



STALK HER

Sweetly

USA Today Bestselling Author

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STALK HER SWEETLY

EMMA BRAY

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Epilogue

CHAPTER 1

Emily

THE PICTURESQUE TOWN of Millfield unfolds before me like a watercolor painting come to life. Cobblestone streets wind lazily through rows of charming cottages, their window boxes overflowing with vibrant blooms. The sun casts a golden glow upon the bustling market square, where townsfolk exchange warm greetings and laughter as they go about their day.

I, Emily Thompson, am an observer of this idyllic scene, my blonde hair catching the sunlight in shimmering waves, while my bright blue eyes reflect the azure sky above. My lips curve into a natural smile, and I can't help but feel my heart swell with love for my home and the people within it.

"Morning, Emily!" calls out Mrs. Harper, the baker's wife, waving her flour-dusted hand from across the street. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is," I reply, returning her wave with enthusiasm. "Enjoy the sunshine, Mrs. Harper!"

As I continue on my way, I can't help but marvel at the sense of community that envelopes Millfield like a warm embrace. It's a place where everyone knows each other, and there's always a helping hand or listening ear when needed. And in this little corner of the world, I've found my purpose—bringing joy to others through my work at the candy shop.

"Emily, dear, could you help me choose something for my grandson?" asks Mr. Jenkins, his eyes twinkling like stars in the night sky.

“Of course, Mr. Jenkins,” I say, guiding him toward the colorful display of candies that fill the shop’s shelves. “How about these chocolate frogs? They’re quite popular with the young ones.”

“Ah, perfect,” he beams, placing a handful of the confections into his basket. “He’ll love them. Thank you, my dear.”

“Anytime, Mr. Jenkins,” I respond, my heart warming at the thought of his grandson’s delight upon receiving the treats.

As I assist more customers in their sweet selections, I can’t help but feel grateful for the opportunity to be a part of their lives, even if only in this small way.

I love working behind the counter of the town’s beloved candy shop, Sweet Delights.

“Emily, would you recommend the caramel turtles or the chocolate-covered cherries?” asks Mrs. Moore, her eyes dancing between the two tantalizing treats.

“Ah, a tough choice,” I muse, my fingers tapping against my chin playfully. “But I’d have to say the caramel turtles. Their gooey center is like a warm hug on a chilly day.”

“Excellent! The turtles it is then,” she exclaims, her face lighting up like a firecracker on the Fourth of July.

I wrap the box of turtles with care, tying it off with a vibrant ribbon that mirrors the joy Mrs. Moore’s purchase will surely bring. As I hand it to her, our fingers brush briefly, and I’m reminded of the connections we forge in these small moments – threads woven together to create the vibrant tapestry of life here in Millfield.

“Alright, Emily,” George calls out from across the store, his voice honeyed with affection. “Time for our daily inventory check.”

“Coming, George,” I reply, offering Mrs. Moore a warm farewell before making my way to the back room.

George Martin, the owner of Sweet Delights, has been like a father figure to me since I first started working here five

years ago. His patience and guidance have helped shape me into the person I am today, and I can't imagine my life without him in it.

“Remember to count the licorice twists twice,” he says, handing me a clipboard and pencil. “We wouldn't want a repeat of last month's mishap.”

“Of course,” I assure him, the memory of our licorice shortage still fresh in my mind. “I'll be extra careful this time.”

As we work side by side, counting candies and sharing stories, I can't help but marvel at the serendipity that brought us together. In George, I've found not only a mentor but also a steadfast friend who believes in me and supports my dreams.

“Emily, I just wanted to say how proud I am of you,” he says, pausing our task for a moment. “You've come so far since you first started here, and your kindness and dedication never cease to amaze me.”

“Thank you, George,” I reply, feeling a swell of gratitude rise within me like the tide on a full moon night. “I couldn't have done it without you.”

Our laughter echoes through the candy shop, a sweet symphony of love and camaraderie that permeates every corner of our little haven. And as I look around at the shelves brimming with sugary delights, I'm reminded once more of the magic we create each day – for ourselves and for the people of Millfield.

The tinkling of the doorbell signals another visitor, and my heart swells at the sight of Olivia Harris striding into the candy shop. Her vivacious energy radiates like a hundred sunbeams, her dark hair bouncing with each step. “Emily!” she exclaims, her bright smile rivaling the colorful displays around us.

“Olivia!” I greet her with equal enthusiasm, wrapping her in a warm embrace. “It's so good to see you.”

“Oh, this place is even more magical than I remember,” she marvels, spinning around as her eyes take in the vibrant ribbons of candies lining our shelves. The sweet aroma of

chocolate and fruit fills the air, mingling with the soft hum of contented chatter from customers – young and old alike.

“Isn’t it?” I agree, beaming with pride for the candy haven George and I have created. “I swear, I fall more in love with it every day.”

“Speaking of love,” Olivia says, raising an eyebrow playfully, “any potential suitors on the horizon?”

“Olivia!” I laugh, rolling my eyes. “You know I’m perfectly happy focusing on the shop right now.”

“Of course, but can’t a girl dream of being maid of honor someday?” Her infectious laughter follows as we continue to banter back and forth. I let myself indulge in the warmth of our friendship, feeling grateful for her unwavering loyalty and support.

A customer approaches the counter, and I turn my attention to them. “What can I help you with today?” I ask, my voice filled with genuine interest.

“Could I get half a pound of the sour gummies, please?” she requests, pointing at the vibrant display of chewy delights behind me.

“Coming right up!” I scoop the gummies into a bag with practiced ease, careful not to crush their delicate shapes. As I hand it over, the woman’s face lights up with anticipation.

“Emily, you’re a gem,” she says, gratitude evident in her eyes. “This is just what I needed to brighten my day.”

“Thank you,” I reply, feeling a warmth bloom in my chest. “Enjoy your treats!”

With each interaction, the candy shop comes alive – a kaleidoscope of joy and camaraderie that permeates every corner. As I share in the happiness of our customers, I can’t help but feel grateful for this life I’ve built.

The rhythmic jingle of the shop’s bell announces yet another customer, and I instinctively glance up from my current project: an intricate chocolate sculpture in the shape of a fairytale castle. My fingers, coated in melted cocoa, deftly

mold the turrets and ramparts, each delicate detail a testament to my love for this craft.

“Hi there!” I greet the newcomer, my voice warm and inviting like the sun’s embrace after a gentle rain. “Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thanks, Emily,” the woman replies, her eyes sparkling with curiosity as they dance across the shelves lined with confections. She hesitates for a moment before asking, “What do you recommend? I’m looking for something special.”

“Ah,” I muse, wiping my hands on a nearby towel, “how about our handmade truffles? Each one is a tiny masterpiece crafted with care, and their flavors are as varied and exciting as the stories whispered between friends on a starlit night.” I gesture to the glass case displaying the velvety spheres, the colors and designs as mesmerizing as a painter’s palette.

“Ooh, those sound divine,” she says, her excitement mingling with the sweet aroma of the shop. “I’ll take a dozen, please.”

“Of course! Any specific flavors?” I ask, already reaching for the parchment-lined box that will cradle these treasures.

“Surprise me,” she grins, trusting the artist within me to create the perfect assortment.

As I select the truffles, I can’t help but feel a wave of pride wash over me, knowing that my passion for these edible wonders has the power to bring joy to others. With each truffle nestled into its new home, I mentally send a silent wish for happiness and love to accompany them on their journey.

“Here you go,” I say, handing her the box tied with a crimson ribbon. “Enjoy, and remember, each bite is an adventure waiting to unfold.”

“Thank you, Emily,” she replies, cradling the box like a cherished secret. “I can’t wait to discover what you’ve chosen for me.”

As she leaves, I return to my chocolate castle, my thoughts swirling like the patterns on a marbled fudge. I revel in the knowledge that every day I spend here – crafting, creating, and

connecting with others – adds another vibrant brushstroke to the canvas of my life. And though there are stories yet untold and dreams still to chase, for now, this candy-coated world is more than enough.

CHAPTER 2

Max

I WIPE AWAY the beads of sweat that form on my forehead as I take a deep breath, pushing myself to complete another set. My muscles strain beneath my taut skin, but this is the pain that keeps me going, the only thing that seems to silence my racing thoughts. It's just another day in the life of Max Foster, the socially awkward software engineer with an unexpected muscular build.

My workout routine is rigorous, to say the least. Six days a week, I find solace in the gym, my personal sanctuary from the world outside. Each session begins with a warm-up, loosening my tense muscles and steeling myself for the challenges ahead. I alternate between strength training and cardio, allowing my body to adapt and grow.

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I focus on compound exercises like squats, deadlifts, and bench presses. These movements engage multiple muscle groups at once, helping me build a balanced physique. Tuesdays and Thursdays are dedicated to isolation exercises targeting specific areas like biceps, triceps, and calves. And on Saturdays, I test my limits with high-intensity interval training, pushing myself to the brink of exhaustion before allowing myself a moment's rest.

The grunts and clangs of weights surround me, creating a symphony of determination that drowns out the whispers of insecurity that so often plague my mind. In the gym, I'm not

the shy, introverted programmer who struggles with eye contact and stammers through social interactions; I am Max, the conqueror of iron and master of my own destiny. The weight room is where I feel alive, where the world makes sense – if only for an hour or two.

As I power through the final rep of my last set, my muscles scream in protest but I relish the sensation, knowing that every drop of sweat brings me one step closer to self-improvement. With a final exhale, I re-rack the weights and take a moment to catch my breath, my chest heaving with exertion.

“Great job today, man,” I tell myself, words that no one else can hear. It may be an empty echo in this vast expanse of steel and determination, but it’s a small victory for me, a fleeting moment of confidence before I step back into the uncertainty of the world outside these walls.

As I leave the gym behind, my heart aches at the thought of returning to the familiar routine that awaits me, the same monotonous cycle of work, solitude, and restless nights.

On my way home, I brace myself for the imminent transition back into reality. The air outside is crisp and cold, clinging to my skin like a desperate lover as I walk briskly through the city streets, trying to avoid any unnecessary interactions.

“Hey there, Max!” calls out my neighbor from across the street. Her smile is warm and inviting, but my shyness gets the better of me. I manage a quick nod and avert my gaze, feeling the familiar pangs of embarrassment.

“Looking good, as always!” she adds cheerfully before disappearing into her building. My cheeks burn with the heat of a thousand suns, and I hurry away, cursing my inability to engage in simple conversation.

