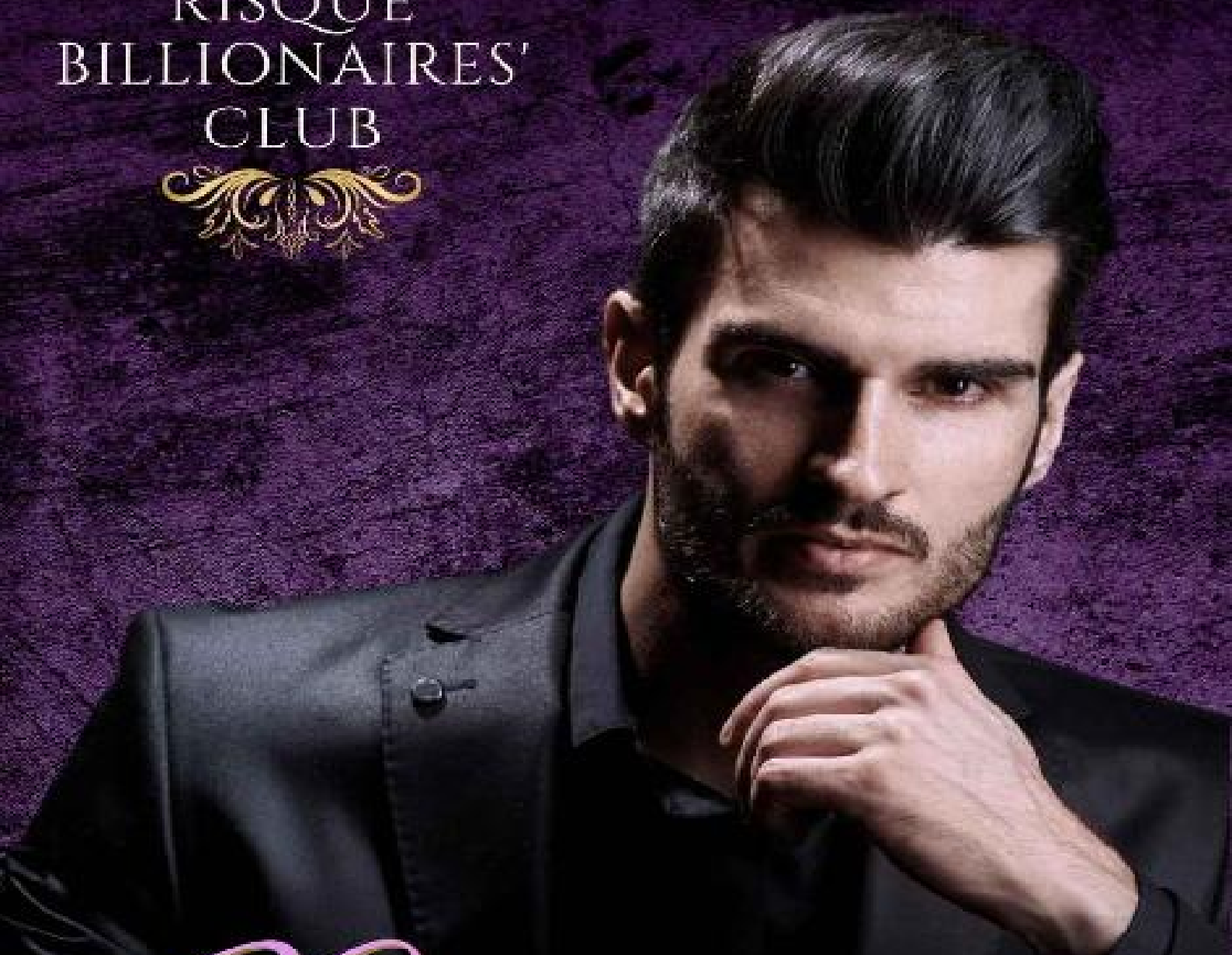


RISQUE  
BILLIONAIRES'  
CLUB



*Ravenous*  
**TEMPTATION**



C.L. CRUZ

LIZ FOX

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# **Ravenous Temptation**

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C.L. Cruz, Liz Fox

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# Chapter 1

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Eva

## Eva

**N**ervous? Yeah, a little.

Excited? More than I care to admit.

My reflection in the mirror stares back at me, unimpressed with every outfit I've tried on so far. What do you even wear on a blind date these days?

A sparkly red dress screams too eager. Jeans? Too casual. God, I haven't been on a date in ages. Maybe I'm rusty. Maybe I've forgotten how to talk to a man without spilling my insecurities all over him. Maybe...

My phone interrupts the maybe-train barreling through my mind. Glancing at the caller ID, I see it's my best friend, Sarah. Perfect timing.

"Hey," I say, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear as I shimmy into a navy blue dress that hugs my curves just right.

"Eva! You ready for tonight?" she chirps, her excitement spilling through the line. "He's a friend of a friend, tall, dark-haired, and apparently easy on the eyes."

I snort at her description. "Easy on the eyes doesn't mean much if he's not easy to talk to."

"You worry too much. Have fun! Enjoy the city lights. And hey, if he's a dud, there's always wine." She laughs, and I can practically see her wink.

Her confidence is contagious, but the doubts still nag at me. It's not the guy's appearance that's got me wound up; it's the whole thing. The blind date, the chance for romance. The city, with its bright lights and never-ending buzz. It's like stepping into another world.

A world I've been too afraid of for way too long.

"I'll try to have fun. Promise," I say, grabbing my purse and heading for the door.

"You better! Call me later. Love you!"

"Love you too," I reply, and the line goes dead.

The city awaits. My heart pounds as I lock the door behind me, the keys jangling like a cheerful tune. I hail a cab, and the driver greets me with a smile as I slide into the back seat. With its bright lights and never-ending buzz, Heathcliff feels like a world far removed from my own. But tonight, I'm making it mine.

"What if he's not what I'm looking for?" I whisper to myself, the words a mere breath against the window.

The thought of turning back teases my mind. It would be easy. Just a quick word to the driver, and I could be back in my comfort zone, snuggled on my couch with a glass of wine and a rom-com.

But that's not what I want. Not really.

The cab continues to weave through the streets, drawing me closer to the unknown. My reflection in the window looks almost ethereal, with the city lights playing over my face.

There's a spark in my eyes, a hope I haven't felt in a while. The uncertainty, the fear, it's all part of the adventure.

"No turning back," I murmur, steeling myself.

Tonight might be a disaster, or it might be magical. But I'll never know unless I go forward.

Twenty minutes later, I pay the cab driver and step out onto the city sidewalk. The restaurant is just what I was hoping for—quaint, not too fancy, but oozing charm. Twinkling lights hang from the ceiling, casting a soft glow over the vintage wooden tables.

I'm early, something I tend to do when I'm nervous, so I decide to sit. A friendly waitress smiles and guides me to a small table near the window, the city's glow painting a picturesque backdrop.

As I settle into my chair, my eyes drift to the couples and individuals around me, each lost in their own world. There's an older couple, hands entwined, sharing knowing smiles. A young duo at the bar, laughter spilling out of them like champagne bubbles.

And then, there's me.

I glance at the empty chair opposite mine, a ghost of a feeling tugging at my heart. It reminds me of past dinners, past loves, past mistakes. Fleeting memories of what was and hope for what could be.

But tonight's not about the past. It's about moving forward, about finding something new. Or someone new.



As the minutes tick by, I find myself checking my phone more than I'd like to admit. Each glance at the empty screen amplifies the tiny knot of anxiety in my stomach.

Maybe I should have ordered a glass of wine right away.

When the waitress comes back, I order a glass of red to calm my nerves. "Just waiting for someone," I say with a small smile.

She nods, her smile understanding, and moves on to the next table.

While waiting, I can't help but overhear snippets of conversations around me. A man confessing his love for the first time, his voice quaking with emotion. A woman gently chiding her date for being too modest, her tone teasing.

Love in its many forms surrounds me. And here I am, straddling the line between longing and apprehension.

My wine arrives, and I take a slow sip, the warmth spreading through me like a gentle embrace. It's comforting but not enough to silence the growing worry.

What if he doesn't show up? What if I've made a mistake?

The thoughts are insistent, but I push them aside.

The clock keeps ticking, and I've finished half my wine. My phone sits mockingly silent on the table. Doubt creeps in, twining with the excitement in my stomach, turning anticipation into anxiety.

I text Sarah, my fingers hesitating over the keys before I finally press send.

*Still no sign of him. Should I worry?*

Her reply is almost instantaneous, filled with the bracing optimism I need.

*He might be running late. You never know with traffic in Heathcliff. Give it a few more minutes. He'll be there.*

I want to believe her, but the bartender catches my eye from across the room, his gaze lingering on me with a sympathy that sinks deep into my bones. Has he seen this before? The hopeful girl waiting, the chair across from her remaining empty?

The wine glass feels cool in my hand, and the weight of disappointment is beginning to settle in. I've given it more time than I should. My friend's encouraging words seem to lose their spark with every passing minute.

Maybe it's time to leave.

I glance at my watch, the minutes scolding me for my foolish hope. Gathering my courage, I reach for my purse, ready to face the night alone.

But then, the door opens.

I look up, my heart leaping into my throat. A new figure strides into the restaurant, his presence commanding the room. Tall, dark, and undeniably attractive, he scans the place, his eyes filled with a determination that mirrors my own.

Could it be?

Our eyes meet, a connection instant and electric. My breath catches, and for a moment, everything else fades away.

He's here.

The doubts, the waiting, the anxiety—it all vanishes in that single moment of recognition.

My blind date has arrived.

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## Chapter 2

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### Sebastian

A flat tire.

