

SUTHERLAND

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LARGE AND IN CHARGE

DAD BOD
Undercover Boss

VIOLET RAE

Dad Bod Undercover Boss

Dad Bod 2.0: Large and in Charge

Violet Rae

Dad Bod Undercover Boss

Published by Violet Rae

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Author's Note

Thank you for reading Dad Bod Undercover Boss.

This book is set in London, UK, and written in UK English. Therefore, you will see British spellings. I've listed some examples below, but this is not exhaustive.

US/UK

Gray/Grey

Jewelry/Jewellery

Color/Colour

Neighbor/Neighbour

Humor/Humour

Demeanor/Demeanour

We also spell many words with an "s" instead of a "z" - socialise/socialize, apologise/apologize, visualise/visualize.

I love the nuances of language, but you may come across some "British-isms" you're not familiar with. I've listed a few below, but if you come across a word you don't understand, please reach out to me, and I'll be glad to explain. I love hearing from my readers, and it gives us an excuse to natter (chat).

Big mitt – big hand.

Loo – toilet/bathroom.

Flannel – washcloth.

Pretty nifty – pretty good.

Squirty cream - spray cream (for desserts)

I hope you enjoy Eva and Max's story.

Chapter 1

Max

LENNARD, THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, SLIDES A FOLDER with some force towards me from the other end of the conference table. There are five chairs between us on both sides—all filled with company executives as we sit in Sutherland's head office in west London.

I stop the folder and straighten it in front of me before flipping it open. *Sutherland's Department Store Profit and Loss* is printed at the top of the dossier.

“Why am I only seeing these figures now?” I ask, pinning Lennard with a no-nonsense stare.

Lennard shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “We knew you were busy putting your father's affairs in order. Besides, it's not unusual for revenue to dip mid-year. We were hoping sales would pick up—”

“Don't make this about me,” I cut across him. “And this is far more than a mid-year dip.” I wave a hand at the figures. Looking slowly around the room, I make eye contact with each person in turn. “My father employed every one of you to do a job. So let me rephrase the question. Why am I only now learning that Sutherland's is operating in the red? We're a luxury department store, rivalled only by Harrods. I'm sure their profits look a lot bloody healthier than this.”

Ten pairs of eyes drop to the conference table as they fidget nervously. Seems no one can answer my question.

I scan the document again. “Loss after loss, quarter after quarter, and no one in this board room can explain what the

fuck has gone wrong. Why we're in a situation where we could lose everything."

I thought I'd sidestepped this responsibility, but I was wrong. I should've known the day would come when I'd have to step into my father's rather large and hard-to-fill shoes and take over the family business. It's my destiny, my fate, a foregone conclusion... and an inescapable albatross around my neck. With the death of my father two months ago, the family legacy has fallen squarely on my broad shoulders.

And it's up to me to find a solution.

If I can't right the sinking ship that is Sutherland's, everything will go tits up, and the business established by my great-great-grandfather will crumble.

I was groomed to run this company from the day I was born. But I rebelled after university when I decided to travel. Spending time in Europe fostered my passion for cuisine, and befriending a pastry chef in Paris cemented my future plans—much to my father's disappointment and disapproval.

I'd just fulfilled my dream of opening a patisserie in London's Covent Garden when he died. Now, I'm setting aside my passion to do the right and responsible thing to keep my family legacy and future intact.

If you want something done right, do it yourself.

My father's words echo in my ears. Shit, I miss him, even though his disappointment in my decision to focus my career elsewhere has always sat heavily on my conscience. He never understood why I wanted to do anything other than slide dutifully into the role he assigned me.

Employing a team of "experts" was his compromise, allowing him to take a step back from the daily stresses of the business. He thought he'd have more time to enjoy semi-retirement with my mother, but a massive heart attack curtailed their plans.

Guilt slices deep into my gut and squeezes a fist around my heart. If I'd been the son he wanted and shared the burden of the business, he might still be here.

While I don't fully trust the high-level executives my father installed, I can't lay the blame entirely at their door. I have to assume some responsibility too. It's not a case of taking my eye off the ball because I wasn't watching the fucking thing in the first place. I was perfecting pastries and building a business model for my patisserie.

But I'm now the sole owner of Sutherlands. My dreams will have to take a back seat while I figure out what needs to be done to get the family business back on track. Then, I'll install a competent CEO I can trust and assume an investment and advisory role to ensure things continue to run smoothly.

"Sitting in an executive office presiding over facts and figures won't give me the answers I need, and neither can any of you, it seems," I state, my mind busy working the problem.

"What do you suggest?" Lennard asks uncertainly.

"Dragging Sutherland's back into the black requires fresh ideas from those in the know. We need to be innovative and modern and inspire brand loyalty with a new, younger generation. I suspect that Sutherland's is lacking in ways that you"—I cast my eyes around the board room—"have no clue how to manage."

Mutters of discontent ripple through the air at my blunt words.

"I'm sorry, but I fail to see how training as a pastry chef qualifies you to have any relevant experience when it comes to Sutherland's," the head of marketing challenges.

I meet his gaze head-on. Much as I dislike it, his question is valid. "Inheriting the mantle of a well-established department store may not have been my choice, but I can assure you that no one is more committed to ensuring that my family business remains intact and thrives. With regards to experience, I spent ten years as a business consultant before I switched directions, and my master's degrees in business and hospitality more than qualify me to tackle the issues we now face."

"It will take more than a few master's degrees to salvage Sutherland's," he points out.

I nod. I take a deep breath and straighten up in my chair, trying to shake off the negative thoughts. This team is all I've got, and I need to figure out a way to get them on board. "You're right. It will take hard work, dedication, and each of us acknowledging where we fucked up. No one enjoys having their shortcomings held up in front of them, but this isn't the time for bruised egos. This is the time to listen to our customer base and pull together as a team to make Sutherland's better than it's ever been."

Positive murmurs and nods circle the room.

"So, where do we start?" Lennard asks.

I release a breath, knowing there's only one place to start. "From the ground up. I need to find out what's happening on the shop floor." I pause and glance around the room. "Looks like I'm going undercover."

Chapter 2

Eva

I STAND BACK, LOOKING AT THE PLACEMENT OF THE mannequins in the window. I've stripped them of the summer collection clothing, ready to re-dress them with the new autumn trends. The window display looks so cold and clinical, and I have ideas for how to make it more appealing and tempt customers into Sutherland's department store.

I sigh in frustration. I have so many ideas for the department store, which is often likened to a more affordable Harrods. But sadly, the store manager, Gerald, is a self-important, overbearing, incompetent arse who thinks he knows everything. The man actively steals my ideas without attributing or recognising my contributions and seems determined to block me from advancing within the company. But his shitty attitude only fuels my determination to climb the career ladder. One day I'll be *his* boss, and he can kiss my rounded—

I snag my heel on the discarded clothing on the floor and lose my balance. My arms cartwheel, knocking one mannequin into another and tumbling them like dominoes. The last one smacks into me, and down I go, landing on my back with a loud "oof."

"Shit. You okay?"

I tip my head back at the sound of the deep voice. Enormous black leather shoes come into focus. My eyes trail up long, muscular legs clad in grey suit trousers. They widen as they skip past a well-endowed groin area to a barrel chest before

finally landing on a pair of deep brown eyes. Even upside-down, those eyes take my breath away.

“I-I think so.” I try to get up, but I’m still pinned beneath the mannequin that fell on me. Her left boob threatens to poke my eye out.

Suddenly, she’s gone, and a big hand appears in front of my face. Tingles explode up my arm as I place my hand in Mr Melty Eyes’ big mitt, and he hauls me to my feet.

My mouth drops open, and I stare blankly at the dark-haired specimen of gorgeousness before me.

His mouth moves. I think he’s asking me a question, but I can’t hear him over the fangirling of my ovaries.

He’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. Huge, at least 6’4,’ with wavy black hair, high cheekbones, and ridiculously thick eyelashes. He’s husky and solid and oozing rugged sex appeal. The man looks like he should be getting down and dirty in a wrestling ring.

“My cat puked on the hall carpet,” I hear myself say.

He raises an eyebrow. It’s clear from his expression that he thinks I’m a fully paid-up member of the Monster Raving Loony Party.

“I knew my day was jinxed when Monty threw up on the hall carpet this morning,” I continue, undeterred. “Then, my dishwasher flooded, my trousers split in an unmentionable place, and now I’ve embarrassed myself with a naked mannequin in front of a strange man. Not that you’re strange. I’m sure you’re completely *not* strange.”

Stop talking, Eva.

I tilt my head to look at him. Bloody hell, the man is even bigger up close, all wide shoulders and bulky build wrapped to perfection in a dark grey suit.

His eyes run over me like hands, and a smile tugs at his full mouth. “Thanks for the compliment. I think. Sounds like you’ve had quite the morning.”

His voice is deep, like rich velvet, and his eyes crinkle sexily at the corners as he smiles. I suddenly find myself fantasising about what our babies would look like.

“You’re *beautiful*,” I blurt.

Really, Eva? My inner Eva who measures every word carefully before she speaks facepalms.

The big man chuckles. “I think you must be talking about yourself because you’d look right at home on the catalogue cover of Sutherland’s.”

His words should hit a resounding ten on the cheese scale, but the genuine warmth in his russet eyes allows him to pull them off.

“I ... Thank you.” My gaze flicks to his huge hands. No ring on his finger, but that doesn’t mean he’s not in a relationship. Some married men don’t wear their wedding rings.

He quirks a dark eyebrow. “So, do you often wrestle with mannequins on the shop floor?”

I press my cool palms to my burning cheeks. “Oh, God. How embarrassing. I’m not usually so clumsy,” I say, glancing at the jumble of mannequins in the window. A male mannequin has landed on one of the females in a very compromising position. “Thank goodness it’s early, and no one else was around to witness my humiliation.”

He taps the side of his nose. “Your mannequin mishap will be our little secret.”

I smirk and give him a little curtsy. “You are indeed a man of honour, sir.”

My grin falters as I suddenly remember I’m at work. I’m meant to be professional, not flirty. Besides, I don’t have time for romance. So, how is this deliciously chunky giant lighting me up from the inside with one glance?

“Oh, I’m being rude. You’re a customer.” I shake off the raw attraction pulling me to him like a planet tugging on its star and plaster on my happy-to-help face. “What can I help you find, sir?”

His throaty chuckle sends a shiver down my spine. “I’m not a customer. I’m Max Lincoln, the new boy.”

I almost snort. *Boy? Hardly. All man, every delicious inch of him*, my libido whispers.

“*You’re* the new sales associate?” I squeak. I expected a gangly, pimple-faced teen, not a big, brawny man who does funny things to my insides.

Shit. What with my cat-puking, dishwasher-flooding, trouser-ripping morning, I forgot I was supposed to be training a new staff member. It should’ve been Gerald, but he said he was too busy doing *management stuff*.

Max frowns. “You weren’t expecting me?”

How could anyone be expecting this hunk of manly goodness? “Of course I was. It’s just ...you’re a little more mature than most sales associates. Usually, they’re twenty-somethings like me, but you’re...”

Max’s mouth twitches, and he raises a questioning eyebrow.

Cheeks blazing, I shake my head. “Never mind.” I stick out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Max Lincoln. I’m Eva Starling.”

My hand looks tiny in his big paw as he clasps it. “Pleasure to meet you, too, Eva Starling.”

My name rolls off his tongue like hot chocolate and sex. I’m very familiar with the first. The second, not so much. But something tells me this man is.

Damn, he fills out his clothes well. He’s not like those no-neck gym rats who strut through here, trying to impress with their big muscles and tiny brains. No, Max is strong and solid. He’s got the thickset dad bod that women crave. I must admit, I’m craving this man’s dad bod too. I can imagine cuddling up to him, wrapped in those big arms, his mouth on mine, his hands caressing my—

“I heard they were looking for staff here,” Max says, cutting across my inappropriate thoughts. “Things have been ... difficult since I lost my dad a few months ago. It’s just Mum and me now, and I needed a job, so here I am.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for your loss,” I say softly, reaching out instinctively to squeeze his hand. “I lost my mum to cancer four years ago, and it still feels like yesterday. My father’s never been on the scene, so I know the struggle to make ends meet and keep your head above water.” I’m not one for sharing my shit, particularly not with men I met five minutes ago, but somehow, it seems natural with Max.

His thumb rubs idly across the back of my hand, causing goosebumps to chase up my arm and my nipples to tighten. “I’m sorry you lost your mum. Losing a parent is hard. My father and I were very different, and we weren’t as close as I would’ve liked, but we loved each other.”

I nod in understanding. “Of course you did. We don’t always see eye to eye with loved ones, but that doesn’t cancel out our feelings for them.”

I could kick myself for opening my big mouth. Max has obviously had a tough time and needs this job to keep things ticking over for his mum and him.

I reluctantly pull my hand from his, missing its warmth. “Well, you’re in the right place.” I give him a bright smile. “Sutherland’s is a great company to work for. They have opportunities for advancement, and if you’re looking to retrain or study, they offer a scholarship program. It’s how I put myself through business school. Next, I want to do the internal management training programme. If only my store manager would approve my request.” I grimace and then shrug. “Maybe I won’t have to rely on him if I get the assistant manager promotion I applied for.”

Max narrows his eyes on me. “Something tells me you’d make a great assistant manager.”

I laugh and wave off his praise, pretending it doesn’t warm me down to my toes. “You sure about that? A few minutes ago, I was in a heap on the floor, being assaulted by a mannequin. Doesn’t exactly scream assistant manager material, does it?”

Max smiles. “I’m a good judge of character, and I see bigger and better things in your future, Eva Starling.”

If by “bigger” and “better” he means himself—yes, please.

No, no, no. He’s off limits, ever-practical inner Eva points out.

My heart sinks at the knowledge. He’s my colleague. Mixing business with pleasure is never a good idea. Look where it landed my mum. Abandoned by her married boss when he learned she was pregnant with me.

Still, Max is incredibly easy on the eye, so at least I’ll have something nice to look at every day. *Look but don’t touch*. It’s a rule I’ve lived by since working in Sutherland’s—most things here are well out of my price range, in the same way that Max Joseph is out of my league.

I summon a smile. “Why don’t I show you to the manager’s office?”

Max sweeps a hand to the side. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 3

Max

I'M IN TROUBLE. EVA STARLING HAS KNOCKED MY FEET OUT from under me.

It's bloody hard not to stare at the sway of her hips and her curvy arse as she walks me to the store manager's office. It's evident that she's driven, focused, and wise beyond her years. She's got big plans, big dreams, and an even bigger heart.

She had my undivided attention as she spoke about Sutherland's. Her enthusiasm and love for the place were clear, and I was impressed with her knowledge of the programs available to her.

I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't know about the scholarship and training programmes, but I'm glad to hear that the structure is there to continue to support and draw enthusiastic and motivated employees into the diverse roles on offer. Sutherland's needs good people to work up the ranks to keep the store thriving.

I know the value of having people I trust on my team, and even though we've just met, I get the sense that Eva is someone I can rely on. She's a breath of fresh air, so open, honest, and bright. Being in her presence is like warming yourself around a crackling fire on a winter's night. She's already banished some of the cold and darkness that seeped into my soul following my father's death.

Eva chats happily as she leads me to the office, introducing me to the layout of this floor and explaining what's on the other levels. Periodically, she picks up things that aren't in the right

spot. She effortlessly replaces them or tucks them discreetly behind the sales counters to be dealt with by another member of staff later. She's efficient and knowledgeable about the store.

"How long have you worked here?" I ask as we walk through Womenswear.

"Six years. I took a part-time job here when I turned sixteen which eventually led to a full-time position when Mum died."

If I had to guess, I'd say Eva is about twenty-two or twenty-three—much too young for me at thirty-three. Besides, I'm sure she'd be more interested in the young studs gracing the company catalogue than an older man like me. I'm fit, but I'm not built or stacked like I used to be. Making mouth-watering pastries day in and day out has given me a little extra padding. Not that I give a shit. I'm happier this way.

Eva sighs heavily. "I love it here, but it's a shame upper management doesn't appreciate the hard-working staff who truly care about this place. No one on the shop floor ever saw Liam Sutherland, and the same applies to his son now he's taken over."

"He never visits the store?"

"Nope. By all accounts, he runs things from head office on the other side of the city. I met Liam Sutherland once, but I wouldn't know his son if I fell over him."

Guilt slams me in the gut. I thought I could come here and wave a magic wand, put everything right in short order, and disappear again. Why does it matter what Eva thinks about me, and why am I compelled to know more about her? I'm here to do a job, one job, and in four weeks' time, I'll be out of here and back in head office, devising a plan to get us out of this mess so I can get on with my life.

But it suddenly doesn't seem that simple. Even less so now I've met Eva. Why does it feel like I'm betraying her?

We head up to the top floor in the lift. It strikes me as odd that the store manager would have his office up here and not somewhere more accessible to his staff.

“Here we are,” Eva says as we head through a door marked *Staff Only*. “Oh, this is the break room.” She pauses outside a room on the right with lockers, a small sofa, two chairs, tea and coffee-making facilities, and a vending machine.

I frown. The room is tiny, hardly adequate for the number of employees who use it.

“Eva, what are you doing back here? You should be on the shop floor. Get back to work,” a voice barks.

