

A romantic couple is shown in profile, about to kiss. The woman has blonde hair in a bun with a blue sequined headband and a tattoo on her shoulder. The man has a beard and is wearing a denim shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

# Off the MARK

A FAKE DATING ROMANCE

KATHRYN  
NOLAN

*Off the*  
MARK

# OFF THE MARK

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# KATHRYN NOLAN

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# CONTENTS

1. Charlie
2. Rowan
3. Charlie
4. Rowan
5. Charlie
6. Rowan
7. Rowan
8. Charlie
9. Charlie
10. Rowan
11. Rowan
12. Charlie
13. Charlie
14. Charlie
15. Rowan
16. Rowan
17. Charlie
18. Rowan
19. Rowan
20. Charlie
21. Charlie
22. Rowan
23. Charlie
24. Charlie
25. Rowan
26. Rowan
27. Charlie
28. Rowan
29. Charlie
30. Charlie

31. [Rowan](#)

32. [Charlie](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[What to read next?](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Hang Out With Kathryn!](#)

[About Kathryn](#)

[Books By Kathryn](#)

*For those who are finally free. Long may we roam.*





# CHARLIE

Showing up to the racetrack hungover was a mistake.

I stood astride my dirt bike in the muggy morning air, trapped behind a starting gate with twenty other riders. The jagged roar of the engines had my back teeth grinding together. Beneath my boots, the earth vibrated, sending shock waves through my bones.

Dempsey appeared on the sidelines, coffee in one hand and a glare I recognized. I lifted a tentative hand in greeting. My agent cocked her head like a predator, sizing me up.

Yep.

Mistakes had been *made*.

A fluttering green flag rose in front of us, and adrenaline pulsed through my veins. My body shifted forward, the entire world narrowing to that blaze of emerald. Anticipating its glorious descent. The tunnel vision banished the worst of my nausea and residual regret from last night. Though Dempsey's obvious ire flickered in my periphery.

Green flashed. The gates fell with a screech of metal. Pure instinct had me rushing headlong in a pack of bikes, aiming to be the first to the turn.

I was fifth.

My wheels careened through ruts carved into the packed dirt and mud by countless tires before mine. There was the usual jostling within the middle pack until we all hit the first jump looking like an angry cloud of dust. I soared high with a

muffled *whoop* of satisfaction—nothing more than a hurtling projectile of leather and metal.

Then I landed, gritting my teeth through the familiar shock before *finally* taking the lead.

Growing up, my dad tried his best to curb my competitive streak. *The only rider you ever need to focus on out there is you, Charlie. You're competing against yourself and no one else.*

Except once I was old enough to travel with him on the road, I watched that man lose his *mind* over every lost race. Watched him fume and fret like a reluctant toddler being put down for a nap. His irritation never lasted long. Not his style.

But I understood from a young age that his attempts to coach me out of needing to win were mostly bullshit.

I leaned low into the next turn, dragging my wheels through rough mud. A trio of riders were hot on my tail, and on the next long stretch they caught up to me. We battled it out through another single jump and then a sharp, nasty drop-off that rattled my joints.

The four of us bolted over the starting line for our second lap. Our bikes pitched to the side in unison on that first tight turn, and my blood sang with a buoyant weightlessness. Even tethered to this dirt-packed track, there was no mistaking the joy that snapped at my heels, urging me towards flight.

We roared into lap three as one single blur of movement. And, okay—I'd done too many shots last night but I could still feel this victory in my chest. Especially when a patch of mud stalled the rider next to me, her tires spinning out as she tried to push through. I avoided the same slowdown, and suddenly I was tearing up the crest of the final drop-off.

My belly flipped as I soared, and I punched a fist in the air in preparation for my win. I landed so hard, my shoulder blades shook. And then my front wheel hit a large, jagged rock on the track that must have been dislodged during the second lap.

“*Shit*,” I hissed, fighting to stay upright, losing my momentum. Which sent me sliding sideways into the last slope, pitching me off at an awkward angle. I bailed from my seat—the kind of rookie error I hadn’t made in years—aiming for a soft patch of grass that turned out to be dirt as unforgiving as concrete.

Every gasp of air *whooshed* from my lungs. Stars swirled in my vision while my limbs reverberated with the impact. I coughed out a shaky “*Fuck me*” and pressed my head back into the dirt with a wince. Tugged off my goggles until I was gazing up at a bright blue summer sky.

A member from the crew rushed over to wave a yellow flag over my prone body, letting the other riders know I’d taken a fall and to use caution moving past me. Someone in the front pack called out a muffled, “You okay, Maddox?”

I held up a thumb to indicate I was probably fine, though the crew member didn’t look so sure.

“The med team’s running over,” he said. “Did you break anything?”

I gingerly pushed myself to sit and did a little mental scan for injuries. But I only felt the sting of wounded pride and a back that would ache tomorrow. So, about the usual for a professional motocross racer.

“Trust me, I’ve had way worse,” I said, squinting one eye shut against the sun. “But can you carry my bike off? And tell the team not to bother. I’ll have them check me over before I leave, promise.”

He nodded eagerly and went to work. Behind him, Dempsey picked her way along the track in stiletto heels with the confidence of a former rider and the expensive pantsuit of an in-demand sports agent.

“Are you dead?” she called out.

I dropped my head back down to the dirt. “Don’t think so.”

I heard the *crunch-crunch-crunch* of her heels. Then her pinched face appeared over my body, less concerned. More annoyed.

“I haven’t seen you bail on a jump in a long time,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I was a little distracted. This is my first time on this track.”

A single eyebrow raised. “Does your distraction have anything to do with you going on a bender in Philly with a few other racers I assume are *also* getting lectured by their agents right now?”

I scowled, pushing up to sit again. “A *bender*? I went out to the bars with some friends and had one too many shots. I’m not some teenager on her first spring break.”

Though *one too many* was a slight *under*-exaggeration. But I wasn’t too hungover to admit that the crisis call I’d received right before deciding to go party—and the very real panic in my dad’s voice on the other end—had contributed to my “teenager on spring break” choice of tequila.

Dempsey helped me stand, brushing dirt from the side of my pants like an aggravated older sister. She had faded tattoos on her fingers and a manicure that would cost me a week’s worth of groceries. “But Bettencourt is your sponsor now, and a company like that isn’t too happy about the many, *many* pictures of you on every sports website, looking wasted.”

I tore off my helmet and shoved my bangs to the side. “Are you being serious right now?”

She nodded grimly.

“So...what? Am I in some kind of trouble?”

Dempsey shot me a look of pure exasperation. “Does violating multiple clauses in your brand-new, lucrative contract sound like *trouble*?”



## ROWAN

I leaned against the doorway and raised a Styrofoam cup of coffee at the beauty with sleep-tousled hair.

“Thanks for this. And for last night,” I said.

Carla bit her lip with a grin. “I had a nice time with you. A *really* nice time.” She gave my body an exaggerated perusal that had me matching her smile. “But I shouldn’t be surprised by that.”

I tossed her a wink before starting down her steps and onto the sidewalk. “Always happy to be of service, ma’am.”

“Yeah, that angelic act doesn’t fool me one bit,” she called out with a laugh.

I spun back to her and pressed a hand to the center of my chest. “As if I’d *ever* sin.”

“Tell that to my broken headboard.”

Chuckling, I sent her one last look before hooking a left turn onto Eighth Street, whistling under my breath as I walked to work. Carla didn’t ask to call me again, and I didn’t offer.

She knew what I was about.

It was a hot and humid morning in South Philly with not a single tree in sight to offer any shade. I crossed the narrow street, dodging the 47 bus and setting off a chorus of beeping horns from the cars behind it. Neighbors perched on stoops, smoking cigarettes while sweeping their tiny patches of sidewalk. Shopkeepers rolled open corner stores, family-run delis, and panaderías.

Still whistling, I strolled past the Cambodian Buddhist temple that sat across the street—neighbors stood outside, lighting sticks of incense beneath an ornate red-and-gold awning. I called out a greeting, then jogged up the short path to the front door of the South Philadelphia Recreational Center. Then I twisted to the side to let a group of kids run past me to the basketball courts. There was a chorus of “*Hey, Mr. Rowan*” as they turned the corner, disappearing to go do the same thing Dean and I had done every day here when we were growing up.

“Mornin’,” I yelled back, “and *careful* on that asphalt. It’s hot out there today.”

I popped my head into the first large room on the left. Dean Knox-Morelli sat at a table with Edna Kozlowski, surrounded by piles and piles of eggplants. “Not even nine a.m. and you two troublemakers are up to no good?”

Edna stood, adding a few extra bags of carrots to her weekly food box. “Let’s not pretend that the biggest troublemaker at this place isn’t *you*, Rowan Shane O’Callaghan.”

I winced. “Little early for the middle name, don’t you think?” I indicated the excess produce. “Do we have a plan for this eggplant surprise?”

Dean nodded and handed me a clipboard with a long list of names. “Eddie’s already taking it out to these folks. Some extra is going across the street to the Temple. The rest will get used in the cooking classes this week.”

I scanned the list, happy to see it get dispersed through Eddie, who always knew which of our elderly neighbors needed food this week. That was thanks to his many contacts at church, the Acme, and his favorite bingo hall off Oregon Avenue.

I passed the list back and tipped my head toward Edna. “Glad to hear it. You see Harper catch that fly ball in the bottom of the sixth last night?”



Her cheeks went pink. “Bryce Harper is too handsome for this world.”

“If that’s the case, I must be some advanced-level threat to the whole universe, huh?”

Dean made an aggravated sound of protest, and Edna swatted my shoulder. “*Trouble.*”

She sniffed daintily, so I bent to plant a kiss on her cheek. Edna and her twin sister were in their eighties and lived together in the same row home they’d grown up in. They were second-generation Polish-Americans who had kept a watchful eye on me and Dean when we were kids.

“Edna, if you see my grandmother when you’re out today, tell her I’m bringing over pork chops and cabbage for dinner tonight?”

“As long as you bring us leftovers,” she replied.

“There’s already a Tupperware container with your name on it,” I promised. I clapped Dean on the shoulder as I walked past him towards the door. “I probably have a meeting I’m forgetting, but if you end up having eggplant problems, let me know.”

“Benny’s later?” he asked.

“Always, big guy.”

In the crowded hallway, I stepped around two harried-looking program interns and then almost spilled an entire cup of coffee all over Luciana Pérez.

“Luciana,” I said, startled. “Sorry, I wasn’t expecting to bump into the board president. Are you here to see Elaine?”

She pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “Do you have a few minutes to speak with me in her office? I’m sure you’ve got a busy morning, but this is serious. And urgent.”

I hesitated at the strain in her voice. “Of course. I’m all yours.”

Luciana followed me down our main hallway, past the computer lab, kitchen, and the large windows that faced the

playground. To the left was our library and the door leading to the basketball court.

This center was one of the beating hearts of this neighborhood—a place for kids who lived in a city without backyards. A place for folks like Edna to pick up extra food when they needed it. We offered reliable internet, hot coffee, and an extra-wide front stoop for company and gossip.

And after my first year pitching in the majors ended with a career-destroying shoulder injury, this place had welcomed me home with open arms.

I pushed open Elaine's door, pausing mid-step when I realized it was empty. Pausing, again, when I realized what a mess it was inside. I tried to remember the last time I'd been in here. Six months ago, *maybe*? Elaine liked moving around the office, hosting meetings in different locations to feel less trapped behind her desk.

I flipped on the light switch and blinked. Winced.

Now it looked even worse.

"I, uh...I guess Elaine's not here yet," I mumbled as I took in the chaos. "She should be in any second now. It's not like her to be late."

Luciana shut the door and clasped her hands in front of her. "Rowan, have a seat. Please."

I slowly rubbed the back of my neck. "You're makin' me a little nervous over here. Is everything cool?"

Her eyes darted over to a chair. So I did as instructed, setting my coffee on the dust-covered glass table. I'd only known Luciana for a few years, but she was one hell of a board president. Like me, she was born and raised here, growing up a mile from the center after her parents moved from Quito, in Ecuador. She was in her late forties, with short, dark hair, light tan skin, and tortoiseshell glasses.

Her expression softened. "Rowan, I'm sorry to have to tell you this...Elaine had a heart attack late last night."

My stomach dropped. "Jesus. Is she all right?"

“She’s improving but not out of the woods. I got a call from her wife, early this morning, letting me know that Elaine was still hospitalized and was an excellent candidate for surgery. It’s hopeful news, and her prognosis is excellent, but Elaine won’t be coming back to work for a while.” She paused, indicated the space around her. “Or potentially... ever.”

I reared back. “That’s not possible. Elaine *is* the rec center. She was working here when Dean and I were kids. She hired me after I got injured when I was a *real* bastard to be around. She has to come back.”

Luciana dragged over a chair to sit facing me. There were dark circles under her eyes. A weariness to the set of her mouth. “We’re all devastated by this. It’s unexpected. And scary. And, yes, Elaine has worked very hard to make this place feel like a home. Her impact is undeniable.” She studied me for a moment. “How much did Elaine share with you about the inner workings here?”

I dropped my elbows to my knees. “Not much. I coordinate the programs, so we do meet often, going over logistics, issues, staffing needs. Elaine was always worried about money, but I still got paid the same time every month.” I shrugged. “Why?”

She glanced at her hands before looking back up at me. “This city owes more than I can say to Elaine and her leadership over the past thirty years. She’s a true visionary, and the neighborhood has come to rely on her tremendously.”

I nodded, remembering the earliest, worst months after my parents died. The sheer volume of food that arrived on our doorstep. I learned later that at least half of it had come from the rec center. From Elaine.

“Sometimes when a nonprofit has had the same leader for decades, things can start to go a little...sideways. People get seriously burned out. They get forgetful. It’s a normal part of the process, and we’ve been more aware of it over the past year or so.”

Luciana pinned me with a steady gaze. “Elaine’s exhausted. I’m sure you’ve seen the effects.” She indicated the mess surrounding us. “Long hours, late nights, the stress of keeping everyone paid. It’s a tough job, and she’s been doing it longer than most.”

I clasped my hands together, struggling to admit that possibly—okay *definitely*—we’d been picking up the slack on stuff Elaine hadn’t been doing. It hadn’t stood out as being a problem though. Helping each other had always been part of the job.

“She’s been tired,” I finally said. “Hell, we’re all tired, right? And she’s a tough lady. I’m surprised that she never mentioned feeling overwhelmed to anyone on the team. She’s the one always telling us to take time off. To rest, to not work so much.”

Luciana’s eyes trailed over to the wall covered in pictures, posters, and degrees. “Elaine takes care of others. She doesn’t always take care of herself. Granted, I don’t know much about baseball, but I’m assuming it was easier to talk to your teammates about their injuries than divulge your own.”

I gave her a lopsided grin, remembering conversations just like that. I used to grind my molars down to dust through whatever therapy my shoulder and elbow went through after each game—all so I could stand on the pitcher’s mound again, waving to a crowd as razor-sharp pain turned my stomach.

But in the locker room? It was all casual jokes and easy laughter, trying to distract whoever was in searing agony next to me. When all I wanted to do was grab my arm and howl.

“Yeah, yeah I see your point,” I conceded, still grinning. “Maybe that’s what being a leader is all about.”

“Vulnerability is always challenging, but when you’re the one standing between people and their paychecks, or people and the programs they need, that kind of responsibility can become too heavy over time.” She tilted her head. “Leaders need to hold onto that spark, that vibrancy, to inspire others to get involved. To give money and time. It’s easy to lose it.”

Something about the way she said *give money* had my nerves jumping again. “And you think Elaine’s lost it, then?”

“I believe it’s much more complicated than that. Things always are. I *can* say that between Elaine’s burnout and general funding changes, the center has never been more at risk financially. We’ve been having to use our emergency reserves to cover payroll.”

My brow furrowed. “Elaine didn’t tell me any of this about...what did you call it?”

“Our emergency reserves. It’s like the savings account for our savings account. We were hoping to get back on track with the huge operating grant we receive from The Arnold Foundation every year in June.”

A chill raced down my spine. “But it’s early August.”

She tipped her head. “They announced their grantees two months ago, and we did not make the cut for the first time in a decade.”

I blew out a shocked breath. “You’re telling me that this money we rely on, some funder can just...what, *take it* without warning?”

“That is, unfortunately, standard operating procedure in the nonprofit industry.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me.”

She smiled—a genuine smile—for the first time since she arrived. “Oh, it is. And the timing is horrible. With Elaine out on medical leave, and our dire money situation, the board of directors will be scrambling to keep the center afloat. But it means making some tough cuts. Cuts we’d rather not make.”

“*Hold up.*” I leaned forward again. “Did you bring me in here to let me go or something?”

She shook her head. “No, not even close. We do need to start the process of cutting programs, even if it’s only temporary. And the senior food program that you started two years ago would be first on the list.”

My jaw clenched. “We can’t do that, Luciana. That program does too much good for this neighborhood, and besides—”

I paused, clueless as to how she’d respond if I said *you can’t fire Dean*. Dean, who was more brother to me than friend, who I’d known since we were four years old.

“Besides, what?” she prompted.

I swallowed my fear and smiled confidently instead. “Cutting that program isn’t an option, so I’m here to help with a creative solution. How does that sound?”

She laughed, her shoulders loosening finally. “Elaine was right.”

“About what?”

“I floated the idea of having a staff member step in as director in the interim, while we’re figuring out our next steps. She suggested you without hesitation.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline. “Are you shitting me?”

“Elaine always had a strong hand in the programming here, so while we can strategize around fundraising, we need someone who knows the day-to-day business of running this place.” She pinned me with a look. “And I’ll be honest. Cutting programs here would be a massive loss to this community. But it might be our only option to save us, moving forward. I wouldn’t turn away *any* creative solutions to keep it though, Rowan. So if you want to be our interim director and shore up some extra funds so we can keep it? That’s the type of leadership we need.”

I scrubbed a hand down my face with a dry laugh. “I mean, you’ve done such a convincing job of selling this gig. Demanding, long hours, burnout, long-term health issues...”

She cracked a smile. “The truth’s the truth. I couldn’t offer it to you without being candid.” She squared her shoulders. “I’ll be clear. The board, per Elaine’s recommendation, is asking you to step in as the director, temporarily, while we search for a funding miracle as well as Elaine’s replacement.”

“And you’re sure Elaine’s not coming back? I’m just having a difficult time not...” I swallowed. “You know. Imagining her not being around.”

“I am too,” she said softly. “She’s been not only a colleague to me but also a dear friend. But her wife, Mattie, told me that she’s been worried about Elaine’s health for months. This is not the way anyone wants to opt into retirement, but between you and me...it’s time. Elaine’s health needs come before anything else.”

I turned to face the windows, mulling over what she’d said. Knowing she was right. When I was playing ball, how many times was I sent out to replace a pitcher whose arm was spent?

How many damn times was I pulled off the mound for that exact same reason?

Our bodies had limits. I knew that better than anyone. And if the fate of the senior food program—and Dean’s job—was on the line, what choice did I have?

I rubbed a hand across my jaw before revealing a lazy grin. “It just so happens you picked the right day to come in here and ask. Because I woke up hungry for a challenge. Long-term, you’ll want to hire someone much more qualified than I am for the permanent role. But you can trust an ex-pitcher to step in and get the job done for the time being. And program cuts won’t be necessary. I’ll handle it, I promise.”

“It can be an *immense* amount of pressure, Rowan,” she said carefully. “Are you sure?”

I stretched my arms out wide behind me, hooking my ankle over my knee. “Pressure’s standing under the lights at Citi Field, dodging a ball rocketing at your head going ninety miles an hour. I watched Elaine do this job for the past three years. How hard can the learning curve be?”





# CHARLIE

Dempsey handed me a bottle of water and a handful of ibuprofen with only a *hint* of disapproval on her face.

I was perched on the back of my truck, with my jacket, chest protector, goggles, and helmet in a pile by my side. Around us, the parking lot was crowded with a contingent of dedicated fans, fellow riders, race staff, and mechanics. The summer sun warmed my bare shoulders as I stretched my stiff neck.

Wincing, I chugged the bottle of water with the pain medicine. And when Dempsey crooked her finger, I bent my head and let her place an ice pack along my hairline.

My agent hadn't competitively raced in more than a decade, but she still showed up to a track with the basics. She was almost as tall as I was—taller in those heels—and her suit was a deep, royal purple. Dempsey was in her late forties, white with a buzzed head, cat's-eye glasses, and more ink on her body than I had.

"You're not still mad at me, are you?" I removed the ice pack to peer up at her.

"It's not even been twenty minutes. Of course I'm still mad."

"I know I'm a total pain in the ass." I gave her my cheekiest grin. "Lovable though, right?"

Her fingers gently lifted my chin so she could examine my face for cuts and scrapes, an old habit of hers born more from affection than legitimate medical knowledge. "You're lucky

my specialty is working with stubborn, hard-headed... *lovable*...pains in the ass.”

Then her good humor vanished. “Charlie. You’re here in Philly for three weeks of elite-level racing and you bailed on a baby jump right before the finish line. This bad press situation would have been a lot better if you’d won.”

I trained my eyes on the city skyline, barely visible through the cloud of dust. “I had a bad race, Dempsey. This shit happens sometimes. You know that.”

“Yes, *and* numerous shots of tequila the night before make it more likely to happen.” My stomach lurched at the reminder. “You *definitely* know that.”

She stepped to the side, placing herself into my line of vision and studying me for so long I started to fidget. “Is everything okay with you?”

I flexed my hand, testing the tender knuckles. They’d been hit by a spray of rocks thrown back by the rider in front of me on the first lap. “I’m fine. Apart from, you know, embarrassing myself in front of my fans and colleagues just now.”

“You’re fine,” she repeated flatly.

“Yep. Though I would literally kill for a greasy breakfast sandwich.”

“Because all of *this*”—she waved her hand up and down my body—“has *avoiding my feelings* written all over it. Is Malcolm okay?”

I hid a grimace. “Dad’s groovy. Currently going through an obsession with British baking shows and feeding a lot of burned croissants to his dogs.”

Dempsey looked ready to call me on my bullshit—and she’d be well within her right—when a happy-sounding commotion drew our attention back to the racetrack. The final scores had been posted. Next to Charlie Maddox, it read *DNF*.

Did Not Finish.

My cheeks went hot. Been awhile since that happened.

Cheering fans circled around the winner, a rider my age named Riley Miller. Unlike me, Riley rode with a team called Archer's Angels, and those same teammates hoisted her in the air while she held her medal high, sun glinting off her pale, freckled skin and hot-pink hair.

When they finally placed her on the ground, they gathered around for a group photo, their body language with each other easy and familiar. Their joy obvious.

Until Bettencourt had signed me, I'd been a privateer, so I only got paid when I won. Good race or bad, the responsibility was solely on me.

Teams were more collaborative. Even a single member placing in the top three meant they all got paid—the overall winnings might be slightly less, but at least you weren't alone. I watched them now with a flicker of something like jealousy in the center of my chest. A yearning with a sharp edge that made me afraid to examine it too closely.

I shrugged it off. Being on a team seemed cute and all but relying on others had always been a surefire way to get disappointed.

My eyes slid to Dempsey's. "Tequila was a mistake."

"It's always a mistake."

"But I'm honestly confused as to why Bettencourt cares," I continued. "Yeah, I fucked up today. And last night. But I've got three more races before the championship race, plus the press conference and the dinner. How am I violating my contract?"

She held up my jacket and tapped the logo emblazoned on the back. "The extremely lucrative contract I scored for you comes with rules and expectations, babe. Those include attending investor dinners, so they can see that their generous investment in your career is working. And you've blown off the last three."

I scowled. "I hate all that fake fancy shit. And I was busy practicing."

"They're mandatory."

I shifted, that burn in my cheeks growing hotter. Interacting with my fans was always fun. We shared a common, adrenaline-fueled language, a love of muddy tracks and rattling engines.

Interacting with a bunch of men in suits who gawked at women pro racers like we were animals in a zoo always put me on edge.

Her voice softened. “Part of this contract is that they expect you to win races, Charlie.”

“Today was a legit fluke.”

Her eyebrow raised. “You haven’t even placed in the top three in *any* race since The X Games six months ago. An issue we’re going to have to address at some point.”

I gently flexed my sore hand again. “I’m winning the next three and claiming that championship, Dempsey. It’s been my destiny since the X Games win.”

For any professional motocross rider, there were a handful of significant races that could make your career. I’d already won The X Games—twice—but had only ever placed at the annual Women’s Motocross Championship. These three weeks were the biggest, most well-attended moto events of the season. Multiple races with hefty purses led up to the championship, on top of trick demonstrations, vendors and exhibits, fan meet-and-greets, and a gala dinner, where riders schmoozed potential sponsors.

And this year it was being held in Philadelphia. I’d been here less than 72 hours and my senses were already heightened, anticipating a glimpse of dark red hair, that cocky grin, those broad shoulders.

Dempsey handed me her tablet. “I believe it’s your destiny too, babe. Because I believe in *you* or I wouldn’t have flown all the way out here.” She tapped her manicured nail on the screen. “Bettencourt’s reputation is family-friendly. No controversy, squeaky clean. You know I get it, all the public image bullshit you’re up against all the time. The way you

have to be a million different things to a million different people. The endless hypocrisy.”

I snagged her hand and squeezed in sympathy. Before she was my agent, Dempsey McKenna had been one of the racers I’d followed obsessively. She was fast and flashy on the track. Charming with her fans. But she’d also been an out, gay woman in the early 2000s, completely at the mercy of homophobic reporters.

She was an expert in how hypocritical this industry could be.

“*But,*” she continued, “regardless of all of that, it’s still completely reasonable for a sponsor to expect the rider wearing their name on their back to not be on sports gossip sites looking trashed.”

I finally glanced down at the article on the screen. *The Bad Girl of Moto’s Night on the Town Turns Drunk and Disorderly* was the cheap, and inaccurate, title. My dad had been surprised at this nickname the first time he’d heard it, a moniker that earned me adoration or scorn depending on the day and who you asked.

Though he shouldn’t have been. He was the original bad boy of the sport, after all: heavily tattooed, surly with the media, a racer with an aggressive, fearless style.

And he always had me—the wild, scrawny daughter he dragged along to every race.

But moto had changed from the early rough-and-tumble days of my father’s reign. It was more popular than ever, with a growing global following hungry for content from their favorite riders.

We all needed to have personal brands. A robust social media presence. An ability to captivate fans. The first time I was teased with that nickname, it stuck.

Wasn’t that hard to keep it sticking either. *Really* wasn’t that hard to lean into the extra edge the reputation gave me. These days, athletes did anything to stand out, and there were

worse things than fans thinking I was some party girl with too many tattoos.

Except the party girl pictures currently displayed on this screen were *not fucking great*. There'd been six of us last night, a loose group of other riders I knew casually that had invited me to tag along. Unbeknownst to us, these bars had been packed with fans, in town for the championship, and we'd gotten recognized fast.

Between the angle of the pictures, the dim bar lighting, and the blur of movement, I somehow managed to look bleary-eyed, stumbling, and *wasted*.

"I look like a goddamn sorority girl on her first spring break," I muttered.

"Don't read the comments," Dempsey cautioned.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing a sigh. "I'd rather not hear any internet strangers' hot takes on this one."

I pressed the tablet back into her hand, too embarrassed to look further. "Listen. I, uh...I see your point. And I'm truly sorry that I pissed them off. If it's any consolation, you can tell them I'm hungover and just ate shit on a baby jump. But what else can I say? Bettencourt knew I didn't have some girl-next-door image when they signed me. The Maddox family isn't exactly known for our squeaky-clean reputations."

She studied me with a look of fond exasperation. "Bettencourt wanted *you* because you're one of the best and only getting better." She hesitated but didn't say the words hanging between us—*until recently, that is*. "So yes, your bad girl image and sleeves of tattoos aren't usually their thing, but they were willing to make an exception for you. To take a *risk* on you—a risk they expect to pay off for them financially. But I also promised that whatever issues you'd had with your reputation wouldn't be a problem moving forward."

She leaned in to pluck a twig from my snarled hair. "When pro racers sign with a sponsor like Bettencourt, they're on their best behavior. I assumed you'd do the same, Charlie."

Dempsey was right. In the world of motocross, I'd hit the lottery and here I was not taking it seriously.

The feelings of unease in the pit of my stomach ratcheted up a notch. This conversation held too many echoes of ones between me and my dad when I was younger, when we had nothing to eat in the house and not a lot of money to buy more. Before the accident that had changed everything, my father's stubborn pride led to him losing out on a lot of opportunities too.

"You're right," I admitted. "I'm not sure how to fix this clause-violating thing, but whatever you want me to do, I'll do it."

She dropped her gaze, the gesture sending a spike of panic through me. "I've done my best, smoothing their ruffled feathers, but I came here because I have a feeling they're going to cut you. Terminate the contract due to the violations."

"Are you...wait, you're serious?" I managed to croak out through an ever-tightening throat.

Her lips pressed into a flat line. "Nothing's in writing or set in stone, it's just...call it a professional gut feeling. At the bare *minimum*, they can slap you with a hefty fine for breach of contract."

The mental math I was calculating sent my heart into overdrive. Given my dad's frantic call this weekend, I needed the money now more than ever. And *fast*. My stomach plummeted, sweeping away the levity I'd been using to avoid losing it. But that *oh shit* sensation, combined with my regret about last night, flooded my nervous system so dramatically I had to steady my breathing.

"I can't lose that much money right now. I barely have any as it is and there's...I've got...stuff. To take care of."

Her eyes filled with concern behind her glasses. "Charlie, are you actually okay? I've known you and your dad for a long time, babe. If there's something going on, you can always—"

"Nothing is going on," I stammered. "But I'll do anything to get back on their good side and prove that I can win."

Reliably. Public apology? Charm some fans at a fancy event?"

She studied me closely before finally saying, "I'll be advocating my ass off for you. Obviously. But other than that, there's not much to do until I can get in a room with them and see the extent of the damage done. The emails and phone calls I've been getting have not been subtle. They're pissed."

I released a jagged breath. "I know you'll do everything that you can. Because you're amazing and I have no fucking clue why you still put up with me."

Dempsey squeezed my shoulders. "I do it because you're going to make me a ton of money someday."

I laughed as I scraped a tired hand down my face. The race adrenaline was wearing off, the humidity clung to my skin, and the direness of my situation was now all too real. My attention landed in the center of the parking lot, to the people crowding around Riley Miller. Her girlfriend, Quinn, had come running over post-race, leaping into her arms for a movie-style kiss that had everyone swooning. She still had her helmet in one hand, goggles in the other, and they both started laughing as fans called for their autographs.

Quinn didn't ride on the same team as Riley, but combined, they were motocross's hottest It Couple.

Everyone was obsessed.

Next to me, Dempsey whistled softly. "They sure are cute together. All the agents have been talking about the volume of great press Riley and Quinn have been getting. Right now, from a PR perspective? These two can do no wrong."

That had me sitting up straight. *These two can do no wrong*. The same news sites posting pictures of me doing shots were also posting pictures of Riley and Quinn, and each time it generated a feel-good response from the internet that was almost...*precious*.

Even I was low-key following along.

"For real?" I asked. "It's influencing their press coverage?"



“Sports fans love a romance. They love anything that makes them feel like they’re getting a glimpse into their favorite rider’s personal lives.”

I swallowed hard. Glanced at the amiable crowd around Riley and Quinn, then back at Dempsey, who was watching them dreamily, probably wondering what it was like to have clients that were *good* with media. And who didn’t flip reporters double middle fingers when they asked rude questions. Which I’d only done one time.

Okay, *three times*.

“You know what’s so funny though? I’m dating someone too,” I blurted out, the words strange and heavy on my tongue. Rolling my shoulders back, I met Dempsey’s narrowed scrutiny with a giant smile. “And my boyfriend lives in Philly so I was *hoping* to show him off while we’re here. Woo some fans with his...his natural, um, charisma.”

She cocked her head. “*You? Have a boyfriend?*”

“Yep.”

“In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? This city that we’re in currently?”

“The one and only. So random, right?”

Her lips pursed. “You never told me about him.”

“Well, it’s...it’s new. I didn’t want to jinx it, but things are getting serious.”

She took a step back, sizing me up. “Huh. That’s interesting. And how new is it?”

I curled my fingers around the edge of my truck and scrambled for an answer.

*Red hair. Cocky smile. Broad shoulders.*

I hadn’t allowed myself to think much about Rowan O’Callaghan since we’d gotten here. Given his reputation, the speed at which I’d thought of him for this spontaneous ruse should have been concerning. But I had more important things to fret about than Rowan’s forever-a-playboy attitude.

“Super new.” I lifted my chin. “We’ve been together a little over two months. Real honeymoon-period stuff.”

A few slow, excruciating seconds ticked by. “Weird. I would have said you were fucking with me but you’re blushing. *Really* blushing. I’ve never seen you do that before.”

“I’m what?” My hands flew to my cheeks, which were warm to the touch.

She crossed her arms. “Not wanting to jinx it is the only reason you didn’t tell me?”

“Can’t a girl have a secret? And it wasn’t like you were asking.”

“You’re not the blushing-over-a-boyfriend type. I kind of assumed you, I don’t know, devoured men for sport.”

I hid a smile. “Hey, hey. Don’t buy into all that *Bad Girl of MX* hype. I have a heart, you know.”

“Oh, I know you do,” she murmured. Then she looked over her shoulder at Riley and Quinn again. “This new information is *intriguing*. Especially since the fans seemed primed for romance right now. I have no idea if this will soften the weekend’s bad press, but if you want to show him off at some events...” She shrugged. “Can’t hurt as long as he’s well-behaved.”

“He’s fucking *nice*,” I protested.

She grinned. “I’ll believe it when I see it. You’ve got a race coming up and the press event right after that. Do you think this nice boyfriend of yours is willing to come and get his picture taken with you four days from now?”

I forced down a surge of nerves at *make this happen in four days*. “Totally. This dude is obsessed with me. I couldn’t keep him away if I tried.”

She looked impressed. “Good for you. Don’t get your hopes up too high, but I’ll see what magic I can work. We still have a lot to do to fix this, nice boyfriend or not.”

Dempsey was one of only two people I regularly gave hugs to, and I didn’t hold back now, flinging my arms around

her neck. She had grown up worshiping my dad's racing style, had even trained with him before he got hurt. When she became an agent, letting her represent me was the easiest decision I'd ever made.

She'd had a front-row seat to Maddox family drama for years...and still stuck around.

"Thank you," I said. "For believing in me even when I mess up. I really am sorry, Dempsey."

"I know you are." She pulled back. "We'll figure it out, one way or another."

Then she grabbed her things and reached for her car keys. "Whoever this guy is, he must be different. The Charlie Maddox I know doesn't suffer fools lightly."

I fixed another fake smile on my face. "You'll love him when you meet him. Everyone does."

It was the most honest part of this bizarre, deceitful conversation. Everyone *did* love Rowan. He was an insufferable flirt who—back when I was still tending bar at Jolene's—I watched take home a different woman more nights than not.

The fact that I'd been blushing earlier while talking about him wasn't an issue. That was an ordinary, physical response to the memory of what Rowan looked like.

Which was...very hot.

Almost annoyingly hot.

Blushing was simply inconvenient. The *problem* was that my old friend Rowan O'Callaghan didn't *know* that he was my boyfriend.

My only option was to go tell him.



## ROWAN

*I*t turns out that the learning curve when stepping in as interim executive director is really fucking steep.

Two days after I'd shrugged off Luciana's concern, I was sitting behind Elaine's desk, dreaming of the days when I was only responsible for *one* part of the complex machine that was the South Philly Rec Center.

Elaine was—thank god—getting better every day, though when I spoke with Mattie, she reiterated what Luciana had said: her prognosis was great. Didn't mean that returning here was an option though.

I kicked my feet up onto the desk, balancing them on a stack of grant reports I'd just discovered were due this week. I was still on the phone, pleading with the same plumber half the block used, because the sink in our kitchen was leaking again and we were *this close* to a flood.

"I told you. I'm slammed, brother," Joey grumbled. "That rain last night flooded everyone's basement on Federal, and I ain't got enough extra hands to send over to you."

I glued my eyes to the ceiling but kept my voice cheerful. "Yo, I get it. I was up early this morning bailing out my grandmother's basement, and Alice wasn't happy about it. She missed her morning coffee with Midge and Maria and some hot gossip about a cousin's baby shower."

He coughed out a laugh. "You know Alice can call the experts."

“We’re trying, but you’re tellin’ me you’re too busy,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, *okay*, you don’t gotta bust my balls about it. I know it’s bad, and you don’t want sink water all over the ground when you’ve got kids running through. Can’t Dean fix it?”

“He’s not our handyman guy anymore. He’s my program coordinator guy and he’s busy.”

An alarm on Elaine’s computer buzzed, indicating my next meeting was in twenty minutes. How the hell did she get anything *done* during the day?

“Joey, I have to run. If you get any openings, take pity on us?”

“Put some towels down, and we’ll do our best, okay?”

We hung up just as Dean ambled into the office with my favorite *Philly Underdogs* mug. He placed it—steaming, full of fresh coffee—on the only spot on the desk not covered in paperwork.

I grabbed it with grateful hands. “People don’t call you a hero enough. But that’s what you are to me.”

He sank into the chair by the desk, shrugging one shoulder. “What if I also told you I already called an old boxing buddy about our plumbing emergency? He’s got a spot on the other side of Snyder and he said he’ll be here in an hour.”

“You’re joking.”

Dean grinned. “It helps that the last time I stepped in the ring with him, he knocked me the fuck out. Think he still feels bad.”

I raised my mug in his direction. “This gives new meaning to *taking one for the team*, dude. Thank you. When I got here this morning and saw the water spraying across the floor, I almost put my fist through the wall. But I was too tired from crying over Elaine’s inbox. I’m not lying”—I turned the screen towards Dean— “she has like nine hundred unanswered messages.”

“Things are that bad?”

I cocked my head towards the stacks of files and boxes. “Do you remember our senior year when I got hit in the leg with a baseball? I found myself yearning for that time when I saw the kitchen.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Your whole leg swelled up like a balloon. Mom and Midge had to hold Alice back in the stands so she didn’t take the batter’s head off with that pointy umbrella she used to carry all the damn time.”

“She used to threaten a *lot* of umpires with that thing. She for sure got some calls turned in my favor through intimidation.”

Dean nodded over at the mess. “You’re doing an admirable thing, taking over for Elaine like this while she’s out. What can I do to help?”

“Absolutely nothin’,” I said easily. “You’re doing your super important job and that’s the best thing you can do. I’m only being dramatic because money’s tight and the board has me nervous.”

His jaw ticked. “Tight as in...I might not have a job anymore?”

I swallowed my coffee too fast, and it scalded on the way down. “Finances are a little uncertain right now, but you and I have been through worse.”

For a second, it didn’t look like he was buying it. So I swung my legs to the floor, rose from the chair, and gave him an affectionate clap on the shoulder as I walked to the other side of the office.

“I’m serious,” I said, hauling over a box of files to the small table by the desk. “I’m handling it.”

He looked slightly more convinced, then began his favorite new hobby: fiddling with the gold wedding band on his left ring finger. Though *fiddling* wasn’t quite right. More like he was gazing at it like he couldn’t believe his own good luck.

Dean was a little taller than me, white with dark hair, a crooked nose and an ex-fighter’s build—complete with the

scowl that had earned him the nickname Dean the Machine during his boxing days.

But he smiled *a lot* more now.

Two months ago, he'd married Tabitha Tyler, a woman he'd been secretly in love with since we'd all gone to school together. Dean and I had grown up on the same block—the corner of 10th and Emily streets—and he'd been quiet and serious even as a kid.

Something changed in him though when Tabitha came home two summers ago. Watching him fall stupid-in-love with Tabitha was all the evidence I needed that whatever *that* was, I'd never felt it.