Of all the inconveniences I could imagine, this one hadn't even crossed my mind. My sports car, an embodiment of sleek design and performance, now wounded and limping. It's like a bad joke.

I'm staring at the defiant rubber, feeling absurdly out of place on the sidewalk. My tailored suit is probably worth more than some of the cars whizzing by, and I don't even know how to change a tire.

Pulling out my phone, I dial the service line, the frustration simmering in my voice as I explain the situation.

"Yes, Mr. Blackwood, we'll have someone out to you as soon as possible," the voice on the other end assures me.

"How long is 'as soon as possible'?" I ask.

My impatience is rising, but the voice is calm, even apologetic. "There may be a short waiting period, sir. Perhaps

an hour or so. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

An hour? I glance around, feeling the weight of that time stretching out ahead of me. People are going about their lives, oblivious to my predicament. I’m not used to waiting, not like this.

“Fine,” I say, biting back my annoyance. “Just get someone here as soon as you can.”

The line goes dead, and I’m left with an hour to kill and no real idea what to do with myself. I could call a driver, head to the club, and make the most of the time. But something stops me.

My eyes catch a nearby restaurant, quaint and unassuming. It’s not the kind of place I’d usually choose, but right now, it feels like a sanctuary. A chance to step out of my world and into someone else’s.

Decision made, I stride toward the restaurant, but as I approach the entrance, I catch sight of a man peeking through the window. He’s got a sneer on his face, and something about his demeanor draws my attention.

“What a joke,” he mutters, not noticing me. “Should’ve known from the profile picture. Too fat for my taste.”

The words snag in my ears, ugly and cruel. I can’t help but approach the window, curiosity piqued and anger bubbling beneath the surface. Who is this woman he’s dismissing so callously?

There she is, sitting alone, a picture of hope tinged with anxiety. And yes, she's beautiful in a real and unpretentious way. Nothing like the women I usually find myself around.

I glance back at her blind date as he walks away, disdain twisting my features. He's nothing. An insignificant annoyance. This man doesn't deserve her, and she doesn't deserve to be left waiting by someone so shallow. I'm caught in a moment of impulsiveness. I want to ensure the no-show doesn't hurt her, and if I'm honest, I'm curious about maybe spending time with someone who doesn't recognize me for my wealth or status.

Turning on my heel, I push open the door, the warm aromas of the restaurant filling my senses. But as I step inside, I find myself under scrutiny. Her eyes, wide and hopeful, find mine immediately. It's like she's been waiting for this moment, waiting for me.

The next thing I know, she's standing, extending a hand with a warm and welcoming smile. "You must be James?" she says, the question in her voice barely hiding her relief. "I'm Eva. I'm so glad you made it."

Her name is as beautiful as she is, and I find myself momentarily taken aback. My mind races, and I realize I'm at a crossroads. I can correct her mistake, or I can play along.

Something about her earnestness, the way her eyes light up as she looks at me, decides for me.

I take her hand. "James," I repeat, using the name she offered, the name her actual date was supposed to have. "It's a

pleasure to meet you, Eva.”

Her smile deepens, her eyes sparkling with excitement and perhaps a touch of nervousness. The connection’s there, unexpected and undeniable. I’m drawn in, caught up in the moment.

I’m not her blind date, but right now, that doesn’t seem to matter.

We settle into our seats, the menu momentarily distracting us, but it doesn’t take long for the conversation to flow. I’m used to the game of social interaction, the formalities, the expectations, but this is different. Eva talks to me with a genuineness I’ve rarely encountered.

“So, James,” she starts, her eyes gleaming with curiosity, “tell me about yourself.”

I scramble for a second, piecing together the fragments of the character I’m portraying. “I work in finance,” I say, borrowing from the persona I’ve adopted. “It’s not as exciting as it sounds, but it keeps me busy. How about you, Eva? What do you do?”

“I’m a teacher,” she replies, her face lighting up. “Elementary school. It’s chaotic, but I love it.”

As she talks about her students, her dreams, her little corner of suburbia, I find myself captivated. She’s witty and bright, with a way of looking at the world that’s both simple and profound. Her life is so different from mine, yet it’s

fascinating. Refreshing. Here, in this moment, I'm not Sebastian Blackwood, the rogue billionaire.

I'm just a man having dinner with a beautiful woman.

We laugh over shared experiences, like the insanity of morning traffic and the never-ending quest for the perfect cup of coffee. I even find myself sharing anecdotes from my life, careful to keep them vague, or adapting them to fit the life of "James."

"So, what's your dream vacation?" she asks, leaning in.

I hesitate, then decide to share something real. "Japan. Always wanted to go. The blend of tradition and technology, the food, the culture. How about you?"

"Paris," she sighs wistfully. "The romance, the art, the pastries."

We both laugh at that, and I can see her relaxing, trusting. The connection is there, a spark growing with every word and smile.

The food arrives, but it's almost an afterthought. We continue to talk, to explore, to connect. I ask about her family and friends and what she does for fun.

As the evening wears on, I realize that this mistaken identity has given me something unexpected: a glimpse into a real and unfiltered world, a connection with someone who doesn't want anything from me but my company. And to be honest, Eva's allure makes me feel ravenous. Her beauty, both in spirit and appearance, is entrancing.



I'm well aware that this can't last, but for now, I relish being "James," cherish being here with Eva, and savor the sensation of truly being seen.

When it comes time to order desserts, Eva opens up about her love for baking.

"You bake?" I ask, genuinely intrigued. "I can barely manage to put a frozen pizza in the oven without messing it up."

She laughs, her eyes twinkling. "If I didn't love teaching so much, I would have my own bakery. Baking is therapeutic for me. There's something about creating something beautiful and delicious from simple ingredients. You should try it sometime."

"I don't know," I respond with a frown. "I think I'd need a very patient teacher."

Her cheeks flush, and her eyes sparkle. "I could be that teacher."

We discover a shared passion for chocolate lava cake. We laugh over a story of her disastrous first attempt at making it and my embarrassing mishap at a five-star restaurant involving the same dessert.

"I'm still learning, anyway," she confesses. "Last week, I tried my hand at croissants. They were a disaster, but a delicious disaster."

I can't help but laugh at her description. "Croissants are notoriously difficult. But I bet they were amazing

nonetheless.”

She blushes slightly at the compliment, her eyes shining. “Maybe one day you can be the judge of that.”

The offer hangs in the air, filled with possibility. The connection between us has grown stronger, but her next words send a chill down my spine.

“You know,” she says, a hint of hesitation in her voice, “you don’t strike me as a finance guy. You seem... different. More passionate, more involved in the world.”

My heart skips a beat. Does she see through the façade?

I quickly recover, turning on the charm that’s second nature to me. “Well, Eva, even finance guys have a soul. We’re not all numbers and spreadsheets. Some of us appreciate the finer things in life, like good food and great company.”

She seems to consider this, her eyes searching mine for a moment, the doubt still lingering. But then she smiles, accepting my words, and the moment passes.

“I’m glad to hear that, James,” she says softly, reaching across the table to touch my hand. “I’m really enjoying our time together.”

“Me too,” I reply, my voice sincere. Despite the lies, our connection is real, and I don’t want this evening to end.

But doubt lingers in the back of my mind, a shadow over the connection we’ve built. How long can I keep up the charade?

And what will happen when the truth inevitably comes to light?

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# Chapter 3

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Eva

## Eva

I don't want this date to end.

There's something about James that's got me hooked. Maybe it's the way he looks at me or the way he listens. Whatever it is, I don't want to say goodbye just yet.

As if he can read my mind, James smiles across the table and suggests, "How about we take a walk? It's a nice night, and the city has a different charm after dark."

I'm all in. We leave the restaurant behind, stepping into the city's lively streets. The night air is crisp, filled with the distant sounds of laughter, music, and the never-ending hum of traffic. Buildings tower around us, some lit up, others dark and mysterious. He's right—the city at night is beautiful, and I'm seeing it in a new light with James by my side.

"So, Eva," James starts as we wander down the bustling sidewalk, "What's your favorite ice cream flavor?"

It's an easy question, and it leads to more. We share personal preferences, childhood memories, favorite spots in Heathcliff. We joke about our guilty pleasures; he loves rocky road and late-night movies, and I confess my weakness for mint chocolate chip and old romantic novels.

It all feels so comfortable as we stroll through the city, dodging the occasional passerby and pausing at store

windows. No pretense, no hidden agendas, just two people getting to know each other.

We're deep into a discussion about our favorite restaurants around Heathcliff when I spot him. My ex-boyfriend, Derek. My heart lurches, and my entire body tenses up. Memories flood back: his smile that could light up a room, the way he used to hold me close, the devastating moment he told me he needed space and then simply vanished from my life.

It all feels like a lifetime ago.

Derek is standing there, laughing, surrounded by friends. I try to look away, but it's too late. I can feel James looking at me, his voice fading into the background as panic overtakes me.

"Eva? You alright?" he asks, his voice laced with concern.

I force a smile, trying to act casual. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just thought I saw someone I knew, that's all."

James doesn't let it go. He tilts his head, studying me, sensing that something's off. "Who was it? Someone you'd rather avoid?"

I hesitate before elaborating. "My ex," I utter, the weight of those years lacing my words. "Derek. Three long years. Our parting was... messy. Never thought I'd bump into him again."

The stone-cold look on James' face contrasts with the gentle pressure as he grabs my hand. "Do you want to face him? Get some closure?"

His suggestion catches me off-guard. As I turn to James, the dim light highlights the chiseled contours of his face. The angle accentuates his jawline and the rogueish glint in his eyes. Even in a situation like this, I can't help but appreciate how incredibly handsome he is, especially with that air of determination enveloping him.

Seeing Derek stirs up a turmoil inside me—bitterness, pain, and beneath it all, an undeniable need to close that chapter.