My hackles rise as I turn to see a lanky guy in his late twenties striding up the corridor towards us. His suit is wrinkled and his red tie is askew. His dark hair is slicked back, but it looks greasy and unwashed. The stench of his cologne hits me, and I resist the urge to waft my hand in front of my face.

Who does this guy think he is talking to Eva like she’s some kind of servant? My hands fist at my sides. I want to punch the sneer right off his face.

“You need to watch your manners when you’re speaking to another member of staff,” I bite out, forgetting the role I’m meant to be playing in my anger.

I see Eva’s shocked and curious gaze from the corner of my eye. Shit. I need to be careful. My instincts are to discipline the jumped-up twat, but I can’t blow my cover.

The little shit shrugs me off, turning his bored gaze to Eva. “You know the rules. Only staff. You shouldn’t have your boyfriend back here.”

Boyfriend? What the ...?

“You must be Gerald Mason. I’m the new sales assistant reporting for my shift,” I inform him through gritted teeth. “And sadly, I’m not lucky enough to be Eva’s boyfriend.”

At least, not yet.

I push the thought aside, reminding myself why I’m here. She’s an employee, technically *my* employee. It’s been a long time since I was involved with a woman, and making a mess

of a working relationship isn't something I should even be considering.

Still, at least I've identified one problem that needs resolving: the management in this place. Gerald Mason's piss-poor attitude doesn't have the markings of solid leadership.

To his credit, the store manager looks a bit sheepish as he realises his mistake. Still, he doesn't apologise as he sends Eva back to work while I fill out some paperwork in his office. It takes everything in me not to pin the little dipshit against the wall and teach him a lesson with my fists.

Instead, I rein in my anger and paste a smile on my face as he tells me how he's single-handedly made positive changes to the store. I swallow the acrid reply on the tip of my tongue. Jesus, this guy is a piece of work. Nothing like singing your own praises and taking all the credit. Those "positive changes" he thinks he's made sure as hell don't reflect in the financial report I studied the other day.

He strikes me as one of those people who behave one way with his superiors and another with his staff. It's a good job Gerald doesn't know who I am. Recruitment made sure all my paperwork checks out, so Gerald won't suspect anything. He's obviously someone I need to keep an eye on.

Once I'm done filling out the forms, Gerald assigns me to shadow Eva for the week. I try to ignore the surge of possessiveness in my gut and the curl of lust in my loins at the thought of spending the entire week with her.

I need to get this strange pull toward her under control, or things are going to get complicated.

I FIND Eva back at the window display and watch her for a few moments unnoticed. She's beautiful, with her glossy brown hair, flawless skin, and blue eyes. She radiates warmth and positivity, humming adorably under her breath as she works. She bends to lift one of the toppled mannequins back on its feet, and the action pulls her pencil skirt tight around the

curves of her arse. Fuck, what I wouldn't do to palm those succulent globes while I kiss her hard and deep.

My cock throbs and rises to attention behind my zipper at the thought of the soft curves lying in wait beneath her clothes. Wide hips perfect for my big hands to anchor her as I fuck her from behind. Heavy breasts with pink nipples made for my mouth and tongue. Strong thighs designed to squeeze my head as I lick her to orgasm.

The imagery is enough to have a bead of fluid leaking from the tip of my cock. Thank God my suit jacket covers my enormous boner. I suck in a deep breath, trying to calm my physical reaction to the goddess before me, but it takes a full minute before I can walk normally.

I move towards Eva as if pulled by gravitational forces outside of my control. "Need help with that?"

She turns and flashes me a breath-stealing smile. "Hey. That would be great, thanks."

Fuck, what I'd give to see that smile every day for the rest of my life. "You drew the short straw. Gerald assigned me to you this week."

"Pretty sure I got the extra-long, girthy straw." She claps a hand over her mouth. "I said that out loud, didn't I? I'm so sorry, that was unprofessional and inappropriate of me."

I burst out laughing and wave off her apology. "You're right. My straw is extra-long and girthy."

Her blue eyes widen, and her pouty lips form an O as pink highlights her cheekbones. Then she tips her head back and hoots with laughter when I waggle my eyebrows suggestively.

The sound washes over me like a summer breeze. Swear to God, if I couldn't see my feet planted firmly on the ground, I'd think I was floating on air.

Eva's eyes glimmer with mischief as she fixes them on me. "I think I'm going to enjoy working with you, Max Lincoln."

Chapter 4

Eva

YEAH, I'M DEFINITELY GOING TO ENJOY WORKING WITH MAX. He's an incredibly attractive man, with his broad shoulders and strong jaw. Then there are his eyes. Deep brown and alive with warmth and intelligence. When he looks at me sometimes, I think he can see straight into my soul.

"Eva?"

It takes me a second to register that I've drifted off in a Max-induced haze, and he's asked me a question.

I blink at him. "Uh, sorry. What did you say?"

His mouth twitches with a repressed smile as if he knows exactly where my thoughts were. "Is window dressing part of the sales assistant duties?"

I clear my throat and force myself into professional mode. "Um, no, but the lady who usually does the window displays called in sick, so I decided to crack on with it while we're quiet," I explain, looking at the massive mess I've made in the front window.

"Is it typical to be so quiet?" Max asks curiously.

I purse my lips thoughtfully. "Yeah, I suppose so. Things tend to pick up for an hour or two with the lunchtime shoppers."

We make small talk as he helps me decorate the window and dress the mannequins in the autumn clothing range. I hide my smile as he fumbles to fasten the tiny buttons of the velvet blouse the female mannequin is wearing. But then my thoughts turn to his big fingers *unfastening* the buttons

of *my* blouse, and I squeeze my thighs together as I quickly avert my gaze.

Max brings up points about the business that makes me wonder who Max Lincoln was before he came to be a sales assistant. I'm not sure I buy that he stumbled into this job. He's too smart, too well-dressed, and too knowledgeable for that to be the case. He carries himself like a boss, and it makes me hot and bothered. When I ask him what he did before Sutherland's, I can see that the question makes him uncomfortable, so I let it drop.

I beg some swaths of brown and orange fabric from Haberdashery and paper from Stationery to make leaves for an autumnal scene. We even borrow a small park bench from Home & Garden, laughing like idiots as we sit on it on the way down in the lift.

When we're done, we stand back to view our handiwork, pleased with how it looks.

"Good job, partner," I say, holding my hand up for a high five.

"This was all you," he says, tipping his head towards the window display as he high-fives me. He keeps hold of my hand and links our fingers like it's the most natural thing in the world.

My heart thuds and my stomach swoops as the contact thrums through my bloodstream like liquid fire.

I love working with Max. He's positive and motivated, and nothing is too much trouble. His keen brown eyes scrutinise everything, noting even the smallest details. But it's not just his work ethic that impresses me. It's the man himself. And that's faintly disturbing, considering I have zero experience with men.

"We make a good team," I say breathlessly, lifting my eyes to his.

Time stills, and the rest of the world drops away as I lose myself in the heat of his dark gaze. His thumb rubs over my fingers, but it may as well be my nipples from the throb it produces between my thighs.

Focus, Eva!

I clear my throat and reluctantly tug my hand free. “So, uh, which department will you be working in after your probation period?”

“Not sure.” Max shrugs as if it doesn’t matter to him where he ends up. “Is Gerald always like that with his staff?”

The abrupt change of subject catches me off-guard. I’m used to Gerald’s confrontational attitude, but having Max defend me earlier made me realise Gerald’s behaviour is not acceptable.

“He can be ... nit-picky,” I reply tactfully, reluctant to talk badly about anyone.

“Nit-picky isn’t the word I would’ve chosen,” Max says bluntly. “I’m not looking for trouble, Eva, but if I need to watch my back with him, I’d rather know upfront. And I sure as hell won’t tolerate him talking to you or anyone else like he did earlier, manager or not.”

All traces of easy-going Max are gone as he bristles protectively. God, he’s hot when he’s riled up, and I try not to melt into a puddle of lust on the floor.

“My opinion is that things are mismanaged,” I admit honestly. “The higher-ups don’t show their faces on the shop floor, so they don’t see the daily issues that arise. I suspect the store could be doing much better, but any ideas to attract new customers or reformat the layout fall on deaf ears.”

Max nods as he listens—*really* listens—which makes my Spidey-senses tingle. Not for the first time today, I question why he’s taken a job as a sales assistant. He’s too smart and knowledgeable to be working the floor. He’s capable of so much more—not that there’s anything wrong with being a sales assistant. I’ve been one for years, and the role is diverse and interesting. Then again, I’ve been picking up Gerald’s slack, which has made my job more challenging than it would usually be.

I open my mouth to ask him about his professional background when a customer approaches, needing directions

to the Menswear department. My questions for Max will have to wait.

AS IT IS, Max and I get no time to talk as we deal with a sudden influx of customers. Then Gerald returns from his two-hour lunch break and steals Max away to carry out his “induction,” whatever that means. I never had an induction when I started, and I wonder if Gerald is covering his arse after his less-than-warm welcome earlier.

Max hasn't returned by the time my shift is over and isn't in the break room. I pop my head into Gerald's office to enquire where he is, but he's not there. I finally track Gerald down as he's emerging from a vacant stock room at the other end of the floor.

“Eva! What are you doing here?” he asks, looking faintly guilty as he locks the door.

“I was looking for Max. Have you seen him?”

“Like that, is it?” He leers. “Already lusting after the new boy.”

My stomach roils as his eyes wander up and down my body. “Don't be disgusting, Gerald. And Max is hardly a boy.”

He widens his eyes innocently. “Disgusting? That's a little harsh, Eva. I was merely observing that you and Mr Lincoln seem to have hit it off. You do know I earn more than him? I could show you some of London's fanciest restaurants if you'd accept my invitation to take you out.”

I'd rather have a full-frontal lobotomy than go anywhere with Gerald. I plaster on a fake smile and say, “You know I don't date co-workers.”

“So you say,” Gerald replies. “With regard to Mr Lincoln, I allowed him to leave an hour early.”

I ignore the pang of disappointment that I didn't get to say goodbye. I nod. “Okay, well, I'm off home now myself. Have

a good evening, Gerald.”

I take off before he can reply, collect my purse from my locker, and head home.

It’s only a twenty-minute tube ride and a five-minute walk to the small semi-detached Mum and I shared before she passed. Coming home to an empty house is still bittersweet after four years. Still, Monty is good company when he’s in the mood. He slinks down the stairs as I close the front door and kick off my shoes.

“Have you finished barfing all over the carpet now?” I ask, bending to pick him up and scratching behind his ears.

Monty blinks up at me with yellow-eyed disinterest.

“Good job I love you.” I kiss his soft head and put him down. He purrs and weaves around my legs as I fill his bowl with cat biscuits. “Yeah, yeah, you’re my best friend when I’m dishing out the food,” I say wryly, placing his bowl on his cat mat on the floor.

I grab the towels I placed by the dishwasher this morning in case of any more leakages and place them in the washing basket. It’s hardly worth repairing with just me here. I can wash up the few plates and dishes I use. Besides, I don’t have the money to repair or replace the dishwasher and can’t imagine I will anytime soon.

The rich aroma of chicken stew permeates the air from the slow cooker I set going before work this morning, and my stomach grumbles.

“Yoga, shower, then food,” I tell myself.

I change into yoga pants and a stretchy t-shirt and pull out my yoga mat in the living room. Selecting my favourite yoga instructor on YouTube, I flow through the sun salutations before moving into the more challenging poses. Yoga was something Mum and I enjoyed together, and we attended a class not far from home. Sadly, that all fell by the wayside when she became ill, and after she was gone, the class was no longer running.

An hour later, I'm freshly showered and dressed in pink jeans, a pink T-shirt, and pink fluffy slippers. Pink became my favourite colour when Mum was diagnosed, being as the pink ribbon is synonymous with breast cancer. I even dyed my hair pink when I did the Run for Breast Cancer UK charity event a few months after Mum died.

I leave my hair down around my shoulders and smile at myself in the mirror. Pretty sure Max would laugh his head off if he could see me in all my pink glory. Although why I'm thinking about him at all is a mystery. I don't go ga-ga over men, no matter how good-looking they are. I've always been far too practical for romantic flights of fancy. But there's no denying that there was something simmering between Max and me. Something I've never experienced.

I head downstairs and grab a dish from the cupboard, and I fill it with stew from the slow cooker. Carrying it into the dining room, I sit at the small drop-leaf table. Tears prick my eyes as I remember all the meals Mum and I shared here. It's the four-year anniversary of her death in a few months, and for some reason, I'm extra emotional today. Too many days have passed since our final hug.

We don't remember days, we remember moments.

Mum's favourite quote comes back to me. She read it somewhere, and it resonated with her. I didn't truly appreciate its meaning until she passed away.

I remember the moments I blew out the candles on my birthday cakes at this table. She baked me a cake every year until she got sick.

I remember the moment we switched on the tree lights one Christmas, and the whole lot went up with a bang and singed part of Mum's eyebrow.

I remember the moment we brought Monty home as a kitten, and he peed on Mum's lap.

And I remember the moment the spark left her eyes as Mum finally succumbed to breast cancer. It was two days after my eighteenth birthday.

Another moment wiggles its way into my memories. Looking into Max's gorgeous brown eyes and the electricity that sparked between us when we touched.

For the first time in my almost twenty-three years, my heart is in danger ... and it scares me to death.

Chapter 5

Max

“HOW WAS YOUR EVENING?” I ASK EVA THE FOLLOWING morning.

She turns from her locker in the break room, where she’s placing her personal belongings. “Quiet. Monty and I watched a film.”

“Which film?”

“I’ll give you a clue.” She smirks and clears her throat. “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.”

I burst out laughing. “Worst accent ever.”

“Rude!” Eva glares at me as she closes her locker “Casablanca is a classic.”

“I know the line, but I’ve never seen the film,” I admit.

Eva’s mouth drops open, and her eyes widen in horror. “You’ve never seen Casablanca? Max Lincoln, you have *not* lived.”

She’s right, I haven’t. Not fully. Not until I met her. “Maybe I should swing by one night, and you can show me what I’m missing.”

Her blue eyes flare, and her cheeks warm with colour. It’s clear to see where her mind went with my words, and my cock twitches in response.

Eva blows out a shaky breath, and her eyes cloud over. “Max ... I-I don’t date co-workers.”

“Who said anything about dating?” I tease. “Besides, who are you trying to convince?” I ask softly. “Me? Or yourself?”

She opens her mouth to reply when we’re interrupted by an annoyingly nasal voice.

“Chop, chop, you two! Time is money. You should be on the shop floor by now.”

I turn to see Gerald looking pointedly at the expensive watch on his wrist.

Who the fuck hired this over-inflated idiot? I grit my teeth, knowing there’s nothing I can do about the self-important wanker right now without blowing my cover.

But once I’ve gathered all the information I need, Gerald Mason will be the first to leave Sutherland’s with my size thirteen up his arse.

THE NEXT WEEK PASSES QUICKLY. Working with Eva is equal parts wonderful and torturous.

Wonderful because she’s so easy to get along with and damn good at her job.

Torturous because each passing day strengthens and deepens my desire for her.

Eva is special. I want to get to know her outside of work. I keep telling myself she’s too young for me, but my heart’s not listening. Something about her speaks to me on an instinctual level. Maybe it’s her glowing smile, the confidence she radiates, or the big heart she wears right on her sleeve.

She’s bubbly, beautiful, and sexy as hell. She stirs my senses in ways I haven’t experienced in a long time. I see the flare of attraction in her eyes whenever we’re together, and I know she’s fighting it. She says she doesn’t date co-workers, but there’s more to it than that. I want to learn everything I can about her, dig beneath her surface and reveal the hidden treasures she doesn’t share with anyone else.

Why Eva's not the store manager is a mystery to me. Even her colleagues recognise her leadership qualities, coming to her with questions and asking for assistance rather than going to Gerald. The man is useless and spends his time breathing down people's necks, nit-picking and snapping at them, and lording his position over everyone. A few polite inquiries here and there quickly reveal what I suspected—Gerald is not well-liked or respected. He's rude, lazy, and makes no attempt to build staff morale.

Eva tackles every situation with knowledge and enthusiasm. She understands what's needed to make things run smoothly and knows the ins and outs of the store's operations. Always alert to customers' needs, she deals with them calmly and efficiently if they make a complaint or become irate.

At one point during my observations, Eva is unable to appease a customer regarding a supposed faulty item, and the disgruntled man demands to speak with a manager. When Gerald finally emerges from his office, he resolves the issue by refunding the customer and tucking away the "unsatisfactory item" in a box separate from standard returns—a practice I suspect isn't company policy. I make a note to take a closer look at the returns and wastage reported by this store and check standard practices regarding override discounts and full refunds.

In a nutshell, it's clear that it's the shop floor staff who are striving to ensure the customer experience is what it should be when they enter Sutherland's department store. Management is failing them on every level, and it's only the hard work of employees like Eva keeping things ticking over.

With each passing day, I grow more uncomfortable about being here under false pretences. Several times, I've considered confiding my true purpose to Eva, but the selfish part of me doesn't want to compromise our blossoming relationship. If she knew I was the owner of Sutherland's, she'd look at me differently. Hell, she might never look at me again. It would change everything between us, and that's not something I'm willing to risk.