Safely ensconced in my apartment, I sigh with relief. The walls around me seem to breathe, their exhalations thick with the scent of familiarity and comfort. Here, I can be myself, unencumbered by the expectations of others.

I find solace in the virtual worlds of my favorite video games, where I can escape the confines of my own insecurities and become someone else entirely. With controller in hand, I navigate through pixelated landscapes, conquering enemies and solving complex puzzles with ease. In these moments, I am no longer Max, the socially awkward software engineer. I am a hero, a champion, a fearless adventurer.

“Take that!” I shout triumphantly as I defeat yet another digital foe. My laughter reverberates through the empty room, filling it with echoes of joy and accomplishment.

But as the screen fades to black and the end credits roll, I’m left feeling hollow, longing for something more than this solitary existence. I glance wistfully at the clock, its ticking hands a constant reminder of the time slipping through my grasp like grains of sand.

“Is this really all there is for me?” I wonder, my thoughts spiraling into a somber abyss. “Am I doomed to forever be trapped within these walls, a prisoner of my own making?”

I power down my console and step into my kitchen, the hum of the refrigerator greeting me as I move toward the cupboards. The whole room is a well-oiled machine. Every item has its designated place, just like the gears in a clockwork mechanism. I can’t help but count my steps as I walk across the tiled floor – one, two, three, four – until I reach my destination.

“Five,” I murmur under my breath, opening the cupboard and grabbing a box of cereal. As I pour it into a bowl, I can’t help but notice the absence of chatter, the soundlessness that fills my apartment like an oppressive fog. This is just another meal eaten alone, another reminder of the solitary life I lead.

“Six, seven, eight,” I continue to count, even as my fingers tap against the edge of my phone, checking for notifications I know aren’t there. My thumb hovers over the screen, as if daring someone to send me a message or invite me out, yet I’m met with only silence.

“Nine, ten.” I finish pouring the milk into my bowl and sit at my small kitchen table. It’s just big enough for two, but it

has always been occupied by just one. The thought sends a pang through my heart, but I push it aside, focusing instead on the rhythmic crunching of my cereal. I know I'm weird. I don't eat cereal in the mornings but at night.

"Eleven, twelve," I count again, my thoughts consumed by numbers and patterns, like an intricate dance I can't escape from. It's a distraction, a way to keep my mind from wandering down darker paths, from dwelling on the loneliness that threatens to swallow me whole.

"Thirteen, fourteen," I repeat, my gaze drifting to the window. Sunlight streams in, casting dappled shadows on the floor. It's a beautiful weekend morning, a time when others are out enjoying themselves, meeting friends, and making memories. Yet, here I am, enclosed within the confines of my apartment, a self-imposed exile.

"Maybe tonight will be different," I muse, trying to convince myself that change is possible, even as my phone remains stubbornly silent. I can feel the weight of its presence in my pocket, but I refuse to check it again, unwilling to give in to the compulsion that has become all too familiar.

"Seventeen, eighteen," I continue counting, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly, like a mantra meant to calm the storm inside me. I finish my breakfast, the last spoonful an echo of the countless solitary meals that have come before.

"Twenty," I whisper, finally standing up and placing the now-empty bowl in the sink. The faucet's water splashes against the porcelain, creating a comforting, albeit lonely, melody.

"Maybe tomorrow will be different," I tell myself again, clinging to the hope that someday, I'll break free from this cage built by my own insecurities. But for now, I count my steps, one by one, leading me through another day in my solitary existence.

CHAPTER 3

Max

I PUSH open the door to the candy shop, a small bell chiming overhead as I step inside. The sweet aroma of sugar and chocolate immediately envelops me, making my senses tingle with anticipation. I'm here on a mission: to find the perfect gift for my sister, Sophie. Her birthday is just around the corner, and she has a notorious sweet tooth. What better place to find her present than this charming little shop?

The interior of the candy shop is an explosion of color, with bright displays and shelves filled with jars upon jars of treats. It's not a large space, but it feels like stepping into a whole new world. To the left, there's a wall dedicated to chocolates in every shape and size – from truffles to intricate sculptures that look almost too good to eat. On the right, gummy candies are organized by type and flavor, creating a rainbow of sticky, chewy goodness.

“Welcome!” comes a cheerful voice from behind the counter, and I glance up, my heart skipping a beat when I see her. A beautiful young woman with bright blue eyes and blonde hair tied back in a ponytail greets me. There's something about her that makes my pulse race, and I find myself unable to look away.

“Hi,” I respond, my voice barely above a whisper. “I'm just looking for a gift for my sister.” I try to tear my gaze away from the girl, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand, but I can't tear my gaze away from her as she flits about the store,

her laughter like wind chimes on a breezy day. The candy shop surrounds me with its colorful, sweet chaos – a sugary wonderland that beckons like a siren’s song. But despite the allure of the multicolored confections, it’s the pretty little worker who truly captivates me.

“Of course!” she exclaims, her smile infectious. “Let me know if you need any help, okay?”

“Will do,” I say, trying to sound casual as I walk deeper into the store. But even as I browse the selection of candies, my thoughts keep drifting back to the girl behind the counter.

I try to tear my gaze away from the girl, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand, but I can’t tear my gaze away from her as she flits about the store, her laughter like wind chimes on a breezy day. The candy shop surrounds me with its colorful, sweet chaos – a sugary wonderland that beckons like a siren’s song. But despite the allure of the multicolored confections, it’s the pretty little worker who truly captivates me.

As I wander deeper into the store, I notice a display of hard candies near the back. They’re arranged by flavor, with each variety nestled in its own glass jar. There are the classics, like peppermint and butterscotch, as well as more exotic options like passion fruit and jalapeño. I carefully lift the lid off one of the jars, releasing a fragrant burst of cinnamon scent. This could be a fun option for Sophie – she loves trying new things.

A few steps away, I spot another display that catches my eye. This one features an assortment of beautifully wrapped chocolates, each piece nestled in its own little compartment. The packaging is exquisite, with gold foil and delicate hand-painted designs. Sophie would definitely appreciate the artistry of these chocolates.

I weigh my options, trying to decide which gift will make Sophie’s eyes light up with delight.

“What does your sister like?” the object of my new obsession asks, her voice warm and inviting, like the first sip of hot cocoa on a winter evening.

“Um, she loves chocolate and...gummy bears,” I manage to say, trying to focus on the task at hand instead of drowning in the ocean that is the woman’s blue eyes.

“Great, follow me!” She leads me down an aisle filled with gourmet chocolates, her hips swaying like a dancer’s as she walks. Her presence is intoxicating, filling me with desire and longing. I want to reach out and touch her, but I know I can’t.

“Here are our best-selling chocolates,” she says, gesturing to a display case filled with mouthwatering truffles and bonbons. “And over here,” she continues, guiding me toward another section, “we have our gummies. These are all made in-house and come in a variety of fun shapes.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, my eyes darting between the rows of candies and the curve of her lips. I select a box of assorted chocolates and a bag of gummy bears shaped like stars, hoping they’ll be enough to please Sophie.

With my choices in hand, I stand there for a moment, debating whether or not to strike up a conversation with Emily. My obsession with her has reached new heights, and the thought of knowing her better, perhaps even making her laugh, sends a shiver down my spine.

“Is there anything else you need?” Emily asks, her eyes searching mine as if trying to read my thoughts.

“Um, no, this is perfect,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Great! I’ll meet you at the register.”

As she walks away, I can’t help but wish I had more courage – the courage to tell her how I feel, to ask her about her dreams and desires.

I approach the counter, and the girl’s warm presence envelopes me like a hug. Everything about her is motherfucking bright and cheerful and perfect—totally opposite from me.

Her name tag reads ‘Emily,’ and I can’t help but think it suits her perfectly.

“Great choices,” Emily says, her fingers dancing across the register as she rings up my purchase. “Your sister is going to love these.”

“Thanks,” I reply, swallowing hard and trying to ignore the pounding in my chest. How can someone be so effortlessly captivating? I want to know everything about her, to be a part of her world.

“Here you go,” she says, handing me the bag with a smile. “Have a great day!”

“You too,” I manage before turning and practically sprinting out of the store. The moment I step outside, I inhale deeply, trying to steady myself. But even as I walk away, I can’t shake the feeling that my life has just been irrevocably changed by a simple encounter in a candy shop.

Why couldn’t I have been more confident? More charming? Maybe then, Emily would have looked at me differently – with interest, instead of polite friendliness.

I exit the candy shop and take in a deep breath, trying to calm the pounding in my chest. The door shuts behind me with a soft jingle, like the final note of a song that lingers in the air.

“Wait,” I whisper to myself, and before I can second-guess my decision, I turn around and steal one last glance at Emily through the window. She’s laughing now, her eyes sparkling like sapphires as she chats with an elderly customer. The sight tugs at my heart, making it ache with longing.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath, turning away and forcing myself to walk down the street. My body feels heavy as I trudge along, weighed down by regret and the knowledge that I let another opportunity slip through my fingers.

“Get a grip,” I chide myself, tucking my hands into my pockets. My fingers brush against the wrapped package meant for Sophie, but it’s no longer just a simple gift. It’s a tangible reminder of Emily’s warmth and kindness.

The street buzzes around me, people weaving in and out of the afternoon crowd, yet it all feels muted compared to the vibrant energy within the candy shop. An old couple walks by,

their hands entwined like vines, and I wonder—could that ever be Emily and me? The thought sends shivers down my spine, both thrilling and terrifying.

“Next time,” I vow, my voice barely audible above the din of the city.

With each step away from the candy shop, my heart aches with the distance, like a rubber band stretched taut between us. Emily has already woven her way into the very fabric of my being, an intoxicating blend of sugar and spice that I can’t resist.

“Emily,” I whisper to the wind, a secret promise carried on the breeze. And though I walk away from the shop today, I know deep down that our paths will cross again—and when they do, I won’t let fear hold me back.

Because *this*—these feelings this girl has stirred up within me—are like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

CHAPTER 4

Max

I'M SITTING in my dimly lit apartment, my laptop casting a cold glow on my face as I type Emily Thompson's name into the search bar. The world outside has faded, leaving only me and my obsession.

Her.

"Emily," I whisper, as though I could summon her through the screen with my desire alone. My heart races, thudding against my chest like a caged animal begging for release.

Her social media profiles pop up, and I hungrily click on every single one of them. My fingers dance across the keyboard like a pianist playing a symphony, each stroke bringing me closer to the object of my fixation.