There was only one woman who'd ever made me feel... *something*...but that was years ago. She'd promised me a hundred times over that she'd rather pour hot sauce into a paper cut than go on a date with me.

It didn't matter now anyway. I tried not to think about her too much, was probably only doing so because I'd seen on ESPN this morning that the Women's Motocross Championships were being held in Philly. The riders were all staying uptown at the convention center.

I hadn't trusted myself to check and see if she was here.

The computer *dinged* with a new email alert, which also reminded me that I needed to get to that next meeting in a hot minute. I strolled over to the desk but not before nudging Dean on the shoulder again.

"You just hanging out, thinking about your wife?"

"No. Yes. Maybe. Shut up."

I cracked a smile. "I'm not judging, big guy. Did I mention that I walked past the two of you on your stoop last week, and you didn't even notice me? I did a whole funny faces-weird walk bit too."

His cheeks reddened. "Tabitha is very...charismatic."

"That she is," I said slowly, clicking open my chaotic inbox. Tabitha was more than just charismatic, though



growing up she was bright and cheerful and friends with everyone. She also understood Dean in a way most people didn't. "I bet you she's staring at her wedding ring too."

"You're probably right."

"Because you're pretty damn charismatic too."

He rose from the chair with a smirk. "Nice try, but that's a lot of bullshit this early in the morning."

I was mid-laugh when I clicked open the message at the very top. From Luciana. Subject line: *The Arnold Foundation update*.

The first line of the email read: "We were able to confirm that the rec center won't be receiving the operations grant. With no other immediate options, we need to discuss plans to cut the senior food program and the staff positions required of it."

"Fuck me," I whispered.

Dean turned around. "What's that?"

"Nothing, we're all good," I lied. I scooped up my phone and notebook and hoped the expression on my face wasn't something like *oh shit, we're fucked*. "I've got a meeting anyway—"

A loud pounding on the office window had both of us jumping.

It was Eddie, banging away and pointing at the tree in the front of our building. Dean cursed under his breath, then pulled the window open. Eddie grew up across the street from us—he was in his seventies, Italian-American like so many folks in this neighborhood, and basically my and Dean's shared adoptive uncle.

I'd hired him as a consultant to help Dean with the food program—the same one that was going to get cut thanks to the email sitting like a bomb in my inbox.

"Jesus, Eddie," Dean said, "how many times we gotta tell you to use the front door when you want to get our attention?"

Eddie shrugged, drawing on his cigarette. “Not my fault I was walking in and spotted a kitten in the tree.”

“A...a what?” I strode over to the window and peered out, only to see a tiny bundle of orange, fluffy fur, shaking and crying. “Well, you don’t see that every day. Looks like we’ve got a kitten trapped in a tree, fellas.”

“Yeah, you wanna save it or what?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t know, is Pam in need of a sibling?”

I was mostly joking, but Eddie’s smile was too sincere. Two years ago, he’d started feeding a feral cat he’d named Pam, building her an elaborate housing contraption on his sidewalk. But she finally moved inside, and the times I’d been over there she was never not in his lap.

“She does need a sibling,” he said, stubbing his cigarette out beneath his foot. “How’d ya know?”

I shot a look over at Dean, who was trying not to smile.

“You heard the man,” he said. “Are we saving Pam’s sibling or not?”

The day was already veering off course. Might as well give in and accept it.

I clapped my hands together. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the last forty-eight hours, it’s that an interim executive director’s job is never done. Let’s go rescue a kitten from the only tree on this block.”



## CHARLIE

I parked my truck and shut off the engine, gazing through the front window at the narrow street. According to my phone, I was two blocks from where Rowan had mentioned he was working the last time we'd exchanged casual text messages. I'd just won my first X Games and he'd sent a goofy picture of himself raising a drink: *I just saw you kick major ass on ESPN. Congrats—I knew you could do it, Maddox.*

From the look of it, he'd been at some crowded neighborhood bar—a baseball game on the mounted TV, people on barstools with empty glasses nearby. It had been so like the bar where I'd worked—and he'd swaggered in most nights—that I'd fired back my usual sarcasm.

*Sorry, that must have been another smokin' hot blonde with incredible riding skills.*

To which he'd replied: *But I only know one smokin' hot blonde with incredible riding skills. That's you.*

Two years had gone by since then. Which made this harebrained scheme of mine even *more* stupid. He could be working someplace else now. He could have moved out of Philly.

Rowan could be dating someone for real. *Seriously* dating them.

I climbed out of my truck, striding confidently toward the rec center. I didn't *actually* care if Rowan O'Callaghan was dating.

But my morning had started with a terse call from Dempsey. Her attempts at getting in to meet with the Bettencourt reps had all failed. The last formal communication we'd received had been the email in her inbox, threatening to terminate my contract due to my "public image."

I picked up my pace, passing connected brick row homes, a corner store, and a tiny park. *Image, my ass.* I was an extreme athlete by training and fearless by birth. That made me damn sure I could ask an old friend for a big favor, even if it was a little...on the awkward side.

And entirely out of the blue.

For as many times as I'd been the sole witness to Rowan's smooth flirting while I was mixing drinks, I'd also seen plenty of women openly hit on him with about as much social grace as a newborn giraffe.

He'd never been anything but kind in response, so why I was hyper-focusing on his reaction I had no idea—

My phone jangled in my pocket, stopping me in my tracks. A video call from my dad.

Like usual, a rush of intense affection paired with jagged worry filled me. I blew out a breath then ducked into a shaded alley to accept the call. He appeared on the screen—long gray hair tied back in a ponytail, a craggy face with a handful of scars, tattoos peeking out from the collar of his T-shirt.

"Charlie honey? It's me, your dad," he said, brow furrowed as he poked at the screen.

I grinned despite my worry. "Dad, I know. You're on video right now. I can see you. Can you see me?"

I waved and he brightened.

"Oh, there you are. Hiya, honey."

"Is everything okay? How are Penny and the pups?"

He twisted around and indicated the back doors of the ranch-style house where I'd grown up in a woodsy, rural town called Sweetwater, near Syracuse. He'd bought it for the extra land, which he'd turned into a practice racing track. And

during the long, snowy winters, we swapped out our dirt bikes for snowmobiles.

“Penny’s out back in the garden. Did I tell you she’s growing watermelons?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Does she know it’s your favorite food?”

In the background, I heard a door bang, and then my father’s girlfriend yelled, “Course I knew, he only mentions it eighteen fucking times a day.”

He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “Guess she knew after all.”

The original bad boy of motocross had softened considerably since his retirement. The crash that had permanently taken him out of the sport had been the first major life adjustment. For both of us. But when he met Penny a few years back at a weekend flea market, the transformation was complete.

Most of his voicemails now were about the PBS documentaries they regularly enjoyed. And most of his stories were about their rescue dogs, Dexter and Bruno.

“So did the lawyer I recommended get in touch with you?” I asked carefully.

Dad passed a hand through his hair and shrugged. The look on his face had my heart sinking to the cracked sidewalk. “She was very smart and, uh, if we can afford her, she said she can help. But the eviction notice is, you know, legally binding or whatever. I’ve got three months to make up the cash or get the hell out.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, toeing the ground so he wouldn’t see that I wanted to straight up cry. “At least we know what we’re working with. Timeline, total amount, that sort of thing. Better to know what we’re up against, right, Dad?”

“Charlie...” he started, “honey, I’m sorry. I don’t know how I got so behind on my payments. I was teaching those riding lessons but the training center in Syracuse shut down.

And Penny helps as much as she can, but she's also got sons and grandkids—”

“She has a lot of bills of her own. I get it.” I sniffed, met his eyes, and plastered a shiny smile on my face. “Most people are struggling to pay one mortgage, let alone the two you've got on that place. It's not like the motocross association has some stellar pension plan for retired riders.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, or, you know, *any* pension plan. Or a union. It's always been one race at a time, living purse-to-purse.”

The full weight of my current financial nightmare smacked me across the face. Even with the little money I'd saved since signing with Bettencourt, I couldn't cover what my dad owed *and* pay for the costs of all my recent traveling for races.

Races I'd been losing.

What I needed was a big, fat purse of winnings. And to not get dumped by my sponsor.

Going out to the bars that night had been so *stupid*.

“Hey, are you okay? You look like you're about to puke on the sidewalk.”

“Oh yeah, I'm all good,” I hedged. “But we gotta figure out how to save the house because you getting evicted would be a mega bummer. You and Penny scrounge up what you can, and I'll cover the rest, okay?”

His smile was part relief, part guilt. “You're always bailing me out, Charlie. I hate that I'm constantly askin' you—”

“You and I take care of each other.” Cutting him off meant I wouldn't be at risk of crying again. “We always have and always will. We're all we've got.”

He coughed into his fist and nodded. “I saw you had a pretty wild night in Philly. Did you and your friends have fun?”

I shoved my bangs to the side. “Yes and no. Shots were fun. But now I'm in the doghouse with Bettencourt. Tequila isn't part of a family-friendly image, I guess.”

He snorted. “All those rules they force on you are bullshit. People think because you’ve got their name on your gear that they own you or something.”

*Yeah. I know, I wanted to say. And that’s why we were always running out of money when I was growing up.*

Malcolm Maddox had done the best he could after my mom fucked off with a guy she met at the post office, leaving him a single dad struggling to parent me while earning money from the only thing he felt he knew how to do.

He wasn’t a perfect dad—far from it—but it hadn’t ever stopped me from loving him fiercely. Even now, behind him, I could see the pictures he had framed of us up on the old seventies-paneling walls. Him, beaming proudly at whatever I was doing on a bike. Pictures of my wins at the X Games, the magazine covers and in-depth interviews placed carefully next to slightly faded versions from his career.

I wouldn’t trade my unconventional childhood for the world. But I was fifteen when he had his final accident. With no mom at home and no extra help, most of the household responsibility landed on my shoulders.

All of it was made worse every time my dad lost an opportunity because of the same obstinance I’d inherited.

“They sure do think that way,” I finally said, “but I’ve got a solid plan to patch things up with them, and Dempsey’s ready to kick some major ass on my behalf. I need the money, *we* need the money, and we’ve got three months to do it.” I gave my dad a cheesy wink. “That number one spot at the championship race is all mine.”

Though even if *all* of that happened—perfectly—I’d be paying off what my dad owed plus my own bills by the skin of my teeth.

“Of course the championship race is yours. Who else’s would it be?” he said, sounding more cheerful than a few minutes ago. “I saw you take that fall yesterday on TV. You didn’t smack your head or anything?”



“Nah.” I waved it off. “Dempsey gave me an ice pack and some meds, and I was fine.”

“It’s like the older I get the more I worry. But it’s only because I love you so much, honey,” he said. “You’re gonna do big things the next couple weeks. I can feel it.”

I swallowed past the giant lump in my throat. “I can feel it too. And really, I don’t want you and Penny to worry because I’ve got it figured out. Which means, I’ve got places to be and people to see. Call you tomorrow?”

“I’d like that. Love you, Charlie.”

“Love you too,” I said, before ending the call. I tipped my head back against the brick and covertly wiped my eyes. Then I took a big, fortifying breath and began walking toward the flirty former pitcher I was going to ask to be my...what... *pretend boyfriend?*

I stopped dead, doubt creeping through my veins.

It would be a ridiculous, utterly absurd request of a *best* friend. But a friend I hadn’t seen in four years? Rowan’s kindness aside, it felt extra shitty to show up asking for a personal favor this huge with nothing I could offer him in return.

“Nope. No way. This is way too weird,” I muttered and spun back toward my truck. Thought about my dad’s heartbroken expression. That red eviction notice I kept seeing even in my nightmares.

Our home in the woods, the only home he and I had ever known, surrounded by fields full of dirt bike tracks we’d carved ourselves.

I was about to be floundering around again, sponsorless and broke, and my dad would be the one to pay the price.

I re-spun, rolled my shoulders back, and walked so forcefully the ends of my ponytail bounced across my shoulder blades. Up ahead, there was a tiny patch of grass and a medium-sized tree. A low, white sign read *The South Philadelphia Recreational Center*. I could hear the sounds of a

basketball game, kids playing, cars driving past with music blaring.

Despite the riot of negative emotions churning through my body, my lips were already curving up. On the nights at Jolene's when Rowan stayed late, stacking bar stools and helping me close up, his love for this city had been tangible.

It was probably one of the reasons I'd been so *flushed* since I'd first spotted the Philly skyline from the highway. My brain held too many confusing memories of watching Rowan wipe down the bar for me after a shift, talking about his old neighborhood with a bashful sincerity that belied his playboy antics.

I reached the very edge of the grass and halted, mid-step. A strange sensation fluttered in my belly at the sight in front of me. Rowan O'Callaghan was sitting on the highest branch of a tree—one long leg hooked on the branch below, his muscled arms braced against the trunk.

And in his large palm sat the smallest kitten I had ever seen.

"Do you have a good hold on her? And don't *scare* her, Rowan," called up an older man with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Rowan raised his palm and stared into the face of the orange fuzz making tiny, chirpy *meows*. "Nah, I won't drop her, Eddie. I think she likes me."

"How can ya tell?"

Rowan sent a lazy grin to the man below. "Because everyone likes me, including kittens."

The older man barked a laugh while I stayed out of view, leaning against the front of someone's house. All the better for me to see Rowan for the first time in four years. I was twenty-four when we met, and he was only twenty-two, and he'd filled out a little since then. Had lost some of the boyishness from his handsome face. His brown eyes crinkled slightly at the sides now and his hair was a tad longer.

But it was still thick and dark red. His smile still the charming, lopsided one he employed when he was trying to make me laugh.

And Rowan still had the strong, broad body of a baseball player. He easily climbed down from the tree, using just one arm. I watched his thick fingers wrap around the branches, the shifting muscles of his large shoulders as he gracefully dropped to the ground.

“Here you go, Eddie. A sibling for Pam,” he said, carefully placing the ball of fur in the arms of this Eddie. “She seems sweet too. Whaddya think you’ll name her?”

He gazed at the kitten with a deep affection. With one finger, he stroked the top of her head. “I told Pam that if I got her a sister, I would name her Tiffany.”

Rowan’s lips twitched at the ends. “That’s a lovely name. She looks like a...like a Tiffany, doesn’t she?”

Then his eyes rose, and he finally spotted me. He went utterly still, brows knitted together like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

I stepped fully into the sunlight. “Hey, Rowan. It’s been awhile.”

His throat worked on a swallow. He blinked. Blushed. “*Charlie?*”

The man with the kitten—Eddie—turned and nodded when he saw me. “I’m not sure who the hell you are, but anyone who can make Rowan look like he got walloped upside the head is okay in my book.”

I arched an eyebrow Rowan’s way. His lips were already quirking upward. “You always knew how to stop me in my tracks, Maddox.”

“And you always knew how to flirt your way into a free drink.”

Now a full, dazzling smile broke across his face. Gaze still glued to mine, he said, “Yo, Eddie. This is Charlie Maddox. She’s a pro dirt bike racer. Charlie, this is Eddie. He works

with me at the center but more importantly has lived across the street for most of my life. So I've known him since..." He paused. "Well, since I moved in with my grandmother."

I extended my hand and shook Eddie's, aware that this man must have played a crucial role in Rowan's upbringing. I'd only ever heard Rowan talk about his parents passing away when he was four a handful of times, if at that.

"Nice to meet ya, Charlie. And how do you two know each other?"

"She's an old friend," Rowan said, as I replied, "I was his bartender."

An awkward beat of silence passed until I stammered out, "And friend. Yep."

"To her credit, Maddox here was an extremely friendly bartender," Rowan added.

My eyes slid back to his. "You always told me I scowled too much and had terrible banter."

"Perhaps it's more truthful to say that you were a friendly bartender *at* me, not *with* me."

His tone was playful, so I must have imagined the split-second of frustration on his face when I'd botched that first description of who we'd once been to each other.

Eddie scratched the kitten's tiny ears. "Whatever this is, I'll let you figure that out in private." He shuffled off and tossed a wave over his shoulder. "Tell Dean I'll be back in tomorrow."

"But you're scheduled to work with him today," Rowan called back.

"I gotta get this kitten home now. He'll be fine on his own."

Eddie kept walking, and Rowan made a low sound of annoyance. "Never become an interim executive director."

"What?"

He shook his head, refocusing on me, and I stepped back. I'd forgotten what it was like to be on the receiving end of Rowan's full, unwavering attention. My stomach did that fluttery flip motion again.

"It's not that I'm not happy to see you, because I am. *Extremely* fucking happy," he said.

*Flip flip flip.*

"But what the hell are you doing in South Philly, of all places?"

I took a deep, steadying breath. "Is it too cliché to say that I've got a proposition for you?"

Rowan's response was a leisurely, crooked grin.

And it was pure sin.



## ROWAN

Charlie Maddox stood in my office, looking like she hadn't changed one bit.

Like she was still working behind the bar at Jolene's, ignoring my attempts at flirtation with a cool confidence that poked at my own.

A lot of things came easily to me. Not her.

*Never* her.

I perched on the edge of Elaine's desk while Charlie stayed by the door. The knuckles on her right hand were slightly bruised, and she winced when she stretched her neck. She was tall and wore black boots with a killer heel, worn-looking jeans and a white tank top that showed off her strong shoulders and colorful tattoos.

Her thick, dirty-blond hair swung from a ponytail and her skin was tan from the sun, the freckles darker across the bridge of her nose.

The very first time I'd laid eyes on her, she'd spun around from the register and asked, "What can I get you?" in her sexy, raspy voice.

I'd replied, "Your phone number. Obviously."

Charlie had burst out laughing, then ignored me.

I hadn't been joking.

"Luckily that shoulder of yours doesn't prevent you from rescuing kittens," she said with a sly grin.

I rolled it back and forth on instinct, felt the taut pinch of strained tendons. The bizarre sense that something, somewhere, no longer fit quite right. “It’ll let me climb a tree every now and then, but I’ll probably pay for it by waking up later, shrieking in pain.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Ouch.”

I nodded at her hands. “I could say the same to you.”

She pushed her thick bangs away from her light green eyes. “My back tire hit a rock during a race a couple days ago, and I tumbled off this jump all wrong. Ended up bailing on an extremely unwelcoming patch of rocky dirt.”

“Sometimes you just gotta bail.”

“That you do.”

I curled my fingers around the edge of the desk. “What’s the bad girl of motocross doing at my rec center? It’s been a minute since I saw you. Four years, give or take.”

She lifted her chin at me, teasing. “Do you follow all the hot dirt bike gossip, O’Callaghan?”

“A guy can’t have a Google alert set for the name of an old friend? Besides, after I retired, it was nice to see one of us making our careers work.”

Her gaze fell to the ground. “Yeah. I’m making it work. Riding bikes, causing mayhem, the usual. I’m with Bettencourt now, so the money’s great.”

I whistled. “The energy drink people? That’s fancy.”

“Sure is.” She smacked her lips together. “Anyway, how are you? How’s Alice?”

“I’m real good. Living easy. My grandmother is still causing a fair amount of mayhem herself.”

I felt her focus shift to the left side of my body. “And how’s your shoulder really?”

“Better than the last time we saw each other,” I said with a sigh. “We did try for a surgery about six months after the double tears. The good news was that most of my joint



mobility healed back to what doctors would call ‘normal.’ The bad news was, well, I’ll never pitch again.”

Shoulders were tricky, delicate things—and nothing about pitching was considered a natural movement. The repetitive combination of the windup with the overextension made it so that we all knew there was an expiration date on our dreams. Like most professional athletes, I started playing young. Probably too young. And for every coach I had who cared about overuse, I had plenty who didn’t.

By the time I was in the minors, I had a host of rotator cuff and elbow issues. Already spent nights grimacing through ice baths and shots and physical therapy that hurt like hell. It wasn’t rare for a pitcher to have a severe labral tear on top of a sudden dislocation.

But it wasn’t common for younger pitchers in the majors to have their shoulder essentially disintegrate on live television after a throw.

It happened to me though.

“Rowan...shit, I’m sorry. That’s horrible,” she said.

I cocked my head at the pile of paperwork behind me. “I’m happy here. I’ve been working at the rec center for three years now, coordinating programs. But our director is out sick for a while, so I’m the temporary stand-in guy.”

She studied me with warm affection. “Look at you. You landed somewhere where you could belong again. I’m so happy for you.”

My body tensed, memories of the last time we’d *truly* seen each other—the night of my injury—bubbling up in my thoughts. Then I hadn’t been sure I’d ever feel like I belonged again.

“Thanks. I couldn’t be a baseball god forever, you know?” I winked. “Plus the pay is way better here.”

Her expression turned sardonic, the same look she wore most nights tending bar, as if my flirting was a game she liked to analyze. “I’m assuming you’re still leaving a trail of broken hearts in your wake?”

I opened my mouth to prove her wrong.

But I couldn't.

I never stayed long enough to get hearts involved, so I doubted there was a *trail* following me around. Didn't mean the reputation I had around town of being a guaranteed good time was wrong though.

I rubbed the back of my neck, flashing her a mischievous grin until she returned it. "I can't help the effect I have on women, Maddox."

She snorted, belying the tiny flush in her cheeks. "Glad to see some things haven't changed."

My smile faltered but I pushed through it. "I'm enjoying this surprise visit and all, but I'm technically late for a meeting and have about ten years of emails to wade through for my boss. Are you...okay?"

"Oh yeah, why wouldn't I be?" she said breezily.

I frowned. "I haven't heard from you in two years and now you're showing up, unannounced. Talking about propositions. What the hell is up?"

Charlie walked toward me and came to stand by the chair, looking even more beautiful than I remembered. I tightened my grip on the desk. For most of our friendship, there'd been a tired, scratched-up mahogany bar between our bodies.

Without that barrier, the yearning to touch her was practically unbearable.

She clasped her hands together, cleared her throat. "I'll start by saying that what I need to ask you isn't easy for me. And I'll admit this is, you know, *awkward* also it's just an idea, not even a smart one, so if you hate it —"

I reached for her wrist, even though five seconds earlier I'd been clutching at the desk with all my strength. Her pulse was rapid beneath my fingers, skin soft. She stopped talking, eyes wide.

I let go immediately.

“Hey, it’s only me,” I said evenly. “I can handle awkward. You spent a ton of time watching me make a fool of myself after practice at Jolene’s.”

One end of her mouth hitched up. “So you admit that you’re bad at picking up women.”

“I never said I was bad, Maddox,” I teased. “I *am* saying, there are swings and there are misses. You had a front-row seat to some misses.”

Charlie tugged on the end of her ponytail, eyeing me with a scrutiny that burned.

Burned in a way I’d always liked more than I should.

“Okay, fine,” she finally sighed out. “I’m in deep shit with Bettencourt because I partied with some friends in Philly this weekend and our pictures got taken and plastered across a bunch of gossipy sports sites. Apparently, this violates a part of their contract that mandates my reputation remain ‘family-friendly.’ Also, I blew off a few of the investor dinners I’m required to attend to charm rich people.”

“Glad to see some things haven’t changed,” I said, echoing her earlier taunt.

She flipped me the bird. My fingers retightened on the desk.

“And it’s comforting to know you’ll always be a pain in the ass. But...” She dropped her head and mumbled something I didn’t catch.

I dipped my head. Caught her eye. “What was that?”

“I need to clean up my reputation and I need to do it quick so I don’t lose this contract. And I thought maybe you could pretend to be my boyfriend for a few weeks.”

Charlie blurted this out in a rush, the words all shoved together so that it took me three whole seconds to realize what she’d said.

And then *really* realize it.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need you to repeat that,” I drawled. “Because I could have sworn you asked me to pretend to be your...boyfriend.”

Her pretty green gaze rose to mine, her cheeks red. “That is what I said.”

“Charlie...” I rubbed my forehead. “Back in the day, you made your lack of romantic feelings towards me well-known.”

“Right. That’s why the entire thing would be fake. I’m not trying to date you, Rowan. Or if I was, I wouldn’t invent some kind of orchestrated ritual to do so.” She arched an eyebrow. “I would just ask if you wanted to fuck.”

My back molars ground together in restraint. I’d gotten better at controlling my intense attraction to Charlie over the years, but a lifetime’s worth of erotic fantasies about her lived rent-free in my head.

Way too many of them involved sex on desks. Like the one I was currently sitting on, with its glorious flat surface and ability to support my favorite fantasies. Such as Charlie, perched on the edge with her legs spread wide. Or Charlie, with her palms flat on the desk and my fingers tangled in that long ponytail of hers.

And I’d give just about everything I had for her to shove me back and ride us both to orgasm. Just because she could.

Just because I wanted her.

Desperately.

I kept my focus locked on her. “I sorta thought you’d have another guy to ask. Figured you’d be with some adrenaline-loving boyfriend by now who could also help you charm the press.”

She ran her tongue across her teeth. A slew of new fantasies burst forth from the motion. “The last guy I dated was like a year ago. And only for a few weeks. I dumped him.”

“Was it because he wasn’t as handsome as me?”

Her lips twitched. “I was better than him at motocross. Turns out he was the jealous type. It was boring.”

I cracked a half grin. “Obviously you were better, Maddox. Though it’s interesting that you didn’t confirm or deny if I was hotter than him.”

Charlie shrugged one brightly tattooed shoulder. “I don’t think of you like that, Rowan.”

“But when you decided that *pretend boyfriend* was the solution to your reputation problem, you immediately came to me. Rowan O’Callaghan. Your hottest friend.”

She pressed her lips together, but amusement brightened her face. “I thought of you because you’re, you know...”

I waited, still smiling.

“You’re...very sweet,” she grumbled.

“*Sweet?* When the hell have you ever wanted *sweet?*”

“Hey, I contain multitudes.” She scowled, but then she raised her palms and took a breath. “I need to say that I believe our society’s obsession with romantic monogamy is problematic and the fact that I’m even *considering* lying about some made-up fairy tale is also problematic. But...you’re an athlete. You know how this world works. It’s deeply unfair for professionals to get positive attention based on their personal life. Not their talent. But the fans love a romance and so does the media. If Bettencourt wants me to generate happy, nice news stories, showing off a new boyfriend at all these events might help. Even a little.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, and dropped the grin. “It is totally, totally unfair. And Bettencourt’s the problem here, not you. So you went to some bars during your free time. Who gives a shit? They should be losing their damn minds over the privilege of sponsoring you.”

Her answering smile was small. But sincere. It made me feel like I was standing under the lights of Citi Field all over again. “Thank you. You always understand this stuff. On the one hand, I don’t want to pretend to be something I’m not. On the other...” She paused, jaw flexing. “I hesitate to even use

this word because I'm worried it sounds too dramatic. But I need a miracle, Rowan. I need...I need your help."

Over the course of our friendship, I'd seen the current expression on Charlie's face all of, what, two times? And every time, including now, my chest ached in a way I still didn't understand.

Physical pain? Yeah, I got that. Got the way the constant, dull throb of torn ligaments and tendons could make a person feel like they were out of their fucking mind, climbing the damn walls.

Whatever Charlie made me feel was similar but also... *different*. I only ever wanted the shoulder pain to go away. Whereas wanting to tear at the walls whenever Charlie was near was a sensation I enjoyed.

Whatever the hell that meant.

Still, until recently I was a man who had to rely on instincts alone. There were a lot of reasons why I wasn't gonna say yes to Charlie's proposition. A whole lot of the reasons had to do with those same instincts. They'd led me through tough calls many times before on the pitcher's mound. They were all screaming *don't do it* now.

I wasn't super sure what this chest-ache thing was all about whenever Charlie was near. But those instincts knew that being forced to *pretend* around a woman I hadn't been able to stop thinking about—or fantasizing about—wasn't a smart idea.

I pushed up and walked to the door, pulling it shut. Charlie eyed me warily until I retook my same position on the desk.

"To be honest, I need a miracle too." I raked a hand through my hair and indicated the mess surrounding me. "It's bad here, and I've got a whole community that relies on this place plus an entire staff of people who need their paychecks on time. We don't have the money to do that right now. The program cuts that the board needs me to make will be a disaster."

Her face fell. "Jesus, Rowan, that's horrible. I'm so sorry."

I shot her an apologetic look. “I’m the one who’s sorry, Maddox. Because you’re looking for a fake boyfriend for the next few weeks when I need to be spending every damn second of those same weeks looking for funds. A lot of funds. Like, *all* of them.”

I slowly rubbed my palms together. “And I always want to help you. Especially since I feel like I owe you—”

“You don’t owe me, Rowan,” she said sharply. “You really don’t.”

“Charlie, you did something that I’m epically grateful for —”

But she was already moving from the chair and shaking her head. “You don’t owe me anything. Especially not for that. Do this favor for me or not, but please leave the night you injured your shoulder out of the equation.”

I blew out a slightly frustrated breath, gut churning. “Okay, fine, I will. But I...I can’t do it. The timing couldn’t be worse. Everything is falling apart around here.”

She was nodding like she understood but her shoulders were rigid, nostrils flared while she grabbed her bag. “You don’t have to apologize. It was completely weird and inappropriate for me to ask you. And it was so *stupid*, it never would have worked anyway. Next time I see you, let’s laugh about it over a beer, okay?”

“Charlie, can we—”

She opened the door with a look that made my chest ache again. “I hope you’re able to get that miracle. This place means so much to you that I bet you’ll figure out a way to fix it. They were smart to put you in charge, Rowan.”

“Wait, do you want to come over tonight and talk—” I stammered out, but she’d already stalked through the hallway and out the front door. Cursing under my breath, I walked over to the still-open window.

“Good luck at the race?” I called out to her.

She smiled politely, threw back a wave, and then she was out of sight.

My head fell into my hands.

*“Fuck,”* I whispered.





## ROWAN

“*D*o you think Alice knows the true reason why this sink is always breaking?”

Dean’s voice was muffled by his position on his back, half his body in the space below the sink.

I was hand-drying dishes and crowding them in next to my grandmother’s absurdly large collection of mugs. “Oh, she definitely does. And the fact that she keeps pretending she doesn’t means she’s saving this knowledge to use as a threat or leverage later.”

He chuckled. Grunted at whatever he was tightening or loosening. Then he carefully slid out, sitting up against the back cabinets with his legs stretched out. I tossed him a rag to wipe his hands. “Flip on the water.”

I did. *Whooped* when water flowed out easily, swirling down the drain. “What would I do without you?”

“You wouldn’t have had a friend to sneak out with in high school,” he said. “So you wouldn’t have used the back kitchen window to sneak back in all the time.”

I grinned in response. “Not my fault jumping everyone’s back patio fences was easier and quieter than using the world’s squeakiest fucking front door.” I patted the sink fondly. “All those years of me stepping on top of you really did a number, huh?”

I extended a hand and Dean took it, letting me tug him to standing. Then I tossed him a clean towel and nodded at the

rest of the dishes. He and Tabitha were here for family dinner, though Alice never let Tabitha clean up.

She'd been back home on the block for two years, was now Dean's wife, but my grandmother still insisted on treating her like a special guest. Mostly because she mistakenly believed that Tabitha was a highly sought-after internet celebrity.

She wasn't. She was just a videographer with an active social media presence, but Tabitha was happy to avoid dish duty. And my grandmother loved putting me and Dean to work—a habit she'd developed when we were rowdy kids with way too much energy.

I stepped over by the refrigerator to fill the cabinets too tall for my grandmother to reach, passing the pencil marks in the doorway left over from her measuring Dean and me. Until ninth grade when we both shot up like giants and she made us mark our own heights.

Alice O'Callaghan had moved to South Philly from Ireland with my great-grandparents when she was young. They'd made a home for themselves in this neighborhood like so many other Irish immigrants, along with folks newly arrived from Italy and Poland at the time. My grandmother still carried the strong, musical lilt of her Irish accent. Still lived in the row home she'd grown up in, then I'd grown up in after she took me in.

My own row home was a measly three blocks north of here, but I spent at least half the week with her. Everyone on 10th Street knew that if I was away for more than forty-eight hours, my phone would blow up with her all-caps text messages: IT'S BEEN WEEKS SINCE YOU CAME BY. WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?

Tabitha's delighted laughter rang out from the front room, turning Dean's head. "What embarrassing early childhood memory is your grandmother sharing in there anyway?"

I peeked around the doorway and confirmed my suspicions. "Shit. It's the photo albums with our school pictures."

“Dean,” Tabitha called out, “I’m sorry but you were so cute in kindergarten I literally cannot stand it. *Cannot. Stand. It.*”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered, “Goddammit.”

“Don’t Midge and Maria show her this stuff constantly? No offense to both your mothers, but they are legit obsessed with you.”

He lifted one giant shoulder. “She’s seen some, but I try to carefully monitor the activity over there for this exact reason. Besides, I think Alice has more pictures of me than my parents do.”

“She loves you big time,” I said.

“Dean, for the love of god, why are you wearing a bow tie in first grade?” Tabitha yelled.

He pretended to be mad, but his expression was too affectionate. He ducked his head into the other room, dishrag over his shoulder.

“Alice,” he said, with mock sternness, “you promised you’d keep the pictures of me and Rowan as babies to a minimum tonight.”

My grandmother sniffed indignantly. “I promised no such thing. Please don’t repeat malicious lies in my kitchen. This is a holy, God-fearing household.”

I laughed. “No fucking way any part of this house is holy.”

Dean and I went back to our positions at the now-fixed sink, me washing, him drying. A common chore we’d done together more times than I could count.

“Thanks for peeking under the hood down there,” I said, cocking my head at the old pipes. “I feel bad always having you fix shit.”

“Fixing shit is a thing I know how to do.” He handed me a dirty glass. “You could have had me deal with the kitchen flooding issue at the center, you know. I don’t mind doing it.”

I shook my head. “Nope. Not anymore. You’re the coordinator for one of the largest food programs for seniors in this whole-ass city. Asking you to also fix everything in that ramshackle building feels like too much.”

“It’s not though.”

“It is,” I said simply. “And the person you brought in did great. Long as we don’t have chairs floating like sailboats in there, I’m happy.”

He was quiet. We could hear the soft murmur of Tabitha and my grandmother in the front room. The low chatter of neighbors on the small concrete patios next to us. Some music, a hint of fragrant smoke from whoever was barbecuing down the block.

“So...uh, were you gonna tell me that Charlie Maddox is in town? Or why I saw her leaving your office looking upset?” Dean asked suddenly.

I paused, mid-scrub, my heart rate speeding up. It’d been two days since that blond badass from my past stood in my office, asking for a favor I had to decline.

She’d dominated my every waking thought ever since.

“Now *that* was a weird day. I can’t believe I forgot to tell you.” Yeah, because I simply *forgot*. “They’re holding the women’s moto championships here in the city, so she was swinging by to say hey.”

He leaned back against the oven and crossed his arms. “She randomly stopped by at a neighborhood rec center, deep in South Philly?”

I dried my hands, then propped myself up on the barstool by the back door. “I was pretty surprised too. But I wanna know how in the hell you remembered Charlie. That was *way back* in my pre-major league days.”

I’d gotten drafted to pitch for a Triple-A team, the Syracuse Mets, right out of high school. They were a feeder team for New York, but until I got called up, I’d lived the typical life of a baseball player in the minor leagues. On the

road for half the year, sleeping on buses and in budget hotel rooms.

In the off-season, I'd come home as long as we weren't in training. But I still had the world's tiniest apartment near where we practiced, a town called Sweetwater outside of Syracuse.

That's why a bunch of players and I spent our nights at the local bar—long as we kept the actual alcohol intake to a minimum. Our coaches were happy to look the other way if no one was hungover at practice. But there was shit else to do, and we were broke on the pittance of a salary we made.

At Jolene's, beer was cheap, the music was good, and they always had a game on.

And Charlie was the bartender.

Dean held up his finger. "She served us drinks the few times I went up to visit you. And I only know *one* pro dirt bike racer. That's Charlie. It's not an easy thing to forget. But even more than that, Charlie was the only woman you ever called your friend."

I pulled a face. "The *only*? That can't be true." I hooked a thumb toward the front room. "Tab's my friend. Has been since, what, the eighth grade?"

Dean gave me a knowing smile. "Yeah, but Tabitha was my girlfriend, now wife, and even in eighth grade...well, you remember."

I shifted, not wanting to admit he was right. It had been obvious from day one that Dean was into Tabitha Tyler. Even before she was his girl, she was *his girl*.

So yeah, I'd thought of Tabitha as my friend from the very beginning.

*Because every other woman you get close to ends up being just a hookup.*

"Well...whatever," I grumbled. "It doesn't matter what she *is*, 'cause she's only here for the next few weeks. Then she's gone."

Dean's smile only grew more smug. "This is fucking hilarious. I said the *same exact thing* to you when Tabitha came home for the summer. And what advice did you give me?"

Nope, I wasn't gonna bite at that. I dropped my arm across the back of the stool. "I know where you're going with this, big guy. Trust me, I've tried with Charlie Maddox so many times she thinks it's funny now. She has zero interest in having sex with me."

He went quiet, watching me. "But didn't Charlie come to be with you in the hospital in New York City when you blew out your shoulder? I thought you'd told us she was there before Alice and I arrived."

Memories of that night were still painful to sift through. Charlie *had* been there, showing up without a moment's hesitation and refusing to leave my side.

She'd even slept curled up on the chair next to my hospital bed until I was discharged a day and a half later, into the expert care of the team's doctors and surgeons.

"She was there," I admitted. "It was...a really intense experience that we shared."

An expression I couldn't read flashed across his face. But then Tabitha twirled into the room, and his ability to focus on anything but his wife went right out the window I used to climb through after curfew. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he smiled down into her dark red hair.

"You looked so grumpy, even as a first grader, and I didn't know that was possible for a little kid," she said.

I shrugged. "I'd probably done something super annoying to him at lunch."

My grandmother shuffled in, holding a heavy photo album I immediately pulled from her arms. My breath caught in my throat when I realized which one it was.

"I see you've got one of our favorites out," I said, gently helping her into the chair next to mine. While I held one side

of the album open, she tapped on a picture of my parents sitting on the hood of their old car outside the Grand Canyon.

“I was just telling Tabitha about how your father was when he started dating your mother.” She smiled, looking as happy as she did heartbroken. “Your grandfather told him that he looked like he’d had an anvil dropped on his head.”

Dean pulled Tabitha closer. “I can relate to that.”

“I’m a very pretty anvil though,” she replied.

Alice traced her papery fingers over a picture of my parents I’d looked at with her hundreds of times. It was a special moment—it’d been taken on their honeymoon, the farthest either of them had ever gotten from the narrow streets of South Philly.

It was also an ordinary moment—a happy young couple looking dorky with cameras around their necks. I shared a startling resemblance to my dad, from our height to our red hair. Made looking at these pictures of him, frozen in time, strange sometimes.

“People are fools when they fall in love,” my grandmother said. “One day you’ll discover that too, Rowan.”

I laughed that off. “I’m still in my *sowing wild oats* stage, but thanks. Not looking for anvils at this current moment.”

Tabitha’s eyebrows shot up. “I thought the same thing before I met Dean.”

I raised my hands. “But if I get tied down, won’t I be disappointing hundreds, maybe even thousands of women all across this fine city?”

Tabitha laughed while Dean threw a dishrag at my face. Casual dating, flirting, picking up women...it’d always been easy for me. I slid into that routine *hard* when I was playing ball.

And learned some routines are more difficult to shake than others.

People all around me were partnering up while I was here for a weekend fling, at most. It wasn’t until I’d watched Dean



fall for Tabitha—literally in front of the whole block—that I wondered if I was doing something wrong.

I understood what my grandmother meant about my dad and the anvil. Got it on some level and could guess it felt really fucking great.

It still hadn't happened to me yet.

Though when I realized *Charlie Maddox*, of all people, was standing on the sidewalk, waiting to see me, I did get that weird chest thing I always got around her.

It was like my body had to alert my brain that it was about to get stupider.

Alice tenderly touched picture after picture while I continued to hold the book. “You joke now, Rowan, but we’ll be telling this as a funny story at your wedding someday.”

