

Praise for Lay Me Bare

READERS: Set your '*Do Not Disturb*' now. You'll be glad you did...

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The sexual tension between these two scorches the pages...

... The ground work has been laid in this book, two coming together, betrayal, heart ache and surprises that shock the characters and readers both...

Karen, Goodreads

...I truly adored this book. Read it in less than 24 hours, and just couldn't put it down. A great storyline with so many emotions, insecurity, trust issues, betrayal, loss. It's all going on. The author paints a picture on every page that I could totally envisage and be part of. She gives us everything we ask for, from the characters we fall in love with (and not just the main characters either - so many people here who made me smile, made me want to know them better), to the HEA ending we totally deserve. You won't be disappointed...

SJT EroticLit Reviews

Just wow! So many twists and turns, I couldn't stop reading. Will and Eva are explosive together. I thought their story had concluded until I got to the twist at the end. Now I can't wait to read the next book in the series.

Traci I Stambaugh

Lay Me Bare is a fast-paced novel with so many twists and turns it really kept me guessing. Both main characters have had very bumpy roads through life that have made them skeptics with trust issues. I wound up reading it over a short period of time because it's hard to put down. Enjoy!

Carol P

Prologue

The sun is about thirty minutes from rising. The early morning light is a murky, dull grey.

I take a step backwards, concealing myself deeper in the inky black shadows behind the bus shelter, as a double-decker approaches the stop, glowing like the Christmas lights that have infected the city.

A lone figure waits for the doors to slide open, his eyes probing the blackness, a manilla file tucked under his arm. My fingers close around the handle of the knife in my pocket, the gun in my waistband digging into my spine as I flatten against a brick wall and hold my breath.

He steps down from the safety of the bus, his erratic breath rising in frozen clouds around him as his head whips from side to side. The buttons of his heavy winter coat are straining with every laboured breath.

Years of experience tells me that the only thing this guy is carrying is the file. My fingers relax and I step forward, my heavy boots crunching on the ice. His eyes meet mine, the dim glow of the streetlights highlight the fear in his eyes. He's done his research. Good. Saves time.

I hold out my hand and he slowly places the file in my palm, his eyes on mine, his breathing getting faster. Shorter. I flip through the images, scan the notes, and stop at recommendations. "Who is that?"

"He's your best chance of getting to her."

"Oh?"

"He's . . . well known in the field. If he can't get to her, no one can."

"What are you telling me, exactly?"

He takes half a step backwards, slipping on the ice. “I tried all of the male honeytraps I use. All got turned down, one way or another.”

“It didn’t work?”

“No,” he says quietly, shaking his head.

“So, they’re still together?”

“All I can tell you for certain is that she didn’t respond to our attempts to engage her.” He stands straighter, looking like a man trying not to be afraid. “Can I ask you something?” I nod. “Why do you want to do this?”

Tapping on one of the images, a freeze-frame, I tell him, “She’s my wife.”

Chapter 1

“So much for a day off.”

My eyes lift from my computer screen as Bells, my best friend and business partner, bounds through the office door with an ‘I-told-you-so’ smirk on her lovely face.

“We’re just too good.” I grin, watching her pull the hair tie from her wrist and twist it around her long dark hair as she falls heavily into her chair, her post-honeymoon tan almost completely faded.

The Easter egg hunt we held at Hyde Park over the weekend launched our fledgling events company into the stratosphere, if the amount of bookings and enquiries is anything to go by. We were already responsible for several weddings, birthday parties, and christenings, but our success at the event now means that we’ve also got a glut of corporate enquiries.

The whole thing went off without a hitch and London was besieged by the Easter bunny and friends.

Easter baskets were left on the doorsteps of some of London’s most affluent homes and stuffed full of goodies courtesy of Bells, who is a genius in the kitchen, along with a trail map for an Easter egg hunt led by a digital bunny jumping from screen to screen, all the way to Hyde Park for the grand finale.

It was just magical and every child’s Easter dreams come true. Social media alone reached over eight million impressions before lunchtime on the day itself, and our phones and email inboxes exploded. It’s also the main reason why I have slept maybe four hours in the last two days.