Photos upon photos filled my screen, an endless cascade of Emily's smiling face. Her laughter, immortalized in pixels, echoes through my mind. I can't resist saving every last image, adding them to the shrine I've created on my hard drive.

"God, she's so beautiful," I mutter, my breath fogging up the screen as I leaned in closer. I imagine what it would be like to have her here with me, to touch her golden hair and trace the lines of her perfect features.

My obsession morphs out of control, consuming me entirely. Night after night, I lay in the darkness, feverish and desperate, my hand gripping my arousal as I lose myself in

fantasies of Emily. In those moments, I can almost feel her body pressed against mine, her heat searing my skin as we tangle together in a dance of lust and longing.

But reality crashes down on me with every shuddering release, leaving me empty and aching for the woman who haunts my dreams.

“Emily,” I sigh, my voice thick with despair. “Why can’t you be mine?”

I know I’m spiraling, but my desire for her is an all-consuming fire that threatens to incinerate everything else in my life. I cling to the hope that one day, maybe, just maybe, I can find a way to make her see me—*truly* see me—and understand the depth of my love for her.



I crouch behind a parked car, my breath coming out in shallow bursts. The candy shop is right across the street, its bright colors and cheerful signage drawing people in like moths to a flame. I watch Emily through the large glass windows as she interacts with her customers, her laughter echoing like the sweetest melody.

“Hey, Emily!” A voice calls out, pulling me from my reverie. Carter Evans, the charming and handsome regular, saunters into the shop, his smile confident and disarming.

“Hi, Carter!” Emily beams, her eyes sparkling like the sun dancing on the ocean’s surface. She greets him warmly, and I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy as they exchange pleasantries.

Carter leans on the counter, his gaze never leaving Emily. “You know what? I think today is a Sour Patch Kids kind of day,” he says, grinning. He knows that’s her favorite candy, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s doing it just to impress her.

“Great choice!” She replies enthusiastically, grabbing a bag from the shelf and ringing up his purchase. My heart clenches like a fist at the sight of their easy banter, and I find

myself comparing every aspect of our lives. Carter is suave and charismatic while I am awkward and withdrawn. He has the ability to make her laugh effortlessly, whereas I struggle to even approach her. He's there inside the shop with her while I'm milling around outside stalking her like the psycho I am.

"Did you hear the one about the gummy bear who went on a diet?" Carter asks, smirking mischievously. Emily shakes her head, leaning in with anticipation. "Well," he continues, "he lost a few pounds and ended up becoming a gummi-lite!"

Emily erupts into laughter, the sound a balm to my aching soul, and yet a dagger to my heart. I can see the lightness in her eyes, the genuine happiness she feels in his presence, and it makes my insides twist with envy.

"Good one, Carter!" She exclaims, wiping away the tears of mirth from her eyes. "You always know how to make me laugh."

"Anything for you, Emily," he replies, his voice laced with sincerity, but I can't help but wonder if there's an ulterior motive hidden beneath his charm.

I watch intently as Carter leans over the counter, his arm brushing against Emily's as he hands her a piece of candy. She accepts it with a smile, her eyes lighting up as she recognizes her favorite treat.

"Thanks, Carter," she says, popping the candy into her mouth and savoring it. "You know me too well."

"Only the best for you," he replies, his voice smooth as honey. But there's something in his expression that I can't quite place—a hint of calculation, perhaps? His advances aren't as transparent as they seem, leaving me unsure of his true intentions.

"Are you coming to the town festival this weekend?" Emily asks, her tone casual but her eyes searching his face.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Carter responds, his grin widening. "Maybe I'll see you there?"

"Maybe," she says, her voice light and teasing, yet laced with a subtle guardedness I've come to recognize. She isn't

quick to let people in, despite her approachable nature. That hidden caution both intrigues and frustrates me.

As they continue their conversation, my chest tightens with frustration and jealousy. It feels like there's an invisible barrier between Emily and me, one that I can never hope to breach. The weight of my infatuation grows heavier with each passing moment, threatening to crush me beneath its pressure.

I need to do something, shake off this paralyzing fear and take a chance. *One foot in front of the other*, I tell myself, willing my body to move toward the store. But the closer I get, the more my insecurities whisper doubts in my ear.

What if she doesn't want anything to do with me? What if all my fantasies are just that—fantasies? And worse, what if she sees the darkness lurking inside me, the obsession that drives me to seek her out day after day?

“Get a grip, Max,” I mutter under my breath, trying to quell the rising panic. “You're just going to say hello. Nothing more.”

But even that simple act feels like scaling a mountain, every step forward a laborious struggle against my own self-doubt. Time seems to slow as I watch Emily and Carter, their laughter ringing in my ears like a taunting reminder of all the things I might never have.

I watch them, my heart heavy with longing, as they continue their playful banter. The more I see, the more insecure I feel, like a fragile sandcastle at the mercy of the relentless waves.

I retreat into the shadows, my heart held hostage by the unbreakable bonds of desire and obsession.

CHAPTER 5

Max

I CAN FEEL the jealousy rising like bile in my throat as I watch Carter lean against the candy shop counter, his dimple winking at Emily. It's a familiar scene, one that plays out almost every day and yet never loses its sting. His laughter rings through the air like a melody designed to torment me, and I can't help but notice how Emily's eyes light up at the sound.

"Another batch of those chocolate truffles, Carter? You must really have a sweet tooth," Emily teases, her bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Only for the best," he replies, flashing her a grin that seems to say he's not talking about the truffles. My fists clench involuntarily at the sight, but I force myself to relax, knowing that my envy isn't helping anyone—especially not me.

As she fetches his order, I can't tear my gaze away from the graceful way Emily moves, her blonde hair catching the sunlight filtering through the shop windows. She's dressed in her usual pastel-colored uniform, which only adds to the air of innocence and cheerfulness that surrounds her.

Each time I see Emily, I feel this inexplicable pull toward her, like a moth drawn to an all-consuming flame. The thought of her has invaded my every waking moment, and even my dreams are filled with visions of her radiant smile. But each time I try to imagine approaching her, my mind recoils at the idea. How could someone like Emily ever be interested in

someone like me? A man plagued by insecurities and haunted by an obsessive nature.

“Thanks, Em,” Carter says, his voice pulling me back to the present. He casually rests his hand on hers for a moment, and I swear I see the faintest blush color her cheeks.

“Anytime, Carter. See you tomorrow?” she asks, her voice laced with a warmth that makes me ache with longing.

“Count on it,” he replies, and I can’t help but wish that it was me she was smiling at like that. As they share a final glance, something inside me snaps, the jealousy too much to bear.

When Carter leaves the shop, Emily busies herself with restocking the shelves, her movements fluid and graceful. My eyes follow her every move, tracing the curve of her neck as she reaches for a jar of candy, the way her fingers deftly twist off the lid, and how she hums a soft tune under her breath.

I know it’s wrong to feel this way, to become so consumed by someone who barely knows I exist. But the more I watch Emily, the deeper I sink into my obsession. She’s like a beacon of light in my otherwise dark world, and I can’t help but crave the warmth she seems to effortlessly exude.

“Excuse me?” A voice startles me out of my thoughts. I turn to see the owner of the candy shop, standing behind me. “You need anything?”

“Uh, no, just browsing,” I stammer, trying to regain my composure. He nods before disappearing back into his office, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again.

As I continue to watch Emily from the shadows, it becomes increasingly clear that I’m in far too deep. She’s out of my league, a fact that I know all too well. And yet, despite all logic, I can’t help but yearn for her. It’s a desire that only grows stronger with each passing day.

A small part of me wishes I could be more like Carter, able to charm her so effortlessly and garner her attention. But I know that even if I were somehow able to change myself, it wouldn’t guarantee Emily’s affection. The thought is both

sobering and infuriating, fueling my obsession and leaving me desperate for a connection that feels increasingly out of reach.

I watch Emily for a moment longer before slipping away, unable to bear the weight of my jealousy and insecurity any longer.

As the day wears on, I find myself returning to the candy shop, though, lingering just outside. I tell myself it's nothing more than chance, that I'm not really waiting for Emily. But deep down, I know the truth: I can't resist the pull she has on me.

When her shift ends, I take a hesitant step forward, steeling myself to follow her. My heart races with every beat, each footstep feeling like a monumental effort. I keep a safe distance, watching her golden hair catch the sunlight as she moves gracefully through the streets of our small town.

"Are you really doing this, Max?" I ask myself, hoping that somehow, my own voice might be enough to snap me out of this obsession. But the answer remains clear. I am powerless against the allure of Emily Thompson.

Emily stops at a small café, ordering a coffee and taking a seat outside. I watch her from across the street, hidden behind the window of a bookstore. She sips her drink and pulls out a book, her eyes scanning the pages with the same intensity she brings to everything she does.

"Look at her," I whisper, my pulse quickening as if I were running a marathon. "She's so...perfect." The word slips out before I can stop it, a testament to just how far gone I truly am.

"Is this really okay?" I wonder, my thoughts swirling like a storm cloud. "To watch her like this, day after day, without ever saying a word? Am I just a coward or something worse?"

The ethical implications of my actions weigh heavily on my conscience, but I can't seem to tear myself away.

I follow her until the sun dips toward the horizon, casting long shadows over the streets of Millfield. To everyone else, this sleepy little town is a picture-perfect sanctuary, all quaint

charm and warm smiles. But to me, it's become a prison, locking me in with my own obsession.

I've spent countless hours poring over her social media posts, memorizing every photo, every comment, every like. It's not enough. I need more.

"Collecting mementos might help," I whisper to myself, trying to justify the twisted logic that has taken root in my mind. "Just something small, something to connect me to her."

The first time I steal a pencil from her desk, my heart pounds like a jackhammer, threatening to burst through my chest. The guilt gnaws at me, but I can't bring myself to return it. Instead, I add it to the small shrine I've created in my apartment—a tribute to Emily made up of discarded receipts, a hairband she left behind, and even a crumpled napkin stained with her lipstick.

"Is this love or just insanity?" I wonder, grappling with the ever-growing beast inside me. It feeds on every scrap of information I can find about Emily, growing larger and more ravenous with each passing day.

"Emily," I murmur, the name feeling like both a prayer and a curse on my lips. "Why can't you see me?"

My frustration mounts, making me feel like a caged animal desperate to break free. I pace the length of my apartment, cursing myself for being too weak to bridge the chasm that separates us. I long to touch her hand, to hear her laughter in a quiet moment shared just between us. But every time I see her, my courage crumbles.