I wrapped an arm around her thin shoulders. “Alice O’Callaghan, can you see the future now?”

“Indeed, I can,” she said primly, but with mirth in her gaze. “Your dad pretended not to be interested in that sort of thing. But then...”

I made an explosion gesture near my ears. “Anvil time.”

“When you know, you know. Just like these two.”

We both looked up to catch Tabitha and Dean exchanging a sex look. At least it seemed like a sex look to me. I passed a hand over my mouth, hiding a smile. “Are you, uh...gettin’ out of here soon?”

Dean cleared his throat. “Unless you need more help in the kitchen?”

I waved them off. “Go, go. Have some fun.”

He stooped to kiss my grandmother on the cheek. “Your dinners get more delicious every week.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “*Dean Knox-Morelli*, making an old woman swoon even after all these years.”

Tabitha swooped in for a long hug. “He’s good at that, and it’s kind of annoying. Some of us have work to get done and can’t be getting distracted by our swoony husbands.”

Dean rubbed the back of his head with a sheepish grin. Meanwhile, Tabitha stepped close to me for a side hug. “I know things are tough right now without Elaine. I thought some pro bono video work might inspire extra fundraising. What do you think?”

I blew out a breath. “I’d be forever grateful, that’s what I think.”

She winked. “Consider it done. I’ll swing by in a few days.”

After she and Dean left, I helped my grandmother up from her chair, walking her over to her favorite recliner by the front window.

“Do you want me to make you some tea before I go?” I asked, anticipating her answer and already mid-turn when she grabbed me by the wrist. She had tears in her eyes, which sent me crouching to my knees in front of her.

“Hey, hey,” I said softly, “what’s going on? Dean made you swoon that much, huh?”

She sniffed, smiling a little. “I wanted to look at those pictures of your parents with Tabitha because they make me happy. I *want* to talk about it with everyone on the block because I miss them. Terribly. It’s comforting to miss them *with* other people. But then, after...”

I swallowed around a lump in my throat. “Then you still miss them. And it’s horrible. Especially in the summer.”

My parents had died during the summer. To this day, I couldn’t hear the sounds of air conditioning window units, or the jangly ice cream truck, without experiencing a collision of grief and memory, all at once.

Some summers were better than others. Some were worse. She hadn’t mentioned anything specifically, but I had a gut feeling this was one of the *worse* ones. She’d been hovering

around the photo albums and crying more than usual, staring out this window with a wistful expression.

Two decades later, and I knew there was a part of her still hoping my dad was simply on his way. That he'd be here any second.

My grandmother nodded and patted my cheek. "What was Tabitha talking about with the center? You haven't mentioned anything being wrong."

I pushed to stand with my left arm and felt the sharp pinch in my shoulder, reminding me that I'd climbed that tree two days ago. "We're having some...problems. Money problems. We need it and don't have enough."

"Oh, yes. A tale as old as time," she mused, sounding tired now.

"Let me get you that tea, okay?"

I walked back into the kitchen and put on the kettle. Found her cup, plate, and sugar on autopilot. I could walk through this house blindfolded and anticipate every dip in the floorboards, every squeaky stair and frayed rug. So as the water boiled, I carefully closed the open photo album and placed it back where it belonged.

Sometimes we sat with these albums for hours. Sometimes we even did it with other people, like Eddie and Maria and Midge, pouring Irish whiskey. Laughing a lot. Crying a little.

There were plenty of other times, however, when it hurt so bad I could barely stand to look at them. Tonight was one of those nights.

Water boiled, I brought over the tea on a tray, happy to see my grandmother peering out the front windows with a smile back on her face. "Don't spy on people. It's rude," I teased.

"I can't spy if people aren't out, doing things, and *no one is doing anything.*"

"Drink your tea." I nudged it her way. "Someone will come out soon with all the best gossip."

She hummed irritably but sipped from her mug. I surveyed the house, made sure everything was plugged in, cleaned up and in its rightful place. “Do you want me to stay and keep you company? We can watch that HGTV show you like where you make fun of everyone’s wallpaper choices.”

She pursed her lips. “People should make better decisions if they don’t want me to judge them.” But then she waved her hand in a *shoo* gesture. “And I’ll be fine. Just text me when you get home so I know you got there safely.”

I scooped up my Phillies hat and keys, bent to kiss her cheek once more. “I can do that. I love ya, Alice O’Callaghan.”

“Love you too, dear heart,” she said. “And everything will work out at your job.”

I paused, my hand on the door and my heart sinking. “Do you think so? Because the situation’s bleak.”

*Like fire your best friend and cut a critical community program bleak.*

She tipped her cup my way. “We take care of each other in this neighborhood. Lord knows you and I have been taken care of when we needed it the most. When someone needs help, we do it. Even if we have to get a little creative sometimes.”

“You might be right about that,” I admitted.

And it was true, because an hour later, I was still turning over my grandmother’s words.

*Even if we have to get a little creative.*

I set my now-empty Yuengling down on my stoop and stretched my legs out till they reached the sidewalk. It was a sticky summer night, and it felt like half the neighborhood was out and about. I couldn’t say what their motives were, but mine were *avoiding my fucking email*.

The message from Luciana—about the grant, Dean’s position, and the senior program—had included the entire board. So now there was a whole string of messages with bad

news, just waiting for me to sift through and respond that I understood. That I got it.

That I'd do it.

I massaged the back of my neck, where a heavy tension had permanently settled. Part of me had been excited to be a leader again, to play the roles I used to love. Rallying people's spirits, motivating teammates through rough patches.

I should have known better.

Before this, I'd been content in my coordinator role, happy to take marching orders and put out small fires. I hadn't been prepared to wander into this current shit show. But hadn't I learned, over and over, not to reach for what I wanted?

It always got taken away.

I snatched up my phone, eager to scroll mindlessly rather than decipher the financial reports awaiting me inside. I peeked through headlines, final scores, various hot takes. Found the page on ESPN's website covering the daily updates from the motocross championships.

My thumb hovered over a link to *read more*.

*I need a miracle, Rowan. I need your help.*

My stomach hollowing, I clicked on it. I wasn't even sure what I was looking for, but I was intrigued when I landed on the championship website. There were tickets being sold for different races. Pages selling merchandise and gear. News updates and press releases.

And a listing of the attending sponsors and investors at the non-race events leading up to the big day.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

I *recognized* these names. Two well-known Philly-based philanthropists. A half dozen companies that had given the rec center financial support in the past. A few more were literally on a sticky note in my office right now, names scribbled down after a meeting with Luciana. Next to those names, I'd written: *Elaine's been trying to get support from these local companies for years but no donations yet.*

I clicked back through the website. All those same names were emblazoned on rider jackets and bike gear, on banners and program flyers.

I let my head fall back against the front door. Charlie was about to spend the next few weeks in the room with some of the richest people and companies in the city. And had invited me to come along with her.

*The fans love a romance and so does the media. If Bettencourt wants me to generate happy, nice news stories, showing off a new boyfriend at all these events might help.*

I'd turned her down.

I thought about my grandmother saying *we take care of each other in this neighborhood*. Of the wounded look on Charlie's face as she fled my office. And I could hear all my gut instincts, reminding me that this was the worst possible time to do something so unbelievably stupid.

But I needed a miracle too, and her bizarre proposition was as close as I was gonna get to it.

Besides, when it came to Charlie Maddox, when had I ever been that smart?



# CHARLIE

*F*ive minutes remained until my second race was about to start. And I couldn't get my riding goggles untangled.

Dempsey briefly watched me struggle before taking them with an exasperated sigh.

"You know, if you *stored* them the way you're supposed to, you wouldn't get these knots," she said, using her nails to pick at the offending area. "You can't go out there without them. Where's your spare set?"

I squinted off to the side, nose wrinkled. "Back in my hotel room, probably."

The one I'd left in a rush this morning—thoughts agitated, body out of sorts, *completely* distracted.

She grunted. "And how does that help us?"

My eyes darted over to the countdown clock. I was straddling my bike behind the start gate. All around me, other riders were suiting up, revving engines, checking in with their mechanics.

Meanwhile, my agent was here to deliver bad news.

But only after she fixed my goggles like a frustrated parent at a swim meet.

"Here," she said, "good as new."

I tucked the end of my braid into the back of my jacket and secured the goggles. Then I pulled on my helmet, but not



before Dempsey fixed it with a furrow in her brow.

“You’d think I haven’t been doing this since I was five years old,” I drawled.

Her lips pursed. “It doesn’t mean you don’t need help out here. Everyone else has some. A trainer or a team would carry everything for you. Including goggles.”

I ignored the question buried within her—understandable—point. “Thanks for the last-minute assist though. Do you want to give me the bad news before I go do a bunch of death-defying stunts?”

She crossed her arms, the colorful lines of her tattoos curling out from the sleeves of her silk top. “It could be worse. As of today, Bettencourt is still your sponsor. *For now*. I finally got a short face-to-face meeting right before this and promised them perfect behavior and wins.”

I glanced up in total surprise and grabbed her hands. “Dempsey, you *queen*.”

“There are stipulations. Big ones.”

“Name ’em,” I said.

“You are on *shaky ground*. Consider this like a probation. One more mistake and you’re out. Permanently. I’m talking an inch of bad press, an unflattering picture, a PR fuck-up.” She ducked to hold my gaze. “And continued losses.”

Jittery nerves flooded my veins, but I hoped that my goggles and helmet obscured them from her view. An announcer called out the two-minute warning, and I reached for my handles.

“Win everything and don’t fuck up,” I repeated. “I can do that. *Will* do that. Dempsey, I’m being serious here—you’re a lifesaver.”

She checked a message on her phone but with a pleased smile on her face. “So I’ve been told. Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention the most important part.” She looked up, beamed. “Bring that nice boyfriend of yours to the press event.”

My relief vanished so swiftly I got light-headed. “My... what?”

“I casually let it slip that you had a Philly boyfriend during the meeting and the reps were *very* happy to hear it, which is a hopeful sign. They want to meet him.”

The announcer’s voice boomed across the field. “Riders, are you ready?”

It was terrible timing for those of us panicking.

“Anyway, don’t forget to win. It’s super important,” she yelled over her shoulder, stepping away from the track in her stilettos.

I cursed under my breath, scrambling now. The green flag fluttered, then dropped, and the starting gates released. The crowded pocket of chaotic energy I was in exploded forward, riders peeling ahead and around the first sharp turn. But by the second lap, I was still mid-pack.

Mud flew around us, and the crowd was a technicolor blur of signs and waving hands. Every time I coasted off a jump—usually a moment of gravity-free bliss—was overshadowed by the embarrassment I’d been boiling under since huffing out of Rowan’s office.

The end of my dad’s career was less about one single injury and more the accumulation of injuries from too many bike crashes on the track. But when his last accident permanently damaged his knee joints, a professional career was impossible.

So much of the household responsibility landed on me. I had to manage a part-time job after school while balancing my own fledgling moto career. Had to stretch my dad’s final winnings and measly savings account to cover our multiplying bills.

My aunts and uncles didn’t seem to care. My mother was in the wind. Our town had a penchant for malicious gossip, so even as a teenager, I knew not to utter a *word* about our struggles.

Most days, I'd rather get a tooth pulled than ask another person for help.

Asking Rowan for help—especially for a favor that was so weird and intimate—had been a *huge* mistake.

I was the one who'd fucked everything up anyway. I could fix it by myself. Would have to, after I figured out a way to un-boyfriend myself to Dempsey.

Regret curdled in my gut. The entire experience had been made worse by the fact that Rowan was only considering going along with my scheme because he thought he *owed me* for being there with him the night of his shoulder injury. I hadn't seen it happen—actually felt lucky that I didn't have the game on, because per Rowan's recollection, he'd collapsed onto the field after the throw that shattered his arm.

Just him telling me the story was a chilling enough image to stay with me for weeks.

But the minute he called me —voice strained and ragged, hospital sounds in the background—I'd kicked every damn patron out of the bar and booked it the five long hours to Queens. It was the one time, truly, where I'd been my most vulnerable and honest.

He thought it was some kind of...*transaction*.

I tightened my grip and attempted to focus as we came around the third lap with only two to go. The trio of riders in front of me stayed there, dodging my efforts to sneak past no matter how hard I tried. The memory of asking Rowan O'Callaghan to *be my fake boyfriend* kept eroding the edges of my concentration.

So did his smile. That confident flick of a grin that was just sweet enough not to be smug. And just sexy enough to send me flying off a jump at an awkward angle in the final lap.

I landed wrong in a rut, way too close to another rider, and my back tire didn't cooperate. I grimaced through the muscular work of keeping the bike upright, but my right hand slipped and smacked against the rear tire of the rider I was battling it out with.

The glove mostly protected me, but a sharp pain still exploded from the point of contact. Frustrated tears stung my eyes.

I was making rookie mistakes like it was my job now. And the finish line was closing in much too fast. A loose pack of us crossed the line in a final blur.

I finished fifth.

I gradually came to a stop in a cloud of dust and pulled off my gloves, goggles, and helmet. A quick scan of the board only confirmed that I'd lost.

Blinking away the tears from earlier, I swallowed a few times and fixed a polite smile on my face. Cameras were already swarming the winner—it wasn't Riley, but one of her Archer's Angels teammates this time. Her team celebrated all the same, gathering around as she beamed—triumphant, surrounded by her people, waving to their fans.

I caught the attention of Riley and her girlfriend, Quinn, who were mixed in with the crowd and taking pictures already. Their expressions were open. Friendly. I raised my hand to wave, got too nervous, pulled back, then winced when I realized how bruised and bloody my knuckles were.

They exchanged puzzled looks. My face flushed, the back of my neck growing hot.

I had the distinct feeling that I was being swallowed by a patch of quicksand that I couldn't escape.

Until I swung off my bike and came face-to-face with Rowan. He wore a white T-shirt, a frayed Phillies hat, and a half grin that had the breath catching in my throat.

I hadn't realized how much I needed a friend.

"What are...what are you doing here?" I stammered.

"I came to see your race. You were brilliant, by the way. Lookin' extra strong on those triple jumps."

I blinked, dazed for a moment. Then shifted my attention toward the track. "I wish... I should have won. But I was too late out of the gate."

He made a sound of sympathy that had me turning back. “Losing sucks. Every fucking time. I get it.”

He always did, always had. It made talking to Rowan at Jolene’s...easy. Not having to explain the vicious ups and downs of being a pro athlete.

“If I’d known you were in the crowd, I would have shown off more. Busted out a few of my special tricks.”

His smile was indulgent. Almost lazy. “Maybe next time? I’ll come prepared with better signage too.” He held a torn-off piece of notebook paper, where in pen he’d written *I’m Charlie Maddox’s #1 Fan!*

The sight of it startled a laugh from me. “I’m not sure it can get better than this, O’Callaghan.”

Then his eyes fell to my right hand. A muscle ticked in his jaw. He lifted his own palm, seeking permission, and I set my hand in his. A spark of awareness burst through the pain, sending a shiver along my spine that was deeply annoying. Because if I admitted it to the cocky redhead in front of me, he’d likely claim that was the effect he had on a lot of people.

“You hurt yourself again.” It wasn’t a question. He ducked his head and his breath caressed along my skin. “What’d you do, get in a fistfight out on the track?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Slammed my hand into another rider’s tire.”

He *tsked*. “You’re lucky it isn’t broken. Do you have a first aid kit in your truck?”

“Sure, but there’s a medic tent over there. I can just...”

I trailed off, because he’d taken a step closer, forcing my gaze to meet his. “I’m a former pitcher, Maddox. I’ve bandaged up more split-open knuckles than anything else.” He tipped his head toward the parking lot. “Come on. Let me fix you up.”

“Fix me *up*?” I asked, standing still when he was clearly trying to get me to follow.

He rolled his eyes playfully, like I was being difficult in a way he found adorable. I was suddenly aware of interest in us—not much, but an added scrutiny.

Rowan hovered his mouth close to my cheek. “As it turns out, I don’t know shit about being a boyfriend. Never been one before. But I think a *good* boyfriend would patch you up.” He paused. “Right?”

Electric heat flooded my veins. I swallowed hard but forced my own confident grin. “Possibly. Though you’re not a medical doctor last time I checked, O’Callaghan.” I held up my hand. “This baby could be fully broken. And now, just because you’re my *boyfriend*, I follow along without using my deductive reasoning?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment. Then shrugged his massive shoulders. “Yeah, but you didn’t request a smart boyfriend. And we both know it’s not broken.”

“How the hell do we know that?”

He nodded down at the hand in question, where I’d been gesturing a moment ago. “You wouldn’t be able to flutter it around. And you’d be screaming. Or at least wailing. I’ve never broken a hand myself, but I’ve seen plenty of them happen in my storied career.” He tossed me a wink. “Trust your boyfriend.”

Rowan turned towards my truck, and a full ten seconds later I realized that I was following him. Obediently. I planted my feet, stunned, but that only placed me directly in front of the crowd of fans. I brightened, starting to move towards them. But a heavy arm landed on my shoulders, spinning me back to the truck.

“She’ll be right there,” he called, voice smooth as silk. “I need to check that hand of hers first.”

I resisted the urge to scowl at him—just barely. “What the actual fuck are you doing?”

“Pretending to date you,” he murmured. “Isn’t that what you asked me to do?”

It was. And I had. And I *needed* this. I'd noticed the swooned look of a few fans when he'd gently redirected me. That reaction was the *exact reason* why I suggested this absurd idea in the first place.

Still pissed me off though, how much the weight of his arm wrapped around my shoulders felt like a comfort. The way the intensity of his focus was like being burned up by the sun.

And not a bad burn either. Which was irritating.

But instead, I attempted another smile. It was hot out, the air dusty, the lot busy and loud. I pulled open the side door of my sea-green truck and fished out my first aid kit. While Rowan picked through the splints and gauze, I lowered the bed and tried to haul myself in.

*Tried* being the operative word.

My busted hand wasn't broken—Rowan was aggravatingly correct—but putting weight on it wasn't ideal. A second later, he stood next to me, mirth in his gaze.

“Have something you want to add?” I asked, trying again.

“Not specifically. But I can lift you. If you'd like.” His eyes flicked behind us then back to me. I could read what he was trying to communicate.

People watching. People interested. Fans with cameras.

“Thank you for asking,” I said, “and uh...go for it.”

He reached over the side of the truck and set the first aid kit into the bed. Those large, strong hands landed on my waist, and I was briefly airborne then softly seated. He stepped back quickly, putting space between us. His throat worked on a swallow.

“I guess that's the...boyfriendly...thing to do,” I managed.

He waved it off, taking my hand and placing it on my knee. “I'm asking this as a friend but...do you ever have anyone help you on race day? A mechanic? A trainer?”

“Not really, no.” I lifted my chin. “I've never needed it.”

He didn't respond, merely tore open the antibiotic wipes and took my hand in his. "Look up at me?"

I did, prepared for the sting and—

"*Fuck*, why does it feel like that every time?"

One side of his mouth hitched up. "The second time I broke one of my fingers, I was running from a girl's jealous boyfriend." At the sign of my brow raising, he continued. "It's not what you think. Well, technically, it is. She'd taken me home for the night but neglected to mention said boyfriend. A serious one, who worked the night shift."

"He caught you?" The fizzing pain in my knuckles was briefly ignored.

"Almost." Another wink. "I ran out of there, carrying my clothes, but snagged my finger in their sliding glass door on the way out. Didn't notice until I was a block away and had to call Dean to take me to the ER." He held up his right pinky, which did have a slight bend to it. "Luckily it wasn't my throwing hand. It hurts when it rains though."

His head dipped as he applied the butterfly bandages, and I realized much too late how utterly surrounded I was—my knees brushed the soft material of his shorts. His upper body blocked the sun and parts of the crowd. The side of his neck was exposed to me, all strong corded muscle.

I inhaled Rowan's scent, familiar even after our time apart: clean soap, warm sun and green grass.

"There...we...go." He raised my hand for my perusal. "How's that feel?"

I blinked, refocused.

"Uh...better. Feels better. Thanks," I muttered. "Will your ego only increase if I say that you're good at this?"

"Good at what?" He slid the brim of his hat up an inch. "Bandaging your knuckles or being a boyfriend?"

I rolled my eyes. "The knuckles, O'Callaghan."

He grinned. "That's the sound of my ego doubling in size."



I turned to the racing track, hiding a smile, and saw Dempsey making her way toward us with a quizzical, but intrigued, expression. Looking back at him, I said, “I thought this was the very worst time for you to do this...*pretend dating* thing with me. I told you not to feel obligated. I can figure something out on my own, I always do.”

An unreadable emotion rippled across his face. “I don’t feel obligated at all. But you said you needed a miracle, right?”

“Yeah. A big one.”

He grimaced. “So do I. A big one. I was hoping we could find a way for this arrangement to benefit us both.”

Something about the raspy edge of *benefit us both* had a hot flush working up my throat.

“What do you want from me then?” I asked. Casually. Carefully. And for only a second, as the two of us huddled together, his gaze flared seductively. It wasn’t the easy charm so prevalent in his bar flirting. It held a darker texture that had my stomach hollowing like I was performing a trick on my bike.

“Hi there,” Dempsey called out.

The sound of her voice pushed us apart, had me pinning her with an apologetic smile. I held up my bandaged hand. “Don’t worry, it’s a non-critical wound. But I am sorry I came in fifth. I couldn’t get past that pack of three.”

Her cool blue eyes were sliding back and forth between Rowan and me. “It was a tough one, babe. They clearly boxed you out. But are you going to introduce me or what?”

I shot a quick glance at Rowan, but he was already extending his hand. “Rowan O’Callaghan. I’m just here to perform minor surgery, ma’am.”

Recognition dawned on her face. “Hey, I know you. You were a rookie pitcher for the Mets what...three, four years ago?”

His eyebrows flew up. “Four years ago, yeah. I’m guessing you’re a big Mets fan then?”

“Huge. Lifelong. Die-hard,” she replied, crossing her arms. She sized him up. Sized me up. “Charlie, is this who I think it is?”

I gulped. It was now or never. Rowan slid a loose arm around my waist, and I knew he was saying *yes*.

“It sure is,” I said brightly. “Dempsey, please meet my new boyfriend.”



## CHARLIE

Rowan knew a bar nearby where we could talk—small, dark, and private—so I hopped in my truck and followed him there. It was just past four in the afternoon, but my nerves were shot and a cold beer would probably do me some good.

Thank god Dempsey had begged off to meet with another client, so she wasn't able to grill us on relationship details we hadn't figured out yet. I didn't miss the tiny smile of approval she'd worn while chatting with us though. The warmth of that gesture was indication enough that I'd been floundering without it.

Leave it to Rowan O'Callaghan, *of course*, to swoop in, bandage my knuckles, and charm my agent all at once.

We parked side-by-side in front of a bar that looked like it hadn't updated its decor since the seventies. *Maximillian's* was scrawled on the sign out front. We were somewhere in the suburbs, near the track, but far from the prying eyes of racing fans.

Rowan held open my door while I climbed down. "This place could give Jolene's a run for its money in the shabby looks department."

"Thought you'd appreciate that," he replied. "I figured it was smarter to hash out the details of a fake relationship without the public sniffing around. Or the nosy busybodies of South Philly."

I cleared my throat. “If I didn’t, uh, make this clear, I’m in a *one more strike and you’re out* situation with Bettencourt, per Dempsey’s meeting with them this morning. Finding out I invented a relationship to win them over while lying to the media would be that strike.”

“Let’s make sure they never find out then,” he said, pulling open the door with one hand and flashing a notebook and pen in the other. “I came prepared, Maddox.”

I slid past him into the dimly lit bar. My boots stuck to the floor, and there were baskets of peanuts on the counter I could already tell were stale. The clack of pool balls, the glasses drying on the counter, the low bass of rock music—all of it had memories of Jolene’s washing over me, made stronger by Rowan’s reappearance in my life.

“Seem familiar?” he asked, voice close to my ear.

“Very. I’ll have to be on the lookout for a smug pitcher, constantly looking to score.”

Rowan laughed, the sound as contagious as I remembered. I pressed my lips together and hopped onto a barstool, rapping my non-bandaged knuckles on the wood out of habit. Rowan slid onto the next one, left leg stretched long, his foot hooked around the lower rungs of my stool. “And I’ll be on the lookout for the smokin’ hot bartender who was way out of every customer’s league.”

I hummed under my breath. “Oh yes, even yours.”

“As you informed me within seconds of us meeting.”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you hadn’t hit on me instead of ordering,” I pointed out.

He dragged his thumb across his lower lip. “An honest-to-god rookie mistake. Only one I ever made.”

I tossed him a smirk. “Yeah, I haven’t missed this bravado.”

“Really? Because I’ve missed you.”

A smile burst across my face before I could suppress it. He tipped towards me, just a little. “Gotcha.”

“But we’re not playing the game,” I protested.

His eyes on mine were a distraction. “Aren’t we always playing some kind of game, Charlie?”

We were—thankfully—interrupted by the surly bartender, who poured two Yuenglings and slid them our way. I took a long, satisfying drink, feeling my shoulders relax. Then I peered over at Rowan. “How do you remember us playing that? It was years ago.”

He arched a single eyebrow. “How could I ever forget? Sometimes I’d think of the stupidest, most obvious jokes during the day, just to see if I could get you to break at night.”

“As if I ever broke,” I replied, chin high.

“Now that’s a bold statement for someone who just did.”

A strange glow settled in my chest. I lifted my gaze away from his and found the TV, which was set to ESPN, as any dimly-lit suburban bar TV should be. I couldn’t have pinpointed when Rowan and I had started it, playing the game where I attempted to maintain my slightly irritated disposition behind the bar while he lobbed cheesy, stupid jokes at me to get me to smile.

I would always fight it.

He’d only fight harder.

And if he failed in getting me to crack, I took a shot of whiskey purely out of spite. But if I lost? I’d give him one for free.

Sometimes we played during the last hour before closing. Sometimes whole weeks would go by—weeks where he was traveling for games or I was on the road, racing—and I’d catch myself missing his mischievous attention.

Other times, Rowan would be tossing out silly jokes to a pretty girl on the stool next to him while I poured drinks and tended bar, adding background noise to his casual seduction.

Because it was only ever that. A game to play with whoever was in his vicinity.

Rowan studied me over the top of his beer. “That wasn’t a joke earlier. I’ve missed you, Charlie.”

I nodded, fiddled nervously with my braid. “Yeah...yeah, I’ve missed you too.”

I turned on the stool, fully facing him now, and the reality of what I’d asked him to do—asked him to *be*—rippled through me. It was always easier to ignore the raw power of Rowan’s attractiveness with physical objects blocking the way.

But not even an hour in and his hands had gripped my waist, his breath had caressed the back of my hand, his muscular thighs blocked me in. When Rowan popped into my head as the right man to pretend with, his natural charisma and our long friendship had been the deciding factors.

I hadn’t anticipated the way my body was going to hum with constant awareness of *his* body.

He nudged my knee with his. “Talk to me about this miracle. Sounds like the bad girl of motocross needs a slight reputation adjustment?”

“Something like that,” I said, setting my beer down. “Before Bettencourt, when I was a privateer, I didn’t worry much about what the community thought about me because all I needed was to win. It didn’t matter if people believed I was like my dad because my reputation wasn’t directly tied to anyone else’s.”

I propped my chin in my hand. “I don’t mind the *bad girl* thing. Even a little bit of an edge helps me stand out in a sport getting crowded with big, branded personalities that attract huge fan bases. And, yeah, I’m not always the most pleasant to reporters. And I like to go out and have fun sometimes. Like, a handful of times a year. But every time I do, some rogue photographer catches me doing shots at a club, and it ends up all over the internet.” I indicated my bare, tattooed arms. “All the ink only makes it worse.”

Rowan’s eyes skated along my tattooed shoulders down to my tattooed wrists with a surprising affection. “Or all the ink only makes it better.”

My chest warmed again, so I swallowed another sip of cold beer. He did the same, gaze locked on mine while his throat worked.

“I saw a lot of this shit happen to guys on my team when I was playing baseball,” he said. “Once the media has this idea of who you are, they’ll sink their teeth into it and never let go.”

I nodded, twisting my glass back and forth. “Per Dempsey, I need to be on my best behavior at the next few events. With a boyfriend on my arm, preferably.”

At Rowan’s bemused look, I said, “She let it slip that I had one at a meeting, and I guess a romantic relationship is just ‘family-friendly’ enough to get me on their good side.”

That look of bemusement turned sly. “Wait. She told them you had a boyfriend before I showed up today?”

I realized my error a beat too late.

“It’s no biggie,” I said quickly, “but I might have *implied* that you and I were an item. Before I officially asked you. Then hadn’t had the chance after that day in your office to spin her some convenient story about why you’d suddenly vanished.”

His head tipped back on a laugh that had me dropping my face into my hands. “Oh, Maddox. That is *brazen as hell*.”

“I panicked, okay?” I pressed my cool fingers to my blushing cheeks.

His grin was a mile wide and much too charming. “What were you gonna do if I hadn’t shown up today? Drag along a cardboard cutout of my body?”

I blew the bangs off my forehead with a noisy breath. “Oh, I don’t know. Tell her you had to suddenly move to Canada?”

He nodded. “A classic. And I’m gonna give you shit about this forever. It’s only fair.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “A cardboard cutout would be less annoying at least.”



He leaned in a few inches. “It’s always been adorable, watching you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend that you don’t love having me around.”

I narrowed my eyes. He did the same. We held that pose, stony-faced, for a few seconds. Until the ends of his lips twitched. Just once, but it had me laughing into my fist, trying—unsuccessfully—to pass it off as a cough.

Rowan winked. “Gotcha. Again.”

“I’m stressed out. I just lost a race.” I held up my hand. “And I’m *injured*. I’m not at my best.”

He chuckled. Finished his beer, then raked a hand through his hair. “Cardboard cutout or not, we’ll get you back on their good side, Maddox. I said this the other day, but it’s still true. They’d be fools to cut you.”

I bit the end of my thumb, nervous about what came next. “I, uh...I was extremely lucky to score this sponsorship for a lot of reasons. It’s a *ton* of money. Money I need now, because my dad was served an eviction notice a couple weeks ago. If I can’t come up with the funds to pay what he owes, help him with the rest of the mortgage moving forward, he’ll be kicked out of that house. So that’s my miracle.”

His jaw clenched. “That’s criminal, Charlie. I’m so sorry.”

I lifted a shoulder. “I fucked up. Big time. The pictures from the bar. Blowing off the events. I can’t have my dad getting evicted because of my mistakes.”

“This isn’t all on you,” he said, brows knitted together. “Most of the fault lies with the awful system that doesn’t take care of athletes after they’ve retired. Especially ones with career-ending injuries, like your dad. How is he gonna pay his mortgage if he can’t race?”

I thought of the bridges my dad had burned after he quit, a result of his physical pain colliding with his new limitations. He refused appearances that paid. Was an asshole to his agent,

who was only trying to do his best. And developed a reputation for being “difficult” that was impossible to shake.

“He didn’t always...he didn’t always make the best choices. Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, huh?”

Rowan’s expression darkened. “Charlie, I don’t really think that’s fair—”

“So what’s your miracle then?” I asked, interrupting him.

He hesitated, jaw still flexing. For a moment, I thought he might press the issue, but then he let out a long sigh. “I told you that the rec center is in the middle of a financial crisis. A major one. We lost an operations grant this summer, one we had gotten for years, and it covered a lot of our salaries. Including this new program I started for seniors in the neighborhood.”

He rubbed the back of his neck a few times. “Since I’m the person temporarily in charge right now, I gotta find a lot of money in three fucking weeks or I have to eliminate that program. The first of many.” He tipped his glass my way. “All those events you want a boyfriend for, well...I checked ’em out online. A lot of rich people and rich businesses will be in those rooms with you. If I can get some face-to-face time and a warm intro from the Bad Girl of Moto herself...”

Rowan’s mouth hitched up, eyes hopeful. And I was already nodding in agreement. “I do know some of them. And if I don’t, I’ll make it happen. Consider it done.”

His smile turned sheepish. “Thank you. Do you...do you think it’s a totally stupid idea?”

“Of course not. It’s a totally strategic idea.”

“Okay then,” he said firmly. “That’s what I need from this...this *arrangement*. Connections to money so my favorite place in the world doesn’t go under. It’s the only way I can justify helping you right now, given how chaotic it is at work.”

I finished my beer and hoped my cheeks weren’t red. My stomach had lurched sideways at the way Rowan had said he needed to justify helping me. And I had no idea *why*. He was

my friend. It didn't make him less of one for needing an excuse to participate in my bizarre proposition.

At least he wasn't still hung up on thinking he *owed me* for an act of kindness I never expected to be repaid.

"It's smart of you," I added. "Smart to leverage this fake dating thing to your benefit if you can. We should be thinking of it as a business transaction. Nothing personal. Just a way for us to both get paid."

Understanding dawned on his face. He leaned forward slightly. "What I said about *justifying* this wasn't the right choice of words. I didn't mean it to sound so impersonal. Like you're a burden to me. Because you're not, Charlie. You've never been."

My face was undeniably beet-red now. "Oh, I know, it's okay. Friendship aside, this *should* be transactional. It's best to be candid up front so no one gets hurt. Right?"

He stared at me for a beat too long. I fought to maintain eye contact.

"Right," he finally said. "And how long is this business transaction?"

"The championship race is at the end of August. So three weeks from now."

His smile was wan. "And I've got three weeks to save these programs. Do you remember my buddy Dean? The boxer?"

I nodded, vague memories of briefly meeting him once or twice at Jolene's—though Rowan often spoke warmly about this man who was more brother than friend. A quiet, serious fighter who'd seen Rowan at some of his lowest points, according to him.

"I sort of convinced him to turn down a super high-paying announcer gig to take an underpaid, overworked nonprofit job at the center with me instead. Running the senior food program."

"You mean the one you'll have to cut?"

He rubbed his jaw. Nodded. “I can’t fire him two years later. The guy just got married, for fuck’s sake.”

The brief flash of vulnerability on his face had my stomach twisting again, this time in sympathy. But then he reschooled his features, all charm and easy humor. “But I wasn’t gifted with these movie-star looks for them to go to waste. Unleash me on a room of unsuspecting rich people and I’ll walk out with a check. I guarantee it.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “Rowan. Firing your best friend would be horrible. I’m sorry this is happening to you.”

His attention darted up to the TV behind me. “It ain’t gonna happen. Not on my watch. Not if we pull this off, yeah?”

Growing up in Sweetwater, the common understanding was that cities were cold, unfeeling places where a person wouldn’t stop and help you if you were lying half dead in the street. But to hear Rowan tell it, his neighborhood was the reason he and his grandmother survived. Why they’d held on through the worst.

To hear Rowan tell it, South Philly was the reason he’d made it to the majors at all.

“It seems like we have to be, given what’s at stake. So no pressure or anything.” I arched an eyebrow. “All we have to do is make our fake relationship appear realistic enough to save my contract, help my dad not get evicted, get the rec center a bunch of money, and protect Dean’s job.”

Rowan grinned but it seemed forced. He clinked his glass against mine. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” I drummed my fingers on the bar. “And we can’t tell a soul about this. About us. It has to be our secret.”

He leaned back on the stool, shaking his head. “Yeah, I can’t do that to Dean. And by extension, Tabitha. I’ll have to tell him.”

I frowned. “Have you told him his job’s on the line at the center?”

“Nope. It’s not the same though.”

“Care to enlighten me on the difference?”

“The cuts the board wants me to make aren’t gonna happen. Telling him will only worry him for no reason. This”—he waved a hand between us— “is something he’ll sniff out immediately.”

I pursed my lips. “That doesn’t give me a ton of confidence in our ability to pull this off if you’re saying Dean will figure us out minute one.”

“He’s known me since I was four. He’s not some rando reporter or a fan on Instagram. And we had Dempsey fooled today with zero prep ahead of time. Dean knows my romantic history too well to believe we’re dating.”

“And what’s your romantic history?” I asked.

He leveled me with a cheeky grin. “Absolutely fucking zero. *That’s* why he’ll know I’m lying. Don’t you have a friend you want to tell? Who’s the person who immediately sees through your bullshit?”

*I don’t have a person like that*, I almost said. Almost. But I didn’t have the heart to admit I didn’t have much in the way of friends. More like friendly acquaintances I could go to a bar with after a race.

Not someone like Dean, that’s for sure.

Things might have been different if I hadn’t spent so much of my school-age years busy with starting my racing career— or busy trying to cover all of our bills. It made talking to my school friends about trivial social drama or homework questions nearly impossible.

“Can Dean and Tabitha keep a secret like this?” I asked, dodging his question.

“Hell yeah, they can. Not only can they keep it, they’ll know how to play it cool around the nosy busybodies on 10th Street, which includes my grandmother. The nosiest busybody of all. Dean and I have been each other’s alibis since we were kids. We know how to play this game. And if we can sell our

pretend love story to all the old gossips in South Philly, it'll spread like wildfire without us even trying."

I was quiet for a moment, avoiding his gaze and watching the day's sports highlights on the screen across the bar. I'd chosen Rowan because he was my friend and I trusted him. To an extent. How did you rely on people not to screw you over?

How did you willingly hand over the tools they needed to do you dirty?

"Charlie. It's not negotiable," he said, catching my eye and keeping it. "I believe we can pull this off, but I've got to be honest with the people I'm closest to."

*Don't you have a friend you want to tell?*

"Sure. Right. I get it," I finally said, forcing a smile. "We're agreeing to lie, on purpose, to a lot of people. It's a little nerve-racking, to say the least."

His expression grew teasing. "Is Charlie Maddox having a crisis of conscience?"

I snorted. "No fucking way. We both know athletes who have done *a lot* worse than use a romance for some favorable publicity. It's a harmless crime. No one gets hurt. And in the end, we both get what we want."

Rowan regarded me with a flirtatious look I knew well. "And is there anything else you want out of this arrangement, Maddox? Because if this is some complicated ploy to get me into your bed, you only have to ask."

I wrinkled my nose as he laughed. "I'll remind you that I don't need ploys, Rowan. Definitely wouldn't need a ploy to seduce *you*. Your desperation is glaringly obvious. Has been for years."

He laughed even louder. "Damn, I forgot how fun it was to mess around with you."

"Sure, yeah, *mess around*," I murmured, *not* sounding disappointed. He was opening his notebook and clicking open his pen. "Are you serious with that thing?"

“Aren’t you? We need to figure out how to convince people we’re in love.” He nodded down at the blank page. “I’m here for all that sweet, sweet research, babe.”

I hid a smile. “Pro tip. Don’t call me *babe*.”

“Sweetheart then. What are you gonna call me?”

“Dickhead. And I’m not a sweetheart.”

Still grinning, Rowan stuck his hand out. “Are we really doin’ this? Fake dating for a couple of miracles?”

I took his hand with a cool smirk. “We sure are. Babe.”

He winked. “Can’t say I hate it.”

His fingers pressed into my skin. They were a little rough. Calloused. And very, very strong.

They were the sure, confident hands of a man who sent baseballs hurtling at ninety miles an hour toward home plate, sixty feet away.

I squeezed back once, heart in my throat. Then let go, all too aware of how unbearably aroused that quick touch had made me.

Rowan didn’t seem to notice, holding up two fingers at the bartender for a second round. “Now that we’ve shaken on it, let’s figure out how we’re going to convince people we’re madly in love.”





## ROWAN

Charlie arched a single eyebrow and tapped the first page in my notebook. “Having spent two years watching you flirt your way through the women of Sweetwater, I wasn’t expecting you to need to take notes. Did I pick the wrong guy for this ill-advised scheme?”

My answering smile was wicked. “You picked the perfect man and you know it, Maddox. But since I’ve never been a boyfriend before, I figured I should prep as much as I would before a game.”

She scrutinized me over her beer, the *take no shit* expression I’d seen her send burly bikers who were rude to her at Jolene’s out the door with their tails between their legs. It was a look of blazing defiance, one that said *touch me and die, asshole*.

