'm—"

"Juniper?" another voice sounds from behind me.

I turn to see a leggy blonde in booty shorts and a tight tank top. She's adorned with huge designer sunglasses, bright red lips, and what appear to be real diamond studs in her ears.

"That's me. Are you Jennifer?"

The woman nods.

"Aw, Juniper and Jennifer! I love it," Sienna says from behind the counter. I notice she has a gorgeous sleeve of tattoos. I wish I were brave enough to get beautiful ink like hers. "What can I get you ladies this morning?"

Jennifer steps right up to the counter and orders some over-the-top coffee beverage

with more modifiers than I even knew existed. I palm the tip money I got from my shift, not liking the idea of using it on an expensive beverage or bakery item. I'm sure they are worth every penny, but I don't have a lot of pennies to spare these days.

"And for you?" Sienna asks.

I look down at the bills in my hand, and then peruse the menu, looking for the cheapest thing. "I'll have a small mug of black coffee."

Sienna lifts an eyebrow, as if she knows I really want every single item in the bakery case, but she doesn't say anything as she turns to get my drink.

"First cup is on the house," Sienna says, sliding the mug across the counter.

"What? No, I can pay," I insist.

"Nope," Sienna retorts with a smile. "Oh! I almost forgot. First timers get a free pastry with their coffee." I'm about to protest, but Sienna cuts me off. "Either you pick which one you want or I'll pick for you."

I narrow my eyes at her, but then grin. "The strawberries and cream scone sounds amazing," I reply. Sienna nods approvingly. "Thank you so much. I'll leave a tip," I say as I reach into my pocket for cash.

"No tips since I'm the owner. If you come back and see one of the other workers, then we definitely encourage tipping. Unless it's a tall guy with brown hair and a mischievous smile. He's my husband, and he's not hurting for money."

"Talking about me again, kitten?" The deep voice comes from somewhere back in the kitchen. It has an undertone of laughter to it, making Sienna roll her eyes and grin.

“Mostly good things, I promise!” she shouts back.

I chuckle and thank her again before sitting down at the table Jennifer selected. The phone I’m purchasing is lying on the table, along with the charger. She’s typing away on a different phone, one studded with rhinestones.

“So, we good? One hundred is what Taylor told Scott, who told me.” She barely looks up from her screen as she talks to me.

“Yes, one hundred for the phone. And, um, are you able to keep me on your plan until the end of the month?” I hate asking, but that was a huge draw for me. Other than the cheap iPhone, of course.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you want. No big deal. I just need to get away from it all, you know?” Jennifer says dramatically. “Daddy won’t pay for my spring break since I skipped out on a job he lined up for me. But, like, what did he expect? I can’t work in an office.” The look of disgust twisting up her face is almost comical. “I just need to find something I’m passionate about. Or someone.” Jennifer giggles. “Hence spring break. This right here,” she says, holding up the phone she’s selling, “is gas money for the week.” She puffs out her chest as if she’s very proud of her scheming ways. I won’t ruin it for her, or myself, by telling her she could probably sell it for three times the amount I’m about to pay.

“Well, thank you so much for?—”

Jennifer’s phone rings and she answers right away, holding her hand up to cut me off. “Hey, babe. Yeah, I’m just finishing up here. Be home soon!”

She stands up, swiping the cash from my hand in one fluid motion. Adjusting her sunglasses, Jennifer blows me a kiss and sashays out of the bakery. I look over my shoulder at the woman behind the counter, who looks about as impressed with Miss



Thang as I am. Sienna winks at me and I smile back. If I get the day shift at work and make better tips, I'll have to come here more often.

I finish up my drink and thank Sienna again before heading back out into the chaotic New York morning. The exchange with Jennifer took all of ten minutes, and while she was rude, I'm thankful it didn't drag on and on. I'm exhausted, my feet throb, my bones ache, and I feel like I'm eighty, not twenty-two.

I make it to the nearest bus stop and pull out my new phone, pleasantly surprised that it has a full battery. Jennifer didn't give me much time to inspect the phone, but everything appears to be working just fine. I Google the bus schedule, sighing with relief to see the next one heading back to my neighborhood comes in just a few minutes.

I'm about to shove the phone back in my bag when it rings. Startled, I hit the answer button without thinking. I just wanted it to stop making noise.

“Hel—”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:42 pm*

“Where are you?” a rough voice cuts me off.

“Um, I think you have the wrong number.”

There’s a brief pause, as if the man had never even considered that possibility. But then he grunts out, “No, I’m right. You were supposed to be here to fill out paperwork thirty minutes ago, Jennifer.”

Oh crap, this guy is looking for the lady who just sold me her phone. “Actually, this is Juniper, and I?—”

“Juniper. Jennifer. Whatever your name is. Did you read through the contract HR emailed?” I’m about to jump in and tell him he’s got the wrong girl, but the arrogant, growly man won’t let me get a word in edgewise. “Being late on your first day isn’t the way to impress me. I need an assistant who will anticipate my needs and meet them before I even have to say anything.”

“That seems like a ridiculously high standard,” I mumble. My hand shoots out to cover my mouth, as if I could somehow pull back the words and keep them locked inside. Why did I say that? I should hang up. I really should. But something he said has a plan forming in my mind.

“And I don’t intend to lower them for you, Juniper.”

Oh, Lord, why did I feel each syllable of my name as it rolled off his tongue? The low, gravelly tone of voice settles somewhere deep in my core, and I swear I can feel my erratic heartbeat in my clit. I mean, what the actual hell is going on?

Clearing my throat, I try to shoo away inappropriate thoughts about the man on the other end of the phone. I don't know anything about him other than he's grumpy, growly, and a perfectionist. Oh, and he needs an assistant. If this is the job Jennifer skipped out on for spring break, I can understand. This guy is definitely a jerk, but I think I can handle him better than my current boss, who tells me to wear tighter shirts to make more tips.

"Of course not," I say, putting on my best waitress voice. The one I use with difficult customers who are determined to find something wrong with their food. "Nor would I ask you to. Just an observation." My tone is light, and hopefully it's working on him. I can't see his face, but I swear I can feel the tension, even through the phone.

"Keep your observations to yourself, Ms. Harper."

"It's Ms. Leigh, actually," I correct him without thinking.

He grunts, a sound I think he makes more often than not. "Fucking HR screw-ups," he mutters.

I hear what sounds like a pen scratching across paper, presumably crossing out my name.

"Did they even tell you where to show up today?"

I feel bad throwing anyone under the bus, but I'll go in and explain everything at the end of the day. Hopefully, I can convince this man, whoever he is, that I can be the best assistant ever.

Silence stretches between us, though I can still hear his breathing. "It's not their fault. I, uh... I lost the email with all of the information," I lie. It rolls off my tongue easily enough, though my stomach twists at the thought of deceiving anyone. "I'm so sorry.

I was trying to find my way to your office but got a bit turned around,” I ramble on as I watch my bus roll away from the stop. I have a new destination now. As soon as I get the address.

He still doesn’t speak, but I can feel the weight of everything he’s not saying. It’s a long shot for him to give me a chance to make a good impression, but I have to try. An executive assistant job surely pays more than overnights at the diner.

“You have one day to prove yourself worthy of a second chance.”

I bite my tongue, swallowing back all the things I want to say. Prove myself worthy? Who does this guy think he is? The man answers my silent question when he continues.

“As the owner, CEO, and brainpower behind Sloan Investments, I need a reliable assistant. One who will show up on time and do what they’re told. Without sassing me,” he adds. “Is that something you’re capable of?”

You don’t even know me! You have no idea what I’m capable of, what I’ve been through, what I still go through every day. Also, did you just say you’re the brain behind the company? How arrogant can you be?

I don’t say any of that, of course. Instead, I focus on the pieces of information he gives me. Sloan Investments. I’d have to be living under a rock not to recognize that name. It’s one of the biggest financial institutions in the city. The name is plastered all over buildings and the news is always reporting on stocks going up and up and up. I don’t even pay attention to that stuff, but it’s successful enough to be a household name around the city.

“Vincent Sloan,” I whisper to myself, remembering his first name. I also remember a photo of the man himself on the cover of Forbes. He topped one of those lists about

the most stupidly rich and handsome men in the country. As if they need more praise and bigger egos. Vincent stood tall, proud, and unshakable in that photo. Like nothing could touch him. He didn't need to tell anyone he was powerful; his stance and dark, perceptive eyes said it all. I remember thick, dark hair that matched his beard, which is uncharacteristic for the slick business people in the upper echelons of society.

A half groan, half snarl leaves his lips, and I wonder if he's mad or in pain. Maybe he thinks I'm being rude by using his first name.

"I-I mean, Mr. Sloan."

Another tortured sound comes through the line, though it fades away as if he's pulling the phone away from his face.

"Good, at least you remembered my name. Maybe not so worthless after all."

"How d—" I inhale deeply, forcing the reprimand back down. Instead of asking him how dare he insinuate I, or any human being, could be worthless, I switch gears. "How can I be of assistance today, Mr. Sloan? I'll get everything sorted with HR when I get there, then I'm all yours." I'm all yours? Why did I say that?

Another rough, jagged sound rumbles through the phone, and I press my thighs together, trying to rid myself of the tingly feeling coursing through my body.

## Page 4

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“Don’t bother coming into the office,” he snaps.

“Please, Vincent. Uh, I mean, Mr. Sloan. Let me prove my...worth.” I choke on the word, hating that I’m groveling. This job could mean serious money. Money my mom and I need. Money that could save her life. So, if I have to suck up to the most arrogant brute in the business world, so be it.

“Fuck,” he swears under his breath. After heaving out a huge sigh, he rattles off an address. I place my bag on the bench at the bus stop I’m still standing at, digging through it to find a pen and something to write on. “That’s for dry cleaning. I have an account there. Don’t let Mr. Santori rip me off. That’s your first task. Let me know if you’re successful.”

Then he hangs up.

Bastard.

Looking down at the scribbled address, I take a deep breath and scurry toward the train station. It’s a long ride to the Upper East Side, but I’m determined to keep this job. For the money, of course. And maybe a little bit so I can rise to every single one of Mr. Sloan’s challenges and show him he can’t just treat people like trash. Seems like a win-win to me.

2

VINCENT

I should fire her.

I should call her back and tell her not to bother with the dry cleaning. This whole situation is already messed up with HR, whatever the fuck happened there, and now she's late. And sassy.

And I hate it. Or, I should hate it. No one talks back to me. Admittedly, not many people talk to me in general, but when they do, it's with the respect I've earned over the years.

Not Ms. Leigh, however. She accused me of having high standards, as if that were a bad thing. Of course, I expect perfection from my employees. I expect it from myself, too. Juniper better get used to that if she wants to keep this job.

No, not Juniper. Ms. Leigh. No use getting too familiar with the woman who will likely be out of a job by the end of the day. A twinge of something pierces my chest, but I clear my throat and ignore it. Why does the thought of sending her away make it hard to breathe?

It's just stress. I usually thrive off of the frantic energy in the investment world. Everyone is out to make a buck, and I happen to be very good at turning other people's money into more money, while taking a percentage for myself. Lately, though, I've been feeling... Well, that's just it. I've been feeling.

And I don't like it.

Drumming my fingers on my desk, I clear my throat and look around my office. Navy blue walls, solid oak furniture, and not a trace of art or personal touches, just the way I like it. This is a room with no distractions. It does little good for me now though as I try to focus on the mountain of work in front of me.

Numbers, I understand. Algorithms, patterns, probability formulas, I can easily figure out. Once you have one piece of the puzzle, the rest fall into place. I happen to make a lot of money off of being the first person to find all the pieces of the puzzle.

People, on the other hand, are infuriating and not worth my time. I talk to clients only when I absolutely have to, usually in a quarterly meeting to report how fat their bank accounts are. Everything else is handled by the cogs in the great machine I've built, including hiring decisions. I've never met Juni— Ms. Leigh, and I'll likely never meet her. Even if she stays on, I don't interact with my employees face to face on a regular basis. Phone and email only. That's my policy.

There it is again. That tightness in my chest. I grind the heel of my hand down on the sore spot, hoping to somehow wipe it away. This...feeling has been lodged in my throat for weeks now, but it gets worse when I think about sending the sassy woman with no respect for my time away.

Like I said, I don't care much for other people. My circle of trusted individuals is very small. In fact, there's really just one person, Cutter Morgan, and we only talk a few times a year. He's the only person I take advice from, and that's probably because he doesn't offer it very often.

Cutter and I met almost fifteen years ago when we were freshmen at NYU. We shared a dorm room, and though we're opposites in a lot of ways, Cutter and I actually got along. The two of us differ on almost everything, from what motivates us to how we dress. I've always been clean-cut and focused on climbing the corporate ladder, so to speak. Cutter, on the other hand...

I can picture his ripped jeans, messy hair, and perma-scowl now. He moved to New York City from his small mountain town on the other side of the country, and regretted the decision almost instantly. I convinced him to stick it out for the rest of the year and really give this city a chance, but ultimately I knew the mountain man



would return home when classes let out.

Cutter went on his own journey while I built an empire. I don't care about the money, as long as it keeps flowing. What I'm really interested in is figuring out the systems in place and using them to my advantage. Nothing illegal, of course. I'm just playing the game, and I'm very good at it.

But lately, I've been restless. No, that's not the right word. I'm agitated and on edge, but there's something else. Something deeper. Something I don't want to name, but can't ignore forever.

I'm lonely.

There. I said it. "Weak fucking piece of shit," I snarl at myself before slamming my laptop shut. I don't need anyone. My old man would laugh at me if he knew the thoughts flying through my head. He's told me throughout the years that the only thing holding him back from reaching greatness was being saddled with a family.

When I first told Cutter that sentiment when we were in college, he said it was the most tragic thing he's ever heard. To me, however, it always made sense. You only have so many hours in each day, and a limited number of days in this life. Ergo, if you want to be great at something, you must sacrifice everything else.

I've never had a problem with that before. All of my time and energy has gone into building up Sloan Investments, and I don't regret it one bit. Sometimes, though, I want... more.

Not more money. Not notoriety. Certainly not another photoshoot for most blah blah bachelor of the year. That was a nightmare. I only recently stopped receiving calls and emails from women who want me to put a ring on their finger and end the bachelor life. I never responded to a single one.

No, I want something meaningful. Something real. Something... someone who sees the man behind the numbers. Whoever he is. I sure as hell don't know, but maybe the right person could bring him out.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:42 pm*

My cell phone rings, making me spit out another curse. “What?” I snap. I’ve already wasted enough time between talking with Ms. Leigh and spiraling this morning.

“Mr. Sloan, it’s Juniper.”

That voice. Christ, I thought I was just imagining how sweet and rich it sounded earlier, but no. Hearing my name tumble from her lips has a certain part of me hardening to the point of pain. The throbbing fucker in my pants hasn’t risen to the occasion in years. One word from Juniper’s honeyed voice, however, and I fear I may never go soft again.

“Yes,” I bite out, grinding my teeth together to push back the wave of lust threatening to drown me.

“How’s your morning going?”

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it. How’s my morning going?

“Why?” I ask before I can think better of it. No one asks me questions, let alone trivial ones. Who cares how my morning is as long as I’m making money?

Juniper sighs and I wonder what her breath would feel like against my skin. Jesus, I need to get it together. This isn’t like me. Maybe I need a vacation.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot earlier and I wanted to break the ice a bit,” she says easily. I hear cars buzzing by in the background, along with the usual chorus of honking that comes with traffic in New York City. “I acknowledge my part in you

having a rough start, but I hope I didn't ruin your day."

"You don't have the power to ruin my day," I inform her in an icy tone.

She answers my gruffness with the softest, sweetest little giggle. It sounds like fucking tinkling bells or some shit. I hate how it eases the tension in my shoulders and makes my heart clang against my ribcage.

"I beg to differ, Mr. Sloan."

Fuck me, every time she calls me that I want to jump through the phone and strip her naked. I have no clue what she looks like, but that doesn't seem to matter to my unruly dick.

"I happen to have three very expensive and pristinely clean suits that could easily find their way to a Goodwill."

I growl and open my mouth to yell at her, but she continues.

"Kidding!" Juniper says with another little laugh. "I wouldn't give your suits away. Especially after talking to that sweet old man and getting you a discount."

She's teasing me. I can't say that's ever happened before. The rest of her sentence catches up to me. "Mr. Santori? Sweet? Did you go to the wrong address?"

Juniper sighs, though I think she's more amused than upset. I shouldn't know that about her, but I feel connected to her somehow. She's intriguing, that's for sure. It's been a long damn time since anything or anyone has interested me.

"I went to the correct address,thankyouverymuch," she says with all the attitude she can muster.

Why doesn't that piss me off? I told her I expected her to do her job without sassing me. Then again, she told me I have ridiculously high expectations.

"And I had a chat with Mr. Santori. Honestly, he's not that scary. Grumpy, for sure, but you just have to know how to get him to open up. Find some common ground, you know?"

"And what do you and a seventy-year-old man who owns a dry cleaning business have in common?" I didn't mean to ask the question. It just slipped out. Clicking and unclicking the pen in my free hand, I wait for her response. It irks me, how much I want to hear her voice.

"Italy!" Juniper exclaims. I can hear her smile. It's absurd, I know, but true. "Did you know Mr. Santori immigrated to America when he was just sixteen? I've always wanted to go to Italy, and he was eager to tell me about his home country. Plus, now I have the inside scoop on the best hidden gems in Milan."

I grunt, not sure what to do with her words. Mr. Santori is notorious for two things. First, owning the best and fastest dry cleaners in the city. And second, for not speaking to his customers. Most people think he either doesn't know English and never cared to learn. Others think his store is a front for the mob and he's sworn to silence. Now I know the truth. The old man likes people as much as I do. He also seems to have a soft spot for snarky, nosey women.

"Anyway, I have good news. I floated the idea of a rewards program by Mr. Santori. You know, like coffee shops have? For every ten drinks you buy, you get one for free. Only, in this case, it would be articles of clothing."

"Hmm," I hum, trying to sound bored. Truthfully, it's impressive. I can't let her know that though. It's her first day, after all. I wouldn't want my new assistant getting a big head.

“He agreed it would be a great way to reward returning customers and to incentivize others to keep their business with him.” She pauses as if waiting for my praise. The fucking crazy thing is, I want to give it to her. I don’t, of course, but the desire is new and terrifying. “Anyway, you’re the first customer to receive the discount. Mr. Santori actually gave me your entire order for free since I helped him come up with the idea.”

“What? Free?” Who the hell is this woman and how did she make that happen? I mean, I know she just told me, but I can hardly believe it.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said,” she teases.

“What did I say about sassing me?” I need to get things back under control.

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“I believe you said you expected me to perform my duties sans sass. But I went above and beyond, don’t you think? Doesn’t clearing a six-hundred-dollar dry cleaning bill earn me just a little bit of sass?”

The corner of my mouth tips up in the hint of a smirk. Goddamn, this woman.

“P.S., six hundred dollars? To clean suits? You could buy a new one for that price.”

“The suits cost ten grand each.”

I hear her quick intake of air, and I imagine her clutching her imaginary pearls. Then I imagine all the sounds she’d make if I stripped her down and ran my tongue over every inch of her body. I’d stop her rambling with a devastating kiss, filling her mouth with eager strokes of my tongue until she’s too weary with desire to talk back to me.

“Well, every little bit helps,” Juniper responds once she’s recovered. The way she says it makes me think it’s a favorite phrase of hers. Maybe one she tells herself over and over again.

An insane, overwhelming need surges through me, clogging my throat as a growl sits trapped in my chest. I don’t want her to just scrape by. I don’t want her collecting little pieces, I want her to have the whole damn world.

Jesus. I should fire her. This is dangerous, uncharted territory.

“Anyway, I’ll drop these off with you and then get my next assignment?”

“No,” I bark. I can’t see her. I don’t know that I could hold myself back from the confusing urges welling up inside me. At the same time, I can’t get rid of her. Not until I figure out the hold she has on me. “Give the dry cleaning to Rhonda, at the front desk. Then I need you to pick up a triple shot cappuccino and a boysenberry cream scone from La Dolce Vita.”

“Boysenberry cream, huh? I never would have guessed you have a sweet tooth.”

“That’s neither here nor there. Text me when you’re on your way back with my food.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” she says like a soldier to a commanding officer.

I’m about to reprimand her, but that damn tinkling laughter floats through the phone, softening everything in me. Well, everything except for one very stubborn organ.