Maybe if I just tried harder, I tell myself, repeating the mantra that has become my own personal hell. *Maybe then she'd notice me.*

Determined to change myself for the better, I throw myself into a rigorous workout routine. Every morning before the sun even rises, I'm out pounding the pavement, sweat pouring down my face as I push myself to run faster, harder. The burning in my lungs and the ache in my muscles become my

penance, the price I pay for being so unworthy of Emily's attention.

In addition to the physical improvements, I focus on building my confidence. I practice speaking to strangers at the grocery store, striking up conversations with people who have no idea of the turmoil inside me. Each time I manage to get through an interaction without stammering or blushing, it feels like a small victory, a step closer to becoming the person Emily deserves.

Soon, my life revolves around the anticipation of seeing her, of orchestrating our encounters just right. I find solace in knowing her schedule, learning when she takes her breaks or has moments of free time. My heart races each time I walk by the candy shop, the smell of sugar and chocolate filling my nostrils, and the undeniable pull of her presence gripping me.

I stand outside the candy shop now, my heart pounding as I muster the courage to approach Emily. The vibrant colors of the treats on display seem to reflect her infectious cheerfulness. With each deep breath, I inhale the sweet scent that lingers around the store, a reminder of the alluring woman inside.

I take in a deep breath and force my legs into motion.

Entering the candy shop, I find Emily arranging jars filled with glistening jellybeans on the shelves. Her golden hair cascades down her back, as though it's spun from sunlight itself.

I walk up behind her and just as I'm finally getting ready to speak, a sudden commotion interrupts me. A young boy has knocked over an entire shelf of candy, sending it crashing to the floor in a cacophony of clattering glass and spilled sweets.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Emily exclaims, rushing to the boy's side. My heart sinks, feeling like a deflated balloon, as I watch her tend to the child with the same compassion and grace that I so admire.

"Please be careful next time," she says gently, helping him up and brushing off the stray candies clinging to his clothes.

I glance at the fallen shelf, seeing my opportunity to speak with Emily slipping away like sand through my fingers. Desperation floods my chest like a tidal wave, threatening to drown me in its depths.

I retreat to a corner of the candy shop. My heart races like a wild stallion, each beat drumming against my chest, demanding to be heard. As the minutes tick by, anticipation coils within me like a serpent preparing to strike.

And then motherfucking Carter breezes through the doorway. My hands ball into fists and I storm out of the shop before I lose it completely.

CHAPTER 6

Emily

THE DOOR CHIMES, announcing another customer's arrival. My gaze lifts from the glass counter filled with an assortment of chocolates and candies in every shape and size imaginable, their sweet aromas blending into a symphony that fills the air. A familiar face graces the entrance, and I smile at him politely.

"Good afternoon, Carter," I say cheerfully, my heart fluttering beneath my uniform as if it knows his intentions better than my mind does. But I keep my composure, treating him like any other customer who walks through the door.

"Emily," he greets me with a nod, his eyes twinkling as they always do when he sees me. "I could use some help selecting a treat for my niece."

"Of course!" I exclaim, stepping out from behind the counter to guide him through the colorful displays. "How old is she?"

"Seven," he replies, and I can't help but notice how he lingers beside me, perhaps closer than necessary.

"Ah, perfect! We just got in a new shipment of unicorn-shaped lollipops that would make her day," I suggest, maintaining my professional demeanor.

"Those sound delightful," Carter agrees, his voice like velvet draped over my ears. Carter is an attractive man, and I suspect he wants more from me, but I don't know. I'm just not

into him that way, so instead of letting his words wrap around me, I focus on helping him choose the perfect treats.

As we complete the transaction, Carter's fingertips graze mine when I hand him the bag, but I refuse to let his touch send shivers down my spine. He's just another customer to me—no matter how charming he is.

"Have a great day, Carter," I say with a bright smile, pushing away any thoughts of what lies beneath his charming exterior.

"Thank you, Emily. You too," he replies, his gaze lingering on me for an extra beat before he leaves the shop.

"Emily, can I talk to you for a minute?" my boss calls from the back of the store.

"Of course," I reply, curiosity piqued. I follow him into his cramped office, where the scent of peppermint and old books fills the air.

"Emily, I've been thinking about retiring soon," he begins, his voice like worn leather. "And I wanted to ask if you'd be interested in taking over the business."

"Me?" My heart leaps with excitement, soaring on wings made of candy wrappers and sugar-coated dreams. Yet, buried beneath it is that hidden layer of caution, warning me not to get ahead of myself. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," he confirms, a proud smile spreading across his wrinkled face. "You have a gift for making people feel welcome and bringing joy to everyone who walks through that door. I can't think of anyone better suited to take over."

"Mr. Martin, I'm honored. I would love to!" I exclaim, my eyes sparkling with happiness as visions of my future as the owner of this magical place dance before me.

"Excellent," he says, clapping me on the back gently. "We'll start going over the details soon. You're going to do great things here, Emily."

I drift back to the counter in a daze. I couldn't stop smiling if I tried. I've always done the best job I could at this place,

but as I glance around it now, I see everything with a whole new eye.

My place. My very own candy shop.

Could things get any better?

CHAPTER 7

Max

I'M STANDING at the edge of Millfield Park, just barely hidden behind an oak tree. My heart pounds like a drum as I watch Emily walk down the cobblestone path toward her workplace. Her golden hair catches the morning sun, and the bounce in her step makes her look like she's dancing on air. She's so full of life, so vibrant. It's no wonder I can't get her out of my head.

I shake my head, but even as I chastise myself for this obsession, I can't bring myself to leave. I need to see her smile, hear her laugh. I need to know she's safe.

As Emily turns the corner, disappearing from sight, I follow at a safe distance. The colorful front of the candy shop comes into view. It's so bright and colorful—just like her.

No wonder George is going to make her the owner. She deserves it. There's no one better fit to run the place.

“Morning, Emily!” I hear Carter Evans call out. He's leaning against the shop's window, his eyes locked onto her with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Good morning, Carter! How are you today?” Emily's voice is warm and friendly.

“Fantastic, now that I've seen your beautiful face.” Carter flashes a charming grin, and I clench my fists, jealousy coiling in my chest. Who does he think he is, talking to Emily like that?

“Thank you, Carter. You’re always so kind.” Emily smiles politely, but there’s a tightness around her eyes that tells me she’s not entirely comfortable with his words.

“Say, Emily, have you ever considered going out for dinner with me? I’d love to get to know you better.” Carter’s voice is smooth as silk, and the way he looks at her makes my skin crawl.

“Um, thank you for the offer, but I’m quite busy lately,” she replies hesitantly. “Maybe another time.”

“Of course, I understand.” He doesn’t sound disappointed, just...patient. As if he knows he’ll get what he wants eventually.

I watch as Emily enters the candy shop, and Carter lingers outside for a moment more before walking away. My heart races, and I can’t help but feel protective of her, even though I’ve never had the courage to approach her myself. What are Carter’s intentions? If he truly has ulterior motives, I need to find out, no matter what it takes.

With newfound resolve, I keep watch from my hidden spot, eyes fixed on Emily through the candy shop window. I promise myself that I will protect her—that I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe. And though I know it may be unhealthy, I cannot help but obsess over her every move, telling myself that it’s for her own good.



The sun casts a warm glow on the candy shop windows, reflecting off the vibrant colors of the sweets inside. My heart races as I watch Emily through the glass, her blonde hair catching the light like a halo. She moves gracefully through the store, arranging a display of chocolates with care. Her laughter is a melody that could sweeten any sour day.

“Max, you’re doing it again,” I scold myself under my breath, forcing my gaze away from her. I know I shouldn’t be here, watching her like this, but I can’t help myself. Good thing I’m good enough at my job I can do it from home. Ever

since I laid eyes on Emily, stalking her has been my job. I only ever went in to a physical office as a formality, but a nerd like me can program from anywhere.

As if on cue, Carter enters the shop, and my jaw clenches. He approaches Emily with an easy smile, his charm undeniable. But something about him sets off alarms in my mind and whispers of danger that I can't ignore.

"Hey there, beautiful," Carter greets her, winking as he leans against the counter. "Your smile always brightens up the room."

"Thanks, Carter," Emily replies, her cheeks flushing at the compliment. She tries to maintain her usual cheerfulness, but I can see the subtle shift in her body language, the way she's not entirely comfortable with his words.

With newfound resolve, I keep watch from my hidden spot, eyes fixed on Emily through the candy shop window.

Days pass, and I continue to watch Emily from afar. Carter stops by the candy shop more frequently, each interaction between them sending a surge of anxiety through me. It's a storm brewing on the horizon, dark clouds threatening to rain down upon Millfield at any moment.

One evening, as I follow Carter through the town, I hear him speaking on the phone, his voice dripping with malice. "No, Emily still doesn't suspect anything. She's too trusting for her own good. Once I have her under my control, she'll be the perfect pawn."

I freeze in my tracks, shock coursing through my veins like ice. So, there it is—the truth about Carter's intentions. He wants to manipulate Emily, to use her for his own twisted gains—whatever those are. My heart clenches with a mix of fury and fear, fueled by the desire to protect her at all costs.

Now that I know who the real enemy is, I won't rest until Emily is safe from Carter's clutches. I will be her guardian angel, her silent protector, watching from the shadows to ensure that she remains unharmed. I may not be the hero she deserves, but I will certainly be the one she needs.



Over the next few days, I watch Emily even more closely than before, my heart swelling with a fierce protectiveness. When Carter shows up at the candy shop, his sly smiles and subtle gestures send shivers down my spine. It's as if he's a coiled snake, waiting to strike when Emily least expects it.

"Stay strong, Emily," I whisper as she laughs at something Carter says, her blue eyes sparkling like stars in the night sky. "I won't let him hurt you."

Time feels like it's running out, sand trickling through the hourglass of her safety. In the back of my mind, I know that sooner or later, Carter will make his move, and when he does, I'll be there to shield Emily from the storm.

For now, all I can do is remain vigilant, a silent sentinel watching over the woman who has unknowingly captured my heart. I may not have the words to tell her how I feel, but my actions will speak louder than any whispered confession ever could.

As the sun sets each day, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson, I promise myself that I will protect Emily, no matter the cost. She is a flame burning brightly in the darkness, and I refuse to let anyone snuff out her light.

CHAPTER 8

Max

I STAND OUTSIDE the candy shop, watching as Emily locks up for the night. The door chime announces her exit, like a sweet melody meant just for her. Through the large glass window, I can see the brightly lit interior with shelves stocked with colorful candies. It's a world of confections that seems fitting for someone as vibrant and joyful as Emily.