Fuck. I didn't ask for this responsibility. My resentment increases at the position thrust upon me. Sutherland's was in my father's blood, and his father's before him. But it's not in mine, and I know my lack of enthusiasm for the business was a constant disappointment to him.

About half an hour before the end of our shift, Gerald calls Eva into his office. Fifteen minutes later, he emerges and fucks off home early. But there's no sign of Eva, and it makes me uneasy. Where is she?

As soon as my shift is over, I head off to look for her. I almost plough into her as I round the corner near the break room. Her head is down, and she doesn't see me as she leaves the ladies' bathroom.

"Eva?" I steady her with my hands on her shoulders.

She lifts her head, and her eyes are red from crying.

"Fuck, are you okay?" My thoughts immediately go to a dark place. "Did that fucker hurt you? I swear to God if he so much as laid a finger on you—"

"No, no. Nothing like that." Eva shakes her head. "I'd kick that useless toe-rag in the bollocks if he so much as *looked* at me the wrong way," she says vehemently "He called me into his office to inform me I've been passed over for promotion. Again. I didn't get the assistant manager position in Womenswear. He took great pleasure in telling me, too. I was so angry, and then I was crying, so I escaped to the bathroom to try to compose myself. How fucking sad is that? Crying in the ladies' loo like a teenager."

I take her hand and tug her around the corner to one of the empty storage rooms. Then I wrap her up in my arms, wanting to absorb the pain and frustration I see in her eyes.

Fucking Gerald. Guilt slams into my gut again. I have the power to do something about this today if I choose to. Eva deserves so much more than this. It's clear that Gerald is a power-hungry control freak. He sure as hell isn't a team player.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur, resting my chin on Eva's head.

Eva sighs and pulls back to look at me, her azure eyes shiny with emotion. “It’s not your fault Gerald is a wanker.”

I chuckle and cup her chin, sliding my thumb slowly over her bottom lip. I caress her face, touching her reverently. Leaning in, I rub my cheek against hers, and she presses her lips to my jaw. It’s such a simple caress, but it sends a bolt of need straight to my groin.

Groaning, I claim her lips with mine. I slide a hand to her waist and pull her closer, grazing the seam of her mouth with my tongue. She moans, parting her lips, and her tongue flicks against mine. The small gesture unleashes a hungry need inside me, and I haul her even closer, melding us together from chest to thigh.

Eva tears her mouth from mine, breathing hard. Her eyes are liquid blue pools as she stares at me. “What am I doing? I-I don’t date co-workers, remember?”

“Is it against company policy or something?” I ask, knowing full well it isn’t.

“No, there’s nothing like that in place. I just”—she frowns—“I like to have clear boundaries.”

My lonely heart isn’t willing to let it go at that, especially not after that kiss. “Okay, I’ll respect your no-dating policy, but I won’t apologise for kissing you because it was fucking amazing.”

“Max, I—”

“My mum always says you can solve anything over a cup of tea and a piece of cake. I know a great place. How about I take you there, and we can trash talk Gerald.”

I can see the war of indecision raging in her eyes as she bites her bottom lip. Why is she so determined to separate her work and social time? A workplace love affair gone wrong? Did some fucker break her heart?

Finally, Eva gives me a smile that makes the blood in my veins pump hard and fast. “There’s nothing I love more than cake and trash talk.”

Chapter 6

Eva

I SHOULD'VE SAID NO. GETTING INVOLVED WITH MAX, A colleague, won't lead anywhere good. I should know that from Mum's experience.

But I can't deny that it feels *good* to spend time with Max outside of Sutherland's. It's natural and comfortable. I notice things about him that aren't so evident when we're busy working. Like how he carries himself, so strong, sure, and confident.

And that kiss. Oh, my God, that kiss. The man is an incredible kisser, and I can't help but imagine his mouth and tongue working their magic on other parts of my body.

That thought makes me squeeze my thighs together as I stroll along beside Max, my arm linked with his. I allow myself to imagine for a moment what it would be like to be this—a couple. Not co-workers, but two people who met under other circumstances and clicked. I thought that kind of thing only happened in books and films, but Max makes me believe otherwise.

He's kind and chivalrous and protective. I saw his thunderous expression when a difficult customer snapped at me earlier today. How he made a beeline for me, standing close, ready to jump in and protect me as the irate customer became more and more agitated, shouting loudly at me.

Even now, I notice how he walks closest to the road, keeping me on his left side, away from the traffic. He steers me

carefully through the crowd, glaring at a man who barrels into my shoulder as we enter a busy street market.

Finally, we arrive at a familiar cafe in Covent Garden. “Caramel y Chocolat? It’s only been open a few months, but this is my favourite place! I love it here. Amazing food, top-tier coffee, and the most delectable pastries I’ve ever tasted,” I exclaim, turning to face Max. “But it’s impossible to get a table,” I add, indicating the packed courtyard and seating area inside.

Max grins. “Don’t worry. They know me well here.”

As if on cue, a woman in her early thirties with auburn hair emerges from inside. She’s wearing the black trousers and bright yellow shirt that make up the uniform of *Caramel y Chocolat*.

“Max!” she exclaims, her face breaking into a wide smile. “Didn’t expect to see you here. How’s the, uh, new job?” she asks with an exaggerated wink.

“Good, thanks, Jess. This is Eva, my colleague from Sutherland’s,” he says, giving her a pointed stare.

“Oh. Oh, of course.” Jess nods, blushing lightly as her gaze slides to me. “Good to meet you, Eva.”

“You too, Jess.” I smile and dip my head in acknowledgement.

Jess and Max are acting strangely. Are they involved? The thought sends a dagger of jealousy slicing into my stomach. Shit. I’m the one who enforced the no-dating rule, so I have no right to feel possessive over Max.

But you do, nonetheless. Especially after that kiss.

“Jess is the manager,” Max explains, glancing at me.” I was hoping you could find us a table,” he adds, turning back to Jess with a hopeful smile.

“You’re in luck, so long as you don’t mind being tucked away in the corner.” Jess points to a small table in the courtyard next to an ivy-covered trellis.

“Oh, that’s perfect, thank you.” I smile.

“You’re welcome. Go sit, and someone will be out to take your order,” Jess says brightly. She gives Max an almost questioning look before disappearing back inside.

Max leads me to the table and pulls out my chair. “M’lady.”

“Thank you.” I grin. The ivy-covered trellis shields us from the other customers, and it’s like being in our own little world. “Get you, rubbing shoulders with the management,” I tease as he sits opposite me.

He looks guilty for a split second before it’s quickly erased. “Jess and I met at university. She has a business degree in food and management.”

“Are you ... together?” The question is out of my mouth before I can think better of it.

“Jess and me?” Max’s eyebrows rise. “No, nothing like that. Jess has been happily married to her wife for ten years.”

“Oh.” Heat hits my cheeks.

“Would it bother you if we were?” he asks softly.

“Yes,” I admit, my mouth running ahead of my brain again.

He smirks. “Good.”

I smile and shake my head. “Arrogant.”

“I prefer ... confident and focused. Especially when it comes to something I want.” His eyes eat me up as our gazes lock.

Aaaand, my vagina is about to spontaneously combust.

I clear my throat and squeak, “I’m surprised we haven’t bumped into each other here before.”

“I usually get my order to go,” he replies with a quick smile.

Just then, the waitress arrives to take our order.

“Can I order for you?” Max asks. “I think I know something you’ll love.”

Intrigued, I nod. “Okay, but don’t disappoint me.”

“Never,” he promises, and I suddenly have the impression we’re talking about more than pastries.

Max orders, and we settle into an easy conversation about nothing and everything. We talk about our favourite movies, books, and music. I realise I've never had such a comfortable and enjoyable conversation with anyone before. Max is easy to talk to, and he seems genuinely interested in what I have to say.

"This is where I come when I want to treat myself or if I'm feeling down and need a pick-me-up." I sigh, breathing in the fresh autumn air.

He frowns and reaches across the table for my hand. "What gets you down, Eva?" he asks curiously, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. His eyes are intense yet soft as he looks at me. The air between us feels charged, and my heart races in my chest.

I'm surprised at the emotion that suddenly lodges in my throat. Max's touch undoes me in ways I've never experienced. "I get ... lonely sometimes since Mum died. Nobody knew me like she did. I miss her like crazy. My dad was never a part of my life, so it was Mum and me for as long as I can remember."

"You never knew your dad?"

"No." I shake my head. "Mum never spoke about him. All I know is that he was her boss. They had an affair but then she found out he was married and had two children. He wanted her to have a termination when he found out she was pregnant with me." My mouth twists wryly. "He didn't want his perfect family ruined. Mom refused. So, it was just the two of us, which was fine by me. You can't miss what you never had."

"Jesus, that's rough," Max says, his eyes flashing. "I can't imagine not wanting to be a part of my child's life." He pauses as he looks at me. "Is that why you don't date co-workers? Because of your mum and her boss?"

I shrug. "That's part of it."

He frowns. "Part of it?"

"I don't date, full stop," I admit self-consciously.

Max's hand tightens on mine. "Why?"

“It’s just never been a priority. Besides, believe it or not, I’ve always been a bit shy and introverted. I’ve just learned to hide it well. I found it hard to make friends as a kid and always waited for other people to make the first move. When Mum died, I was determined to do her proud. She taught me to work hard, take pride in my achievements, and believe that one day I’d be rewarded for my hustle. Losing her young made me grow up fast and gave me a solid work ethic. I’m proud of my accomplishments and that I’ve paid my way and established my independence without needing to rely on anyone else. I have a roof over my head, a job I love, and a cat who occasionally barfs all over the carpet.” I chuckle. “I’ve come a long way since I started working at Sutherlands. It’s helped to bring me out of myself, and I love meeting so many different people from all walks of life. I have a lot to thank Sutherland’s for. The company scholarship saw me through university, and the job itself has helped to build my confidence and manage my social anxiety. I try to pay it forward every day by making each customer feel cared for.”

“You’re fucking incredible,” Max says softly, his gaze intent on mine.

I blow at a shaky breath. Seated in this outdoor courtyard with the afternoon hustle-and-bustle around us, it’s easy to imagine we’re on a real date. Maybe in some European city like Paris or Venice.

“So, what about you?” I ask, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table. “Have you always been in retail?”

“No. I have a degree in business and hospitality.”

My eyes widen. “And you’re working as a sales assistant?”

“Things changed when my dad died. I had to re-evaluate. I needed to tie up loose ends and put dad’s affairs in order, so certain things had to go on hold,” he says as if he’s choosing his words carefully. “Losing a parent suddenly is tough. So many things are left unsaid. You think you have all the time in the world, but you don’t. I didn’t follow the career path my dad wanted for me, but I hope he’d be proud of me now.”

The vulnerability in Max's dark eyes brings a tear to mine. I scoot closer, placing my hand over his. "How could he not be proud of you, Max? You're an amazing person. Caring, considerate, protective." *Hot as hell*. "What about your mum? Are you close?"

"Mom and I have always been close, but she's lost without Dad. They did everything together."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

Max shakes his head. "Just me."

"So, we've both lost a parent, and we're both only children. I always wanted a brother or a sister. I think I'd like having a sibling to share stuff with now Mum's gone."

"Mum and Dad couldn't have any more kids after me, so I knew it was never a possibility. But I've often wondered if things would be different if I'd had a brother or sister." He sounds almost wistful.

"So, what do you like to do in your spare time?" I ask, wanting to distract him from whatever sadness he's lost in.

"Would you believe my true passion lies in creating pastries? I love creating new recipes, although my waistline doesn't thank me." He chuckles wryly and pats his stomach.

"You look great. You're tall and carry it well. Women love men with a little extra padding."

His mouth twitches as his eyes burn into mine. "And what about you, Eva? Do you like men with a little extra ... padding?"

My heart thunders at the heat in his gaze. *Holy hell*, he's devastating when he's flirting. "I, uh, prefer to focus on what's inside, not on external appearances. The best-looking people in the world become ugly fuckers if they have shitty personalities."

Max tips his head back and laughs, and my ovaries almost explode at the rich, throaty sound. "I love your honesty, Eva. You're like a breath of fresh air. Opening up to others doesn't

come easy to me, but it feels natural with you. I don't think I realised how long it's been since I laughed until I met you."

My heart batters my ribcage. What is this man doing to me? Every word he says pulls me closer like the universe has tethered us together somehow.

I'm saved from replying as the waitress returns with our order. My mouth drops open as she places a pot of tea and a huge chocolate éclair with fresh cream in front of me. Max has ordered a large almond croissant and a coffee for himself.

"Am I supposed to eat this or climb it?" I ask, lifting wide eyes to Max. "That has to be the biggest one I've ever seen."

Max smirks, and I blush.

"Éclair. The biggest éclair, you perve!"

He bursts out laughing, and I can't help joining in. He looks younger and more carefree. Max said he'd laughed more with me than with anyone for a long time, and I suddenly realise that's true for me too.

Plus, I'd be lying if I said I didn't secretly love the attention he pays me and how his warm smile makes my chest ache with some emotion I'm not entirely sure how to classify. He looks at me in a way that causes my heart to beat faster and turns my insides to mush. It's like he *sees* me. After being passed over and ignored by so many in my life, it's wonderful to have someone look at me the way he does.

And it makes me question why I'm so determined to keep him at arm's length. Am I using the co-worker situation as an excuse because of what happened with Mum? I've never met my father, but something tells me without a doubt that Max is nothing like him. Is it worth taking a risk on him? Worth risking my heart and my independence?

Yes, a voice whispers.

Max watches as I wrap my mouth around the éclair, and the heat in his gaze has moisture pooling between my thighs. I'm suddenly assaulted with a vision of taking something else long and thick into my mouth.

“Oh. My. God. This is amazing,” I moan as the chocolate, cream, and pastry all dissolve into an explosion of sweetness on my tastebuds.

When some of the cream oozes out and sticks to the corner of my lips, Max reaches out as if he can't help himself. He catches my chin and swipes away the cream with his thumb, and I watch as he brings it to his mouth and licks it clean.

Holy shit.

My desire for him kicks up strong and hard and so swiftly that if I wasn't already seated, I'd melt to the ground in a puddle of hormones. Why the hell can't I have this? Why am I denying myself a chance at happiness?

I don't remember moving. It's as if I'm pulled towards him by a cosmic thread, a particle floating aimlessly until this very moment. And then my mouth is on his in a searing hot kiss. I grip his forearms, and a small moan of pleasure escapes me as my tongue teases the seam of his mouth.

He doesn't need any encouragement as he takes over the kiss, plunging his tongue inside my mouth. When he strokes it against mine, I feel it everywhere, from my core to my toes to the strands of my hair. My world centres around his tongue and how he uses it. He conquers my mouth, and I wonder if he would conquer other parts of my body the same way.

“Fuck,” Max mutters against my lips. “You taste like sugar and sin.”

My stomach swoops at his words, and I squeeze my thighs together. Here I am, breaking my own rules, but I don't give a damn. All my fucks have fucked off to the distant land of No Fucks Given, and the only thing that matters is the heat emanating from Max's body and his taste on my tongue.

And then Max is pulling away, leaving me panting like a cartoon character with my tongue halfway out of my mouth.

“Fuck, I can't do this, Eva,” he growls.

Reality comes crashing back down on me, along with a hefty dose of embarrassment. I put some space between us, shocked that I allowed myself to get so wrapped up in the intoxicating

spell he weaves around me with his deep voice and molten eyes—with his very presence.

Shame slams into me, and I pull my tattered barriers around me, sliding into professional mode. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“I don’t mean the kiss, Eva. Never that,” he says gruffly. “Because I want to do that again. And again.” His eyes darken with intent. “But I can’t. Not until I come clean with you.”

Come clean with me? My stomach clenches and my heart shrivels in my chest. Oh, fuck. He’s married. He’s dying! He’s an alien from a distant galaxy. Okay, maybe not the last one but—

“I’m the owner of Sutherland’s department store.”

My jaw goes slack and almost lands in the remains of my chocolate éclair. The alien thing may have been preferable. “I-I don’t understand. You can’t be the owner because you ... you’re *Max*.”

“I *am* Max. My real name is Max Sutherland. Lincoln is my middle name. I inherited the business when my father died. For the most part, I ignored my responsibility to Sutherland’s before that because I had other ... priorities. But two weeks ago, I sat around a table with my CFO and a bunch of executives, and it was clear our profit margins were nowhere near where they should be. I decided the best way to discover what was going wrong was to investigate myself.”

“So, you’ve been spying on us. On me,” I state, hurt and anger bubbling to the surface. “All that stuff about how good I am at my job was to butter me up? Get the gullible sales assistant to give you the lowdown on what’s going on with the plebs at the bottom?”

“Eva, that’s not what—”

I hold up a hand to stall him. “Any other secrets I should know? Are you a government spy? Are you one of those weirdos who likes pineapple on his pizza?”

“Not unless you count me being the owner of this place, too,” he says, waving a hand around us.

I stare at him, lost for words. *He owns Chocolat y Caramel too?* How much money does this guy have? Now his weird exchange with Jess makes sense. He didn't want her to blow his cover.

"I wasn't kidding earlier when I said my true passion was in pastries. I've designed this place from the ground up. Everything sold here is meticulously made to my recipes."

"This is what you meant earlier about not following the career path your father wanted for you. You were supposed to take over Sutherland's," I whisper.