“I just wanted to say, thank you for giving me another chance. I’d like to come see you at the end of the day and get all the paperwork sorted out.”

“No.” The word physically pains me as it leaves my lips, but I can’t see her. Not yet. She’s messing with my head, and other parts of me. I need a bit more information on her, need to be the one in control instead of the other way around. “In fact, you should know right now that I don’t often see my employees. I text and email, calling when absolutely necessary. But my job is about the numbers. The trends. I need solitude, and that solitude must be protected. That will be part of your tasks - not bothering me and not letting anyone else bother me, either.”

She’s silent for so long, I wonder if she hung up. I never apologize, and I’m not going to start now. Besides, I didn’t say anything to her that I haven’t also said to every single one of my assistants. They are faceless to me. As long as the cogs in the machine are working smoothly, there’s no need to interact with anyone. I like it



that way.

Really. I do.

“I understand,” Juniper finally responds. “But I have the job?” She projects an air of confidence, but I hear the slight tremble in her voice. Christ, this woman is cracking me wide open, making me feel wild and protective. She needs a job. I need an assistant. It’s not about her, specifically. It’s about me.

Right. Keep telling yourself that.

“Yes.”

She lets out an excited shriek, followed by boisterous laughter. A horn honks in the background, and I can barely make out someone shouting. “I got the job!” Juniper exclaims, her voice a bit faded, as if she pulled the phone away to tell someone else.

“Whoopdie-fuckin’-do,” another voice says, this one gruff and weathered. Slightly slurred, too, as if the man has been drinking.

I want to rip his head off for talking to my Juniper that way. Fuck. Myassistant. That’s what I meant. An insult to her is an insult to me, as the head of the company.

“Well, that was just rude,” she mumbles into the phone. My lips do that thing again. It’s almost like a smile, but not quite. “Anyway, thank you, Mr. Sloan. You won’t regret this, I promise. I’ll try to tone down the sass.”

I grunt, swallowing down my response. I like her sass. Her feisty attitude. Her disregard for my position of power. Fuck. What have I gotten myself into?

## JUNIPER

“Look at us, both moving on to bigger and better things,” Gabby says, flashing me a rare excited smile. “This place won’t know what to do without us.”

Ron, my boss at the diner, was shocked when I walked into his office and quit. He was even more shocked when Gabby walked in after me and did the same thing.

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We both agreed to finish out the rest of our shifts on the schedule, which meant four days of trying to grab sleep whenever I could between running errands for Mr. Sloan and doing my overnight shift at the diner. I just finished up my last shift, and I'm dead on my feet. Today is Friday, so I just have to get through one more day of doing Mr. Sloan's bidding, and then I'll have the entire weekend to sleep. Thank god.

The only thing I'll miss about my job at the diner is working with Gabby.

My friend squeezes my hand but I need a hug for this momentous occasion. Gabby is stiff at first, then relaxes and hugs me back. It makes me sad to think she either doesn't like hugs or never had any growing up. I give her a final squeeze and take a step back.

"I'm so proud of you for getting your real estate license and applying for all of those jobs," I tell her. "Where is it you're going again?"

"Top Spot Realty in Hope Mountain, Colorado," she announces. "They are going to pay for me to take the test to get my license in Colorado, then assuming I pass, I'll be out of here for good."

"You've worked so hard for this, Gabby. I hope it's everything you're looking for," I tell her truthfully. "Promise me you'll still call and text?"

"Of course I'll call. I don't have any other friends," she says with an eye roll. "Now get on out of here before Ron tries to make you work one last shift."

I nod and wave goodbye, hoping everything works out for my friend. She deserves so

much more than the rough start she's had in life. I have no doubt she can take care of herself no matter where she lives, but my secret wish for her is that she'll find someone who will support her and show her it's okay to be vulnerable.

As I step outside into the cool early morning air, I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, feeling the weight of being an underpaid waitress fall off my shoulders.

And then my phone pings, letting me know my assistant job has begun.

Busy day today. Quarterly meetings are coming up soon. I emailed you transcripts and notes that need to be organized, collated, and printed.

The text goes on to list my errands for the day as well as a few other tasks. First, however, this girl needs some caffeine and a change of clothes. Stat.

Twelve freaking hours later, it's nearly seven p.m. and I'm starving, exhausted, and aching everywhere. Mr. Sloan must be hungry and tired as well. None of my errands included lunch or even coffee. The man must be in the thick of it if he didn't ask me to grab his standard triple shot cappuccino. He usually has me set his drink outside of his door and text him when it's there. Seriously, the man likes his privacy.

However strange he is, we've settled into a little routine, Vincent and I. Sorry, Mr. Sloan. He's already corrected me multiple times. I get that it's more professional that way, but it's also impersonal. I mean, I pick up the man's dry cleaning and have access to his calendar. Plus, I got him a dry cleaning discount, and I always keep a constant supply of boysenberry cream scones. That should earn me first-name status, in my opinion. Then again, Mr. Sloan does have those ridiculously high standards of his.

My stomach lets out another loud, disgruntled growl, and I decide enough is enough. Scrolling through my phone of available take-out options, I pick an old favorite that's

close by and start heading that way. Mr. Sloan may not have asked for dinner, but that's what he's getting. I'm supposed to anticipate his needs, right? That's what he told me over the phone that first day. I'd like to think I've more than proven myworth, though I still hate that phrase.

Of course, he'd never admit I'm doing a good job. I've learned the only time Mr. Sloan talks to any of his employees is to either hand out more tasks or tell them what they're doing wrong. He's sparse on praise. At least, I've never been on the receiving end of it. I wonder if he's just that aloof or if no one meets his expectations.

I should be annoyed, but honestly, it makes me feel sorry for him. Mr. Sloan must be lonely all the way up there in his high rise, surrounded by wealth, disappointment, and nothing else.

Stepping into the little hole-in-the-wall burger joint, Burgatory, I get a whiff of fresh burgers on the grill and fries sprinkled with their signature spice blend. Like a lot of places in the city, this hidden gem looks questionable on the outside, and the inside, too. But one bite of the best burger in the whole universe will erase all of that.

My mouth waters as I look over the menu. Double Royal Cheeseburger with bacon and blue cheese, Luau Burger with pineapple, Canadian bacon, and spicy BBQ... the list goes on and on. I'm not ashamed to admit I've had every burger on this menu over the years, and it's still hard to decide which one to get.

Once I've decided on the Taco Burger, I peruse the menu for Mr. Sloan. I nearly snort out a laugh at the thought of Forbes' most eligible millionaire bachelor in a ten thousand-dollar suit stuffing his face full of a greasy burger. However, if there's one thing I've learned in my time working with the annoyingly formal Mr. Sloan, it's that he doesn't like waste. Therefore, I know if I drop off a burger for him, he'll feel obligated to eat it. Or maybe give it away, but that would require him actually talking to someone.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Denny, the owner, says in greeting. He’s a heavyset man in his early fifties, though he looks decades older. My mom and I used to come here a few times a month growing up, and I’ve heard bits and pieces of his story. Denny has lived a rough life with gangs, drugs, and a few stints in prison. It shows in his leathered skin and faded tattoos. But he left all that behind to start up a burger joint with his wife and kids.

Looking at him now, there’s no doubt he’s happy with the life-altering decision. I’ve only ever known him as the happy burger man, though I know that wasn’t always the case. Something flickers in my chest, making my heart stumble all over itself. Could Mr. Sloan ever be happy like Denny? Would he ever leave the business world behind to pursue something else? Or, at the very least, he could let someone into his life. Just a little.

“I’ve been swamped with working two jobs,” I answer, giving him a smile. Denny frowns, and I know what he’s going to say next.

“Two jobs? You’re too young to be breaking your back to pay the bills.” His voice is gruff, but his brown eyes are kind.

“I worked my last shift at the diner today, so it’ll just be the one job from now on. Better pay, better hours, and healthcare.”

Denny whistles. “What’s the catch?”

I smirk at him and think about my grouchy boss. “I’m an assistant at Sloan Investments. Working for Mr. Sloan himself.”

“Hot damn, you got an upgrade!” he exclaims. “Is it true though? About Vincent Sloan? Word around town is he’s cold and never speaks to anyone.”

“He’s a private person,” I hedge. I don’t want to talk bad about my boss, even if it’s to an old friend that wouldn’t tell a soul. In fact, I have the urge to defend Mr. Sloan. He’s not cold, he’s just... different. “And very focused on his work.”

Denny nods knowingly. “Is that why you’re here then? Feeding the boss?” The way he winks makes me think there’s a euphemism in there somewhere, but I’m choosing to ignore it.

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“Just grabbing some food for myself and thought I’d pick up something for him. He’s been busy with quarterly meetings and?—”

“I got it, I got it,” Denny says, cutting me off. “As soon as people start talking about offices and desk jobs, I tune out. Nothing personal, of course. I just can’t imagine the hustle and grind. It sounds terrible. Uh, no offense.”

I laugh, letting him know I’m not offended in the least. “That’s probably for the best. If you were in an office, who would make the world’s best burgers?”

Denny grins and says that’s why he likes me. I rattle off the order—one Taco Burger for me, and one Double Royal for Mr. Sloan, and then take my seat at the counter to wait for my food. It only takes a few minutes since Denny usually bumps my order to the front whenever I come in.

Sure enough, less than ten minutes later, I’m on my way back to the office. The elevator fills with the greasy, salty, marvelous smell of food that’s terrible for you, but oh so delicious.

When I get to Mr. Sloan’s floor, I stop by my little half cubicle, which is mostly barren. I don’t spend much time here since I’m mostly out running errands and taking care of all the day-to-day details of Mr. Sloan’s life so he doesn’t have to. I do, however, have a pen and paper. I scrawl out a note and staple it to the paper bag containing his burger.

Carefully and quietly, I tiptoe to the door of his office, which of course has no windows, and set the food down. I lift my fist to knock but then decide against it. I’ve



yet to see the mighty Vincent Sloan in person. Something tells me it would scare him off if I barged in with food.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I've made it my new life goal to get Mr. Sloan to come out of his shell, just a little bit. This could either be a major breakthrough or a major setback. I realize I'm basically hunting my grouchy, antisocial boss. Coaxing him out of hiding with a tasty burger.

That thought shouldn't make me giddy, and it certainly shouldn't make my pulse race and my core throb. I shouldn't have this much fun teasing him. In fact, I shouldn't be here at all. But I'm not going anywhere.

I grab my phone and dart off to the side, crouching behind a huge potted plant. I have a great view of the door to his office while still remaining out of sight to Mr. Sloan. Pulling up his contact info, I type out a quick message and hit send.

Dinner is outside your door. I'm headed home unless you need anything else.

Those three little bubbles appear and disappear. I stare at the screen, willing him to respond. Is he upset? Thankful? I'd worry that he already left for the day, but that's impossible. He's the first in and last out.

I'm so focused on my phone, I almost don't hear the doorknob click or the door swinging open a half inch. Once I realize the man himself is coming out of his office, I stare at him with rapt attention.

He's tall, that's for sure. I knew he was, but seeing him up close... and those muscles. God, he's absolutely shredded. I have a sudden appreciation for his ridiculously expensive suits. The one he's wearing fits impeccably, molding to his thick biceps and broad chest. He's not wearing the jacket, just the pristine white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Hello, forearms. Why is that so sexy?

Mr. Sloan looks to his left, then to his right, his eyes gliding over my hiding spot. He doesn't notice me, which is good. I want to observe the man when he thinks he's alone.

One massive hand combs through his hair, making the muscles in his arm flex. Holycrap, I had no idea I had an arm fetish, but I can't seem to get enough of them. At least, on this man.

When his dark hair is swept away from his face, I can see more of his strong brow, straight nose, and well-trimmed beard. His eyes sweep over the hallway and reception area one last time, and I use it as an opportunity to peer into those dark eyes. What secrets do they hold?

Finally, Mr. Sloan seems content in the knowledge that he's alone. He bends down and grabs the food, looking inside. His nose scrunches up, and I barely suppress a giggle. With a body like his, I imagine he hasn't had a burger in years. He'll take one bite and be hooked.

He sees the note, pausing to read it. Then, the most amazing thing happens.

His lips twitch, and one side curls up into the barest hint of a grin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my breath catches in my throat. I want to hug him and fist pump the air and also, strangely, cry. When was the last time Mr. Sloan smiled? How can I get him to do it again? He said he didn't like my sass, but I'm thinking it's time to dial it up a bit. He liked my note, after all.

The next second, Mr. Sloan goes back into his office, shutting the door. I slump against the wall, trying to calm my rapid heartbeat. My face is flushed, and there's an odd tingle working its way down my spine and into my center. My thighs press together automatically, and I wiggle on the floor, trying to ease whatever restless

sensation is trying to take over my body. After a few deep breaths, I realize I'm more turned on than I've ever been in my whole life.

Uh oh. This wasn't the plan.

I scurry out of my hiding spot and hightail it out of the building as fast as I can without raising suspicion. I need to get home before I unpack all these new and scary emotions. I think I may be in too deep, but there's no turning back now. I got Mr. Sloan to smile. Now I need him to smile at me. Just me. Forever.

I'm so screwed.

4

VINCENT

Ifold and unfold the note for the hundredth time since I first read it last night.

Work harder. Just kidding. I was trying reverse psychology. Did it work?

She's teasing me. And I like it.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:43 pm*

Not only is Juniper intelligent and thoughtful, she's playful. And even a little bit cunning. I can't remember the last time I had a burger. Who has the time to work something like that off at the gym?

My schedule is very regimented. Every minute is accounted for. Five hours of sleep, ninety minutes in my personal gym – usually laps in the pool or kickboxing, then off to work. I give myself thirty minutes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, though most times I eat while working. I end the day with the news, a book, and a final look at the stock market.

The point is, it's going to take me extra time to work off that burger. I already have one indulgence; my boysenberry cream scones. I don't need more junk food to be addicted to. Juniper knew that, too. She knew I'd never choose a greasy meal, but also that I wouldn't throw it away. She played me. And I can't stop thinking about her.

In fact, I spent half the damn night fantasizing about a different kind of indulgence. Fuck, I'm sitting here at my desk, hard as a fucking rock as I run my fingers over Juniper's note and remember my dream from last night.

I don't even know what she looks like, but her voice... Jesus, I imagined her full, pouty lips as she told me to fuck her deeper, harder, goddamn, her whimpers fill my ears even now. I clench my fist and then drop it to my lap, groaning as I rub my painful erection.

It's not even noon yet and here I am, tempted to whip my dick out and jack off at my desk. And over what? A voice? The rational side of me, the one usually in control, is

ready to shut this shit down. I should fire Juniper and be done with it. She's already wasted my precious time by taking up my thoughts and invading my sleep. I need both to perform my job well.

It was my rational side that forced me out of bed this morning after a restless night of confusing, arousing dreams. I went through my routine, hitting up the gym for a particularly brutal workout, then making myself a healthy smoothie. I decided to skip the scone this morning since I had about five thousand calories last night in that damn burger. The worst part is how much I loved it. I literally licked my fingers after.

As soon as I stepped into the office, however, a different part of my brain took over. It still hasn't let up, and I'm not sure what to do about it. Instead of checking the stocks, researching leads, and getting lost in the numbers, I pulled out the carefully folded note Juniper wrote and read it over and over. I even... fuck. I even lifted it to my nose to try and get a whiff of her scent.

She broke me.

Work has always been enough, but right now, I can't find it in me to give a single fuck about the numbers. How can I focus on lines of data when Juniper is waltzing all over the city doing my bidding? Her and her feisty little attitude, hand-scrawled notes, and sweet, indulgent voice fill up my mind, leaving no room for all the shit I should be doing to get ready for the quarterly meetings.

My phone pings with a text, and I see Juniper's name pop up on the screen. My palms turn sweaty and my heart stutters to a stop before working in triple time. When did I become a nervous teenager asking his crush to the prom? Not that I have a crush on Juniper. Or went to the prom, for that matter. Too many expectations, too much drama, and more importantly, I didn't want to go. No one interested me then, and I haven't had much interest in dating since.

Seeing my phone light up with a text from the enigmatic Juniper has some long forgotten part of me waking up. I'm... excited, I think. I usually get a jolt of energy at the beginning of a big project or new investment opportunity. What I'm feeling now, though, is a hundred times more powerful, and it's all directed at one miss Juniper Leigh.

Lunch is outside your door. Don't worry, I got a kale salad to make up for the burger. You have to admit, it was the best burger you ever had though, right?

I didn't ask her for lunch, but I shouldn't be surprised that she went out of her way to pick something up for me. And of course, she knew I devoured the burger and wasn't happy about it. Juniper really is a great assistant. Maybe I should consider telling her that someday.

My fingers hover over my phone and a thin sheen of sweat dots my brow. What do I say back? I never thank people for performing their duties. That's what their paycheck is for. But ignoring Juniper doesn't sit right with me.

Before I can come up with a response, she texts me back.

I'll take your silence as agreement. Even if you disagreed, I know you'd be lying.

A gruff sound rumbles out of my chest and my lips curl up at one end. Without thinking it all the way through, I type out a response. Confident, aren't we, Ms. Leigh?

I can't tear my eyes away from the three bubbles at the bottom of the screen. The rush of endorphins and adrenaline is unlike anything I've ever felt before. What is this? Am I flirting? No, that's ridiculous. I don't know how to do that. Plus, I'm not the kind of man who would flirt with their assistant. Then again, I'm not the kind of man to have a fucking wet dream about my assistant's voice, either. Like I said, she broke

me.

Juniper's answering text interrupts my spiral. Your non-response is very suspicious, Mr. Sloan. I think you're addicted to the burgers now. Is that it? I can replace your salad with another Double Royal.

Another gravelly sound falls from my lips, and this time I recognize it as a chuckle. I can't believe I ate something called the Double Royal, I reply.

A soft, tinkling laughter drifts through my thick office door. Holy shit, is she standing right there? Could I open the door and finally lay my eyes on the woman who has haunted my thoughts for far longer than I care to admit?

That's not a no, she texts back. Another text pops up immediately. If you liked that one, you HAVE to try the Mashed 'Tater Burger.

Sounds like a gut bomb, I say back for some reason. I shouldn't be encouraging her, but every time I see those goddamn bubbles on the screen, I get a shot of dopamine. It's not the burger I'm craving right now, but I can't think about that.

Oh it definitely is. I won't ruin the surprise, but let's just say it's spud-tacular.

I bark out a laugh and then cover it with a cough. Spud-tacular? It's cheesy and so damn adorable I don't know what to do about it. Ignore her? Send a work-related text? Jump out the window so I don't have to deal with the urge to swing open the door and taste her lips?

My phone rings and I nearly throw it across the room. Fuck, I'm tense. Little Juniper has rattled me, and I don't know if I like it or not. I'm half expecting it to be her, but instead, Cutter's name flashes across the screen.

Part of me is disappointed, I realize. I wanted to hear Juniper's sassy voice as she gives me a hard time. But the more rational side is slowly taking over the reins. I don't have time to get caught up in the spell my new assistant is trying to weave, whether she knows it or not.

So, it's for the best that I talk to my oldest friend and not respond to Ms. Leigh. I have to get things back on track.

"Cutter," I answer, forcing thoughts of Juniper away.



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“Vincent,” he replies, his no-nonsense tone matching mine. While our lifestyles are completely different, we have common ground when it comes to how we communicate.

“Has it been six months already?” I ask, checking the date on my computer.

“You make it sound like we have scheduled calls. I guess it shouldn’t surprise me you have an allotted time slot for personal calls.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say with a sigh.

“I know, I know. I’m giving you shit. Someone has to.”

I grunt, which makes my old friend bark out a laugh. It’s about as rusty as mine, but truthfully, I’m glad to be talking to him. Cutter hasn’t had an easy go of it the last few years after a tragic incident involving his father. We were talking more regularly immediately afterward, but the weeks keep turning into months, as they do, and it’s probably been too long since I’ve checked in on Cutter. He’s all alone out there on the top of his mountain. Looking out of my corner office window looming above the city, I realize that’s another thing we have in common.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he answers all too quickly. I wait a beat, silently letting him know I don’t buy his bullshit. “Mostly,” he hedges.

I hum in acknowledgment but don’t say anything. Cutter needs space to tell me

whatever is on his mind. I can't do much to ease his suffering, but I can listen.

"The thing is," he continues. "There's this... this woman." I'm not sure what I was expecting him to say, but that wasn't it.