“Another day done,” she says to herself, unaware of my presence. She flips the sign on the door to ‘closed,’ and as she does, a small smile dances on her lips. It's no secret that she loves her job, but there's something about closing time that makes me think she cherishes these moments alone in the candy wonderland.

Emily is alone in the shop now, counting the day's earnings and preparing to leave. I watch her graceful hands sort through the cash, her blue eyes alight like the glow of gummy bears in the afternoon sun. I've been coming here for weeks, yet I still can't muster up the courage to say more than a few words to her. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to be near her, to protect her, even if it means simply watching over the candy shop where she spends her days.

“Alright then,” she murmurs, slipping the money into the register and giving the counter one last wipe with a cloth. “Time to go home.”

As she gathers her belongings, my heart races, fueled by the desire to keep her safe. I wish I could tell her how much

she means to me, but words fail me every time. Instead, I focus on silently keeping watch, ensuring nothing disturbs the peace of her evening departure.

“Goodnight, little candy shop,” she whispers as she turns off the lights, plunging the store into darkness. Her silhouette is barely visible against the dim streetlights, but she remains the brightest thing in my world.

My instincts tell me to keep a close eye on her. The quiet night only amplifies my concerns, and it seems I’m not alone in noticing her vulnerability. From the shadows across the street, a group of thugs emerges. There are four of them, each one rougher looking than the last. Their menacing demeanors send shivers down my spine, and they carry weapons—a baseball bat, a crowbar, and one even has brass knuckles.

“Looks like we got ourselves a little treat tonight, boys,” one of the thugs sneers, cracking his knuckles. The others laugh, their voices low and malicious.

“Let’s make this quick,” another thug says, adjusting the grip on his baseball bat. “We don’t want any unexpected surprises.”

My heart races as the footsteps of the thugs echo on the pavement, each step increasing my unease. Their eyes fixate on Emily through the window, predatory gazes sizing up their prey. She’s completely unaware of the danger lurking outside, but I won’t let them hurt her.

“Come on, don’t want to disappoint Carter,” the third thug urges, taking a swig from a flask before tossing it aside.

I watch from the shadows of a nearby alley, my heart pounding in my chest. The tension in my muscles is palpable, like a tightly coiled spring, ready to snap into action at any moment. I can’t bear the thought of those thugs getting anywhere near Emily, and I know I have to act. For her, for myself, for the truth that burns within me like a wildfire.

My body is a testament to countless hours spent honing my physical prowess—thick cords of muscle wrapped around bone, sinew, and determination. I roll my shoulders back,

feeling the satisfying crack of vertebrae aligning. A deep breath fills my lungs, the sweet scent of candy contrasting with the pungent aroma of stale garbage in the alley. As I exhale, I let go of my fear, my hesitation, my doubt.

“Hey!” I shout, bursting from the shadows like a lion protecting its pride. My words slice through the air, sharp and clear, and the thugs turn their attention toward me. Their eyes narrow, sizing me up, but I don’t care. They won’t lay a finger on Emily. Not if I have anything to say about it.

“Who’s this fool?” one thug sneers, his grip tightening on the baseball bat.

“Doesn’t matter,” another replies, cracking his knuckles. “He won’t be standing long.”

“Emily, stay inside!” I call out, hoping she hears the urgency in my voice. “Lock the door!”

“What?” Her voice trembles, a blend of confusion and fear that stirs something primal within me. “What’s going on?”

“Trust me,” I say, my eyes locked on the threats before me, my voice steady and unwavering. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Big words,” the third thug taunts, brandishing his crowbar with a sinister grin. “Let’s see if you can back them up.”

“Come on, then,” I challenge, steeling myself for what’s to come. The fight that follows is swift and brutal, a whirlwind of fists, feet, and raw power. The sound of bone meeting bone rings out like a symphony, each crunch and collision fueling my determination.

Emily cries out, her voice filled with terror as she watches from the safety of the candy shop. But I don’t let it distract me. I can’t afford to. I need to prove myself to her, to show her that I am worthy of her trust, her affection, her *heart*.

“Stay back, Emily,” I grit out between clenched teeth, sweat dripping down my brow as I face the final thug, the one with brass knuckles glinting in the dim light. “I’ve got this.”

Our eyes meet, and I see something in hers that I haven't seen before—a flicker of admiration, of gratitude, of something more. And it gives me the strength to land one final blow, sending the last thug crumpling to the ground.

“Emily,” I breathe, my chest heaving as I reach for her hand. Our fingers interlock like puzzle pieces, and for a moment, I feel as though our souls are intertwined. The warmth of her touch sends sparks dancing across my skin as we race through the shadows. “We need to go. Now.”

“Okay,” she whispers, her fingers trembling within my grasp.

As we disappear into the night, I promise to keep her safe—no matter what lies ahead. And as I glance at her beautiful face, illuminated by the glow of the streetlights, I know that I would do anything, endure anything, for her. For *us*.

The fight has ended, but my heart still races. I glance over at Emily, her wide blue eyes filled with a mix of fear and admiration. And it's in that moment that I know—she's worth fighting for, every single time.

“Who were those men?” she asks, her breath coming in short gasps as we navigate the darkness together.

“Thugs,” I reply, my mind racing with thoughts of Carter, his cunning smile, his manipulation. “But don't worry. They won't hurt you anymore.”

“Who would have thought?” she swallows. “This kind of danger lurking right here in our perfect little town. Thank you for protecting me,” she whispers, squeezing my hand tighter.

Her hand in mine feels like a lifeline, connecting us to each other in this whirlwind of chaos.

“Any time,” I promise, swallowing hard as we reach the far end of the alley, hidden from view. My chest tightens with the weight of my unspoken confession. I'll do anything to keep her safe, anything to protect her.

“Did your sister like the chocolates?” she asks.

My heart leaps within me. *She remembers me!*

“Yeah,” I tell her. “She loved them.”

Like I love you.

She grins at me. “What’s your name?”

“Max,” my voice comes out low and rough.

“Max,” she repeats it and I about jizz in my pants. Fuck, I’m pathetic, and I’ve got it so bad for her.

And as she gazes at me with a mix of gratitude and admiration, her eyes shining like constellations in the night sky, I know that I will move mountains for her—even if it means facing demons I never knew existed.

CHAPTER 9

Emily

THE WARMTH of the sun caresses my skin, as if trying to soothe away the lingering fear that clings to me like a stubborn shadow. Max stands beside me, his strong arms folded across his broad chest, dark brown eyes full of concern.

“Thank you,” I breathe, my voice soft and wavering. “You...you really saved me back there.”

He looks down at his shoes, his cheeks flushing with a hint of pink. “It was nothing, Emily. I’m just glad I was there to help.”

“Nothing?” I shake my head in disbelief. “Max, you’re a hero.”

His gaze shifts to meet mine, the vulnerability in his eyes making it hard to look away. It feels like we’re two souls dancing on the edge of a newfound connection. I never thought someone like him would emerge from the shadows and save me—I never thought I’d be *in need* of saving. Yet, here he is, standing before me—a beacon of hope and strength.

“Can I walk you home?” Max asks quietly, his awkwardness emphasized by the way he rubs the back of his neck.

“Of course,” I reply, realizing that this man might just be someone I could trust. Friendship blooms within me like a rose opening its petals to reveal hidden depths of beauty.

The sun casts a warm glow over the city, bathing the buildings in hues of gold and amber. Max and I stroll down the sidewalk, our footsteps synchronized like the rhythm of a heartbeat.

“Hey, we should exchange phone numbers,” I suggest, my voice wavering slightly. I don’t know why I feel nervous. I’m *never* nervous, but good lord, I remember him from that day in the candy shop. He has to be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.

Max gazes at me with a tinge of surprise in his eyes, but then nods in agreement.

“Sure, that’s a good idea,” he says, pulling out his phone from his pocket. I do the same, and we exchange digits, each typing the other’s number into our respective devices with careful precision. “And email addresses too, just in case,” he adds, his shyness evident in the way he looks down at his phone while speaking.

It’s kind of enduring seeing such a huge, hulking, handsome guy like him exhibiting shyness. He reminds me of a big teddy bear.

A big, handsome, extremely muscular teddy bear.

“Great,” I reply, feeling the warmth of a blossoming friendship spread through my chest like liquid sunshine. As we finish exchanging contact information, a thought crosses my mind—one that makes my heart race with anticipation.

“Max,” I begin, trying to sound casual despite the pounding in my chest, “would you like to join Olivia and me for coffee sometime? There’s this lovely little café nearby that we often go to.”

His eyes widen, and for a moment, I worry that I’ve crossed some invisible boundary. But then his lips curl into a smile, and it’s like watching the sunrise after a long, dark night.

“I’d love to,” he replies, the sincerity in his voice tugging at my heartstrings. “Just let me know when, and I’ll be there.”

“Perfect,” I say, returning his smile with one of my own, feeling the corners of my eyes crinkle with joy.



The moment Max and I step into the café, it's like we've entered a small sanctuary carved out of the bustling world outside. We met in the park first and walked over together. The air is imbued with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, mingling with the sweet scent of baked goods that seem to whisper promises of delight. Soft jazz music floats through the air, wrapping around us like a lover's embrace.

“Wow, this place is so cozy,” Max remarks, his eyes taking in everything, from the mismatched cushions on the plush seating to the strings of fairy lights that dance along the walls. A smile soft as morning dew graces his lips, making my heart flutter like a butterfly caught in a summer breeze.

“Isn't it?” I reply, guiding him toward an empty table nestled near the large window overlooking the street. We take our seats, the sunlight casting a warm glow over us, bathing us in its golden embrace. As we settle, I can't help but notice how Max's muscular frame contrasts beautifully against the delicate surroundings like a wild stallion in a field of daisies.

As we peruse the menu, I steal glances at Max, watching the way his brow furrows just slightly when he reads each item. It's strangely endearing, and I find myself wanting to know more about what goes on in that complex mind of his. Does he weigh each option as carefully in other aspects of life? Or is there something about the simple act of choosing a beverage that brings out the perfectionist in him?

“Any recommendations?” he asks, pulling me from my musings.

“Definitely the lavender latte,” I suggest, my voice laced with enthusiasm. “It's like drinking a cup of liquid poetry.”

“Sounds interesting,” Max says, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “I'll give it a try.”

We place our orders and spend the next few minutes sipping warm coffee and exchanging stories, the steam from our cups rising like tendrils of dreams, weaving around us as we laugh and connect. It's fascinating to watch Max's walls slowly crumble, his shyness giving way to genuine interest in our conversation.