Decision made, I square my shoulders. “Yeah, let's go.”

The mischievous glint in James's eyes boosts my courage. He's my pillar as we march toward my past. Derek's eyes momentarily widen before settling into a smug expression. Time seems to slow.

“Eva,” he says, pointedly ignoring James. “I'm surprised to see you here.”

“Long time, Derek,” I say, feigning casualness. “James, meet Derek,” I speak, holding onto James's hand like a lifeline. “Derek, this is James.”

The silence is thick as they size each other up.

“So, you're the ex?” James drawls, a teasing undertone suggesting he's privy to Derek's past antics.

Derek, momentarily caught off guard, responds, “You're the new guy, huh? Good luck.”

James' unyielding gaze meets Derek's. “Whatever went down between you two? History. But know this: disrespect Eva, and you'll answer to me.”

Derek's sneer falls flat, defensiveness taking over. "Respect? Mate, you don't know half of what went on. In fact, Eva and I have a lot to discuss."

I find my voice, stronger than I remembered. "That's where you're wrong, Derek. I've moved on. You might want to try it."

The sting of truth catches Derek off guard. He shoots a look at his entourage, their interest palpable. "Oh, you've moved on?" he retorts, bitterness evident. "We'll see."

James tightens his grip, a protective gesture. "Actually, we won't. We're heading out. Have a good night."

His confident stride guides us away, but I sense Derek's gaze burning into my back. One last look confirms his flustered demeanor.

I lean into James, grateful for his strength. A secluded spot in a park provides solace against the city's chaos. Adrenaline still surging, I whisper, "Thank you, James."

His grin is half rogue, half gentleman. "Always got your back, Eva. What's that guy's deal, anyway?"

"He took one look at me and tried to fit me into this mold of who he thought I should be. I had low self-esteem," I admit, "and he took advantage of that. I spent so long playing the part of the chubby, insignificant girlfriend that I'm still trying to figure out who I really am."

James' stormy eyes flash with rage on my behalf. "Scars from a relationship like that take time to heal," he rasps, a



gruffness in his voice that wasn't there before.

Gazing at James, who seems to carry the world with ease and undeniable allure, I feel a pinch of that old inadequacy. "I doubt a guy like you has ever felt inferior," I say.

His eyes, intense and probing, settle on mine. "You're thinking about you, right?"

Swallowing hard, I admit, "With Derek, I constantly felt like I had to level up—be prettier, more refined. And now, with you..." My voice quivers.

Cutting through my insecurity, James states with fiery conviction, "With me, you just have to be Eva. Nothing more, nothing less." His clenched fists and tense jaw highlight his own struggles with identity.

Raising an eyebrow, I prod, "What's your story?"

"I get the chains of expectations, the chokehold of playing a part." He chuckles bitterly, "Always the tough guy. Never allowed to show a dent in the armor. Forever the rebel, but it's tiring."

His vulnerability surprises me. Here's this strong, handsome man, a personification of male charisma, and he's revealing insecurities. Compelled, I squeeze his hand, "The real you doesn't need labels, James. Drop the act."

His deep-set eyes shine, softening with appreciation. "No one's ever seen past the facade, Eva. Thank you."

Our eyes lock, the weight of the conversation and the raw vulnerability shared settling between us. The pulsing city

lights paint him in shifting shades, but his gaze is unyielding, burning with an intensity I've never seen before.

Without breaking our gaze, he moves closer. "Eva," he murmurs, his voice low and gravelly, tinged with that commanding tone I've come to recognize. "I'm going to kiss you now."

His fingers brush against my cheek, trailing fire as they make their way to the nape of my neck. Holding me firmly, he tilts my head, gauging my reaction.

There's a challenge in his eyes, a silent question. It's clear he's not asking for permission but rather daring me to pull away. And even though every rational part of me says I should, the draw to him, the undeniable chemistry, keeps me rooted in place.

He leans in, claiming my lips with a possessiveness that takes my breath away. It's a heady, dominating kiss that speaks volumes about his character: assertive, in control, and fiercely protective. But there's a tenderness there too, a gentleness only for me.

When he finally pulls back, I'm left breathless, my heart racing. His eyes search mine, and there's a smirk on his lips, as if he knows exactly the effect he's had.

I'm left dazed, trying to process the whirlwind of emotions. But one thing's clear: James isn't someone I can just brush aside. He's challenging, captivating, and he's made his intentions crystal clear.

After the intensity of the kiss, we find ourselves walking back to the restaurant, the city's nighttime energy engulfing us, yet the world seemingly reduced to just the two of us. The noise around us is just a faint hum as we're both lost in our thoughts.

Reaching the front of the restaurant, he signals for a cab. As the vehicle pulls up, he opens the door for me.

"We should see each other again," he says, his voice filled with a desire that mirrors my own feelings.

I nod, still caught up in the whirlwind of emotions, and hand him my phone so he can text me. "Yes, I'd like that. Tonight was... unexpected, in so many ways."

His eyes twinkle with a mix of mischief and genuine interest. "Life is full of surprises, Eva. And I have a feeling we're just scratching the surface." He leans in, not to kiss me again, but to whisper in my ear. "I'll be in touch soon. Sleep well."

I can't help but shiver at the closeness, the intimacy of the moment. "You too, James."

With a final, lingering look, he shuts the cab door. As the taxi speeds away, I lean back into the seat, my thoughts a mix of anticipation and wonder. What had started as a simple date had evolved into something much more profound.

And as the city lights rush past me, I realize that this is just the beginning of something new and thrilling.

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## Chapter 4

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### Sebastian

The pale crack of dawn infiltrates the penthouse, roughening the edges of luxury with its stark light. This grand space, once a sanctuary, suddenly feels like an echoing chamber. My mind's a damn mess, and every corner seems to echo one name.

Eva.

Kicking off the twisted sheets, a ghost of warmth lingers where she might have been. I reach out, half-expecting to feel her there, to catch a hint of her scent on the pillow. This wasn't the plan. This level of... obsession.

Flashes of the previous night flood back. The damn flat tire. Derek's sneering face, Eva's raw emotion, the tangible weight of the trust she placed in me.

Or rather, in James.

The damn charade gnaws at my core. Every smile, every stolen moment last night was meant for another guy. It should

piss me off more, but instead, there's this raw, primal urge to protect her. That's new.

And damn disconcerting.

Striding to the vast windows, I take in the waking city. Heathcliff, with all its gritty allure, unfolds beneath me. A sight I've seen countless times, but this morning, it's like I'm viewing it through a different lens. Her lens.

One damn day. That's all it took for her to shake up my world. And it's not just because she's stunning—Heathcliff's swarming with pretty faces. It's that fire in her, that mix of guts and fragility. The way she looked at me and through me. The thrill and dread of being truly seen... it's something else.

Stripping off my clothes, I step into the shower. The hot stream of water cascades over me, washing away the lingering echoes of the night, leaving only the present moment.

As the water pounds against my skin, I close my eyes, letting my mind drift back to her. Her soft laughter, the way she looked at me, the way her lips felt against mine. I can almost feel her presence as if she's right here with me, the steamy air filled with her sweet scent.

I imagine her in the shower with me, our bodies pressed close, her lips meeting mine in a fiery embrace. The steam swirls around me as I grasp my cock firmly, feeling the surge of desire and power that defines me. Each touch ignites a wildfire of sensation, driving me toward the edge of a release that's been building since last night.

The pressure mounts, pushing me closer to the edge. I'm teetering on the brink, and with a primal roar, I let go. It's an explosion, a burst of raw energy that floods my senses and leaves me spent and satisfied.

As the sensation subsides, I lean against the shower wall, catching my breath. The water continues to rain down on me, soothing and comforting. My mind is clearer now, the weight of the morning's thoughts lifted, if only temporarily.

I've got no business getting hung up on this. There's a life I need to run, obligations I've got to face head-on. Yet, beneath this hardened exterior, it's clear what Eva's stirred in me. She's reignited a spark, something I believed I'd snuffed out ages ago.



My day is nothing but a haze. This towering skyscraper is where I've always been a force to be reckoned with. While my brother, Nathaniel, has always been the rule follower, I'm the rule breaker who pushes the envelope. The one who gets things done no matter what.

Sometimes much to my big brother's dismay.

The constant hum of activity, phones ringing nonstop, the relentless typing, the murmured conversations from every corner—they were once the soundtrack to my empire building.

Today? It's different.

The vast cityscape pulls my focus from behind my grand oak desk. The adrenaline rush of sealing a big deal or outplaying a rival now pales in the face of getting to know Eva. It's disconcerting how fast she's grown into a perpetual thought, making even the mighty walls of Blackwood Enterprises seem less commanding.

By the time lunch hits, I'm itching to escape the confines of my office.

The eatery, perched on the 50<sup>th</sup> floor, boasts a bird's-eye view of Heathcliff's sprawling canvas. It's an elite joint where the city's powerhouses broker deals over gourmet dishes and wines that cost an average man's paycheck.

"I hear the Nikkei is on the rise again," Alexander remarks, adjusting the cuff of his tailored shirt. He's a close friend, my business partner in several ventures, and the only man I trust with my intricate corporate plays.

I nod, swirling the deep red Bordeaux in my glass. "Heard some tech giants might merge. Sounds like an opportunity."

Our exchange moves through the usual business beats, the ebb and flow as second nature as breathing.

It's when our main courses arrive—a perfectly cooked chateaubriand for me and seared tuna for Alexander—that I find an opening. The weight of Eva's presence on my mind makes me bold or perhaps just desperate for perspective.

I place my glass down with a soft thud, catching Alexander's attention.

“Met a woman yesterday,” I begin, my voice firm.