"Oh?" I nearly choke on the word. Is this yet another thing we have in common? Women who have taken our attention and energy without our permission?

"Yeah. Well, I mean... shit. It's not like that. God knows I don't deserve to have that kind of relationship."

"Cutter, that's not true." I hate that my friend carries around so much guilt.

"Agree to disagree," he grunts. "Anyway, this woman, she's... she's in my space."

"Okay..." I draw the word out, not sure what he's getting at.

"Like, literally. In my cabin. Can't remember the last time someone else was here. I don't think I've had a visitor since before..." Cutter trails off, not wanting to finish the thought. I know what he's referring to. He hasn't had anyone in his space since before the incident. "Anyway. She's resting up now and I don't know... I don't know what to do."

"Resting up?"

"Yeah, the little trespasser was wandering around my property last night in high-heels and some fancy business outfit one of your employees would wear. She just needed a place to stay for the night. Once she wakes up, I'll send her back down the mountain." He's talking to himself more than me, but I don't mind. If he needs to process stuff out loud, being here is the least I can do for my friend.

“Sounds like a good plan,” I say after a few moments of silence. “Everything okay?” I ask again. After years of knowing Cutter, I can tell something, or possibly someone, has rattled him.

He sighs heavily, and I can see him running a hand through his hair. “It’s just... she’s here, ya know?”

“Yes, you already said that. But she’ll be gone as soon as she wakes up, right? No big deal. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to brood and tend to the land in the afternoon.”

“Right. Yeah.” Cutter sounds lost in thought. “But I think maybe I... like her here?”

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline and I pull the phone away from my face to stare at it. Shit, we really do have the same conundrum going on. “I get it,” I tell him, bringing the phone back to my ear. I’m not sure if I meant to say the words out loud, but it’s too late to take them back now.

“Really?! I thought you were going to tell me to wake her up and kick her out.”

“Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know,” he admits, letting out another exasperated breath. “What’s going on with you? Did you have a stroke and suddenly believe in the power of love?”

“No,” I scoff. I don’t think I sound too believable, however. When Cutter snorts out a laugh, I know I must have come off as overly defensive. “I don’t believe in the power of love,” I reiterate. “I can sympathize with unexpected women bursting into your life and making you... feel things.”

“Now this is a story I need to hear.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I say, unconvincingly. “She’s my assistant and that’s that.”

“Right,” he confirms. “You have an assistant, and I have a trespasser. That’s all they are.” He’s talking to himself as much as me. “We don’t do relationships. We’re better alone.”

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“Exactly. I’m glad we had this pep-talk.”

Cutter grunts, then I hear rustling in the background. “Shit, she’s awake,” he whispers in a panic.

“Breathe, buddy. She’s just a woman. And she’s about to be sent home, right?”

“Yeah. Totally. She’ll be gone before dinner.” He sounds less and less sure of his plan with each word.

“Good luck,” I say before he rushes out a goodbye and hangs up.

Poor guy. A month ago I would have scoffed and told him he was delusional for letting a woman get him all twisted up. Now? Well, now I’m fucking tangled up in my own woman, and I don’t even know what she looks like. So much for this call being a distraction from Juniper. God help me for whatever comes next.

5

### JUNIPER

Mr. Sloan won the lottery when he gave me a second chance last month. Not that he’d ever admit that, of course. But I think we work brilliantly together. I translate his grunts and growls into actionable tasks, and he pays me enough money to take care of my mom. I’ll even have money left over at the end of the month to throw into savings. It’s a beautiful relationship.

I groan and open up the freezer, sticking my head inside to alleviate my sudden blush. We're not in a relationship. He wouldn't tolerate my existence if I wasn't so damn good at my job. But that doesn't seem to register with my brain.

Mr. Sloan doesn't even know what I look like. He finds me irritating and nosey. He's grunted about my sass every single day, and he's never once said thank you. I think I might faint if he actually praised me.

Oh Lord.

Now all I can think about is his deep, velvety voice calling me a good girl while bouncing me on his lap. Holy hell, what is wrong with me? I've never had these thoughts or urges before. Never wanted approval from any man. Never felt my clit throb, begging for relief. I can never get there on my own. It's like my body knows only Vincent can unlock my pleasure.

In other words, I'm screwed. Not literally, of course. I may find release that way, but it would only open up another can of worms. I've never been with anyone, never dated, never even kissed a guy. If, by some miracle, Vincent was my first... I'd want him to be my last.

Crazy, irrational, and silly, right? He's a jerk. He treats his employees like they are faceless robots doing his bidding. Then again, they all listen and nod their heads, never pushing back or questioning his judgment. Unlike me. No wonder I frustrate him so much.

"Find anything good in there?"

My mother's voice snaps me back into the present. I realize I've been standing with my head halfway in the freezer for several minutes. My cheeks and nose are cold, but it's a welcome sensation from the heat that was prickling my skin earlier.

“I’ll need to go grocery shopping soon,” I answer, tugging out a bag of nearly empty frozen berries. “I have enough to make us some breakfast smoothies though. Does that sound good?”

“Sounds wonder—” She stops mid-word, and I spin around to look at her.

“Mom!” I exclaim, rushing over to her side.

“I’m fine,” she says weakly as she leans against the kitchen island. “Just got up a little too fast and made myself dizzy.” She smiles at me, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“I’ll help you to your chair. You’ll feel better after you have something to eat.”

Before my mother can protest, I loop my arm around her waist and guide her back to the living room. She gives me most of her weight, which isn’t saying much. The cancer has made her waif-thin, even though she used to be on the curvier side, like me.

“You need to get ready for work,” Mom says as I adjust the pillows on her recliner and drape a blanket over her lap. “I’m fine, Juniper. Just a low energy day.” She pats my hand and closes her eyes.

There have been far too many low energy days lately. We have an appointment with her oncologist next week, and hopefully we can start on a more aggressive treatment plan now that we have money in the bank.

I place the back of my hand on her forehead, checking her temperature. She’s a little warm, but not enough to be alarming. “I’ll be right back with some water,” I say softly.

“I’m supposed to be the one taking care of you,” she murmurs. “I’m your mama, after

all.”

“I don’t mind taking over for a while.”

Mom blinks one eye open and gives me a tender smile. I return it with all the love I have for the woman who raised me. She’s kind and beautiful and sharp as a tack when she’s not battling brain fog. Looking at her now has me swallowing back tears. She’s far too thin and her once bright eyes are dull and sunken. I’m holding out hope, but each day gets harder and harder to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I give her hand a squeeze and head back to the kitchen to make her fruit and wheatgrass smoothie. Setting the glass down on her favorite tray, I arrange some crackers and protein bars, along with a bottle of water.



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Entering the living room, I set the tray down on the side table next to her and hand my mom the water bottle first.

“Drink up,” I encourage, standing in front of her until she complies.

My mom can be a stubborn woman, but she usually goes along with my demands about her health. Her hand reaches out, all skin and bones, trembling as she grasps the bottle.

“Mom?” I ask, watching her face flush red and then turn ghostly pale.

I watch in horror as her eyes roll into the back of her head and her muscles tense, growing rigid. The next second, my mother contorts and shakes, throwing the water bottle and knocking the tray to the ground as a seizure grips her body.

My brain blanks for a moment, frozen with fear as I stare at my mother in shock. And then the research kicks in. I have stacks and stacks of books and printed off articles on every aspect of lymphoma. Seizures aren’t a common symptom, but can be if the cancer has spread to her brain.

But I can’t think about that right now.

I clear the area surrounding her, making sure the lamp and table are out of her reach. Then, I roll her onto her side, keeping her airway open, even as she jerks and spasms. I remember reading that you shouldn’t put anything in a seizing person’s mouth, and it’s a myth that they can swallow their tongue. They can bite you, however.

Helpless, I watch her tremor and drool, tears streaming down both of our faces. It only lasts thirty seconds, but it feels like hours. The jerky movements stop and I fall to my knees next to her, holding my mother's hands.

She blinks unevenly, confusion coloring her features. "Ju-Jun-per? Wh-what's happening?"

"You're okay now," I say in a shaky voice. Pushing through my fear, I swallow the lump in my throat and put on a brave face. She doesn't need me to fall apart right now. She needs me to be strong and take control. I wish I had someone to be strong for me. Someone to share the burden, to tell me I'm okay.

There's no use in dwelling on that now, however.

"You had a seizure," I tell her in a calming voice. "But it's over now. I'll call your doctor and?—"

"No," she protests, her tone fierce and final, even though she's having trouble catching her breath.

"Mom..."

"Juniper..."

"It's just a phone call."

"We both know he'll want to see me. You can't miss work. We can make an appointment for next week." She nods her head as if it's a done deal. "Sorry about the smoothie, honey. I'm going to rest my eyes for a bit and then I'll make a new one. You go get ready for work. You'll be late enough as it is."

I heave out a sigh and shake my head no. “If you think I’m going to work today after witnessing you having a seizure, you’re crazier than I thought,” I mutter. The image of her frail and fragile body convulsing uncontrollably will forever be burned into my brain, but I suppress the fear. I can fall apart later. Right now, I need to get my stubborn mother to the hospital, whether she likes it or not.

It takes a stern talking to from Dr. Wilson over the phone, as well as a promise from me to make chicken pot pie when we get home to finally get my mother out the door. She insisted on getting dressed, telling me she had on her least favorite pajamas. I wanted to protest, but I have to pick my battles with her sometimes. Besides, I knew she wasn’t really trying to be difficult. My mom wants to maintain some dignity, and with an illness that strips her of so much, I can at least give her that.

Two hours later, I’m still in the waiting room, waiting on Mom to get back from another round of tests. I dreaded calling into work for a personal day, but the lady I talked to in HR was very understanding. Her voice only trembled a little bit when I mentioned that I report directly to Mr. Sloan. She gave me her sympathies, though I’m not sure if it was mostly for my mom or for having to deal with the beastly Vincent when I return.

“Ms. Leigh?”

I look up and see Dr. Wilson standing by the check-in desk, holding my mom’s chart. I take a cleansing breath and stand up on shaky legs.

“How is she? Can I see her?”

“Of course. You two can go home today after a few more tests. There wasn’t any permanent damage, though I know it must have been scary for both of you.” I nod, barely holding back tears. I’m trying to be numb to it all until I can curl up in bed and sob into my pillow. “You did good, Juniper. Your mother said you rolled her on her

side and gently brought her back when she regained consciousness.”

“I didn’t hurt her or anything? She knocked over a tray with glasses and plates on it. Did she cut herself or?—”

“Juniper,” Dr. Wilson says, placing his hand on my shoulder. He’s close to retirement age and has always been gentle and supportive, like a surrogate grandfather. He smiles, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing and making him look soft and kind. “You were exactly what she needed. And now, it’s time for me to step in. I’d like to discuss chemotherapy instead of radiation, but I have a feeling I’ll need your help convincing your mother.”

I let his words sink in, the last of my energy leaving me as I nod. If he’s suggesting chemo, it must be spreading faster than we originally thought. “I’ll do my best,” I promise him.

Four hours, three tests, and one heated discussion later, I have Mom loaded up in our beat-up old Honda, which we only use on occasion to save on gas money. We ride in silence, the air thick with tension. Her arms are crossed over her chest as she stares out the window. I blink back tears, telling myself to keep it together just a little bit longer.

My mom was, predictably, upset about the mention of chemo. I have no idea what it’s like going through cancer, and I can’t imagine having your best option for survival be to pump your body full of poison, but I also can’t imagine life without my mother. I need her to get better.

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We didn't come to any resolutions today, and I didn't think we would. After an hour of going over the pros and cons with Dr. Wilson, Mom was tired and I was at my wit's end. I love my mother with all my heart, but she frustrates me to no end sometimes.

"Still up for chicken pot pie?" I ask, hoping to smooth over our rough day. "Or I can make chicken and rice if you're feeling nauseous."

My mom sighs and rests her hand on my shoulder, looking at me over the console. "Chicken pot pie sounds nice," she whispers, giving me a weak smile.

I nod and go through the list of ingredients in my head, making sure I don't have to stop at the store for anything.

Mom is nearly asleep by the time I pull into our little cottage. Maybe that's why she doesn't say anything about the black SUV with tinted windows sitting in our driveway. I park the car and brace myself for whatever is next. It's already been the day from hell. What's one more thing?

I get out of the car, ready to face down this new challenge. And then Vincent Sloan slides out of the SUV, buttoning his pristine suit jacket and fixing those dark eyes on mine.

Crap.

VINCENT

Holy. Shit.

A curvy angel with silky red hair peers up at me, her green eyes staring straight down into my goddamn soul. This can't be Juniper. I must have gotten the wrong address from HR. Wouldn't surprise me, considering their less than stellar track record lately.

But Jesus, those doe eyes. Round, vulnerable, and hiding nothing. She looks like a doll, a perfect, precious doll with rosy cheeks, full lips, and a button nose slightly turned up at the end.

"Mr. Sloan?" the angel asks.

I watch her mouth form the words, mesmerized by her sweet voice. I've heard it over the phone several times, but hearing it in person is far more potent. Her soft tone hums through me, vibrating every muscle and squeezing my heart back to life.

"Um, is everything okay?"

I realize I've just been standing here gawking at her, so I clear my throat and shake my head no. "You didn't show up to work today," I grunt. Is that my voice? When did it get so harsh and gravelly?

Juniper's lips twist up into a tiny, amused smile, and my heart stutters in my chest. I guess she's used to my gruffness, but suddenly, I don't want to be that way with her.

"Good observation," she teases, nibbling on her bottom lip. Does she know she looks like a temptress? I'm guessing no, which only makes her more sexy.

When Juniper didn't text to check in at the beginning of the day, I was annoyed. After

an hour of no communication, I was frustrated and angry, especially when she wouldn't answer my calls. Far more than I would be with any other assistant. I know I'm a difficult man to work for, but I thought we had a good system between us.

By noon, I was going out of my mind. Anger and betrayal swirled in my chest, making it hard to breathe. It didn't make sense why this woman who I had previously never even laid eyes on had such a hold on me. Storming out of my office, I marched to the human resources department with every intention of having them send her a termination email.

Instead, I demanded to know where she was. I wasn't expecting an answer, but the woman behind the front desk informed me she took a personal day to take care of family issues. What family issues? Why didn't I know? Where the fuck does she live? I only got the answer to my last question, but I'll find out the rest from Juniper herself.

"Are you going to introduce me to your gentleman friend?" The voice is coming from the direction of the car, but I'm having a hard time tearing my eyes away from the short, curvy goddess in front of me.

"Mom! I'll be right there. Just wait a minute," Juniper says as she rushes over to her mother's side.

I watch helplessly as she carefully pulls her frail mother out of the vehicle. It's clear the woman is ill, though to what extent, I have no idea. Another answer I'll have to get from my assistant.

Juniper's mother stumbles a bit, snapping me out of my daze. In three long strides, I'm standing next to the women, who both crane their necks to look up at me. Hovering over them, I'm not sure what to do next. I've never been this out of my element, never felt the intense, almost blinding need to take care of someone. I want

to share her burdens, protect her from pain, fix her problems, and fall down on my fucking knees in front of her. Whether to propose, worship, or lick her sweet pussy, I don't know. What the actual fuck is happening to me?

“Here, let me.” My voice is hoarse, nearly a growl, and I wince at my harshness. I'm not good with words. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing, but I need to be useful. Holding out my arm, I gesture for Juniper's mother to hang on to me as well, steadying her.

“Oh, how thoughtful,” the woman gushes, giving me a smile and a knowing wink.

Is my new obsession written all over my face? That would make sense, since I feel it in every cell in my body. “I'm Bethany, since my daughter is having trouble remembering her manners.” She tuts before changing the subject. “Isn't that so thoughtful of Mr. Sloan, Juniper?” Beth leans against me and we start walking up to the front door of their rundown cottage.

“Yes,” Juniper says cautiously. I look over at her and see those green eyes narrow into slits. “Suspiciously thoughtful.” The way she puts her hands on her lush, full hips and eyes me up is so damn adorable, I can't hold back the tiny grin tugging at my lips. Feisty as ever.

Her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink, and then deepen into red. God, I want to see her blush every-fucking-where, from head to toe, while I drag my lips over every dip and curve.



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“Do you often make home visits when your employees call out?” Juniper asks, darting ahead of us to unlock the door.

“Only you.” I think I shocked myself as much as I shocked her. I didn’t mean to say that.

Juniper’s eyes soften as she tilts her head to the side. Then, she shakes off whatever thoughts are fluttering through her head, and shoves the creaky door open. I make a note to have it replaced. Hell, this whole place could use a facelift. But that’s not important right now. First things first.

“Well, thanks. We’re good now. I’m sure you have more important things to do,” Juniper says, not looking at me. She’s busy guiding her mother to an overstuffed recliner. The women pause and Juniper’s shoulders fall. I take a step closer, wanting to ease her stress and destroy whatever made her anxious. “Let’s sit on the couch for now,” she tells her mother, who nods in agreement.

I peer at the chair, trying to see what’s wrong with it, but my eyes land on something else. A tray lays haphazardly on the floor, surrounded by shards of glass from a broken cup. Some green mixture is splattered everywhere, as well as energy bars and a few other things.

I’m not sure what happened, but it’s obvious these two left in a hurry. I’m guessing it had something to do with her mother getting to the hospital. Looking over my shoulder at Juniper, I see she’s fussing over pillows and blankets for Beth. I peer into the small kitchen, spotting a few rags and cleaning supplies in the corner.

There's not much I can do to help, but I can clean up this mess so Juniper doesn't have to deal with it. She's trying her best to be brave and strong, but I saw the weariness in her eyes. She's a breath away from falling apart. I want to be the one she turns to when her world comes crashing down.

Looking down at the mess, I start by picking out the glass pieces and then dabbing away the green stain before applying carpet cleaner. It's been a long damn time since I've had to clean anything myself. I have well-paid staff to do those mundane tasks for me.

"You don't have to do that," Juniper says from behind me. "You're going to get your suit dirty."

"Good thing I get a discount at my favorite dry cleaners then," I quip while finishing up.

The softest, sweetest laughter falls from her lips. I feel it trickle down my spine, lighting up every nerve ending along the way. "Yeah, I heard you have a pretty great assistant."

"Is that right?" I ask, standing up and turning to face her. "What else have you heard about my assistant?" I'm aware that her mom is sitting a dozen feet away from us, but I can't stop myself from stalking forward.

"Um..." Her trembling voice trails off as she fixes her emerald gaze on me. She's trying to be playful, but she's too nervous to pull it off.

"Juniper," her mother calls. "Offer Mr. Sloan a drink and invite him to sit down. Show him we have some manners."

Juniper rolls her eyes and my lips twist into an almost-smile. I see where she gets her

sassiness from. “Yes, Mama,” she drawls, though I can hear the love in her voice. “Mr. Sloan?—”

“Vincent,” I correct her. She stares at me for a second, apparently as surprised as I am at my words.

Once again, I’m speaking without thinking. My employees never address me by my first name. I like the distance it puts between myself and everyone under my employ. It’s not that I think I’m better than them. I’m just more important, and I pay their income, so that deserves some respect. Looking at Juniper now, however, I realize I want something more than isolation and respect. I want her.

“Uh, okay,” she quickly recovers. “Would you like something to drink, Vincent?” Juniper emphasizes my name, and goddamn if I don’t like hearing her say it. She bites down softly on her bottom lip, a gesture that’s both adorable and sexy as fuck.

“No, thank you.”

“Okay then.” Juniper stares at me from across the living room, waiting for me to say something.

For the first time in my life, I feel awkward. I’ve never cared about anyone’s opinion enough to let it make me nervous. In fact, I don’t care much about what anyone says about me, period. Who gives a fuck when you have millions in the bank and adding to your wealth every day?

But this woman...

Fuck. She’s rearranging my future, making room for her needs, wants, and dreams. Juniper is also digging around in my chest, trying to get to my heart. I’m not sure what good it is, or why someone like her would want it, but I’m just obsessed enough

to not give a shit. She has a hold on me, and now I need to make her as crazy as I am. How the hell do I do that?

“Are you okay?” Juniper asks.

At the same time, I say, “What happened?” as I sweep my hand out to the carpet that still has a faint stain from the spilled beverage.

“That would be my fault,” Beth sighs. “I gave my girl a good scare this morning. It’s my fault she skipped out on work, too, so please don’t take it out on her.”