Being on the receiving end of it always made me hard as a rock.

Though that wasn’t the only reason I was currently gripping my glass as tight as a two-seam fastball. Less than a foot separated us on our stools, bringing me much too close to a beautiful woman I now needed to desire *less*, not more.

She still wore her boots and racing pants, but her white tank top exposed more bronzed, tattooed skin than I could handle. Dirt smeared one cheek. Her knuckles were bruising around the bandages I’d applied. Blond hair fell from her braid in messy tangles, and she smelled faintly of dust, sweat, and sunscreen.

It made me want to press my face against her neck and breathe in all that sun-warmed skin.

My fragile willpower had been in tatters since I'd stepped on that racetrack and finally got to see her do what she loved the most—live, in action, not just on some screen.

Back at Jolene's, whenever she was home from traveling for races, she would eventually offer up stories and updates. Even a video or two if most of the other patrons had gone and it was only us.

She was stingy about personal details with the majority of people who frequented that bar. Not me though. And I always had to work real hard to act normal whenever she did share a video from a race. Because watching her hurtle through the air on a damn *dirt bike* like it was the easiest thing in the world always made my chest swell with pride.

I would smile. Nod. Try not to say something like *you're the coolest person I know, and I think about you, like, a hundred times a day. Is that normal?*

Charlie took a long sip of her beer, that scrutiny turning mischievous. "Ah, I get it now. My new fake boyfriend's a rookie."

I snorted. "In name only. Feel free to ask the women of Sweetwater. They'll confirm I'm one hell of a quick study."

She circled her finger through the air. "Sure. You're good at sex. *Supposedly*. But since that's not what I'm looking for, let's get you some notes."

I pulled the notebook back before she could grab it. "Hold up, Maddox. I was under the impression that you were something of a rookie in this department too. At least based on the microscopic amount of personal information you shared with me back during our bar days."

"I've had...some boyfriends."

"Some? What, like...two? Seven? Twenty?"

She hesitated. "They weren't anything special. There was the guy I told you about the other day."

“The shithead jealous of your talent?”

“Yep,” she said, smacking her lips. “One cheated on me. One was totally boring. One was bad in bed and *not* a quick study.” She winced like she’d caught a whiff of something foul. “A couple years ago I went on a handful of dates with this man who ended things because he wanted to be with a woman who had a career that was more *girly*.” She flexed the fingers of her injured hand, wincing again. “I told him I thought being able to defy gravity on a bike was pretty badass and last I checked *girly* meant *badass*. Then I dumped my soda over his head and walked out.”

“Christ, you weren’t exaggerating,” I muttered. “Okay then, it’s settled. It’s my duty to be the world’s best fake boyfriend for the next three weeks to make up for those bargain bin assholes.”

She laughed, the sound low and sexy. It lifted the hair on my arms every single time.

“You’ve got a deal,” she said, picking up the pen. “You have my permission to give it your best shot.”

Charlie’s respect and trust had always been something earned, not freely given. So the fact that she’d asked me, of all people, to be her fake boyfriend for the positive media attention made me light-headed with want.

Until this very moment, I fully expected the whole thing to be some horrible prank.

But she’d shaken my hand and had agreed to my terms. Was now my pretend girlfriend for the next twenty-one days.

The personal and financial stakes were high for us both. Mistakes weren’t an option.

And that meant this precarious hold I had on my willpower was a problem I needed to fix *immediately*.

I propped my elbow on the bar. “Ultimately, this is all about optics, right? What do you want people to think when they see us together?”

Charlie cocked her head, thinking. “I need an antidote to this idea that I’m unreliable. Too edgy. Unwilling to play by the rules.”

“You hate playing by the rules.”

She grinned. “I’m working on it. But a nice, friendly boyfriend who shows up for me, publicly, and stares at me like he’s obsessed should do the trick. Does that make sense?”

I cocked a thumb at my face. “I’m the nice, friendly guy?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“That’s easy enough. Growing up, Dean and I were more on the troublemaking side of things. But you can trust that my sweet Irish grandmother raised me up right. I will not disappoint.”

She snagged her bottom lip with her teeth. “I don’t need you to lay your jacket over a puddle so I don’t get my dainty little feet wet. I hate all that stuff. So nice. Polite. But not super traditional.” She peered over my paper. “You’re not writing any of that down.”

“Don’t have to. We haven’t seen each other in a few years, but I still *know you*, Charlie. You’ve never been impressed by empty, vaguely sexist gestures of chivalry.”

Her eyes slid from mine, back to the television. But she was trying to hide a smile and not doing a great job of it. “I’m that transparent?”

“Being an authentic person will do that to ya, babe.”

She scowled at me. Playfully. So I nudged her, just as playfully.

“Can I make a request too?” I asked.

“Go for it.”

I pressed my hands together in prayer. “Go easy on me when you fake dump me after the championship race?”

Her eyes widened. “You’re asking *me* to go easy on *you*?”

“I always assumed you left men’s hearts in *smithereens* form.”

“And you don’t?” she shot back. “I wasn’t just a witness to you flirting with women nonstop. I was also the one serving them drinks days later, when they were mourning the fact that you hadn’t called to their friends. I poured a lot of shots in your name, Rowan.”

I scoffed through a flicker of unease. “Yeah, I was young and really fucking stupid about how to handle casual dating. But I *tried* to be straightforward. I never promised I would call or anything.”

Charlie spun on her stool with an amused smirk. “Well, *that* was a lot of verbal tap-dancing. Damn, I was only giving you a hard time because I thought you already knew about these women.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I didn’t...I didn’t not know. I just...” That flicker of unease surged into a discomfort that had me reaching for my beer. Charlie’s gaze burned into me, but I didn’t meet it.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve not been some saint either,” she admitted. “Sure, I’ve dated some trash men. But it’s not like I’ve handled every relationship perfectly. There’s probably a bar filled with men cursing my name as we speak.”

That pulled a tiny smile from me. “So like...you poured a lot of shots in my name? Or were you exaggerating?”

Her brow furrowed. “I wasn’t exaggerating. What did you think was going to happen, messing around like that in a gossipy town? There’s no way someone doesn’t get hurt at least once, right?”

Some part of me knew she was right.

Accepting that was a whole other issue.

I lifted a shoulder and finished the last of my beer. “We make a good match, Maddox. Neither of us are saints. Though all of that was real. This is pretend. It feels like it’ll be much easier to get it right when there are no feelings involved.”

Charlie cleared her throat. “Exactly, yeah. Plus, we’re not here to dig through our personal trash cans. We need to agree on our relationship backstory so we can get the details straight. I already told Dempsey we’d been dating for two months and we’re in our”—she winced—“honeymoon period.”

My head tipped back on a laugh. “Holy shit, this is gonna be fun.”

“You’re welcome for making it easy for you.”

“And how’s that?”

She pushed her bangs to the side. “Isn’t that the early part of a relationship when it’s all constant hot sex and talking?”

“Don’t look at me, I’ve got no clue. Though Dean and Tabitha have been together for two years now, and they both worship the ground that the other walks on.”

She tapped her fingers on the bar. “Even when I’ve had boyfriends, I don’t think they ever...” She waved her hand through the air. “If you did that, it should cover our bases.”

“Worship the ground you walk on?”

She swallowed. “Fake it, obviously. For the public. And the cameras.”

My hand was back to gripping the glass again. “I can fake it. But you have to do the same for me, Maddox.”

A teasing grin slid up one side of her face. “I’ll try my best, O’Callaghan, but don’t go getting a big head about it.”

I had a million filthy ideas about how to worship this woman the only way I knew how. The way I knew *best*.

And every one of them involved bringing down those stubborn walls of hers, one by one.

Because if I *ever* got Charlie Maddox in my bed, we could finally drop the act.

Drop the game.

Exist solely in a place of desperate lust, fucking each other with the same hot, sexual energy that always simmered

between us, through every teasing word and charged glance.

At least, that's how I'd always felt.

"It sounds like we've been together two months then," I said roughly.

She hummed her agreement. "And is there anyone you've slept with during that time that would be shocked to learn via social media that you've been dating me?"

I balked, thought of Carla and a few other women I'd been with. "Yeah. A handful of women from the last couple months might be surprised. Might not, given my reputation." A muscle in my jaw ticked. "I'll, uh...keep an eye on things and let you know if it's gonna be a problem for our story."

Wariness hovered on her face. I lowered my voice. "It's highly unlikely it'll become one, but if it does, I promise I'll talk to them and handle it."

Her shoulders loosened. "We can work with that."

"Where were you two months ago? I'm assuming we've been dating long distance."

She glanced up at the ceiling. "Let's see... I was out in California for a few weeks, in races up and down the coast. Then in Colorado, Idaho, and Wyoming, also racing. I was staying back home in Sweetwater right before this though, working on my dad's track with my trainer."

"Is that where you stay in the off-season?" I asked.

"I'll crash with Dad and Penny if I'm too wiped out from training and don't want to drive home. But I rent a studio apartment in town that I sublet when I'm gone for long stretches. Which is most of the time. Maybe you drove up to see me in Sweetwater from Philly?"

I traced deliberate circles around the top of my half-empty glass. "There'd be no *maybe* about it. If we were dating like this for real, and you were driving distance from me, I'd happily break the speed limit to get to you. Hell, I'd make it to Colorado if I had to."

Desire flickered in those pretty green eyes of hers—usually so enigmatic, but I recognized that heat. “All those miles just to worship me?”

“Pretty sure that’s the definition of the word, Charlie.”

She shifted forward on her stool, chin in her hand, strands of hair falling around her face. There was an openness to her expression I hadn’t seen much of before. At least not since the night of my shoulder injury when I’d called her from the hospital in absolute agony.

I’d joked my way through the efforts to stabilize me when I first arrived, gritting my teeth and awash in excruciating pain. Charlie got it though, got that my entire world had just ended on a single pitch.

When it was time for her to head back to Syracuse, she’d crouched on the edge of my bed with hollow cheeks and lines bracketing her mouth. Then she’d brushed a strand of hair from my forehead with so much tenderness it cracked me wide open.

I’d completely lost it, curling forward to cry against her chest as she held me close and whispered my name. She didn’t try and sugarcoat a damn thing. Didn’t feed me a bunch of lies about silver linings and things happening for a reason.

I was an orphan by the age of four—I wasn’t a stranger to the fake, fluffy platitudes people trotted out when the worst happened. Charlie hadn’t done any of that, and I’d never forgotten it. Never got to fully thank her either, since after that day I went back home to a baseball career in tatters while she promptly went off and won her first X Games.

The gulf between us stretched wide again, neither of us seemingly willing to get too close. In the end, it was easier to keep our infrequent text exchanges friendly and surface-level.

“Should we invent a story about how we met? Something dramatic?” she asked, yanking me from the past.

“Why don’t we tell the truth? We met at Jolene’s when I was pitching for Syracuse. Stayed friends and reconnected”—I leaned in, saw that same heat in her gaze— “and you finally



admitted you'd been pining for me, your hottest friend, all these years."

She pressed her lips together, trying *so* badly not to smile. "Pass."

"Yo, where's the lie?"

"Rowan, you asked me out, like, four hundred times at Jolene's. If anyone in this pretend story was pining, it was you."

Her smug look of presumed victory sent blood rushing to my cock. And she looked so sexy like that—so coy and flirtatious—I shrugged and said, "Sounds like an origin story to me. You nailed it."

She chewed on her lip. Then she held her thumb and index finger a centimeter apart. "I can tell people that I pined too. A teeny, tiny, little bit."

I pressed a hand to my heart. "I should be so fucking lucky to deserve your minuscule affection, Charlie Maddox."

She laughed at that, then grimaced at the clock behind the bar. "I need to get back to the hotel soon and take care of my bike. Anything else we need to cover?"

I hesitated. "Touching each other?"

Charlie went still. Cleared her throat. "Right. Clearly. We can't be out in public without some convincing handholding."

"And what you're comfortable with," I said slowly. "We're friends first, Maddox. I don't want it to make things...weird."

Her smile was breezy. Confident. "It won't make me feel weird, though I appreciate you saying it. But we obviously shouldn't kiss." At my surprised look, she said, "Why would we? Wait, do you *want* to kiss me?"

I chuckled softly, spreading my legs wider on the stool. I clasped her non-injured hand and gently tugged her to stand between them. "Charlie. We don't have to kiss. At all. Friends *shouldn't* be kissing. But we can do other stuff. And we can even practice now, if you want." I nodded my head at the

mostly empty bar. “It could be good practice since we’re in public but no one recognizes us here.”

She rolled her shoulders back. “Sure, sounds like a plan. So we just...like...*now*? Now we’re...together?”

I couldn’t tell if her nerves were from the thought of being touched, generally, or being touched by me, specifically.

“I’m a little nervous too,” I admitted. “Why don’t I touch you the way I would if you were my actual girlfriend? And you tell me what’s okay and what’s not. Or you can tell me to fuck off, and we don’t have to touch at all.”

Charlie huffed out a laugh, but then went back to what she’d been doing. Which was staring at my mouth with a naked hunger. I didn’t move—I wasn’t about to pull my nervous friend against my body with a goddamn *erection*.

But then she blinked a few times, and whatever I’d seen there vanished. “How would you touch me if this wasn’t pretend?”

I kept my smile easy and very lightly brought my legs together, trapping her where she stood. We were face-to-face now, so I could study her reactions. Her eyelashes fluttered. She swallowed rapidly. I draped a loose arm around her waist, and her skin was warm against mine.

Then I did something I’d wanted to do since the first moment I saw her at Jolene’s. I reached up and caught a strand of blond hair between my fingers. Rubbed it once and tucked it neatly behind her ear, careful not to let my fingers graze her skin for longer than necessary.

After all, none of this was real. If it was, if she was mine, I would have taken that sweet curve of skin between my teeth.

“Is this okay?” I asked.

She raised a shoulder, nonchalant. Almost in challenge. “That’s fine.”

Eyes locked on her face, I caressed my palm up and down her spine. Soft. Barely there. She inhaled sharply, her attention moving back to the TV screen.

I stopped, but she only said, “That’s fine too. And why are you looking at me like that?”

I pulled her in another inch, dropped my mouth close to her ear. “I’m attempting to salvage what’s left of my ego over here. The last time I touched a woman and she said it was *fine* was...never.”

She arched a defiant eyebrow. I wanted to kiss the freckles on her cheeks. “I’m sure that ego of yours will live to see another day.”

My thumb slipped beneath the hem of her shirt, and I stroked it across the small of her back.

More warmth. More softness.

So much *heat*. She shivered against me.

“Still okay?”

“Totally.”

I did it again, tracing a series of circles for no other reason than the fact that I suspected she liked it.

“Do you touch all the women you date this much in public?” she asked, voice a little shaky.

I clicked my tongue. “I’m your boyfriend now, Charlie. I would hope that any man you dated before me touched you like this, long as you wanted him to. And if he didn’t, he was a fucking fool.”

Her throat worked, gaze dropping to my mouth again. “Don’t you mean *pretend* boyfriend?”

I increased the pressure of my knees against her hips. “But didn’t I say I’d give it my all?”

With gentle pressure, I nudged her a little closer and threaded the fingers of my free hand through hers, squeezing. “You can touch me too. If you want.”

“Oh joy, dreams really do come true,” she drawled, making me grin. But her hand slid down my arm, pausing at my bicep. I flexed, hoping to make her laugh. It worked, and the sound skated across my skin like sunshine. “How will I

ever focus again now that I know the elite privilege of touching Rowan O'Callaghan's arm muscles?"

"That's the cost of fake dating your hottest friend, remember?" I murmured at her ear. This close, I watched her skin erupt in goosebumps. Felt, more than saw, the pleasure in her response. Her one hand palmed my shoulder, then back to my bicep again. Then my forearms, her fingers stroking across my palm. Back and forth, like she was intrigued.

I let her explore, even as lust coiled in my belly.

Even as the urge to kiss her was verging on unbearable.

"This was a good idea. Getting used to one another so we don't look...awkward," she said, sounding dazed. Her other hand was on my knee now, gliding up my thigh. I shut my eyes, gritted my teeth.

"Yeah," I managed. "Wouldn't want that."

Her hand slid up my thigh another inch. "It has to seem realistic."

That same strand of hair had come undone, and I tucked it back behind her ear without thinking. Let my hand travel to the long, thick weight of her braid. I tugged on the end with an indulgent smile.

Charlie was staring at my mouth again.

"It doesn't seem like we're gonna have a problem convincing people it's real," I whispered.

Her eyes flew to mine, widening slightly. Her blush deepened, lips parting.

From behind us, a very drunk man yelled, "Yo, Romeo and Juliet. You're blocking my view of the goddamn game."

Charlie—suddenly scowling—ducked her head past my shoulder. "Why don't you shut the fuck up about it?"

The response was a slurred, "Who asked you, bitch?"

I twisted at the waist, extended an arm. "Hey hey. Knock it off, pal. That's my girl you're talking to."

The guy looked me over. Frowned. Then went back to drinking. My best friend was the intimidating former boxer, not me. But I was still an ex-athlete, bigger than everyone in here, and I didn't mind using that to my advantage for this one moment.

When I turned back, Charlie was clearly fighting a smile. "Did you call me *your girl*?"

"I'm trying to be a suitable boyfriend for you, okay?" I teased.

"It's better than babe, at least."

"See? I'm already improving." I cocked a thumb over my shoulder. "A drunk guy yelling at us in a bar is basically the Philly stamp of approval, even out here in the 'burbs. We're golden now."

Charlie leaned an elbow against the bar. "In what way are we golden?"

"That guy called us 'Romeo and Juliet.' This fake dating thing just became official."



## ROWAN

“*W*hat do you think?” I asked, tipping an open cardboard box towards Midge.

She peered in and beamed at me. “It’s exactly what we need. Where did you get this much food for the Lavender Center on such short notice?”

I propped my hands on my hips. “I honestly don’t know. I got to work early this morning just as a delivery guy from the Acme was showing up with all these breakfast kit boxes. Handed me a card but it’s back in the office somewhere. He said I had a *secret admirer*. But it’s probably a donated delivery we forgot about.”

It’d been a surprising start to the day, but I wasn’t complaining about all the extra. And the donation was quality—fresh fruit, milk and orange juice, cereal and oatmeal.

I’d known just who to call.

Maria reached for my wrist. “It means a lot, Rowan.”

I hefted in two more boxes, then shut her trunk. “The senior food program is for *all* the elders in South Philly. When they need more, I’ll get more. Or I can send Dean over during one of his big drop-offs.”

Midge studied me closely. “And you’re sure you can spare it? Dean said things have been a little tight, with Elaine being out and all.”

I waved off her concern, even as a chorus of voices in my head were panic-shouting. “We’re figuring it out, day by day.

Yeah, it's a bit more chaotic than usual, but that doesn't mean we would ever stop supporting folks at the Lavender Center."

Maria's finger's tensed around my wrist. "You do look rather tired."

"I do? Because I *feel* spectacular."

"You look exhausted, sweetheart," Midge added. "You need more sleep."

"I'm sleeping like a baby. Promise."

"Do you want me to bring you dinner tonight? I can make that pot roast you love, and you can freeze it for later in the week?"

I hid a smile but nodded. Dean and I learned years ago that once both his mothers decided you looked tired, hungry, or both, it was best just to submit.

Also, no one in their right mind would turn down dinner cooked by the two women in front of me, who appeared to be ordinary by day and were culinary geniuses by night.

"Actually, that would be great," I replied. "Bring extra and I'll take it to Alice, okay?"

"By all means, the more the merrier," Midge said, rubbing her hands together.

I slipped back into the side room to pick up the two remaining boxes from the mystery donor. Dean's moms had swung by last month to talk about starting up regular food drop-offs for a group of seniors at the Lavender Center who didn't have enough to eat at home. Food insecurity rates were high all over Philly, but especially so for elderly folks in this neighborhood. It was why I'd pulled in Dean, with Eddie's help, to run a food program specifically for that population.

The Lavender Center ran a variety of programs for LGBTQ+ kids, teens, and adults. When we were in school, Dean had gone to a support group for queer kids, queer families, and their allies. Raised by two gay women, Dean had needed a place to talk about the bullying he experienced, and I'd always gone along with him.



It was an extra special place for him and Tabitha. She'd gone to the same groups for support after she came out as bisexual in high school.

I hoisted the boxes onto my non-injured shoulder and walked them to Midge and Maria, sliding them into the backseat. Stepping back, I brushed my hands together. "That should be it. And when folks need more, or if they need different, you know where to find me."

Maria fussed over the wrinkles in my shirt, clucking her tongue. "This executive director title looks wonderful on you, Rowan. They made the right choice."

I rubbed the back of my head. "Nah, I'm the temporary solution. I think my leadership days are over."

"You wouldn't want to take over for Elaine?" Midge asked.

"Elaine's job is demanding," I said. "The board will want to hire someone who has more training, I'm sure. Definitely not a guy who used to make it his job to skip math class every damn day."

At their expressions, I pointed two fingers at them both. "Do *not* tell my grandmother that."

They exchanged a sly glance before crowding me in a joint hug, patting my cheeks as they said goodbye.

"Well, you've got our vote and you can take that *straight* to that board of yours," Midge huffed. "Dinner's on us tonight. And for the love of god, *sleep*, will ya?"

"Yes, ma'am, and yes, ma'am," I promised, stepping back onto the sidewalk and waving them off.

I watched them drive away with a tightness in my throat I had to swallow three times to loosen. My parents died in a car accident when I was four, and I learned that the most important people in your life can get taken from you for no reason and without warning.

I'd also learned—later, when I was older and understood how much had been done—that without our neighbors on 10th

Street, without Midge and Maria specifically, no one would have been there to help my grandmother and I make it through.

And I still hadn't shaken the night my grandmother had pulled out the pictures of my parents on their honeymoon. The grief was there, waiting for me on days like this—long days. Stressful days. Weeks when I wasn't sleeping well.

Though my current insomnia was part work stress keeping me up and part Charlie Maddox, who I was now in a fake relationship with until the end of August.

If I could stop *obsessing* over what it felt like to touch her for the very first time in that bar, sleep might come a little easier for me.

“Hey,” Dean said, ambling up the sidewalk, “was that my parents just now?”

I grinned. “Mornin’, big guy. Yeah, you just missed ’em. I came in this morning to a bunch of boxes of donated breakfast food from who knows where. But I thought of the Lavender Center and gave them a call.”

He raked a hand through his dark hair. “I love a mystery donation and they need it bad over there. But what are you doing loading food donations anyway? Someone inside could have done it.”

“Yeah, I know,” I admitted. “I needed a reason to remember why the hell I was here at seven this morning, answering emails. And Midge and Maria always cheer me up.”

Dean cocked his head. “Are you sleeping?”

I scrubbed a hand down my face. “Every member of the Knox-Morelli family is riding my ass about my sleeping habits right now.”

He squeezed my shoulder as we headed back inside. “We meddle because we care.”

In the hallway, he stopped at the large window that faced the playground and waved to his niece, Juliet. We'd added a mural last year—a giant, wall-sized painting of a community

garden—with the words *Every Day is Your Chance to Make this City Better*.

It was something our fifth-grade teacher used to say, a quote that had guided both Dean and me, in different ways, back to this very spot.

“How’d your meeting go last night?” I asked, pushing open Elaine’s office door.

He sank into the closest chair with a hint of a smile. “It went great. Eddie and I have been talking to Edna’s cousin’s former hairdresser, who lives next to Mifflin Square. She and her husband are both eighty-five, live independently, with a big ole fridge sitting empty. Eddie and I mostly worked on building trust.”

“Any family?” I leaned on the edge of the desk.

Dean frowned. “A ton that live right nearby. They’re helping as much as they can, but it’s the city. They’re struggling too.”

“Yep,” I said, swallowing a sigh.

We didn’t need to say more than that. In a place this broke, with neighbors you shared a wall with sitting around without food in their goddamn fridge, we all knew that no one was coming to save us. It was why I returned here after having my dreams demolished on the pitcher’s mound.

South Philly needed a place where the people who lived there could take care of each other.

And if I didn’t find the money needed to save the program Dean ran, what were all the folks with empty fridges going to do?

I leaned over to peek at my scribbled to-do list. “On the good news front, the free lunch summer program for kids is still running great, we got the new laptops set up in the lab...” I glanced up. Grinned. “The kitchen sink is officially leak-free, my friend.”

His mouth hitched up. “Halle-freaking-lujah.”

Tabitha burst through the door with her usual giant smile, hands full of white paper bags. “If you think that’s good news, I come bearing fresh donuts from my dad’s diner.”

I snatched a bag from her hand. “Now how did your dad know I needed this?”

“He heard you haven’t been sleeping great.” She wrinkled her nose. “He wanted me to tell you he thinks you work too hard.”

Dean’s shoulders shook with restrained laughter.

“*Jesus*, this fucking neighborhood,” I muttered. Then opened the bag and inhaled the scent of warm pastry, cinnamon, and sugar. “Also, *Jesus*, your dad is a saint, Tab.”

I looked up to spot Tabitha, gazing down blissfully at Dean, who was cupping her cheek. I averted my eyes, giving them a little privacy, feeling that same weird pinch in my chest I kept getting whenever I saw couples doing...*couple-y* things lately.

I didn’t want to think about why doing those same things with Charlie in the bar felt completely natural when it was all pretend.

“I’m not just here to eat donuts and stare at Dean’s handsome face,” Tabitha said, licking powdered sugar from her fingers. Dean blushed into his food. “I’ve got a meeting with Bianca in a few minutes. We’re hoping I can get some quality video content of some of the programs today to use for a fundraising video. Remind the neighborhood what the rec center does and why it’s crucial that its doors stay open.”

“You’re a damn *angel*,” I said, scanning those same notes. “I was supposed to check in with her about the same thing, but if you’re already meeting that works for me.” I clicked my pen, crossed it off my list. “Tabitha Tyler to the rescue, as always.”

She was a local hero using her skills to promote art programs, social justice issues, community gardens...

And neighborhood rec centers desperately in need of funding.

“Eh, it’s nothing. It’s a slow week for me, and I just wrapped up a big project. Perhaps I could even get an interview with the executive director?”

I shook my head. “Elaine’s in better spirits but barely out of a surgery.”

She cocked her finger at me. “I meant you.”

I laughed it off. “I never say no to having my face on camera. But I’m not sure the public needs to see an interim director who doesn’t know what he’s doing. Doesn’t exactly inspire trust.”

Dean stared at me. “Is that what you think is going on here?”

“It’s what I know,” I said, dropping my elbows to my knees. “Get Eddie to do it. He’ll yell at everyone and make ’em feel bad. Open their wallets right up.”

Tabitha was taking notes with a wry smile. “I love interviewing Eddie, so that’s a given. Still might interview you though.”

“You’ll have to catch me first.”

Her smile widened. “I don’t have to catch you, Rowan. I only need to lead you to the first bar in the city having a ladies’ night. I’ll get that interview when your guard’s down, while you’re flirting with a frenzy.”

I laughed. “I would describe my style of flirting as *smooth* rather than frenzied, but you make a fair point. I’ve always liked a ladies’ night.”

My stomach twisted as I realized that getting my two closest friends alone in this office was about as good a time as any to spill the beans about Charlie.

“So, uh...speaking of *flirting*, I’ve got some...uh, news,” I said normally, in a super normal tone of voice.

Dean and Tabitha both paused mid-donut, eyes widening.

“You have flirting news?” he asked.

“It’s not technically what you think,” I started. “But it also kinda is? This old friend’s in town, and I used to know her when I was playing in the minors. And she asked me for some help recently and I, well...agreed to help her.”

Dean’s eyebrows shot way up. “Are we talkin’ about Charlie Maddox here?”

I nodded, but Tabitha interrupted me before I could explain more. “You mean the dirt bike racer?”

“You know who Charlie is?” I asked.

She was already scrolling through her phone, biting the tip of her thumb. “Charlie Maddox is an icon. A film school buddy shot this short documentary last year on women competing at the X Games, and she was featured heavily in it.”

Tabitha turned her screen around and tapped on it. I recognized the promo picture often used when Charlie was in the media. She was standing astride her dirt bike in a tight, all-black outfit and spiky boots that gave me *a lot* of impure thoughts.

And the secretive smile on her lips was much too dangerous.

“I’m sorry, *this* is your *friend*?” Tabitha asked.

“She’s always been just a friend,” I said with a casual shrug. “When I was in Syracuse, I would go to this bar called Jolene’s with a bunch of the other players. Charlie’s from the area and bartended there as a side gig to earn extra cash in between racing season.”

Tabitha pulled a face. “Did you ask Charlie out when you first met only to have her turn you down in a big way?”

“Course not.”

“Did you though?”

I scoffed, feeling the back of my neck go hot. “Okay, sure. I did ask her out and she did turn me down. But I wouldn’t say *big way*. More like...so small it was barely noticeable. Though that’s not really the point or worth bringing up or discussing. Ever again.”

“Rowan,” Dean interrupted, “are you and Charlie a thing now? Because if you are, I’ve got a shitload of questions.”

“We’re dating.”

Both of their jaws dropped open.

“But it’s fake,” I added. “I’m pretending to date her to help improve her reputation.”

The silence from Dean and Tabitha stretched on for a few seconds, long enough for me to understand just how fucking bonkers the situation was when I said it out loud.

“Can you, uh...explain more?” Dean finally asked. He looked like I’d just told him I was quitting my job tomorrow to become an astronaut.

I cleared my throat and relaxed into a smile. “Charlie’s here because the motocross championships are being held at the tracks outside the city. It’s a huge-ass convention, a ton of fans and press. She’s one of the favorites to win, especially since the X Games, but she’s in hot water with her sponsor. She’s got a bit of a reputation problem. Has been blowing off some of her events and has lost a lot of races recently.”

He arched a brow. “That’s enough for most of these sponsors to cut you loose. It’s all profit and loss to them.”

When Dean had chosen to leave a successful boxing career because of a head injury, everyone from the fans to the announcers ridiculed him. Five years later, and he *still* got shit from drunk assholes at bars who thought they could take Dean the Machine in a street fight.

And I’d been playing baseball in some form from the age of ten and knew exactly what it was like to lose the career that meant everything to you.

We understood how it felt to be reduced to nothing but a body. I was a shoulder that made millions for team owners. A throwing arm that sold out seats. A fastball that won championships. And when I got hurt, I was easily discarded.

“Charlie’s *this close* to getting cut,” I said grimly. “And the timing sucks because she’s trying to get a bunch of money

together to help her dad who's being threatened with eviction. Weird as it sounds, Charlie thinks showing up to these championship events with a new, adoring boyfriend on her arm will help avoid the worst from happening."

There was another awkwardly long pause. Then Tabitha said, "So you are...?"

"Charlie Maddox's fake boyfriend for the next three weeks."

"Oh...my...god." She clapped her hands. "This is, like, the *wildest* thing I've ever heard, and I'm already here for it."

Tabitha looked delighted, but Dean wasn't ready to let me off the hook. "I get why Charlie asked you but what are you getting from this?"

I cracked a grin. "Besides helping out a friend in need?"

He didn't budge. "Uh-huh."

I managed a shrug. "With all the transition goin' on here, the center could *also* use some extra cash. There's going to be a lot of rich people at some of these events, so I told her yes on the condition that she introduces me. But listen"—I extended a hand towards them—"one of the conditions was that I got to tell you two what was really going on. That's...well, that's the whole scoop."

It wasn't, of course. The *whole* scoop was that I was supposed to be gearing up to fire the guy in front of me by the end of the month.

Dean's brow stayed furrowed, but he didn't say anything.

"Are you telling Alice about all of this?" Tabitha asked.

"Not a word. Though I'm giving it seventy-two hours before her friend who works the deli counter at the Acme finds out and tells her while she's buying cheese. And..." I hesitated, still thinking about our family dinner. How tired and sad she'd looked, sitting in her chair. "I don't know. It's August and she's been pretty down. More than usual this time of year. Maybe this is wishful thinking, but a few weeks of her



believing I've got a girlfriend might cheer her up. As long as she doesn't get too attached to the idea."

Tabitha's eyes softened. "Well, count me in as a reliable alibi. And I get why you want to help, Rowan. You've had plenty of experience with all the complicated aspects of being an athlete. Charlie must trust you."

Those words had a sweet affection spreading through my chest. The kind that could complicate this fake situation in a very real way.

"Thank you, Tab," I said earnestly. "I know it's a lot to ask, pretending and all."

"Except it's really not." She picked up her phone and work bag, glancing at the wall clock. "I would do anything to help Alice. And if the bonus is helping out the center *and* a friend in need, how could a girl possibly say no?" She placed a hand on the top of Dean's head, gave it a quick scratch. "I need to go meet with Bianca, but we'll swing by after, fill you in on our marketing plan."

She spun around to leave, but Dean snatched her wrist. Pulled her in for a kiss that had her blushing. When she finally left, his expression shifted, from devotion to disbelief.

I crossed my arms over my chest, prepared for an interrogation. "What do you think about all of this? You haven't said much, big guy."

He chewed the last of his donut thoughtfully. Took his time. I was used to his pauses, the deliberate way he chose his words. But the coiling in my gut was because he was making me nervous.

"I've got no problem being your alibi on this. And strange as it sounds, I know why she came up with the idea," he said. "The media likes all that romance shit, plus you're a former athlete, a local, they'll latch onto it. But I'm more worried about you pretending to be the boyfriend of a woman you legitimately like. That's the problem I see, not the lying part."

"I do like Charlie, but you know it's not like that with us," I protested. "Sure, I had a thing for her when I was twenty-

two. But that was forever ago, and I'm only doing her a favor."

He bounced his knee up and down. "Are you? Or do you want things to be real between you two?"

"I'm doing her a favor," I repeated.

Dean nodded deliberately like he didn't believe a single word out of my mouth. Which was a problem—the next few weeks hinged on my ability to lie.

"People change over time," he said. "You've changed too, even if you can't see it. The summer that Tabitha came home, you told me to be careful. I'm tellin' you the same now."

The reason I'd said that was because he and Tabitha were having sex. And *that* was clearly off the table with Charlie.

But I knew where he was coming from. Knew it and appreciated it.

I held up my hands in defeat. "You're right. I'll be careful, I promise. It for sure has the potential of becoming a little sticky."

His expression turned rueful. "Sticky's a decent word for it." Then he cocked his head. "Are you sure you're okay? I know the summer's tough. And it feels like everything went from *I'm the new ED* to *we're running out of money* to *I'm a fake boyfriend now* super fast. If you're overwhelmed or something, you can always talk to me."

And for a single second, I *almost* blurted out the truth about the funding nightmare we found ourselves in. But I didn't. Couldn't. Dean had been through so much since his early retirement, had struggled with the listlessness we all felt once we were sent back out on our own. No coach, no team, no fans.

Over the past two years, between Tabitha and this job, it felt like Dean was finally himself again.

He had done way too much for me—his family had done way too much—for me to cut him loose. *Again*.

"I'm okay, but I appreciate you saying something. It is *weird*, that's for sure. And I wanted to tell you because I'll

need someone I can confide in about it. Even get some advice on how to do the whole boyfriend thing. I trust you, Dean. More than anyone else.”

This answer seemed to satisfy him. He tossed our food garbage and gave me a nod by the door. “Benny’s tonight?”

“To watch the Phillies smoke the Padres? Hell yeah.”

He paused, halfway out the door. “In terms of the boyfriend thing, you know more than you think. At least you always seemed like the expert on that stuff. I always felt like the amateur.” He smiled sheepishly. “Sometimes still do, though Tabitha swears otherwise.”

I forced an easy grin. “Yeah, you’re right. Don’t know why I’m doubting my skill set when I didn’t use to before.”

“You’re fake dating a woman that you once had a thing for. That’s confusing and would have a lot of people second-guessing themselves.”

Then he left, leaving the door open, and I released a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

*You’ve changed too, even if you can’t see it.*

I didn’t think that I had. I still felt like the guy who never stayed the night—so much so that when Charlie needed a friend to *fake* a commitment, she knew I was the one to call.

Was I the problem in these situations? Or was I just not built to fall in love the way that Dean and Tabitha had?

Or the way my grandparents had.

And my parents.

I went to stand over the chaos on Elaine’s desk, trying to get a visual for the day ahead: meetings, calls, grant reports. My attention snagged on the card from the mystery donor this morning and I turned it over, expecting to see one of our usual supporters.

Instead, the typed message read: *I hope this helps a little. We used to get boxes like this growing up when we didn’t have a lot of money. - CM*

I was dialing Charlie's number before I could overthink it. She picked up on the second ring, voice breathy and slightly muffled.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Did you send a bunch of South Philly seniors giant boxes of breakfast food this morning?" I asked, still smiling down at the card.

There was a pause, then, "Rowan? Oh, hey—sorry about that. The music's loud out here, and there's a bunch of us scrubbing our gear, me included. Gimme a sec."

There were scraping sounds, the low bass of rock music, Charlie calling something out away from the phone. When she next came on, it was much quieter.

"I've been power washing my dirty-ass bike, so I'm soaked through and covered in grease," she said lightly. "If you want a visual of what your smokin' hot blond of a girlfriend looks like right now."

I whistled low. "Are there people nearby, listening in?"

"Uh-huh," she said distractedly. "No, but I miss *you* more...babe."

"I'm gonna give you so much shit about this later, Maddox."

"Being away from you is like torture—okay, the coast is clear. I casually let it slip this morning while having breakfast with some of the other riders that I had a new boyfriend. And now I feel like everyone's watching me like a hawk." She paused. "And don't think for a second I'm going to sit back and take it from you, O'Callaghan."

"But I miss *you* more, babe."

She made a little growl of frustration that I liked way too much. "Forty-eight hours of fake dating and our relationship is already on the rocks."

I leaned against the edge of the desk. "Can't say I'm surprised, given our combined lack of experience in this area."

You're *not* supposed to annoy the hell out of your girlfriend on day two?"

"Someone should write a manual. *How to pretend to date your friend when you don't know what you're doing.*"

The playfulness in her voice was contagious.

"But, shit-talking aside, I was about to call you anyway to see if you wanted to meet for coffee tomorrow morning? We should nail down details on all the public events I'm attending where I'd like to parade you around," she said. "And the bonus is that it's likely we'll bump into fans and riders. Everyone's been going to this big market across the street—"

"Reading Terminal?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's it. Do you know it?"

"You can't grow up here and not know it," I said. "But I don't come uptown for just any girl. If I'm hauling up Broad Street for Reading Terminal, I'm takin' you to a local's spot inside. Best scrapple in the city."

She hummed in approval. "My favorite, how'd you remember?"

I held my tongue. *Because I remember everything about you* was too sincere this early in the morning.

"Any girlfriend I had would love scrapple, fake or not," I said instead. "Should I meet you in the lobby tomorrow morning?"

"It's a date," she said.

A heady anticipation zipped up my spine, so strongly that Dean's warning followed in its path: *You told me to be careful. I'm tellin' you the same now.*

"I have to get back to cleaning the grease off my chain, but what were you asking me earlier?"

I swallowed hard. "Right. I almost forgot. Did you send a bunch of food donations to the center this morning?"

"Oh yeah, did they make it there all right?" she asked brightly. "Also, was that okay that I did that? I didn't even

think—”

“It was perfect,” I said quickly. “Came right when I needed extra food for some hungry neighbors.” I walked over to stand by the window, flicking the edge of the card with my thumb. “Charlie...it meant a lot. To more than just me, especially since you’ve only been here once. It was generous of you, is what I’m trying to say.”

She was silent for a moment. “I don’t have to see it more than once to know it’s important to you, Rowan. And, uh...” She cleared her throat. “My dad and I did get donated breakfast boxes that were similar when I was in high school. I can’t even remember where they came from, but they always came right when we needed them too. It’s just a small thing.”

“It was a big thing,” I said firmly. “Thank you.”