"My father left the business in the hands of executives who've ignored their responsibilities. But I'm guilty of doing the same, and I'm trying to put things right."

My skin feels tight over my face as I say, "You're not who I thought you were, Max. I thought we had a connection, things in common. But we're as opposite as it gets. You're a gazillionaire, and I'm just a girl scraping by. You're a successful businessman, and I'm a sales assistant. I understand you're doing a job, but I wish you hadn't made my colleagues and me unwitting pawns in your little spy game."

I push to my feet. I need to get out of here. I'm a jumble of emotions. Betrayal and shock churn in my stomach, and the memory of that amazing kiss turns to ashes in my mouth.

"Eva—" Max reaches for me, but I step back.

"I-I should go. This was a mistake and—" I bite my lip as a thought occurs to me. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't report me to the store manager for behaving unprofessionally." My eyes widen, and I laugh a little hysterically. "Shit, what am I saying? You're his fucking boss. You're *my* boss." I suddenly feel nauseous. "I hope we can forget what happened with the ... the kiss. Both of them. Because quite frankly, I need this job."

"Eva, I kissed you too, and your job isn't at risk—"

"Okay. Good. That's good." I nod abruptly. "And don't worry, your secret is safe with me. I won't blow your cover. I'll see you at work on Monday, Mr Sutherland."

Before he can reply, I take off like the hounds of hell are snapping at my heels.

Chapter 7

Max

THE NEXT WEEK IS HELL. WHILE I'M MORE CONVINCED THAN ever that I need Eva in my life, she's all business at work on Monday. She's polite and friendly, but she no longer meets my eyes, and the smile that always lights me up inside is absent. Her unease is obvious as she flits around, keeping busy and staying out of my way.

I try to talk to her about what happened at *Caramel y Chocolat*, but each time she cuts me off, or we're interrupted by a customer or another staff member. She's even taken to eating her lunch elsewhere, so I don't see her in the break room. She's distant and aloof, no longer the Eva I met that first day, tangled up in a pile of mannequins. I miss her. I miss her warm smile and easy humour.

Kissing her has changed everything. The attraction simmering between us bubbled over into a need the likes of which I'd never experienced. It cemented what I already knew—I've developed feelings for Eva Starling.

Which is why she deserved the truth. There's no way I could pursue anything with her with a huge lie sitting between us.

But I'm not giving up. Eva and I are meant to be together. I know it in the same way I know the sky is blue and the grass is green. I don't care how long it takes, I'll prove that my feelings for her are real. She thinks I was using her for information, and maybe it started that way, but the second I laid eyes on Eva, everything changed. She's burrowed beneath my skin and changed me on a molecular level, making me hers.

I know she had a shitty example with an absent father, who happened to be her mother's boss. Technically, I'm her boss, but I'm sure as hell not like her father. I want the wife and the kids and the house. The *home*. And I want it all with Eva.

True to her word, she hasn't told anyone my real identity. That alone gives me a spark of hope that I still have a chance with her. If I had my way, I'd say to hell with it and come clean to everyone, but I know that's not in the best interests of Sutherland's and its employees. This is an investigation. I promised the board of executives answers and solutions, and I intend to deliver them.

As the days pass, I keep a close eye on Gerald. Eva's comment about me not reporting her to him disturbs me. Is the guy so insecure he'd use any little thing against her? He's taken credit for implementing ideas that Eva has proposed. It's clear he's holding Eva back, and not only her but other staff too. The more I learn about the store manager, the less there is to like. While he hasn't physically intimidated anyone, his passive-aggressive attitude doesn't sit well with me. At all.

The week continues with Eva being cool and polite or avoiding me altogether. I try to be patient and give her the space she needs while showing her that I'm still the same Max she met three weeks ago.

If I thought she was unaffected by me, I'd back off in an instant. But when we're serving behind the counter together, our bodies in forced proximity due to the confined space, I know she's far from immune to me. I see the flare of desire in her eyes when she thinks I'm not looking. I feel her tremble and see the pulse throbbing in her throat when our arms brush accidentally. I hear her breath hitch when our hands touch as she shows me how to issue a refund to a customer.

And I'm sure as hell not immune to her. The scent of violets and vanilla clinging to her skin has me wanting to swipe my tongue over her skin to see if she tastes as sweet as she smells. Every time we squeeze past each other in the restrictive space, her soft curves press against me until I'm sure my cock is going to poke one of the customer's eyes out. I grit my teeth as my brain veers off on a wild fantasy where I hike up her skirt,

bend her over the goddamn counter, and sink into her wet heat...

By the time Friday rolls around, I'm bad-tempered, frustrated as hell, and no closer to breaking down the wall Eva has thrown up between us.

I spend the weekend at my apartment in central London trying to put thoughts of Eva from my mind. Saturday morning, I set up a video call with the company executives, which doesn't go down too well, but I don't give a fuck. Many of them have been languishing in their roles and letting their responsibilities slide. It's time they understood that their positions don't give them permission to offload important decisions.

Once everyone has joined the call, I get the ball rolling on sorting the issues I've identified so far. Replacing Gerald sits high on my list of priorities, but I have to do it the right way to avoid repercussions. I also share Eva's innovative ideas for Sutherland's growth and improvement with the board, being sure to give her the credit.

As I finish the video call, my phone pings with a message, and I grin when I see who it's from.

Seb: *Just landed at Heathrow. Fancy lunch with an old friend?*

Me: *Unexpected surprise. What brings you to London?*

Seb: *Business. Can't do business without lunch first. My treat.*

Me: *Sounds good.*

Seb: *Great, because I've already booked us a table at The Astor.* He adds a winking emoji.

The Astor is an exclusive gentlemen's club in Wood Lane. It's not a tacky club with strippers but a luxurious restaurant-cum-lounge where high-profile business entrepreneurs and the movers and shakers of the entertainment world can enjoy sophisticated Michelin-star food.

Me: *Shoulda known you'd already have reservations.*

Seb: *See you in an hour?*

Me: *Look forward to it.*

Although Seb and I keep in touch via text messages and the occasional call, I haven't seen my friend in almost two years. Seb lives in Los Angeles, and we met ten years ago through a friend of a friend when I was travelling in the US. We formed a friendship which has only strengthened in the subsequent years. It'll be good to see him and catch up—plus, it will take my mind off a certain blue-eyed, curvy brunette who's in danger of stealing my heart.

AN HOUR LATER, I'm greeted by the concierge and escorted to a table in the private dining area, an elegant and discreet space in the heart of The Astor.

Seb is waiting for me at the table, a big smile stretching his features. Like me, he's a big guy, but his dark good looks and practised charm draw women's attention.

"Good to see you, buddy," he says, clasping me in a hug.

"You too, Seb. What a great surprise," I reply, slapping his back.

"Getting a little chunky there, Maxie-boy." Seb smirks. "Looks like you've been indulging a little too heavily in those amazing pastries you make. Not that I can talk," he says, patting his stomach. "Too many business lunches and not enough gym time. I kinda like easing up on all that shit these days. Life's too short to be so hard on ourselves, am I right?"

I smile, taking a seat opposite him. "No arguments from me. Counting calories is overrated."

The waiter approaches, and Seb orders a bottle of Barolo, Vietti, 2017 vintage, not even flinching at the cost. I know my friend's net worth is in the millions if not billions, and he's not shy about spending when he wants to.

"So, how's life treating you?"

Seb shrugs, leaning back in his chair. "Same old, same old. Trying to keep ahead of the competition and keep the family out of trouble."

Seb's family own the Regis hotel chain, with hotels around the world. He's a damn fine lawyer who specialises in "fixing" problems before they occur.

He's in London to finalise the settlement of a luxury property in Knightsbridge. The property belonged to the Regis family, but they sold it to settle a debt years ago. Seb has been working tirelessly to win it back for as long as I've known him. It sounds fascinating, I can tell he's deeply invested in it.

"Rather you than me. All that litigation would drive me fucking insane."

"It's not so bad. My work is rewarding, and it keeps my mind sharp," he says, tapping a finger to his temple. "But enough about me. I was sorry to hear about your dad."

I nod. "Yeah, it's been rough."

"So, what's the plan with Sutherland's?" he asks, knowing my heart has never been in the family business.

I take a sip of my wine, stalling for time. I don't want to ruin our reunion by unloading all my emotional baggage on him. But when he raises an eyebrow, I know I can't avoid the question.

"Profits have been down, so I've had to step in temporarily. I've been working undercover at the store, trying to get to the bottom of what's gone wrong," I say, giving him a brief rundown of the situation. "I've identified some major issues that need to be addressed, one of which is the store manager." I pause, taking another sip of wine. "And then there's Eva."

"Eva?" Seb echoes, looking intrigued.

I nod, a smile tugging the corners of my mouth at the mention of her name. I recall her sweet scent and the way her curves pressed against me when we kissed. "Yeah, Eva, one of the sales assistants. She's amazing, Seb. Smart, beautiful, funny. She has all these amazing ideas for the store."

"So what's the problem?" Seb asks.

I sigh. "We, uh, kissed, but I couldn't let things go any further without telling her who I was. Fixing the store's issues

suddenly seemed less important than risking her trust.”

“How did she take it?”

“Badly. Accused me of spying on her and her colleagues and questioned every word out of my mouth since we met.”

“I can understand why she feels that way,” Seb says honestly. “To her, it probably seems like *everything* was a lie.”

I nod, taking another sip of wine. “Exactly. The plan was to go in, do what needed to be done, and get out. But meeting Eva has changed everything.”

Seb leans forward, his expression serious. “Changed, how?”

I take a deep breath. I’m not used to baring my soul, even with Seb. “Because I’m falling for her. Hard.”

Seb nods like he already knew what I was going to say. “I’ve never seen you like this. For what it’s worth, you did the right thing, my friend. Building a relationship on secrets and deception is doomed from the start.”

I blow out a breath. “I think I may have destroyed any chance at a relationship with her. Until last week, she thought I was just another sales assistant working on the shop floor with her. Her knowing I’m the owner of Sutherland’s puts barriers between us.”

Seb leans back in his chair, considering me. “It doesn’t have to. You’re still the same person. It’s not like you went in there and pretended to be someone completely different.”

I sigh. “I just don’t want to hurt her. She’s been through a lot in her life, and I don’t want to be another person who lets her down.”

“Being honest about who you are isn’t letting her down. It’s respecting her enough to hand her the power. She could’ve blown the whistle on the whole thing, but she didn’t. That has to count for something,” Seb points out. “Just keep being yourself and give her time. If what you feel for each other is the real deal, she’ll eventually see what a catch you are, chubby boy,” he finishes with a smirk.

I burst out laughing, enjoying some banter with my friend. “Fuck, it’s been too long,” I say, raising my glass in a toast and taking a swallow. “What about you? Anyone special?”

“Yes. Aria and she’s very special. But after listening to your brave admission, I see I have some work to do if I’m going to win her over.”

Seb doesn’t offer any more information, and I know better than to push my friend when it comes to matters of the heart and personal issues. He’ll tell me when he’s ready.

We both fall quiet as we peruse the menu.

“What the fuck?” Seb mutters, reading the food selection. “I had my heart set on Hereford rib on the bone with stilton hollandaise sauce, but all they’re offering is Indonesian rijsttafel with beef rendang. Or Peruvian sea bass ceviche? What the fuck is ceviche?”

I shake my head. “Roasted arse-cheek on toast for all I know.”

“Pacific Ocean black cod fillet with a manuka honey reduction and mushroom foam. Mushroom foam? The photo looks like a pile of snot on a plate. A very small pile of snot, at that,” he says, tipping the menu on its side as if that will help him decipher the photograph.

“Whatever happened to a good ol’ fashioned dirty cheeseburger and chips?”

Seb closes his eyes with a groan. “If there’s one thing you English do well, it’s fish and fries. Do you remember that pub we went to in the Cotswolds? The Swan? They served the best battered fish, fries, mushy peas, and tartare and curry sauce in the world.”

“I can’t help you with the fish and chips, but I know a place around the corner from here. Best burgers this side of the Thames,” I suggest.

Seb casts his eyes around the restaurant. “Wanna make a break for it while no one’s looking?”

I grin. “Fuck, yeah.”

We each toss a few hundred-dollar bills on the table and sneak out like naughty schoolboys.

WE END up at Bob's Burgers, a small, unassuming joint with red vinyl booths and greasy burgers that drip down your chin. It's exactly what we need after the stuffiness of the fancy restaurant.

We both order the double cheeseburger and fries and devour every bite. As we sit back, groaning in satisfaction, I realize how grateful I am for Seb's friendship. Even though we may not see each other often, the bond between us can't be broken by distance or time.

"You know," Seb says, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "I think I may have a solution to your Sutherland's problem."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

"What if you made Eva the store manager? You said it yourself, she's smart and capable. And from what you've told me, she's passionate about the store and wants to see it succeed. Who better to lead Sutherland's than someone who's invested in it, both emotionally and professionally?"

I give him an assessing look. "Funny you should say that."

Seb grins. "Knew you would've already considered it."

"Considered and disregarded it."

He frowns. "Why?"

"Two reasons. First, Eva needs to know she's been promoted on her own merit, not because she's friends with the boss. And second, I need grounds to dismiss Gerald. The guy's a shitbag, but he's a clever shitbag. He skates the line in terms of his attitude, so I have nothing substantial to pin on him."

"Okay, so when it comes to Eva, you make it clear that she has to go through the interview process along with any other candidates who apply for the position. You put everything in the hands of a recruitment agency, and if she's the right person

for the job, which we both know damn well she is, she'll know she's earned it rather than having it handed to her. Hell, sounds like she's already earned it, but this just makes the whole process impartial."

I consider his words. "I don't know, Seb. What if things don't work out between us? It could ruin everything."

"Or it could be the best thing that's ever happened to both of you," he counters. "Look, I'm not saying it's a foolproof plan. Are there legal safeguards to move her out of the role if she doesn't work out? I can help you with that or recommend an English lawyer to handle it. The final decision would still lie with you, but it is a possibility worth considering. If nothing else, it will show Eva that you value her skills and contribution to the store."

I nod slowly, knowing he's right. Seb's idea could also be the solution to all my problems. Whatever decision I make will have a huge impact on both my personal and professional life. But for the first time since I told Eva who I was, I'm hopeful. Hopeful that there may be a way to regain Eva's trust and that Sutherland's will be more successful than ever with her at the helm.

"Dealing with the shitbag will be tricky. If he's not fulfilling his duties as store manager, he's entitled to verbal and written warnings unless you can prove he's broken company policy. If not, you could find yourself facing a lawsuit for unfair dismissal. If it were me, I'd be watching him carefully and making detailed notes about his movements and actions. But in my experience, if he's the asshole you say he is, chances are it won't be long before he shoots himself in the foot. And you know I'm always on the end of a phone if you need legal advice."

I nod, grateful to have Seb on my side. "Thanks for the advice, buddy. I appreciate it."

"Anytime, bro," Seb says, clapping me on the back. "Now, let's go find some dessert. A good friend of mine owns a patisserie down the street that stays open late and sells pastries to die for."

I chuckle, knowing he's referring to *Caramel y Chocolat*.

We leave Bob's Burgers behind, our conversation and laughter carrying us forward.

Chapter 8

Eva

I'M MISERABLE.

It's a rainy Saturday afternoon, and I'm curled up on the sofa watching Casa Blanca for the gazillionth time. At least I'm not alone. Monty is curled up in my lap, purring like a steam engine. I still remember the scrawny little kitten we brought home seven years ago. Mum and I rescued him when he was six weeks old. His owners had cut off his whiskers, and he had cat flu and an eye infection. I dread to think what would've happened to him had we left him in the squalor we found him in.

I'm so glad to have him. He's a great source of comfort right now because I know I'm wallowing. I can't stop thinking about Max. About that kiss and the bombshell he dropped on me. He's the owner of Sutherland's, for God's sake. The big cheese. Top dog. Big gun. All the synonyms. And I'm Eva, the sales assistant who wants to be so much more. Don't get me wrong, I'm damned proud of how far I've come. I just wish someone would see my potential because Gerald sure as shit doesn't.

Max does, my wayward mind whispers.

Does he, though? Can I believe anything that came out of his mouth, or was it all part of his plan to charm information from me?

"What do you think, Monty?" I ask, stroking his silky fur.

Monty yawns and lifts his leg to clean his arsehole.

I sigh. "Right. Thanks for the advice."

My phone pings next to me on the sofa, and I grab it to see a text message from my friend, Maddie.

Maddie: *Grace and I are staging an intervention.*

Me: *An intervention? What do you mean?*

Maddie: *We haven't seen you for weeks. You know all work and no play makes Eva a dull girl. Answer your door.*

Me: *What do you me—*

The loud knocking at the front door halts my thumbs on the keypad. Monty skedaddles from my lap as I stand and head down the hallway. My jaw drops as I throw open the door to see my two best friends on my doorstep. “What ...? How ...?”

Maddie pushes past me and turns to face me with a grin. Her long blonde hair is piled in a messy bun on her head, and her blue eyes sparkle with mischief. “Grace has a rare weekend off, and Jacob is spending some daddy-daughter time with Kaitlyn, so we decided an impulsive girl’s night in was long overdue.”

“But ... I ...” I shake my head and try to swallow the lump in my throat. Seeing my girls so unexpectedly unravels me, and I burst into tears.