Alexander’s usually stoic eyes sharpen. “Just a woman? Or someone special?” His smirk is playful but guarded.

“Eva,” I say, the name rolling off my tongue, sounding as intimate as a secret. “It’s complicated.”

His eyebrows arch slightly, his eyes reflecting an amused glint as he takes in the scenario. “When isn’t it with you? What’s the deal?”

With a quick glance around the exclusive restaurant, ensuring our conversation remains private amid the muted conversations of Heathcliff’s elite, I confess, “She thinks I’m someone else.”

He raises his eyebrows higher this time, amusement dancing in his eyes. “You, of all people, caught in a mistaken identity situation? The irony.”

I shoot him a quick, warning glance, my patience thinning. “It’s not some passing fling, Alex. I’m... invested.”

He leans back, studying me for a moment, the jesting tone gone. “Do you think you’re ready for this?”

Flexing my fingers, I let out a slow breath, honestly uncertain. “All I know is she’s different.”

He pauses, swirling his drink contemplatively. After a moment, he finally cautions, “Just tread carefully. Emotions aren’t as predictable as our boardroom deals. They don’t always play fair.”



Smirking, I remind him, “Neither do I.”

On my way back to the office after lunch, I stop by a nearby cafe for a late-day pick-me-up. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafts over as I push open the door. The dim lighting, rustic wooden furniture, and low hum of conversations provide a comforting contrast to the cold, stark interiors of most boardrooms here in the business district. As I wait in line, idly scanning the room, my gaze freezes.

Across the room, bathed in the soft glow from the window, is Eva.

She’s engrossed in a book, her brow occasionally furrowing in concentration or amusement. Her hair cascades around her face, and a single strand falls across her eyes. Without thinking, she blows it away, a simple gesture that inexplicably ignites something inside me. My heart skips a beat. The realization that she’s here in my territory excites and unnerves me.

Instead of lurking in the shadows, I make my approach, confidence driving each step. “Never thought I’d run into you here,” I comment, a teasing note in my voice.

“James!” She smiles a genuine, warm smile that makes me momentarily forget why I was even here in the first place. “My friend, Sarah, works nearby. We just had lunch at this lovely little café around the corner. They serve the most divine French pastries,” she gushes, her eyes lighting up at the memory. “I was just relaxing before heading back home. Care to join?”

“I’d love to,” I reply earnestly, pulling out the chair across from her.

“Busy day?” Eva asks, her voice light and casual while sipping her coffee.

“You have no idea,” I reply, chuckling. “Though, not nearly as interesting as bumping into you here.”

She laughs. “Well, my day’s been quite ordinary. But this,” she waves her hand between us, indicating our chance meeting, “certainly livens things up.”

The light banter helps, but there’s a current of tension just below the surface. Every time she calls me ‘James,’ I feel the sting of my deception. My every word is measured and weighed down by my dual roles. It’s draining, but her company is exhilarating, a contradiction I’m still trying to understand.

“I’ve been thinking about last night,” she starts, a faraway look in her eyes. “I haven’t connected with someone like that in a long time.”

I nod in agreement, my mind racing to find words. “I felt the same. It’s not every day you find such chemistry with a stranger.”

She seems to mull over that, then with a playful glint, remarks, “Deep thoughts over coffee, huh?”

My phone interrupts our contemplation. Apologetically, I glance down to find an invitation to the Heathcliff Gala. As

distracted as I am by Eva, my first instinct is to decline, but then a reckless thought crosses my mind.

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask, looking up.

She looks taken aback but intrigued. “No plans, why?”

“How about attending one of Heathcliff’s most elite events with me?” The question hangs in the air, daring, inviting. The idea of showcasing her, of letting the elite of Heathcliff see this intriguing woman on my arm, tempts me more than it should.

And there’s that deeper urge: to observe how she’ll fit into, or stand out from, my world.

Her eyebrows shoot up, a mix of surprise and amusement. “Are you always this spontaneous?”

“Only when the company’s worth it,” I reply.

She seems to contemplate for a moment. “Alright, James,” she smirks, “I’m in.”

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## Chapter 5

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### Eva

The neon-lit streets of Heathcliff blur past as my cab zips through the city. For the life of me, I can't decide if my racing heart is due to excitement or sheer nervousness. It isn't every day you're headed to one of the most elite events in town with someone you've just met. The term "whirlwind romance" seems like an understatement.

I quickly shoot a text to Sarah. "Can you believe this? I'm on my way to the Heathcliff Gala. With James."

A few seconds later, my phone buzzes with her response. "Seriously? With James? I mean, I set you two up thinking you'd hit it off for a coffee or two, not end up at the city's most exclusive event."

Her message only amplifies the surreal nature of this evening. We had all laughed at the idea of the blind date, with Sarah being confident about the match. But this level of connection?

Nobody saw it coming.

A twinge of doubt ripples through me. Is this all too good to be true? But then, I remember our conversation at the cafe, the ease of it, the depth and the palpable chemistry.

I tap back quickly. “I know, right? But there’s something about him. It feels... right.”

The dots indicating she’s typing appear, then disappear, then reappear. After what seems like ages, her reply comes. “Just be careful, okay? Sometimes things that seem too good to be true, are.”

I stare at the message, a faint tremor of unease sneaking in. Why would she say that? I shake off the feeling, reminding myself that tonight is about adventure, discovery, and James and me.

The cab pulls up to the grand entrance of Heathcliff’s famed botanical gardens. As I step out, the majestic archway, adorned with twinkling fairy lights, beckons me in. The air is filled with the soft melodies of a string quartet, intertwined with the gentle hum of chatter and the fragrant scent of blooming flowers.

Immediately, the grandeur of it all hits me. The gardens are aglow everywhere I look, illuminated by strategically placed lanterns that cast shadows and lights in mesmerizing patterns. Exotic plants line the pathways, their leaves shimmering in the soft lighting. Temporary marquees in white and gold are set up amidst the greenery, and I can glimpse the city’s skyline

beyond the tall trees, reminding me of the world outside this enchanted space.

Guests in elegant gowns and sharp tuxedos drift between the displays, their laughter echoing softly. Everyone seems to know everyone, an elite crowd in their element. The opulence, the people, the ambiance—it's overwhelming, and I suddenly feel out of place, like an intruder in this world of affluence and old money.

But then, a familiar face in the sea of strangers. James. His tall frame, confident posture, and magnetic presence make him stand out, even here. Our eyes meet, and his lips curve into that knowing smile, instantly calming my nerves.

“Overwhelmed?” he murmurs, pulling me gently into his side as he takes in my wide-eyed wonder.

“A bit,” I admit, my voice barely audible above the soft music and conversations. “It's just... a lot.”

He nods. “It can be. But I promise,” he whispers, leaning closer, “I won't leave your side tonight.”

His reassurance is all I need. With him as my anchor, the night feels full of potential and excitement. Hand in hand, we step further into the gardens. Each corner reveals a new secret, and with James by my side, the grandeur becomes more digestible, more personal.

We find ourselves by a small stage, where a jazz band starts to play a slow, soulful number. Without hesitation, James pulls

me close, and we begin to dance. His grip is firm, guiding, yet gentle, allowing me to move with him seamlessly.

“I didn’t take you for a dancer,” I tease, looking up into his eyes.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” he counters with a smirk, spinning me gracefully before pulling me back into his embrace.

As the song ends, we meander through the gardens. We find a quiet spot by a pond, its surface aglow with the reflection of floating lanterns. We sit on a stone bench, and our conversation delves deeper. We talk about our dreams, aspirations, and fears. The ambiance of the gardens seems to be in our favor, making it easy to share and to listen.

He shares amusing anecdotes from his work, making the world of finance sound like a comedy sketch. In return, I talk about the funny things my students have said or done. There’s laughter, a lot of it. Moments where our gazes lock, words unsaid but feelings understood.

“I haven’t had a night like this in ages,” I admit, fingers playing with the stem of a champagne flute.

James looks thoughtful for a moment. “Neither have I. It’s refreshing. Feels like an escape.”

Drawn in by the gravity of our connection, our faces inch closer until our lips meet. It’s a hungry kiss filled with the intensity of suppressed desire. His hands rest on the small of

my back, pulling me closer, while I lose myself in the moment, fingers grazing his jawline.

Just as the kiss deepens, the moment shatters with a voice dripping in saccharine sweetness. “Darling? Is that you?” The voice is a mixture of surprise and mischief.

Pulling back, James and I turn to find the source. A woman, tall and statuesque, stands a few steps away. She’s dressed impeccably in a figure-hugging red dress, her blonde hair cascading down her back in perfect waves.

James’ posture changes subtly, becoming more guarded. “Clarissa,” he greets with a nod, his tone restrained.

Her piercing gaze lands on me, analyzing, calculating. “And who might you be?”

I open my mouth to respond, but she continues, seemingly talking to herself, “A new friend, darling? Or someone... temporary?”

A rush of emotions flood me—jealousy, insecurity, anger. I’m suddenly an outsider, watching a play I wasn’t prepared for.

She moves closer, every step oozing confidence, and places a deliberate hand on James’ arm. “I’ve missed you, darling.” Her voice is soft, flirtatious.

James clears his throat. “Been a while,” he admits, making no move to distance himself from her touch. His eyes briefly meet mine, a silent plea for understanding or perhaps patience.



“Missed me, darling?” Clarissa purrs, her fingers brushing his cheek, her use of the term so possessive that it cuts straight into my heart.

James’ only response is awkward laughter. But his inaction and silence in the face of her advances speak volumes. Every fleeting touch and shared gaze between them feels like a twist of a knife. The trust I had in James wavers with every moment.