I could sense, more than hear, the smile spreading across her face. “Any time. I’ll see you tomorrow in the lobby?”

“Looking forward to it,” I replied, forgetting it was all fake.

Forgetting that a relationship between me and Charlie could never be real.

And goddamn if I didn’t spend the rest of the day with the stupidest grin on my face.



# CHARLIE

I reached the end of my five-mile run on the treadmill and decreased the speed for a cool down. My heart slammed against my rib cage, and my chest heaved. The giant mirror in front of me reflected my bright red face and shoulders, shining with sweat.

There was a legitimate reason that I'd been here for two hours, grinding my way through a grueling workout. The authorized account was something like *I've got an important race in two weeks, so I better focus up and hit the gym since I've been sucking on the track, big-time.*

The unauthorized account was *I'm unbelievably horny, and it's all Rowan's fault.*

Three days had passed since we'd experimentally touched each other at that bar—strictly for fake relationship purposes—and I was deeply concerned about my inability to rein in my body's reaction.

Seventy-two hours later and there was still this deep, lingering *ache* that wouldn't leave me alone.

This was brand-new territory for me, and I desperately hoped it was normal to obsess over the way Rowan had caressed the shell of my ear. Tenderly. But also confidently, like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Like he would know how to caress other parts of my body too.

It was unnerving, the way my knees had weakened at his touch. Those hands gripping my waist, his thick thighs boxing



me in, the way his muscles flexed and twitched beneath my fingers.

*Weakness* was a new sensation for me. Weak knees most of all.

I already knew I couldn't let it happen again.

The treadmill slowed to a full stop, and I stepped off, my legs trembling from exertion. I dragged a towel over my face and guzzled half my water bottle, feeling a bead of sweat slide between my shoulder blades. Still out of breath, I glanced at my phone in search of distractions from remembering the way Rowan's lips had tipped up as he'd said *I'd happily break the speed limit to get to you.*

The thing was, pretend or not, it was a scenario that felt *right* to me. Because obviously he would, and *obviously* I'd be waiting, and once inside the house, we wouldn't even wait to get our clothes off before he'd be hauling me up against the door and—

There was a sharp chirp from my phone—a Google alert for my name—and then I got the distraction I needed.

And wished I hadn't gone searching for one at all.

It was from the page ESPN had devoted to covering the women's moto championships, and it was nothing but an opinion article from some staff writer, giving predictions that he clearly believed were "hot takes."

Halfway down, I found my name in bold: *Charlie Maddox has been the rider to watch for the past couple years, and she's got a string of exciting wins, and a devoted fan base, to back up this claim. But the notorious party girl—daughter of Malcolm Maddox, whose reputation isn't much better—has been on the receiving end of a string of bad press, made worse by the losses that have hounded her since racing season last year. Sure, Charlie's style is flashy, and her confidence is fun to watch, but is it just me, or do athletes like this always flare up fast...then burn out quick?*

Blood roared in my ears. I wasn't a masochist on purpose—I steered clear of the places where internet strangers

dissected every single thing I did just to find fault in it. And I usually knew better than to read anything without Dempsey reviewing it first.

She *surely* wouldn't have sent me this, because the last thing any athlete needed was discovering that the "experts" expected you to fail.

Bettencourt was going to hate this.

"Notorious party girl, my ass," I muttered, totally pissed. I tossed my towel in the gym laundry basket—more angrily than I meant to—and spotted a few of the riders I'd chatted with yesterday over breakfast. Riley and Quinn were there with other team members and women I hadn't met yet. They were in the middle of a weight-lifting session with a trainer, but I still raised my hand to wave.

Even as I did, I knew my face was much too hopeful, my posture too bright, the speed of my hand waving set to *is it glaringly noticeable that I'm trying too hard*.

And thank *god* they hadn't seen me, because in my desperation to seem friendly I narrowly avoided tripping over a barbell. I careened around it, just barely, already picturing the snarky headline on one of those sports gossip sites that I hated: *The Bad Girl of Moto tries, and fails, to make friends; looks like a lost puppy while doing it*.

I shoved the sweaty bangs off my forehead and opened the door leading back to the convention center lobby. I needed to get my shit together—all of it, and fast—but then I turned the corner only to find my fake boyfriend coming my way, strolling past groups of people with a casual self-assurance. He either didn't realize that some of those people were stopping to stare at him or he didn't care.

Because his dark, mischievous eyes were fixed solely on mine. A moment later and they dropped, taking in my appearance with a gaze that lingered.

That's when I realized what I looked like. And probably smelled like. While Rowan wore nice jeans and a white linen

button-down that stretched to fit his extremely broad shoulders.

“Let me guess,” he said as he reached me, “you missed me so much it’s like torture?”

I bit my lip but I was still smiling. Way too visibly. “Do you start all of your dates by talking shit?”

His eyes crinkled at the sides. “Only the ones with you, Maddox. I’m here a little early, but in my defense, I wasn’t expecting on bumping into you like this. I thought I’d have fifteen more minutes to wait by myself.”

“First date nerves really got ya, huh?”

He passed a hand over the buttons on his shirt. “Is it that undeniable? Tabitha put this outfit together for me. She called this *morning coffee chic*, and Dean made a grunt of approval, so I’m hopin’ I look okay?”

Rowan was flirting, as usual, but the burst of sincerity that hung on the end of his question was painfully *adorable*. Given my frazzled mental state post-workout, I wasn’t sure my body could handle it.

Then he reached his hand forward and hooked his fingers through mine, gently tugging me an inch closer. Because I’d asked him here, on purpose, so that fans could see us. So I could ensure that when my sponsors saw articles referring to me as a *notorious party girl* they *also* saw me with a devoted boyfriend.

And the smart thing to do would be to stop scowling up at him because he had the audacity to look both hot *and* adorable, all at once.

“You look...good.” I managed.

He ducked to catch my attention. “Can you say that a little louder for your boyfriend?”

I huffed out a breath. “Okay, fine, you look super hot in that shirt.”

“You look super hot too, by the way.”

I arched an eyebrow in disbelief. “I was hoping to look, and smell, less of a mess before charming the fans with our over-the-top romance.”

“It’s impossible for you to look like a mess.”

“Even after a race? When I’m covered in mud and even more sweat?”

His eyes did that long, lazy perusal again. “I like what I like, Charlie. And I always thought you looked sexy as hell covered in mud.”

It was suddenly impossible to swallow. “Nice to know you like the natural look.”

“I’m a simple man,” he said with a wink. “You wanna get to that coffee date or what?”

I took a step back and flashed my room key. “Give me ten minutes to rinse off the worst of it. And you can get those ten minutes you wanted for your date nerves.”

He cocked his head to a low couch. “I’ll be over there being nervous when you’re ready.”

His stare pressed into the space between my shoulder blades, all the way across the lobby and into the first bank of elevators. For the duration of my quick shower, I convinced myself that my rapid heart rate was caused by the treadmill, and not Rowan’s silky drawl as he told me I looked *sexy as hell*.

After, I pulled on clean clothes, grabbed my sandals, and managed to make my hair look semi-normal with an obscene amount of dry shampoo. And when I darted back to those same elevators, the way my stomach pitched and swooped like a flock of sparrows was *obviously* caused by the descent to the lobby.

Rowan was waiting when I got there, standing in the middle of the dirt bike exhibitions, the milling fans, the excited chatter. The sight of him arrested me like it had ten minutes earlier, but this time I fixed a sweet smile on my face. A girlfriendly smile.

The smile he sent back was too wicked for an innocent coffee date.

“How are those nerves?” I asked.

“Rampant. How was missing me? Tortuous?”

I scratched the top of my head, squinting up at the ceiling. “Were you gone? I didn’t notice.”

The sound of his laughter turned a few heads in our direction. I took a step closer, pulse jumping. “Should we go in for a romantic hug? For the optics, I mean—”

Rowan closed the small distance between us before I could finish talking. His strong, sun-warmed arms wrapped around my mid-back, which had me looping my arms around his neck, shooting up to my tiptoes until his face was pressed into the crook of my shoulder.

The endless, persistent *ache* I’d felt since the bar roared awake. I was surrounded by his scent of sunscreen and fresh grass. His chest was a solid weight, pressed to mine, and when he released a long, steady breath, it caressed the curve of my throat.

“Did we practice nuzzling the other day?” he whispered against my skin. “Just feels like the romantic thing to do during a hug.”

My fingers trailed down to the collar of his shirt, dipping in to settle at the hollow of his collarbone. Then lower, to the first inch of exposed chest and rough hair. “I don’t remember. You should demonstrate, see if it jogs my memory.”

There wasn’t an inch between us, so I felt the rumbled vibrations of his approval. His palm splayed across my back, holding me firmly while the tip of his nose dragged up the column of my throat.

The surge of white-hot lust that erupted from this motion had my nails digging lightly into his chest. This time, that rumbled sound was more growl than laughter, and I swear to *god*, Rowan pressed his face against my neck and *smelled me*.

I forced back the plaintive whimper on the tip of my tongue. It was a *hug*, for fuck's sake. I didn't need to shatter every inch of my cool because he inhaled me like a wild animal.

"How was that?" he murmured, his mouth open and hot, with the *barest* graze of his teeth.

"Fine," I said, parroting my words from the other day.

This time, his laughter was razor-edged and pitched low enough only for me to hear. "You really do enjoy making me work for it, don't you, Maddox?"

"And you've always liked doing the work," I taunted. In the back of my mind, I knew we were standing in a very public lobby, but that wasn't important at the moment. Right then, with Rowan's lips on my neck and lust searing through my veins, I felt a thrilling recklessness.

Until I realized he was delicately extricating himself from my embrace, stepping back with a glazed look in his eyes that gave me a flutter deep in my belly. He raked a hand through his hair and nodded at the front doors.

"You didn't ask me here just for hugs," he said—lightly. Carefully. "Let's get you the fried eggs and scrapple that I promised."

"For sure, yeah. Lead the way." I sounded all breathless and hated it. Though Rowan's jaw was locked tight, and his voice had a rough scrape to it I'd never heard before.

All those years of watching him flirt with other women at Jolene's like it was his actual job, and he'd never looked so on the verge of losing control.

But whatever had happened between us just then was romantic enough—or *something* enough—to attract attention. He took my hand as we neared the front glass doors, and I felt scrutiny on us the whole way.

"We've got some fans," he said under his breath.

My gaze slid sideways to his. "Sure do. All that neck nuzzling did the trick."

A grin flew across his face, teeth bright white beneath the hot Philly sun. He didn't respond, merely pulled me across the street and into the bustling market I hadn't visited yet.

We stepped through the doors of Reading Terminal Market and into a happy sort of chaos—food vendors as far as I could see, open produce stalls, neon signs, glass cases displaying chocolate-covered pretzels and hot, fresh donuts.

And everywhere, *people*—shopping, eating, haggling. I caught the scent of warm bread and sizzling steak before Rowan was gently guiding me onto a diner stool.

He sat next to me, one elbow propped on the counter, that easygoing grin only widening as an older woman with dark brown hair and an Eagles jersey slapped her notebook down and triumphantly clapped Rowan on the arm.

“How the hell are ya, Rowan? How's Alice?” she half yelled.

“Never been better. And Alice is a menace to society who swears I've abandoned her whenever I go more than twenty-four hours without visiting.”

The woman hooted. “So the same as always?”

“Yeah and I hope she never fucking changes,” he replied, then pointed at me. “Tina, this is Charlie. She races dirt bikes for a living. You might have seen all the riders across the street.”

I shook her hand, and she eyed me, intrigued. “I ride a motorcycle myself, a Harley Sportster. I always did appreciate a lady on a bike.”

I grinned back. “Ladies on bikes need to stick together. You should come watch us race at the track outside the city. We get rowdy out there.”

“And Charlie Maddox is one of the best,” Rowan added.

“You are?” she asked, both brows raised.

“I've been told.”

Tina laughed again before calling out an order for two coffees to the frenzied crew working over skillets in the middle of the cramped, crowded space. It looked like a roadside diner you'd pull into off Route 66, plopped into the middle of this chaotic market.

When Tina turned back, she waggled her finger between the two of us. "What's your deal then? Rowan doesn't usually bring a lot of ladies around for breakfast."

I met Rowan's gaze—he shifted on the stool, then placed his hand on my knee and squeezed. I could feel the tip of each finger, firm through the thin fabric of my yoga pants.

"Charlie's my girlfriend." Another squeeze. "And I told her she *had* to have the best scrapple in the city."

"Holy shit," Tina said, drawing each syllable out. "I thought I'd never see the day."

I dropped my chin into my hand and attempted my best version of *heart eyes* at the roguish redhead across from me. "I sure am a lucky girl."

"*Ha*," Tina snorted. She waved her towel at us before turning back to the coffee pot. "Don't sell yourself short, bike lady. More like Rowan's the lucky one."

I gave him a pointed look. "This is where you start worshiping the ground that I walk on."

Heat sparked through his eyes. His hand slid a half-inch higher on my leg. "That's what the scrapple's for, bike lady. And Tina's right about who the lucky one really is."

Two coffees arrived in tan mugs. Rowan snatched his up, but kept his other hand above my knee, a constant, intimate pressure.

"Is this the locals' place?" I asked.

He nodded, twisting his mug on the counter. "Plenty of locals do their shopping here, and it's got a long history, but the vibe can be touristy, especially in the summer. A lot of folks in South Philly hate coming uptown but my grandmother used to do her shopping here when I was little. We'd take the



subway together and, if I was *good*, we'd come to Tina's after."

"I call bullshit that you were ever *good*."

Another squeeze of his fingers. "I do like to misbehave. But you already knew that, Maddox."

I considered him over my mug. "Look at you, flirting your ass off this early in the morning."

"I can't flirt with my girlfriend?"

"Fake," I said softly, even as I was leaning closer.

"Yeah, but there are people over there, buying pretzels, with moto hats on, and they've been watching you this whole damn time."

He reached forward and brushed the end of my ponytail from my shoulders. Then slid his hand, warm from the coffee mug, around the back of my neck. His thumb traced circles along my skin, and I could claim *pretend* all I wanted, but there was no hiding the goosebumps he caused.

It was a comforting touch, more affectionate than sexual, and not the kind I was used to. The shitty boyfriends I'd had only ever touched me with a single intention: to get me into bed.

This felt...nice. Easy. *Safe*.

Though who was I kidding? I was certain Rowan touched every woman he took home like this. He was that kind of guy. It may have *felt* nice, but that didn't mean I was anything like that to him.

I hadn't moved, but my thoughts must have shown on my face. Rowan's brows knit together in response.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," I said, using our arriving food as an excuse to pull away, "just super stoked about this breakfast."

It took a moment, but he schooled his expression, pointing at my fried eggs, scrapple, and home fries with his fork. "I'm already saying *you're welcome*."

I took a bite—the meat was fried, crispy, salty.

Just how I liked it. Just how I used to tell *Rowan* I liked it at Jolene's.

I swallowed, pretending to think it over. Then said, “Tina is my new god.”

He laughed. “Consider yourself worshiped.”

I ducked my head to eat—and to hide the flush rising up my face. We were comfortably quiet for a few minutes, with the occasional stray glance, until I felt him nudge my arm.

“About the food that you donated the other day,” he said, “Dean's moms, Midge and Maria, brought it to the older queer seniors they know at The Lavender Center. Apparently it was a big hit, lots of people bringing home lots of food that needed it. They wanted me to thank you again and to tell you that you're an ‘actual fucking angel.’ Direct quote.”

That startled a laugh from me. “They don't need to thank me. I'm glad it worked out for your neighbors.” I set my fork down, pushing away my empty plate. “The day that I came to the center was intense, since I was storming in to ask you to”—I lowered my voice— “*fake date me*, completely out of the blue. But it left an impression. It felt like a home in there. Like safety and community. It felt like you, Rowan.”

Then I busied myself with drinking my coffee and watching the local news on the TV, mounted to the wall. Anything to avoid the fond warmth that virtually poured from Rowan's body language.

I didn't have a place like the rec center when I was growing up. We were so far out past town, just me and my dad. Or, more accurately, it was the two of us plus the tangible absence of my mom and heavy loss of my dad's career. For being so lonely, it sure was crowded.

“You should come by and meet everyone on 10th Street, where I grew up. My grandmother would love the hell out of you.”

I reluctantly met his gaze. “But they don't even know me.”

He tipped forward like he was sharing a secret. “You’ve got a Philly energy they’ll love. And that’s a compliment.”

I cocked my head, lips twitching. “You’re gonna need to explain before I decide if it’s actually a compliment.”

“You’re tough as fucking nails. Honest. Fearless, clearly. And you can hold your liquor. They’ll welcome you with open arms while doing the Eagles chant.”

Tina rushed past, scooping up my plate and mopping the spot in a blur. “Are you saying that Alice hasn’t met you yet? You ain’t got shit to worry about. She’ll see how you two look at each other and set the wedding date herself.”

She didn’t wait for a response, just whirled around with a coffee pot, refilling the mugs of other customers. I blinked, noticed that winglike flutter in my belly and the deep blush on Rowan’s cheeks.

“Fearless, huh?” I managed, trying to keep it light.

“I always thought so,” he said roughly.

The charged air between us felt much too dangerous, so I pulled out my phone and tapped open the list of events I’d made for us to go over.

“Should we discuss our plans for the next couple weeks? We don’t have much time to pull off those miracles.”

His face darkened, but he nodded and said, “That’s why we’re here.”

I tipped the screen his way. “Tomorrow night is the press event. I’ll be up on stage with ten other riders, answering questions from reporters in the audience. Fans can attend, vendors will be there, and sponsors also. Having you come with me would be huge, although I don’t always have the best relationship with reporters. My dad didn’t either.”

“Are they dicks to you?”

“Well...I flip them off. A lot.”

His lips quirked up. “I’m assuming they deserved it.”

“Yeah, they were being dicks.”

“Sounds like a *them* problem,” he said, smiling fully now. “What’s your plan for tomorrow night, though?”

I pulled on the ends of my ponytail. Shrugged one shoulder. “Since my reputation needs a glow-up, and you’ll be trying to convince the rich people there to trust you, the last thing I want is *more* bad press when you’re also linked to me. And I can’t afford it with Bettencourt there.”

I bared my teeth at him, chin high like I was on display. “Does this look like the polite, natural smile of a professional athlete on her best behavior?”

Rowan examined every angle of my face with teasing interest. “*Fuck me*, you look like America’s Dirt Bike Sweetheart, but with full tattoo sleeves. That nice boyfriend of yours has had a *real* positive impact. How *does* he do it?”

“By being my most annoying friend.”

“Don’t you mean hottest?”

I managed to hide my smile behind my mug, though Mr. Hottest Friend himself was busy looking way too self-satisfied.

“Will you bring all that charm to the potential donors that will be there?” I asked.

“If all goes to plan, then yeah,” he said—and beneath the cocky tilt of his mouth, I could tell he was worried. “What should I wear to this shindig that will impress them?”

I tapped my nose. “Full clown suit. Orange wig and face paint. A bow tie and suspenders. Those big shoes if you got ’em.”

He cocked his thumb and forefinger and clicked his teeth. “You got it, babe.”

“And uh...you’re gonna do great, Rowan,” I said quickly. “Once all those people find out what you do for your neighborhood, and what’s going to happen without that funding, they’ll be lobbing money at you so fast you won’t be able to keep up.”

He peered at me for a second. “Thanks for having my back on this, Maddox. I appreciate it.”

“Wait until you realize that you have to escort me to a gala dinner, ten days from now,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

He whistled under his breath. “I only ever went to a couple of those when I was in the major leagues. Motocross is big time now.”

“Getting bigger and bigger every year,” I admitted. “But it’s a sport that relies on private cash to stay successful, so at things like this they trot out the riders so they can meet us. A ton of potential donors will be at that gala, plus some will be at the two final races before the championship.”

The word *championship* set off a burst of anxious jitters. But Rowan was nodding along like he hadn’t noticed, typing the dates into his phone calendar.

“Should be no problem, I can come to all of them.” His eyes slid up to meet mine. “And after the championship race, we’ll...”

“Break up,” I said, aiming for casual. “Probably not right away, so it doesn’t seem too convenient. But I’ve got a big race in Miami immediately after this, and since you won’t be there, I can let it slip somehow that it’s over. Amicably. No hard feelings or whatever.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll break up, sure,” he said smoothly. “If the press or a fan ever asks me, I’ll say something about how you were *too* perfect of a girlfriend and I couldn’t handle being around a woman that beautiful. It’s distracting. A man has to *work*, you know?”

“My beauty was a distraction,” I deadpanned, trying not to smile.

“It’s totally a thing. Did you ever see me play pool at Jolene’s?”

“You played pool? I only ever saw you at the bar.”

His mouth curved. “Exactly. I wasn’t trying to poke my fucking eye out while you were around. *Distracting me.*”

I pressed my lips together as tightly as I could. He was playing our old game, *trying* to get me to smile. And I was about to blow it because talking about breaking up with Rowan—breaking up something that wasn't even *real*—was obliterating my concentration.

“You’re gonna do it,” he teased.

“*I’m not.*”

“Maddox, they can see you smiling from the Phillies’ stadium.”

“How is that possible when I’m not—”

A loud, throat-clearing sound came from our right. A trio of women stood there, decked head-to-toe in motocross swag—hats, tank tops, buttons on their bags.

The first woman raised her hand in a shy, bright wave. “We’re sorry to interrupt, but we spotted you coming in, and are you...Charlie Maddox? Because if you are, we are *huge* fans.”

I straightened on the stool and brushed my bangs to the side. “That’s me, though usually I like to meet fans not after a sweaty run, while shoveling eggs in my face.”

The second woman made a sound of disbelief. “Oh, please, you’re gorgeous every day of the week.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Rowan said.

The three fans swiveled toward him, and from their sly glances, I guessed they’d been checking us out for a while.

“Rowan O’Callaghan,” he said, holding out his hand to shake. “I’m Charlie’s boyfriend.”

“*Ooooooh,*” the first woman said. “We thought there was something going on between you two.”

“Rowan’s from Philly,” I explained, “and he’ll be here for the championships.”

“*Oooooooh,*” all three crooned.

Rowan flicked a playful gaze my way. Winked. I was definitely smiling now—which meant he’d won, *again*—but it was only for the optics.

“Well, we won’t hold you two lovebirds up for long,” the first woman said. “But I wanted to tell you that my sisters and me”—she pointed behind her— “we’re fraternal triplets, if you can believe it. And we had an older brother who raced dirt bikes, and he made the mistake of putting us on one when we were five years old, and I don’t think we’ve stopped riding since.”

I brightened. “That’s so cool. Dirt bike racing *triplets*—I love it. Is this your first time at the championships?”

“It is,” she said, “and we came specifically because of *you*, Charlie. You’re our absolute favorite, and we know you’re gonna win the big one.”

An electric joy zipped up my spine. I wasn’t a stranger to having fans approach me, sweet and starry-eyed. But it never got old, having the support, knowing that there were other women out there taking up space in the same sport we were all devoted to, a sport that not everyone understood.

“Thank you, it means a lot to me,” I said. “Knowing there are people in the audience, rooting for you, is a true gift.”

“We’ve been following you since your dad was racing,” the second sister said. “We’re also big Malcolm fans.”

“Hell yeah,” I said with a laugh. “I’ll tell my dad I ran into you. He’ll get such a kick out of it.”

She leaned in, tossed a look at Rowan. “We adored watching Charlie’s old man out there. He was such a hoot on the track, didn’t care one bit about being nice or polite. But honestly? Charlie’s better.”

I opened my mouth to disagree, but the triplets were shaking their heads.

“It’s the truth, honey,” the first sister said. “You’re the future of this sport, and I know your dad must be so proud. Our daughters sure are, and so are we.”

My throat constricted. I thought about my dad, and all his pictures of us on the wall, sitting in that house he loved, those bright red eviction notices in a pile on the table.

“He is,” I said. “And tell your daughters I can’t wait to see them at a race someday.”

“Do you want me to take a picture with all of you together?” Rowan asked, stepping back and away from the counter to give us space.

The sisters turned for permission, and I waved them close.

“Please, let’s do it. I’ll send it to my dad too, if that’s okay.”

After passing their phone to Rowan, they crouched next to me, arms lightly around each other while he snapped the photo. For a moment, I felt peacefully content in a way I hadn’t in months.

A contentment that was made extra confusing when Rowan handed the phone back to the sisters and interlaced his fingers with mine. We’d practiced handholding already, had touched each other even more intimately back in the lobby, but he’d done this with an easy familiarity that spiked my heart rate.

“Well, if that didn’t make my entire damn day,” the first sister said. “Thank you so much, Charlie. We’ll be cheering for you. That race has your name on it, we just know it.”

“Thank you for stopping by,” I said. “It made my day too.”

“And *you*,” she continued, pointing at Rowan, “are adorable. You’re adorable together. Stop flirting so much, it’s already too hot in here.”

He raised his palms with a sheepish grin. “Guilty as charged. I’ll tone it down a notch so we don’t give everyone in here heatstroke.”

They laughed delightedly, waving again as they walked back toward the entrance.

Rowan cocked an eyebrow in my direction. “How’d I do?”



I was prepared to do our usual *giving each other shit*, but I'd glimpsed the painful yearning on his face while the sisters were talking to me and had a suspicion on what it was about.

"A-plus for charm," I said. "Thank you, Rowan."

He waved it off. "It's the boyfriendly thing to do. Also, it's no surprise to me that your fans are badass." Then he sighed, sliding his phone and wallet back into his pocket and leaving cash for the bill. "And as much as I'd love to hang longer, I should get back to the center. These back-to-back meetings ain't gonna conduct themselves."

I stood, nodded at the cash. "Thanks for breakfast too. Next time you see Tina, can you tell her it was the best scrapple I ever had?"

His smile broadened. "You liked it?"

"Fucking *loved* it."

But as we moved through the market, back out into the sizzling summer day, his jaw stayed set, gaze a little distracted. I linked our hands together again—for optics purposes only—and said, "Is it tough seeing fans?"

His head turned, a line between his brows. The light we were waiting at changed to green, and I had to tug him forward when he didn't move.

"Uh...yeah," he said. "Yeah, it was tough. This stuff always brings up a lot of memories for me."

"Does it get any easier after you retire?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He shook his head. "No. Not one bit. There are lots of things I don't miss—all the travel, the physical pain, the grueling schedule. And I *like* the life I've got now, wouldn't change it if I could. But also..." He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not sure a person ever gets over having their dreams destroyed like that. Instantly. It's like the way I miss my parents."

I went still, eyeing him closely. "Because it's...constant?"

“Yeah. Something I live with, the way my shoulder still hurts.” His fingers squeezed mine, his smile as sweet as I’d ever seen it. “Not having the rec center in my life would be horrible though, so it feels like I’m where I’m supposed to be. It’s all complicated. Something I know you’ve always understood.”

We stopped in front of the large glass windows of the convention center. I was dimly aware that we were being watched, but the status of my reputation felt trivial in this moment.

Because I did understand. Late nights at Jolene’s, when he didn’t leave with someone but stayed, stayed until he was the last one there, we *did* talk about this stuff. He hadn’t lost baseball yet, but he had lost his parents. And I had a dad who lost *his* career plus a mom who’d bounced from our lives like we were a mere inconvenience.

“I do,” I said firmly. “Rowan, if any of this is going to bring up too many bad memories—”

“I’ll tell you, I swear.” His face lightened. “I’m still prepared to give this fake boyfriend thing my all. So you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Fine, but I’m only keeping you around for your scrapple connections.”

He pointed upwards. “And my hot face.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I mean, it’s no *distraction*, but not everyone can be as hot as me.”

He laughed, rich and rumbling, and stepped in close. My head tipped back to hold his gaze, and I panicked when I thought he was going to kiss me.

And when I realized, secretly, that I wanted him to.

“What’s...what are you doing?” I asked, a little breathlessly.

His dark eyes searched mine. “We already did neck nuzzling so I thought we should keep things fresh for whatever fans are creepily spying on us right now.”

I snorted. “What do you have in mind?”

“I could...kiss your hand?”

“Like a prince in a fucking fairy-tale?”

“More like an old-fashioned gentleman,” he said with a lopsided grin. “Though I mean no offense. I’m no gentleman, and you’re no lady.”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “Thank you for clarifying. I would hate for it to get out that I was secretly a *nice girl*. Talk about a career killer.”

Rowan lifted my knuckles to his lips, eyes still leashed to mine. “Don’t lie, Charlie. You’ve always been a secret nice girl.”

A volley of snarky replies rose in my thoughts, but then his mouth touched my skin, and those same thoughts went haywire. His lips were firm. Confident. He kissed my hand again, his gaze blazing with a dark lust so far from *gentlemanly* it was laughable.

I wasn’t laughing though. I was wilting, my knees starting to weaken, so I locked them instead and gave Rowan the kind of cool scrutiny he often teased me about at Jolene’s.

Anything to mask what the feel of his mouth was doing to me. He turned my hand over and kissed the inside of my palm.

“You’re not very princely, O’Callaghan,” I managed.

He lowered my hand but still held it. “Good thing too. Because you’re not a princess.”

Rowan released me, starting to stroll backward with a flirtatious tilt to his smile.

I propped my hands on my hips. “I can’t be a princess?”

He winked at me. “You can be whatever the hell you want, Maddox. I’m only sayin’ I was never into the princess in the story as a kid.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Who were you into?”

“It’s not obvious?” he asked.

I shook my head, enjoying taunting my fake boyfriend way too much.

“I was always into the warrior girl on the horse,” he said, nodding at me. “*Obviously*. Anyway, I’ll pick ya up in your hotel room tomorrow at seven.”

“Clown suit?” I asked, sure my cheeks were blazing red.

“You got it, babe.”

Then I watched Rowan walk back toward the subway for much too long, chanting the words *pretend, pretend, pretend* over and over in my head.



# CHARLIE

The next night I was leaning over the hotel dresser, fixing my eyeliner in the mirror, when a video call came through on the iPad I had propped up a few inches away.

I swiped to answer with one hand while continuing to fix my makeup with the other.

“Hey, Dad,” I said. “Thanks for that PBS recommendation on, uh...old boats. Can’t wait to watch it.”

There was some slightly muffled background noise and then, “Oh, honey, you’ll love it. Me and Penny are still talking about it. Aren’t we, Penny?”

I was never going to watch a twelve-part series on old-ass boats—and based on Penny’s barely grumbled *uh-huh* I was making the right choice.

Yet this newer, softer, domestic version of my dad wasn’t something I’d ever take for granted. Seeing him with his girlfriend and his rescue dogs and PBS subscription made my chest ache with the hope of it all.

Until I spotted the red eviction notice, hanging from a magnet on the fridge door behind him.

Dread washed over me, but I swallowed it down. Stepped fully into view, with a little smile and wave.

Dad clapped. “Look at you, dressed all fancy for the press. You look great, Charlie.”

Penny walked past in the background and hooted.

I brushed my hands over the front of my black, one-piece jumpsuit. The straps tied high around my neck, halter-style, and the back was low, the pants wide-legged. “Do I look all right?”

“Better than I ever did, showing up to those things.”

I tapped my chin. “Yeah, the ripped-jeans-and-leather-jacket look is all the rage right now. People are paying tribute to moto’s original bad boy.”

Dad scoffed. “I was only pulling whatever was clean from the laundry bin.”

“Same here,” I said, nodding down at my outfit.

This video call was helpful practice for the casual attitude I was projecting—an attitude I absolutely *did not feel*. I’d gone shopping today. For clothing. In a goddamn *store*. I’d taken one look at what I was planning on wearing tonight, thought about Rowan’s eyes on mine as he kissed my hand, and suddenly everything in my suitcase seemed inadequate.

It didn’t make a lick of sense, getting this worked up for a fake boyfriend when I never did for my real ones.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

I lifted a shoulder. “Just a little. Not that I’d ever tell anyone that.”

Dad smoothed a hand over the top of his head. “You haven’t been treated that great recently. I’d be nervous too if I had to stand in front of a pit of vipers and be nice to them.”

“When were you ever nice to reporters?”

His smile was rueful. “Never. Don’t trust ’em, never did. You shouldn’t either, Charlie.”

“I never have and I never will,” I said, my usual reply to this Malcolm Maddox-specific directive. But all of this was easier for him to say now, when he was barely in the spotlight anymore. I despised the way I’d been treated by the media—and what felt like half the internet—recently. Did my best to ignore it.

Except the sponsor that paid me expected positive media, which would then reflect positively on them, which in turn reflected, again, onto *me*. The cycle was obnoxious but also integral. I couldn't shake loose from its binds no matter how desperately I tried.

"Hey, so I met a few of your devoted fans today," I added. "Fraternal triplet sisters who grew up adoring you. I'll send you the picture we took. They were extremely cute and said you were a *hoot* to watch on the track."

He brightened. "Your old man's still got it."

I made sure to catch his eye on screen. "I'm of the opinion that he never lost it."

He sent me a grateful look before going a bit red in the cheeks. He coughed into his fist and said, "Random question, but do you have a boyfriend out there in Philly?"

I propped my hands on my hips, surprised. "Well...yeah. But it's new, and I haven't gotten a chance to tell you yet. How did you know?"

"Penny told me." He turned his head and waved her over. She came, carrying a dirt-covered watermelon in one hand, flapping a pair of sunglasses in the other. "She saw it somewhere. He looks like a...like a nice man."

Unease flickered through the pit of my stomach. I'd done this whole thing with Rowan to bolster my reputation with the media and increase my press coverage. Of *course* they were likely to see it.

Lying to them about it didn't feel fair though.

"Rowan's nice and a wonderful person," I replied. "We've known each other for a long time. Do you remember when my friend, the major league pitcher, hurt his arm during a game and I went with him to the hospital? That was Rowan."

Nothing I'd said was a lie, but the way my dad's gaze softened only agitated that unease.

"I remember," he said. "How is he? Healed up?"



I hesitated. “He won’t pitch ever again but he’s landed a job that makes him happy and has a family that supports him.”

“Good,” Dad said firmly. “I’m sure you being there with him that night meant a lot.”

Memories of our time in the hospital still raised goosebumps on my skin—the thick tension in the air, the steady beat of various machines hooked up to Rowan’s body, his face gone sheet-white from the pain.

The way holding him as he cried gave me a feeling I’d never experienced before—a fierce protectiveness that made me want to commit acts of violence against every single person who’d ever wronged him, even slightly.

If he’d asked me to tear the world in half to ease his agony, I would have eagerly said *yes*.

Penny sank down next to Dad, handing him the watermelon and dropping her glasses onto the coffee table. “Are we talking about the ginger hunk of burning love I saw you with on Instagram?”

“*Penny*.” I laughed, feeling like a teenager. “Where did you see these pictures?”

I was already picking up my phone, awaiting instructions. Penny rattled off a cheesy, niche fan account that shared its own *TMZ*-style gossip about the dirt bike scene. I found the account but kept my focus on Penny and Dad.

“Should I look? Or will it only make me upset?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It’s nothing like that. Just some cute pictures of you and...what’s his name again?”

“Rowan.”

“That’s a hunky name.”

I rolled my eyes, still smiling, and glanced at Dad. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, by the way. He comes from a nice South Philly family.”

His face lit up. “Then what the hell is he doing with a Maddox?”

I snorted. “Careful, you’ll scare off Penny.”

She slapped her hands on her thighs and laughed. “*Scare?* It’ll be a cold day in hell when I ever get scared—”

I left them to their banter and scrolled through some of the recent posts, many of them about riders here at the championships. Quinn and Riley were in a few, with so many hyped-up comments my eyes widened. I spotted one about my night out in Philly and skipped it with a grimace.

Then I found it. A carousel of images of Rowan and me: when he bandaged up my knuckles at the race, when we hugged hello in the lobby, a photo of us mid-laugh at the diner.

My heart performed a neat backflip in my chest as I took it all in. The ease, the intimacy, my relaxed body language and delighted expressions.

*This is what you wanted*, I reminded myself. Because as I quickly scanned the comments, they were...positive? The caption read: *Has the Bad Girl of Moto finally found true love?*

I fought another eye roll even though fans were eating it up with a spoon. The top comment, with hundreds of likes and replies, read: *Goddamn, if a man looked at me like that? I say good for Charlie, snagging a boyfriend who looks like he wants to devour her on the spot.*

My face flamed at the mental image that invoked. I set the phone down and blew out a shaky breath, feeling overheated in the stuffy hotel room.

“The pictures of you and Rowan sure are popular,” Penny said. “It’s nice to see you getting some love from the fans. Much deserved, if you ask me.”

I arched my brow. “I can’t decide if I should tell him you called him a *ginger hunk of burning love* or if it’ll only inflate his ego to an unmanageable size.”

She shrugged. “I like a man with red hair. And he seems to like *you* a whole lot.”

*I was always into the warrior girl on the horse. Obviously.*

“The championship weeks are always intense. Having Rowan here makes it a lot easier.”

Dad winced in sympathy. “I know the last couple races were tough.”

I nodded, rolling my lips together. “My headspace was all messed up for the first one. And the second, I couldn’t break into the pack at the front. I was slow off the gate. I’m just stuck living in Loser City. Population: me.”

He fixed his face in mock sternness. “Now you know I only allow you to say *one* mean thing about yourself per day.”

I held up a single finger. “That was it, I swear.”

Penny scooted back outside to the garden, leaving the two of us alone. He tipped forward, brows snapping together. “What’s going on with that headspace of yours? Are you feeling worried because of...because of the eviction?”

I nodded but forced a smile. “It’s part of it. You know I’d do anything to save that house for you, Dad. And feeling like my sponsor’s about to cut me every time I lose is taking me out of that racing mentality. I’m...I’m overthinking out there, less instinctual. It’s distracting. And Dempsey made it clear that I was already a risky proposition for them. Makes me feel like I’m about to get dragged to the principal’s office and given a condescending lecture on how I’m disappointing them.”

Both of my dad’s dogs jumped onto the couch to sprawl across his lap. He scratched them behind their ears for a second before directing his focus back to me. “No wonder you’re distracted, that shit gets in your head and stays there. You’re not a risk, Charlie. You’re a sure thing, and they better start believing it.”

I pressed my hand to my stomach to soothe the quiver of apprehension that was gradually building the more I talked about Bettencourt. I’d never even told Dempsey this, because whatever *this* was seemed careless and shortsighted when I said the words out loud. Being sponsored by the company that owned the majority of energy drink companies in the world—

the ones featured at NASCAR and Formula 1 races, on banners in the backdrop of Olympic events—was supposed to feel like a *windfall*.

I'd first felt this quiver the day I signed the contract. In the end, money's money, and this was *the most* money I'd ever been offered. A life-changing, game-changing amount.

Signing it was easy.

And yet—Bettencourt leaned hard into that “family-friendly” image, a phrase that had been used often in the past to hide all manner of biases and hate. The implicit understanding was that wearing their name on my back meant hemming in parts of myself and my core values that they didn't like. As if being an outspoken woman in a sport dominated by men was somehow *not* for families.

“Risk or not, they signed *you* because you're one of the best,” Dad continued. “I wasn't signing with sponsors this big and flashy when I was your age. You got their attention by blazing those trails like a bat outta hell.” He grinned. “No one knows how to fly better than we do. Take it one race at a time, one start at a time, one lap at a time.”

I sucked in a long, steady inhale, then released it. Grinned back. “You're right. I've got one more race before the championships. It's mine for the taking.”

“It's yours for the taking,” he repeated. He shifted on the couch, clearing his throat. “And when it comes to the eviction, listen, I...honey, I've been thinking. About the house and the money. I'm not exactly rolling in it, never have been, and this isn't the first time I've been behind on the mortgage. Maybe —” He coughed again. “Maybe it's time we sell it.”

I shook my head, but he was still speaking.

“It's not your job to fix all this, though I know you want to. Know you have in the past, more times than I can thank you for.”