"Emily," he says at one point, his voice soft and vulnerable, "I'm really grateful for this. For you inviting me here, for everything."

"The pleasure is all mine," I reply, my heart swelling with warmth. And I mean it. This moment feels like a gift—one that I'll cherish and protect with every fiber of my being.

With each sip of coffee, each shared story, and each stolen glance, our connection deepens, like roots intertwining beneath the earth. And as we sit there, bathed in sunlight and surrounded by the cozy ambiance of the café, I can't help but feel that something truly beautiful has begun to bloom between us.

The scent of coffee beans fills my nostrils, a fragrant invitation to let go of my worries and simply be present. I take a deep breath, feeling the warmth of the café seep into my bones. Max and I are settled into a cozy corner table, our knees almost touching. I can't help but notice the way his strong hands wrap around his mug, fingers tapping out an anxious rhythm on the ceramic.

"Tell me about your hobbies," I prompt, breaking the comfortable silence between us. "What do you like to do in your free time, Max?"

He hesitates for a moment, as if sorting through the pages of his life, searching for the right words. "I love to play video games, read, anything that stimulates my mind really," he finally says, his voice steady and genuine. "It's like diving into someone else's world for a little while, you know? Escaping reality."

"Absolutely," I agree, my heart thudding against my ribs like a hummingbird's wings. "There's something magical about getting lost in a good book or game."

Max's eyes light up at my response, and I feel a spark of connection ignite between us. "You game?"

"Used to," I admit. "I don't have a console now, but I used to love gaming with my brother when I was growing up."

As the conversation flows, we discover more common ground. A shared love of hiking, an appreciation for art, and a mutual fascination with foreign languages.

"Je parle un peu français," Max admits sheepishly, blushing from beneath his dark curls. "I've always wanted to visit Paris and practice my French."

"Paris is incredible," I enthuse, recalling my own trip to the City of Light. "You'll fall in love with it, I promise. And your French sounds great!"

"Merci beaucoup," he replies, grinning, and I can see the confidence blooming within him like a flower.

Our laughter and easy banter catch the attention of the other patrons, their heads turning toward us like sunflowers seeking the sun. In this moment, it feels like the universe is conspiring in our favor, as if we've stepped into a kaleidoscope of possibilities, and all we have to do is choose one.

The café door swings open, ushering in a gust of crisp autumn air. Olivia strides in, her dark hair framing her face like a halo of midnight. She spots us and graces us with a warm smile that could outshine the sun. I can't help but feel grateful for her presence, knowing she's always had my back.

"Hey, you two," Olivia greets, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to me. "So, what have I missed?"

"Max was just telling me about his love for languages," I explain, glancing over at him.

"Wow, that's impressive!" Olivia exclaims, genuinely intrigued. "I've always wanted to learn another language. Maybe you can teach Emily and me some French sometime."

"Je serais ravi," Max replies, clearly delighted by the prospect.

As the conversation continues, I can see the bond between us strengthening, the threads of friendship weaving together like a tapestry. There's an undeniable sense of belonging that fills the air—a feeling that, somehow, we were always meant to find each other.

The steam from my coffee rises, swirling like tendrils of morning mist above the cup. The rich aroma of roasted beans and cinnamon infuse the air with a welcoming warmth. I take a sip, letting the liquid heat envelop my tongue and carry me to memories of cozy mornings spent in bed, wrapped in a cocoon of blankets.

“Emily mentioned you were the one who saved her from those creeps the other day,” Olivia says, turning to Max with an appreciative gaze. “I can't thank you enough for stepping in when you did.”

Max's cheeks turn a rosy hue, as if kissed by the first light of dawn, and he stammers, “It was nothing, really. I just couldn't stand by and let anything happen to her.”

His words are like raindrops on parched earth, quenching a thirst I didn't know I had. It's rare to find someone so genuinely concerned about others. My heart swells with gratitude, and I place a gentle hand on his arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“Still, it meant a lot to me,” I say, my voice softening like melting chocolate. “Thank you, Max.”

“Of course,” he replies, his eyes meeting mine for a moment before he quickly looks away, but not before I catch a glimpse of the fire burning within him—a passion that sends shivers down my spine.

We fall into easy conversation, our words weaving together in a symphony of laughter and shared experiences. We discuss everything from our favorite books to childhood adventures, creating a tapestry of understanding that connects us on a deeper level. With each story exchanged, I can't help but feel the weight of my reservations lifting, replaced with a budding sense of trust and camaraderie.

As Olivia recounts a hilarious tale about her misadventures in baking, Max joins in with anecdotes of his own. I watch the way his eyes sparkle with mirth, and how his laughter resonates like a melody that makes my heart dance.

The afternoon passes in a blur of stories and laughter, our words painting pictures more vivid than any canvas.

The last drops of coffee linger in the bottom of our cups as the sun begins to dip lower in the sky. Olivia had to jet, but Max and I lingered on, as if we're both reluctant for this to end.

“Emily,” Max says, his voice soft and hesitant like a whispering breeze. “I’ve really enjoyed spending time with you today. Do you think...maybe we could do this again soon?”

His eyes search mine, vulnerability swirling in their depths like a storm-tossed sea. A warmth blossoms in my chest, the realization that I feel the same way enveloping me like a comforting embrace.

“Of course, Max,” I reply, my voice barely more than a breath. “I’d love that.”

His smile is a sunrise, lighting up his face and chasing away the shadows.

Our time together draws to a close, and we rise from our seats, reluctance heavy in the air.

“Take care, Emily,” Max says, his voice a gentle caress.

“Goodbye, Max,” I reply, giving him one last smile before turning away.

As we part ways, the colors of the setting sun paint the sky with a breathtaking tapestry, reflecting the beauty of the connection we’ve built. The taste of newfound friendship lingers on my tongue, sweet and promising, leaving me eager for the next chapter of our story.

CHAPTER 10

Max

THE WARM AROMA of caramel and vanilla dances around me as I step into the candy shop. My heart races, and for a moment, I forget the cold winter air biting at my cheeks. Emily's laughter chimes like windchimes in a gentle breeze, instantly pulling my focus to her.

"Hey, Max!" she exclaims, her bright blue eyes sparkling with excitement. "You're just in time to try our new chocolate-covered strawberries. They're divine."

I can't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "Sounds delicious," I reply, trying to maintain eye contact despite my shyness. As we chat about the latest confections, I find myself more and more entranced by her words, each one sweeter than the treats that surround us.

"Did you see the new art exhibit at the gallery downtown?" she asks, her eyes lighting up. "The impressionist paintings are absolutely breathtaking."

"I haven't had the chance yet," I admit, feeling the warmth of her interest seeping into my soul. "Would you like to go together sometime?"

Her face lights up like the first break of dawn, and my heart swells with hope. "I'd love that, Max."

As I leave the candy shop, clutching a bag filled with the chocolate-covered strawberries, my thoughts spiral around Emily. She is the sunbeam breaking through the clouds on a

stormy day, and I find myself wanting nothing more than to bask in her light.

But how can I express these feelings? The idea of confessing my growing affection outright makes my stomach twist into knots. I need something more subtle yet meaningful, something that will convey my gratitude for every shared smile and conversation.

“Flowers,” I whisper to myself as I walk along the snow-dusted sidewalk. Yes, flowers would be perfect. A beautiful, delicate symbol of the connection blossoming between us.

The moment I step outside, the world greets me with a wintry embrace. Snowflakes dance and swirl around me, each one unique and captivating like Emily’s laughter. My breath hangs in the air as I make my way down the street, imagining her reaction to the flowers.

“Yellow roses,” I say to myself, feeling the warmth of their meaning bloom inside me. They symbolize friendship, joy, and new beginnings—the very essence of what I hope to share with her.

As I enter the florist’s shop, the fragrance of countless blossoms fills my nostrils, reminding me of the first time I encountered Emily’s sweet scent. The florist greets me with a warm smile, and I request a bouquet of yellow roses, each petal an echo of Emily’s bright spirit.

“Would you like to include a note?” she asks, gesturing to a stack of elegant cards.

“Yes, please,” I reply, taking a deep breath as I summon the courage to put my feelings into words.

I pick up a pen, feeling its weight in my hand and the possibilities it holds. With a steady hand, I write:

Dear Emily,

Each day I spend with you is like discovering a hidden treasure – a gem that sparkles with the promise of joy and happiness. Your

kindness and warmth have brought light to my once-gray world, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

These yellow roses are but a small token of my appreciation for every shared smile and conversation. Like these delicate petals, our connection has bloomed into something I cherish deeply. Thank you for being the sunshine that brightens my days.

Yours,

Max

Handing the note back to the florist, I watch as she tucks it gently among the vibrant roses. As the bouquet is wrapped, my heart races in anticipation of Emily's reaction. Will she understand the depth of my feelings, hidden beneath layers of petals and ink?

"Here you are," the florist says, presenting me with a stunning arrangement. "Good luck."

"Thank you," I reply, cradling the flowers like a sacred treasure. As I exit the shop, the world seems brighter, as if the sun has broken through the clouds to share in my joy.

"Emily," I whisper, clutching the bouquet tighter, "I hope these roses can convey what words alone cannot."



Emily

Sunlight pours through the candy shop windows, casting a warm glow on the colorful jars lining the shelves. The scent of sugar and chocolate fills the air, creating an atmosphere of pure delight. I'm standing behind the counter, arranging candy bags, when the bell above the door chimes, announcing Max's arrival.

“Hey, Emily,” he says, his voice tinged with nerves as he steps into the shop. In his hands is a bouquet of yellow roses, their petals vibrant against the white tissue paper cradling them. My heart flutters like a hummingbird at the sight.

“Hi, Max,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. “What brings you here today?”

“Um, these are for you.” He hesitates before extending the bouquet toward me, his eyes searching mine for any sign of rejection.

“Yellow roses?” I breathe, my fingers brushing over the soft petals as I take the flowers from him. “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“Read the note,” he urges, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as if bracing himself for my reaction.

I carefully unfold the small piece of paper tucked among the roses and read Max’s words—words that feel like a lifeline thrown out to someone who’s been drifting at sea for far too long.

“Max,” I whisper, the tears welling up in my eyes refusing to be held back any longer. “This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you.”

“Really?” Relief floods his face, and I can’t help but notice how it transforms him, smoothing out the lines of worry that had etched themselves there moments before.

“Really.” I clutch the note to my chest, letting the feeling of being seen and cherished wash over me like a wave.