“Oh, love! What’s happened?” Grace croons, gathering me into a warm hug.

Her soft words of comfort make me cry harder. God, I love these two women! It’s as if they knew I needed them today.

“It’s okay, sweet pea. We’re here now, and we’ve brought shitloads of wine, pizza, and chocolate. Well, lemonade for Maddie.” Grace grins, glancing at Maddie’s baby bump.

Maddie is six months pregnant with her second child, a boy. Her daughter, Kaitlyn, is almost four and can’t wait to meet her baby brother.

“Come on. Let’s grab some plates, and you can tell us all about it,” Maddie says, heading for the kitchen.

Five minutes later, we’re all sitting in the living room with three open pizza boxes on the coffee table.

“So, spill, Super Starling,” Maddie says, drawing her feet beneath her in the chair.

I smile at the nickname Maddie gave me when we met five years ago. She was one of the nurses Mum and I saw regularly at the hospital when Mum was having chemo. Maddie was an amazing support to me when Mum was poorly, always there with a friendly smile, a box of tissues, and a hug. After Mum died, we stayed in touch, and Maddie even came to the funeral. She later introduced me to Grace, who lived with Maddie and her husband, Jacob, for a while when she had nowhere else to go. Since then, our friendship has grown, and we’ve all become close.

I take a deep breath and blurt, “I think I’m falling for my boss.”

“Oh, shit,” Grace mumbles around a mouthful of pizza.

Both women know about my Mum’s relationship with her boss and his lack of interest in keeping me when she told him she was pregnant.

“Only I didn’t know he was my boss when I was falling for him. I tried to keep him at arm’s length. You know I have my rule about not dating co-workers.”

“It’s not a co-worker rule, Eva. You don’t date anyone, full stop,” Grace points out, gathering her dark brown waves into a ponytail. “Not that I can talk. I was the same before I met Fletcher.”

Her face softens, and her grey eyes sparkle as she talks about her man. Fletcher is ex-army and lost part of his leg in an IED in Afghanistan. Like Grace, he’s a paramedic. They met at work and, after a bumpy start, fell in love.

“So, how did you not know he was your boss?” Maddie asks, her brow puckered in confusion.

I tell Maddie and Grace everything, from the embarrassing way I met Max to our kisses and his confession.

“Oof. That’s a doozy of a situation,” Grace says, opening one of the four boxes of chocolates they brought with them.

“Interesting, though. He didn’t have to tell you who he was,” Maddie observes. “He could’ve strung you along and carried on doing his undercover thing. The question is, why *did* he tell you?”

“He said he wanted to keep kissing me, but he couldn’t without coming clean. I mean, he made no secret that he liked me before all this happened, and I was the one holding him at arm’s length, but—”

“But he slid under every one of your defences,” Grace finishes with a knowing smile, popping a chocolate into her mouth.

“I didn’t even know he had until he dropped his bombshell. And that made me question everything.” I sigh. “Every time he paid me a compliment. Every time he asked me a question about the store. Every time he looked at me like he wanted to eat me alive.” I groan, burying my flushed face in my hands.

“She’s got it bad,” I hear Grace say to Maddie.

“About time,” Maddie replies.

“This is serious, girls!” I say, grabbing an orange cream and shoving it in my mouth.

“Of course, it’s serious,” Maddie agrees. “But frankly, it’s good to see you finally going ga-ga over a guy. You’ve been all work and no play for too long. When we met, you were working part-time and trying to take care of your mum. After she died, you threw yourself into your studies and your job. It’s about time you had a little life in your love life.”

I sigh. “I know he likes me, but I’m pretty sure it’s not love on his part.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Grace chimes in. “If he didn’t genuinely care for you, he wouldn’t have said anything.”

“And he risked his whole clandestine operation by telling you,” Maddie says dramatically. “He couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t expose him.”

Oh, I want to “expose” him, all right, but not in the way Maddie means.

I fall quiet as I absorb their words. They're right. Max could've carried on regardless, but he cared enough to tell me the truth. "He's still my boss and rich as sin," I remind them. "I don't want any special treatment."

"Do you honestly think he would give you special treatment? Outside of the bedroom, I mean." Grace waggles her eyebrows suggestively.

I chuckle and shake my head. "No. He's not like that. Max Sutherland doesn't strike me as a man who gives free rides."

"Unless your name's Eva Starling." Grace snickers.

I groan. "Your mind is in the gutter, woman!"

Grace grins. "Can't help it. I have an insatiable alpha male at home." Her grin drops, and she reaches for my hand. "Seriously, Eva, we just want you to be happy. If you think Max is the one who can do that, you should grab him with both hands. Literally."

Maddie nods in agreement. "You deserve it, Eva. You've been through so much already. Don't let fear hold you back from something that could be amazing."

I take a deep breath, feeling their support and love surrounding me. Can I take a chance on Max?

"What if it all goes wrong?" I whisper, the fear gripping me once again.

"Then we'll be here for you, no matter what happens," Maddie says softly. "That's a promise."

A sense of relief washes over me. They're right. I can't let fear hold me back from something that could be amazing. And something tells me being with Max would be more than amazing.

"I ... I think I'm going to take that chance," I say, a smile spreading across my lips.

Grace claps her hands. "That's what we like to hear! Now, let's open that second bottle of wine and celebrate the fact that Eva is finally going to get laid!"

I laugh along with them, grateful for their unwavering support. This whole situation with Max is scary and uncertain, but knowing I have my girls to back me up means everything. “Thank you, guys. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“Anytime, love. But now, no more man talk. Let’s talk about something fun, like baby names!” Grace exclaims, pulling out a notebook and pen from her bag.

We all laugh and spend the rest of the evening eating pizza and chocolates and brainstorming names for Maddie’s baby boy.

As I lie in bed later that night, I think about Max and the possibility of something more between us. The fear is still there, but so is the hope. I’ll talk to Max on Monday, clear the air and tell him how I feel.

For the first time since Max told me his secret, I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

BUT MAX ISN’T there when I arrive at work on Monday. When he hasn’t put in an appearance by late morning, I head for Gerald’s office.

“Have you heard from Max? He hasn’t come in today.”

Gerald quickly places the tablet he’s holding face down on his desk. “Why do you want to know? Missing your boyfriend, Eva?”

Good God, a five-year-old has more maturity than this man. How he ended up as store manager, I’ll never know. What would he say if he knew Max was his boss? I can’t wait to see his face when he finds out. Something tells me Gerald won’t be here for much longer once Max reveals his identity.

“No, Gerald. Just concerned for the welfare of a colleague,” I reply patiently.

“If you must know, I’ve assigned him to Homewares this week. He’s spent long enough in Clothing.”

I release a breath at hearing he's okay. I'll head up to Homewares during my lunch break and ask if we can go somewhere after work to talk.

But when lunchtime rolls around and I head up to the third floor, there's no sign of Max. Julia, the staff member working with him, tells me he's gone out for lunch. Frustrated, I head back down to my floor, intending to catch up with him during my next break.

Sadly, I end up sacrificing my break to deal with a disgruntled customer who comes in demanding to see Gerald. When I explain he's already left for the day, the man becomes irritable and informs me that he's come to collect a designer watch and that Gerald is personally overseeing his purchase. If a special item has been ordered for customer collection, it's recorded on the computer system, but when I check the customer's details, I'm unable to find anything. I eventually placate the man with a promise to personally look into the matter and call him tomorrow, offering him a ten percent discount on a future purchase as a token of goodwill.

The rest of the afternoon is chaotic as one of my colleagues goes home sick, leaving us short-staffed. As closing time approaches, I'm frustrated I still haven't managed to catch up with Max. I'm also a little peeved he hasn't tried to find me, which is unreasonable considering I'm the one who's spent the last week giving him the cold shoulder and refusing to talk. I need to put things right with him, but first, I have to get to the bottom of the missing item.

By the time I've checked the main stockroom, the majority of staff have left for the night, and the usual bustle of the day is replaced with an almost eerie silence. I make my way back to Gerald's office, wondering if he's stored the customer's watch there for safekeeping. I feel a little guilty searching through his drawers, but pause when I come across the key to the storeroom I saw him leaving the other day.

I frown as a thought occurs to me. What was Gerald doing in an empty storeroom?

Grabbing the key, I head to the other side of the building, turning down the narrow hallway at the end until I reach the relevant door. Unlocking it, I step inside, fumbling for the light switch on the wall. My eyes widen as the fluorescent light flickers on to reveal stack upon stack of boxes.

“Empty, my arse,” I mutter, moving further into the room. There must be over a hundred boxes in here.

“Eva?”

I shriek at the sound of my name and spin on my heel. In true Eva fashion, I lose my balance and tumble backwards into a stack of boxes ...

Chapter 9

Max

MY PLANS TO TALK TO EVA ON MONDAY SEEM DOOMED FROM the start when Gerald informs me he's moved me to Homewares on the third floor. The store manager seems to take great pleasure in telling me I won't be working with Eva for the rest of the week, which only makes me more determined to get rid of the narcissistic asshole as soon as possible.

Then, instead of spending my lunch break talking to Eva, I end up dealing with an emergency at *Caramel y Chocolat* when Jess calls me to say the oven isn't working. I manage to get hold of a technician to fix it, but he can't come until tomorrow. In the meantime, I instruct the staff to put up a sign telling customers we have a limited choice of pastries but that they can enjoy a twenty-five percent discount once we're back up and running.

I'm late returning to work, which doesn't please Julia, the sales assistant I'm working with. Like Eva, she's committed to her job and does the work of two people.

It's the end of the day before I know it, and I immediately head off in search of Eva before she leaves. I don't want to wait until tomorrow to see her. I need to see her tonight. I need to hold her in my arms and tell her how I feel.

I've decided my time undercover is over. Eva is more important than nailing Gerald to the wall, and I won't sacrifice my chance to be with her. Gerald will dig his own grave one way or another, and I'll be waiting when he does. In the meantime, I have what I need to implement new policies and

procedures that will positively impact Sutherland's. I won't be taking credit for them, though. That will fall to Eva and the other staff members who've shown their loyalty and dedication to the business.

I nod and smile at a few staff members as I make my way to the first floor where Eva usually works, but she's nowhere to be found. Have I missed her? No, Eva doesn't duck out early. She's always the first to arrive and the last to leave.

I spot one of the security guards, who tells me he saw her heading to the far end of the floor, an older part of the building where a few vacant stockrooms and unused offices are located. What the hell is she doing over there?

I walk the length of the store, exiting through a staff door into a narrow hallway. I smile as I hear Eva talking to herself through the open door of an old storeroom. Pausing in the doorway for a second, I drink her in. She has her back to me, and her long, brown hair is released from its usual bun to tumble down her back. My fingers itch with the desire to thread through those silky strands. God, I've missed her.

"Eva?"

She shrieks and spins on her heel, losing her balance and falling backwards into the boxes stacked behind her.

"Shit!" I race towards her as the boxes tumble around her. By the time I reach her, only her legs are visible, sticking up through the fallen cases.

I thrust my hand into the jumble, grasping her arm and pulling her up. "Fuck, are you okay?" I demand as I steady her on her feet and check her over for injuries.

"I'm ... fine," she huffs, placing a hand on her chest. "You scared the living shit out of me, Max!"

I pull her towards me and wrap her up in my arms, inhaling her sweet scent. "Back at you, sweetheart. Frightened me to death when I saw those boxes fall on you. Are you sure you're okay?" I ask again, pulling back to look at her.

"Fine, just got sideswiped by a box," she says, rubbing a small red spot on her forehead.

I move her fingers aside and probe the area gently. “It hasn’t broken the skin.”

“Um, Max?” Eva says, her eyes widening as she looks around us.

I follow her gaze and curse. Several boxes have spilt their contents all over the floor, revealing everything from designer clothing to expensive jewellery to high-end homewares. All items that are meant to be tagged and moved to the relevant floor.

“What the ...? These items aren’t supposed to be hidden away in boxes marked as faulty,” Eva says, stating the obvious. “Gerald told me this room was empty. I came looking for a missing item for a customer on the off-chance it was here. I never expected to find ... this.” She spreads her hands wide, indicating the array of goods. Her eyes lift to mine. “What the hell is going on, Max?”

“Is Gerald the only one who uses this stockroom?” I ask, ignoring her question.

She nods. “He has a key. I found it in his desk drawer earlier. I saw him leaving this room a few weeks ago, and he looked uneasy, but I passed it off as Gerald being Gerald.”

I look around at all the “faulty” merchandise. There must be thousands upon thousands of pounds worth of goods stashed in here.

Eva’s eyes are wide as she looks at me. “Do you think ...?”

My mouth settles into a hard line. “Looks like Gerald is turning a personal profit by marking perfectly saleable items as faulty. The items register as a loss for the company but a gain for the sleazy little shit selling them online as his personal side hustle.”

“Oh, my God,” Eva whispers, shaking her head in disbelief. “Who knew Gerald was intelligent enough to pull off something like this?”

“Oh, he’s a slippery little shit. Hiding the goods in plain sight,” I say angrily.

This is the ammunition I need to remove Gerald—and not just remove him. I have enough proof here to send the little shit to prison. I should be happy, but all I feel is anger that he’s abused his position this way. I’m also pissed off at myself, that it’s taken Sutherland’s teetering on the edge of bankruptcy for me to pull my head out of my arse.

“He’s effectively taking money from hardworking people’s pockets,” I growl. “There’s no telling how long he’s been doing this, and while he’s not solely responsible for Sutherland’s financial issues, I’d hazard a guess that he’s cost us thousands, if not hundreds of thousands.”

“What do we do? Call the police?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I need to catch him in the act.”

“Are you saying that as Max Lincoln, the sales assistant or Max Sutherland, the boss?” she asks, lifting wary eyes to mine.

I move towards her and place my fingers under her chin, tipping her head up so she’s looking at me. “Both because they’re one and the same. The Max you know is exactly who I am. Everything I told you, everything I shared with you, was true, Eva. But I’m sorry I hurt you. That’s the last thing I wanted to do.”

Her blue eyes search mine. “I know. You did what you had to for Sutherland’s. I see that now. Besides, it’s not like we knew each other before you came here. You didn’t owe me anything, so it was unfair of me to blame you for a decision I may have made myself were I in your situation.”

“I have a boardroom of executives who knew things were heading into the red and didn’t tell me until it was almost too late. I couldn’t trust them to give me the answers I needed about why the business was haemorrhaging money. The only way I could do that was to see for myself. And you can bet your beautiful, curvy arse if I’d done that as Max Sutherland, I’d never get any real answers. Going undercover was the only way, but I swear it was never my intention to use or hurt anyone, Eva, least of all you.”

She gives me a watery smile. “I couldn’t figure out why I was so pissed off when you told me who you were, especially as I was the one holding you at arm’s length. And then I realised why. I felt betrayed when you told me you were *the* Max Sutherland because I thought of you as *my* Max. My colleague, my friend, and”—she pauses and bites her lip—“a man I was developing feelings for. And then I panicked about the kisses, and you being my boss, and, shit, I’m so sorry—”

I place my fingers over her mouth. “God help me, Eva, don’t you dare apologise,” I growl. “Not for a bloody thing, least of all a kiss that made me feel alive for the first time in a long time.”

Eva holds my gaze steadily. “I’m not sorry about the kiss. I don’t live my life with regrets. But ... I have limited experience with this kind of thing, Max. I don’t date. I don’t hook up. I just work, and for a while, I went to university. I spend the rest of my time doing yoga and stuff that keeps me mentally healthy because”—she drops her eyes and swallows hard—“it’s bloody lonely without Mum.”

I cup her face and brush away the tear sliding down her cheek with my thumb. Her breath hitches, and her eyelids flutter at the contact. Yeah, she’s definitely not immune to me. Thank fuck because I want this amazing woman more than anything. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t date either. Haven’t had time, and I’ve, uh, been a little self-conscious since I gained weight.”

Eva’s eyes widen. “You’re kidding, right? You’re ... bloody gorgeous.”

“And you’re damn good for my ego,” I reply gruffly. “After Dad died, I was so wrapped up in the aftermath and intent on taking care of everyone else that I neglected to take care of myself. That’s the mode I’ve been in for a long time: work first, play later. And it hasn’t made me happy. The only thing that’s given me a modicum of happiness is waking early and making pastries, a profession my parents indulged because it was a ‘side thing,’ something I could do while I bided my time waiting to take over the business. But when I realised the business was in trouble, I knew I’d have to stick around longer

and find a way to sort it. That's how I came to be here. But I wasn't expecting you, and I sure as hell wasn't expecting to fall in love with you. But your vibrancy and energy and positivity lifted me up. I've been going crazy these last few weeks, Eva. God, I've missed you."

She lifts her hand to cover mine on her cheek. "I've missed you too. Thank you for sharing who you are with me. It lets me know I can trust you to be honest with me, even when it comes to the tough stuff."

"Well, seeing as you value honesty, here's something else you need to know." I drop my hands to her hips and pull her closer so she can feel my hardening cock. "I want you, Eva. I'm not hiding it anymore, and I'm stating my intentions loud and clear. So, if this isn't what you want, tell me now and even though it will kill me, I'll walk away."

She stares at me, her desire laid bare in her eyes. But there's also something else. "I'm scared, Max. You're my boss. What if we start something, and people accuse me of nepotism, of sleeping with the boss to get ahead? Not that we're sleeping together, or *not* sleeping as the case may be, but ... ugh ... I'm so bad at this."