“This is true. However, you,” she says, pointing a serious finger my way, “should be in bed.”

“I’m good.” I shrug. *Who needs sleep, anyway?* “I don’t have to worry about taking care of Summer, so I have more time to work.” I click on the next email and read.

“Ah, yes.” My head snaps up at her tone. My sleep-deprived brain is too slow to come up with a quick getaway. “You’re child free for two whole weeks. Whatever will we do?”

“Bells,” I groan, knowing exactly where this is heading.

“Don’t even bother, Eva. We’re going out. Dressing up. The works. You’re turning into a celibate bloody hermit!”

“Hey! Worry about your own sex life and leave mine alone.” A night out on the town, being drooled over by drunks and druggies, is not my idea of fun. Just leave me in the woods. I’ll have plenty of fun.

“You missed out the hermit part.” She laughs lightly and drops her eyes, her mouth pulled up at one corner in the way she’s always done when she’s thinking. The smile says she’s thinking about Gary.

“I didn’t mean you should worry about it right now,” I mumble, going back to the deluge of emails that have come in over the long weekend.

Gary and I have known each other forever, even longer than I’ve known Helen ‘Hells Bells’ Tyler. Or Lucas, as she is now. He was my brother’s best friend his whole life and has taken over Davey’s role since, well, since there was a role to fill.

“Is it weird for you? Gary and I?” she asks, her voice too quiet.

“You mean the fact that my best friend married my surrogate big brother, who is technically my brother-in-law, making you technically my sister-in-law?”

“Yes,” she says quietly.

“I’ll get over it.”

I can barely hear her when she whispers, “I love him.”

“Well, it’s a bloody good job you do after the effort I put into organising your wedding,” I tease.

The shrill tone of the landline saves me from any further Gary-related conversation, as Bells dives on the phone before I can. She winks as she lifts the receiver to her ear.

“Coffee?” I mouth. She nods as I push to my feet and head for the rooftop café.

I wave to the receptionist and return the smiles of the other tenants and business owners as I head for the stairs.

Bells and I moved our little events company into a corner office in this trendy Covent Garden converted warehouse just three months ago when E:Vents had taken off in a big way. Bells’s idea. I’d have been perfectly happy with a tarp over a decent-sized log, but she felt it would create the wrong impression or something.

Since then, we have been flat out with finalising a big launch event, smaller birthday parties and generally being PR whores. It’s incredible, if exhausting.

All those years of learning how to function on high doses of caffeine, and a serious sleep deficit running around an A&E department, are finally paying off.

Chapter 2

I step out of the lift and on to the rooftop terrace and smile. This space is my favourite thing about this building: floor to ceiling windows let in all available light, even on London's grey days. I run my fingers through the fronds of one of the tall potted palms that are dotted all over. I think the greenery is supposed to bring tranquillity to the madness.

I often bring my laptop up here and hide in a booth, letting the fronds conceal me, or else, if it's not raining, I sit outside and pretend I'm breathing fresh, clean air. I have a good imagination.

I wrap my arms around my middle and head towards the counter, watching my boots track tiny bits of dried mud across the otherwise spotless wooden floor.

"Americano with milk?" the server asks as I approach the counter. A sure sign I drink too much coffee.

"Please." I smile. "And a cappuccino. To go."

She picks up two paper cups and stops, gaping over my shoulder. "Are you okay?" I ask. Her gaze moves back to mine and she closes her mouth shut with an audible snap of teeth. She turns away quickly, but not so quick that I can't see that she's blushing as red as a bus. What on earth . . .?

I turn to see what caused her reaction. And stop breathing. He's . . . *wow*. That is the kind of face that would make you buy an overcoat in the summer. High cheek bones and stubble that makes your fingers itch to touch it.

His dark blue eyes stay on mine, gluing me to the spot. I'm trapped. I couldn't move if I wanted to. A hint of a smile plays on his full, sculpted lips.

He steps closer, close enough to smell the seductive citrus and mint scent coming off his skin and I freeze. He doesn't take his eyes off mine, as he reaches past me.

"Your coffee is ready," he murmurs in a voice that could melt chocolate.

My what? Oh! Coffee. Yes. That's why I'm here. Coffee.