“Why don’t we catch up, darling?” Clarissa suggests, her finger hooking onto the lapel of his jacket, pulling him just slightly closer, marking her territory. “For old times’ sake?”

I expect, or rather hope, for him to pull back, to establish a boundary. But he hesitates, and that momentary pause feels like a betrayal.

Holding back the tears threatening to flow, I murmur, “I should get going.”

“Eva, wait—” he starts.

But I’m not ready to hear him out. Not yet. “I need to go. Now.”

He doesn’t protest. Instead, he simply nods. “I’ll take you.” To the woman, he says, “Clarissa, if you’ll excuse us.”

I don’t hear her response. I’m already moving away, with James right behind me, guiding me through the crowd.

The car ride is silent, save for the low hum of the engine. The tension is palpable, hanging thick between us like a fog. His hands grip the wheel, every muscle taut, while I stare out

of the window, the neon lights of Heathcliff passing by in a blur.

When we reach my doorstep, I turn to face him, the looming conversation casting a shadow. “James, I need some time to think.”

His eyes, dark and intense, search mine. “All I ask is that you give me a chance to explain.”

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# Chapter 6

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Sebastian

## Sebastian

The night's chill wraps around me, but it's the coldness in Eva's eyes that really stings.

"Look," she starts, her voice quivering just a touch. "I'm not sure—"

Before she can finish, I close the gap between us. Ignoring the unspoken rule of waiting for an invitation, I confidently stride past her and into her home, hoping the audacity of the move might just break the ice.

"Eva," I interject, trying to channel my usual charm despite the tight knot of anxiety in my chest. "Just a few minutes. That's all I'm asking."

The interior of her house reflects her perfectly: warm, genuine, and unpretentious. Small personal touches are everywhere, from the hand-knit throw draped over her couch to the collection of mismatched mugs on the kitchen counter. It makes me feel both at ease and out of place simultaneously.

"Fine," she relents, crossing her arms and leaning against the hallway wall. "Talk."

Taking a deep breath, I begin, searching for the right words. "Clarissa's father is a major business partner of mine," I admit.

Eva raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to continue.

"We've had numerous business dealings together, and Clarissa became... involved over time." I pause, feeling the

weight of what I'm about to say. "There was never anything serious between us. But I won't deny that I let her believe there could be."

"Why?" Eva asks, her voice soft but edged with curiosity.

I run a hand through my hair, frustration settling in the pit of my stomach. I'm not used to having to answer these types of questions. "It's complicated, Eva. In my world, connections and relationships are often used as leverage. Keeping Clarissa close was a strategy. It gave me an edge in negotiations, knowing the inner workings of her father's mind."

Eva's eyes search mine. "So, you used her?"

"It's not that simple," I say. "But, yes, there was an ulterior motive. With her, I had an advantage. I've always played my cards close to the chest, doing whatever was necessary to close a deal, even if it meant blurring lines."

Eva's expression is unreadable, and for a moment, I fear I've lost her. But then, she sighs. "James, relationships, genuine relationships, are built on trust. Can I trust you?"

Silence stretches between us, filled only with the muted sounds of her home. The hum of the refrigerator, the distant ticking of a clock.

"Eva, you deserve more than being caught in the crosshairs of my messy life. But if there's one thing I want to make clear, it's this: you are what I want."

She studies me for a moment, her face unreadable. "I understand the pressures you're under, James. And it's not like

I expect you to change overnight. But if there's going to be an 'us,' there needs to be trust. No more games."

I nod, the gravity of her words sinking in. Normally, I wouldn't have a problem making empty promises, but knowing that my identity is the biggest lie of all, I don't speak. Instead, my hands slide to the small of her back, pulling her close, erasing any space between us, and I claim her lips with mine. The kiss is passionate, intense, filled with a promise of things unsaid.

When we break apart, both of us are breathless. Her eyes, usually so clear and decisive, are now clouded with desire, making it difficult for her to maintain her earlier skepticism.

I smirk, confident in the power of our chemistry. "Now, tell me you want me to leave."

She doesn't. She can't.

Pulling her to her feet, I kiss her again, bunching the skirt of her dress in my hands. "Let me see you," I murmur, my voice a low, seductive rumble. "Let me see the woman you've kept hidden from the world."

My fingers find the zipper at the back of her dress, and with a soft smile, I slide it down slowly, savoring the anticipation in the air.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, my breath mingling with hers as the dress falls to the floor, exposing the lingerie that adorns her curves. I step back to take in the sight.

Her cheeks flush, but there's a spark of excitement in her eyes, a yearning to be seen and desired.

I reach out, letting my hand glide along her skin, tracing the contours of her waist and hips. She shivers under my touch, a reaction that sends a thrill through me. Her fingers find the buttons of my shirt, mirroring my actions, revealing the strong muscles that lie beneath the fabric.

"Touch me," I breathe, my voice husky with want. I guide her hands, letting her explore my chest, my abdomen, feeling her fingers dance across my skin. I pull her closer, letting her feel the hard contours of my body against her, our skin igniting a fiery connection that's impossible to ignore.

Our mouths find each other again. I cup her face, my thumb tracing her lips, then trailing down her neck, down the gentle curve of her breast. She moans into the kiss, the sound sending a jolt of desire straight to my core.

I press her back onto the couch, the urgency of our passion driving us closer. I want to give her everything, to make her feel desired and cherished in a way she's never experienced before.

As our hands continue to explore, mapping the contours of each other's bodies, I can feel the tension building, the need for release growing with every passing moment.

But we're in no rush. This is about savoring the journey, about immersing ourselves in the exquisite pleasure of discovery.

“Tell me what you want,” I murmur against her lips.

She meets my eyes as she takes a deep breath, summoning the courage to express her needs. “I want you,” she says, her voice a sultry whisper that sends tingles down my spine. “I want to feel you, every inch, every touch.”

My own want burns within me. The way she’s telling me her desires, her readiness, it’s exhilarating. I want her to trust me and surrender to the passion between us.

“Tell me more, Eva,” I coax, my lips grazing her neck as my hands explore her curves, skimming the fabric of her lingerie.

She gasps, her hands roaming my chest, feeling the muscles beneath. “I want to touch you,” she confesses, her fingers tracing my chest, hovering near the trail of hair leading down.

Eva’s fingers find their way to my belt, a clear invitation, a declaration of her readiness. I respond in kind, my hands tracing the curve of her hips, slipping beneath the fabric of her lingerie, feeling her heat, her arousal. She gasps again, her touch igniting a fire within me that matches the blaze building between us.

I guide her hand to my erection, letting her feel the proof of my desire, the hardness that longs for her touch.

“Do you feel what you do to me, Eva?” I murmur, my voice thick with want. “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you.”

Without hesitation, I slide down her body, my lips seeking her most intimate place, driven by the desire to give her the pleasure she craves. My hands rest gently on her hips, holding



her in place, letting her know I've got her, that she can surrender completely to this moment.

I explore with my tongue, slow and deliberate, savoring every reaction, every gasp, every quiver of her body. Her taste is exquisite, a heady mix of arousal and anticipation. She arches, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer, urging me to continue my worship. I find her rhythm, my tongue flicking with precision, my lips creating a seal that draws her deeper into the sensation. I lose myself in the taste, the texture, the intoxicating aroma of her arousal, and the sounds of her pleasure are the sweetest music.

“Eva,” I whisper against her, my voice laced with desire, “let go. Feel it all. I want to give you everything.”

Her grip tightens in my hair, and I know she's close. Her hips move in rhythm with my ministrations, and I'm relentless, matching her passion, pushing her toward that precipice of bliss. The world outside this room ceases to exist; there's only her and me, connected in this intimate act of pleasure.

And then it happens; her body tenses, a primal cry escapes her lips, and she shatters. Waves of pleasure wash over her, her orgasm sweeping her away in a whirlwind of sensation. I'm there, keeping her grounded, riding the waves with her, drinking in the raw beauty of her pleasure, cherishing every moment.

As her climax subsides, I release her, moving back to recline comfortably on the loveseat, a smirk of satisfaction playing on my lips. Eva sits at a distance, her usually fiery eyes clouded

with a mix of passion and uncertainty as she pulls the throw over herself.

I can see her grappling with the storm of emotions inside her. It's evident that she's torn between the undeniable pleasure we shared and the pressing need for a deeper emotional connection. There's a vulnerability in her eyes, a silent plea for more than just the physical.

But tonight, I'm not willing to give in to that particular call.

Reaching out, I tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear, my fingers lightly grazing her warm skin. "Quite the evening, wasn't it?" I remark, keeping the tone light.

She meets my gaze, a myriad of emotions swirling in her eyes—confusion, desire, the beginnings of frustration. "James, I..."

But I silence her with a finger to her lips. "How about this," I say with that familiar, confident glint in my eyes. "Tomorrow night, come out with me to the Risque Club. Let me show you more of my world."

The proposal catches her off guard. I can see the wariness, the curiosity, and the anticipation flashing in her eyes all at once. But she doesn't voice any of it. The emotional gulf between us is palpable. She wants more, and I'm hedging.

It's a dance we've started, and neither of us knows the steps yet.

As I make my way to the door, I give her one last lingering kiss, full of promise and mystery. The door closes softly

behind me, leaving her in the silent aftermath of our charged encounter.

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## Chapter 7

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### Eva

The night air brings a shiver to my skin as I step out of the car, heels clicking against the polished stone pathway. The club's grand glass doors mirror back a woman poised with elegance, yet the tumult within her is evident—a heart caught between a surge of desire and the sharp pang of betrayal.

Even before I can fully take in the opulence of the entrance, James appears, his presence dominating the scene. “Eva,” he murmurs, extending his hand to guide me. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

Ahead, the club unfolds like the luxurious fortress James had described. Dazzling chandeliers shimmer from above, their glow reflecting off deep mahogany walls and casting fleeting shadows over the club's elite. The room is a sea of tailored tuxedos, elegant gowns, and the undeniable aura of privilege.