"Does it matter what others think if we know the truth?" I ask bluntly.

She sighs. "It shouldn't, but I'd be lying if I said it doesn't."

"Fuck what others think, Eva. You're worth far more than some idle gossip. I don't give a shit what people say about me, but if they so much as breathe a word about your integrity, they'll have me to answer to."

She looks taken aback by my ferocity. "I ... You care that much?"

"Yes," I rasp. "I care that much. I care about you, Eva."

"I ... care about you too, Max. And you're right. I can't let the fear of how others perceive me get in the way of my happiness and well-being."

I tap her nose with my finger. "That's my girl."

My girl.

Fuck, I want her as mine.

I grasp her hand and tug her from the room, locking it behind us.

“What are you doing?” she gasps as I practically haul her down the hallway and out of the staff exit to the underground carpark where my BMW is parked.

“Taking you home so I can worship every inch of your gorgeous body.”

Chapter 10

Eva

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO REACH MAX'S PLACE IN AN exclusive apartment building overlooking the River Thames. On the way, I text my elderly neighbour, Dorothy, who has a spare key, asking if she can feed Monty. Dorothy is sweet and is only too happy to feed Monty and make a fuss of him on the rare occasions I'm away from home.

Max parks in a reserved spot and whisks me up in the private lift to the penthouse. The place is huge, with an open plan kitchen, living and dining space and a hallway leading to what I assume are the bedrooms and bathroom. The decor is neutral shades, simple, refined, and elegant, and the entire apartment has breathtaking views across London. I move to the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing out at the Tower of London and Tower Bridge. The electric blue of the Shard shines like a beacon in the night.

This is a whole new world, far removed from my little two-bed semi, and I'm faintly intimidated.

As if sensing my uncertainty, Max comes to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "This is just trappings, Eva. None of it means anything without you. Not anymore."

I turn in the circle of his arms, looking deep into his warm brown eyes. The intensity of emotion I see there sends need cascading through me. I want this man with every fibre of my being. He's the epitome of everything I never knew I wanted in a man—masculine, strong, and solid, like a rock I can lean on. And when he looks at me like he wants to devour me, I'm

ready to cast aside any remaining caution. He wants me, and God help me, I want him too.

But I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to vocalise what I want. So I try to convey it without words. I press closer, feeling his hard length against my stomach and his breath stirring the hair at my temples. My breathing grows heavy, and my breasts rub against his chest, turning my nipples into tight buds.

Max groans. "Is there something you want, my little starling?"

I nod, loving the endearment. "You."

His hands tighten on my hips, holding me to him. His lips play at my temple, my ear, my neck, and it's enough to snap that last tendril of resistance as desire kicks up. The look-but-don't-touch mantra that's been on repeat in my head for weeks melts away, replaced by the hot, hungry need I've been holding at bay from the moment I saw him.

I moan as Max's mouth crashes into mine, and his tongue spears past the barrier of my lips to lick inside. I've been kissed before, but never like this. This man kisses me like it's the end of the world, and I'm the only thing that will save him.

Sliding my hands up his neatly pressed shirt, I flip the buttons open one by one. My fingers itch with the need to rake over his skin, to absorb his heat and strength. They follow the trail of dark hair from his belly button down, undoing his belt and trousers enough to plunge a hand into his boxers and wrap my hand around his heavy thickness.

Jesus Christ, Eva." Max hisses as I stroke him.

The fire burning inside me grows like an inferno at his swallowed groans. I feel wildly powerful, strong, and sexy, knowing he wants me this much, this badly.

But then he grabs my hand, stilling it. "Tonight is all about you, Eva. It's been fucking torture working so closely with you for days on end without getting to touch you. Need to taste you, sweetheart. Need to lick you the way you licked up the cream from that éclair."

His words send liquid heat to my core, and I whimper with need. He lifts me and carries me down the hallway and into his bedroom, placing me gently on the enormous bed. Then his hands are on my blouse, wrestling buttons from buttonholes with his big fingers. He's impatient, and the last few buttons fly across the room as he tugs at the material aside.

"Fuck." A shudder goes through him as he looks down at my breasts, barely concealed in my lacy bra. He doesn't move, just stands there gazing down at them with an undecipherable expression.

"Max?" I ask uncertainly. I'm suddenly self-conscious. Does he ... not like what he sees?

He stalls my hands as I move to cover myself. "Fuck, no. Don't hide from me," he grits. "You're bloody beautiful, Eva. I'm trying my best not to come in my boxers just looking at you. You're enough to make a man embarrass himself."

My breath comes in short pants as I wait to see what he does next. I don't have to wait long. He unhooks my bra and tugs it from my body. My breasts spill free, and heat pools low in my belly as my nipples furl into tight buds.

"I've never had a man's mouth on me before," I whisper. "Please, Max. I ache."

Max's throat works as he swallows hard. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm going to take care of you."

He crawls up the bed, caging me in, groaning deep in his throat as he drops his head and finally captures my breast in his hot, wet mouth. He suckles me hard, his tongue rasping across the sensitive peak and pulling a choked moan from my throat. I bury my fingers in his thick dark hair, holding him to me as he moves to the other breast. It's as if a hot wire of lust connects his lips to the bundle of nerves between my legs. God, I never knew it could feel so good to have a man's mouth on me like this.

Tearing his mouth from my breast, he tugs my skirt down my legs and tosses it aside, leaving me in just my knickers. He inhales sharply as he sees the damp spot his touch has

produced on the fabric at my centre. Before I can take another breath, he's stripped them down my thighs, leaving me completely open and bare to his hot gaze.

"So beautiful," he rasps. "Gonna taste you now, Eva."

My legs quiver as he trails kisses up my inner thighs. I mewl as his thumbs part my folds, and then he's consuming me like a man on death row devouring his last meal. His tongue delves through my folds, licking, sucking, and slurping on my pussy and swirling around my clit.

"I've never tasted anything this sweet in all my life, Eva. Swear to God," he mutters against my trembling flesh.

"Max, please!" I beg, tugging at his hair. "I need ..."

"Okay, sweetheart. I've got you," he promises.

"Oh, fuck." I jerk as he eases a thick finger inside me. "So good."

He slowly slides another finger inside while still sucking my clit. His other hand squeezes my breast as he thumbs my nipple.

"Oh, my God, Max. Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"Not stopping until you come all over my face, Eva," he mutters against my shivering flesh.

He pumps his fingers in and out of me, and I cry out as he curls them to hit some magical spot inside me. The bed shakes beneath us as he fucks me with his fingers, and my core clenches as shivers chase along my spine. Delicious tension grips my muscles as my orgasm approaches. I'm sure it's going to wreck me.

"You're making me come, Max," I whimper, tugging sharply on his hair.

"Come for me, Eva. I want you all over my mouth and fingers."

His words send me over the edge, and his name is torn from my throat as my orgasm ripples through my entire body. My

juices spill out, and Max laps them up eagerly as I shake and shudder through the pleasure.

“Fuck, yes,” he groans, straightening and gripping his heavy cock. “Eva,” he growls, “this pretty little pussy is gonna make me come.”

I let out a whimper as Max pumps his cock furiously. He tips his head back, and his throat muscles tense as he releases all over my stomach and pussy.

“Fuck! Oh, fuck, Eva,” he roars, marking me with his seed.

It’s primal and dirty and the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced, knowing I’m responsible for the bliss etched on his face.

Max is still breathing heavily as he stands. He disappears into the adjoining bathroom and returns with a towel, using it to gently clean his cum from my belly. I know I should be embarrassed, but I’m not. This intimacy feels so right with him. I’ve waited my whole life for this man.

Max straightens and strips off the rest of his clothing. He’s ... gorgeous. Barrel chest, soft stomach, strong arms and solid thighs. His cock is semi-hard, despite his recent release, and his sac hangs heavy between his legs. His cheeks turn ruddy as I drink him in, and I suddenly realise he’s self-conscious.

I clamber to my feet and move to stand before him. “You’re the sexiest man I’ve ever seen, Max,” I move closer, nuzzling his face into my neck. “Hey, you’re shaking,” I murmur, stroking my hands down his back as he crushes me to him.

“Never experienced anything like that, Eva,” he says, his eyes swirling with emotion as he pulls back to look at me.

“It was ... incredible,” I whisper, my cheeks heating with remembered pleasure. “I didn’t know it could feel like that.”

Max shakes his head, his mouth turning up in a crooked grin. “Neither did I, sweetheart.”

I frown. “But you’ve been with women, right?”

He nods. “Yeah, but only two. One was my girlfriend in the sixth form at school, and the other was more than five years

ago. But I've never experienced anything like we just shared."

"Oh," I whisper, inordinately pleased that I'm not competing with some ghost from his past.

Max cups my face, looking deep into my eyes. "You're the only woman who's ever made me feel this way, Eva."

He kisses me so softly and tenderly that it brings tears to my eyes. I melt into him, meeting the thrust of his tongue with mine as a throb of need reignites between my thighs.

"Shit, I don't think I'll ever get enough of you," he husks, breaking the kiss and dropping his forehead to mine. "Let me take care of you."

He sweeps me into his arms and carries me to the bathroom, where he deposits me on the counter. I watch as he turns on the tap, getting it to the right temperature before tipping some lotion into the bathtub. The water froths, and within minutes, the tub is full.

I smile as Max plucks me from the counter and carries me toward the tub. "I can walk, you know."

He kisses my forehead. "I know, but I like carrying you. I like having my woman in my arms."

My heart melts a little more at the possessiveness of his words. He lowers me gently into the tub before climbing in and positioning me so I'm straddling his lap. Cupping my face, he kisses me deeply, his tongue stealing into my mouth to tangle with mine. I sigh into his mouth, tangling my hands in his thick hair as I melt into him.

"So, what happens now?" I ask breathlessly when we finally come up for air.

"Now I fuck you senseless," he mutters.

"That's not what I me—oh!" My core clenches as he bends to suckle my nipple. "I meant, with Ger—"

Max cuts me off by placing his fingers over my mouth this time. "Not now. Tonight is about you and me, Eva. Plenty of time to talk business tomorrow once I've had my fill of you."

Not that I see that happening anytime in the next fifty years or so.”

“That sounds ... permanent,” I whisper, holding his molten gaze.

“As permanent as it gets, sweetheart. I love you, Eva. I want you by my side for the rest of our lives. I don’t care where so long as we’re together.”

I close my eyes, and tears squeeze between my lashes. Happiness flows through my veins as I lean my forehead against his. My heart aches for this man. “I love you, too, Max. No one’s ever seen me the way you do. No one’s ever made me feel so desired. But you also make me feel safe, Max. I didn’t recognise it straight away, but the first time I looked into your eyes, I felt like I was ... home.”

“Fuck, Eva,” Max growls right before his mouth crashes into mine.

I open up for him, and Max groans, tightening his hold on me as he fuses our lips together. He slides his tongue against mine, then licks the roof of my mouth, making me whimper.

His fingers skim my body, brushing over my breasts and my belly. The heat between my thighs intensifies, and the needy throb reignites. I moan as Max’s cock swells, pressing against my core.

“Need to be inside you, sweet girl. Need to claim every single inch of you,” he mutters against my lips.

“Yes. Please,” I moan into his mouth.

Max grunts in satisfaction as he stands and hauls me with him. Water cascades from his gorgeous body as he steps out of the tub, helping me to do the same. He lifts me, and I instinctively wrap my legs around his torso, panting for air.

“Fuck, this arse is perfect,” Max grunts, sliding his hands up to massage my rounded cheeks.

I rest my forehead on his as water drips down my hair onto his face. Max doesn’t mind. He nuzzles into me, then tips my

head up, sipping from my lips again as he carries me back to the bed.

Chapter 11

Max

WE LAND ON THE MATTRESS IN A TANGLE OF LIMBS, AND EVA whimpers as I grind my hard cock between her thighs. Liquid pleasure thrums through my veins, drenching my muscles and making my dick pulse with anticipation.

Eva's blue eyes are bright with lust as I pull back to look down at her naked body. "Fucking perfect," I growl, brushing my knuckles over her nipple.

She shudders, and her head falls back as I palm her breasts, squeezing them in my large hands and tweaking her nipples.

Settling my weight alongside her, I trail my hand down the curves and valleys of her body until I'm cupping her sex. Tracing the outside of her pussy with my fingertips, I tease her sensitive flesh, making her jolt. I chuckle darkly as she whimpers, continuing to stroke her throbbing cunt.

Her breath hitches as I slip a finger between her folds, rubbing gentle circles over her clit and gathering up her arousal.

"Fuck, is all this for me?" I growl, bringing my finger to my mouth and sucking it clean.

"Yes," she chokes as more of her juices leak from her pussy and coat her inner thighs.

Her cunt pulses against my finger as I stroke her swollen, sensitive flesh, and Eva shouts her pleasure when I thrust a finger deep inside her and curl it up to hit her sweet spot.

Her back bows off the bed and she sobs as a violent orgasm tears through her. "Oh, fuck, Max..." she cries, her voice

broken and breathy.

I don't stop, wringing every ounce of her orgasm from her until she melts into the mattress.

"Oh, wow," she hums, her pupils blown with pleasure as she looks at me with a shy smile.

I gather her close, breathing as heavily as she is, my cock throbbing with the need to bury himself in her tight sheath.

"Christ, you come like a bloody goddess," I rasp against her ear.

I pull her against me, leaning down to capture her lips. She opens up for me, meeting my tongue thrust for thrust.

We're both breathless by the time I pull away. I groan as I hold her, pressing her against me. Fuck, I love her. I need to show her how much with my tongue, fingers, and aching cock.

Eva curls her arms around my neck. "I want you inside me, Max. I need you."

Ah, shit. This woman is going to unravel me and make me whole again.

"Whatever you want, my starling," I murmur, leaning in to kiss her again.

The kiss quickly becomes desperate, and I flip our positions so Eva's on top. She lifts, straddling me. I love the way her eyes sparkle with lust as they roam my body. She seems to love everything she sees, and it makes me feel masculine and desirable regardless of my extra pounds.

"Condom," I mutter before I lose all sense.

Eva bites her lip. "I'm on the pill, so if you want to ...?"

Fuck, the thought of sinking into her with nothing between us feels so right. "I'm clean, sweetheart. I want you bare."

Running my hands up her thighs, I rest them on her hips, drawing her closer as I sit up. Eva rocks against my heavy cock, leaning in to capture my lips in a heated kiss that I swear I can feel in my bones. She trails her hands over my chest, and I groan as she teases my nipples.

“Are you sensitive here, like me?” she asks softly.

I brush my fingers over a taut peak, and her head falls back on a moan. I grin. “It feels good for me, but I think you win.”

Eva’s smile is so full of love and desire that my lungs stop working for a few seconds. I need to see that smile every day.

“I want you so much,” she whispers, her blue gaze fixed on mine. “I want you to be my first.”

I groan, resting my forehead on her. “Fuck, I need you so bloody bad. You’re killing me here, Eva.” I knew she was a virgin, but hearing her say it out loud has me equally nervous and possessive. I’m no gigolo, but I have enough experience to make this good for her or pop a blood vessel trying.

“Don’t be nervous, love,” she whispers in my ear. “I’ll take care of you.”

I pull back to see her teasing grin and burst out laughing. “Shit, I don’t think I’ve ever laughed during sex, but then I’ve never experienced anything like the emotions you inspire in me, Eva. And I fucking love it, all of it.”

“Me too,” she whispers.

Eva rocks against me again, and my laughter turns to groans. I look down to see her pussy lips sandwiching my length and almost shoot my load.

Gripping her hips, I trail my mouth along her jaw, neck, and shoulder, nipping and kissing as I go. I rub my nose against her pebbled nipple, licking it before sucking it into my mouth.

“More, Max,” she moans. “I need more.”

I grunt and suck more of her breast into my mouth, releasing it with a pop before moving to the other. Biting down on her nipple, I pinch the other between my fingers.

Eva jerks at the sting. “Oh, God, Max. I feel that *everywhere*. Again, please!”

I lick and bite and pinch her nipples, feeling her juices bathe my cock as she continues to rock against me.

“Bloody love your tits, Eva. Love how sensitive you are,” I grunt, dragging my cock up and down her slit.

Each time I bump her clit, she shudders and her nails dig into my shoulders.

“Please, Max. I need you. Get inside me, please,” she begs.

I reach between us and line myself up with her entrance. “Sure you’re ready for me, Eva?”

She glares at me. “If you don’t get inside me right now, I’ll—”

I punch my hips forward, and we both groan as I slide a few inches inside.

Eva leans in and bites my bottom lip. “More.”

I thrust the rest of the way in. “Fuck, Eva,” I choke, forcing myself to hold still. She tenses, and I swallow her small cry. “I’ve got you, my beautiful starling. Just relax. I won’t move until you’re ready.” I kiss her again, letting her adjust to the newness of intimacy.

“I feel so full,” she whispers. “But it’s amazing. Please move, Max.”

I pull out and slowly slide inside again. Rolling my hips in shallow thrusts, I create a gentle rhythm.

Eva bites my ear and demands, “More. Give me everything.”

I lose it. With a groan, I pull out and slam my cock inside her. Gripping her hips, I show her how to move so she’s taking me just as hard as I’m taking her.