*Yeah, I know, I wanted to say, because who else was going to do it when we don't have any other options?* My family had lived race-to-race and paycheck-to-paycheck for so long, part

of me always knew there'd come a time when all the borrowing and scrounging and whispered prayers would come up short.

“Dad, I appreciate you saying this but I'm not even sure we can sell it at this point in the process. And more than that, we're not...” I swallowed. “We're not losing that house. It's ours. After mom left, it was all we had, that track was all we had. I want you and Penny to be able to stay there for as long as you can. I've got a plan and I *am* fixing it.”

“We might not have a choice,” he said. “I hate it as much as you do.”

The skin around my eyes was growing hot. “It'll be okay. I'm winning this championship and we're keeping your house. It's non-negotiable.”

His smile looked tired around the edges. “Stubborn as your old man, huh?”

There was a knock at the door and relief coursed through me. *Rowan*.

“You raised me right,” I said. “And I hate to go like this, but Rowan's here, and I need to go not trust any of those reporters.”

He was nodding but didn't look entirely convinced by my promises. “Have fun. Don't let them get to you. And I love ya, Charlie. So much.”

I bent down closer to the screen and felt the miles stretching long between us. “Love you too.”

The first year after my father's final accident made it impossible for him to compete, I used to come downstairs in the middle of the night to find him watching old videos of his races. The sound would be muted, so he wouldn't wake me, and the lights would be off.

He was always crying.

It wasn't an all-out wail or anything. Wasn't even the way he used to swipe angrily at his cheeks the first months after

mom left. It was a silent anguish, the struggle of accepting that everything was permanently different.

I was only a teenager then, but I always crept back upstairs to give him privacy. Even at that age, I figured being a broke single dad, in chronic pain, was the sort of thing where crying by yourself at the kitchen table was just gonna happen.

Sometimes I wished I'd told my dad how scary that time was for me.

Sometimes I wished he would have talked to me about what he was going through.

And on those mornings after, before school, if he asked me if I was okay, if anything was wrong, I did the same thing I'd just done on that call.

Pretend. Tuck every burden deep inside so I could carry it along.

Perhaps that's why—when I finally opened the door to find Rowan in the hallway—I walked right into his open arms and hugged him without a single hesitation.

I sensed his surprise, but then his arms wrapped around me, strong and steady. His lips came to rest on the top of my head, stirring my hair.

“Are you okay? Did something happen?” he whispered.

I pushed back, a little too quickly, and motioned him inside my hotel room. He slid past me, moving easily into a space that felt on the larger side a few minutes ago. But now I was only aware of the magnificent width of his shoulders as he perched on the edge of the dresser.

“Oh, I'm completely fine. I...I, uh, thought I saw someone. Just keeping up the ruse,” I said, standing next to him and facing the mirror. I tilted my head to check my earrings, feeling the weight of his perusal on my profile. “I enjoyed your gift this morning, by the way.”

He made a rumbling sound of approval. “I was hoping Tina would deliver for you. Did she send what I ordered?”

I half turned to face him as his lazy grin appeared. “Fried eggs, home fries, scrapple, and white toast. And it was the best breakfast of my damn life.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky,” he drawled.

“I’ve got a fake boyfriend who knows how to treat me right.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I thought about sending you some flowers. You know, in case a gossip fan saw you get a delivery. But you seem like the kind of lady who would take fried meat over a bouquet.”

My lips quirked, and I crossed my arms. “How’d you know?”

“You don’t make it hard, Maddox. But I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

*Enjoyed* wasn’t the right word. I’d opened my door this morning to a delicious-smelling delivery from the diner we’d eaten at yesterday and a card that read: *Good morning to my favorite distraction.*

I’d blushed so furiously I could only snatch the bag up from the floor and dart back inside, just in case any fans saw me losing my cool over breakfast.

“I really did,” I said sincerely. “It made me think about that time, when we hadn’t seen each other for a while at Jolene’s because of our travel schedules, and you kept leaving...what was it...Ring Pops all around for me?”

He tipped his head back on a laugh. “You told me once how much you loved them in high school and how weird you felt saying they were your favorite candy.”

“Yeah, because they’re like jawbreakers in terms of time and commitment to eating them.” I bit my lip with a smile. “I’ve got no regrets about loving them though. Hey, does Tina do anything in a Ring Pop?”

“Fraid not, or I’d already have sent it.”

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. “It was still a nice way to start the morning. Especially since I made you get

dressed up just to drag you into the lion's den tonight.”

Rowan slid his hands into his pockets. “That’s funny, since I’m pretty sure you’re the damn lion, Maddox.”

I scoffed. “Are you buttering me up for some sordid reason, O’Callaghan?”

“No, ma’am. I once saw you scare off a drunk guy who was harassing everyone in the bar and he was wearing this leather vest with the words ‘I am the Pain Machine’ stitched onto the back.”

I felt the ends of my lips twitch. “Oh yeah, Pain Machine. I miss that guy.”

Another laugh, this one raspy and under his breath. I was very aware that we were standing in a room that now felt too small, with a giant king-sized bed only steps away. I watched him take in the unmade sheets covered in gear and a pair of my old sweatpants.

I didn’t care at all if he saw that my room was a mess. I’d sought out a hug from Rowan under *technically* false pretenses—and that was way more nerve-racking.

His focus landed back on me, doing a quick head-to-toe sweep. “And I thought we were both goin’ in clown suits.”

“I clean up nice.”

“This isn’t *nice*, Charlie.” A muscle clenched in his jaw. “You look stunning. As always.”

Our eyes held for a beat too long, especially in this room. The room with the bed. And the dresser.

And the shower.

I stepped back and made a show of giving him a dramatic once-over. “Now *this* is one heck of a clown suit. No wig and red nose though?”

Rowan tossed me a wink that had heat pooling in my belly. “A lot of people in South Philly say I clean up nice too. What do you think?”



He wore a black button-up with short sleeves, his bare arms muscled and freckled from the sun. Gray suit pants clung to thighs so thick I had to tear my gaze away. Not that any of these attributes *mattered*—even when I turned Rowan down, back during our Jolene’s days, I was acutely aware of his powerful body.

I was only trapped in a permanent state of overstimulation because of our current intimacy in public places.

I cocked my head to the side. “I wasn’t going to tell you this because you don’t need one more overly dramatic compliment about your looks. But my dad’s girlfriend, Penny, saw some pictures of us on Instagram and called you a ‘ginger hunk of burning love.’”

His teeth flashed white as he smiled. “So you’re saying I look like a *hunk*?”

“Y-yes,” I hedged. “The fans will be so grateful that you’re blessing them with your sexy ginger presence.”

Another lingering stare, a heady tension dancing in the air between us. Desperation had me searching out the time, cursing when I saw we were about to be late. I whirled back to the mirror to check my appearance again.

“We should...probably get going then?” I said, fixing my bangs.

“We should.”

I tightened my high bun and traced my finger along the red curve of my lipstick. I met Rowan’s brown eyes in the mirror.

That was a mistake.

I remembered that comment on our pictures: *good for Charlie, snagging a boyfriend who looks like he wants to devour her on the spot.*

Rowan was a flirt to his core. When there was a woman he wanted, he *did* look at her that way. I saw it happen too many nights to count, watched women melt beneath the scorching fire of his focused attention and carefree charm.

The hunger in his eyes now was different. Edgier, full of something like true yearning.

I'd never, not once, been on the receiving end of such palpable longing.

Which was why I spun around and blurted, "Do you think we should practice kissing?"



## CHARLIE

Rowan went utterly still. “Sorry...what did you say?”

“Should we practice kissing? On the cheek. Not on the lips, of course. But, like, here?” I indicated the side of my face like a heavily tattooed Vanna White.

He studied me, his eyes moving back and forth. “Are you sure? Because I’m fine holding hands and sensually hugging each other.”

At my inquisitive brow, he said, “Hugging but with more neck nuzzling. For what it’s worth, seems like we’re talented in that area.”

The memory of our *sensual hug* was hot enough to send desire spiking through me. The feel of his open mouth on my throat, the caress of his breath, his hushed growl.

“I’m completely sure,” I said, lifting my chin. “It feels like we’d make this fake dating thing seem more realistic if you kissed me...*somewhere*...when we were out in public.”

He considered this, taking a step closer. “A cheek kiss does seem the most appropriate given that we’re, you know—”

Rowan waved his hand between our bodies.

“Friends who aren’t really dating?” I finished. “That’s how I feel too. Sorry for springing it out on you like this. We’ll be around people nonstop tonight so figured we should discuss it here while we still have privacy.”

He passed a hand along his jaw and wouldn’t drop my gaze. “Charlie, are you sure you’re okay? You seem nervous,

and not about the panel. Did something happen with your dad?”

I resisted the urge to look away. To lie. It didn't feel right, pretending with Rowan when I'd just done that with my dad.

“What gave it away? Me babbling about cheek kissing?” I said breezily.

Rowan's smile was comforting. “Don't worry about it. I'm legitimately asking, friend to friend.”

I tugged on an earring, fiddling with the clasp. “My dad video-called right before you showed up. He and Penny wanted to ask me about my *new boyfriend*.”

Jaw dropped, Rowan pointed at his chest and mouthed *me*?

I laughed, and the act loosened my shoulders. “That's where the ‘ginger hunk of burning love’ came in.” I tipped my head back and forth, unsure of how to express the complex knot of emotions that call created. “My dad knows I'm stressed about the eviction notice, stressed about money. He offered to sell the house, which I don't even think we can do, but I wouldn't let him do that even if he could. Let him lose the one place we had that made us a family.”

“You've always been responsible for a lot, Charlie.”

I shrugged it off. “I would do anything for him. My dad raised me by himself and it wasn't easy. Let me run wild on a dirt bike when I asked, and that—” I paused, throat taut. “It's how you feel about baseball. Racing that bike is my entire *soul*. And he was the one who put me on it when I was five and said *go get 'em, tiger*.”

I smiled at the memory. Rowan did too, then said, “I'm sensing a *but*.”

“He's never been that great at managing his money. And sometimes makes...bad decisions. Or at least *shortsighted* ones. I'd help him in a heartbeat, no questions asked. But every time we avoid some financial catastrophe, my hope is that the next time will be different. So far, that hasn't been the case.”

Understanding dawned slowly on his face. “When I came back to Philly after my injury, I spent the first year telling everyone I was *all good*. Told the neighbors I was lucky to have pitched in the majors for sixty-one games, and that letting go of a lifelong dream was no biggie.”

My stomach twisted in sympathy. “I watched my dad get crushed by that loss. I know...I remember how you felt, Rowan.”

“Getting people’s pity and sympathy wasn’t my thing. I’m sure it ain’t your thing either. But I know what the hope can do. When it was just me and Dean together, I told him the pain didn’t mean shit. Someone was going to call and tell me they made a mistake. My coach would reach out. My teammates, my agent. The truth was, they didn’t want me anymore. Not like that.”

He raked a hand through his dark red hair. “Every day I was furious with myself for being so goddamn disappointed when I knew the outcome was always gonna be the same. The hope tore me up inside more than anything.”

He moved closer, three more steps, until he was officially close enough to kiss me. I tipped my chin up, my hands behind me and gripping the dresser.

“I understand why you feel so conflicted about your dad’s situation, is what I’m saying,” he added. “The hope makes it complicated.”

“This whole ‘being a human’ thing *keeps* getting complicated,” I said with a wry smile. “It super sucks.”

“It does, but not all the time. Sometimes the complicated parts are the most fun.” He stayed focused on my mouth. “Where would you like me to kiss you, Charlie?”

All the air in my lungs vanished. Rowan’s body language was restrained, his expression friendly. Like this was a transactional arrangement and nothing more.

Which it was.

This leashed control was more arousing than if he’d taken this moment to make a sloppy move. Every other man I’d

dated or fucked would have done it.

That was because every other man I'd been with had been utterly predictable. Deep down, I believed Rowan was predictable too.

But this caution had a different flavor to it. Part of me wished he *would* make a cheap pass or tell a stupid joke so I could roll my eyes and slip back into the dynamic we'd perfected over the years.

And slip away from the allure of this small, darkened room and his whispered question.

*Where would you like me to kiss you?*

I tilted my neck, exposing my cheek again, and tapped it. "Here is good."

He fully closed the remaining distance between us. I felt the heat of his palm at my hip. The drag of his fingers as they slid around to my lower back. And then his face, dropping toward mine.

There was a pause. His breath feathered across my cheekbone. Then his mouth, performing that same delicate caress. The mouth that loved to taunt and tease me, the mouth that formed the smile he employed like a weapon, bewitching those around him.

Those lips had performed plenty of sinful acts, yet here he was, pressing them to my skin like I was something precious. Quick, barely a second. He moved back, but not away. His fingers still flexed against my spine and his mouth hovered near my cheek.

The tip of his nose pressed into the hair at my temple.

I didn't move. Couldn't.

"Is there anywhere else you'd like me to kiss you?" Rowan whispered.

"No, that was sufficient," I whispered back, voice shaking. "As long as you do that and act like you worship the ground that I walk on, we should be able to pull this thing off."

He hummed under his breath. “It’s important that this goes well tonight. For your reputation. For the rec center. If I have to stare at you like every time you smile at me, it feels like I’ve been hit on the head with a sledgehammer, I’ll somehow find the strength to do it.”

“This *is* why I asked for your help. Your superior flirting abilities are unmatched.”

He exhaled, his warm breath dancing along my hairline. Tingles raced up my spine.

We needed to go. *I* needed to go.

Actually, I needed to go back in time and ask someone less *Rowan-like* to be my fake boyfriend.

“Is there anything else you need from me before we leave?”

I swallowed. “There’s a lot that I want right now. I don’t think you can magically make them happen. But I appreciate the offer.”

His lips brushed across my temple. “I can make some things happen for you. All you have to do is ask, Maddox.”

The persistent throb between my legs twisted, became a true ache. Rowan had no idea how many times I wiped down the bar while watching women he had taken home nights before stumble in with the kind of smile that said *I just had the best sex of my fucking life*.

It was a gossipy town. These women always talked about him in front of me, shooting me sly glances because we all knew about *Rowan*, right?

His easy confidence wasn’t an act. I could give a single, one-word command, and this man would fall to his knees eagerly. Make me forget the past couple weeks, forget the pressure, forget all the people I was disappointing.

I wanted to forget so very badly.

I’d had plenty of meaningless sex—and that was practically Rowan’s *specialty*—so why couldn’t I shove this



big, brawny man backward onto my hotel bed and help us *both* forget for a little while?

A burst of happy laughter and loud voices from the hallway had us stumbling apart. I slid my hands into my pockets, cocking my head at the door.

“That was a really good practice session,” I managed. “The cheek kiss should work. Are you...um, are you ready?”

There was a flicker of disappointment on Rowan’s face, but he smoothed it over. Grinned at me like he hadn’t a care in the world. “I was born ready, babe.”

I pulled open the hotel door and he followed me down the hallway. “Yeah, try that one again.”

“Let’s see...I was born ready, *cupcake*?”

“I’ll put on an *actual* clown suit, wig and all, and wear it on my next race before I ever let a man call me cupcake.”

I pressed the elevator button while Rowan eyed me with a playful look. One hand came to rest by my head, and he leaned close. “Then how about...kitten?”

“Oh, fuck *off*, Rowan,” I said with a laugh. “There’s nothing kitten-like about me. What part of my personality is soft and cuddly?”

“What part of your personality isn’t stubborn and full of mischief?” he said, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

The ease of it, the pure flirtatious affection, amped up that need between my legs.

“You might have a point,” I admitted, stepping backward into the elevator as the doors opened. It was empty, and Rowan went to stand against the opposite wall as we started our descent.

Still felt much too intimate.

“Kitten-cupcake it is then,” he said smoothly.

I shook my head with a barely concealed smile. Then snapped my fingers, digging into my pockets as I remembered I’d made something for Rowan.

“Here, take this.” I held out a worn piece of notebook paper, filled with my scribbled notes. “I spent the afternoon doing some research. I hope it helps.”

Brow furrowed, he opened the paper and scanned it. Looked up at me sharply. “Is this a list of potential donors who will be here tonight?”

I nodded. “Tonight and at most of the other events. They’re rich, they love dirt bikes and—also—happen to love getting their asses kissed in public settings. From what I could tell.”

I stepped over to tap the first name, *Steve Duncan*. “I’ll point this dude out to you once we get downstairs. He’s your warmest lead.”

Rowan held up the sheet. “This is so fucking helpful, Charlie. Thank you.”

“It was no biggie. Besides, we had a deal. I help you, you help me, remember?”

His throat worked. “Right. Our business transaction.”

That flicker of hurt on his face was back—larger this time—but the elevator door was dinging loudly as it reached the lobby. Rowan took my hand, and then we were stepping into a busy space—cameras, fans, vendors, people milling about with cold beers. This event was 100% a shameless attempt at courting better press for motocross—with the exception of The X Games, sports involving dirt bikes generated less overall media and interest, even as our fan base was growing larger and more dedicated.

As we made our way through the crowd, we walked beneath a large white banner that read *Dirt Bikes Are the Future*.

“There’s Dempsey,” I said, spotting a hot pink pantsuit. “And...*that’s* Steven over there, by the bar. Do you want an introduction before I head onstage?”

Rowan brightened. “I’ll be fine. Talking to people has always been the easy part for me.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You’re not nervous?”

“Nah, I’m golden. Are you still nervous about tonight?”

I hesitated, realizing he had done a decent job of distracting me. “Much less than I was.”

A harried-looking person with a headset rushed up just then. “Charlie Maddox? The panel is starting in fifteen minutes, if you could please come with me?”

“I’ll be right there,” I promised. And when I turned back to Rowan, he very softly kissed my cheek again.

“Go kick some ass,” he whispered. “I’ll be in the audience if you need anything.”

And I leaned into him without a second thought.



# ROWAN

Charlie strode towards the stage, but not before flashing a very pretty smile at me over her shoulder.

It was clearly for the audience. Clearly for the fans.

Which made it all fake.

My brain knew that. My body sure as hell didn't.

I didn't have to force the look of minor obsession on my face as I watched my pretend girlfriend move through the crowd. I'd been painfully, desperately into Charlie Maddox from the moment we met.

My lust for her itched under the skin, a constant distraction. Even now, I couldn't keep my eyes off her, couldn't stop staring at the nape of her neck, her bloodred lips, her leisurely swaying hips.

She'd been understandably nervous back in the hotel room, but that wasn't the case now. She climbed the stairs to the stage with her chin raised proudly and her shoulders thrown back.

I wanted to taste the curve between her neck and her shoulder with my fucking teeth.

I knew what it was like to want something you could never have. There'd been a time in my life when I wanted my shoulder to be magically fixed, when all I thought about were the lights, the stadium, the pitcher's mound beneath my cleats. Used to wake up dreaming about my fingers sliding over the

leather stitching, the way my palm understood the shape of a baseball better than anything else.

Now here I was again, staring at Charlie and probably looking as starved as I felt.

I dragged a hand down my face. I had a list of names she had clearly spent a lot of time on—and less than fifteen minutes to charm this Steven guy, who was still lurking near the bar.

I scanned the list again, my thumb stroking across her handwriting. *Pennsylvania native, she'd scrawled. Gives to a lot of charities, lives out in the suburbs, huge sports fan.*

There were at least twenty names on here, each one with facts and details. It was worrying, how happy I'd been when she handed this to me. The same sweet warmth had flooded my chest as the day she'd sent all that food.

I figured that wasn't a good sign.

I took a big breath and made my way over to the bar, where Steve was in the process of ordering another beer. A surge of nerves spiraled through my veins, surprising me.

Charlie was right, as usual. I was nervous.

But I kept my focus on a memory from today at the rec center—getting to Elaine's office early and finding a handmade card taped to the door. The picture was a lopsided circle with lines shooting out, what looked to be three or four eyes in the middle of it. Beneath it read: *Thank you Mr. Rowan. You are doing an awesome job!!!!*

So I sent up a quick prayer to the gods of nonprofit fundraising and went for it. Raising a finger, I leaned an elbow on the bar. "I'll take another one of those beers if ya got it?"

The bartender nodded, pouring me a glass that was as cold as it was frothy. I made eye contact with Steve and lifted it.

"Cheers. Are you here for motocross too?"

He nodded enthusiastically, then clinked his glass against mine. He looked to be in his fifties or sixties, white with gray hair and an outfit that said *I'm wealthy but also relaxed.*

“I sure am,” he replied, then shook my hand. “Steve Duncan. I’m a huge moto fan. *Huge*. And I’m sorry to have been so obviously spying on you, but are you...*with* Charlie Maddox?”

I kept my smile loose. “Rowan O’Callaghan. Also a huge fan, though yeah, that has a lot to do with being Charlie’s boyfriend.”

“Wow,” he said, looking genuinely impressed. He pumped my hand a few extra times. “It’s an honor.”

“That’s how I feel about dating Charlie.”

He cocked his head, then snapped his fingers. “The *ballplayer*. You were that hotshot local kid who got called up to the Mets. I watched you blow out your shoulder while pitching against the Giants a few years ago. That’s you, right?”

My casual smile froze in place while I scrambled for a polite answer. Dean and I were used to people’s strange, offensive reactions to our very public injuries. It was annoying, especially from a guy like Steve, who was probably eager to talk a big game about what he would, or wouldn’t, do if *he* was on the field.

Not that he had any idea what it was like to stand on that mound, in front of thousands of screaming fans, and throw a ball sixty feet away over the world’s smallest target.

“That’s me all right,” I said, forcing a laugh.

He winced in exaggerated sympathy. “I always feel so bad for you guys when those injuries happen. You’ve got these big dreams and shiny contracts, then *bam*. One bad throw, and you’re out for life. This is why I love sports so much. It’s like watching a Greek tragedy. All that excitement and all that heartbreak.”

He clinked his glass against mine again. “Not that I have to tell you that.”

My back molars ground together. “You sure don’t, Steve.”

Steve glanced away for a moment, like he’d recognized someone in the crowd. I tried to find a lead into the rec center,

based on what I knew about him. *Speaking of tragedies, my nonprofit is totally fucked. Wanna help?*

“I’ve been following dirt bike racing for a long time,” he continued, turning back to face me. “I even used to follow Charlie’s dad, Malcolm. *He* was really something else to watch. Shame what happened to him too, all those accidents. Their bodies get so beat up out there.”

He didn’t look like he thought it was a shame. He looked like he had when describing the loss of my lifelong dreams as a *Greek tragedy*. Like we were all just actors in a play and not people who felt legitimate pain.

“I bet a boyfriend like you is a real...” Steve faltered, waving his hands through the air like he was worried he was about to irritate me.

“A real what?” I prompted. Already irritated.

“A stabilizing influence. That Charlie’s a wild one. You don’t get a nickname like hers for being well-behaved, right?”

This guy was moments away from nudging me with his elbow like the creepy uncle at a barbecue.

“Charlie is her own person, an incredible athlete, and a grown woman who can make her own decisions,” I said mildly. “She sure as shit doesn’t need *my* influence.”

But he was already bobbing his head along with my words. “Of course, of *course* she is. I meant no offense. Promise.”

The lights in the room flickered, calling everyone to attention. Steve smiled nervously then tipped his head toward the stage. “Looks like things are about to start. It was nice chatting, Rowan. Such an honor to meet you.”

He slipped past and was out of sight before I had time to register that I hadn’t even gotten a chance to talk about the center.

“*Fuck,*” I muttered, setting my glass down and leaving cash next to it. I knew that part of this job was getting money from people you didn’t like—and I’d talk to donors way more



annoying than that asshole to save the senior program and Dean's job.

But my temples were throbbing from having to be fake polite to yet *another* baseball fan who thought I was a throwing arm and nothing else. And my stomach still churned with frustration at the way he spoke about Charlie.

I'd been distracted. Big time. If Elaine or Luciana were here, they would have handled it better.

Shaking my head, I moved toward Dempsey, who was motioning me over.

"It's nice to see you again, Rowan," she said. "You and Charlie have been the talk of the evening."

I slipped my hands into my pockets. "That's all her. I'm the guy lucky enough to come with."

The crowd hushed around us, pulling my attention to the stage. Ten racers, Charlie included, sat panel-style with individual mics in front of them.

The emcee of the evening tapped her own. "Welcome, everyone, to the women's motocross championships here in the great city of Philadelphia."

The audience clapped and cheered. On stage, Charlie appeared as calm and confident as usual. But there was a nervousness to the way she clasped her hands that gave away her unease. At least to me.

"We have another week and a half of events planned for all of you before the big day," the emcee continued, "but many of us so look forward to this press event. A chance for the media to interview some of the brightest stars in our sport and for the fans to ask questions as well. After, please stay for drinks, photo opportunities, and more mingling."

The air buzzed with excitement and whispered conversations. I noticed the extra interest in me, some pointing fingers. There was a complicated stirring of pride in my chest at being recognized as Charlie's pretend boyfriend.

“So let’s begin, shall we?” the emcee asked, pointing to a reporter in the crowd. “Caroline, do you want to start us off?”

For the first twenty minutes, a sea of sports reporters—some local, some national—asked standard questions of the women on the panel. They went back and forth on wins and losses, overall rankings, cross-training regimens. It all seemed fairly normal, though next to me Dempsey’s body language was tensing up the longer it went on.

A reporter my age, in a red button-up shirt and square-rimmed glasses, stood.

Dempsey muttered a string of curse words under her breath.

“I’m James Clark with Sports Night Extreme.” He turned his body toward Charlie. “Charlie Maddox, you’re a rising star, and we’ve been tracking your career since your first X Games win.”

Charlie smiled smoothly. “Thank you, I appreciate the follow.”

“Do you want to tell our reader base why you ride dirt bikes?”

Her smile widened. “Who doesn’t want to learn how to *fly*?”

The audience tittered, and a few people clapped.

“Great answer,” James replied. “And I meant to say earlier that I’m sorry about some of your recent losses on the track. It seems tough out there for you right now.”

Charlie kept her smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Competing with these women up here next to me, and all the others in the audience, is a privilege. Whether I win or lose.”

“And what did Malcolm think about those pictures taken of you partying in Philly the night before this convention began?”

Around us, people laughed a little awkwardly. Charlie stiffened, pursing her lips.

“What did my *dad* think of me going to a bar with some friends?” she asked, in a tone that let everyone know how stupid she thought the question was.

“Do you need me to repeat the question?” James asked, in a tone that let everyone know he knew exactly what he was doing.

Charlie shifted in her chair. “He was mostly just disappointed he wasn’t there to hang out with us.”

The audience laughed again, less nervously.

“Okay, you got me there,” James replied with both hands up. “But here’s something I wanted to get your opinion on. Do you think professional athletes in the spotlight have a responsibility to their fans? A responsibility to have a public image that’s more professional? More respectable?”

Charlie slowly leaned forward. “Personally, I’ve always found respectability to be a concept wielded against people in our society who act in ways that threaten the status quo. So what I want to know is: do you ask men this same question?”

“Young fans look up to you, Charlie,” he said, ignoring her response. “They see you on social media and what they’re seeing is a professional athlete getting falling-down drunk, compromising her health and her performance, seemingly without remorse. If I was a parent and my children were interested in any bike-related sport, I would tell them not to support you.”

Charlie frowned. “Is there anything that I’m doing while I’m on that bike that’s offensive to children? Apart from affecting the sensitive egos of some of the men in the crowd?”

That same crowd murmured, and Dempsey’s expression was more pleased, less anxious. Meanwhile, I was torn between total obsession with Charlie and an urge to drag this piece of shit reporter out of the room by his neck.

“Now I’m not talking about you, James,” she added. “I’m saying that if you *were* in the crowd at a race, I wouldn’t want you supporting me. Because here you are, at a convention for a male-dominated sport, where the women sitting up here with

me have been on the receiving end of bullying, pay inequality, and *endless* discrimination. Instead of pointing out what's truly offensive in this sport—everything I just said—you're trying to write a story about a time I got a little drunk with some friends?"

There was a long pause, then James laughed sarcastically. "You don't have to come for me, Ms. Maddox. I'm only repeating what's already been said about you online. The court of public opinion *does* have an impact on people's careers these days. I was trying to be nice, give you a chance to respond."

"You have my response then," she snapped.

The crowd was silent for a few awkward seconds. Until the emcee jumped in with a cheerful, "Let's take a quick break. We'll be right back."

I wasn't aware that I'd stepped forward until Dempsey placed a hand on my arm. I tore my gaze away from Charlie—who looked rightfully pissed off—and sent a questioning eyebrow at her agent.

"James Clark has always been such a sexist shithead," she muttered. "He baited her on purpose. In fact, he's known for the way he writes about women. We've been trying to get him uninvited to these events for years."

I cocked my head his way. "So I *should* go punch him in the face?"

"You'll have to wait in line," she said, then studied me, looking pleasantly intrigued. "I can see why Charlie likes you, Rowan. You seem good together. Really good *for* each other. I've known her for a long time, and she's always been reluctant to open up. When we first met, back when I was training with her dad, she was a scared kid with too much responsibility. There weren't a lot of people in her life she could trust. I can see why she chose you."

My stomach flipped. "And why is that?"

"You were friends first, right? At that bar near Syracuse?"

I rubbed the back of my neck with a bashful grin. “Yeah, because Charlie shot me down *constantly*. I was trying too hard to impress her.”

Dempsey returned my smile, still peering at me like a puzzle she’d just figured out. “On the rare occasion I’ve seen Charlie with a boyfriend, the guy always seemed like an easy *yes*. Easy to date but also easy to dump. You don’t seem like that kind of guy to her.”

I was way more like Charlie than Dempsey even realized. Every woman I’d ever been with had been an easy *yes* too. An easy *sure, seems fun, why not?*

Only Charlie had been a challenge.

Only Charlie had been impossible to forget.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a blur of blond hair and red lips, charging off the stage. Dempsey and I turned at the same time to see Charlie pushing through a side door and leaving, though the public speaking portion of the night wasn’t close to done.

“Dammit,” Dempsey swore.

“I’ll go get her,” I said. “Can you keep that James dickhead out of the lobby?”

“You got it.”

I moved through the crowd and out into the lobby, scanning for colorful tattoos and a haughty expression. At the very end, I saw Charlie slip through a long hallway, and I followed.

People were definitely watching us.

I peered around the hallways and spotted her—shoulders hunched, her fingers massaging her forehead. I halted, mid-step. From her body language, I could tell she was still angry, but wasn’t sure if she wanted company or to rage by herself. She had every right to walk out after what James had done, but she’d asked for a fake boyfriend for a reason—her reputation—and I didn’t want the brewing situation to worsen.

So I planted myself in a large armchair, visible to nosy fans but close enough to the hallway that I could snag her. Which was exactly what I did a minute later when Charlie walked right past me. Her cheeks blazed red, and a few strands of hair had fallen from her bun.

I caught her wrist and she spun, still scowling, then froze when she realized it was me.

“There’s my beautiful girlfriend,” I drawled. “I missed you.”

Her body relaxed almost immediately. “Obsessed much?”

I tugged her onto my lap. “You already know the answer to that question, gorgeous.”

“Whatever happened to *cupcake*? I was starting to like the sound of it.”

“Liar,” I teased. “And ‘gorgeous’ suits you better.”

I’d been acting in the moment, encouraging Charlie to sit on my lap, and didn’t realize how fucking stupid that idea was until I fully took in the warmth and weight of her body curled into mine. The position put her face a few inches above me, allowing her to stare down with a brash tilt to her red mouth.

I liked that. A lot.

My cock twitched, pressing to the zipper in my pants. I curved one hand up the powerful muscle of her thigh, then gripped her waist. I used the other to brush the hair from those pretty green eyes.

Up close, irritation still simmered there. And the rigid set to her shoulders told me she was pretending to be the carefree girlfriend but was actually furious.

“Hey,” I murmured softly, “that reporter sucked, and I figured you wanted to be alone and angry. Which I support. But as your fake boyfriend, I thought a better story, reputation-wise, would be that I waited out here to drag you onto my lap because I *am* obsessed and can’t keep my goddamn hands off you.”

I nudged my nose at her jaw. “I’m still an amateur here, so if that’s not a good—”

“No, that’s...that’s perfect.” She sounded a little out of breath. “I’m glad you’re making smart decisions at least. Bettencourt’s going to hate the way I handled myself in there. Walking off stage during the break is only gonna make it worse. It’s the type of shit my dad used to do.”

I touched her chin, turning her face to mine. “That James guy was an asshole and way out of line. What you said, calling him out like that, was the right response. The audience clearly thought so. I thought so too.”

Her throat worked on a swallow. “You did?”

“It made me proud to be your boyfriend.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Even if it’s only pretend.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, because not an hour ago, I was promising I’d be polite and cheerful up there, *especially* since I want all these rich people to give you money. Instead...”

“Instead what?”

Her front teeth sank into her bottom lip. “I let him get under my skin even though he’s not worth my anger. Let him bait me into an argument because he thinks I’m like my dad too. It always makes me worry. Worry that, you know, the *court of public opinion* will decide that I’m...unlikable. And that’ll be the end for me.”

I smoothed my palm along the bare skin of her back. “What’s unlikeable? *You*? No way.”

She shrugged, face darkening with emotions I couldn’t begin to pull apart.

“Charlie, you’re a force of nature with an addiction to extreme sports, a passion for standing up for what you believe in, and a long history of taking care of your family, even when it’s complicated. I could give a flying *fuck* about what James or anyone else says about you. They don’t *know* you.”

Her gaze went wide, like she was stunned. There was a beat of silence. Another. She shifted closer, lifted her arms and

draped them around my neck. A second later I could feel her fingers sifting through my hair. Then her nails, lightly scratching down my scalp.

I clenched my jaw to keep from groaning.

“Thank you for saying that, Rowan. It’s like you’ve always...”

Whatever she was about to say was cut off when a group of fans sidled up to us, turning our heads. But instead, they laughed nervously and bounced away. Charlie half-raised her hand in greeting, but someone called out, “We’ll come back later. You get it, girl.”

Charlie buried her face in my neck. Her shoulders shook with muffled laughter, her breath hot on my skin.

I tipped my mouth toward her ear. “Look at you, gettin’ it.”

“We’re gonna end up on an Instagram gossip site again.”

“Wait, *again?*”

She sat back, eyes sparkling with a lightness at odds with how frustrated she’d been just a few minutes earlier.

“There are pictures of us on a *TMZ*-style sports site. You know, like *Has the Bad Girl of Motocross finally found her man?* That kind of thing.”

I held my tongue, *this close* to firing back something teasing like *well, have you found your man?* Knowing full well what she’d say, knowing full well what we’d agreed to.

*Yeah, a fake one who I only have to pretend with for another ten days.*

“I didn’t show you the pictures yet,” she continued, “because the comment section is one long Rowan O’Callaghan thirst session. Didn’t think your ego could take an injection of such pure infatuation.”

“Admit it. You’ve got a hot, popular boyfriend,” I said in a relaxed tone I didn’t feel. “So I guess our...plan...is working?”



Charlie rolled her lips together. Nodded. “Looks like it is, yeah.”

I scanned her face, feeling her body relax further against mine. “It’s horrible, feelin’ like an easy target in a situation like the one you were just in. When I got called up to the majors and saw how much scrutiny me and my teammates got from the press, I was always like...damn, can’t we just play ball?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Right, *yes*. And you think James can stay upright on a dirt track going fifty-five miles an hour before flying off a jump?”

“That dickhead *cannot*. It’s the same as his ability to last more than five minutes in the outfield. People like that criticize because they believe they’re better at it than we are.” I jostled her closer to me. “No one’s better than you, Maddox.”

“Okay, now you’re trying to get me to smile for the game.”

“I’m *trying*”—I nudged the tip of my nose along her neck—“to get you to smile for real. Because you’re my soft, cuddly *kitten*.”

Charlie’s head fell back on a laugh that shook her chest, a laugh that had me grinning like a fool against her throat. I pressed my mouth to her pulse, savored its leap beneath my lips.

Then I paused. I’d been reacting to the glorious moment of a laughing Charlie on my lap. Not playing as her pretend boyfriend, only here for the positive press.

But the biker babe in my arms didn’t pull away or jump off at my wandering mouth.

The opposite was happening.

She was wiggling her ass, suddenly pressed to my straining cock, and lust shot through me so strongly my hands wrapped around her waist and gripped her still.

“Are you okay, Rowan?” she whispered.

“Never been better, gorgeous. Why do you ask?”

She clasped her arms around my neck, bringing our faces an inch closer. How had I never counted the freckles across the bridge of her nose?

How had I never noticed all the flecks of blue in her green eyes?

*There weren't a lot of people in her life she could trust, Dempsey had said. I can see why she chose you.*

"I can tell people are watching us," she said. "And that's great. That's what we wanted. But we didn't, uh...*practice* lap-sitting back at the bar, so I wanted to make sure you were all right with everything."

I breathed out a laugh, every muscle taut. "No, we did not practice this. I would have remembered what it felt like to have you wiggling around on top of me."

Her lips parted. "Do you want me to move?"

I tightened my grip. "Don't you dare."

The air between us grew charged with something dark and seductive.

This time, Charlie seemed to roll the lower half of her body deliberately against my cock. I'd never been harder, never desired more, than sitting in the lobby of the goddamn convention center with a pretend girlfriend making me dizzy with wanting her.

All of her.

"What would you do right now if this wasn't fake?" she whispered.

My heart stopped. Restarted. Stopped again. I pressed my face to her neck and kissed her there. I *felt* her shiver. *Felt* her sigh of breath at my ear.

"We sure as hell wouldn't be here," I murmured against her skin. "Not in public, where I can't touch you where I want to. Where I can't kiss you where I need to. Where I can't slip my fingers between these beautiful legs and make you come on my hand."

Another full-body shiver. And a whimper, so quiet I could have imagined it. I nuzzled the spot under her ear, nipped at her lobe. “If this wasn’t fake, we’d already be back in that giant hotel bed of yours. And I would be eagerly, happily, at your service, Charlie Maddox.”

She turned her head so the tips of our noses almost brushed. Everything around us had disappeared, nothing more than a low hum of background noise. Her green eyes fell to my mouth, her face bent toward mine, and *holy shit* Charlie was going to kiss me.

Nothing about this suspended moment felt like it was for the public or their cameras. All of this seemed very, very real. And hadn’t I learned to reach for what’s good before it’s taken away?

I raised my lips to hers. An inch separated us.

Half an inch.

Someone cleared their throat. I considered snarling at them to *fuck off* but then Charlie sputtered out, “Oh, *Dempsey*. Heeeeeey, what’s up?”

“Sorry to interrupt the new It Couple,” she replied.

I still hadn’t torn my attention from Charlie’s profile, but Dempsey’s taunting tone was obvious. Charlie scrambled off my lap, looking vaguely flushed and undone. I pushed my hands through my hair—anything to feel like my feet were planted on solid ground again.

What the *hell* had just happened?

“No apologies needed,” Charlie said, while fixing the straps of her jumper. “It’s our honeymoon period, and all of that. We tend to get a little carried away.”

Dempsey grinned. “That’s some honeymoon. And it’s no problem. Well, there’s one problem which is you’re very popular, the panel isn’t over, and we’ve got audience members hoping to see you back inside because they’ve got questions.”

I stood as Charlie slid her hands into her pockets. “Even though I messed up big-time with James?”

“Don’t worry about Patronizing McAsshole. *He* looked like the dick, not you.”

“But I fell for it. I’m worried Bettencourt will be mad.”

Dempsey touched Charlie’s wrist. “You made an inspiring speech, stood up to a condescending jerk, *and* you and Rowan have been all anyone can talk about. You done good tonight, babe.”

Charlie’s gaze met mine, her eyebrows quirked in surprise. I winked and her lips tipped into a smile that felt like a secret, just between us.

Though who was I kidding—we *did* have a secret just between us. We were making all of this up.

I extended my hand and Charlie took it. “Ready to go back in?”