A symphony of soft conversations fills the air, the serenity occasionally interrupted by laughter or the delicate chime of

glasses. The atmosphere is one of calculated indulgence, captivating yet with an undercurrent of unease.

With every step deeper into the club, I feel the weight of curious eyes on me. This crowd, accustomed to the world's extravagances, is clearly intrigued by a new face. Their unspoken questions are evident: Am I just James' latest conquest, or could there be more to the story?

There are secluded alcoves where couples whisper secrets, and private rooms with drawn curtains, hinting at mysteries I'm not sure I want to uncover. The air is thick with the scent of expensive perfume, the kind that clings to your senses long after it's gone.

It's a world far removed from my suburban sanctuary. A world where desires are on display, limits are tested, and everything has a price. It's all a bit too much, but I remind myself why I'm here.

James.

A part of me is still reeling from last night, the fervor we shared, and the stark contrast of the emotional void that followed. Now, I'm hoping that tonight might offer us a fresh start, a chance to find our footing again beyond the blinding chemistry.

James gestures toward a nearby lounge area carved out by plush couches and dim, ambient lighting. "Let's find a quieter spot."

Walking side by side, a palpable distance separates us. He starts to narrate the grandeur of the club, a slight pride in his tone. “Over there is our premium bar,” he indicates, “stocked with some of the rarest spirits you’ll find anywhere. And that,” he motions toward the pulsating dance floor, “is where the city’s crème de la crème come to lose themselves.”

I glance over, catching glimpses of writhing bodies, silhouettes energized by the hypnotic beats. “It’s impressive,” I admit, though my tone suggests I’m still weighing my true feelings.

“And up there,” he points to the elevated booths with a sweeping view of the skyline, “are the private sections. Best view in the house.”

I catch a couple of club patrons nodding at James in recognition, acknowledging his regular presence. Yet, he only offers them cursory nods, minimal pleasantries. No sign of the magnetic man I’ve come to know.

Our pace slows as we approach a serene area bathed in hues of icy blue and stark white. “The Winter Lounge,” he announces, “inspired by the Northern Lights. One of the newer additions.”

“It’s beautiful,” I murmur, genuinely impressed. But then I can’t resist teasing him a bit. “Do you give the grand tour to all your guests?”

He chuckles but then becomes slightly serious. “Tonight, I’m only interested in what you think. Do you like it?” His face,

illuminated by the soft lighting, is almost weary, a stark contrast to the vivacious man I met not so long ago.

“You come here often, but it feels like you’re as out of place as I am,” I muse as we find ourselves seated on a plush couch nestled in a quiet corner.

James looks at me, his eyes searching mine. “Sometimes, places like this only remind you of what you’re missing.”

I reach out, placing a gentle hand on his. “Perhaps we’re not so different. Both trying to find real connection in places that offer everything but that.”

He chuckles, but there’s no real humor in it. “You’re perceptive, Eva. It’s both intriguing and unsettling.”

A gentleman in a crisp tuxedo discreetly approaches us. “The evening’s performance is about to commence. If you’d like, I can guide you to one of our premier viewing areas.”

James gives a curt nod, and we follow the man. We pass numerous alcoves, each designed with a unique ambiance. Some have plush red velvet couches, others sleek leather, and a few adorned with silk drapes that give them an almost ethereal quality. The attention to detail is impeccable, ensuring every guest feels like royalty in their private domain.

Finally, we reach our reserved area. It’s intimate, a semi-circle of rich, dark wood with a comfortable-looking settee for two and an open wall that offers an unobstructed view of the stage. The design ensures privacy, allowing patrons to enjoy the performance without being in the direct gaze of others.

James helps me into my seat and then takes his place beside me, our shoulders brushing slightly. The proximity, combined with the exclusive setting, sends a thrill down my spine.

Before I can voice my admiration, the lights dim further, casting the stage in an anticipatory shadow. The gentle murmurs from the crowd fade, replaced by the thick weight of expectation.

As a violin's haunting notes pierce the silence, a solitary spotlight illuminates the center of the stage, revealing a woman. Her raven-black hair cascades down her back, her skin gleaming like polished bronze. Dressed in a flowing, translucent gown, she moves as if she's part of the very shadows that surround her.

A moment later, another spotlight catches a man emerging from the opposite side. His tall, lithe frame exudes power, contrasting beautifully with the woman's delicate grace. Their eyes lock, and an electric charge seems to pass between them, palpable even from our secluded vantage point.

The male dancer's fingers trace delicate paths down the female dancer's arms, his palms settling at the small of her back, drawing her even closer to him. Her leg arches gracefully around his waist, her delicate foot tracing a tantalizing path along his muscular calf. Their bodies move as one, the thin fabric of their attire doing little to hide the evidence of their arousal.

The dancers, lost in their world, slowly sink to the floor, their choreography transitioning from a passionate tango to a



series of intimate caresses and embraces. The lighting dims, casting them in soft silhouettes.

With deliberate motions, the female dancer deftly slides the straps of her gown off her shoulders, letting the fabric pool around her. The male dancer follows suit, shedding layers until both are nude on the stage. He pulls her close, their bare bodies merging, each contour and curve fitting together like two pieces of a puzzle. With every slide of skin against skin, they paint a tale of love, desire, and raw sensuality.

As the dancers' fervor grows on stage, the atmosphere around us becomes thick with tension. The palpable sensuality in the theater is infectious.

Without taking his gaze from the performance, James' fingers lightly graze my knee. The unexpected touch sends a shiver through my body. His hand slowly creeps up the smooth expanse of my thigh, hidden beneath the layers of my dress. My first instinct is to stop him, but then I remember that no one can see us.

And even if they could... Well, maybe that's part of the thrill of this world.

His fingers brush the edge of my lace underwear, causing me to involuntarily gasp. The boldness of his touch, combined with the provocative scene before us, ignites a fire within, and I spread my legs invitingly.

As James' fingers venture further, the boundaries between observer and participant begin to blur. While the performers on stage move in rhythm, James' fingers dance their own

choreography against my wet heat. Each deliberate touch is perfectly timed, his fingers teasing and exploring with an expertise that make it hard to focus on anything else.

As the dancers on stage reach the peak of their performance, James' pace increases, his movements more determined. His thumb grazes my clit, while his other fingers delve deeper. I clench the plush fabric of the settee, the sensations becoming almost overwhelming.

The combined sensory overload of the dancers' intimacy and James' expert touch is intoxicating. My breaths grow shorter, my body tensing in anticipation. And then, as the dancers on stage share a final, passionate embrace, a surge of pleasure overtakes me. Waves of ecstasy wash over my body, each more intense than the last, as James skillfully brings me to a shattering climax.

As the final notes of the music fade and the dancers on stage share a lingering, intense gaze before bowing gracefully to the roaring applause, the reality of our surroundings begins to seep back in. Pulling his hand from beneath my dress, James turns to face me, his eyes dark and full of promise. Without uttering a word, he leans in, capturing my lips in a fervent kiss that's a heady blend of passion, desire, and a hint of mischief.

Breaking the kiss, he whispers huskily in my ear, "Let's get out of here."

We weave our way through the crowd, the opulent ambiance of the club serving as a sharp contrast to the raw, stripped-down emotion of the dance we just witnessed and the moment

we shared. I'm distracted by my own arousal when a familiar, honeyed voice pierces the atmosphere.

“Well, if it isn't Sebastian Blackwood and his lovely date. Leaving so soon?”

Confusion clouds my thoughts. Sebastian? Who is Sebastian?

“Clarissa,” he acknowledges, his voice cold and distant, not bothering to correct her as to his name.

She saunters over, giving me a disdainful once-over. “Darling,” she purrs, addressing him but never taking her eyes off me, “usually you have better taste. I guess even billionaires have their off days.”

The name “Sebastian Blackwood” still swirls in my head. It sounds vaguely familiar, like a distant echo. A name I might have heard in passing or read in some tabloid headline but never paid much attention to. But the clarity in her comment about billionaires adds a heavy weight to it.

The connection is a slow burn, confusion giving way to realization. James isn't James.

He's Sebastian Blackwood.

Feeling a blush creep onto my cheeks, I pull away, not fully grasping the magnitude of it all but feeling deceived by the situation.

“Eva,” he starts, reaching out, but I take a step back, my face a blend of surprise, confusion, and a hint of betrayal.

The heady, intimate atmosphere between us is now fractured by doubt and distrust. I can't help but see the polished crowd, the whispered conversations, and the lingering glances in a new light. Everywhere I look, people seem to be in on a secret I'm not privy to.

Sebastian's hand rests on my arm, his grip gentle yet firm. "Eva, let me explain—"

"Explain what? That you lied about your name? Or that you thought it was fun to bring an ordinary girl to your glittering world just to watch her stumble?"

My heels strike the gleaming wood floor with sharp, staccato beats as I rush out of the club, the cacophony of city life enveloping me. But all I hear is that name—Sebastian.

The crisp night air bites at my cheeks. A cab slows as I near, its yellow light beckoning. I don't even glance back as I open the door and slide in. The driver looks at me through the rearview mirror.

"Anywhere but here," I manage, my voice thick with emotion.

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## Chapter 8

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### Sebastian

The thumping bass of the club reverberates in my chest, echoing the unease that grips me. Eva is gone. But then, why should I care? People come and go, and I've always been the master of shrugging off attachments.

With a smirk, I lean against the bar, swirling the amber liquid in my glass, its fiery bite reflecting the many times I've been left before. *I can always get her back*, I reason. A smooth line here, a charming smile there, that's all it ever takes.