I just manage to say, "Thanks," as I take the cup holder from his hand, careful not to touch him. Or smell him. Or look at him. I head for the door. Fast.

Bloody hell! Who the hell is that?

It doesn't matter. It's irrelevant. Of no consequence to me, whoever he is.

I remind myself of this several times as I drift down the stairs on a cloud of citrus and mint, my world tinted deep blue. I've seen that colour somewhere before . . .

Bells is talking at me before I'm even through the door. "Bloody hell! Eva. Do not move until the next client has been in. I don't care if there's a nuclear disaster. Do not leave this room until you've met him."

"Err . . . Okay . . .?" I give her a confused look, dislodging her cup from the holder and handing it to her.

"If he's as gorgeous as he sounds, we're in for a treat today!"

"Yeah? Must be something in the water."

"What do you mean?" she squeals, far too excitedly. I don't get 'giddy schoolgirl' over guys. There's no way she's going to let this one drop. "There was this guy upstairs." I shrug in a 'so what' way and she squeals again.

"And?"

"And nothing. He was a good-looking bloke. That's all."

"That's all?" Her incredulous tone draws my eyes back to her face. "Eva," she says seriously, pulling me down into my chair so hard I'm glad my cup has a lid. "I can't

remember the last time you even noticed a man was breathing the same air as you, so you can take your ‘and nothing’ and shove it. I don’t buy it. I’ve pointed out loads of gorgeous guys to you – who, by the way, were clearly interested – and you didn’t even look twice!”

“What difference does it make? I’m married.” Bells rolls her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

“Oh please! Married my arse! I don’t give a shit what your certificate says. You haven’t set eyes on that piece of shit for years. Dan has never even met his own daughter for Christ’s sake!” I flinch at her harsh words. She doesn’t see it the way I do.

“Oh shit, Eva. I’m sorry . . .”

“It’s okay.”

I don’t want to talk about this. There are only two other people in this world that know the truth about my husband, and Bells is one of them. She reaches out and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she says in a low, serious voice.

“What?” I ask cautiously, bracing myself for her verdict.

“You’re ready!” She squeals again, bouncing up and down like an overexcited toddler, her long dark ponytail swaying with her. “Girls night out.” She holds up one finger to halt my interruption to her brilliant plan. “You have zero excuses, lady. Your best, and only one, is hundreds of miles away sunning herself on a Spanish beach with your mother and mine. So you,” she says, narrowing her espresso eyes, “will come out with me tonight. Willingly or not, I *will* get you through that door. And you will *not* be wearing jeans.”

The sharp rap on the door interrupts my intended comeback, and Bells's face lights up like a Christmas tree. I glance at the door and my breath catches somewhere in my throat, before I realise it's just Gary.

His dark hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail. That's how I know for sure it's him with just a quick glance. Sometimes I think the only reason he grew his hair was to make more of a distinction between himself and Dan. That, and anglicising his last name.

Gary's workwear consists of a razor-sharp suit and an open-necked shirt. The only time I've ever seen him in a tie was on their wedding day. I glance down at my faded light-blue jeans and sleeveless olive-green T-shirt smirking. I don't do suits. Ever. Bells does the fashion thing flawlessly. Me? Not so much.

"Ladies," he greets us smoothly with a smile, and a kiss for Bells.

"You have to save me. Your wife is planning to torture me," I tell him, stepping into his outstretched arms and squeezing him back.

"It won't kill you, Eva. It'll be fun," she chides.

"Says you," I grumble.

"Ah, yes. Squirt's in Spain, isn't she?" Gary grins, his hazel eyes dancing.

"You're supposed to be helping, Gary," I groan, slapping his chest playfully and pushing him away.

"Aww. I'll come too, if you like . . ."

"No," Bells says, sternly. "Girl time. How are we supposed to talk about you if you're right there?" she teases, laughing out loud at the indignant outrage of Gary's wide-mouthed expression, his eyes bouncing back and forth between us as I giggle my way around my desk.

"Come in!" she calls, when there's another tap on the door, clearing her throat and biting her lip in an effort to stop laughing. It's not helping.

Holy. Shit. It's him!