“Let’s do it,” she said, back straight and chin lifted. She waved to a few fans who’d been ogling nearby, and they erupted into peals of happy laughter. But beneath her confidence, I sensed her shy hope, could feel her fingers squeezing mine, and that, more than anything—even more than an almost-kiss—had my heart hammering against my ribcage.

That, more than anything, made me wish that my fake girlfriend was mine for real.



## ROWAN

Dean peered around at our surroundings like we were standing on Mars. He squinted against the summer sun. Sipped his coffee. Shrugged.

“Why’d you bring me out to the suburbs again?”

I glanced up from the pile of signs I was crouched over. “What’s wrong with the suburbs? It’s nice out here. There’s *grass*, dude.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “But no one’s yelled at me from their stoop. And there’s too much parking. It’s too easy to find a spot.”

My phone buzzed with an all-caps text message from my grandmother that read ARE YOU COMING TO FAMILY DINNER OR HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME FOR GOOD?

“Our very nosy family members can still be disappointed in us though,” I said with a grin, showing him the text.

He snorted and took the phone. “I’m telling Alice that Tabitha and I will be there tonight along with Mom and Midge. As long as you think that’s okay?”

“More than okay. Your parents make her laugh, and she needs it right now. It’s also hot as hell so we could turn it into a kiddie pool night.”

“Smart plan.” Dean tapped away before taking out his phone and sending another text. “I told Tab to call Kathleen and invite her and her boozy book club.”

I cocked my thumb and index finger with a wink. “That’ll do it. Alice loves hearing their tipsy explanations of whatever romance novel they read.”

Most summer nights on 10th Street were spent around a dingy kiddie pool that Dean’s parents filled with icy water and dragged into the middle of the sidewalk. Midge, Maria, Eddie and my grandmother sat and gossiped, feet in the pool, cold drinks in their hands. Occasionally calling over other neighbors as they strolled by.

Though it was growing in size—Tabitha’s stepmother, Kathleen, was now a special guest, as was that book club and the frozen alcoholic drinks they offered.

It always cheered my grandmother up. And I’d do anything at this point to do that.

I rose from the ground holding two signs, one for me and one for Dean. A large crowd was forming around us, eager fans here for a morning race at one of the dirt bike tracks outside of the city. I hadn’t seen Charlie yet, though I was extremely aware of her getting ready with her bike, milling about with other riders in their helmets and gear.

And I was also aware that my body was strung tight as a bow, skin already buzzing at the thought of seeing her ride again.

“What do you think? Do these say something like *hey, Charlie, I’m happy to cheer you on at your race in a normal way?*”

He was silent, studying both with his usual seriousness. Maybe it was the sun, but I swore he was fighting a smile. “I don’t know. Is that amount of glitter...normal?”

I stared down at the pile of signs which were covered in so much glitter it was gonna be a problem. “I, uh...might have gone a little overboard.”

“How many signs did you bring today?”

“Fifteen. But that extra thirteen is backup.”

He arched a brow. “And how many did you make last night?”

I peered out over the crowd, avoiding his smirk. “I don’t know...thirty?”

“Okay,” he said, like a doctor about to give a diagnosis. “That’s not normal. Or at least it’s normal the same way that when I want to make Tabitha breakfast in bed, I get up at dawn. Cook two ‘practice breakfasts’ using recipes from Mom and Midge. Eat them. Decide they’re not good enough for my wife. Cook two more. Eat *those*. And take the fifth breakfast up, but only after I feel it’s perfect.”

I eyed him warily. “That sounds messed up. This marriage thing is no joke, huh?”

He very pointedly looked down at the pile of signs I’d made for Charlie’s race day. “How many breakfasts would you make for Charlie then?”

My brain sputtered out at even trying to consider all the details of this pretend scenario. Breakfast in bed meant Charlie Maddox. In my *fucking bed*. Two days had already passed since that almost-kiss in the lobby, and I hadn’t known a minute of peace since.

*What would you do right now if this wasn’t fake?*

Based on the amount of filthy, nonstop fantasies I’d indulged in over the last forty-eight hours, the answer was what *wouldn’t* I do with a naked, eager Charlie in my bed?

And then I’d spent half the night glittering poster board with things like *Charlie Maddox Is #1!* Really, I had no right to be giving Dean shit about his breakfast story.

“Rowan.”

“What?”

“How many breakfasts?”

I shoved my sunglasses up with a grin. “I don’t know, dude. One? Because I’d get it perfect on the first try?”



His response was to purposely—and sarcastically—pick up a sign. “Cool. I’ll be here at this race, acting normal, standing with my best friend who is pretend dating that blond woman on the dirt bike over there in a way that is also normal. Because you and Charlie have always been just friends and only friends.”

I coughed into my hand, trying not to laugh. “Yo, did I mess with you this much the summer Tabitha moved home?”

“Oh, it was so much more,” he said, smiling now. “Also, *one breakfast* my ass.”

I was mid-laugh when I noticed mister Greek tragedy himself—Steve Duncan— ambling through the crowd of fans. Today’s look said *I’m rich but also I go to brunch*, and it was obvious when he recognized me.

“Not this guy again,” I said, deflating a little. But I waved anyway, since there would only be a few events left for me to reel in donors, and I was growing desperate for cash.

“Which guy?”

“Potential donor for the center,” I said out of the corner of my mouth. “Don’t tell him you used to be a boxer. A couple nights ago he described my injury as a *Greek tragedy* and insinuated that Charlie needed a man’s stabilizing influence in her life.”

Dean grunted into his coffee. “Our favorite kind of sports fan.”

Steve made his way to us, and if he was embarrassed about the things he’d said to me at Charlie’s press event, he didn’t show it.

He clapped me on the arm like we were old friends. “Beautiful day for a race, eh, boys?”

“Yep, sure is,” I said, shoving the signs behind me with my foot. “It’s nice to see you again. This is my buddy Dean.”

Steve extended a hand but Dean just kept drinking his coffee, wearing a subtle version of his old *Dean the Machine* expression. I didn’t think Steve recognized him. But he did

drop his hand like it was no big deal before propping both on his hips.

“Nice to meet you too, Dean. How do you two know each other? Do you follow the moto circuit too?”

Our eyes met, and Dean inclined his head. I realized I might have a tiny hook after all.

“We work together in South Philly, where we’re from,” I said, nodding back at the skyline in the distance. “At a neighborhood rec center. We do food for seniors, programs for kids, social work support, that type of thing.”

Steve bobbed his head. “A rec center? Like funded by the city?”

“Most of them are, but ours is privately funded. Grants, donations.” I shrugged. “We just lost our biggest grant funder, so we’re scrambling at the moment, trying to keep our doors open.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s a damn shame, Rowan. I’m sorry to hear it, especially given how tough your jobs must be, working in Philadelphia of all places.”

“Aren’t you from here too?” Dean asked.

“No, no, born and raised on the Main Line, about an hour northwest. I don’t know Philly well but I watch the nightly news.” He waved his hand sympathetically, like Dean and I had recently come back from a war. “All the trash. And the, you know, all the violence and crime. It’s a damn shame too, since I *always* told people on the Main Line that Philadelphia could have really been something.”

Dean and I shared another look. His jaw was locked, brow pinched in annoyance. We were used to taking intrusive questions from strangers about our injuries. We were also used to taking half-formed opinions from suburban folks who knew about as much about our neighborhoods as I knew how to walk on the goddamn moon.

I swallowed a whole lot of my pride and said, “Dean and I come from South Philly, and we’d do anything for our city. Because it’s done so much for us. I know what’s on the news. I

also know my neighbors better than the news does. Know that Philly's like anyplace else. A lot of good folks, trying their hardest to make ends meet, all shoved together close in row homes. We're all we've got. But that's a helluva lot. We see it every day at the rec center, how people take care of one another. Show up for each other. Give extra when they have it. That's why I come to work every day."

I rubbed the back of my neck, where I felt hot and a little bit itchy. But also relieved that Steve had shown up again—I'd been kicking myself nonstop about letting him slip through my fingers without even *mentioning* the center. It was surprising how easy talking about this place was starting to become.

I hadn't said anything that was untrue. Hadn't said anything that I didn't know, personally, from showing up day after day. Steve was either gonna get past some of that rich-suburban-dude bias about my city...or he wasn't. Didn't mean I couldn't speak my mind about it.

Steve frowned, like he was mulling over what I'd said. "That's great. Truly, it is. And I'm not saying you and Dean don't do necessary work or aren't needed. It's more that...and I don't mean to offend you...but I feel *sorry* about what you deal with every day. So much of that city is a lost cause now." He showed us his hands with one of those *I'm just telling it to you straight* faces. "Yes, I'm not *from* there the way you and Dean are. But even out on the Main Line, we can see what's happening. And it doesn't give us a lot of hope right now."

"And how often do you come to Philly?" Dean asked in a clipped tone.

"Not much anymore, frankly. Though it's been okay to be in that downtown area, near the convention center for the championship events." He gave an overly dramatic shudder and a cheesy smile. "Maybe I'm just not a city guy like you two are. I'm a man who needs a backyard and a grill."

He laughed, rubbing his hands together, then said, "Oh look, the riders are getting lined up at the start gates."

I slipped a business card from my pocket and held it out to Steve with the last shreds of my willpower. "If you ever want

to come one day and see what we do, give me a ring and I'll set something up. Might give you some hope after all."

Steve brightened, but it was still patronizing. Raising money was necessary, but that didn't mean the rec center and the people who used it deserved to be pitied while it happened. I gritted my teeth together but fixed my smile in place.

"Why thank you, Rowan. I might take you up on that offer. Now, I need to head to the front because some of the sponsors have extra-special seats, me included. I'll wave to your girlfriend for you," he said, starting to move back through the crowd. He was gone in an instant, and I wasn't sure whether I'd done a better job or a somehow worse, shittier job.

Dean squeezed my shoulder. "Well. You tried. You really want to get money from that asshole?"

"I do," I said—and meant it. "We need it, and whatever he gives us I'll use to help all those *lost causes* we see every day."

He chuckled. "He can see what's happening in Philly even from an hour away. Must have some kind of miracle vision."

"Or he's just a sanctimonious dick."

"That too."

Dean bent to pick up a sign. "I feel bad messing with you about Charlie now that I know you have to deal with guys like that to get us money."

I tossed an arm around him and pulled him toward the front. "Be for real. Is there a time in the almost twenty-three years that I've known you that I *wouldn't* have messed with you about making thirty handmade glitter signs for a girlfriend?"

"Fake girlfriend."

"Yeah, *fake* girlfriend. That's what I meant."

I avoided eye contact until we'd made our way closer to the front. The air smelled like dust and bike grease and sticky summer humidity. And there was a pre-race charge, that moment-before-a-lightning-bolt energy that still made me feel

like I needed to go find my mitt before running out to a bright green baseball field. Dean must have felt it too.

He nudged me. “It’s nice sometimes, to remember what all of this was like. How addicting it was. Though it’s even nicer not to be the ones putting our bodies on the line.”

I rubbed my shoulder, the bumpy ridges of the long scar from the surgery that didn’t fix a damn thing.

“Do you think Steve’s going to donate?” Dean asked.

“I’m not sure.” My fingers curled around the edges of the sign. “Charlie said he’s fairly philanthropic, but both times I’ve talked to him he hasn’t seemed interested.” I nudged Dean back. “It’s probably a good thing that Luciana told me yesterday they’re starting the process of looking to hire for Elaine’s position. There’s gotta be someone in South Philly who can fundraise the *hell* out of guys like Steve better than I can.”

It’d been a somber couple days at the center, with Luciana coming by a staff meeting to let us know that after Elaine’s medical recovery, she’d be officially retiring. According to Luciana, she was starting to feel a lot better, but the scare had done what it does to a lot of people—made her reconsider her priorities.

A tiny bit of relief had flooded through me at the thought of handing over the reins of the understaffed, underfunded, at-capacity situation I’d been dumped into.

But another stronger sensation had done the same—it was jealousy at whoever got to lead next, challenging as it was.

It’d been almost two weeks now that I was interim director and I was starting to...*like it*. Like it so much that I hesitated to admit it out loud. Except that enjoying feeling like a leader again wasn’t the same as being *qualified* to do so.

Dean didn’t respond—just sipped his coffee, held his sign, and peeked over at me like he couldn’t figure something out.

“What is it?”

“Nothin’,” he said lazily. “I thought you were gonna apply for Elaine’s job. She already told Luciana to put you in temporarily. I know she’s been stressed and overworked lately, but she always had a nose for finding the right people for the right tasks.”

“Key word there is *temporary*.”

He grunted. “So? You seem happy.”

“That’s the sleep deprivation making my skin glow.”

“Rowan.”

I pulled up short at the seriousness in his voice.

“Being new sucks. You used to eat shit at every baseball practice when we were in middle school. Coming home late, tellin’ me and Alice how you were never gonna play pro ball because you’d never be talented enough.” He raised a shoulder. “You’re new at it so it’s only normal to suck.”

There was a painful truth in his words that had me shifting back and forth on my feet. I hadn’t felt like a rookie in a while, and I liked the challenge. But as I cast a sideways glance at his profile, that wasn’t the only thing making me uncomfortable.

The threat to Dean’s job was serious, and I still hadn’t said anything because I wasn’t going to let it happen. Worrying him for no reason felt cruel.

Still. The longer the situation dragged on, the guiltier I felt keeping him in the dark. Wasn’t sure which was worse.

“Do I really suck that bad at it?” I finally asked.

“Nah, you’re *good*. That’s what I’m trying to say.” He pointed to a bunch of riders walking across the track toward their bikes. “Hey, isn’t that Charlie over there?”

It was Charlie, helmet under one hand, goggles around her neck, moving with a casual confidence to her bike. She swung her leg over and sat back on the seat, pulling her helmet on and flexing her fingers in her racing gloves.

Then she twisted around, her face moving like she was scanning the audience. My stomach went hollow. I’d been

head down at work for the past two days, and we'd barely spoken apart from texting about this race. And not a *single word* about what happened in the lobby—my lips on her throat, the whispered fantasies, the hungry look in her eyes as she dipped down to kiss me.

Charlie pushed her helmet back up, facing me from her spot behind the start gate. With a wry grin, I held my sign high. Glitter coated the tops of my shoulders and dotted the front of Dean's shirt. He lifted his at the same time, and we let out our loudest, Philly-sized *whoop*.

"Let's kick some fucking ass, Charlie," I hollered.

A few people laughed around us. A few more joined in, clapping and cheering her name.

Her response was a smile that dazzled.

Talk about liking something too much.

But a second later, every stray mechanic was scurrying off the track and then a checkered flag dropped. The start gates fell, and they were off in a blur of wheels, rocketing toward the first turn so fast it took me a second to realize that Charlie hit it first.

"Oh, shit." Dean whistled.

My focus was superglued to Charlie, who was maneuvering her bike off a series of steps, coasting down a short, sharp hill, then gaining momentum before sailing off a jump in a perfect arc, like she was tracing the shape of the sun on the horizon.

Beneath that helmet, I knew she was smiling—knew it because one jump later she pulled off a trick she loved to do. *The whip* is how she'd described it to me one time on a hazy, late night at Jolene's. Her upper body stayed mostly upright while her lower body shot to the side, forcing her bike sideways.

The crowd cheered for it. I was grinning myself stupid, could feel it in the muscles of my face. Next to me, Dean said, "That looked fucking cool."

Eyes on the track, I leaned in. “Now you get why I made too many signs.”

“Now you get why I make so many breakfasts.”

Laughing, I clapped my hands and yelled Charlie’s name as she flew past. She was now in a pack of four going into the second lap. I knew this race had a decent first-place purse—\$15,000—and I also knew that Charlie had lost the last few and needed a win. For a couple different reasons.

The stakes were high for this race.

Standing there like that, I couldn’t help but get swept up in the motion, the speed, the electrifying adrenaline. I held my breath and watched her edge around the third rider, sneak past the second rider, thoroughly *gun it* until she was on the heels of the first.

“Come on, come on, *come on*,” I chanted—sign dropped, hands on my head.

Charlie made a serious play for the top spot, so close that my heart lodged in my throat. My voice went hoarse from cheering. The audience moved as one, like a flock of birds, seeking out the final few seconds of momentum.

There was one last flash of color. Another flag.

And Charlie had come in second.

I was moving toward the finish line before I was even aware of it. Riders kept roaring past the line in a cloud of dust, and photographers were already taking pictures, but I was only aware of Charlie.

Goggles and helmet torn off, her hair a wild tangle, my fake girlfriend was beaming as other racers congratulated her. I understood the very unique pain of second place but based on her body language she was overjoyed.

Per the digital rankings sign near the announcer’s stand, the second-place purse was still a cool \$10,000. It wasn’t going to stop her dad’s eviction, but it was at least a start.

Our eyes met through the crowd, and our connection rippled like a shock wave through my body. We were



surrounded, a constant press of people and sound, but I couldn't have told you anything about it.

I stopped twenty feet before her bike, happily surprised when Charlie launched herself into my arms. I lifted her feet off the ground and buried my face in her hair. The ease and comfort of this celebratory moment threatened to knock me off my feet, even more than the force of Charlie's body leaping to mine.

No part of it felt planned for the positive optics or staged for a social media post. No part of me wanted the illusion anyway.

And as she reared back to send a triumphant fist into the air, I realized with a start that I would absolutely get up at dawn to make this goddess a hundred breakfasts if she asked.



# CHARLIE

Second place.

*Second place, second place, second place.*

Half an hour later, I was midway through cleaning off my bike, still in a blissed-out daze. It wasn't first, and I was so close to beating Riley Miller over that finish line I could taste the bitter near-victory on the tip of my tongue.

But it had been six *long* months since I'd placed in the top three. Today I'd felt *in the zone* on that track.

It was a long time coming. Only when I'd leapt into Rowan's arms in sheer joy did I realize how desperately I missed the thrill of this sport, how desperately I missed feeling like I knew what I was doing.

Of course, only *after* I'd leapt into Rowan's strong arms did I realize that sharing my delirious glee with him had been instinctual. A pure gut reaction, running to a man who'd always made me feel safe.

It sure wasn't for the benefit of a bunch of cameras.

"That was a beauty of a race out there."

I squinted up at the voice, tossing the rag over my shoulder. It was Riley and her girlfriend, Quinn.

I cracked a smile. "Thanks. I tried to catch you, but you were too fast on that final turn. Congrats on the win."

Riley extended a hand, and I let her pull me to stand. She wore an Archer's Angels jacket, and her pink hair was tied

back from her face. She was about my age, white with bright blue eyes and a gold nose ring that matched the ones in her ears.

“Next time you might,” she said with a friendly grin. “I’m Riley, by the way. I don’t think we’ve officially met.”

“Charlie,” I said. “And you’re Quinn, right?”

“That’s me. And you did look great out there.” She was a slightly taller Black woman, with square-rimmed glasses and long braids pulled over one shoulder. When she offered her hand to shake mine, I spotted Riley’s name tattooed on her inner wrist. “I hope it’s not too dorky to admit we’re both a little intimidated to ride against you at the championships.”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’ve been intimidated by you both all year.”

They laughed, Riley taking Quinn’s hand with a squeeze. A few fans called their names, and they waved, off-handedly, but stayed focused on me. I peered around their shoulders and saw that same group, whispering excitedly.

“Heads up, but I think this fan club is gonna ask you for autographs in a minute.”

“They’re too sweet,” Riley said. “We got to meet your agent at the press event the other night. I told her she was the first out, gay dirt bike racer I knew and was, um, low-key *obsessed* with tracking her career.” She wrinkled her nose. “I might have made a fool of myself.”

Quinn scoffed. “No way, she loved it. I could tell.”

“And I second Quinn,” I added. “She’s really open about what she went through and has always loved getting to meet other queer racers. I’m sure she adored meeting you.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. “I don’t know what your agent situation is right now, but Dempsey’s brilliant if you’re looking to switch. I don’t know why she puts up with me and my shit, but she’s the best.”

Quinn cocked her head with a quizzical smile. “Well, because you’re Charlie Maddox. *You’re* the best.”

I didn't even have time to fully react to such an unexpected compliment before Riley was taking a step closer. "We're not currently looking for new agents. But Quinn's leaving privateering to join our team."

"Archer's Angels?" I asked.

"The very same. And I guess..." Riley shrugged, looking nervous. "I wanted to ask how things were going with Bettencourt?"

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Bettencourt? It's a big contract and they've been..." What the hell did I say? "Great. They've been great. I was privateering too until recently. It's tough being out there on your own so I totally get joining a team."

"It can be tough being on your own even with a sponsor," Riley pointed out.

I remembered the easy camaraderie between the women on Archer's Angels, remembered the sharp edge of my yearning for something I felt like I never had the luxury to enjoy.

"And joining our team isn't a guarantee we could ever make you as much as one, single Bettencourt contract," she continued. "In fact, I know we can't. But the money's still great. Consistent. Our team owners are amazing, we get to travel and train together, and when one of us wins, we all win."

I blinked, my stomach fluttery. "Are you...?"

"Asking you to join our team? Yeah, I am," Riley said with a bashful smile. "This isn't an official offer or anything. But I *may* have been asked by our team owners to feel you out. See what you were thinking. I know you've got a contract with hard dates attached to it, so we're not trying to steal you away. The next time you're a free agent, would you consider it?"

"I, uh...I'm not sure. I never even considered joining a team." I bit my lip, legitimately unsure. And very, very flattered.

I resisted the words I wanted to say: *I never thought a team would want me.*

But maybe Archer's Angels wouldn't make me feel like my public persona and personal life were somehow an embarrassment, a flaw in their "family-friendly" image.

Riley reached for my arm, touching my elbow. "Just think about it. And we'll message you on Instagram with our numbers. Call us anytime if you've got questions, because we would love to have you join us."

With that, they turned to go and were swallowed up by a few clusters of fans, while I stood there in a happily stunned silence for a minute. Shaking my head, I dropped back to the ground and picked up my rag. Wiped down the spokes of my tires and ran my fingers through the grooves, checking for leaks or anything more troubling than a few rocks lodged in the rubber.

*Second place. Archer's Angels. Second place. Archer's Angels.*

It was like my brain couldn't handle this burst of double good news—because even if I didn't join their team, it was a hopeful sign, reputation-wise, if the motocross team that boasted Riley—and soon Quinn—on their roster was sniffing out if I was available.

*Well, you're Charlie Maddox. You're the best.*

A honk sounded behind me. It was Rowan parking my truck, his right arm lazily draped over the steering wheel, the other hanging out the window. A wicked grin appeared on his face the second our eyes met.

I'd tossed him my keys so he could meet me by the track where I'd load my bike in the back, but I hadn't expected seeing him drive my car to feel so intimate. It was a simple domestic act performed by romantic partners everywhere, the kind of thing a fake boyfriend would do for his motocross-racing girlfriend.

Then why did the sight of him climbing out of it make a hot flush creep up my neck?

*If this wasn't fake, we'd already be back in that giant hotel bed of yours. And I would be eagerly, happily, at your service.*

Oh. Right.

That's fucking why.

I was used to fighting my physical attraction to Rowan tooth and nail. Never wanted to join the ranks of all the women who routinely swooned in his presence—because what was the point of acknowledging something that would never be?

But after the press event, I cracked open that locked door and found myself windswept and dazed at the strength of my longing, fully unleashed.

I knew why, and the reason was almost more terrifying. That reporter had been infuriating—but Rowan was just *there* for me. Listening, making me laugh, understanding me in a way I'd spent the past couple days obsessing over.

It had once been so easy for me to write off the flirtatious spark that always danced between us. Easy for me to write off the way I opened up to him, turned to him, helped him when he needed it. His orbit had always been wide and full of charm, so alluring I couldn't blame myself for getting sucked in.

But I'd gone ahead and asked the biggest flirt I knew, the guy *famous* in my bar for never staying the night, to *worship the ground that I walked on*.

He had gone and done it. And done it so convincingly I was starting to believe the lie.

Rowan closed the distance in a few long strides, reaching down to pull me up the same way Riley had. But he kept our hands entwined, turning them side-to-side.

“No knuckle bandaging needed?” he asked.

“Not this time,” I said. “But there *will* be others, I'm sure of it.”

His gaze burned and I fought the urge to squirm beneath the scrutiny. “I'm here for whatever you need. All you have to do is ask.”

He released me, but not before dragging the tips of his fingers along mine.

We'd barely spoken since I'd discovered that sitting on Rowan's lap would provide fodder for waking fantasies so lurid, I was helpless to resist giving in to them. So later that same night, with my hand between my legs, my fingers circling my clit, I told myself it was *all for the optics*. The way I'd ground on top of him. The way I'd let myself so thoroughly enjoy the glide of his lips along my throat, his wandering, confident hands, the rough scrape of his teasing whispers.

*Optics* was why I'd taunted him.

And as I fucked myself with my own hand, it was Rowan I pictured—in a fantasy where I was back in that lobby, back on his lap, and we were entirely alone. A fantasy where his hands stayed tight on my hips, working me back and forth against his cock, our mouths so close we shared one long, shuddering breath. My body had ached with the imagined, agonizing friction, my low moans, Rowan's gasps, and bruising, head-spinning kisses.

I came so intensely that night my spine arched off the mattress, my mind filled with dreams of what Rowan would look like, undone and panting, with my name on his lips.

Only for the optics though.

Rowan dipped his head, catching my eye. "Are you okay, Maddox?"

"Uh-huh," I stammered, blinking through my sex haze.

"Do you want help getting your bike in?"

"Nope, I got it," I said, already hauling it up onto the back. I ducked as I secured the tires to the clamps, needing to avoid eye contact for a minute. It was too much, staring back at Rowan with the secret knowledge that I'd fantasized about grinding myself to orgasm on his lap not forty-eight hours earlier.

But when I finally resurfaced, he was perched on the edge of the truck bed, with just enough space for me to join him. I



did, grateful for the ice-cold bottle of water he handed me.

“You’ve got a few fans staring at you over there,” he murmured.

I nodded, finishing the water. “Good to know we’ve got an audience.”

I sat across from Rowan, my back to the side of the truck and my feet stretched toward him. I’d replaced my racing boots with an old pair of sandals, so when Rowan wrapped his fingers around my ankle and squeezed, my skin went hot.

A smile played around his lips. “Long time no see, huh?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. “Did you miss me?”

“I always miss you, Charlie.”

I scanned the milling crowd of people, an easier task than basking in the cozy affection of Rowan’s gaze. Though turning back to it wasn’t much better—he was holding a raspberry Ring Pop in his hand.

“For the second-place winner, Charlie Maddox,” he said, flashing a grin. “The best rider with the coolest tattoos in the biz.”

Laughter startled from me. “Rowan, you didn’t...”

He nudged the ring toward me until I took it. Popped it between my lips, and all but *purred* with happiness. “Why are they so fucking delicious?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know, gorgeous. You’re, like, the only person I know who treats Ring Pops like a culinary delight.”

“They *are* a delight. And I will defend them forever.” I nudged his leg. He trapped my ankle again, pressing his thumb along my calf.

“Seriously though,” he said, “watching you win like that was...” He paused, a light blush making the freckles around his eyes stand out darker. “It was really something. I’ll never forget it. You deserved that first, but you seem pleased with second.”

I pressed my aching shoulders against the sunbaked metal behind me. “I am pleased. Second place can definitely suck big-time. Not today though. Not after six months without placing. Shame Dempsey wasn’t here to see this one, but she very rudely has *other clients* to deal with.”

“But do those other clients have Ring Pops?”

I licked the side of mine. Watched Rowan’s throat work. “Doubt it.” Another long lick. Rowan’s fingers tensed around my ankle. “Today felt...today felt like I’d finally come home. Finally come home after months of wandering around in an ugly wilderness.”

“How so?” he asked softly.

I tapped my temple. “You know all that mind-body connection stuff you’re taught when you’re already a serious athlete by the time you’re in middle school?”

“Oh boy, do I,” he drawled. “I’ll never forget all that ‘your body is a temple’ bullshit my old coaches used to swear by. You’re a machine—”

“Your body is an instrument,” I added.

“If you think bad, you’ll play bad.”

“Have negative thoughts on race day and you’ll lose the race, every single time.”

His jaw set, expression darkening. “It made me view my body as something utilitarian. A tool for someone else to use. Not mine. Not really. Later, it just felt like a moneymaker. So when I was released after my injury, I knew all that *your body is a temple* stuff was fake. If it wasn’t, they wouldn’t have been so eager to dump me like yesterday’s trash.”

My heart squeezed in my chest. Rowan believed his career-ending injury came from years of overuse. Years of little league, then high school, and then minor league coaches not respecting the limits of his body but rather urging him to push past them.

*Pitching is the most unnatural movement you can force your body to do*, he used to say—casually, before he got hurt,

before his words became a premonition of the worst to come.

I extended my hand, and he took it, dragging me closer until our legs were semi-pretzeled together. Then I tipped forward and kissed him on the cheek. Just once, lightly.

“Were there...were there people watching us?”

“Mm-hmm,” I lied, lips rolling together. “We must look like a cute photo op.”

“Yeah. We must,” he said slowly. His gaze fell to my mouth then crinkled at the sides. His thumb came up and he stroked below my bottom lip. “You’ve got some Ring Pop here.”

“Hazard of all this pink sugar,” I mused. Pushed back a few inches, so a respectable, less tempting, distance between our upper bodies existed again. “But you’re not... Rowan, your body isn’t a bag of garbage to get tossed out when it’s no longer needed. And I’m sorry—and, honestly, furious—they did that to you.”

“I am too.” He reached forward again, this time brushing my bangs from my forehead. It was funny, how effortless this tenderness was starting to become.

How effortless it had been to want to kiss him on the cheek and then *do it*.

His fingers roamed until he smoothed them across my temple. “So what’s going on up here?”

I swallowed. “It feels...feels broken.”

“What does?”

I exhaled sharply. “Until today’s win, it felt like I’ve spent all this time recently not in the right headspace. Foggy. Frazzled.” I winced. “Hungover, which, contrary to what people say online, I’ve *never* done before.”

“When did it start?” he asked.

I looked away, squinting back up at the sun. “Uh...after I signed with Bettencourt. I hate even saying it out loud. There are younger riders who would gladly run me over on this very

track for this opportunity. I've been throwing it away and if"—I waved my hand back and forth—"this doesn't work, and if I lose the championship next week, my dad's gonna be the one who pays the price."

Rowan made a sound of understanding. "What if they're not the right fit for you?"

I snorted. "Then I better *make them* the right fit for me."

He shrugged again. "Just a thought. You think that mind-body thing is busted, but I don't know. Could be it's trying to tell you something."

The icy truth of that smacked into me, but I already knew I wasn't ready yet to confront it. Bettencourt meant *money*, and *money* was the only fix for all my current problems.

Still. I found myself searching out Riley, Quinn, and the rest of their team anyway. This time, they spotted me and waved.

"Was there anything different that helped you win second place today?" Rowan asked.

I held my tongue. *I knew you'd be watching me* felt too real, especially for two friends faking it.

"Who knows?" I said airily. "Good night's sleep, and I visited Tina this morning for a scrapple sandwich."

He winked. "Smart girl."

I cocked my head toward the track. "Did I see you talking up Steve again before the race? He better shell over some big cash for you guys. I know he's good for it."

Rowan hummed a *meh* sound. "Things with Steve went okay last time, potentially slightly better today? Or worse. Only time will tell."

"At the press event, you mean?"

His jaw clenched. "Steve has a fondness for the drama of a bad sports injury. Referred to my shoulder as being like a *Greek tragedy*. And today, Dean and I did talk to him about the rec center a bit. But he's from the Main Line." Rowan

rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, indicating *lots of money*. “And enjoyed sharing his uninformed, condescending opinions of my city.”

Anger had me leaning forward again. “What did he say about your shoulder?”

Twin lines deepened around his mouth. His nostrils flared. “It’s not a big deal. He’s one of those sports fans who likes to rehash your public injuries and humiliations like they happened to a character in a movie. Not a human being in real life.”

His focus sharpened over my shoulder, and by the narrowing of his eyes, I guessed he’d spotted Steve nearby. “You know. We’ve got these big dreams, big contracts and then...one false move and it’s all over in an instant. A tragedy.”

I made a strangled sound of frustration, pushing to my knees and whirling off the truck bed. “I’m gonna make that dude’s *face* a tragedy.”

Rowan’s hand, looping around my elbow, stopped me mid-step. “Hey, slow down there, killer,” he crooned.

I scowled over my shoulder. “At least let me hit him in the face with my helmet, Rowan. He walks around the motocross circuit like he’s some philanthropic *god*, and I made you go talk to that asshole. This is my fault.”

“It’s not, Maddox.”

He tugged, gently, until I stopped, crossing my arms across my chest. His expression was all sweet softness, and it had my heart backflipping in my chest.

“It’s not your fault,” he repeated. “You had no idea he was a dick in disguise. He hides it well, I’m sure. But it’s always nice remembering I’ve got you in my corner.”

I blinked, wondering why my throat was tightening. “I just...the rec center deserves to stay open and, you know, we had...we had a deal. This is a transaction. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you if I fail on my end. If I fail the center.”

“That’s not possible,” he said quietly. “Plus, we’ve got that fancy gala night and the championship left, yeah? That’s at least two more opportunities I’ve got to reel in some big, rich donor. I’m not worried yet.”

But the anxiety that rippled through his gaze told an entirely different story.

He slid off the back of my truck and handed me the keys. The hovering fans had dispersed, and most of the remaining crowd was back down the hill, near the track. Rowan raised a hand, then looked back at me.

“I brought Dean along,” he said, “but he met up with a few of his old boxing friends. I should get back to him soon, get back to the center and tackle some Sunday administrative tasks.”

My eyes tracked over to the tall, broad man with dark brown hair, who even from far away emanated a quiet power. “And Dean’s the one who made all the glitter signs with my name on them?” I teased.

Rowan coughed into his hand. “Uh-huh, yep. The big guy’s always loved a glitter pen, and I was like...sure, yeah, dude. I’ll hold your signs or whatever.”

My lips twitched with the effort to hide my smile. Rowan caught it, slid a hand along the back of his neck with a bashful grin. “Did you...like them?”

“I loved them. I snagged a couple to take home with me, if that’s okay?”

“I’ve got another twenty-eight back at my place if you need more, so...”

“Glitter signs and Ring Pops,” I said. “A girl could get used to this.”

I expected Rowan to laugh or joke or tease me back. But he was shoving his hands into his pockets, brows knit together.

“What is it?” I asked, a little concerned.

He swallowed carefully. “Nothing, I’ve just been thinking about the past a lot lately. About the two of us.”

Suddenly my limbs felt jittery, so I planted my feet, one hand gripping the truck. “What about it?”

“We were always doing things for each other, back at Jolene’s, weren’t we? Like, how many times did you let the team drink for free when we lost?”

I smiled at the memory. “Oh...I mean, that’s nothing. I liked all those guys, Rowan. They worked hard for not a lot of money. A little free beer on a rough night isn’t much.”

“Yeah, but you used to send me home with free food from the kitchen too. Remember that?”

“You were all broke. If I had extra, why not share it? Besides, my manager there was a douche, and I was *always* working by myself. You were like my unpaid barback whenever you were in town, pouring extra beers and cleaning glasses when I was busy.”

One end of his mouth tipped up. “Like that random bachelorette party that came through?”

“Oh shit, *right*. We made a great team that night.”

“I know. You even shared the tip jar with me. Which I appreciated *almost* as much as the time you spent your break putting tire chains on my car.”

“A huge snowstorm was coming,” I said. “What was I gonna do, let you drive around unsafe?”

I wanted to fidget. I wasn’t sure why he was bringing all this stuff up, but a flush was creeping up my neck.

“Charlie...” He hesitated, something he rarely did. “If you don’t have plans tomorrow...we could go out and celebrate your win? Just the two of us. I promise to take you to all the best places the locals in South Philly go. No tourist traps, I swear.”

His tone was light. But that wasn’t what captured my attention. It was the glimpse of genuine sincerity on his face that sent up a flare of anxiety.

So I laughed, purely out of nerves.

Probably wasn't the right thing to do.

“Do you mean...like an actual date? Rowan, we set rules for a reason. Made this a...a *transaction* so that no one got hurt. We both agreed to it.”

He looked uncharacteristically annoyed with me. “Course I'm not asking you on a date, Maddox. I've already asked you on dates a dozen times, and you've said no. Also a dozen times. You don't have to worry about me catching feelings for you. I'm not.”

Dual feelings of hope and disappointment warred in my chest—something about the way my heart soared at the words *if you don't have plans tomorrow* and then plummeted at *I'm not*.

It was much too confusing, as if there was a reality where a full-time, traveling athlete who was rarely in the same place twice could date a man who was the heart and soul of the city he'd promised to call home forever.

It was a careless and reckless kind of hope. *Weak*.

Rowan rubbed his forehead. “We're friends, yeah? I was only asking if you wanted to go someplace where we didn't have to pretend. Keep talking, have a drink, that's all.” He looked around, as if needing to confirm we were truly alone. Dropped his voice a little. “I know I'm only here for a reason. You need someone to prop you up and make you look good. And I'm happy to do it.”

I winced. “This is making me out like I'm just here, using you. Rowan, we *are* friends. That's why we set it up to be more equal, to make sure this had the possibility to help you too.”

“*Charlie*,” he whispered, every syllable of my name overflowing with frustration. “I don't see you for four years and then you show up, asking me to pretend to be your boyfriend, to pretend to be *obsessed* with you in public. And I said yes because you know me. And you know there isn't *anything* you could ask that I would say *no* to.”



I stepped back, stomach churning. The truth he was edging around was as scary as all the others I was avoiding right now. “I thought you said you didn’t consider this a debt you had to repay. From the night...the night with your shoulder. Because there isn’t anything to repay there, Rowan. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” I swallowed around a lump in my throat. “And you’d do it too, for me.”

He dragged a hand down his face, looking as haggard as I’d ever seen him. “That’s not what I...”

He cast his eyes to the sky, like it held the answers he was searching for. “I know what women think I’m good for, and they’re not wrong to believe it. *You’re* not wrong to believe it. I had a lot of fun messing around back then. And to be brutally honest? I’m still doing a lot of that now. Doesn’t mean I’m proud of how I acted all the time at Jolene’s, and I thought you would get that. But Dempsey was right.”

I reared back. “Dempsey was right about what?”

“That it’s too hard for you to open up to people and let them in. And I know why, for you, it’s so terrifying. I get it.” He lowered his voice again, but it was more intimate this time. “But it’s you and me, Charlie. It’s always been *different* between us, hasn’t it?”

All those insecurities and fears came roaring back, shaped by our time together at Jolene’s. “I don’t...fuck, I don’t know,” I blurted out.

But before I could own up to that *overt* lie, Rowan was already fixing a grim smile to his face. My stomach hollowed out.

“Well. You can’t say that I didn’t try. Again.”

“Rowan, you can’t *fault me* for wanting to employ a little bit of self-preservation in this,” I said, exasperated. “For two years, I watched you treat the women of my town like they were disposable, watched women get their hopes up and their hearts broken by *you*. Yes, we were younger. Yes, we both made a lot of mistakes. But I’d be lying if I said it didn’t affect whether or not I think of you as someone who”—*won’t shatter*

*my heart into a million pieces*—“could be serious about dating. Real dating, which is a lot harder than all the pretending we’ve been doing for the cameras.”

He propped his hands on his hips, a muscle in his jaw popping. “I still don’t stand a chance here, do I?”

I opened my mouth, but was too stunned, too flustered, to answer. He blew out a jagged breath, turning at the sound of Dean pulling up a few feet away.

“Listen, my ride is here,” he said wearily. “Forget everything I said just now. I’m under all this stress at work and I haven’t slept and I’m talking nonsense. I don’t want some Instagram gossip to start a rumor that we’re breaking up—”

My body should not, *should not*, have broken out in a cold sweat at that.

“—so is it okay if I kiss you?” he finished.