“Good,” he says, a shy smile playing on his lips. “I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate our time together.”

“Max,” I say, my voice shaking with emotion. “I’ve been feeling the same way.” The confession hangs in the air between us, a fragile thread threatening to snap under the weight of our shared vulnerability.

“Emily,” Max breathes, reaching out to brush his fingers against mine in a hesitant touch that sends shivers down my

spine.

“Thank you,” I breathe, my eyes locked with Max’s as I step closer to him, feeling the warmth of his body radiating against mine. “For the flowers, and for making me feel so special.”

He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat like a ship caught in a stormy sea. “You’re worth it, Emily,” he whispers, his voice barely audible above the pounding of my heart.

With that, I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his in a tentative, electrifying kiss. It’s like a lightning bolt, igniting something deep within me—a fire that burns with the ferocity of a thousand suns. Max hesitates for only a moment before he kisses me back, his strong arms wrapping around me, pulling me tight against his solid chest. His lips are soft and warm, and they taste like the promise of something more—something real and true.

I don’t know what comes over me then, but the truth comes tumbling from my lips. “Max, I need you.”

“Emily,” he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot and ragged. “Are you sure about this?”

“More than anything,” I whisper, my heart somersaulting in my chest like a trapeze artist soaring through the air. “Would you like to come to my place?”

Max nods, his eyes burning with desire and vulnerability, and we walk hand in hand to my apartment. Sexual tension hangs in the air between us, and my sex grows wetter with every step.

Max is silent, but I know he feels the same way. I can feel his excited nervousness. It mirrors my own.

“Your hands are trembling,” I say softly, taking one of his large hands in mine. He looks down at our intertwined fingers, nodding slowly.

“It’s just...I’ve never done this before,” he admits, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “And I want it to be perfect for you.”

“Neither have I,” I tell him, finding solace in our shared inexperience. “But we’ll figure it out together, won’t we?”

“Of course,” he replies, his eyes full of love and determination.

Slowly, tenderly, we undress each other, our fingers tracing paths of discovery across the landscapes of our bodies. I marvel at his hard cock. The air around us is charged with electricity as our bare skin meets for the first time, a symphony of sensation that leaves me breathless.

“Max,” I moan his name as his lips kiss mine gently and then with increased passion.

“Fuck, Emily, baby.”

Something within me clenches at hearing Max call me ‘baby,’ and I melt into him.

Max lowers me gently onto the bed, my body sinking into the soft sheets like a feather drifting through the sky. He hovers above me, his muscular frame casting a protective shadow over my own delicate form. Our gazes lock, and for a moment, we are suspended in time, two souls teetering on the edge of the unknown.

“Are you ready?” Max asks, his voice tinged with reverence and awe as his eyes sweep over my naked body. “God, you’re so perfect, Emily.”

“You are too,” I whisper as I reach up to pull him closer. “I trust you, Max.”

And with that, he enters me—slowly, cautiously, as if navigating uncharted waters. His cock fills me so completely I gasp. It’s an entirely new world of sensation, one that leaves me gasping and clinging to his broad shoulders as we explore this intimate territory together. Through the pain and discomfort, there’s something beautiful and transcendent about the way Max moves within me, each careful thrust bringing us closer together—not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

“Emily,” he groans, his face contorted with pleasure and effort. “You’re so incredible.”

“Max,” I whimper, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I bury my head in his neck so he doesn’t see them.

Max grunts and starts fucking into me harder, his breathing getting more labored with each stroke.

“E-Emily, I’m gonna come.”

I meet his thrusts, my core pulsing around his cock as my body starts to convulse with pleasure.

The moment we both start to come, we are falling, tumbling through the sky together, united and lost amongst the stars, and as we quake around each other, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’ve found something more than a lover in Max.

I’ve found my soulmate.

CHAPTER 11

Emily

THE WIND BLOWS GENTLY through my hair, tickling my cheeks as I walk down the street. The rhythmic click of my heels on the pavement accompanies me like a metronome, keeping time with the beat of my heart. Though the sun is setting, a lingering warmth still remains in the air, a nostalgic reminder of the summer days that have long since passed.

“Emily!”

The sound of my name interrupts my thoughts. I turn to see Carter approaching, his stride confident yet somehow hesitant. Concern etches itself across his handsome features, and I can’t help but feel a flutter of curiosity mixed with apprehension.

“Hey, Carter,” I respond, my voice steady despite the uneasiness creeping up my spine. “Is everything alright?”

His warm brown eyes search mine for a moment, as if gauging whether or not to speak, before he finally breaks the silence. “I thought you should know, Emily...I’ve seen Max watching you.”

My heart skips a beat at the mention of Max’s name, the image of his piercing green eyes and shy smile flashing through my mind. The passion we shared last night...

“Oka-ay...” I drag out the word, my confusion evident.

“No, Emily, I mean I’ve seen him *watching* you—like creepy psycho watching you.”

A surge of emotions courses through me. Disbelief, confusion, betrayal, *hurt*.

The rhythmic clicking of my heels against the pavement suddenly seems jagged and discordant. “What do you mean?” I ask.

Carter sighs, clearly struggling with whether to share his concerns. “I’ve seen him lurking around outside your apartment and the candy shop, always keeping an eye on you. It’s like he’s constantly monitoring your every move, and it worries me.”

The words hit me like a tidal wave, threatening to drown me in their implications. My eyes widen as shock courses through me, making my heart race. The image of Max, always so gentle and endearing, stalking me like a predator preys on its victim sends shivers down my spine.

“Are you sure?” I whisper, hoping against hope that there’s been some kind of mistake. “Maybe he’s just...I don’t know, concerned about something else? A group of men did just try to attack me.” I try to defend Max—both to Carter and my mind.

“Another time,” Carter continues, “I was out for a run, and I saw him sitting in his car near your apartment, taking notes or something. It looked like he had a whole file on you, Emily. That’s when I knew I had to say something.”

My stomach churns, thoughts swirling together like a whirlpool threatening to pull me under. How could Max keep this from me? I thought we were building a foundation of trust, brick by brick, but now it seems like our castle was made of sand, ready to collapse beneath the tide.

As Carter reveals more of Max’s clandestine actions, my heart hammers in my chest like a wild bird trapped in a cage. The severity of Max’s behavior dawns on me with each sickening detail. He’s morphed from the guy who would catch

me when I fell to the lurking shadow that silently stalks my every move.

“Emily, he’s been watching you for weeks,” Carter says, his voice a thread of silk barely holding together against the weight of his concern. “He’s been outside your apartment at night, taking photos...he’s even followed you to work.”

Max pulls out a packet and hands it to me. I open it and shift through the photos of Max watching me.

While Max was watching me, Carter was apparently watching him.

My hands begin to shake like trembling autumn leaves, the shock of this revelation uprooting everything I thought I knew about Max. My breathing grows shallow, as though trying to draw air through a pinhole.

“Are you alright?” Carter asks, his eyes reflecting the storm of emotions swirling within me.

I nod, but the motion feels hollow and unconvincing. My thoughts scatter like dandelion seeds on the wind, refusing to be corralled into coherence. How could I have missed the signs? Had I been so blind to the cracks beneath Max’s seemingly tender exterior?

What if he’s not really as shy as he puts on? What if it was all an act to get him to trust me? All the ‘what if’s’ keep spinning through my head so quickly it’s hard for me to keep up with them all.

“Emily,” Carter says gently, his voice filled with sincerity. “I wouldn’t bring this up if I didn’t think it was important. I care about you, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

The concern etched into his handsome features is like a dagger piercing my heart, slicing through the delicate layers of trust I’ve built up around Max. As much as I want to dismiss Carter’s claims, the seed of doubt has been planted, and I can feel it taking root within me, twisting and growing like ivy reaching for sunlight.

“Thank you for telling me,” I say, my voice barely audible above the chaotic symphony of thoughts and emotions

crashing through my mind like a hurricane. “I...I need some time to think about all this.”

“Of course,” Carter replies, his eyes filled with sympathy. “Just know that I’m here for you, Emily. Whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

A dull ache forms in my chest, expanding with each beat of my heart as Carter’s words echo in my head. The Max I’ve come to know and trust feels like a mirage, vanishing before my eyes, leaving me stranded in a desert of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 12

Max

I DIAL EMILY'S NUMBER, my heart pounding in anticipation. The call goes straight to voicemail, and I frown, worry settling in the pit of my stomach. Trying again, it's the same result. I can't help but wonder if she's intentionally ignoring me, or if something happened.

Me: *Are you okay?* I text her, my fingers tapping against the screen with a sense of urgency. It feels like an eternity before a response comes through.

Emily: *Don't you already know? You've been watching me...*

My heart sinks like a stone dropped in water, the ripples of despair spreading through my chest. She *knows*. Somehow, my secret has been exposed, and the fragile threads connecting us have snapped under the weight of my obsessive behavior. Desperation takes hold as I quickly type out another message.

Me: *Please, let me explain.*

But there's no answer. Silence stretches out between us like a chasm I cannot cross. I stare at my phone, willing it to come alive with her words, but it remains lifeless in my hand.

The world around me loses its color, everything fading into shades of gray as Emily distances herself from me. I can't believe I finally had her—that bright, shining light in my otherwise dull existence—only to fuck it all up. And yet, even

after realizing that my actions have pushed her away, I can't stop watching her.

It's as if I'm trapped in an invisible cage, driven by the obsessive need to ensure her safety. I lurk in the shadows, my eyes hungrily drinking in every detail of her from a distance. Her vibrant blonde hair flows like a golden river down her back, framing her delicate face as she greets customers in the candy shop with a dazzling smile. Her bright blue eyes are gems that seem to sparkle with an inner light, drawing people in like moths to a flame.

I still remember the way she felt in my arms. So *right*. So *perfect*.

So *mine*.

"Emily," I whisper to myself, the name tasting bittersweet on my tongue. It's a cruel irony that the person who has brought so much joy and light into my life is now the source of my greatest despair. I'm drowning in the abyss of my own making, unable to reach the shore where she stands, untouchable.

Maybe I can't find a way to explain my actions, to make her understand why I've been watching her. Maybe I can't mend what's broken between us, but I continue to watch Emily from afar, determined to protect her from harm.

Even if it means sacrificing my own happiness.



Carter's laughter echoes through the air, grating on my nerves like nails on a chalkboard. I watch him from the shadows, my hands balled into fists as he leans in closer to Emily, his smile oozing false charm. The sight of them together sickens me, stirring a tempest of anger and frustration deep within my chest.