"Mr Hunter?" Bells asks in a high-pitched voice nowhere near her own, earning her a scowl from her husband.

"Helen." He greets her smoothly with a killer smile, before turning those eyes on me.

"You must be Eva," he murmurs. Yes. I suppose I must be. "Will Hunter." He smiles and stretches out a hand to shake mine.

I can't make myself move. I look from his hand to mine, my imagination in overdrive as my eyes travel over his hands. I flinch when my brain whispers that he's not wearing a ring.

Bloody hell! Stop it. Shake the man's hand. "Hi." I sound weird. I clear my throat and try again. "Hi, yes, I'm Eva. Eva Adams." I reach out my hand slowly and place it in his. And wish I hadn't.

His long fingers close around my hand, his eyes burn into mine as a kind of tingling warmth moves up my arm. We both look down at our joined hands before he releases me, and I cross my arms over my middle, gripping the sides of my rib cage.

Just don't touch him. Simple.

"Gary? Did you need something or was this a social call?" Bells asks pointedly.

"I'll see you later." He winks and turns for the door.

"Do you have to go?" I squeak as Bells ushers him out and closes the door after him. *Crap!*

"So, what can we do for you, Mr Hunter?" she asks, turning back to us with a wide smile and directing him to take a seat.

"I'm launching a new hotel this summer and I'd like your input. I was very impressed with your event over the Easter weekend." His lips curve up at the corners as he sinks into the chair opposite mine at my desk.

Has this office always been so bloody small? It's claustrophobic. I make myself sit opposite him and not run for the door, my fingers tightening around the arms of my chair.

Holy. Shit. It should be illegal to look that good. It's unfair to every other man in the world who can't wear jeans like that.

Bells pulls over her chair and passes me a notepad. I smile my thanks and catch her quirked eyebrow. I give her a brief glare and her face breaks out in a grin.

Oh God, no.

"Well, Eva is the woman you need. I just cook."

Shut! Up! I scream at her in my head.

"Eva?" The way he says my name makes me feel like everyone else says it wrong.

I take a slow, deep breath. Enough now. Game face on. He's just a client. We'll launch his hotel into a neighbouring galaxy if that's what he wants. Then, we'll shake hands, walk away, and life will go on just as it always does.

Yes. A launch, I can do that.

My eyes finally leave his and find the pen and pad. "Do you have a date in mind?" I ask in my best professional tone, silently scolding myself for such an over-the-top reaction to a man I don't even know.

"Late June, early July."

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to include?" I keep my gaze firmly on my pad. Looking at him is not recommended. But his silence draws my eyes up, slowly, travelling over his broad chest, his well-defined muscles accentuated beneath the material of his white shirt, his full mouth, turned up at the corners in a small smile making his designer stubble twitch, and finally landing on his eyes. Beautiful, clear deep blue. That familiar blue. The invitation in them is blindingly obvious, but I'm not falling for it. I know his type.

I keep my expression relaxed and neutral, pen poised, waiting for my would-be client to answer a very simple question. He shifts slightly in his seat and leans back, regarding me intently.

“What would you suggest?” he asks in a tone that says he’s talking about something else entirely.

I shrug noncommittally. “Keep it simple. Play to your strengths – or maybe the venue’s, in this case. Make it something that will appeal to your target market.” I put down my pen and mirror his laidback body language. “What is your objective, Mr Hunter?” I ask, deadpan.

He swallows as his eyes flicker down to my mouth. “Family-friendly, homely, and intimate, but so . . . much . . . fun.” I draw a sharp breath and demand my eyes look at something else. *Anything else!*

“I’m sure that could be arranged.” Bells beams and I want to kick her. She’s doing this on purpose. The cow! “Let’s arrange a venue visit and we’ll go from there.”

Will runs a hand through the milk chocolate waves of his hair. *I want to do that.* I finch at my own thoughts. Christ! What is wrong with me?

“Do you have time today?” he asks me as Bells pulls the diary towards her.

“No.” I need more time to prepare for being alone and professional with him. I don’t know what the hell this is, but I need to get a handle on it before . . .

“Yes! It’s fine, Eva. I’ll cover the next appointment; you go see the hotel.”