My balls slap her ass as she bounces on my cock, her tits jiggling in my face. I dip my head, sucking a hard nipple into my mouth, and Eva cries out, clenching around me.

“Bloody hell, you feel so good. So hot and tight, squeezing my cock. I fucking love being inside you.”

I lean back, angling my hips up. Eva cries out as the new position hits that spot deep inside her. I continue to pump in and out of her tight sheath, pushing and pulling her onto me and fucking myself with her body.

I look between us and groan. “Fuck, Eva. So good. Love watching my cock pumping into you.”

“Max, I’m going to ... Oh, God, oh, god!” Eva throws her head back and claws at my shoulders as she climaxes.

Tension wraps around my muscles, pulling them tight against my skin as my orgasm crawls up my spine. “Fuck, that’s it. Milk my cock, Eva.”

I thrust once, twice, three times, and then still. “I’m coming. Oh, fuck, I’m coming so fucking hard.”

I shake as my orgasm crashes over me. I shift us so Eva is on her back and move over her, watching as she rides out her orgasm. My hips stutter as the last of my climax ebbs away, and I brace myself on my elbows, still buried deep inside her pulsing cunt.

Leaning down, I lick the sweat from between Eva’s breasts before kissing her deeply, sliding my tongue inside her mouth and drinking her in. Eva returns my kiss, tangling her hands softly in my hair as we come down from the incredible high.

We both groan as I pull out of her. I roll onto my side and tug her against me. Eva drapes a leg over mine and rubs her hand over my stomach.

I smooth her tangled hair away from her flushed cheeks and kiss her forehead. “You okay, sweetheart?”

“More than okay.” She sighs, her eyes drowsy with satisfaction. “I’m glad I waited for you. Thank you for making it so amazing.”

I swallow hard, rubbing my thumb over her swollen lips. “I should be thanking you. Sex has never been like that before. I was connected to you in every way, not just physically,” I confess gruffly.

Eva cups my face and strokes her thumb over my cheek. “Me too.”

We stay tangled up in each other for a few minutes before I get up and head to the bathroom. I run a flannel under the hot tap

and smile softly at Eva's questioning look as I return to the bedroom.

"Taking care of my woman," I say, gently cleaning between her legs.

It's an intimate gesture, and when I look up at Eva, her eyes are glistening with tears.

"How did I get so lucky?" she whispers. "I feel so safe, so precious when I'm with you."

I toss the flannel into the laundry basket and climb back into bed, tugging her close. "I'm the lucky one. You're incredible."

Eva bites her lip as she looks at me. "What now?"

I know what she's asking. Where do we go from here? What about Gerald? "We'll talk business tomorrow, sweetheart. But as for you and me, I want you to be mine in every way, Eva. My wife, the mother of my children. Everything. I want it all. With you."

"I love you, Max," she whispers, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Love you too, my starling. So fucking much."

I wrap myself around my woman, and we both give in to sleep.

WAKING up next to Eva is everything. Almost as good as sinking inside her silken heat last night. Thinking about how she trembled beneath me as she climaxed has my cock hardening, wanting a repeat performance. My chest swells at the memory of her creaming all over my cock and knowing I was responsible for her pleasure.

It's still early, and dawn is just streaking the sky as I drink her in. Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks as she sleeps. Her brown hair is spread around her in a tangled mess, and her lips are still swollen from last night's kisses. She's fucking stunning. And she's mine.

I ease back the covers and trail my hand over her curves, following the dip of her waist and the swell of her hip. Eva stirs, rubbing herself against me, and I grit my teeth. My cock wants nothing more than to slide into heaven again, but she must be sore after last night.

She blinks her eyes open. “Max,” she whispers, her voice husky with sleep, a small smile curving her lips.

“Morning, love,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her softly.

“Need you,” she husks, sliding her hand down my chest and stomach.

I hiss as she grasps my cock and strokes her thumb over the tip. “Aren’t you sore?”

She wriggles her hips a little, then waggles her eyebrows at me. “Nope.”

I chuckle. “Fuck, you’ll be the death of me, woman.”

She smirks. “Not yet, I hope. You promised me another fifty years or so, remember?”

“Oh, I remember,” I growl, sliding my hand between her thighs and dipping my fingers into her cunt.

Eva moans as I thrust two fingers inside her and press the heel of my palm against her bundle of nerves. She hooks her leg around my hip, opening herself up to me so the tip of my cock nudges her entrance. I push in a little way, testing to make sure she’s not lying about how sore she is.

“Fuck,” I grunt as her pussy flutters around my cockhead.

“Yes, please,” Eva whispers, raising her hips so I slide in another inch.

My balls draw up tight as her muscles massage my aching cock. Bloody hell, this woman makes me feel like a teenager, ready to shoot my load within seconds.

I thrust inside her and bury my face in her throat, sucking the sensitive skin where her neck meets her shoulder. Every one of my senses is flooded with Eva; her hot cunt wrapped around my cock, her violets and vanilla scent mixed with the musky-

sweetness of her arousal, her ragged breaths and mewls of pleasure.

She wraps her other leg around me, hooking her ankles behind my back and clinging to me while I stroke into her.

“Max,” she chokes, her blue eyes locked on mine as she trembles beneath me.

“Let go, love. Give me everything,” I rasp.

I grind my hips so my pubic bone rubs her clit with each stroke. Driving deeper. Thrusting harder.

Her toes curl into my lower back as she rocks against me, meeting my frantic thrusts. Fuck, I hope she’s close because I’m about to explode. Leaning down, I suckle her nipples, feeling her clench around me.

“I’m com ...ing,” she sobs right before her back arches off the bed.

Her face scrunches as she presses her head into the pillow, mouth open, eyes squeezed shut as her body quakes.

I roar and bite down on her breast as I come, my balls drawing up tight as I empty inside her. It seems like I come for an eternity before the pleasure ebbs and drops me back down to earth.

I roll onto my back, draping Eva over my chest and gliding my fingers along her spine in calming strokes.

“Better than any alarm,” Eva mumbles, kissing my chest. She sighs contentedly and wraps her arms around me, hugging me close. “So, what now? What’s the plan regarding Gerald?”

Gerald. I don’t even like the sound of his name rolling off her tongue. I cup her face so she’s looking directly at me. “Do you trust me, Eva?”

She snorts. “You’ve dined on my vagina and fucked me senseless, so I think the answer to that is a resounding yes.”

A laugh rumbles up my chest. “Best thing I’ve ever tasted. I could die a happy man between your thighs.” I slide my hand over her rounded arse cheek and give it a squeeze.

“Okay, getting off track,” she says breathlessly. “Tell me the plan. You said you didn’t want to involve the police last night. Why?”

“I said I don’t want to involve the police *yet*. We need proof that ties him to the goods in the storeroom. There must be a paper trail of his transactions somewhere, for his own benefit.”

Eva’s eyes widen, and she snaps her fingers. “I’d bet my left ass cheek it’s on the tablet he brings to work. I’ve caught him on it several times in his office. Never thought anything of it until now.”

“Think you can create a distraction while I grab it?”

She grins. “Darling, I’m the queen of distraction.”

I growl and roll her over, caging her in with my body. “Yes, love, that you are.”

Chapter 12

Eva

MAX TAKES ME HOME SO I CAN GRAB A CHANGE OF CLOTHES before we head into Sutherland's. With a quick kiss, he takes off for Homewares while I head to Clothing.

The morning passes quickly, and nerves jangle in my stomach as I wait. Our plan is simple, but I'm still jittery and ramped up on adrenaline as I head to Gerald's office just before lunch. Sure enough, he's tapping away on the tablet, and like yesterday, he quickly places it face down on his desk as I enter.

"Any chance you could knock before you barge in here, Eva?" he demands with a glower.

"Sorry, it's just ... I need help with a customer. Apparently, you ordered a Patek Phillippe watch for a Mr Wright, but I can't find it or any record of the transaction, so—"

"Shit!" Gerald hisses, his face paling. "What is he doing here? I told him not to—" He halts suddenly as if remembering where he is and forces a smile. "Don't worry, Eva, I'll take care of this. Where is he?"

"He's waiting in the lobby. I'll take you to him," I say, keeping my expression neutral.

We pass Max and another man dressed in a smart suit as Gerald follows me towards the lifts. I give Max a slight nod and watch as the two men discreetly make their way to Gerald's office.

Gerald and I step into the lift and ride down in silence. He seems jittery and shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

It's satisfying to see him squirm a little. The lift pings and the doors swish open. We walk to the waiting area in the lobby, but there's no one there.

"Where is he?" Gerald asks with a frown, looking around.

"I'm not sure," I say innocently, knowing full well Mr Wright was never here in the first place. The police called him early this morning, and he's down at the station answering a few questions. "Maybe he got tired of waiting and left."

"Oh. Well, I'll call him as soon as I get back to my office," he says, looking relieved.

"So, did you give any more thought to my offer of dinner?" he asks as we ride back up in the lift.

Seriously? Is he fucking joking?

"My answer is the same as last time, Gerald," I say lightly.

"Right. You don't date co-workers." He pauses, his watery-blue eyes meeting mine. "So why are you fucking Max Lincoln?"

"I ... *What?*"

Gerald nods. "Saw you arrive with him this morning, looking very loved-up, the two of you.

He reaches out, hits the stop button, and takes a few steps towards me.

I retreat until my back hits the lift wall. "Um... Gerald, what are you—"

"What's so special about him?" he asks, advancing further. He's not a big guy like Max, but he's tall and wiry and no doubt stronger than me.

"My personal life is none of your—"

"None of my business, I know," he sneers. "But I'm curious what makes a woman like you open her legs for a man like him. It can't be money because Max Lincoln earns a pittance compared to me."

Okay, this is *so* not how this was meant to go. “You just answered your own question, you moron. It’s not about money or status. It’s about what’s inside. It’s about treating people with respect, something you wouldn’t understand. You’re just a pathetic excuse for a man, trying to intimidate a woman by trapping her in a lift because threatening her is the only way you’ll ever get her undivided attention.”

I jump as Gerald slams a hand on the wall next to my head. “Be careful, Eva. I can make this job a living hell for you.”

My heart hammers in fear, but damned if I’ll let him see. “Do your worst, asshole.”

I duck under his arm and hit the button to get the lift moving again. Bending, I pull off my stiletto and brandish it at him. “Lay one finger on me, and I’ll—”

I yelp as his hand flashes out, and he knocks my shoe from my grasp.

He backs me up against the wall again. “You’ll what, Eva? Tell your boyfriend? I can do whatever I like to you in here, and it would be your word against mine.”

Jesus Christ, how did I not see how unstable this man was before now? And surely this is the longest lift ride in history? I’m surprised we’re not bursting through the top of the building like the lift in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. This whole scenario certainly seems just as surreal.

“You’re right, Gerald,” I say in a soft voice, trying to pacify him.

A sickening smirk splits his face as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “I’ve always looked out for you, Eva, and I’ll continue to, so long as you behave.”

Nausea roils in my stomach. I try to jerk away from him, but Gerald wraps his hand around my throat. A whimper forces its way past my lips. Gerald has lost the plot along with any awareness of where we are and what he’s risking. He increases the pressure on my throat, and I panic, clawing at his hand.

The lift pings and the doors slide open.

Thank God!

I open my mouth to force a scream for help when a roar like a wild animal reaches my ears. A second later, Gerald is ripped backwards and tossed to the ground.

“Max,” I choke as my legs give way, and I slide down the wall.

“Jesus, I’m so sorry, Eva,” Max grits, his dark brown eyes full of rage and regret as he crouches in front of me.

Before I can reply, Max is heading for Gerald again, who’s picking himself up off the floor. Gerald doesn’t even see the punch that knocks him back to the ground. He howls and grabs his nose.

“What the hell?” he shrieks, covering his face with his arms as Max goes after him again. He grabs him by the throat like Gerald did with me.

“You thought you could put your hands on her, frighten her, threaten her?” he growls, getting up in his face. “How does it feel when someone stronger than you makes *you* feel helpless?”

“Please!” Blood flows from Gerald’s nose as he pleads with Max to stop.

“Mr Sutherland, we’ll take this from here.” A hand lands on Max’s shoulder.

I look up to see two police officers behind him, along with some of my colleagues and several customers. Seems we’ve drawn quite the crowd.

“M-Mr Sutherland?” Gerald squeaks, his eyes wide. “*You’re* Max Sutherland?”

“Yes, and your worst fucking nightmare. James?” Max holds his hand up to the smartly-dressed guy who accompanied him into Gerald’s office earlier. James places Gerald’s tablet into his open palm. “James is an I.T genius, and he took him all of thirty seconds to locate proof on this”—Max shakes the tablet—“that you’ve stolen hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of goods from Sutherland’s and re-sold them for personal

profit. You are relieved of your position with immediate effect, and these nice officers would like to ask you some questions down at the station.”

Max releases Gerald so abruptly his head hits the floor with a thump. The police officers help him to his feet and cuff him before leading him from the building.

Good riddance to bad rubbish, as my mum used to say.

“Max.”

My voice turns him around and carries him towards me as I push to my feet. I’m vaguely aware of one of the security guards clearing the crowd of people as Max gathers me up in his arms.

“That was *not* part of the plan,” I say shakily, burrowing against him.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he chokes, stroking his hand along my back. “If I’d thought for one second—”

I pull back and place my fingers over his mouth. “Stop. This isn’t on you. It’s on Gerald. Neither of us realised how unstable he was.”

“Well, he won’t be bothering you or anyone else anymore,” he says gruffly. “I’ll make sure my lawyers throw the fucking book at him.”

I nod. “Good. Now, if I can just find my shoe, I’ll get back to work.”

“Oh, no, you won’t. You’re going home. You’ve had a traumatic experience,” Max says firmly, bending to scoop me off my feet and into his arms.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Max pulls into my driveway and carefully helps me inside. Monty is waiting, and the traitor takes an immediate shine to Max, rubbing against his legs and purring loudly—not that I can blame him. I was doing something very similar last night. And early this morning.

“It’s not a luxury penthouse apartment. It’s small, but it’s well decorated, comfy and cosy,” I say, hovering self-consciously in the hallway.

Max moves close, cupping my chin in his hand. “Don’t. Don’t do that, Eva. Being here, in your house, your *home* is a privilege. You’ve fought hard for this place, and you should be proud of the life you’ve built for yourself since your mum died.”

His words bring a lump to my throat, and the last few hours catch up with me. I crumble, and Max envelops me in his strong arms, cradling me against his chest as my tears wet his shirt.

“What do you need, sweetheart? Tell me,” he murmurs.

“A shower. I need to wash the day off me. And then I need you. Just you.”

Max’s jaw clenches, and he presses a kiss on my forehead. “Come on.”

Max helps me upstairs and into the bathroom, where he turns on the shower and adjusts the temperature. He cups my face, his eyes tortured. “I’m so sorry,” he says for the umpteenth time.

“Love, there’s nothing to apologise for,” I whisper, covering his hands with mine. “I’m a little shaken but fine.” I summon a smile. “We Starling women are made of stern stuff.”

“I know. It’s one of the reasons I love you so much. But you don’t have to be tough all the time. I’ll be here to hold you up when things get rough.”

Oh, this man. He’s my world. “In that case, I never want you to let me go again.”

Max makes quick work of our clothing, taking my hand and guiding me into the shower stall. His eyes darken as he watches the rivulets of water trail over my breasts and trickle between my thighs.

I press my palms against his chest, and our eyes connect. I’m humbled by what I see in those russet depths—love,

vulnerability, desire, possessiveness, and so much more.

Max reaches for the shower gel and tips some into his palms, making a lather before moving his soapy hands over my neck and shoulders. He caresses me so gently, placing sweet kisses over my forehead, eyes, and cheeks. If ever there was a wordless declaration of his love, this is it. It's evident in every brush of his fingers against my skin and every lingering kiss.

I lift my hands, tangling them in his wet hair and bringing his mouth to mine.

"I love you so fucking much," Max growls against my lips.

"I love you too." I gasp as he pulls me to him, letting me feel his rigid cock.

Max runs the back of his knuckles over my pebbled nipples and down my sides to grip my hips. I moan and grind into him as his tongue slips past my lips to tangle with mine. My fingers tug at his hair, needing him closer ... closer.

"I need inside you, love," he groans.

I smile and then gasp as he pushes me against the shower wall and grips my thighs, lifting my legs around his waist. He teases my slick entrance with his fingers and rolls his hips against me.

"Fuck, you're already wet for me, my starling. I need you begging and screaming for me, need the bite of your nails in my shoulders and your cunt tightening and throbbing around my cock."

Oh, bloody hell. I may have just had a mini orgasm from his dirty words alone.

"Sounds g-good," I huff, making him chuckle.

"You like it when I talk like that, Eva?"

I've lost the ability to form words, so I nod and mumble, "Mmm-hmm."

Max's husky laugh rumbles against my chest, and my clit throbs mercilessly.

“Tell me what you want, love. I want to hear it,” Max demands.

So many answers swirl in my lust-fogged head, but only one falls from my lips. “You. Just you, Max.”

My words seem to unleash the beast in him, and he pins me to the wall and slides inside me with one hard thrust. He fills me, stretching me wide. So big. So tight. So *good*.