The mention of work feels like a slap in the face. I showed up here with the intent to reprimand my assistant and tell her she’s on thin ice. But then she turned out to be sexy and adorable, on top of her sweet and sassy personality. I wasn’t expecting her to have such a big heart, but it takes a special person to take care of a sick parent. Plus, I can’t yell at someone in front of their mother. I’m not that much of an asshole.

“Of course not,” I reply, clearing my throat. I know I’m being weird and intrusive.

Beth looks amused. Exhausted, but amused. Juniper just continues to stare, her round eyes blinking up at me.

“I came to... check on you,” I lie. Though it’s not really untruthful, is it? I knew somewhere deep down when I got her address, I wouldn’t be firing her. I just didn’t know I’d be tripping all over myself to get her to smile at me. “What happened today? Can I help?”

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Juniper's jaw drops. God, I must really be a bastard if she's this surprised at my offer. She's about to answer, but Beth beats her to it.

"If you couldn't tell, I'm not quite myself these days. Damn cancer. Lymphoma, to be exact." I nod my head and murmur that I'm sorry to hear that. "Anyway, things have been up and down lately. Today was a down day. No big deal."

"No big deal? You had a seizure! It was terrifying!"

I turn to look at Juniper, resisting the urge to pull her into my arms. I don't hug people. I don't even like touching them if at all possible. But this woman? I want her as close as possible. I want her sweet scent in my lungs, her curves pressed against my hard body, her moans filling my ears as I devour every inch of her.

"Sweetie, I'm okay. No harm, no foul," Beth says soothingly.

Tears spring into Juniper's eyes, but she blinks them back quickly. I wouldn't have noticed they were there if I wasn't studying everything about her. I reach out on instinct, wanting to comfort her somehow. Dammit, I'm no good at this shit, but for the first time, I want to be.

Juniper ignores her mother and me, scurrying off to the kitchen. I don't know if I should follow or give her space. My chest aches, knowing everything she endured today. All on her own, too. I look at Beth, who gives me a subtle nod, motioning toward the kitchen.

"I'm just going to close my eyes for a bit," she says, already leaning her head back on

the couch.

I give her a rusty smile and head toward the kitchen. I don't like knowing Juniper is upset and I'm not there to make it better. How it all changed so fast is beyond me, but I feel our connection throughout my whole body, all the way down to my bones.

Stepping into the small galley kitchen, I stop a few feet away from the woman who is changing everything about me. She's facing away from me, bracing herself on the counter and taking deep breaths. When a sob escapes her throat, I can't hold back any longer.

I move closer, hesitating slightly before resting my hand on her shoulder. Jesus, I'm no good at this intimate stuff, but I'm trying. I can be better, I know I can. Juniper just needs to give me a chance.

"Mr. Sloan," she murmurs before sniffing.

"Vincent," I whisper, correcting her again.

"Vincent," she repeats, looking at me over her shoulder. My girl has unshed tears in her heartbreakingly beautiful eyes, letting me know she's at the very limit of what she can handle. That's okay. I'll be right here to handle everything else.

I turn her toward me with my hand on her shoulder, wanting to somehow breach the last few inches of space between us. I don't know what I'm doing. It's a first for me, and I must say, I don't like it.

Juniper doesn't make me suffer for long. She surprises me by leaning closer, closer, closer, until her arms wrap around my waist and she buries her head into my chest. I close my arms around her, crushing her against my body.

I hold her while she cries silently, her shoulders shaking as she clings to me. Juniper trembles in my embrace, letting go of every stress, every fear, everything she's been holding on to for so long.

"Let it out," I whisper, trailing a hand up and down her back.

She shivers and snuggles closer, breaking something inside of me.

"I'm right here, angel." I'm not sure where the pet name came from, but it feels right.

"I w-was so scared," she stutters out. "I thought... I thought I lost her."

I nuzzle into the top of her head, breathing in her sweet coconut and sunshine scent. How she manages to smell like warmth and light, I have no idea, but it's true.

"I've got you," I murmur. I have no idea what to say, but my words must be at least somewhat comforting. She relaxes the tiniest fraction, letting me smooth my hands over her back and comb her wildly beautiful hair.

"It's always been my mom and me. She's all I have." Her whispered words sink down into my chest, cracking my damn heart wide open. As if I weren't already vulnerable enough around this woman.

"You have me," I tell her gently as I weave my fingers in her hair. Tugging at the strands slightly, I tip her head up and fall right into her eyes. They glisten with tears and are rimmed in red, but my Juniper is still the most gorgeous creature I've ever seen.

"I don't understand," she says hesitantly.

"Me either, but I feel it. Don't you?" I dip my head down, hovering just inches above

her lips and feeling her soft breath against my skin.

“What do you feel?”

My heart is thundering in my chest, my muscles shaking with tension and need. I’m desperate for her touch, her kiss, her sweet surrender.

“You,” I whisper before nipping her plump bottom lip. I lick the same spot, soothing away the little bite. Juniper shivers and presses herself closer to me as she fists my suit jacket. The need to mark her as mine takes hold, overshadowing every other instinct and thought in my head.



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Our lips meet, briefly at first, and then again with more intention. I slide my tongue between her parted lips, swallowing down her surprised gasp. Juniper lets out the softest moan when I lick the roof of her mouth. I do it again, loving the way she shivers at my touch.

Walking us back a few steps, I pin Juniper against the counter, growling with approval when she immediately grinds down on me. The heat of her pussy makes my already hard cock swell even more, imprinting the metal zipper on my sensitive skin. It sends a jolt of pain right along with the pleasure coursing through my body.

“Fuck,” I grunt, pulling back slightly to take in Juniper’s disheveled state. With rosy cheeks, glossy eyes, and tangled hair, my angel looks more like a temptress. Mine. All mine.

Standing up on her tiptoes, Juniper winds her arms around my neck and pulls me down, sealing her mouth over mine. I love it. Love that she’s as desperate as I am. That has to be a good sign, right? I’ll make her addicted to my kisses, my touch, my everything. It’s all for her now.

I fall into Juniper’s wanton kiss, meeting her with just as much passion as she’s showing me. Drinking down her sweetness, I glide my hands down her sides and grip her hips, rocking her against my throbbing dick. She jumps and whimpers when I bump against her clit, and fuck, fuck, I think I might come from that sound alone.

I continue thrusting against her sensitive bundle of nerves, already addicted to giving this angel pleasure. Trailing my lips down her throat, I lick and nip the skin on the way. Juniper lets out a shaky breath, tipping her head back to allow me better access.

I nuzzle into the side of her neck, pausing to gather my thoughts. Juniper weaves her fingers through my hair in the most tender of touches, stroking my scalp as I breathe her in. This moment is somehow more intimate than the kiss we just shared.

Lifting my head, I peer into those clear green eyes, making sure she's okay with everything that just happened. I'm met with a shy yet filthy smile, like we're keeping a dirty secret. I don't want Juniper to be a secret, but Jesus, the look in her eye is so deviant, I might have to coax it out of her again.

"Any more questions?" I ask, tucking some hair behind her ear as we untangle from each other. The red strands are velvety soft, and I rub them between my fingers for a second, luxuriating in the texture. I want to feel her hair brush against my thighs as Juniper rides me hard and tips her head back. I want to see the fiery red locks spread out on my pillow as I kiss my way down her body.

"Yeah, lots," Juniper says with a twinkle in her eye. "But I promised Mom I'd make chicken pot pie for dinner if she went to the hospital. I better get started on that."

I press a kiss on her forehead, closing my eyes and savoring her soft skin against my lips. How did Juniper, my sassy little assistant, become the most precious, important thing in my life so quickly?

"I can order dinner if you don't want to cook. I can get anything catered, just name your favorite food."

She considers my offer for a moment before shaking her head no. "I've got chicken I need to use up, and besides, I like cooking. It's soothing, I guess. I can't control much in my life, but when I'm in the kitchen, I'm in charge."

I nod thoughtfully, eating up every word she's saying. I want to know everything about my angel. It pains me that she feels so out of control about her life, but it's

understandable. She's not alone anymore, though. I'm damn proud of my girl for finding a way to cope until I showed up.

"Can I help? I'm not much of a cook," I admit.

"Nope," Juniper responds, popping the "p" as she gives me a breathtaking smile. "I'm in charge here, Mr. Sloan, remember? And I'm kicking you out of the kitchen."

"But—"

"Shoo! Go entertain my mom. She seems smitten with you."

"Is she the only one?"

Juniper blushes, looking down before meeting my gaze. "No," she whispers.

"Good," I say with a satisfied smirk. "We'll continue this discussion later then."

"Did we do much talking?" she teases.

"Just the right amount, in my opinion. Maybe too much."

"Mmhm." Juniper rolls her eyes as I step out of the kitchen. I'm ridiculously happy I got her to joke around after her breakdown. Now I just need to convince her to give me a real shot at winning her heart.

7

JUNIPER

"Are you sure you're feeling better today?" I ask my mom as I shove my wallet and

keys into my purse. “I can stay home with you another day.”

“Nonsense. You need to work, and I need to rest. No offense, dear, but you can be a mother hen sometimes.”

I glare at her, but then laugh as she gives me an exasperated shrug. I know I can be intense when it comes to her care, but someone has to be. It took months to convince her to go to the doctor in the first place. I shudder to think what could have happened if we hadn’t caught the cancer early on.

Taking one last look in the hallway mirror, I straighten my pencil skirt and brush a few wayward strands of hair out of my face. My stomach swirls with nerves and anticipation. I’m not sure what today will bring after everything that happened last night.

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“Okay, I’m off then. I’ll check in with you over my lunch break.” I give my mother a kiss on her cheek and pinch it for good measure. “Just wanted to make sure you know who the mother hen is in this relationship,” I say with a stern voice. She laughs, which was the whole point. When you’re a caretaker of a sick parent, you seize any little moment of joy life has to offer.

Twenty minutes later, I’m standing in front of the office doors to Sloan Investments. I’ve only been here a handful of times, seeing as Mr. Sloan usually sends me out on random assignments that keep me buzzing around the city all day.

Today, however, I received a brief text from Mr. Sloan as I stepped out the door.

Come into the office today.

That was it. I wasn’t expecting a love poem or anything, but after the moments we shared last night, I thought he’d at least be... cordial. Crazy, I know. That would mean Mr. Sloan has some sort of self-awareness.

Still, last night was unexpected, to say the least. He came to check up on me. More like fire me, I’m sure. But something changed when his dark eyes fixed on mine. I saw the man behind the stacks of cash and algorithms. He showed me a softer side, even held me while I dissolved into a puddle of tears.

And then there’s the kiss.

I mean.... Holy shit. Is that what a real kiss feels like?

The way he took control, pulling me closer, exploring my mouth with steady strokes of his tongue. I felt wanted, powerful, and yet completely surrendered to whatever Mr. Sloan wanted to do with me.

“You going in?” a man asks as he darts around me to get to the door.

“Yes,” I say after clearing my throat. “Thank you,” I reply as he holds the door open for me.

Squaring my shoulders, I take confident strides toward the reception desk, giving the secretary, Rhonda, a smile. “Is Mr. Sloan in?” I ask.

“Yes, but... are you sure you want to see him?” I furrow my brow at her response. “He has the nickname ‘Beast’ for a reason.”

This time, I can’t hold back my glare. I don’t want anyone referring to him as a beast. Unless it’s me, giving him a hard time. “He asked me to come here today, actually,” I tell her.

“It’s even worse than I thought then. He never asks people to come to his office. What did you do?”

I kissed my boss and cried in his arms. “Nothing,” I lie.

“Mmhm,” Rhonda responds. “Good luck.” She points down the hallway toward a massive oak door at the end. “He’s in there.”

I nod and put one foot in front of the other, ready to face my fate. Does he regret it? Does he want more? Would I give him more? Yes. Definitely yes.

Lifting a trembling hand, I knock on the door, waiting for a reply. When nothing

happens, I knock again, harder this time.

A second later, the heavy door swings open and Mr. Sloan pulls me inside, pressing me against the wall as he slams the door shut. His eyes look feral, shining with darkness, anger, and something deeper. Something primal.

“Mr. Sloan, I?—”

“Vincent,” he growls. “You call me Vincent.”

“Okay,” I say on a shaky breath. “V-Vincent. What’s happening?”

“What was always meant to happen,” he whispers before covering my mouth with his.

There’s nothing tentative about this kiss. He’s not exploring me, he’s claiming me. I open up for him, wider, wider, so he can kiss me so deeply I feel it in my toes. They curl inside my heels as my panties grow damp. Oh god, I can feel my desire wet my thighs as Vincent continues to ruin me with his kiss.

We’re both panting by the time we break apart. Vincent rests his forehead on mine, his solid chest rising and falling as he catches his breath.

“I need to get something from my penthouse upstairs,” he grunts through gritted teeth.

“Oh,” I respond, confused by the sudden change in subject. Was I imagining how freaking life-changing that kiss was? Maybe he could taste my inexperience and it turned him off.

“You’re coming with me.”

I quirk an eyebrow up at him and he rewards me with a devilish smirk. Damn, the man is sexy as hell on any given day, but when he shows me his playful side, he's downright irresistible.



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Without giving me a chance to answer, Vincent grabs my hand and storms out of his office, dragging me down the hall to the elevator banks. He presses the button a dozen times, making me giggle. Vincent peers at me, looking like a brute and a sexy beast all at once.

Before he can respond, the doors open and he hauls me inside. A restless, burning energy sparks the air around us as the elevator doors close, sealing us in. I sway closer to Vincent, my body moving on its own, needing more of this enigmatic man. My lungs fill with his masculine scent, and a shiver runs down my spine as I look up into those deep, dark eyes of his.

My shoulder brushes against his chest, reminding me of how much bigger Vincent is than me. I love it. I've been a bigger girl my whole life, but standing next to this muscled beast, staring up into his obsidian eyes as he towers over me... it's enough to make me feel dainty and precious.

"What do you need upstairs?" I ask, unsure of how to handle the tension mounting in me.

A low, barely audible growl is unearthed from deep within Vincent's being, the sound feral and possessive. "You."

I gasp as the growl grows louder, and then he's on me, his lips crashing down on mine as his arms wind around my body.

Vincent lifts me up into his arms with ease, pressing me against the wall of the elevator as his tongue slides against mine. My thighs automatically tighten around his

hips and I rock against his hard as stone body, achy and already shamefully wet.

I don't even realize we've moved until Vincent sets me down and leans me against the wall, right next to the private elevator we just exited. His arms cage me in, and he stares me down. Vincent's breathing is ragged, like mine, and I can feel the little puffs of air as they leave his lips.

A guttural, rumbling sound escapes from deep within Vincent's chest as his gaze slides down my body. I still can't quite believe this sculpted god of a man finds me sexy, but my throbbing clit doesn't care. I need relief, and right now, Vincent is willing to give it to me. I let out a breathy whimper, my already damp panties becoming soaked.

Finally, his eyes snap up to meet mine, a fierce, feral glow emanating from his nearly black irises. One hand slides down the wall from where he was caging me in, his fingers trailing down my neck. Vincent slowly wraps his hand around the front of my neck in a gentle, yet firm grasp.

I should be scared, right? The brutal beast of a man is panting and grunting as he glides his thumb up and down my throat, caressing my sensitive skin. He looks like he's thinking of all the ways he can ruin me.

But instead of fear, I feel like I'm about to come. Vincent pulls me closer to him, our lips inches apart. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply, letting his breath out with a contained growl. When he opens his eyes, they are filled with a need that matches my own.

He squeezes my throat and closes the distance between us, crashing his mouth down on mine. Vincent pries my lips apart and pushes his tongue inside my mouth, licking and sucking on my tongue at a desperate, almost frantic pace.

I moan and press my thighs together to try and relieve some of the unbearable pressure building up between my legs. Vincent's other hand drops from the wall and grips my ass. Hard. I gasp into his mouth and automatically roll my hips against his.

He groans, trailing the hand at my neck down my body, cupping my breast and pinching my nipple through my thin blouse and bra. I cry out, breaking our kiss as I tip my head back, exposing my throat to Vincent's greedy mouth. He scrapes his teeth down my neck and sucks a super-sensitive spot below my ear.

"Fuck," he mutters into my skin, trailing kisses lower and lower until he's nipping at the tops of my breasts.

I glide my hands up his massive chest, liquid desire pooling deep in my core as his muscles flex beneath my fingers. He trembles slightly, as if my touch is his undoing. Vincent grips my thighs and lifts me up, pinning me to the wall with his massive, chiseled body.

His cock nestles in between my thighs, causing my legs to tighten around his waist. His hardness grinds into me, sliding, pounding, playing right against the aching knot of my clit. I dig my nails into his rock-hard biceps and let him take control, let him bring me the pleasure I know only he can give. I surrender to his heat, his touch, his soft lips, and his greedy tongue.

He picks up speed, dry fucking me up against the wall. Vincent sucks on a tender spot between my neck and shoulder, catching my flesh in between his teeth and biting down. I come in a vicious wave of ecstasy, my body trembling in his arms as pleasure pulls me under.

In one fluid motion, Vincent sets me down on the ground and falls to his knees in front of me, peeling my skirt and panties off before I even know what's happening. He pries my legs apart and buries his face in between my thighs, lapping up my

release.

I tangle my fingers in his hair as he grips my ass and holds me closer to his face. Vincent alternates between long, languid licks up the seam of my pussy and drawing tight little circles over my clit.

More and more of my juices leak out of me, my inner muscles pulsing and sucking on air, aching to be filled with something. As if reading my mind—or, more accurately, my body, Vincent shoves two fingers inside of my entrance, stretching me to the point of pain, but it feels so,so good.

I come again, screaming his name as he pries me open, scissoring his fingers inside of me and dipping his tongue into my tight tunnel. Over and over my body shakes and spasms, either one long orgasm of five small orgasms, I don't even know.

My vision is fuzzy and sweat coats my skin as my knees give out. Vincent grips my hips in a bruising hold and pins me to the wall. I lean forward and brace myself with my hands on his shoulders. I can't stop coming, shaking, crying out. Vincent continues to suck my clit and scrape his teeth over my folds.

I can't even feel anything anymore. Every part of me is numb and tingling by the time Vincent glides up my body, pulling my pants up as he goes. He kisses me and wraps his arms around the small of my back to keep me close to him.

I finally have to break the kiss, my vision going blurry from lack of oxygen. Resting my forehead on his chest, I gulp down air and try to figure out what happens next. Vincent combs his fingers through my hair, calming me down and making me feel so safe. Precious, even. It's such a contrast to the way he devoured me, body and soul, only a few moments ago.

“Incredible,” he whispers, though it seems like he's saying it more to himself than to

me.

Vincent tugs softly at my hair, tilting my face up toward his. Those chocolate eyes of his roam over my face like he's trying to memorize everything about me. It's intense, but then again, everything about Vincent is intense.

He presses a kiss to my forehead and lets his lips rest there until our breathing returns to normal. Vincent leans back and cups my cheek, tracing his thumb over my swollen lips. "Incredible," he murmurs again.

"You, too," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. I watch his lips twitch as a hint of smile spreads across his features. God, this man. He's a riddle, wrapped up in a mystery, and dressed in a ten thousand-dollar bespoke suit. "So, um... did you get what you needed from your penthouse?" I ask with a smirk, remembering his thinly veiled excuse for dragging me up here in the first place.

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“I’ll never get enough of you, but I suppose we should get back to work.”

His words make me smile and blush. It sure sounds like he wants to keep me around for a bit, maybe even kiss me again. I have no idea what we’re doing here, and I don’t think Vincent does, either. I can tell I rattle the man, but I guess he likes my particular brand of crazy.

“Yeah, I hear the boss doesn’t take too kindly to people being late or slacking on the job.”

Vincent gives me another rare grin before leaning down and nipping the side of my neck. “What am I going to do with that sassy mouth of yours?” he asks, the deep rumble of his voice rolling over my body.

“I don’t know, but I can’t wait to find out.”

He chuckles and then groans as his hands slide down my body and he palms my ass. Vincent rubs me against his intimidatingly large length trapped in layers of clothing, making me shiver.

“Fuck, you’re so tempting, angel,” he growls against my ear, his lips brushing the sensitive skin with each word.

I’m about to climb him like a damn tree when a speaker I hadn’t noticed mounted on the wall buzzes, the shrill sound cutting through the lust-filled moment we were sharing. A few seconds later, I hear Rhonda’s voice over the intercom.