I shake my head. No bloody way. And she grins like a lunatic. “Perfect. I’ll see you there about lunchtime then, Eva?”

He hands me a card and I take it cautiously from his fingers, avoiding any contact with his skin. My brain is desperately scrambling for excuses to stay far, far away from Will Hunter. “Thanks, but I should really go to the PR thing. It’s been booked for weeks and—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bells interrupts. “I’ll let her know you’re busy.”

There is no PR thing. Not today. It’s supposed to be my day off, so she knows I’m trying to get out of it and she’s not going to let me. Cow!

“Great. Thanks,” I mutter.

Chapter 3

This is work, I remind myself for the millionth time on my thirty-minute drive from the office to the hotel. A client meeting. Just a site visit. Look around, get the details you need and leave. Run like hell if you have to, but leave.

Do not look at him, do not smell him. Definitely do not touch him.

I follow the satnav's directions and pull off of the quiet country road at the next left and on to a grand, sweeping driveway, lined with huge beech trees that must be hundreds of years old. I love the way they repeat from purple to green to copper and back to green.

My mental pep talk goes to shit the second I pull up a few feet from what looks to be an old manor house. It's undergoing renovations, but it's still fairytale-worthy beautiful, with wooden beams across the tops of the windows and a wisteria plant clinging to the cream coloured façade.

Will Hunter is standing on the front steps, talking to a man in paint-covered overalls. There's something about the way Will stands. He looks every bit the master of his domain, even in faded jeans and a white button-down shirt, his sleeves folded up.

I can feel his eyes on me as I park up. My palms are instantly slick with sweat, my heart rate skyrocketing.

Oh God.

I close my eyes briefly, leaning my head back on the soft, worn leather of the head rest. This is a bad idea. I should have made Bells do this. Insisted, even.

I jump when the car door opens, my eyes popping open. "Hi." He smiles and I forget how to breathe again.

"Hi?"

“Are you coming in?” he asks, failing to hide his self-satisfied grin and glancing up at the grey clouds as fat raindrops splat on the windscreen.

“Yes. I am.” And then I’m leaving. This is a contract I definitely shouldn’t take.

Gritting my teeth and holding my breath on purpose this time, I release my seat belt and swing myself out of my old Mitsubishi Warrior. Let’s just get this over with, shall we?

“Can I get you a drink before we start?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.” He nods once, shoving his hands in his pockets. “How about a tour, then?”

“Great,” I say with a smile. That’s why I’m here. A tour. The venue. Not the owner. A very quick tour.

“We’re following the format of the other hotels with this one, so this will be a coffee bar area,” he says, waving a tanned, toned-to-perfection arm in the direction of a huge bay window, flanked on both sides by French windows. The wall is mainly glass, showcasing the lush, manicured grounds beyond, currently being bombarded with rain falling so hard it’s bouncing off the ground.

“Other hotels?”

He flashes me a wicked smile. “Yes. This is my fourth.”

I really want to ask about them, but I don’t. The more I talk the slower this will be, and I need super speed.

“My business interests are largely centred in the hospitality industry.”

I nod, burning with curiosity but keep my mouth shut and stay a step behind him. I can always Google him later.

Will leads me through room after stunning room with high ceilings and an abundance of natural light, despite the dire weather, until I've seen it all, from the kitchen to the conference room.

"So that's the ground floor covered. Do you want to see upstairs?"

"No." My response is too fast. He looks at me curiously, a small smile bringing my attention to his mouth. Good. God. The man is beautiful, and doesn't he know it.

Enough!

"That's everything I need for now. I'll get back to you."

"Eva?" His voice halts my intended escape.

"Yes?"

"I was hoping we could have lunch together to discuss."

"Lunch?" *No. God no!* Right on cue, a man dressed in chef's whites pushes a cart laden with covered dishes past where we're standing, back near the entrance, towards the dining room. "Um . . ."

"Come on," he cajoles with that smile. "It's ready now. And I'll never eat all that on my own."

"I'm sure you could find someone to eat the rest of it with you." I'm absolutely certain there would be no shortage of takers.

"I'm asking you," he says, in a low rumble that's surely meant for the bedroom.