"Sebastian," a familiar voice calls, breaking me from my reverie. Alexander stands before me. His face holds a mix of concern and challenge, and before I can deflect with a flippant comment, he grips my shoulder. "Come with me."

He pulls me away from the bar, through a maze of halls, and into one of the club's many lounges. Dimly lit and intimate, it feels a world away from the chaos of the main floor.

"What's going on?" I ask, feigning indifference.

“That was her, wasn’t it?” he asks. “The woman who went running out of here is the one you said wasn’t just a passing fling, right?”

I wave a hand dismissively, collapsing into a chair.

He studies me for a moment, then says, “I’ve seen you play this game before. But I didn’t think you’d play it with her.”

I roll my eyes, trying to exude that Sebastian-esque charm. “Eva’s just another face in the crowd. What’s it to you?”

Alexander sits on another chair and leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Cut the crap. For once, be real. With me, if not with yourself.”

His words, so direct, shake my facade. I sink into the plush chair, suddenly feeling trapped.

“Every time you get close, you throw money at the problem or charm your way out,” he continues. “But this isn’t about your wealth or charisma. This is about you, and you know it.”

I look away, fighting the urge to snap back. Because the truth? It stings.

“When was the last time you truly let someone in?” Alexander asks, softer now.

For a few moments, the room is silent except for the distant muffled music. The weight of years of evasions, flings, and facades press down on me.

“She’s not like the others. And I think, for once, you’re scared.”

I scoff, trying to regain some control. “Scared? Please.”

But even as I say it, I know he’s right. Eva is different. And the realization terrifies me.

Alexander stands, his message delivered. “You can keep running, or you can face it. Your choice.”

As he leaves, I’m left alone, my reflection staring back at me from a mirrored wall. The weight of Alex’s words hang heavily in the air, seeping into the recesses of my mind. Eva. Unlike the others, she wasn’t a mere fleeting encounter.

Why did I let myself believe it could be that simple?

The real connection, our genuine moments, weren’t nestled among the champagne flutes or in the luxury of a gala. It was in our shared dreams of travel, our mutual love for desserts, and the understanding of each other’s scars.

It was in those stolen moments when we weren’t trying to impress or keep up with any charade.

Taking a deep breath, I recognize the truth. I want to be with Eva, not as a billionaire on a conquest but as Sebastian, the man with dreams of cherry blossoms and a soft spot for sweets.

And maybe, just maybe, I can show her that.

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## Chapter 9

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### Eva

The soft knock against my door the next morning isn't something I'm expecting. The delicate dance of morning sunlight filters through my sheer curtains, casting a golden hue on everything. Still in the comfort of my oversized pajamas and the warmth of drowsy morning thoughts, I take a second to muster the energy to answer.

Opening the door, my heart stutters. There stands Sebastian, his usual billionaire façade absent. Instead, a raw sincerity in his eyes meets mine. Gone is the confident swagger, replaced by a genuine uncertainty that makes my chest tighten.

His hands grip a familiar box from my favorite bakery, the unmistakable aroma of fresh pastries wafting up. For a moment, I'm too stunned to speak, just taking in this new side of Sebastian that feels so... real.

"Eva," he says. "Can we talk?"



One wrong word, and he might lose me forever. But as he looks at me, his eyes pleading for understanding, I realize he's baring himself.

All in.

So I nod hesitantly, waiting for him to elaborate. He guides me into my sunlit living room and settles onto my leather couch, setting the pastries on my coffee table and patting the space next to him. I hesitate, uncertainty gripping me, but eventually sit, keeping a clear gap between us.

“No more games,” he declares, locking eyes with me. “I’m Sebastian Blackwood. Yes, it’s a powerful name, but last night? I was just a man trying to escape from it all. No pretense, no weight of the Blackwood empire, just... freedom.” His candidness surprises me.

I search his face, a whirlwind of feelings inside me. “Why the deceit? Why not just be honest from the start?” My voice is quiet but demands answers.

He edges closer, every inch he moves echoing in the pounding of my heart. Our worlds, once so separate, seem on the cusp of blending seamlessly.

“Eva,” he says softly, his voice rich with emotion, a tremor of vulnerability breaking through. He intertwines our hands, holding onto a connection that goes beyond mere physical touch. “I never meant to deceive you. When I saw you in that restaurant, and you greeted me so warmly... that connection was real. And I didn’t want to ruin it by being... me.”

“Sebastian,” she scolds, but I don’t give her a chance to continue.

“But today, I want to give *me* a chance. I didn’t come with an elaborate plan or lavish surprises,” he says softly, his eyes darting away for a brief moment. “Just an idea and a hope.” Pointing to the box on the table, he continues, “Thought we could share these and maybe, if you’re up for it, escape the city for a day?”

My curiosity piques. No glitzy venues or over-the-top gestures?

He seems to read my thoughts, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Just somewhere we can breathe. Maybe a countryside drive? Or that local fair that’s happening? We can wander, eat simple foods, and just... be ourselves.”

The offer is unexpected, but something about it feels incredibly enticing. The promise of a day away from our usual lives, a day of uncomplicated fun and genuine connection. I can’t deny the flutter of excitement in my stomach. Maybe, just maybe, this could be a new start for us.

Taking a deep breath, I meet his gaze, “Okay, Sebastian. Let’s give it a shot.”



The drive to the countryside is a soothing journey in itself. Rolling hills dotted with wildflowers, the freshness of the air, and the absence of the city’s constant buzz act like a balm. As

we approach our destination, the local fair's colorful tents and cheerful music greet us.

Sebastian parks the car, and we just sit there for a moment, taking it all in. He's the first to break the silence. "Shall we?" he asks, extending his hand.

Walking side by side, we get lost in the fair's vibrant atmosphere. Children laugh as they rush from one stall to another, the scent of popcorn and candy floss mingling with the rustic aroma of hay.

We find ourselves drawn to an enclosure where families are feeding farm animals. "Ever fed a goat?" he asks, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

I laugh, shaking my head. "No, can't say I have."

Before I know it, Sebastian's bought a handful of feed, and we're surrounded by a troop of enthusiastic goats. Watching him, there's a lightness about him I haven't seen before. The billionaire veneer is nowhere in sight, replaced by a man who's genuinely enjoying the simple pleasure of feeding animals.

The day unfolds beautifully. We try our hand at carnival games, and while Sebastian's attempt at knocking down cans is hilariously awful, the joy in the act is palpable. We share a cotton candy, pulling apart the soft, sugary clouds and laughing when it sticks to our faces.

As the sun starts its descent, casting the fairgrounds in a warm, golden glow, Sebastian retrieves a blanket from his car,

and we venture down a trail until we find a quiet spot overlooking a shimmering lake and the vast expanse of the countryside. We spread the blanket out and sit side by side on the soft ground.

Turning to Sebastian, I observe him closely. The carefree smile, the relaxed shoulders. This is a side of him that's both new and refreshing. The weight of his billionaire persona is absent, replaced by a genuine connection to the moment, to the surroundings, and maybe, just maybe, to me.

As he catches me staring, he leans in, whispering, "What?"

Shaking my head, I smile, "Just admiring the view."

Sebastian's eyes linger on the horizon, absorbing the warm hues of the setting sun. For a few moments, the only sound between us is the distant laughter of families enjoying the fair.

Summoning my courage, I speak, the words coming out softer than intended. "Sebastian, why all the barriers? Why hide behind the billionaire mask?" My gaze fixes on him, trying to read his thoughts.

He takes a deep breath, looking at me with an intensity that's almost piercing. "You know," he begins, "in the world I come from, it's easier to put on a facade, to hide behind wealth and charm than to risk being vulnerable."

I nod, but there's a hint of skepticism in my eyes. "But there's more to it, isn't there?"

Sebastian's face reflects a myriad of emotions: hesitation, contemplation, and then, resolution. "I grew up believing that

my worth was tied to my success. That if I wasn't the best, wasn't at the top, I was... insignificant. Over time, those walls, those barriers, they became second nature."

His voice grows more somber, the weight of his past pressing down. "I've been betrayed, taken advantage of, and it seemed safer to keep everyone at arm's length. To be the charming billionaire rather than the real Sebastian."

I reach out, placing a gentle hand on his. "Sebastian, everyone has scars. It's how we wear them, how we heal from them that defines us."

He looks up, meeting my gaze with newfound clarity. "I want to change, Eva."

I smile warmly, sensing the genuineness in his words. "Let people in. Let me in. Beneath the mask is a person who's kind, genuine, and worth knowing."

He squeezes my hand, gratitude shining in his eyes. "Thank you, Eva. For seeing past the barriers, for giving me a chance to be me."

Sebastian shifts, turning toward me. There's a new light in his eyes, one I've never seen before—hope. A hope that's both vulnerable and earnest.

"Eva," he says, his voice laden with emotion, "I promise you, from this moment on, I will strive to be more open, more genuine. Not just with you, but with everyone in my life."

I can sense the gravity of his words, and how much it means for him to say them. But words have never been enough for

me. I've always believed that actions speak louder. Before I can articulate that, he continues.

“And I know,” he starts, leaning closer, his gaze never leaving mine, “that words can only mean so much. But I want to prove it to you. Every day. With every action.”

His face is inches from mine now, the warmth of his breath mingling with the crisp evening air. Our eyes lock, a silent communication passing between us. Without any more words, he leans in, capturing my lips with his in a tender and passionate kiss. It's a promise, a testament to the new chapter we're embarking on.

The world around us fades away, the distant sounds of the fair becoming a mere whisper. All that matters is the feel of his lips on mine, the weight of his promise, and the shared journey we're about to embark on.