He fucks me hard and fast, grunting with each snap of his hips. I lean forward and suck his bottom lip into my mouth before kissing him wildly. I didn't realise how much I needed him like this, needed to feel him deep inside me, washing away the events of the day.

“Yes, Max. God, don't stop,” I mewl.

He's relentless as he pounds into me, nailing me to the wall with each rough stroke. And then I'm doing everything he said he needed, begging and screaming for him and digging my nails into his shoulders as my cunt tightens and throbs around his cock.

My orgasm buffets me, knocking the air from my lungs while fiery pleasure burns through my veins. I moan and buck against him as our bodies slap together with every stroke of his fat cock.

Max grunts as he unleashes a torrent of cum deep inside me until it spills out and runs down my legs. He holds me through it until the tremors of our orgasms ebb, and we slowly glide back to Earth.

We're no longer alone. We've found each other, and I know I've found my happily ever after with the most amazing man in the world.

Epilogue

Eva

ONE YEAR LATER

I sit at the breakfast bar in our London apartment, wearing a blindfold. My husband has been whipping, creaming, and melting stuff in the kitchen for the last three hours, much like he did to me in the bedroom this morning—well, minus the whipping part.

He's been working on three new recipes for *Chocolat y Caramel*, and I have the honour of being the first person to sample them—hence the blindfold. According to Max, it will sharpen my sense of taste, enabling me to give him better feedback. Although, I think he's also getting some kind of kinky thrill from feeding me while I'm blindfolded. Who knows what he'll end up putting in my mouth?

Max has already introduced two new desserts to the *Chocolat y Caramel* menu, one of which he made for his mum. Barbra is a wonderful lady. She and I hit it off right away, and often grab lunch together. She has a sweet tooth and loves her desserts, and Max named his most recent creation "Barbra's Spotted Dick with a Twist," replacing the traditional suet sponge with puff pastry. Barbra usually likes it with a dollop of squirry cream instead of custard, which always makes Max laugh.

But my husband isn't only talented in the bedroom and baking department. He's pretty nifty when it comes to cooking, too. When he places a delicious meal he's prepared in front of me, I can't ignore the symbolism of him providing me with

sustenance. Of him taking care of me in a way no one else has since Mum died.

I spent so long afraid to lean on someone for fear it would make me dependent on them, but I didn't realise how damn tired I was fighting for every scrap of independence. Max made me see that there's no shame in sharing the load and accepting help. Having him work alongside me, *with* me, supporting me has opened my mind and heart to the joy of sharing the good stuff and the bad with someone you love. Marrying him six months ago was the happiest day of my life, and every day since has been a revelation.

It was the anniversary of Mum's death a month after the incident with Gerald, and for the first time, I had someone to lean on. Max accompanied me to her grave, where we placed her favourite flowers—violets and white poppies. I introduced them, silly as it sounds, but it was comforting to think Mum could hear me, maybe even see me from over the rainbow. I know she'd approve of Max wholeheartedly, and she'd be happy for me.

Gerald was dismissed from Sutherland's for gross misconduct, and charges were brought against him by Sutherland's lawyers, resulting in a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. As Max said, While Gerald wasn't solely responsible for Sutherland's financial issues, his mismanagement of the store and poor leadership was certainly a significant part of it.

With Gerald gone, there was an opening for a store manager. I was all set to quit my job and find another store to work at to avoid wagging tongues, but Max convinced me to apply. He told me in no uncertain terms that I had the knowledge, know-how, and passion required for the position.

I was reluctant at first, but when Max told me the hiring process would be managed by an external recruitment agency, I relented. I was worried about how it would look with us being in a relationship, but after going through the lengthy interview process, I knew I'd earned the job on my own merits. As Max said, I wasn't given the role because of our relationship, I was given it because there was no candidate

more deserving than me. And yes, he made me cry when he said it.

There are good people with solid ideas willing to work hard to see the Sutherland's brand rebound in the market. I already have plans underway to revitalise each department by updating their offerings to appeal not only to the "moms" but to the family as a whole. We'll be expanding our online sales and in-store collection processes and redoing the shop layout for a more customer-centric experience.

Max's heart was never in running a department store. He doesn't love it the way I do, so he stepped aside to focus his energy on opening a *Chocolat y Caramel* patisserie in the store. We don't have a hospitality area, so it will be a fantastic addition to the business. It will encourage greater foot traffic and entice shoppers and tourists into the store and keep them there.

Max is more than happy to take a back seat as a board member and leave the rest to me. And the beauty is we've found a way to bring both of our dreams to fruition.

I couldn't bring myself to sell the little semi-detached house I shared with Mum and decided to rent it out. A couple and their two children now live there, and it comforts me to know the house is filled with love and laughter.

Monty and I came as a package deal, and he's settled in well at the apartment. Fortunately, he's an indoor cat, so he's quite content to prowl the rooms as the whim takes him.

"Okay, this one is called a cruffin," Max says, pulling me from my thoughts.

"A cruffin?"

"Yep. It's a cross between a croissant and a muffin." He taps my bottom lip with a fork, and I open up.

"Oh, that's good. I taste vanilla and cinnamon, and the sweet combination of cake and flaky pastry melts on my tongue."

"Next up is Vegan Plum and Apple Pastry."

“Nice.” I nod. “I’m glad you’re adding another choice to the vegan range.”

Max places a piece on my tongue, and I moan. “The apple and plum work perfectly together. Nice sharpness, not too sweet, and as always, the pastry just melts.”

“Okay, final one,” Max says.

I open up, and he spoons a small amount into my mouth. I hum in approval. “Oh, sweet heavenly lord, this is amazing. It’s like a decadent pudding rather than a pastry. Rich, smooth dark chocolate with a hint of coffee, vanilla, and ... what is that? I can’t quite place it.”

Max removes my blindfold. “It’s violets.”

I look down at the ramekin holding the luxurious dessert, and my hand flies to my mouth. The top is decorated with delicate violets and white poppy petals.

“This one is called Faith’s Fondant,” Max murmurs.

“You named a dessert after Mum?” I whisper, lifting my eyes to his.

He nods. “Do you like it?”

I shake my head as the first tear trickles down my cheek. “No. I bloody love it, you incredible, wonderful, *thoughtful* man. God, I love you so much.”

Max gathers me into his arms and kisses me softly. “Love you, too, Mrs Sutherland.”

KEEP READING for a sneak peek of Carnival Pleasures, Maddie & Jacob’s story:

Bonus Content

Carnival Pleasures

JACOB

I've returned to London to be with my parents on the anniversary of my sister's death when my friends convince me to cut loose and have some fun at the Notting Hill Carnival in London. I should be with my family, but I can't turn down the chance to see my lifelong best friend, Maddie—the woman I've been in love with for as long as I can remember. I've accepted my place in “the friend zone” where she's concerned, but when an opportunity to show her my true feelings arises, I grab it with both hands, both lips, and my whole heart.

Maddie

As a nurse, I work long hours. So, when my roommate persuades me to swap my scrubs for a glamorous gown and beautiful mask at the Notting Hill Carnival, I take the opportunity to relax and have fun. Sharing a hot kiss with another masked reveller is unexpected and exciting, but there's something about the sinfully sexy stranger that feels...oddly familiar.

I'm pulled from his arms by the crowd just as I realise that my sexy stranger is none other than Jacob, my best friend I haven't seen in almost three years. Circumstances have kept us apart, but Jacob and I share a special bond. I held him while he grieved the loss of his sister. I've shared some of my innermost fears and secrets with him. And now that I've kissed him, I want to tell him another secret—my feelings for him are far from platonic. But can I risk losing the best friend I've ever had for a chance at forever?

CHAPTER One

Maddie

Cold sweat drips over my brow, sticking my fringe to my forehead as I bolt up in bed. My breathing is laboured, a heavy wheeze as I try to calm down. Reaching for the water I keep on my bedside cabinet, I knock the alarm to the floor, and the glow from the clockface bounces over the walls of my bedroom.

One thing I can see? I ask myself, trying to focus my mind.

My eyes drop to the alarm clock. I gulp down the water.

Two things I can smell?

The clothes softener I use and...my own sweat?

Yuck.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, already feeling calmer.

Three things I can feel?

The cold pint glass, the bedsheets, and...

I reach out with my free hand until my fingers wrap around the stuffed red elephant that Jacob won for me at a fair when we were kids.

Huffy.

The name was his idea of a joke about my moodiness at being in such a crowded place, but now I find comfort in his soft—if a little worn—fur.

Finally, I'm calm enough to get out of bed. I plod through to the kitchen to refill my glass, holding Huffy by his worn trunk in my other hand with my journal tucked under my arm. Per my therapist's instructions, I note the time in my dream journal and what the nightmare entailed.

Panicked shouting.

Endless corridors.

Unable to find a way out.

A shudder works its way up my spine, and I wonder if I'll ever be able to sleep without the nightmares. Without being haunted by the past I thought I'd finally escaped.

My mind goes to Jacob and how I would text him whenever I had a nightmare. He always replied.

Even at stupid o'clock in the morning.

I look back at the corridor that leads to my bedroom, where my phone sits on my nightstand. But the thought of heading back there right now makes my stomach revolt. Besides, I need to learn to deal with this on my own.

My roommate, Fiona, walks into the kitchen. "Hey, babe," she says while yawning. "What's got you up at this hour?" Realization dawns on her face as she spots my journal. She moves closer, wrapping me up in a warm hug. "Nightmares, huh?"

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" I ask into her mass of curly hair.

"It's okay. You want company?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm going to head back to bed and see if I can get some more sleep before my shift starts."

I give her hand a grateful squeeze and head back to my room. It's weird, but I've never told Fiona about my nightmares or why I get them. But she still seems to know that something is lurking there, in my subconscious mind. Somehow, over time, she has become the crutch I need in the night, but she will never be Jacob, and my heart breaks a little at how much I miss him.

At how much I miss *us*.

Jacob

Mum is sobbing quietly behind the door.

I know it's selfish, but I didn't want to come back this weekend. Not on the anniversary of my sister's death. It's hard coping with the loss of such a bright and beautiful light, as well as trying to comfort my mother. It's not that I don't want to comfort her. I just don't know how.

I mean, what do I say? It's not like I can tell Mum that everything will be okay. Kait's gone. She's not coming back. Two of the harshest facts we've ever had to face.

I knock gently on the door—Kait's bedroom door—knowing what's on the other side. The room has been left untouched, a shrine to my sister. Mum will be surrounded by photos of Kait spread over the bed. Kait's soft stuffed rabbit clenched in one fist, hospital bracelets clutched in the other.

She doesn't call for me to come in, but I open the door anyway, hoping the smell of fresh coffee will rouse something from her other than tears.

She barely acknowledges me as I place the mug beside her. "Morning, Mum."

Dad has already left for work, his usual routine since losing Kait four years ago. He can't bear Mum being like this. He doesn't know how to make it better, I suppose. Because how can losing a child ever be made better?

Kait's cheeky grin smiles up at me from a photo, and my chest tightens for a second.

She wouldn't want us to be sad.

I pick up the photo, one that Dad snapped in the last few weeks of her treatment. I'd asked Mum to shave my head to match Kait's, and Kait found it hilarious, claiming I had an alien head. Mum is standing in the background with the clippers and that sad, knowing smile on her face while her eyes are silently screaming, "Not my child! Don't take my child!"

I place the photo back on the bed, wishing things were different. Wishing Kait had survived the brain tumour, wishing my Mum never had to grieve in the first place. Wishing she

hadn't lost herself to the grief. Because along the way, I lost my Mum along with my sister.

The one good thing about returning home for the weekend is that I'll get to see Maddie. My best friend for more than half my life, separated by the different universities we attended. She always dreamed of being a nurse, and despite missing her every day, I know she's happier for following her heart. Even if it breaks mine not being able to see her every day.

I grab my phone to type out a text. There was a time when we could finish each other's sentences. Talk into the night about every little thing. We both wondered if we could be more than just friends but agreed not to risk our friendship.

God, I miss her.

I click Mum's door shut behind me and head out. I can't stay in here surrounded by memories of Kait, memories of happier times.

Happier times I'm not entirely sure ever existed.

CHAPTER Two

Maddie

The emergency department is packed. The waiting area is standing room only, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get the patients triaged any quicker. Thankfully, nothing so far is life-threatening. It's primarily cuts and bruises. A few bumped heads to be glued back together. This placement has been the most hectic so far and made me realise I'm not cut out for this side of emergency medicine.

My phone vibrates in my pocket while a glamorous seventy-two-year-old patient talks me through how she thinks she broke her arm during an early morning risqué romp with her married, thirty-one-year-old boyfriend. At twenty-one, I could do with experiencing a risqué romp for myself. Or any kind of romp, for that matter.

Her arm is swollen with limited movement. I input all the pertinent information into the computer and ask her to head up

to the x-ray department, plucking my phone out of my pocket as she leaves.

The familiar warmth at seeing Jacob's name fills me, and the tension in my shoulders eases. I know what today is, and I wish so much I could have had the day off work, but this is the last day of my final placement before I qualify, and it isn't as simple as asking for a day off.

Jacob: *Want to meet up tomorrow?*

I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to call him. To hear his voice. Tell him all about my nightmares and have him hold me like he used to. Have him tell me that it's okay and I'm safe now. Safe with him.

Only I'm not with him. Because how could we risk our friendship for anything more when it might not work out?

Another patient walks in so I slip my phone back into my pocket, summon a smile, and focus on the task at hand.

By the time my shift is finished, and I've signed off, I'm exhausted, but a sense of excitement fills me. One final assessment in the form of my dissertation, and I'll be a qualified nurse.

I pull out my phone to text Jacob back.

Me: *Would love to but promised to go to the Carnival with Fiona.*

The heat is stifling on the Tube as I head home. I feel bad for not suggesting drinks tonight, so I send another text to that effect. I want to support Jacob, especially today, but holy hell, I am exhausted.

My phone dings.

Jacob: *Sorry, dealing with mum and dad fighting. I'll try to catch up with you at the Carnival tomorrow.*

Guilt coils in my stomach.

If I could get out of going to the Carnival, I would. It's really not my scene. But Fiona wouldn't let up about it until I caved and said I'd go with her, just to shut her up. I don't mind, but I

don't know what to expect, and I don't like being caught by surprise. I like to be in control, and having to go to an event I've never been to before with thousands of strangers has me tied up in knots.

Jacob

By the time my parents have calmed down and gone to bed, I'm exhausted. Drained. It's been the same every year since we lost Kait, only every year I've been older, and they've treated the argument accordingly. More shouting, more swearing, more things a kid doesn't want to hear his parents say. I hate to admit it, but sometimes I wish it were me that died. I wish Kait could have lived, and my parents could have been happy, as irrational as that thought is. Parents aren't cut out to lose children. Witnessing their devastation makes me wary about having my own kids, something I made the mistake of sharing with Dad, which sparked the argument. Then Mum got involved, and it all went downhill from there.

They couldn't understand my fears, how losing Kait had left me with my own demons to wrestle while they were busy grieving. Grief is a whole mess of emotions that fuck with your head, and we've all been processing in different ways, pulling in opposite directions. I hate how Kait's death has aged my Dad, how it's pushed my Mum right to the edge. But most of all, I hate how it's destroyed our family unit.

I'm not sure what time Mum and Dad went to bed in the end, but I crashed in my room a little after midnight with Def Leppard blaring on my headphones to drown them out.

The alarm goes off, and I roll over in bed to check my phone. I miss waking up to Maddie's name on my screen with a good morning message and goofy emojis. It's insane to imagine her going to the Carnival. Something so busy, so full of energy. It used to take me days to convince her to come to the travelling fair that passed through once a year. She would only ever give

in on the last day *if* I promised to buy her candy floss and a bag of sugary doughnuts.

She hates crowds and noise and not being in control. I can't imagine that's changed much in the year we haven't been in each other's pockets. But then I've changed plenty, so maybe she has, too. Maybe she's lost the invisible armour from the trauma she experienced at the hands of her stepdad as a teenager. Maybe she's a little more comfortable in busy environments.

Her training as a nurse will have forced her to be in out-of-control situations. She always said she wanted to be a nurse because it's about taking control of a situation and helping people. Her nurturing nature was one of the first things I noticed about her when we met. She never allowed her stepdad's abuse to subdue that trait. If anything, it made her more determined to pursue her dream.

The Carnival starts in two hours. The streets will be filled with row after row of parade floats, dancers, and calypso drummers. As they toss their inhibitions aside, strangers will become friends, possibly even lovers.

By the time I'm showered and dressed and heading out the door, my Mum has surfaced from her bedroom. Her eyes are red-rimmed, but at least she's wearing fresh clothes and ready to put her grieving to one side for another year.

"I'm going to the Carnival later. Would you and Dad like to come?" I ask her.

"Oh, no, thank you, Jakey. You go and have a nice day."

She hasn't called me "Jakey" since I was a kid. I watch as she floats down the stairs in a daze, and I wonder if she's safe to be left alone.

My phone distracts me as it buzzes with a message from my best friend.

Quin: *Meet me at The Edge before the Carnival.*

I quickly tap out a reply.

Me: *No can do. Heading to meet Maddie first.*

Quin: *Trust me, if you wanna see Maddie, you need to meet me there.*

I frown. This is my chance to see her after a year without her. I have to go.

Continue reading here: [Carnival Pleasures.](#)



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Much love,

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