I can't tear my eyes from his as he steps closer, erasing any distance between us and taking my hand. The simple touch is more intense than before. That was no gentle warming. That was a thousand-volt shock. His fingers tighten around mine when I inhale sharply. "Please?"

"Okay," I whisper on a shaky breath. No one has to know. His smile is triumphant as he raises my hand to his mouth and brushes his lips lightly across my knuckles.

I'm bloody sure I just whimpered. Who does that? I clear my throat as Will leads me by the hand in the same direction the chef took.

"So, what do you think?" Will asks as he folds gracefully into the seat opposite me.

"I think it's beautiful," I tell him honestly, my eyes drawn to the massive window and the grounds beyond. His sharp breath brings my gaze back to him and locks it there. Bloody hell, his eyes are . . . work! Work, Eva!

"You want a child-friendly event?" I clarify, marshalling my thoughts.

This place seems like it'll be high-end. I can't imagine him wanting kids running around everywhere.

"Yes," he says, surprising me. "Family-friendly. The kids are the ones that sell it to the parents, after all, and I want to attract families living nearby to the restaurant, gym and spa facilities too. Not just overnight guests."

Well, I suppose he has a point. I pick up my cutlery and dig into my chicken Caesar salad, my brain running wild.

"What are you thinking?" Will asks after several silent minutes.

I glance up and he's watching me intently. "What are the grounds like?"

"I'd love to show you around the grounds, but the weather . . ." He gestures to the window and the pouring rain beyond. "You can always come back for that bit of the tour."

"But lots of space?" I ask, an idea germinating and taking shape.

"Yes, the site is just over five acres, including a small woodland. It's more of a copse, I suppose."

I nod as a scene comes to life in my head. "*Alice in Wonderland.*" I smile, spearing a piece of chicken.

“Sorry?”

“Theme? For the launch. The grounds should be a key selling point for families, so I’m thinking a garden party type of . . . what?” He’s grinning at me, fork suspended halfway to his mouth. That gorgeous mouth. The things he could do with that mouth.

“Sounds great, send me your quote.”

“Yep,” I squeak, demanding my eyes stay on my food.

I’ve barely finished chewing before Will says, “Is he your boyfriend? The guy that was in your office earlier?”

“Gary? No, he’s Bells’s husband.”

“Bells?”

“Helen. Hells Bells,” I explain.

“You’re not wearing a ring,” he observes.

I glance down at my hands on the table as if I need to confirm this, even though I haven’t worn that kind of ring for years, and shake my head.

“Will you go to dinner with me? Tomorrow, maybe?”

“Are you trying to fatten me up?” I say with a laugh, wiping my mouth on the linen napkin and glancing at his face.

Oh God. He’s being serious. I can’t. I really shouldn’t.

“Will. That’s not a good idea,” I tell him, shaking my head and feeling suddenly nauseous as my heart gallops in my chest.

“Why not?”

Tell him!

“You don’t know me, Will.”

“Isn’t that the point of a date? To get to know someone?”

I gasp. "A date?" *Oh God. That's worse.*

He nods slowly, studying every inch of my face. Gazing back into deep ocean-blue pools, I want to say yes. For the first time in a long, long time I want to say yes. But I shouldn't. For so many reasons.

"You have to eat. I have to eat. Let's eat together." After a long pause, he says, "It's just food, Eva."

I surprise myself more than him when I croak, "Okay."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow. Around eight?"

"Sure," I answer quietly, my eyes on my boots.

He tips my chin up with two fingers and his voice turns soft, "I'm looking forward to it." His eyes flick to my mouth, before he adds, "I'll need your address, please."

"Oh, I'll be in the office." I would probably have been there anyway. But now, I'll definitely be there. He doesn't need to know where I live.

A brief frown flashes across his forehead. "Okay. Your office at eight."

"See you then," I confirm with a shaky smile and melt into a puddle of hormones when he brings our joined hands to his lips again, his eyes burning into mine. This time, I'm nearly sure I felt his tongue, but it was too brief to be certain.

I need to leave right now before I do something stupid. "Bye," I breathe, gently pulling my hand free.

"See you soon."