“Mr. Sloan, your nine a.m. appointment is here.”

Vincent’s shoulders tense and then drop as he steps away from me. I’m still slumped against the wall, unsure if I can even walk after what we just did. He walks over to the speaker and mumbles some sort of response to Rhonda before turning back to me.

In two strides, he’s in front of me again, gently tucking my stray hair behind my ears and then cupping my face. “So beautiful,” he murmurs. Vincent then clears his throat and looks away from me.

Are his cheeks turning pink? Oh my god, is he blushing?

“You’re pretty okay yourself,” I respond, grinning up at him. For a half second, I see a playful sparkle in those dark eyes of his. I want to draw it out more. I want to see him smile and laugh with abandon.

After a few more seconds of soaking up the moment, I straighten myself up and try to look like I wasn’t just ravished by my boss first thing in the morning. Vincent laces his fingers through mine and gives my hand a squeeze before calling the elevator up for me.

The whole ride down, I wonder what the heck I’ve gotten myself into.

8

VINCENT

Seven hours and twenty-eight minutes.

Seven long hours and twenty-eight excruciating minutes filled with meetings and shaking clients’ hands as they thank me for adding to their wealth. These quarterly

meetings are always the death of me. I squeeze all of them into just a few days so I can get all of my interactions out of the way at once. Then I have a blessed few months of peace.

Today, however, was particularly brutal.

I still taste Juniper's kiss, her skin, her arousal. Goddamn, my girl is incredible. And I haven't seen her in seven hours and twenty-eight—excuse me, twenty-nine minutes.

My clients have come to expect me to be quick and to the point. I'm not known for my chit-chat or hospitality skills. But even I can admit I was less patient and more irritable than usual.

They don't understand.

If I didn't have a dozen meetings scheduled today, I would have stayed up in my penthouse with Juniper all day. Fuck, she's so soft and pretty, so pure and sweet, yet quick-witted and feisty. She's everything. And that's exactly what I want to give her. Everything. All of me.

I just need to get through this last meeting.

"Now, this chart here," Mr. Montgomery says as he points his stubby finger at the screen I'm showing him. "It shows where my money is going?"

"Yes," I grit out. I've answered this question from him at least three times now.

Mr. Montgomery nods and finally pushes his chair back to stand up. Thank fucking god. We shake hands and he thanks me before heading out the door. I collapse into my desk chair, holding my head in my hands. What a fucking day.



A soft knock interrupts my thoughts, followed by the sweetest sound in the world.

“Mr. Sloan?” Juniper’s voice eases the tension in my shoulders while making my dick jerk. I’m not used to either feeling, but I want more. More of whatever my angel will give me.

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“Juniper,” I growl as I stand and nearly rip the door off its hinges.

She looks up at me, those wide, green eyes capturing mine and pulling me closer, closer, closer until I lift her curvy body up into my arms and slant my mouth over hers.

I’ve never felt this way, never felt this desperate, this out of control. I feel like if I don’t kiss her right now, I’m going to dissolve, disappear completely because she’s the only thing that makes me real.

I wrap one of my hands around the back of her neck while the other one rests on the small of her back, keeping her close to me. Juniper’s pulse beats rapidly on the side of her neck and I can see her swallow thickly.

She needs it, too. She needs me. It’s a powerful feeling, to be needed by someone like Juniper. And I’m a man used to power. But this... this is something else entirely.

“Wow,” she says breathlessly when we break apart. “I hope that’s not how you greeted everyone who knocked on your door today.”

I chuckle at her cheeky response. My heart stops when she smiles at me. Jesus Christ, I thought she was gorgeous before, but her brilliant, sparkling eyes and wide smile just might kill me. How is she so full of light and life? And how can I make it my own?

“Feeling sassy today?” I murmur as I continue trailing kisses down her neck.

“Always,” Juniper sighs, making me grin. “I like your laugh.”

I pause, letting her words sink in. What a precious thing, to enjoy the way someone laughs. I can’t say I’ve ever noticed anyone’s laugh until Juniper. I love every sound she makes, and I’m hoping to hear a few new ones tonight.

“I like you,” I finally reply, taking her lips once again.

Juniper relaxes into the kiss, letting me carry her to my private elevator. We don’t separate as we step inside, or as the elevator jets us up several stories in the blink of an eye.

When the doors open into my penthouse, Juniper finally tears herself away from me, seeming to notice our change of location for the first time. She climbs out of my embrace, which I’m not a fan of. I let her know it by lacing my fingers in hers and pulling her toward me. My angel collides with my chest.

“Oomph,” she breathes out before giggling and tilting her head up.

“Sorry,” I grunt. “I’ll have to be more careful with you.”

“I think you handle me just fine.”

I groan at her words, then lean down and rest my forehead on hers. I’m going to lose my damn mind if I don’t get inside her, but this is all very fast. Some part of me knows that. And as much as I want to defile my perfect angel right here and now, I need to know she’s on board.

“We can slow down,” I tell her, rubbing my nose against her tiny one. Every single inch of her is precious and mine and fuck, I’ve never felt so possessive of anything or anyone in my life.

“After this morning? Are you kidding me?” Juniper sounds offended, which only makes me chuckle again. She smiles at me and gets up on her tiptoes to kiss me. “I want whatever you want,” she whispers onto my lips before kissing me again.

“Are you sure?”

Juniper nods. “I’m sure, Vincent. I just need to let you know... I, uh...” She takes a deep breath and blows it out.

“What? What’s wrong?” I’m about to give her some space, but Juniper fists my shirt and pulls me closer.

“Nothing’s wrong. I promise.” I stand still, looking down at her and waiting for her to continue. “I just think you should know that I’ve never done this before.”

“I sure hope you’ve never slept with your boss before,” I growl. Truthfully, the thought of any man’s hands on her makes me livid, but that’s not fair. Just because I’ve been out of the game and celibate for years, doesn’t mean she has.

“Of course not!” Juniper gasps. “I’ve also never slept with anyone.”

“Fuck,” I grunt. “Say it again.” Juniper looks confused, so I bury my face into the side of her neck, licking over her pulse point before explaining. “Tell me I’m the only one to taste you. Tell me I’m going to be the only one to see your beautiful body on display. Goddamn, angel, tell me I’m the only one who will stretch out that tight little pussy.”

“Only you,” she whimpers, tilting her head to the side to give me more room to devour her. I lick her neck and nibble on the shell of her ear.

“Good,” I growl.

I walk us a few steps backward, pressing her back against the wall with the weight of my body as I slant my mouth over hers, thrusting my tongue in between her lips so I can finally have another taste. She moans softly for me, and then loudly as I tangle my fingers in her long hair and angle her head to deepen the kiss. A sharp thread of desire slices through me when I feel her teeth sink into my bottom lip.

“God, Juniper,” I groan, kissing down her neck and nipping at her pulse point.

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Her deft little fingers are already working at my shirt, which is soon discarded on the floor behind me. Then she attacks my belt, followed by the button and zipper of my pants. She shoves her hand into my boxer briefs and pulls out my angry cock, giving it a rough stroke that nearly brings me to my knees.

I cage her in with one of my hands on the wall behind her on either side of her head as she pumps my massive erection with both of her hands. I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate on the way the soft skin of her hands glides up and down my shaft, teasing me with each stroke. I thrust my hips and shove my dick deeper into her hands. Again and again, we work together to jerk me off.

My balls draw up tight as she swirls the pad of her thumb over the tip of my cock while her other hand squeezes the base. The fucker jumps in her hands and swells up, almost ready to go off...

And then she's not touching me.

My eyes snap open and I look down to see Juniper on her knees for me, tugging my pants and boxer briefs all the way down so they pool at my ankles.

"Jesus," I grunt, unable to stop the first spurts of cum from leaking out of me.

Juniper licks the drops off of the tip of my dick, massaging the little slit there and making my knees shake. I watch in awe as her pink tongue darts out of her mouth and tickles the underside of my cock from tip to base.

She licks me up and down and then presses a kiss to my balls, making me growl.

Juniper pulls back and stares up at me, her green irises practically swallowed whole by her dilated pupils. Her fiery red hair glows, making her look wild with lust.

“Is it okay?” she asks. Jesus, the earnestness in her eyes, the way she wants to please me... and the fact that she’s never done this before, has me painfully hard and throbbing. This woman is mine, all mine. Forever.

“You’re incredible. You like that? Like my big fucking cock?” She nods enthusiastically and bites her bottom lip. “Show me,” I grunt, barely hanging on.

Her nostrils flare out and her eyes go wide with the challenge. Goddamn, what that does to me. Juniper unhinges her jaw and takes me into her hot, wet, little mouth, sucking me down with the same frenzied need I feel building deep inside of me.

She sets a relentless pace, bobbing her head up and down my thick dick, taking more of me with each downward stroke. I pound my balled-up fist on the wall when she swirls her tongue over a particularly sensitive vein. The little minx does it again and again, making me shake with the need for release.

I slide one hand down the wall and grip her hair, holding her head in place.

“Gonna fuck this pretty mouth of yours now, Juniper,” I growl. She moans, triggering the beast inside of me.

My hips snap as I shove my cock down her throat, stretching her pouty pink lips around my girth. God, I can’t stop, she feels too incredible, her tongue still massaging me, her cheeks hollowing out as I stuff her full of me over and over.

I feel her nails rake down the back of my thighs and I almost collapse from the sudden urgent need to come. Juniper moans and digs her nails into my ass, holding me against her as I explode forcefully down her throat. Some broken, feral sound

escapes my lips while Juniper swallows again and again.

I rip her off of my still-hard cock and pull her up toward me, tilting her head back with the hand I still have in her hair. My mouth claims hers in a wild kiss. I growl and nip at her lips, her chin, her neck, and then rest my forehead on hers, panting for air. Juniper looks all disheveled, her hair sticking out, her cheeks stained red, her lips swollen. She closes her eyes and leans back against the wall while I just stare at her.

“So beautiful, angel,” I whisper, tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear. Juniper smiles so sweetly, then blinks her eyes open and nibbles on that damn bottom lip of hers.

One word echoes in my head, beats in my heart, swims in my veins.

More. More. More.

“Gotta get you naked,” I grunt, peeling off her clothes with shaky hands. Jesus, I’m actually trembling with the need to feel her tight little cunt squeezing my cock. First, I need to taste my precious girl again.

I guide my curvy as hell woman to the bed, laying her naked body out so I can feast on her properly. I take a second to appreciate every single inch of her voluptuous figure, then climb into bed with her, letting my fingers trail down her torso until I’m cupping her pussy.

It’s drenched, her sweet cream dripping down my fingers as I rub her swollen clit. Withdrawing my hand, I lick her desire off my skin, groaning at her sweet, musky flavor.

“Need a better taste,” I grunt.



Juniper nods her head and watches as I kiss and lick my way down her torso, stopping to give plenty of attention to her full, heavy breasts. I place open-mouthed kisses down her ribcage and stomach, dipping my tongue into her little belly button. I've never been so aware of a woman's body, so focused on every single detail like I want to memorize everything about her.

I place a line of kisses from one hip bone to the other. Her hips buck up toward my face when I nuzzle into the closely-cropped curls of her pussy.

"Tell me what you need, baby," I whisper into her sex before blowing cool air over the soaked fabric covering her pussy lips.

Her thighs twitch and she moans so sweetly for me. "Please..." I look up at her and raise an eyebrow, loving when her eyes narrow into slits, her annoyance so damn sexy in this moment. I wait her out, though it only takes a few seconds for her to surrender. "Please lick my pussy. I need it. I need you, god..."

Her words snap my last thread of control. I growl and bury my face between her creamy thighs. She's wet, sloppy perfection, already dripping for me. I open my mouth and drink her down, devouring every part of her, sucking on her swollen outer lips, spearing my tongue deep inside of her tight little channel, lapping up her juices, and batting around her clit.

I slide my hands under her ass and squeeze her cheekshard, shoving her beautiful, pulsing cunt impossibly closer to me. I shake my face from side to side, smothering myself in her juices and snarling into that pretty pussy as she comes for me, screaming my name.

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Again and again, her muscles contract and release as wave after wave of her delicious honey pours into my mouth. I swallow every drop and push her past her orgasm, deeper into her pleasure. I couldn't stop if I wanted to. She tastes too fucking good, feels too fucking good.

I lick her pussy, just like she asked, and roll my tongue along her clit, spreading her lips wide. She moans and grabs my hair as I work her up again, my tongue and lips sucking, teasing, tasting her sweet cream as I claim her clit as mine.

Each swipe of my tongue makes her entire body twitch, so much so that I have to hold her down with my forearm across her hips.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, I can't... I can't...”

“You can. Be a good girl and come for me. Come right the fuck now,” I command.

Her body locks up, her muscles shake, her thighs clamp around my head in a vise grip. And then I bite her clit and she falls apart for me, her body twisting up with pleasure and wringing itself dry. Watching her get obliterated by her orgasm makes me fucking feral.

One final shuddering breath ripples through her body, and then she goes completely limp.

“Vincent,” she says on a shaky breath.

I worry it was too much for her. I mean, god, she's young, sweet, pure, and all things

good in the world. And I just ravished her like the brute I am. My girl surprises the fuck out of me when she rolls on top of me and punishes me with her kiss.

I let her have control for now. Her tongue slides against mine as she rubs the slit of her pussy against my abs. Feeling her wet heat on any part of me has my dick roaring to life again. Juniper pulls back and sits up, still straddling my torso. Her lips are swollen, her hair is a mess, and her skin is covered in a thin sheen of sweat. She's never been more beautiful.

I thread my fingers through Juniper's hair and tug on the strands, roughly, pulling her down toward me. She smiles, her eyes filled with equal parts lust and wonder.

I lean up and bite her big, puffy bottom lip before thrusting my tongue into her mouth and sucking the air right out of her lungs. She gasps as I flip her on her back again and glide my impossibly hard cock through her folds, the head tapping her clit with each gentle thrust.

"Vincent," she moans again, her nails digging into my biceps. My name on her lips has me close to the fucking edge already. How can one person be so utterly devastating to my self-control? It's been years since I've been with a woman, but one look, one touch, one taste of Juniper and I know I can never be without her.

"I've got you," I murmur into the side of her neck. "I'll take good care of you. You'll never want anyone else."

"Never," she agrees, her breaths growing shallow.

"I haven't been with anyone in nearly a decade," I tell her. "I've always used a condom, but I don't want to with you. I want to feel your warm little pussy squeeze the life out of me and milk the seed from my cock."

“I want that too.” She nods frantically, pushing her hips up so they kiss the tip of my dick.

A wave of pleasure ripples through my body and my balls draw up tight. Fuck, I’m not going to last very long once I’m inside her. She shudders and closes her eyes, her pussy lips fluttering against the sensitive head of my cock.

“Look at me,” I command. Her eyes snap open, their green irises clouded over with lust.

Slowly, I press myself into her tight little opening, trailing my right hand up and down her curves, tweaking her nipples and kneading the soft flesh of her hip, encouraging her to move with me. I slide my hand to her center, circling her clit with my thumb.

Juniper gasps and opens up a little more for me, her juices helping me slide deeper inside her.

“That’s it, angel, let me in. Let me make you feel good.” I continue rubbing tight little circles on her bundle of nerves as I kiss down the front of her throat and in between her breasts. When the tip of my cock hits her barrier, I pause and look up at my queen. “This is it. There’s no going back once I’m inside you.”

“I want it. I want you. Make me yours, Vincent.”

I growl and drive forward, breaking through her innocence and sinking inside her snug pussy. She whimpers and I hold myself still, placing kisses up and down her neck, her jaw, her cheeks, and finally I take her lips in a long, languid kiss.

“Holy fuck,” I grit out, burying my face into the crook of her shoulder. “So goddamn tight for me. Are you okay, Juniper?” I ask, lifting my head to look at her to make

sure she's telling me the truth.

"So good. So full. I think I need... I think I'd like it if you moved."

"Jesus," I mutter as precum leaks out of my dick.

I pull all the way out and circle her entrance with the head of my cock. She whines and moves her hips, trying to get me where she wants me. Good. I need her to be certain she wants me, that she needs me as much as I need her.

I snap my hips and hit home in one long thrust. We both cry out at the sensations breaking over our bodies. I feel it, feel her blood pulsing in her veins, the air filling up her lungs, the muscles of her pussy sucking me in further than I thought I could go.

"You're so deep," Juniper whimpers, shifting her hips and spreading her legs wider for me, letting me fuck her just like she asked.

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I grunt with each powerful thrust, grinding down then pulling almost all of the way out only to hammer into her again and again. I feel her cunt tightening around me as her cream coats my cock. She's fucking gushing for me, the wet, sloppy sounds filling the room along with the smell of our combined pleasure.

"Fucking hell, Juniper. Holy fuck," I groan, angling my hips to find her G-spot. I know the instant I hit it. Her pussy clamps down on me as her breath hitches and her eyes squeeze shut. Juniper twists beneath me and cries out as her orgasm is ripped from her very core.

I slide my hands under her shoulders and pull her closer, shoving her down on my dick each time I hit home. I fuck her through her climax, pounding that sweet little pussy as she tenses and releases, shaking with pure bliss.

I give her a moment to rest, and then I roll on my back, taking her with me. Juniper places her hands on my chest to steady herself, her cunt still pulsing around my shaft.

"Ride my fucking cock, angel," I growl. I see a flash of insecurity cross her face, but I pull her down for a kiss so she doesn't spend another second doubting herself or her effect on me.

My hands slide up her thighs and grip her hips in a punishing hold. Together we find the right rhythm, creating a delicious ache with each roll of our hips.

"V-Vincent..." she stutters out, her big tits swaying in front of my face as she rests her hands on either side of my head.

I suck on her breasts, lick her nipples, scrape my teeth along her sensitive flesh and bite down hard enough to leave my mark there. I want every goddamn inch of her to bear my mark.

I grab her ass,hard, and grind her pussy down on me while I fuck up into her, hitting her G-spot with every rough stroke. Juniper starts to tremble, her arms barely holding her up as we climb higher and higher.

“Come for me, angel,” I grit out, one hand still squeezing her ass while the other trails up her side and wraps firmly around her neck.

“Ohmygod,” Juniper moans, her pussy pulsing as a flood of wetness pours over my cock, soaking the sheets beneath us.

I tighten my hold around her neck and dig my fingers into the flesh of her ass, forcing her to ride me hard. My spine tingles andmy balls draw up tight, my dick swelling and throbbing inside of her warm, wet pussy.

“Fucking come right now!” I roar as my thrusts grow erratic.

“I-I-I...”

I squeeze her throat and she detonates, throwing her head back, screaming my name as tears pour down her flushed cheeks. My orgasm shoots through me, the sharp ecstasy stealing my breath as I empty myself inside of her womb. It hurts so fucking good, feeling her walls choke my raw dick as rope after rope paints the inside of her pussy.

Juniper collapses, curling up on my chest and burying her face into the side of my neck. I wrap my arms around her, keeping her close as we stay connected like this, as close as two people can be.

After a few moments, my angel is still shaking in my embrace. I kiss the top of her head and gently nudge her so she's looking up at me. God, those eyes. They pierce me through and through. I suddenly realize how roughly I handled her. And for her first goddamn time. Once I was inside her, I lost my mind.

"How are you feeling?" I murmur, rubbing my nose against hers. A soft smile graces her lips, easing the tension in my chest.

"Deliciously worn out and thoroughly fucked." Juniper's lips pull into a smirk, and that's when it hits me.

I'm ridiculously, completely, helplessly in love with her.

The realization that I need her more than my next breath fills me with panic, but then Juniper kisses the side of my neck and nestles her head there, reminding me of how perfectly we fit. There's nothing to fear when my angel is snuggled up in my arms, soothing every single thing about me.

"Me too," I answer with a chuckle. Juniper giggles, the sound traveling through me and chasing away the last of my worries. I'm in love with the most beautiful, precious woman in the world. Soon, I'm going to have to figure out how to tell her. Right now, however, Juniper needs her rest. "Can you stay the night?" I ask, trailing my hand up and down her spine.

She nods and idly circles her fingertips over my bare skin, that single touch driving me wild and yet calming me down at the same time. "I'll check in with Mom in a bit, and then again in the morning. I used to work overnights at Big Ron's Diner, so she's gotten used to her nightly routine with me out of the house."

"You worked at a diner? When was that?" I guess I still don't know that much about Juniper, but that's okay. I'll enjoy every new thing I learn.