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# Chapter 10

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Sebastian

## Sebastian

The night's pure magic. Moonlight blankets us, and the lake sparkles like diamonds. Eva looks at me, desire glistening in her eyes. She's wearing a t-shirt and jeans, simple yet sexy as hell, those curves hinting at what's underneath.

Pulling her nearer, our bodies meld, and I feel her warmth through my sweater. My hand travels down her back, making her shiver.

"Sebastian," she breathes, her voice a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. There's hesitation in her eyes, maybe the thrill of being caught outside. I want to erase her doubt.

"Don't worry," I murmur, my lips brushing against hers. "We're secluded here, just us and the stars."

She bites her lip, her eyes locked onto mine, a storm of emotions brewing beneath the surface. "I know, but what if someone sees us?"

I smirk, the thrill of the risk adding to the fire burning between us. "Let them see," I say, my voice low and seductive. "Let them envy us."

Her hesitation begins to melt away, replaced by a hungry longing. She lifts her hips, jeans sliding down just enough to uncover her lacy panties, an irresistible invitation.

I whisper, "You're so beautiful." My fingers trace the edge of her panties, teasing, feeling the heat emanating from her.



She arches her back, pressing her body closer to mine. “Sebastian, don’t tease me,” she pleads, her voice a sultry mix of need and desire.

My lips find her ear, my voice a sensual promise. “I just want to savor the moment. To savor you. You are the most ravenous temptation.”

Eva’s response is a soft moan, a delicious melody that spurs me on. She’s breathtaking in this moment. I lean in, tasting her lips, and then move between her legs. Her eyes lock onto mine, a mix of anticipation and want, as I start kissing her thighs, eager and hungry.

She runs her fingers through my hair, guiding me closer, her breath quickening with each touch. I tease her, my lips tracing her skin, my fingers tracing the curves of her body, making her shiver with pleasure. She’s radiant in the moonlight, every reaction captivating me.

I find her center, her panties a barrier that I’m eager to bypass. I look up, seeking her permission, and she nods, the need clear in her eyes. Gently, I pull her panties aside, revealing her moist flesh, glistening with anticipation.

My mouth finds her, and she gasps, a sweet sound that fills the night. I go down on her, my tongue exploring, her taste driving me wild. I feel her hips moving to meet my mouth, a primal instinct taking over.

I’m relentless, keeping a steady rhythm, my focus entirely on giving her pleasure. She digs her fingers into the grass, her body tensing, the tension building, driving her closer to the

edge. Our eyes lock, and she's right there, teetering on the brink.

“Eva,” I murmur, my voice a seductive promise, “Let go, beautiful.”

With a shudder, she releases, her body trembling, her moans filling the air with pure pleasure. I hold her through the waves, a mix of passion and tenderness, my mouth continuing its work, making sure she feels the ecstasy she deserves.

Eva is radiant with the afterglow of her climax, her chest heaving as she catches her breath. I'm on my back now, my jeans unbuttoned, my arousal evident. She moves closer, her gaze hungry, her lips brushing against mine, a silent promise of what's to come.

She knows what I want, what I need. She's eager to please, her hands finding their way to my waist, deftly pulling down my jeans. I watch her as she takes my cock in her hand, her touch sending electric shocks through my body.

Her lips follow a tantalizing path of pleasure, her tongue dancing along my length. I groan, the sensation intense, but I'm holding back. I guide her up, her eyes locking onto mine, a mix of desire and a hint of teasing mischief.

“Not yet,” I whisper, my voice thick with need. “I want to feel you around me.”

Her eyes widen with a spark of understanding. She straddles me, the heat of her core against my aching arousal. I hold her waist, teasing her entrance, feeling her wetness, her readiness.

“Sebastian,” she moans, her voice a mixture of desperation and longing. “Please.”

I guide her down, and we both gasp as she envelops me, a perfect fit. She starts moving, a slow, sensual rhythm, and I watch her, lost in the sight. She’s stunning, her curves, her face flushed, her hips swaying with a sensual grace.

The building pressure threatens to consume me, but I’m not ready to climax yet. I want to feel her shudder around me, hear her moans of ecstasy as I drive her to the edge once more.

“Eva,” I growl, my voice a primal demand, “I want to hear you scream.”

She responds, her pace quickening, her nails digging into my chest. I’m lost in the sensation, the anticipation of her climax, the way she’s riding me with fierce determination.

She’s close, teetering on the brink, and I can feel it, sense the way her body tenses, the way her moans grow more urgent. I hold on, wanting to experience her release, wanting to watch her surrender to the pleasure.

But I want more too, a deeper connection, a merging of our desires. I grab her hips, controlling the rhythm now, taking her to the precipice, but not over it.

“Sebastian,” she cries out, her voice a plea, “Please, let me come.”

I relent, giving her what she needs, and she shatters, her body convulsing around me, her cries echoing in the night. I’m lost in the feeling, the sensation of her climax.

As she rides out her pleasure, I flip us, my body covering hers, my lips finding hers in a passionate kiss. She tastes herself on me, the erotic taste driving us both wild.

“Eva,” I groan, my voice raw with need, “You feel incredible.”

She arches her back, meeting my thrusts with a hunger that matches my own. Our bodies move in perfect harmony under the starlit sky. The sensation is intense, overwhelming, as we become lost in each other. The friction, the heat, it’s driving us both wild. I can feel her walls tightening around me again, her moans growing louder, a crescendo of pleasure that’s pushing me closer to my own release.

“Eva,” I gasp, the pressure building in my core, “I’m... I’m close.”

She nods, her eyes locked onto mine. Her body tenses, and I can feel her inner walls pulsing around me, a sign that she’s about to come undone once more.

“Sebastian,” she cries out, her voice a melodic harmony of pleasure, “I’m... I’m coming!”

The sight of her climax, the way her body tightens around me, is enough to send me over the edge. I lose myself in the sensation, a rush of ecstasy unlike anything I’ve ever felt. I thrust into her one final time, my release washing over me in waves of pleasure.

We’re both breathless, our bodies intertwined as we come down from the high of our shared climax. Lying back on the

blanket, I feel the crisp night air around us, contrasting sharply with the lingering warmth between Eva and me. Above, the stars twinkle with unmatched brilliance.

“I used to gaze at these stars and feel so insignificant,” I say, my words floating into the stillness. “But with you here, everything feels more... connected.”

Eva laughs softly beside me. “It’s interesting how sharing a moment can shift how we see things.”

Propping myself up on an elbow, I look down at her. “Today changed a lot for me, Eva. More than I thought it could.”

She meets my gaze, her eyes reflecting the starlight. “Life’s full of surprises. Today was one. And tomorrow? Who knows. But I’m glad we’re facing it together.”

I lay back again, pulling her into my arms. We’re silent for a while, simply listening to the sounds of the night around us. It’s comfortable, easy.

The night continues its slow march towards dawn, but in this moment, everything feels just right.

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# Epilogue

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## Eva

The smell of flour, butter, and sugar fills the air as I walk into the cozy little kitchen of the downtown bakery. There's an excitement bubbling inside me because Sebastian and I are attending a baking class together. I've always had a knack for whipping up sweet treats, but Sebastian? Well, he's an expert at consuming them.

Today's gonna be fun.

"Ready to get your hands dirty?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at him playfully.

He grins, donning his apron which, honestly, is a sight to behold. "As long as I get to taste-test everything, I'm in."

The instructor guides us through the process, and it's not long before I'm kneading the dough with practiced ease. Sebastian, on the other hand, is struggling. He's added too much water, and his dough is sticking everywhere.

I lean in close, teasingly whispering, “Having some trouble there, Mr. Billionaire?”

He chuckles, trying to swipe a floury hand across my cheek. “Just luring you in for a closer look.”

Despite his initial clumsiness, I have to admit, watching Sebastian in the kitchen is downright entertaining. He’s not bad; he’s just hilariously uncoordinated. Every time he tries to roll out his dough, it ends up lopsided or stuck to the table.

Eventually, I can’t resist and wrap my arms around him from behind, guiding his hands. Our laughter rings out, echoing the playfulness of the moment. Flour ends up on our faces, in our hair, and even a bit on our clothes. I’m certain we look like a mess, but it’s the most fun I’ve had in a while.

As we near the end of the class, I notice Sebastian sneaking off to talk to the instructor. I’m too busy adding finishing touches to my pastry to give it much thought.

Moments later, he returns, holding a perfectly baked mini cake. I’m impressed but also a bit suspicious. I doubt he baked it. On top, written in delicate icing, are the words: “Marry Me?”

I gasp, my eyes darting from the cake to his hopeful expression.

“Sebastian, did you—”

He cuts me off, getting down on one knee, holding the cake out to me. “Eva, I might not be the best baker, but I know what

I want. And that's a lifetime of messy, beautiful, unpredictable moments with you. Will you marry me?"

The emotion in his voice, the sincerity in his eyes, it's all too much. Tears blur my vision, but I manage a nod, pulling him up for a deep, passionate kiss.

"Yes," I whisper against his lips, "a million times yes."

In the background, our classmates cheer, but all I'm aware of is Sebastian's embrace and the sweet promise of our future together.



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RISQUE  
BILLIONAIRES'  
CLUB

A portrait of a man with short, dark hair and a light beard, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light blue shirt, and a dark tie. He is resting his chin on his hand, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and textured.

*Depraved*  
**TEMPTATION**



C.L. CRUZ    LIZ FOX

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## Also By the Authors

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Four friends—and their rivals—who triumphed against all odds, no matter the cost. Now they've made it. One by one, they'll become obsessed with *possessing her curves*.

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## About the Authors

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Liz Fox writes short, sweet, and steamy romances. They feature curvy women and the alpha men who fall in love with them. A curvy woman herself, she has a special place in her heart for happily ever afters.

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