"Come on, Emily. Just dinner," Carter murmurs, his voice dripping with honeyed sincerity. But I see the way his eyes dart around, calculating, predatory. I know there must be some

ulterior motive behind his actions, and I'm determined to uncover it.

In the following days, I delve into Carter's past, his business dealings, anything that might give me a clue as to what he's truly after. And then, like a bolt of lightning, it hits me: the candy shop. He wants the location, the prime piece of real estate nestled in the heart of Millfield. He plans to make Emily dependent on him, exploiting her trust and vulnerability to gain control of the shop.

The pieces fall into place, and my blood runs cold as I realize the true extent of Carter's scheming. It was him who orchestrated the attack on Emily, hoping to scare her enough to turn to him for advice. I imagine him, feigning concern, offering to buy the building off her once she becomes the owner, convincing her it's an unsafe location.

My resolve hardens, and I vow to protect Emily from Carter's machinations at all costs.

"Emily, please," he pleads, desperation creeping into his voice. "I just want to take you to dinner."

But Emily is stronger than he realizes. She keeps him at arm's length, thwarting his advances with a quiet grace and determination that makes my heart swell with pride.

"Thanks, but I'm busy," she tells him firmly.

Carter's patience wanes, and I sense the dam of his restraint beginning to crack. He grabs Emily's arm, pulling her toward him, and it's as if a switch flips inside me. No more hiding in the shadows. I need to act.

"Let go of her," I growl, stepping out from my hiding place. The shock on their faces is palpable, but I don't care. All that matters is putting an end to this twisted game.

"Max?" Emily stammers, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Emily, he's been lying to you," I say, my voice shaking with barely contained rage. "He wants the candy shop. He's been manipulating you this whole time."

In that moment, the veil of Carter's deception shatters, and Emily sees him for who he truly is. Gratitude fills her gaze as she looks at me, and suddenly, the fire within me that had tried to tamp down to embers roars back to life.

"Why, you meddling motherfucker," Carter spits at me.

"Stop," Emily orders, holding up her hand. She looks at Carter with disgust, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Get out," she commands, her voice cracking. "Get out of here or I'll call the cops."

"You're making a big mistake, Emily," Carter snarls.

"Get out," she repeats, her tone unwavering.

It's the last thing he wants, but there's no other choice. Carter storms off, and I walk over to Emily. She wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace, and I hold her close, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against mine.

"Thank you," she whispers into my chest, her voice choked with emotion.

"Emily," I begin, "I'm sorry about—"

Emily shushes me with a finger to my lips. "It doesn't matter anymore." She peers up at me shyly before she admits, "I've missed you, Max. And I can't believe you ever stalked me maliciously."

"I didn't," I swear earnestly. "You've seen me, Emily. I'm awkward as fuck. I'm just a nerd who's in love with a girl way out of his league."

My face colors when I realize what I've just confessed, but Emily's eyes soften as she smiles at me with that sweet smile I'd cut my right hand off just to see. "You love me?"

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her palm reverently. "I fucking worship you, Emily. I know I'm quiet and awkward and weird, but I'd do anything for you."

Emily shakes her head. "I don't think you see yourself the way other people do, Max. You're hot as hell. I don't get why you're not more confident. You could have any girl you wanted."

My heart soars at her words, and I cup her face in my hands as I tell her earnestly, “The only girl I want is *you*.”

“Good,” she grins, “because the only guy I want is you.”

My heart damn near leaps out of my throat. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying, Emily?”

She wraps her arms around my neck and whispers against my lips, the soft feel of her lips grazing mine as she does so, “I love you too, Max.”

And with that, I seal my mouth against hers, kissing her with all the pent-up tension, all the longing, all the love I’ve been bottling up for months. Emily’s hands grip my hair as she kisses me back, our tongues dancing as we taste each other. My hands wander down to her ass, my palms cupping the soft, round flesh through her skirt. I pull her against me, my cock hardening at the sensation of her softness pressing against me. Emily makes a sound of approval as she leans into me, her breasts smashing against my chest. “I want you so bad,” she breathes. Her eyes flutter shut as I lean down to kiss her neck, and she moans when I lay her back against the counter.

“I want you too,” I growl, my cock straining against my pants.

Emily reaches down and rubs my bulge, her eyes gleaming. I feel like her hands are on me for the first time as she rubs my cock through my jeans, her grin widening when I groan. She unzips my pants and pulls my cock out, and I thrust into her hand, testing the waters, seeing how far she’s willing to go. Her hand wraps around my cock as she pumps it up and down, lust greedily filling her eyes as she does so.

“Ohhh, fuck,” I groan as she strokes my cock. “You’re so good at that, Emily.”

“I’m better at other things,” she grins. “Let me show you.”

Emily lifts both her legs and wraps them around my waist. I feel her soft, wet heat on my cock, and I know what she wants. I know exactly what she’s asking for. I want to be inside her so fucking bad that I may have to beg.

She looks up at me with lustful eyes. “Please, Max. I want you.”

I slide into her, and it’s like coming home. I’m so deep inside her that I can barely see straight. Emily’s fingernails dig into my back as I begin to thrust into her.

“Ohhhh, fuck!” she cries out, her hips rocking back and forth in time with mine. She throws her head back and moans, “Harder! Please! Harder!”

I slide my thumb inside her mouth, and Emily immediately begins to suck it.

“Come for me, baby,” I growl. “Fucking come for me now.”

I feel her clench around my cock as her back arches, her whole body tightening and then shuddering as I thrust into her. I feel her start to come, and I slide my thumb out of her mouth as I lean down and kiss her. She moans into my mouth as she comes, and it’s more beautiful a sound than I ever imagined.

I thrust into her with one final, hard stroke, deep inside of her, before I come with the most intense orgasm I’ve ever experienced.

I groan into Emily’s mouth as I let my cock spurt a hot, sticky stream of cum into her. Emily kisses me as my cock pulses and shakes, and I kiss her back, my face growing hot against her neck.

I tighten my arms around her, holding onto her desperately.

I’m never going to let her go. Never again.

She’s *mine*.

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Max

“OHHHH, FUCK!”

Emily cries out as my cock rams into her, over and over again. She holds onto the headboard, her face flushed with pleasure. She’s fucking gorgeous, so sexy and in-the-moment, and I love fucking her.

“Harder, Max!” she moans. “Harder!”

I grip her hips, pinning her down as I thrust into her, my cock buried deep inside her. I can tell that she’s close to coming, and I don’t want to come yet. Not before her.

Not before she’s had a chance to enjoy this new, more dominant side of me.

“You like it hard, Emily?” I growl, thrusting into her. “You like it when I fuck that tight pussy of yours long and hard?”

She moans, nodding, and I grin. I can feel the orgasm rippling through her as her pussy tightens around my cock.

“Come for me now, baby,” I groan, feeling the pleasure build up inside me. “I want to feel you come when my cock is deep inside you.”

She moans loudly, her face tight with pleasure, as she gyrates on my cock, thrusting her hips to meet my every stroke. I feel her body tighten around me, and I know that she’s close. She’s so close that I can feel it.

“Come for me, baby,” I growl in her ear. “Come for me now. I want to feel you come on my cock.”

She moans as I feel her pussy spasm around me, her legs tightening as she lets her orgasm overtake her. I groan into her ear as I thrust into her—hard—and I feel my cock explode into her depths.

“Ohhhhh god,” she moans as I keep thrusting into her. I’m trying not to be too rough, but I’m so turned on that I’m not sure how long I can last.

“Keep fucking me, Max,” she moans.

I’ve always loved the way my name sounds when she says it. I love the sound of her voice, and I love how she sounds when she comes.

I thrust into her as her orgasm starts to fade, and I can feel her getting close to the edge again.

“Harder,” she moans. “Please, Max. Fuck me harder.”

I pull her hair back and lean down and kiss her neck as I thrust into her as hard and as fast as I can.

“Ohhhhh, Max,” she moans. “I’m going to come again, oh god...”

I feel her pussy clench around my cock, and I thrust into her as hard as I can, feeling the orgasm rush through me.

But then Emily pushes out from underneath me and pushes me onto my back.

She crawls between my legs and starts sucking for all she’s worth.

I spear my fingers into her blonde hair and hold onto her head as she bobs up and down on me. “Oh, fuck, yes, baby,” I groan. “Put all those years of sucking lollipops to use, honey.”

I’ve long since lost my shyness around Emily. I’m completely open with her and will say shit that would have normally made me blush to even think about. Knowing that Emily accepts me—all of me, even the nerdy, insecure side of

me—made all the difference. Knowing that she’s mine and I’m hers is all that matters to me.

And my beautiful girl loves it when I dirty talk her, so that’s what I’m going to do.

“I want to fuck your face, Emily,” I groan as I start to buck my hips toward her.

She smiles and continues to bob up and down on my cock, her tongue swirling against my shaft as she works me over.

“Do you like that, baby?” I groan. “Do you like it when I fuck your sweet face?”

“Yes,” she moans. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

“Oh fuck!” Hearing my sweet Emily say that is enough to send me over the edge. My cock instantly obeys and starts spurting into Emily’s still-sucking mouth.

My head falls back onto the bed as Emily continues to lick and suck me dry. When she’s done, she crawls up me and smiles down at me like a contented kitten.

I pull her into my arms and settle her against her chest, kissing the top of her head as I do so.

I can’t believe that this amazing woman is my wife. And I couldn’t be prouder of her. She took over the sweet shop, and it’s doing better than ever. I see to the technology side of things, and I’ve even helped her expand so that there are now Sweet Delights all over the country.

We make a good team. The only thing missing from our lives is a family.

But I’m working on changing that every chance I get.

I place my hand on Emily’s belly. She knows what I want. She knows that I want everything with her, but I have to be patient. That will come in time.

She places her hand atop mine and then tilts her head up to look at me. “What do you think about Candy if she’s a girl? Or maybe Graham for a boy?”

I blink as my mind catches the drift of what she's saying. "Emily," I stroke my hand over her belly in wonder. "Are you saying...?"

Emily nods her head and bites her lip. "Yes, Max. We're pregnant."

Tears spring to my eyes, but I don't even try to hide them. I'm a big softie, and my wife knows it.

Plus, she's got tears in her own eyes too.

I huff out a laugh as her names finally hit me. "Do we *have* to name the kids after desserts?"

She smiles and nods. "Most definitely. That's my only caveat. Their names have to be something sweet."

"Just like their momma," I hum against her before I seal our future with a kiss.