“Oh. Um...” Juniper trails off, her muscles tensing as she tries to roll away from me.

“Where are you going?” I say with a chuckle. “I didn’t know you used to work at a diner. Was it while you were in college?”

“College...” I’m not sure if that’s an answer to my question or if she’s just repeating the word. Her tone is strange, but then again, I’m not very good at reading people. “Right. Yeah, it was before I started working for you.”

Weird, vague answer, but maybe I’m just reading it wrong. “I can’t wait to find out all of your secrets,” I whisper, kissing her temple and tucking her into my side. “Let’s get some sleep for now, though.”

Juniper nods and sighs, relaxing against me once more. I’m not sure what just happened, but I’ll figure it out. Now that I know what it’s like being inside her, feeling her surrender to me, watching her come apart again and again... I can’t let her go. I just need to figure out how to get her to agree to be mine forever.

### JUNIPER

I slowly become aware of soft warmth surrounding me, a spicy, woody scent filling my lungs as I breathe deeply. Blinking one eye open and then the other, light floods my vision, spilling over onto Vincent's bare chest and chiseled muscles.

God, the man is beautiful. Sexy. Sculpted.

The hand I have resting on Vincent's chest slowly slides down his solid, gorgeous body. I mean seriously, the man is all muscle and sex appeal. I still can't believe he wants me, that he finds me beautiful. But after last night, there's no denying he's as addicted to me as I am to him.

I explore the hard planes of his chest and abs, trailing my fingers lower and lower until they wrap around his thick cock. He's really freaking big. It's kind of astonishing to think that he fits inside of me. I can't wait for him to fill me up again. Reaching out, I start to stroke my hand up and down his many inches.

Vincent's muscles tense and I hear a soft groan fall from his lips. I look up to find him still asleep. I shuffle down closer to his cock and get on my knees so I'm bent over him. I lick his shaft from top to bottom, loving the way his hips automatically thrust up to get closer to my mouth.

"Mmm... Juniper..." he mumbles in his sleep.

Encouraged by his groans, though spoken unconsciously, I open my mouth and suck just the head of his cock inside. I look up at Vincent right as his eyes snap open.

“Fuck, Juniper, Jesus Christ, baby.”

I pop off of his dick, wondering if I did something wrong.

“Don’t you dare stop now, sweetheart. Need those lips around my cock.”

I smile and crawl in between his legs to give me better access. I stick out my tongue and lick him again, like a lollipop, flicking my tongue across the head again and again before dipping it inside the slit on top.

“Juniper! Fuck!”

I love giving him pleasure like this, seeing him almost out of control. I open my mouth wide and descend on his cock, taking him as far as I can. Massaging the vein running along the bottom of his shaft, I begin to suck and slowly pull back out. I bob my head up and down while Vincent grunts and fists my hair, guiding my movements.

“That’s it, baby. Just like that. Shit, Juniper, your mouth feels so goddamn good.”

I hum around his dick and he growls, thrusting up and shoving his cock further in my mouth till it hits the back of my throat. I gag a little, and he pets my head.

“Relax, love. Breathe through your nose and open up that little throat of yours.”

I do as he says and feel him going down my throat. I swallow on instinct and he growls again. When I get a good rhythm going, I reach down and take his balls in one hand, massaging them and sending a shiver through his entire body.

“Fuck yes, baby. So damn good but we gotta stop.”

I lean back and give him a questioning look.

“Come here, Juniper,” he grits out. “Need your lips on mine right the fuck now. Need to come inside that pussy.”

I crawl up his body, kissing and licking every muscle I see along the way. Straddling him, I lean down and place my hands on either side of his head. Vincent wastes no time. He cups the back of my neck and pulls me down, crashing his lips on mine. He owns this kiss, licking and sucking and driving me wild with need.

Vincent’s hands glide down my back, cupping my bare ass and pulling me closer, urging me to grind down on him with my soaking wet pussy.

He breaks the kiss only to attach his mouth to my neck, licking and nipping and kissing down to my shoulder.

“Are you still sore, baby?” he mumbles into my skin.

“No, I need you.” I’m all breathy but I don’t care. I can’t get enough.

“Need you too, Juniper.” He lifts me up by my hips, hovering me over his throbbing, angry dick. “Ride my fucking cock like a good girl.”

I moan at his words and sink down on his hard shaft.

Vincent hisses out a breath once I’m fully seated on him. I wiggle my hips, getting used to feeling him like this again. Then, I lift up on my knees until he’s almost all the way out and impale myself on him.

“Juniper,” he growls. “Fucking Christ, so good, baby.”

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I continue bouncing up and down, grinding my hips each time, hitting my clit on his pubic bone. Vincent anchors me to his lap and sits up, licking my swollen, sensitive nipples before latching onto one.

“Ah, yes, yes...” I moan. He switches, licking and kissing his way over to my other breast.

“Fucking love these tits, baby.”

Vincent pushes them together and licks up my cleavage. I get a picture of his cock there instead, his thick, hot length making my breasts jiggle with the force of each thrust. It’s so dirty, but the image alone has a wave of wetness pouring out of me.

“What were you just thinking about? I feel you gushing all over me,” Vincent grunts out.

My cheeks burn as a blush takes over my face. I can’t form words, let alone string them together in a sentence, so I arch my back, shoving my breasts in his face.

“Need me to fuck these tits, baby girl?”

“Oh, g-god yes,” I moan. More wetness pours out of my pussy at his dirty words. I love it. My eyes close and my hands find their way to my breasts as I knead them and pluck at my nipples. My nerves tingle, my muscles tense, my movements become jerky.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you need from me. Sweet Jesus, you’re incredible. I’ll

never get enough of you.”

I roll my hips two more times and then throw my head back, crying out as my orgasm slams into me. Vincent grabs my hips and continues a relentless pace as he fucks up into me, riding out my orgasm.

I’m still coming down when I feel us shift, Vincent flipping me on my back and pressing me into the bed. He’s still deep inside of me as he gathers my wrists in one of his large hands and pins them above my head.

“Gonna fuck you nice and hard, baby. After you come on my cock again, I’m gonna stick my dick in those luscious tits.”

“Yes, please,” I pant out.

He growls and leans down to kiss me. It’s messy and passionate and perfect. Then, Vincent leans back on his heels and guides one of my legs over his shoulder, and then the other. He pulls out and slams into me, letting out a primal noise as he hits the end of me. Again and again, he bottoms out, tearing me apart in the most exquisite way.

I’m still so swollen and sensitive from my first orgasm that it doesn’t take much for him to wind me up again.

“Fucking love this pussy. Want to stay buried deep inside of you for the rest of my life. You want that too, Juniper?”

“Yes, yes... Fuck!” The coil snaps and I feel my pussy convulse around his cock again and again. Vincent reaches down and rubs my clit, causing me to jerk and spasm beneath him, one orgasm rolling into another. Our combined juices trickle down my ass and soak the sheets.

“So beautiful. Love watching you come. You’re gorgeous.” Vincent pulls out of me and slips two fingers deep inside of my cunt, scooping out my honey before rubbing it in between my breasts. “Push your tits together, Juniper. Make them nice and tight for me.”

I do as he says, hot liquid pooling in my belly again at his words. God, I can’t imagine coming again, but I’m impossibly turned on right now. He straddles me and strokes his cock once, twice, and then shoves his length in between my breasts.

I open my mouth and suck the head of his cock each time he thrusts forward.

“Shit, Juniper, you like that? Like when I fuck your big tits?”

“Ahhh, yes,” I manage to moan.

“Me too, baby. I’m so close already. Pinch your nipples. Do it now, love.”

I do as he says, playing with my breasts as he glides up and down me. My thighs start trembling and I don’t understand how I can be on the edge of an orgasm after coming so many times already. And yet...

“Oh! Oh god, Vincent... ohmygod...”

I squeeze my thighs together again and again, clenching my pussy to try and find some relief. When I pinch my nipples, an unexpected orgasm rolls through my body, causing me to arch my back and dig my fingers into my tits.

“Jesus, Juniper, are you coming right now?”

I cry out, unable to answer him in words.

He grunts and pulls back, still straddling me, and strokes his cock twice before shooting hot cum all over my chest. I almost climax again just thinking about how dirty and primal it is. He's marked me.

Every cell in my body throbs as I continue to shake from my powerful orgasm. Vincent flops down on the bed next to me with his eyes closed, panting and sweating.



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We lay next to each other on our backs, both coming down from the intense high we just experienced.

Finally, Vincent breaks the silence.

“That was incredible. So fucking hot. Jesus.” He turns his head to look at me. Reaching out, he traces along my jaw, down my neck, and over my shoulder. “So beautiful,” he murmurs more to himself than to me.

Vincent pulls me into his side and arranges us so my arm is flung over his chest and my head is resting on his muscled arm beneath me.

I love the way he handles my body roughly when we’re in the throes of passion, and yet so tenderly afterward. I need both. Need his dominance and his gentleness. His control and his care. Sighing contentedly, I relax into his embrace, feeling safe and happy in his strong arms.

Try as I might to enjoy the afterglow, my stomach twists at the thought of starting off our beautiful relationship on a lie. Everything happened so fast, and when I tried explaining myself, Vincent wouldn’t let me get a word in. He didn’t even want to see me for the longest time, so how was I supposed to explain that I sort of stole the job and I’m not technically qualified for it?

I have to figure out a way to talk to him about it before things spiral out of control. Last night, I let it spill that I worked at Big Ron’s Diner. I think I dodged his questions well enough, but I hate deception and I’m starting to hate myself for lying to Vincent.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Vincent asks. I look up at him, but his eyes are closed. A soft smile plays on his lips, making my heart trip all over itself. He looks so peaceful and serene, and every cell in my body rings with joy that I could put him in such a blissed-out state. I don’t want to ruin it with my confession, but I vow to talk to him about everything tonight.

“Just thinking about you,” I tell him, pressing my lips to his cheek. At least it’s not a lie. “And how late it’s getting.” Looking over his shoulder, I see the clock on his nightstand reads six thirty. I’m usually getting my first text with my marching orders for the day right about now. Instead, I’m naked, in bed, with my boss. Vincent groans and rolls over, caging me in as he looms above me.

“My boss gets grumpy if I’m late,” I say with a pout.

Vincent laughs and his whole face lights up. Good Lord, I’m still not used to seeing this man so light and happy. I’ll never get tired of it.

“I hear your boss is an antisocial bastard,” he whispers into the side of my neck before kissing me there.

I smile into his kiss and nod my head. “Yeah, but he’s starting to grow on me.” I’m about to give him some more of that sass he pretends to hate, but I’m cut off by my phone ringing. “Shoot, I better go check on my mom and get cleaned up and stuff. I need to change my clothes and?—”

The phone rings again, and Vincent rolls off of me and grabs it from the side table, handing it to me.

“Take your time,” he says, kissing the tip of my nose. God, he’s so freaking sweet. Who knew?

Vincent crawls out of bed and stretches, baring his beautifully powerful naked body to me as the light from the window kisses the contours of his muscles. The man gives me a smirk and a wink as he strokes his half-hard cock.

“Juniper? Hellooooo?” My mom’s voice breaks the spell, and Vincent chuckles as a blush spreads across my face.

“Yeah, hi,” I squeak out before clearing my throat. She laughs and asks how I am. We’ve always been open about everything, so she knows where I’ve been all night.

After making sure Mom is up and doing well, I kiss Vincent goodbye and tell him I’m going to change and freshen up at home before coming back into the office.

Forty-five minutes later, I’m dashing through the lobby of Sloan Investments. “Hold the door, please!” I call out, slipping into the elevator at the last minute.

Vincent said to come in whenever, but I don’t want to take advantage of our new relationship. I’m not sure how the whole boss/assistant dynamic is going to work, only that I’m willing to do anything I can to hold on to Vincent. Which means I need to face the music and tell him about how I came to be in his employ.

I know something is wrong the moment I step out of the elevator. Rhonda gives me some strong side-eye then nods her head in the direction of Vincent’s office. “Better get in there if you want a fighting chance at keeping your job.”

“What...?”

Before she can answer, a banshee screech pierces the tension, making Rhonda and I jump. I snap my head in the direction of the noise, my stomach rolling when I realize it’s coming from behind Vincent’s door.

I look back to Rhonda, hoping for some sort of explanation, but her gaze is focused back on her computer, letting me know she's not going to get any more involved. Okay, then.

Squaring my shoulders, I knock on the solid oak door, swallowing back the lump in my throat. I'm about to knock again, but then the door swings open, revealing a red-faced Jennifer.

Oh shit.

"There she is! The little slut stole my phone and my job!" she shrieks. I figured out who the banshee is.

"I didn't steal your phone," I say for some reason. Why my brain decided to start there, I'm not sure. "I paid for it fair and square."

Jennifer rolls her eyes and puts her hands on her hips, making her look like a pissed off Barbie doll. She must have had a good time wherever she ran off to almost a month ago. Her skin is golden brown and her hair looks as though it's been kissed by the tropical sun.

“And the job?”

This time, it's Vincent who addresses me. I slowly drag my eyes over to where he's standing behind his desk. His huge arms are crossed over his chest and he looks down his nose at me, those chocolate brown eyes nearly obsidian.

He's livid.

On the outside, the man appears cold and calculating, but the tick in his jaw and the slight flare of his nostrils lets me know he's on edge. Was it really just an hour ago I was curled up in his arms while he kissed my nose? Now he's eyeing me up like he doesn't even know me. Like we didn't trade hearts last night. It hurts more than words can say, but I deserve his wrath.

Desperate to redeem myself, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “I needed the money.” I wince, realizing how tactless that must sound.

“You were just using me for an opportunity to make money then?”

“No! No, I?—”

“Of course she was!” Jennifer butts in. “My boyfriend's cousin said she was broke and needed a phone?—”

“Which I bought from you at the agreed-upon price?—”

“And then she went and stole my new job right out from under my nose! I was just

trying to be a good person, Mr. Sloan, and look what it got me. I can tell you were just trying to be a good person, too. We both got played.”

I snort at her melodramatic monologue but sober up quickly when I see Vincent’s intense gaze hasn’t changed. This is not going well.

“It wasn’t like that,” I insist, though I don’t know what other explanation I could offer. “I just... well, I was working overnights as a waitress and barely making ends meet, and then I bought my phone off of Jennifer, and you called, and I swear I tried letting you know I wasn’t who you were looking for, but—”

“Not hard enough,” Vincent growls. “You didn’t want to tell me that first day? Or the second? Or perhaps the twentieth? Or maybe when I came over to your house. Or, possibly, before or after you slept with me.”

Tears sting my eyes as Jennifer lets out a cackle. “Oh my god, she really is a slut.”

My shoulders slump and shame coils in my stomach, sitting like a rock and dragging my whole frame down. I can’t believe he said that in front of her. I know I misled him, but he didn’t have the right to throw me under the bus and discuss our personal relationship with her.

“I’m not a slut,” I whisper.

At least that part is true. Vincent was my first, and as crazy as it sounds, I was already planning on him being my last.

“Just a manipulative thief then,” Jennifer scoffs.

“Enough,” Vincent growls, though I don’t know if he’s addressing me or Jennifer.

I dart my eyes over to Vincent, still holding on to some hope that he's coming to my defense. Does he really think I'd sleep with him to keep my job or climb the corporate ladder or whatever? Couldn't he feel what happened between us that day he came to visit after my mom went to the hospital? Or when he sank inside me for the first time? The way he held me last night, I swear it felt like he was already as in love with me as I am with him.

His features are hard as stone, giving nothing away. Is he hurt? Disappointed? Angry? I'm guessing all three, but is there even a slight chance he could understand? I have no idea. I've got nothing.

"Vincent, what we have is real," I murmur, pleading with my eyes for him to believe me. "Yes, I was dishonest when you first called, and I know I should have said something sooner. I was on my way here to confess everything, but then..."

"But then I beat you to it," Jennifer finishes for me with a wicked smile.

I hate her. "Where were you for the last month? How can you seriously come waltzing in here weeks after your job was supposed to start, and then be mad at me?"

"Jennifer here was just telling me about a family emergency that kept her away," Vincent says, his voice totally void of any emotion.

"I thought you were taking time off to be free and go on spring break with friends," I mutter.

"She's obviously lying again, Mr. Sloan. Poor girl, I'm starting to think she can't help it. Some people have that condition, you know."

"I'm not?—"

“I think you’ve caused enough trouble, Ms. Leigh,” Vincent snaps.

I inhale sharply, trembling at the iciness in his voice. Shaking, I tilt my head up to meet his gaze. Dark, brooding, and right back to the man he was when I first started working for him. The memory of his serene smile this morning is all but gone.



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“Vincent, uh, Mr. Sloan. I can explain. I needed the job, yes, but I didn’t plan on falling for you. That was real. It still is. Please believe me,” I beg.

“It’s worse than I thought,” Jennifer tuts. “She’s just trying to manipulate you.”

“No, I?—”

“I said, enough.” Vincent’s booming voice echoes around his enclosed office, shaking me to my very bones. “Ms. Leigh, you are fired, effective immediately. Collect your things and leave the premises without further incident, and I’ll give you one month’s severance.”

“I know I messed up,” I choke out. “I understand you firing me, but please, can we talk about us?” I can go back to the diner, I know there are shifts available. Or I can find another waitressing job. Anything. It’ll suck, but if I have Vincent, it would be worth it.

“Us?Us?” he sneers, his tone full of acid. “There is no us. There never was, isn’t that right? Leave, Ms. Leigh, before I have to call security.”

I stand there, mouth agape, watching the love of my life reject me. Even worse, the tall, leggy, Malibu Barbie is grinning like the Cheshire Cat, watching my life fall apart with glee.

My vision dots with black spots, and I can’t seem to get a full breath in. Sweat beads on my forehead and brow as I back away from the scene, turning to run away. I open the door with a shaky hand and stumble out into the hallway, not even bothering to

look at Rhonda as I head to the stairs.

I can't stand the thought of waiting for an elevator, so I throw the door to the staircase open and nearly fall down the first flight of stairs in my haste to escape. I only make it down three flights before collapsing in the landing and curling up on my side. I have about five more to go, but I don't have anything left.

Trembling from head to toe, I let the tears consume me, muffling my cries with a hand over my mouth.

There is no us.

Vincent's words are on repeat in my head, his cruel tone slicing my heart into tiny shreds as I fall apart in the fifth-floor stairwell. The worst part is, I only have myself to blame.

10

VINCENT

"Well, that was awkward," the flirty blonde says, twirling her hair as she blinks up at me. "I'm glad it's just us now though."

She takes a step closer to me, but I hold my hand up to stop her. The woman pouts, a look that is unbecoming and rather annoying. In fact, everything about her makes me want to recoil. She's as fake as they come, and I know she wouldn't have lasted one day as my assistant. I'm not looking to hire her on now.

"Thank you for informing me of the job mishap," I say, clearing my throat.

"Like I said, we both were played. I'll go ahead and take the rest of the week off to

care for my father, then I'll officially start on Monday?"

"I thought it was your mother who was unwell."

"Oh. Right, yes, well, they both need caring for these days," she responds, darting her eyes down to her purse and then over to the side, focusing on anything but me. "I may need a few afternoons off next week to take Mother for her MRI."

"She needs an MRI for a broken leg?" It's clear Jennifer is a shit liar, and I've had enough of liars for the foreseeable future. Before the frustrating woman can say anything else, I throw the door of my office open and gesture for her to leave. "The position is no longer available. You may see yourself out."

Her jaw drops, and she stares at me in shock. Then, her face twists into an ugly, entitled sneer. "Is that it?"

"Send my well wishes to your father. Or was it your mother? For her head injury. Or, sorry, broken leg."

She knows I'm not buying her bullshit. The woman swings her thousand-dollar purse over her shoulder and lifts her chin up high. She's about to tell me something bratty, but I cut her off.

"Out."

No sooner have her six-inch stiletto heels crossed the threshold than I'm slamming the door shut. Deflating against the wall, I comb my fingers through my hair, tugging at the strands until my scalp stings.

I try swallowing, but something is stuck in my throat. Jesus, I choke out a cough and wipe moisture from my eyes. What is wrong with me?

Pushing myself away from the door, I stride across my office and slam my fist down on my desk. The heavy wooden surface creaks under the pressure, but I don't feel any pain. I should be furious. I should sue Juniper for every cent she's wrongfully taken from me under the guise of my assistant. I should call my best lawyer and have him drag her through the wringer.

Instead, I dig the heel of my hand into my chest, hoping to alleviate the tight ball of pressure forming over my heart. I wipe away more wetness from my eyes, still not sure what is happening to my body. Surely these aren't tears. I don't cry. Not for anyone or anything. Certainly not for the woman who made me believe in fairy tales only to betray me in the end.

Then why can't I breathe? The thought of going up to my penthouse alone, without my angel, twists something deep inside me. Pain sears through my lungs and heart, rattling into my bones. I slump into my office chair, trying to gain some control of my body and emotions.

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My eyes land on the note Juniper wrote to me a few days ago.

Work harder. Just kidding. I was trying reverse psychology. Did it work?

Why would she write this if all she wanted was a job? She didn't have to go out of her way to get me dinner or try to make me smile, yet everything Juniper has done in her time here has been to make my life easier. Even when she's sassing me.

I pick up the note, holding it between my thumb and forefinger and lifting it up to my nose. Like the crazy person I've become, I sniff the paper, hoping to catch some of her sunshiney scent.

Her words from earlier come back to me. What we have is real... I didn't plan on falling for you.

"Bullshit," I growl, pounding a balled-up fist against my chest. She was lying. She had to be. I don't understand people and their complicated motives. Why can't relationships be like a formula? I can find all the right pieces, plug them into the equation, and come up with a solution. Real life is much messier, and I don't know how to handle that. I don't know how to handle these chaotic feelings.

All I know is that Juniper brought me peace. She crawled under my defenses and set up camp somewhere close to my heart. And then she ripped it out with her betrayal.

I grunt and stand up, not sure what my plan is, just knowing I need to leave. Everything in this room reminds me of Juniper, of how stupid I was to fall for her charms.

I storm out of my office, taking one look toward the elevator bank, where Jennifer is typing away on her phone and waiting for a ride down to the parking garage. Spinning on my heel, I turn in the opposite direction, making my way to the stairwell instead. It will be good to get some of this restless energy out.

Halfway down the second flight of stairs, I pause when I hear a muffled sound coming from further down. Cautiously, I take a few more steps until a quiet sob fills the stairwell, followed by a miserable snuffle.

Juniper?

Christ, is she hurt? Was she so upset she fell down the stairs? Fuck, if anything happened to her...

I leap down the stairs three at a time, hitting the landing with a thud.

“Oh my god,” I hear her gasp. I look over my shoulder and see her curled up in the corner of the fifth-floor landing. The sight breaks me.

Her arms are wrapped around her torso as her chest heaves with heart-wrenching whimpers. Juniper’s green eyes look faded, wary, and rimmed in red. Her delicate little cheeks are blotchy and wet with tears.

“Are you hurt?” I grunt out. She flinches away from me, and goddamnit, that hurts more than anything that’s happened today.

“S-sorry,” she stutters out, wiping her eyes and unfolding herself from her position on the floor. “I’m going.”

“No, I...” I what? I want her to stay? I love her? I’m a miserable asshole without her?

Juniper tilts her head to the side, waiting for me to finish. This is completely uncharted territory for me. I'm pissed. Right? I'm angry. She deceived me. Then why can't I stop walking toward her? Why do I long to hold her against me and let her explain everything?

My window of opportunity is sealed shut when Juniper stands up, swaying on her feet. I reach out for her, but she backs away, taking a few steps further down the stairs. "Juniper..."

"I love you," she blurts out.

I'm so stunned, I can't even form thoughts. She doesn't give me any time to recover before dashing down the stairs. I watch in horror as she trips and stumbles, only to catch herself on the railing.

"Wait! Juniper, are you okay?"

I follow her, chase her, really, but she nods her head and pushes the door open to the fourth floor. I'm hot on her heels. She needs to explain herself. Preferably while I have her secured in my arms, but I'll take caging her in an elevator if necessary.

By the time I catch up to her, Juniper is slipping into the elevator, which is full of more of my faceless employees. "Juniper!" I yell, not giving a single fuck that I'm making a scene.

She presses her hand over her mouth to catch a sob, and shakes her head no. Those damn emerald eyes filling with tears. Fuck. I did that to her. My chest feels as though it's being ripped open, the tattered remains of my heart tumbling out and landing at her feet.

Juniper's emerald eyes never leave mine as the doors close, the elevator taking my

angel away from me.

“Fuck,” I roar, the sound startling everyone around me into silence. I look around at my shocked and slightly frightened employees, knowing I need to calm down. “Everything is fine,” I grunt out, though no one believes me. “Back to work.”

I rub my eyes and roll out my shoulders before calling up another elevator. I could continue to chase after Juniper but she clearly doesn’t want to be around me right now.

Once I’m back in my office, I collapse into my chair, the energy completely drained from every part of me. A headache pounds behind my eyes and my stomach twists on itself, making me nauseated.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:43 pm*

My phone rings, jarring me out of my disheveled state. Cutter's name flashes across the screen and I'm quick to answer it. Two calls in the same week? It must be something serious.

"Everything okay?" I answer. It comes out jagged, my voice somewhere between a growl and whisper.

"Woah, should I be asking you that?"

"You first."

"I'm okay," he assures me. "More than okay, actually. I'm great. I... I called to update you on my girl."

"Your girl? The trespasser?" This is a turn of events I didn't see coming.

"Sadie," he corrects. "I didn't send her home the day I called you. I'm not sure how it happened, but she stayed the night again. And then another night. And then I couldn't imagine life without her, ya know?"

I grunt in acknowledgment. I'm happy for my friend. Really, I am. Just because my epic love story turned sour doesn't mean I can't appreciate Cutter finding his other half.

"Anyway," he continues. "I would love for you to meet Sadie some time. I also wanted to check on your situation with your assistant. Were you more diligent in ignoring your feelings than I was?"

I sigh heavily and press my free hand over my heart, trying and failing to relieve the hollow ache there. “No,” I finally answer.

“Ah, so things... didn’t turn into a happily ever after?” my friend guesses. “Honestly, Sadie and I had a rough spot, too. I was an idiot and had to grovel but it was worth it. She was worth it.”

“Grovel? You?”

Cutter chuckles. “Yeah, never thought I’d be the type. But I would have done anything to prove myself worthy.”

“Shit,” I mutter. His words hit closer to home than he knows.

“So, tell me what’s going on. I’m a relationship expert now,” he jokes. Sadie must have done a number on him. The man I talked to last week was a grouchy loner with a guilty conscience and a head full of darkness.

“I... I don’t even know. Juniper said... and I snapped and then she left, and... goddamnit,” I sigh defeatedly, running a hand through my hair. “I made her cry. I literally just fired her and sent her away in tears less than five minutes ago and my head is all over the place.”

“Oh, shit. So this just happened? I have great timing then, huh?”

“I think I messed up,” I say slowly, the words tasting foreign on my lips. I don’t make mistakes, but if I did, it would be someone else’s fault. Not this, though. I made Juniper cry. I fired her without giving her a chance to explain. I hurt her. Me.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know where to even start,” I tell him truthfully. I replay the entire scene in my head. “I didn’t want to like her,” I say, my lip twitching into the hint of a smile. “But she actually cared, you know? She asked how my day was and brought me meals. Even though her attitude was unprofessional, she had a certain charm.”

“Sounds like she’s exactly what you need to balance you out. I get that feeling. So, why did you send her away crying?”

“She lied.”

“About what?”

“Everything.” Even as I say it, I know it’s not true.

“Really?Everything?” Of course Cutter would call me out on my shit. “Whatever happened, the emotions are real. I can tell you’re wrecked just from your voice. You must look like shit in person.”

I stare at my balled-up fists, squeezing hard and then letting go. I’m shaking as I inhale shallow breaths. It hurts. Every part of me aches. How did one woman destroy me so completely?

My father’s words come back to me, as they often do. Family was the only thing that kept him from achieving wealth and status. In that regard, maybe Juniper did me a favor. It might hurt like a motherfucker right now, but with Juniper out of my life, I can focus on my career again.

What we have is real.

Juniper’s whispered confession drowns out my father’s voice. Real. What is real? Money. Numbers. Things I can count and plan. Things I can control.

The image of Juniper's soft smile in the morning fills my mind. The way the sun kissed her cheek and hip as she lay on her side, her curvy figure silhouetted in the morning light. Her sparkling green eyes lock onto mine, telling me without words that she's real, too. She's flesh and blood, smiles and sass, strong and so damn beautiful.

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What's the point of climbing to the top if I'm all alone and miserable? My father's dream of unimaginable wealth doesn't have to be mine. I can want something different. Something more. Something tangible, real, and worthy of sacrificing everything for. Goddamnit, I want Juniper as my wife, my partner, my whole world.

"Fuck," I groan, scrubbing a hand down my face. "I don't know anything anymore."

Cutter chuckles. "Yeah, welcome to the terrifying world of being in love."

"Love," I repeat slowly, letting the word sink into my bloodstream. "I love her."

"I don't think I'm the one who needs to hear those words," Cutter says. He's right. He chuckles and says something about going to get my girl.

I hang up without a goodbye, though I make a note to call him later. We'll have to plan a visit soon and go on a double date. Never thought I'd be planning something like that with Cutter, but damn if these women haven't changed everything about us in the best way possible.

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### JUNIPER

I put the last of the groceries away, closing the cabinet and leaning against it. My head is still spinning from everything that happened yesterday, but it feels good to do something normal like grocery shop.

Besides, I needed to stock up while I still have money in the bank.

A wave of panic washes over me, settling like a rock in my gut. I haven't told my mom about Vincent firing me yet. I figured I have the weekend to ease her into the idea of me working at the diner again. For the moment, she's at a doctor's appointment to discuss treatment options. I dropped her off before heading to the store, hoping my insurance through Sloan Investments holds out long enough to at least get some solid advice.

I take a deep breath and focus on doing what I can. Clean. Yes, this little cottage needs a good deep clean. I'm talking scrubbing the oven racks, dusting the baseboards, and polishing all the light fixtures. Anything to distract me from the gaping hole in my chest where my heart used to be.

The few hours of sleep I got last night were riddled with visions of Vincent, his cold, dark eyes, and the way he sneered at me as he told me to leave. I know I screwed up. He has everyright to be upset, but I didn't expect him to be so cruel. Maybe I should have. He has a reputation, after all.

After gathering the cleaning supplies from the closet, I get to work tearing apart the kitchen and wiping down every surface. The more I think about the awful scene in Vincent's office, the more distraught I become. Angry, even. Yes, I lied. Yes, I should have said something sooner. But Vincent just took Jennifer's word for it, without so much as allowing me to defend myself.

And then he went and told Jennifer we slept together! I mean, what the hell?

"Ow," I hiss, looking down at the steel mesh sponge I'm gripping tightly. The thin threads of metal poke my skin, bringing me back into the moment. I loosen my hold and continue cleaning the trays on our stovetop.

Something catches my eye out of the kitchen window. I drop the sponge and peer outside, furrowing my brow when I see several men with ladders and toolboxes wandering around the yard.

Wiping off my hands and smoothing back my frizzy hair, I head to the back door to see what they are doing. I certainly didn't call anyone over to fix anything up. I can't afford it, especially now with my current unemployment situation.

"Excuse me?" I say once I open the door. I cross my arms over my chest and take a step outside. "Hi there, I think you guys have the wrong place."

One of the men sets down his toolbox and takes off his baseball cap before addressing me. It's an old-fashioned gesture and makes me soften toward him. "Are you Ms. Juniper Leigh?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply hesitantly. "I didn't call about anything. I don't really have the money..."

"All paid for, miss. We're mostly assessing the place today, but we'll get started on repairs to the roof and siding tomorrow. The porch is high on the priority list, too. Then doors, a new security system, fresh paint, and a few other things. We don't do all of that, but I'll make the call to my buddies when we're at the painting phase."

I stare at him, not sure what to say. "Um. But, who...?"

"Juniper."

That voice. Deep, gravelly, and devastating.

I turn to see Vincent in jeans and a t-shirt. My eyes nearly pop out of my head. I've never seen the man dressed so casually, and let me say, he looks just as good as when

he's donning his ten thousand-dollar suits.

"Mr. Sloan," I squeak out. His shoulders drop as he takes a step closer to me.

"Call me Vincent," he corrects.

"What are you doing here?"

I sway closer to him, my body moving on its own. Every part of me longs for his touch, his warmth.



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“The house needs repairs,” he says simply, as if it’s obvious. “I also talked to your mother’s oncologist. I’m glad she has an appointment today. Whatever she chooses for treatment is already paid for. I gave her doctor the name of a few specialists and pointed him in the direction of some clinical trials, so she’ll have a lot of options.”

“But why...?”

He ignores my question. “I wasn’t sure what your favorite color was, so as soon as you let me know, I’ll have a car delivered here. I don’t like you and your mother driving around in that rusted out death trap.”

“What? That’s too much!” I say exasperatedly. “Why are you doing this? I thought... I thought you hated me.”

Finally, Vincent turns his full attention on me, his dark gaze capturing mine. The untouchable facade crumbles around him, and he lets me see the broken man underneath. “I could never hate you,” he murmurs, his voice full of sorrow. I’ve never seen such depth of emotion from the normally stoic beast.

“But...”

He takes a step closer, cautiously lifting his hand to my cheek. I let him hold me, his tender touch bringing tears to my eyes. I told the man I loved him, and he fired me. I should slap him. Instead, all I want to do is collapse in his arms.

“I fucked up,” he whispers. “I let you go. I had a momentary lapse in judgment, and I promise it will never happen again.”

“What are you saying?”

He’s silent for a moment, his thumb caressing my cheek while he holds me captive with his brown eyes. Searching, pleading, willing me to listen and believe him.

“I love you, Juniper.”

My heart skitters to a stop and my breath is caught in my throat. I want to tell him I love him too, that we can start over, no secrets this time.

Instead, I blurt out, “I’m mad at you.”

Vincent grins, and good god, that’s a dangerous look on him. It makes me want to strip down and climb him like a tree.

“I know, and I deserve your anger. That’s why I’m fixing up the place and getting you a car.”

My eyes narrow at him and I take a step back. “You’re buying my forgiveness?”

“No, Juniper, it’s not like that.”

“Then tell me what it’s like. From where I’m standing, you broke my heart and tossed me out of your office. And the cherry on top was telling Jennifer we slept together and having her call me a slut. I don’t deserve that!” My arms fly out as I gesture like a crazy person. I knew I was upset with my beast of a former boss, but I didn’t realize how much until right now.

“No, you don’t deserve that. I’m trying to apologize,” he says as he starts to pace back and forth in front of me. “I’m not good at this shit.”

“Let me give you a hint. Money won’t solve all of your problems.” I cross my arms and give him my best glare.

One minute, I’m trying to set his head on fire with my stare, and the next minute, I’m upside down.

“Hey! What the hell?” I screech as Vincent stomps up the creaky porch stairs with me flung over his shoulder. I pound on his back, but he just grunts and pushes the door open, heading straight for the couch.

Once he has me settled in his lap, I try scrambling off. Vincent locks his arms around me, pressing me against his chest. I try half-heartedly to fight him off, but as soon as he tightens his hold, I relax. I’m not scared or suffocated in his strong embrace. It’s like he’s calming me down breath by breath, willing me to surrender.

“I know very well that money won’t solve my problems,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head.

His sweet gesture has tears stinging the back of my eyes.

“I’ve had more money than I know what to do with for years, but I was still an empty shell, void of any color or happiness. And then you came along, with your chatter, charm, and greasy burgers.”

“The three things I’m most known for,” I add, sniffing a bit as the first tears fall. Vincent gives me a small smile, though I can tell he doesn’t want me to cry.

“There’s that sass,” he says, kissing my nose. “I’m no good at relationships. I don’t know how to be a good partner, but I wanted to show you how I’ll provide for you. How my money is your money. For thirty-three years, I’ve lived by the principle my dad hammered home every single day—you have to sacrifice everything for success,

even family. Especially family, according to my old man. You made me realize my priorities were completely fucked up. I still want to sacrifice everything to achieve my goal, but it's changed."

"Changed?" I croak out.

"Completely," he agrees. "It's you, angel. I want you. I want you every single day, as my wife, my love, my everything. I understand why you did what you did, why you took the job. Opportunity literally called you, all you did was answer."

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“I was going to tell you. I promise. As soon as I left your place that morning after we were together, I knew I couldn’t go another day without getting the truth out there.”

“I know, angel. I should have let you talk instead of kicking you out. Jesus, and I’m so sorry for what I said and how I handled everything. The thought of what we had being a game, being fake, I just... I snapped. Please forgive me, love.” Vincent tucks some hair behind my ear, letting his fingertips trail down my cheek and neck. “You’re so precious, Juniper. Let me make it up to you.”

“With a car?” I tease, though there are still tears in my eyes.

“For starters,” he says with a grin. “But I was thinking about something else. Something you could wear every day that would remind you how much I love you, how I would do anything for you.”

“Uh... like a necklace?”

Vincent chuckles, the sound echoing through me and warming me up from the inside out. “I was thinking about another piece of jewelry, actually.” He shifts on the couch and digs around in his pocket, producing a small blue velvet box.

“Oh my god,” I whisper as he opens the lid, revealing an elegant white gold ring with a princess cut emerald in the center, surrounded by tiny diamonds. He slips the ring on my left ring finger and then places my hand over his heart.

“Juniper Leigh, I don’t deserve you in my life, but I will do everything within my power to earn your trust and love. I can’t go back to who I was before. You changed

me, shook me up, destroyed my carefully plotted-out future and replaced it with something so much better; you. You're all I want."

The tears are flowing freely now, and Vincent battles to wipe them away, a worried look creasing his perfect features.

"Did you forget to ask me something in your beautiful proposal?" I say with a little smirk.

Vincent blows out a breath and chuckles. "Juniper, will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry?—"

I cut him off with a kiss, this one deeper and filled with more meaning than any of our previous kisses. Vincent parts his lips for me, letting me slide my tongue inside his mouth and taste him. God, I missed his flavor, which is crazy since it's only been a day since we last kissed. But this is different. There are no secrets between us, nothing I'm trying to hide. He's seen me, all of me, and he loves me.

I moan softly into his mouth, making Vincent growl and slide his hands underneath the shirt I'm wearing. My skin prickles with awareness everywhere he touches me. I adjust myself so I'm straddling him, never breaking our kiss, our connection.

I can't help the needy whimper that falls from my lips when my core rubs up against his cock. He lengthens and hardens beneath me, the sensation making me so, so wet.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I hold him close as I grind down on his lap. Vincent groans and breaks our kiss, only to nibble down my neck. I shiver and squeeze my thighs around his hips, needing more.

Vincent leans back and cups my face, resting his forehead on mine. We're both breathing heavily, the air thick with what we both crave. He slides his hands down

my neck, my shoulders, my torso until he grips the hem of my shirt and gently lifts it off my body.

“Fuck,” he groans, attaching his mouth to my neck, kissing and sucking while tearing off my yoga pants and panties. We’re a flurry of hands and kisses as we strip each other, desperate to feel everything once more.

I’m bare before Vincent in more ways than one. I feel vulnerable and yet somehow bold. Exposed, yet covered in the safety that is my Vincent. My home. My love. His fingertips trail up my sides in featherlight touches as he looks at me with a mix of awe and reverence.

Leaning forward, Vincent captures my nipple in his mouth, gently sucking as his hands slide around to my back, pressing me closer to him. I tip my head back and rock my hips against his, savoring every swipe of his tongue and stroke of his fingers.

Vincent hums in approval as he switches breasts, lavishing the other one with the same attention. I feel the vibrations deep down in my core, making more of my arousal drip down and coat his throbbing dick. It swells up even more as a soft growl rumbles up from his chest.

He tilts his head back, breaking our kiss to growl softly. I scoot back just enough to reach down and loop my fingers around his cock, stroking him and rubbing his precum up and down his thickness.

“Jesus,” he grunts, his muscles tensing and flexing as I pick up my pace. Vincent grips my hips and lifts me up, positioning me so the head of his cock is right at my entrance. My core clenches up and releases more of my wetness, helping him to slide in easily. “This what you need, baby? Need me to fill you up?”

“Yes... God, Vincent...” I breathe out, moaning as my tight channel stretches to

accommodate him. I feel every vein and ridge of his shaft as he enters me. It feels so damn good to be connected like this, to be completed in a way only Vincent can provide.

My hands move on their own, tangling in my hair as I stretch my body out for his pleasure. He groans and sucks on my neck as his hands slide up my back and grip my shoulders. He presses my body down on his as he grinds his thick cock against me, hitting my clit just right.

I jerk and tremble in his embrace, gasping for air when he pushes me right to the edge. Vincent trails his fingers back down my spine, gripping my ass and spreading my cheeks apart as he starts to fuck up into my pulsing cunt.

“Love feeling you, Juniper. Love your sexy fucking body,” he murmurs, nipping at my earlobe and causing me to shudder in his arms.

“Mmhm,” is all I can manage to say, too lost in the sensation of his cock scraping along my walls and hitting every pleasure point inside of me.

My orgasm blooms deep in my core, throbbing outward and seizing my muscles. My joints lock up and I suck in a breath, bracing myself for what’s to come. I squeeze my core around him and roll my hips in jerky motions, needing to come so bad it hurts.

Vincent senses my urgency, cupping the back of my neck and drawing me down for a heated kiss. He pulls my bottom lip through his teeth before diving in, tangling his tongue with mine as he bounces me off his length. He tilts his hips and hits that one spot that drives me crazy. Over and over he hammers into me until the coil snaps and I cry out my orgasm. Pure pleasure slams into me, overwhelming my senses as I writhe and whimper and get completely swept away by my release.

When I open my eyes, I’m lying on my back, Vincent hovering over me and staring



at me with a hunger so fierce it makes my pussy contract again, despite just having an intenseorgasm. He growls and begins moving again, his dick still buried deep inside me.

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He builds us both up with slow, measured rolls of his hips. His need is palpable, but he's being so gentle with me, sliding in and out, again and again, never breaking eye contact.

Vincent cups my face with one hand, wiping away a tear I didn't know was there. He kisses the spot before burying his face into the side of my neck.

"I love you," he murmurs, nuzzling into me as we make love.

That's exactly what this is. It's intense, but in a different way than we've been together previously. Everything is heightened, our bodies tangling together as much as our souls.

"Vincent," I whisper. "I love you so much."

His dick twitches at my words, making me moan. I love that he's as turned on by my words as he is my body. I'll never get enough of this man.

He slides one hand between my back and the couch, pressing me closer to him, needing as much of me as possible. His touch leaves a trail of fire and awareness as he grazes his fingertips over my ass and then grips my thigh. Vincent spreads me open even wider and hooks his hand behind my knee, lifting it up and changing the angle.

I gasp and whimper as he hits me so damn deep. My nails dig into his biceps as he slowly pulls out and pushes back in, going deeper with every thrust. Each time he reaches the end of me, I jerk and spasm, electricity flowing through my veins and

sparkling a fire deep in my core. Flames lick at my nerves as my moans turn into cries of pleasure, torture, bliss, and an almost painful need for release.

“That’s it,” he grunts, his hips stuttering as he picks up his pace. “Fuck, I feel you, baby. Are you going to come for me?”

I nod and whimper, my body trembling as I take everything he’s giving me. Liquid heat erupts from my core, spilling out of me, making me convulse in his arms as I come. Hard.

Vincent grunts and snaps his hips against mine, fucking me roughly as I fall apart. I can’t breathe, he’s so deep, so thick, and feels so mind-numbingly incredible. I thought my pleasure peaked, but I spasm around him again when he unleashes his cum inside me. He grunts out his orgasm, grinding his dick down as it swells up and jerks, coating my pussy with his release.

His lips find mine and he thrusts his tongue inside my mouth, swallowing down my moans and sucking the air out of my lungs. He breaks the kiss, only to scrape his teeth down the side of my neck, across my collarbone, over my breast, and down my torso.

“Wh-what are you...?”

My question is cut off when he settles between my thighs and licks my pussy. I gasp and moan loudly, my body moving on its own to grind against his face. My pussy feels raw and so damn sensitive from the orgasms I’ve already had, and yet each stroke of his tongue brings me closer, closer, closer to another release.

He growls as he licks up our combined juices. It’s so dirty, so fucking filthy. And that only turns me on more. Vincent spears his tongue into my entrance, massaging my walls and driving me insane.

My thighs snap around his head when he turns his attention to my clit, sucking on the over-sensitized bundle of nerves. I twist in his grip and bow my back off the couch, only to have him spread his hand out over my lower belly and push me back down onto the mattress. He keeps his hand there, creating a delicious pressure that radiates from my core.

I grab at the cushions as my orgasm claws at my insides, tearing its way out and wringing pleasure from every cell in my body. Vincent growls into my pussy, never letting up, expertly using his tongue and teeth to keep me at my peak for so damn long.

I'm shaking and sweating and whimpering his name over and over, unable to escape the brutal bliss overwhelming me. I feel an intense, all-consuming pressure tugging at my lower belly. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced and I'm almost afraid of what's happening to me.

My hands tangle in Vincent's hair, gripping and twisting the strands, needing him to anchor me here on earth.

Another stronger, wild orgasm threatens to end me completely, even as my body is still reeling from my previous one. Every muscle draws up tight, my joints locking, my breath frozen in my lungs. Time stands still, waiting, watching as I surrender to the pleasure Vincent is bringing me.

All at once, everything inside me unravels. I gush for him, an embarrassing amount of wetness leaving me, as I scream and thrash around almost violently.

"Christ," he grunts, lapping up every last drop. "Jesus Christ," he repeats, his breathing ragged. "You squirted all over me, angel. So fucking hot."

I can't do anything except whimper and melt into the mattress, all the strength

draining from my body. I'm vaguely aware of Vincent getting up, hardly registering when he cleans me up with a damp washcloth.

My eyes barely flutter open when he lifts me up into his arms and carries me through the house, to my bedroom.

Vincent gently lays me down before crawling in next to me. He drapes my limp body over his and I automatically curl up into his chest. Vincent presses a kiss to the top of my head and tucks a blanket around us.

"You okay?" he whispers.

"So good," I mumble, hardly recognizing my own voice. Vincent chuckles and kisses my head again.

"Me too, angel. Me too."

Silence surrounds us as our hearts find the same rhythm, beating as one.

"Yes, by the way," I say after a few moments of silence.

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“Yes?” he muses, stroking my back and smiling down at me.

“You didn’t technically ask, but yes, I think I’d like to stay by your side and be your everything.”

“I was going to ask before someone cut me off,” he growls playfully, nipping at my chin.

“Excuses, excuses,” I sigh. Vincent tickles my sides and I giggle, trying to get away from him.

“It’s a done deal now, angel,” he says, hauling me back into his arms.

“I’m okay with that,” I tell him with a grin as I settle back down. “Pretty good deal, too. I think I married up.”

He chuckles, giving me another squeeze. “I definitely got the better end of the deal, but I’ll spend the rest of our lives making it up to you. Cars, houses, vacations, kisses, orgasms, cuddles, kids, I’ll give you everything.”

“I love you, Vincent. I want everything with you, too.”

“Shall we start now? With more orgasms?” he says with a playful grin.

“If you insist,” I say, mock exhaustion in my voice. Vincent nips a ticklish spot on my neck, making me squirm and giggle. The man holds himself above me, a look of pure love and lust in his dark brown eyes. He’s perfect. And he’s all mine.

## EPILOGUE

### VINCENT

Juniper's sweet sunshiney scent still lingers in my office from when she stopped in this morning with my daily triple cappuccino. It's hard to believe we've been together for a year and a half, yet at the same time, I can't imagine life without her.

Before my precious Juniper waltzed into my world, I had one goal. Make more money. Now? Well, I still only have one goal. Make Juniper happy. I think I've done okay the last year and a half, but there's always room for improvement.

We got married six weeks after I proposed. I didn't want to wait that long, but Juniper deserved the wedding of her dreams. For most people, that would take a long time to plan and execute, but I was able to use my wealth and connections to make it happen in a matter of weeks. I've never had a more worthy cause to spend money.

Since then, I've stepped back a bit from the daily hustle of the financial world. I'm still owner and CEO of Sloan Investments, but I've learned to delegate and use my time wisely. A few years ago, I had to drag myself away from work to stumble through the rest of my life. Now, I have to drag myself away from my sweet, sexy Juniper just to get a few hours of work in a day.

I wouldn't change it for the world.

My phone dings and I glance over, seeing a text from Juniper's mother, Beth.

Just got back from my checkup. 6 months cancer free, thanks to you!

I respond right away, congratulating her. Beth was treated by one of the top oncologists in the country last year. She endured an extensive treatment program that

put her through the wringer, but Beth came out the other side, kicking ass and taking names. She's a fighter if I've ever seen one.

Juniper is just as strong, just as determined, and just as loyal as Beth. That's how I know she'll be an incredible mother to our children. We haven't had any yet, but I don't want to rush my sweet girl. After she stepped down from being my assistant, my talented wife decided to learn more about her real passion—cooking. She recently finished up another cooking course through the local culinary school. Juniper isn't sure what she wants to do yet, only that she loves cooking and wants to gain more experience. And, as I've already stated, I want to make her happy. If that means taking every cooking and baking class every college in the world has to offer, then that's what I'll do. Thankfully, however, Juniper seems content to stay in New York for now.

There's a knock on my office door, pulling me out of my thoughts.

My beautiful wife pokes her head in and gives me a radiant smile when her eyes meet mine. I swear she's glowing.

God, this woman undoes me in ways I can't even begin to understand.

"Hey, angel, what's up?" I ask. I stand up and walk over toward her, unable to keep my distance any longer. Whenever she's around, I have to have my hand on her, be near her in some way.

"I, uh, I have something to tell you." Her brow furrows and she stares at her feet. I can't stand to see her like this.

I cup her face and gently guide her up to meet my gaze.

"What is it? You can tell me anything."



“I... I don’t know how this happened... I mean, I know how it happened...” Tears well up in her eyes and she looks tentative, scared, almost.

I wrap her up in my arms. I don’t know how she went from her brilliant shining self to crying in a matter of minutes, but I’m determined to fix it.

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“What happened? Talk to me, I can’t fix it if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

She pulls away from me, and I reluctantly let her. Juniper wraps her arms around her torso like she’s unsure of herself. I keep my hands on her hips, needing her to still be close to me.

“Vincent, I’m pregnant.”

My world turns upside down.

Pregnant.

I can’t fucking believe it. I’m going to be a dad. She’s going to be the mother of my children. It’s everything I’ve been dreaming about for weeks.

So many emotions rush through me, overwhelming joy being at the top of the list. I look in her eyes and she seems unsteady, like she’s bracing herself for my reaction. Does she think I’m mad?

I kneel before her and unwrap her arms, kissing her belly, thinking of my kid growing inside of her at this very moment.

“Thank you, thank you, Juniper.” I look up at her beautiful face and she gives me a confused look. “Angel, I’m so goddamn happy. I want this so bad, I want you to have all of my babies.” I smile up at her, hoping to ease some of her worry.

“You do?” she squeaks out.

“Hell yes.”

I stand up and kiss away her tears, wrapping one arm around her waist to pull her closer while the other one goes to the nape of her neck to hold her in place while I move my mouth from her cheeks to her lips, claiming her and showing her just how much I want her.

I feel her wrap her arms around my waist and melt into me. I break the kiss to look at this perfect woman in my arms. She buries her face into my chest and I kiss the top of her head before resting my forehead there.

“I love you, I love our baby. I can’t wait to be the father of our kid.”

She smiles and kisses me sweetly, then tucks her face in my shoulder. I rest my head on hers again, rubbing comforting circles on her back.

“You are growing my baby inside of you!” I exclaim, almost yelling, still completely blown away by the news.

“Yup,” she says and laughs a little into my shirt.

“How are you feeling? Do you have morning sickness? Do we need to go to the doctor? Do you need to sit down? Can I get you anything?” A flood of questions washes over me and pours right out of my mouth. I was protective and attentive to Juniper before the pregnancy, and now it seems those tendencies have gone into overdrive.

She leans back and smiles. “I’m okay, I promise. I feel fine.” Juniper peers up at me with so much love in her eyes. “You’re really happy? You really want a family with me?”

I tuck a few strands of loose hair behind her ear and rest my forehead on hers.

“You are my family. Forever. I can’t wait to share our love with this little one.” I take a step back and kneel in front of her again, kissing her belly and resting my head on it.

She tangles her fingers in my hair and pushes me down ever so slightly. I look up and grin at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Do you need something from me?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Yes, god, Vincent, I ache for you. All the time. They say pregnancy makes you horny... I’m so ready for you right now.”

I groan and ease her back into the wall. Lifting her dress up, I see she’s not wearing any panties.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you were ready,” I tease.

“A girl can hope...” She trails off into a moan as I kiss her swollen pussy lips.

I lift one of her legs over my shoulder to give me better access. I flatten my tongue and lick her from her entrance to her clit, circling her sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Ah, yes, Vincent.”

She rocks her hips into me, urging me on. I spear my tongue deep inside of her, tasting her honey straight from the source. Massaging her walls with my tongue, I reach out and begin rubbing her clit, winding her up till her muscles quiver with tension, bracing for sweet release.

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Then I pull back, leaving her on the edge.

“Noooo!” she protests.

“You know I’ll always take care of you, love.”

I strip my clothes off in record time and lift her by her ass, pressing her into the wall while her legs go around my hips.

“Please, please let me come, I need to, need it so bad...”

I bend down and lick the slender column of her neck, nibbling just below her ear like I know she loves. I rock into her, sliding my thick, angry cock up and down her soaking wet slit, not pushing into her just yet.

Her legs shake as I push her toward the edge again, feeling her entire body go rigid in my arms. Again, I pull back.

Juniper practically screams in frustration, but then I slam my aching cock into her in one thrust and her cries turn into moans as she falls apart in my arms. I swallow her sounds as I kiss her, feeling her tight pussy pulse around my hard length. Her orgasm holds her body hostage as she writhes against the wall, rubbing herself on my dick, riding out her ecstasy.

When she relaxes into my body, I tighten my grip on her ass and slowly slide out of her only to pound back inside her warmth. The sounds we make are obscene, her juices leaking out all over my cock, dripping down her legs. I look down and see her

pussy swallow me, still pulsing from her orgasm.

“Fuck, baby, look at us, look at how we fit together. It’s fucking perfect.”

God, I could watch this all day, watch her tight, hot cunt stretch over me.

Juniper rolls her hips and digs her fingernails into my shoulders, clearly getting as much satisfaction from watching us as I am.

“I’m so close... I... don’t stop...”

I rest my forehead on hers, sweat dripping down my face as I rut into her like a fucking animal.

“Yes, yes, yes...”

She comes again, sinking her teeth into my shoulder, her whole body squeezing around mine, her pussy sucking me in, her legs like a vise grip around my hips, her hands clawing at my back, trying to get closer to me, trying to fuse her being with mine.

“Jesus Christ, Juniper, Jesus fucking Christ, so goddamn good, so good, baby.”

I thrust into her two more times before erupting deep inside of her. My legs start shaking and I carefully guide us to the floor, a tangled heap of limbs. I roll on my back and pull Juniper with me, tucking her into my side.

“Are you okay, angel? I wasn’t gentle. I’ll have to be more careful with you now.”

“Don’t you dare!” She looks up at me with furrowed brows. “I’m perfect. I feel perfect. Like... like I’m home.”

I pull her closer, kissing her forehead.

“You are, love. You’re home.”

## BONUS EPILOGUE: 10 YEARS LATER

### JUNIPER

“Look, mommy! I made the rose all by myself!”

I put down the piping bag in my hand and focus on my daughter, Kaitlyn. She’s beaming with pride at the frosting rose on the cookie she’s decorating. “Honey, it’s beautiful!” I exclaim. My ten-year-old gives me the biggest grin. She just recently lost the last of her baby teeth and currently has a gap in her bottom jaw, which makes her all the more adorable.

“I want to try!” Diego, our six-year-old says from the other side of me. He doesn’t have the fine motor skills yet to do the more delicate frosting work, but damn if he doesn’t want to try every single time I have a cookie order. He currently has blue frosting on all ten of his fingers along with a glob of pink frosting smeared across his cheek.

“Why don’t you finish the cookie you’re working on and then we can practice, okay?”

Diego nods his head and dutifully returns to piling on copious amounts of frosting on the poor sugar cookie that is already crumbling under the weight. It’s becoming more of a frosting sculpture than a dessert, but as long as he’s having fun, that’s all that matters. His cookies have yet to make it into an actual order, not only because of the quality, but because my son has a sweet tooth and has to eat every cookie he decorates.

I started my own catering business five years ago, just a little while after Diego was born. I don't have a storefront or anything, but I take orders for custom cakes, cookies, and all sorts of baked goods.



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When I told Vincent about my idea to start up a business, I was worried at first he'd think it was a silly idea. He already makes more than enough money for our family to live quite comfortably, even with all the charitable donations and cancer research he funds.

Of course, I had nothing to be anxious about. My husband was overjoyed for this new chapter in my life and career. The very next day, he called his contractor to start renovations on our kitchen. We added an industrial convection oven with two separate compartments so I can bake multiple things at different temperatures, as well as new counters, a large kitchen island, and a set of gorgeous copper kitchenware with matching utensils.

Vincent loves spoiling me and our kids, as well as my mother. A few years into my mother's remission, he floated the idea of starting a foundation for lymphoma research, with my mother being the face and CEO of the foundation. She cried, making Vincent apologize profusely. He's still not used to "happy tears," but we convinced him it was a good thing. She's been thriving in her career for about eight years now and couldn't be happier.

"There you are," my husband says from behind me. He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me gently against his chest. I lean back, melting into him. Vincent kisses my temple and the side of my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. I can't help it. I'm always going to be a needy, wanton mess when his hands are on me. He chuckles softly into the shell of my ear so only I can hear. "Me too, angel," he murmurs. "Tonight," he promises. I nod my head and relax even more.

"Daddy! Look at my rose!" Kaitlyn exclaims. She's bouncing up and down on the

stepping stool she's standing on. "See the swirl and crisp edges? Just like Mom taught me."

"That's amazing, sweetheart," he replies, resting a hand on her shoulder. Kaitlyn leans into him, letting her father give her a side hug. "You'll be starting your own bakery soon."

Our daughter's brown eyes shine with a look of awe and excitement. "Yes! Can I have my own oven so I don't have to share with Mom?"

Vincent and I laugh at Kaitlyn's request.

"If she gets an oven, I get one, too!" Diego pouts.

"How about we get you your own frosting station where you can mix huge bowls of all kinds of frosting?" Vincent offers.

Diego gasps, his eyes wide as he thinks of all the frosting he's going to eat. None of it will make it to the cookies.

"You're incorrigible," I tell my husband, though I'm not really upset.

"When it comes to spoiling my family? Absolutely." He kisses my cheek and I can feel his lips pull up into a smile against my skin. "But that will have to wait for now. We'll revisit the kitchen expansion in a few years."

"Years?!" both kids say at the same time.

"That's basically forever," Diego grumbles.

"It'll go by faster than you might think," I tell him. "Why don't you two get cleaned up while I box up this order. Then we'll get started on dinner."

Our kids perk up at this idea. They love being in the kitchen as much as I do, and while their presence often means meals take more time to prepare, I'm always happy to spend more time with my sweet girl and sassy son.

Kaitlyn and Diego run off to the bathroom to wash their hands, leaving Vincent and me alone in the kitchen. He wastes no time spinning me around and taking my lips in a devastating kiss. His hands crawl up my back, one tangling in my hair and angling me so he can have more, taste more, and fuse our souls together.

"Wow, what was that for?" I ask breathlessly once we break apart.

"You're just so damn beautiful and sexy and I can't help myself," he murmurs before nipping at my bottom lip and diving in for another kiss.

I surrender to his touch, letting him draw me impossibly closer, pressing my curves against the hard slats of his muscles. His tongue explores my mouth, lapping against my tongue while he swallows down my soft whimpers. Even after twelve years of marriage, this man can get me worked up in a matter of minutes.

We finally come up for air, both of us panting and slightly flushed.

"Love everything about you," Vincent whispers.

I snuggle into his chest, tucking my head under his chin. I love how perfectly we fit together. Vincent wraps his arms around me and rocks me back and forth, humming contentedly to himself. I know he's thinking the same thing.

I had no idea how completely and thoroughly my life would change when I answered Vincent's call all those years ago. I wouldn't change a thing. It's hard to believe I have everything I've ever wanted, but I know my husband will continue to surprise me with more than I could ever imagine. I can't wait to see what the next ten years have in store for our precious family.

The End