I lifted my chin and nodded. “Sure. That’s fine.”

He swooped in, and I was all too aware of how short and clipped his question had been, when just days earlier those same words—*where would you like me to kiss you, Charlie?*—had trembled with desire.

His hand on my back was warm, his lips soft, but his body was taut and unyielding.

Like he was faking it.

“Rowan, wait,” I whispered, resisting the urge to cling to his shirt, “You can’t leave now. We need to talk about all of this.”

His lips brushed my temple. A bolt of pure yearning shot through me. “I’ll see you in a few days for the gala, okay? Congrats on your win today. I’m so glad I was here to see it.”

Then he was striding off, having a quick, whispered conversation with Dean before jumping in the passenger side. Dean lifted his hand and they took off, down the gravel road along the parking lot then squealing off onto the highway.

I watched him go, aware that I needed to act naturally so it didn't look like my fake boyfriend and I just had a *real* fight about our *real* feelings and were now, potentially, fake breaking up.

It was fucking *absurd*.

I went about packing the rest of my gear with my body language as loose as I could manage given that I was half stunned. Half exasperated.

*All the way* pissed off.

I was used to the array of garbage men I dated peeling off in a car after getting in a fight with me about something trivial. It usually signaled the end of our casual, emotionless relationship.

So it wasn't the sudden argument that was surprising. It was who I was arguing *with*.

A man who was perpetually unruffled and unbothered, laughing every time I turned him down. Flirting with me shamelessly until he got me to smile.

We absolutely were *not dating*, and yet there was a vulnerability in his frustration that had me more rattled than what any previous boyfriend had ever said to me.

And what did *that* mean?



## ROWAN

Two days after my fight with Charlie, I was still in a mood about it. And the mood was a shit sandwich of frustration, regret, and a cringe-y embarrassment every time I replayed it in my head.

Right now, I was doing that at least once an hour. More if I wanted to make myself extra miserable.

Charlie Maddox was making me *feel* things.

Undefinable things that went so far beyond my usual lust and flirtation I was scared to explore them. She'd been so captivating and powerful on her bike that race—had leapt into my arms like I *meant* something to her—and I was just proud to be by her side.

Even if it was under false pretenses.

So I took my usual blend of foolish courage and decided to ruin everything by doing something stupid—ask Charlie out on an actual date.

Her wariness toward the idea had been so obvious, so immediate, that I fumbled through the truth and told her a mean lie. *You don't have to worry about me catching feelings for you. I'm not.*

The thing was, Charlie *was* opening up. She'd given me a beautiful inch, and I'd stolen a mile. She didn't trust me not to hurt her because she thought I was still that type of guy. And all I'd done since she'd walked back into my life was tell her I *was* that guy.

I should have been more honest. Even if it was messy. Even if I didn't understand it all. Should have tried harder to get her to see the way we used to care for one another, back at Jolene's. I stacked stools and she changed my tires, or I cleaned glasses and she fed my team for free...didn't she get it?

We were always turning toward each other.

The night I hurt my shoulder, when I was being led out to the ambulance, they'd asked me who I wanted to call to meet me at the hospital. My entire block would have shown up if I'd asked them to—and later on, I did.

But in a moment when I was composed of nothing but pain and grief, when there was no place left for me to hide, I had called *Charlie*.

Instead of saying any of that, we'd pissed each other off, and then I'd driven away with Dean like a sulky teenager. Even the especially raucous kiddie pool night we'd had with my grandmother following our argument hadn't shaken loose my sour mood.

I'd been aggravated in a way I hadn't been in a while, the sudden argument bringing up all my old insecurities from my shoulder injury, how easily my team had let me go.

I'd only ever been a body to them. And then I'd gone and agreed to be just a body for Charlie too.

Certainly not anything more than that.

Sighing, I reached back and shut my storm door. Walked down my stoop carrying cups of coffee and Eddie and my grandmother's favorite cannoli. Ever since Dean, Tabitha, and the rest of the neighbors had come together a couple of summers ago to turn the abandoned lot on their street into a miniature park, I spent half my mornings chatting with Eddie and Alice while Dean and Tabitha busied themselves in their now overflowing community garden.

Humidity sat heavy on the streets though it was barely seven thirty in the morning. Kids raced by on their bikes while some played on their stoops. I waved to a couple neighbors

hosing down their front sidewalks, the air filled with the smell of the steam, the hot asphalt, a coconut-scented sunscreen.

I could already see Eddie, leaning over the fence of the park, cigarette in his mouth and Tiffany the kitten perched on his shoulder. I opened my mouth to call out a greeting, but then my phone buzzed in my pocket.

It was Luciana. *Shit.*

I ducked into a side alley and picked up the call. “Mornin’.

Thanks again for walking me through that headache of a grant report the other day. Felt like I was stumbling around in a maze the whole time.”

She chuckled softly. “No one knows how to do them. I swear they make them complicated on purpose.”

“I’ll say.”

“I’m always here to help. You’re doing us the biggest favor, filling in like this during a hectic time.”

I propped my foot up on the wall behind me. “It’s no problem. I’m hoping you’re calling before eight because it’s good news?”

I heard the unmistakable sounds of Luciana making breakfast for her son, Benny. “It’s a mix of both. The good news is that you should check your email, because I got an alert last night that a \$10,000 donation came through on the website from some local philanthropist. Steve...”

“Duncan?” I stammered.

“That’s it. Did you speak with him? He sent a message and included me on it, asking for a tour at a future date and said that he’d spoken to you twice, as well as someone named Charlie...Maddox?” She laughed a little. “I’m not entirely sure but I think she races motorcycles, so was curious how you’re all connected because I couldn’t put it together.”

*Charlie.* I tipped my head back and squinted up into the cloudless sky.

“I can see why it’d be confusing. Charlie is my...” I paused. “She’s my girlfriend and she happens to race dirt

bikes. And is damn talented too. This huge convention is being held in Center City right now and she's making a point to introduce me to some of the local rich folks who sponsor these types of things."

"Sounds like a supportive girlfriend," she said. "Is this new? You and Charlie?"

I cleared my throat. "Kind of. I'll be sure to thank her later."

I didn't know what the hell this all meant—only that I doubted Steve would make such a large gift after our two brief interactions. I needed to read the email myself, but given how angry Charlie had been on my behalf over the things he'd said, I wondered if she'd gone and spoken to him after all.

Even after our argument.

"Please do thank her. Anything helps when it comes to making payroll this month. And this next part, the bad news, isn't the smoothest segue but I'm rushing to get Benny on the bus so forgive my awkwardness."

"It's all good, what's up?" I asked, my stomach twisting into knots already.

"You haven't answered the email that the board sent on Monday. I know it's a lot to process, and an awful task to give to you, but I need to know that you read it and understand what we're asking you to do."

My skin prickled with unease. "The email confirming that I need to fire Dean and Eddie, you mean."

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "Elaine was able to sit in on our emergency budget meeting over the weekend, and no matter how many permutations we tried, our *best* option is eliminating the senior program and those two staff positions. Not permanently. Lord knows we need it right now. But absent an infusion of funding, it's our smartest option on a short timeline."

"Luciana, I can't...I won't do it."



“Then I’ll do it,” she said gently. “I’m saying this as respectfully as possible, but we’re not asking. And our decision is final. Hiring Elaine’s replacement will take awhile, which is why it’s falling on your shoulders. But I’m serious about taking it off your plate. I know how close you are with Dean and Eddie.”

I went to massage my left shoulder, as if that was the source of my physical discomfort. “What are all the folks who rely on us gonna do?”

“Elaine’s first suggestion was to direct them to Philly Food Network since they run a similar program for seniors.”

“But they’re out in the southwest when our clients are east of Broad. I’m not having them hop buses for a box of food.”

“I agree it’s far from ideal but it’s the first stopgap measure we came up with. Our top priority, our *main* focus is to raise the funds to bring our senior program back. But with the numbers we’re looking at, the earliest would be next summer.”

Luciana was right. Even bewildered by all the new reports I was learning to decipher, it was clear that we were completely *fucked*.

It was also clear that the cleanest cut would be the food program.

“Rowan, I can’t tell you how sorry I am. We tried, we truly did, and I promise we’ll keep trying.” There was a muffled sound, and she lowered her voice. “As a leader, letting go of staff is one of the most agonizing decisions to grapple with. Resisting it doesn’t make you weak. Having compassion and empathy, wanting to fight to keep them, makes you strong. Even still, I will step in to help you if you need it. Just say the word, okay?”

“Okay,” I repeated, throat tight. “And sorry for not responding earlier.”

“It’s fine, this is a stressful time. But we’ll get through it together.”

*Together without Dean and Eddie though.*

That didn't feel like *together*.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I'd ignored that email for a reason, already on edge between my fight with Charlie and the everyday fires I was putting out in Elaine's absence. Confronting the reality of what they were asking felt impossible.

Luciana's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. "Can I ask you one more thing before I go?"

"Yeah, of course."

"The board thought you would submit your name for consideration of Elaine's position."

I went still. "Uh...what? Me?"

"Yes, you. Given the budget situation we're in, I would understand why taking a leadership role wouldn't be appealing. Elaine was very clear about you being her successor, and you've done an amazing job with basically no preparation."

"Are you sure?" I let out a dry laugh. "I feel like I'm barely keepin' us from burning down every day."

"I warned you about the steep learning curve," she said with a similar laugh. "From the outside, operations seem very smooth. It doesn't mean there aren't changes that need to be made. I would just ask you to consider...now that you've peeked behind the scenes, would you want to be part of those changes?"

"Well...sure," I admitted, my brain sparking at the edges. "There's a ton. I've been keeping this little list of ideas and thought I would pass it off to the next director. As long as they're not too stupid."

"I highly doubt they are," she said firmly.

I glanced over to 10th Street. "One of those ideas is saving the food program *before* we have to make cuts. Taking services away from this neighborhood will only feel like a punishment to people who've suffered enough. The cuts might seem like the only option but once we do it, I'm worried we'll

lose all this trust and goodwill we've spent years building. If I was in charge, I would handle the situation differently."

Luciana was silent on the other end for a moment. "You would apply for the ED position to save Dean and Eddie's jobs?"

"I'd apply for the position because I believe I *can* save their jobs. And I'm the right person to do it."

Where this certainty came from, I had not a clue. I was realizing it was the truth though.

What if Charlie and I getting into an argument helped me push past some of the other fear I was clinging to?

"I'm glad to hear it, because I've been rooting for you this whole time," she finally said. "Let me talk to the board, hammer out some details, and get back to you. Does that work?"

I grinned. "You know where to find me. Surrounded by grant reports at Elaine's desk."

We hung up and I felt the tiniest bit lighter. It was a small victory—maybe—but I'd take it.

"Yo, Rowan," Eddie yelled from across the street, "you gonna stand there in the sun letting our food melt? Some of us have places to be, you know."

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and strolled up to the park with my arms outstretched, the plastic bag of food dangling from my finger.

"Are you really gonna fuck with me when I walked over here to feed you?"

I passed the plastic container of cannoli to my grandmother with a wink. "Don't let Eddie lie. I'm his boss now, and I know where he has to be in the morning, and that's not for another three hours."

She tapped her cheek for a kiss, and I gave it. "I've never believed a word out of that man's mouth, thank you very much. I'm not going to start now."

Eddie sniffed, sitting on the chair next to Alice. A large rainbow umbrella provided shade so that these two elderly maniacs could gossip in the morning before moving to Midge and Maria's stoop for additional lunchtime gossip.

Eddie handed me a tiny ball of purring fluff. I held it up to my face. "Do you think Tiffany remembers me rescuing her?"

"Probably. She's smart, that one," he said. At his feet, his other formerly feral cat, Pam, snoozed in a patch of sunlight. "And you don't know *where* I'm going to be today."

"Don't I? Because it should be your job. The ole place of employment. That side hustle I set you up with."

Eddie stubbed out his cigarette and opened his container. Grunted his approval and said, "Yeah, we'll see about that."

I dragged over a squeaky folding chair and sat on it backward, my elbows propped up. Dean and Tabitha strolled into the park—Tabitha yawning with a serious case of bedhead, Dean carrying a mug of coffee and a tiny radio.

He clicked it on to our favorite local sports station, and I relaxed into the gentle rise and fall of Phillies player stats and post-game analysis—the only numbers I'd ever understood. Used to be after my injury that I couldn't even listen to the sounds of the sport that had been a constant metronome in my life.

Now it only caused a momentary pang of discomfort.

"Mornin', lovebirds," I called out. "What's growing today?"

Dean set his coffee down on the picnic table and watched as Tabitha examined the first of three large planter beds.

She squealed and said, "We got tomatoes, baby!"

Dean shrugged. "Tomatoes. A lot of 'em."

"We could have told you that," my grandmother said primly. "Eddie and I have been tracking the garden for months now."

I cast a questioning look at Eddie who shrugged in a Dean-like fashion. “Me and Dean divvy up the extra produce into the food boxes. We know who likes what at this point.”

I hid a grimace. “See? You don’t even need me at the center anymore. I’m the boring old guy in a suit now.”

Eddie huffed out a laugh and my grandmother patted my knee softly. “You look very handsome in a suit.” She squinted, tilted my face side-to-side. “And tired. You’re working too much. Or worrying too much. That must be the reason why you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I saw you less than thirty-six hours ago,” I said with a grin.

“Complete and total abandonment.” She sighed. “I always knew it would come to this.”

“Did you ever think these guilt trips are the reason I’m tossing and turning all night?”

“I should hope so. I know how you tomcat around.”

I twisted in my seat. “Yo, Dean. Are you hearin’ this?”

Tabitha was mid-laughter, filling a basket with tomatoes while Dean was shaking his head with a small smile.

“You do have tomcat ways,” Tabitha called over. “I say own it.”

“Alice speaks the truth,” Dean said. “I’ll get you some cat ears for Halloween.”

In my lap, the kitten yawned, and I scratched the top of her head with the tip of my finger. “It’s one thing to besmirch my good name when I’m alone. But around Tiffany? That’s low, man.”

Eddie bent to scoop up the kitten. “She’s not so innocent, this one. She watches the soaps with me and Pam every afternoon. I think she knows how the world works.”

Then he turned on his heel and waved goodbye from over his shoulder. “Thanks for the cannoli, Rowan. I’ll see youse later.”

“I’ll see you at the center though, right?” I called. “For your job that I pay you to do?”

He grumbled something I didn’t catch before disappearing around Tabitha’s aunt’s house. Dean and I exchanged another amused look. Eddie enjoyed being vulnerable about as much as I used to enjoy plunging my shoulder into ice baths at the end of practice. The man was the definition of *he’s grumpy because he cares*.

He did care, pulling hours at the center past what we paid him and always doing his best to get food where it was needed.

Letting Eddie go wasn’t an option.

I switched seats, moving to sit next to my grandmother so I could tip my head back, close my eyes for a second. Her fingers tapped gently on my arm, and the neighborhood surrounded me—the baseball stats on the radio, the 47 bus stopping to let off passengers at the corner across the way. Behind us, two neighbors were having a friendly-seeming argument while a Spanish-language pop song slipped out from the tiny market on the corner.

This block had saved me and my grandmother during our darkest moments—not only the summer that my parents died but the years after. Over the course of one night, Alice became a grieving mother and my sudden guardian. And I became an orphan, on a new street, in a new house, being raised by a grandmother I’d always liked but hardly knew at all.

It’s not a time I remember super well, for all sorts of reasons, but I do recall that meeting Dean made a lot of things better for me.

Knew that Midge and Maria fed us more nights than not, stayed late to do the dishes, and kept the house full of people when we needed a distraction.

And I knew that Eddie—for all his gruff grumbling—took me shopping for clothes and toys and a brand-new bike when my grandmother couldn’t get out of bed.

For years, a host of South Philly folks were constantly around—sometimes obvious. Sometimes not, like the times Eddie would fix a leaky patch in our roof without saying a word. Or how Annie—the woman whose house used to be on this abandoned lot—would walk me and Dean to school. Or take Alice to church.

Before Elaine was my boss at the rec center, she was leaving a box of food on our stoop for Christmas.

I opened my eyes and pressed the palm of my hand over the spot in my chest that ached now. For my parents. For this neighborhood. For the senior food program that Dean and I had been so proud of.

I owed everything to this place. Whether they hired me as the ED or not, I *needed* to figure out a way to fix things at the rec center before it was too late. There was only one event with Charlie between now and the ultimatum I'd been given—the championship gala dinner. I needed to bring my A game to that dinner, and in the meantime, keep shaking the pockets of every donor we had.

The surprise \$10,000 from Steve was a great start, and helpful, but I needed to secure a lot more to save the day, and Charlie's list of names would help me do it.

As long as she was still speaking to me.

“Tabitha? Dean? Come over here for a second,” my grandmother said. “I’ve got a bone to pick with all three of you.”

My eyebrows shot up. “All three of us?”

“Yeah, what did I do?” Tabitha exclaimed.

Dean sat, pulling Tabitha down in his lap. “Whatever she says, don’t deny it. Just accept your punishment.”

I was about to add something equally as smartass but clammed up at the expression on my grandmother’s face.

“*You*,” she said, pointing, “have a secret you’ve been keeping from me.”

“How would I be doing that? I see you all the damn time, lady.”

She sniffed, looking smug. “But you forgot to mention that you’re dating a nice girl who rides motorcycles?”

I darted a surprised glance at Dean and Tabitha, who were doing a horrible job of keeping their cool.

I dropped my elbows to my knees. “Okay, who told you?”

“My hairdresser’s son’s friend saw a picture of you two together on the internet. And you know Susan, who works the deli counter at the Acme, confirmed it.”

My gut twisted with the weight of the lie now that this scheme had finally found its way to South Philly. Beyond whatever boyhood mischief I got up to, I wasn’t in the habit of telling *actual* lies to my grandmother, though I knew she’d find out about Charlie eventually.

Given how she and I had left things, did it even matter anymore?

I opened my mouth, prepared to tell the truth, but then I saw how...*happy* she seemed.

“You’re not...mad?” I asked warily.

“Yes, I’m mad. But I also want to have her over for dinner, get to know her. How’s tonight? And why do you look sick to your stomach?”

Dean coughed awkwardly into his fist—he’d seen me on the ride home from Charlie’s race, knew we weren’t on the best terms right now.

“It’s not having her over for dinner,” I said, “it’s that, with me and Charlie, things are casual. It’s not serious. And I don’t want you to meet her, or get your hopes up, if it’s not made to last.”

Lying didn’t feel great but setting her up with false expectations wasn’t something I could justify.

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’m not worried about that, Rowan. Casual, serious”—she waved her hand



through the air— “can’t an old lady cook dinner for her family and meet a motorcycle girl?”

And it was there—the slight hitch in her voice, the tremble in her fingers that tended to worsen this time of year, that had me saying, “Absolutely. I’ll call her on my way in to work.”

She clapped her hands together. “Wonderful. I’ll plan the menu and the drinks. Dean and Tabitha, you’ll come too.”

“Yes, ma’am, we’ll be there,” Dean replied. Tabitha gave a cheeky salute.

“Now how did you and Charlie meet?” my grandmother asked.

The back of my neck was glowing hot, and not from the sun. It was the memory of what I’d said, *tried* to say, when we fought.

*And I said yes because you know me. And you know there isn’t anything you could ask of me that I would say no to.*

“Do you remember the friend who sat with me at the hospital before you and Dean arrived?” I said and watched my grandmother’s face soften. “That’s Charlie. We reconnected recently and started seeing each other. *Casually*. Her big race is a little over a week away, and then she’s back on the road again anyway.”

That was the tricky reality, buried beneath this *pretend dating* scenario that I’d cheerfully ignored. It didn’t matter what happened—she was always gonna take off in the end. She always had. And where would that leave me?

“Yes, I remember. I never met her but always wanted to because I’m so grateful she was there. What is she like?” my grandmother prompted.

“Charlie is tough. Brave. Fearless and completely determined. A fighter.”

Her eyes shone. “I like her already. It sounds like she’ll fit right in here.”

“She doesn’t tolerate any of my bullshit either,” I added with a grin. “Charlie’s one of a kind.”

I kept my focus trained on my grandmother. Whatever facial reactions Dean and Tabitha were having to what I was saying were only going to give my grandmother more to gossip about. All Dean had to mention was that I'd stayed up half the night decorating glitter signs for Charlie's race, and Alice would be hand-addressing wedding invitations by the end of the week.

My grandmother stood, and I rose with her, taking her elbow. "Are you okay? Want me to walk you back home?"

"Nonsense, Tabitha will do it," she said. "We watched one of those home improvement shows together last night, and I've still got opinions on the furniture they chose."

Tabitha slid over and took her hand with a wink. "Spoiler, it was super-duper ugly, and we're both mad about it."

I dropped a kiss onto my grandmother's cheek. "You're not still mad at *me*, are ya? I'm sorry you had to find out about Charlie from your hairdresser's son's friend."

She smiled, sly and secretive. "Now isn't it a good thing that I've never been able to *really* be mad at you, dear?" She waved at me from over her shoulder as she and Tabitha shuffled down the sidewalk. "Don't forget to call your Charlie and tell her to bring her appetite."

I watched them go with a lump in my throat. Not because of the lying thing. Because of the way my heart had reacted to *your Charlie*.

Dean appeared next to me. "Are you okay?"

"I felt better when Coach Reid would make me run the bleachers as punishment for being 'such a goddamn smartass every goddamn day.'" I smirked. "That's a direct quote."

"Sounds about right," he said. "The smartass part. And feeling awful after what happened with you and Charlie."

I bit back a sigh. "Who I now need to call and invite to a surprise family dinner."

"She'll come."

"Are you sure about that, big guy?"

“I am.” He cocked a thumb at his chest. “I’m the romance expert now, remember?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You’re right. What do I know? I’m not even in a real relationship and I’ve already fucked it up.”

“All the heart stuff...it’s weird and confusing. It was to me at first. So when you’re trying to talk about your feelings but it seems like you can’t get it right, it’s frustrating. I’ve been there. You saw how it went down with me and Tabitha that summer.” Dean scuffed his shoe along the dirt, dislodging a stone. “When we drove home after the race, and you told me what happened, it sounded like two people trying to be honest with each other. But the honesty doesn’t mean the conversation will be easy.”

I turned to look at him, the man who’d always been more brother than friend. “What should I do then?”

“Be honest with her again,” he said. “You owe her that, at least.”



## ROWAN

*I* sat on the edge of Elaine's desk, staring at the printout that had been left by my laptop.

It was the email notifying us that we'd be receiving a \$10,000 wire transfer shortly from the bank account of Steve Duncan. And the note, addressed to me.

*Rowan—it was nice seeing you again at Charlie's race the other day. I know we didn't get to chat in detail, but Charlie spoke with me later and her passion for this cause was so undeniable, I wanted to send a little something to show my support. Would love to talk more when you're free.*

I rubbed my forehead, scanning further. I would never get used to rich people describing \$10,000 as "a little something."

But I wasn't here to judge. I was just stunned that Charlie had been able to convince him, since she'd only been here once. Hell, I was still stunned that she'd made this happen at all.

A soft knock at my door had me turning to face it.

"Is this a bad time?" Charlie asked, leaning in the doorway.

I blinked, speechless. Though even from here I could see that the past forty-eight hours had been about as kind to her as they'd been to me. She wore sweatpants, sandals, and a worn black T-shirt a couple sizes too big. It didn't look like she was wearing any makeup, and there were big, thumbprint-sized shadows under her green eyes.

“Hey there, Maddox,” I said. “And, uh...no. I’m just surprised to see you is all.”

Her smile was almost timid. “I didn’t think you’d pick up if I tried to call.”

I winced. “Was I that bad?”

“You?” She pointed at herself. “I’m talking about me.”

I held up the paper, one brow lifted. “Ain’t nothing bad about this, Charlie. You got Steve to donate \$10,000 to the rec center, didn’t you?”

Her expression perked up at my words, and she stepped fully into the office, quietly shutting the door behind her. “He came through? Because he said he would, but also, as you warned me, he was—”

“A patronizing asshole?”

She snapped her fingers. “Yep. That’s the one.”

I set the paper down, shifting my body so I fully faced her. She didn’t come closer, her teeth gnawing on her lower lip. “How did you get him to do it? And...and why?”

She blew out a breath, gaze landing everywhere but on mine. “I didn’t hit him in the face with my helmet like I wanted to. But I told him what this place did. How it was like a home. Like a community, everyone filling in to help where it’s needed. And I read your website and talked to him about your older neighbors who need extra food every month, and it turns out Steve’s family isn’t *all* mega-rich. He remembered his great-grandfather being on food stamps, and how complicated he felt about having to ask for help, later in life.”

Emotion crowded the back of my throat. I grabbed the printout again, where I’d missed the indicator that read: *earmarked for the senior food program.*

“I know it’s not enough to, like, permanently save Dean’s job, but I was hoping it was a start,” she added.

I sent Charlie a huge, grateful smile. “It’s like you putting on my tire chains all over again.”

She smiled back, the sight of it loosening the muscles in my chest. “This is tough for me to talk about, but I think I was...lonely, as a kid. I had my bike and I had my dad, and both those things made me very happy. But my world was pretty much racing dirt bikes and trying to pay our bills. I wasn’t close to many people. Every time I walk in here”—she indicated the space around us— “all I feel is this yearning, that I wish I’d had a place like this. Wish my dad had a place like this now.”

She paused, turning her gaze back to me. “That’s why I did it. And because, as you pointed out the other day, it seems like we’ve been taking care of each other for longer than I wanted to admit.”

A heady kind of relief rushed over me. “Charlie, can I say how sorry I am—”

But she was shaking her head. “Not to interrupt or anything, but I kinda practiced what I wanted to say. In the mirror, like a total nerd, and you can’t tell anyone I said that, okay?”

I settled back on the desk, pleasantly surprised. “I promise, I swear it. Not a word.”

There was another long silence from her while I waited. She kept chewing on her lip, fingers drumming on the back of the chair she was standing next to. The silence held the same heavy weight as the pauses I would take on the pitcher’s mound before throwing—reading the sign from the catcher. Aligning my body into a perfect form. Winding up as players on base dropped low, preparing to steal.

The heaviness came from the possibility. That’s what waiting for Charlie to speak felt like to me.

“I don’t get called on my bullshit very often,” she finally said. “Mostly because it feels impossible to let people in. Trust isn’t...it’s not easy for me. It probably has something to do with my mom leaving me like it was no big deal. Like I was no big deal.”

The sad tilt of her mouth was almost too much for me to bear.

“My extended family dumped us too. Me and my dad. When he wasn’t winning anymore, they stopped coming around. So it’s been this thing I do, pushing people away.”

I reached my hand out, unable to resist bringing her close a second longer. To my surprise, she took it. Let me tug her along until she was standing between my spread legs.

Up close, it was even more noticeable that she was as wrecked as I was—there was a weariness around her eyes, the same kind that had my grandmother peering at me this morning like she was worried I was seconds away from passing out.

“After the race, you were trying to be a good friend, and I was an asshole about it. I’m really, *really* sorry, Rowan. And you’re right. It’s not fair of me to keep comparing you to how you were back at Jolene’s when it’s obvious how much you’ve changed. How different you are.”

I squeezed my pinkie finger against hers. “You weren’t an asshole.”

“But I was.”

“Meanwhile, I took what was a celebratory professional moment for you and tried to ask you on a date when you’d made it clear you weren’t interested,” I said. “Then sulked off when you wanted to talk about it. *I* was the asshole, and I’m sorry for messing everything up.”

Her eyes narrowed but her lips were already curving into a smile. “So are we both the asshole?”

I grinned, rubbing a hand across my jaw. “We’re both amateurs at this. I’m surprised we’ve lasted this long as a fake couple.”

Charlie stepped closer, our pinkies still entwined. “What you said, about asking me on a date. After the race, you swore you *weren’t* doing that. But were you truly asking?”



I almost went for my usual evasive tactics—a flirty joke, some explanation I could shrug away with a grin. Instead, I opted for Dean’s advice. He *was* the expert now, after all.

“I was asking you on a date, Charlie. But I wasn’t sure how to say it, because what I wanted to say didn’t feel perfect or all-the-way right.” I raked a hand through my hair, trying to ground myself. “What I said about not having feelings for you was a lie. And I wish, instead of being a coward, I had asked you out to dinner. No pretending. We could try and figure out why it’s always been different between you and me.”

I glanced down at my feet before looking back up at her. She closed the rest of the distance between us, sliding her hands into mine, interlacing our fingers.

There was no one around. No fans, no cell phones, no staged moments.

Just us.

“You know, those nights you used to stay late with me at Jolene’s,” she said, “I would tell myself I was your consolation prize. A cute girl to keep you company when you weren’t taking anyone home.”

“Never,” I said, voice so low it was practically a growl. “That was never the case with you, Charlie.”

Her cheeks were flushed now. “I know it wasn’t, and it’s not fair for me to keep using that as an excuse for avoiding what’s happening between us. *Especially* since the time we spent at the hospital, the night you got hurt, meant a lot. And there was nothing casual about being there with you when the worst happened. Convincing myself that I didn’t matter to you was easier for me than admitting what was true. Day two of knowing each other and we could have had some messy, meaningless hookup in the back room of that bar. We were alone enough, and often, and it was pretty much how you and I did things then.”

Her fingers traced along my inner arm, sending a shiver through the entire length of my body.

“But I always resisted it. Always turned you down.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Part of me knew, if you and I got together, it *would* be different. Maybe our fling would have lasted longer, been a little more serious. But you always seemed like such a heartbreaker.”

Guilt twisted through me. And regret. For being young and stupid and not thinking shit through before sleeping with women who wanted more than I was willing to give.

“The truth is...” Her throat worked on a swallow. “The *truth* is I was never worried about getting hurt when I hooked up with other guys. But I was worried when it came to you. They were never a risk to me.” Our eyes held. My heart stopped. “You were though.”

I released a jagged exhale and brought Charlie’s hand to my mouth, placing a kiss on her palm. “For all my boasting, if you’d ever agreed to go on a date with me, when I was twenty-two and full of myself, I would have been scared shitless.”

“You? No way, O’Callaghan,” she said, her voice so full of our old teasing I realized just how much I’d missed it.

“Yeah, me,” I shot back. “You just don’t remember because you were cool as hell and I was happy just hanging around at two in the morning, trying to make you laugh with my stupid jokes.”

“They weren’t stupid. I liked them a lot but pretended I didn’t.”

I grinned at her. “*Now* you tell me, damn.”

Movement outside the side windows caught my attention—no one familiar, but I didn’t want what I said to Charlie next to have any kind of audience. I rose to shut the blinds and double-checked the lock on the office door.

Then slowly, carefully, retook my place on the edge of the desk, holding Charlie’s hands.

“I’m not as careless as I used to be, but until you showed back up, I was worried that I hadn’t changed,” I admitted. “Cause I never *get* serious with anyone. Have never been in

love before, at least not the way Dean and Tabitha are. I used to look at them and think something inside me was broken. But it's not. I just never tell the whole truth."

"And what's that?" she whispered.

"Charlie, I lost my parents. I lost my dream career. I'm a week away from having to fire my best friend and cut a program here that my neighbors rely on." My voice was hoarse, heart a jackhammer against my ribcage. "I don't want to lose *you* because I'm too afraid to tell you what I should have said years ago."

I let go of her hand but only so I could reach up, slide my palm against her cheek, and swipe my thumb across the soft indent of her lower lip.

"Every single time I walked into that bar, it was *because* of you. Every night I stayed late, it was because I wanted *you*. You were all that I cared about, and I thought I'd moved past it. Except then you showed up again, and it was like nothing had changed for me."

I cupped the other side of her face, and her upper body was swaying towards mine, and time *stopped*.

"I never had to pretend to worship you, Charlie, I always have—"

She fisted my shirt in her hands and kissed me. Pure shock rippled through my body for all of a second—and then a jolt of euphoria had me claiming her soft mouth the way I'd fantasized about for far too long. My hands slid back to tangle in her thick hair, holding her still while my lips moved hungrily against hers.

Charlie opened for me, giving as good as she got, her kisses as eager and starved as I felt. She pressed her entire upper body against mine, and when her hands looped around my neck, I reluctantly let go of all that blond hair. But discovered the pleasure of exploring the curve of her hips, my palms sliding up her back and yanking her roughly against me.

My mouth parted on a ragged inhale. She nipped at my lower lip, the pain sending a bolt of feverish lust through me.

A shiver worked its way down her spine, pulsing in the tips of my fingers. She arched her back. Her head tipped to the side, breaking our kiss but giving me full access to the curve of her neck.

We were no longer in public, no longer having to play pretend for the optics.

I didn't hesitate.

I snapped the frayed leash of my respectful restraint and buried my face against her throat, inhaling her scent like a goddamn wild animal.

Her response was to grab my hands and place them directly onto her ass. I squeezed hard, hauling her into me with a rough, possessive growl I'd never made before.

Her needy whimper was more sensation than sound, and it made me fucking *feral* with wanting her. I dragged my mouth up her neck and took her earlobe between my teeth. Tugged on it the same way she'd done with my lip.

Charlie twisted her fingers in the collar of my shirt and almost tore it in half. She was already half climbing on top of me, yanking on my hair, her breathing a series of harsh pants. She pulled my head to the side, flattened her tongue at the base of my throat, and licked up to my jaw.

I grabbed her ass—the heft of rounded, flexing muscle giving me those out-of-control urges again—and then I was pulling an eager Charlie onto my lap. Our mouths met again, more frenzied this time, and I tangled my fingers in big fistfuls of her hair. Felt *devoured* by a woman I'd spent countless hours dreaming of being devoured by. She licked between my lips, brushed her tongue against mine, and our joint moan echoed through the room.

I never wanted to stop.

Only wanted her to shove my back to the desk, kick those sweatpants off, and fuck me in the same way she was kissing me—frenzied and furious. It made our desperate gripping and tangling and *yanking* as satisfying as it was frustrating.

Charlie flattened her hands on my chest. Her mouth slid into a seductive grin, and then my elbows met the desk, her hands landing next to my head. My chest heaved. Her green eyes were glassy, lips swollen, and I couldn't help sending her my own teasing grin in response.

I pinched her chin. She ducked her face and trapped the tip of my thumb between her teeth. I laughed softly, the rumbled vibration ending in a hiss of pleasurable agony when she bit down.

I *tsked*. “So just to set the record straight. You *were* pining for me during our Jolene’s days after all.”

“Oh, shut *up*.” She laughed. Took my mouth, kissing me so fiercely my head fell back.

My fingers dove into her hair, both of us smiling through the kiss, and there was no going back now. Whatever I was supposed to do today would have to be scrapped, replaced with *make Charlie come until she begs me to stop*. All I needed to do was—

“Oh my god, wait. Rowan, we’re at work. At your work, *on your boss’s old desk*,” she whispered. “What are we doing?”

I blinked, my lust-fogged brain starting to clear. But I only managed a strangled, “Oh *fuck*.”

Her feline smile had me seeing stars. “Interesting choice of words given what I was about to do to you.”

I pushed to sit up but banded an arm around her hips, keeping her in my lap.

“Oh yeah?” I pressed one, two, three kisses along her neck. Very, very deliberately. “And what were you going to do to me, Maddox?”

“Mmmm, guess you’ll never know.”

I growled playfully against her skin, making her laugh again, and my body filled with the same floating euphoria I used to get after a win. It was a freeing feeling.

It always made me sure I could *fly* if I tried.

“But we should probably...” She waved her hand around. “You know, not...*here*. Especially since once we start...”

Her gaze fell to my mouth again, our lips hovering close. So close.

“I don’t see us stopping, do you?” I murmured. Every muscle in my body was taut, primed and waiting.

“No. Not for hours.” She brushed her mouth over mine, a soft linger that turned into a long, sensual exploration. “Not for days.”

Light exploded across my vision. Our tongues stroked together, and she whimpered again. I wondered if the two of us were floating above my desk because my limbs felt that weightless.

When we parted, Charlie and I shared a look of charged emotion that stunned me. The only thing I could think about was my grandmother, telling me I would be nothing but a fool when I finally fell in love.

Or what my grandfather had said to my dad, right after he met my mom: *he looked like he’d just had an anvil dropped on his head*.

I dragged my thumb along the curve of her bottom lip. “You make an intriguing point. And call me old-fashioned, but I’d prefer you in my bed, Charlie. Where I can worship you as I see fit.”

She hummed again. “At my service, you mean.”

“I trust you’ll make me work for it.” Our lips met again. “Because you were right, gorgeous. I love doing the work.”

Her next kiss burned, a wildfire that scorched, and I was opening wide for her. Letting her take all that she needed. Charlie rocked herself against my cock, moaning into my mouth. My remaining self-control narrowed to the thinnest thread. A wisp of a strand, but I clung to it in the end.

Because even though she was out here making my dreams come true, having sex at my neighborhood nonprofit was a professional deal-breaker for me. I had less than a week to pull

off a series of financial miracles. Getting caught defiling Charlie in my boss's old office was the exact *opposite* of the thoughtful, visionary leader the rec center needed right now.

I clawed my way back to semi-coherence and broke us apart. We were panting in unison. Charlie nodded like she was in pain.

“Okay. We’re stopping,” she breathed.

“Definitely not kissing anymore.”

“Who wants to kiss? Not us.”

“Never been a fan myself,” I said mildly.

Though I immediately grabbed her face for one final, smacking kiss on her cheek—a kiss that had her laughing again. But she finally disengaged, moving from my lap and straightening her wrinkled clothing. Her eyes were still hazy, her movements hesitant. I stood too, limbs buzzing, head swimming, that primal part of me wanting to roar at how far away she felt now.

I raked a hand through my hair, and Charlie stepped closer, shaking her head.

“Here, let me fix it.” She carefully finger-combed the strands, and with her focus hovering near my forehead, I gave in to the urge to stare at her up close—the curl of hair around her ear, what looked like a scar under her chin, the splash of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Yearning drove through me—deeper than simple lust, deeper than attraction, like my body was trying to signal to my brain the intensity of my feelings for this woman. Even when confused, even when trying my damndest to dismiss them, they hadn’t stopped.

Fucking *anvil on the head* was right.

“There,” she said, moving back. “You look a little less like a tattooed bad girl just ravaged you on your desk.”

“And yet that’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

She snorted. “Never been a fan of kissing, my ass.”

But the moment she began gathering her things, a jittery nervousness surged between us. Was this what it felt like after telling a truth you'd kept close to the chest for years?

Was this what it felt to be...*vulnerable* again?

Charlie's throat worked as she began walking backward to the door. I noticed that her fingers trembled when she brushed her bangs to the side. "Anyway, uh...now that we're not kissing, thanks for listening to all that stuff I said. Good talk?"

"Uh-huh. And same. Thanks for...thanks for listening. This was one of my favorite kinds of talking," I managed.

"Cool, cool. Me too." She was trying to get the door to unlock. Unsuccessfully. "I should probably go and do dirt bike things. And you should probably do your job. In this office. At that desk. And apparently I've lost the ability to, um, open doors."

I was next to her a second later, tearing my gaze away from her swollen lips so I could prove that I *did* know how to unlock doors. I jiggled the handle. Pushed the lock to the side and nothing.

Okay, I *had* known how to unlock a door before I'd been ravaged on a desk.

"It's always been finicky," I said, laughing nervously.

"Well, it's not every day that you finally kiss your fake girlfriend," Charlie said, just as nervously.

I forced another laugh. This was how I knew if we'd ever gone on a date for real, back in those days, I would have died on the spot.

One kiss—one very, *very hot* kiss—and suddenly door handles felt like advanced calculus.

It wrenched open, finally, and thank god there was no one in the hallway. I followed her the short walk through the front door, both of us squinting in the glare of the summer sunshine. I was fairly certain the air smelled sweeter, was even *more* sure that the sky was blue in a way I'd never seen before.



When I flicked my gaze back to Charlie, her face was dreamily tipped up to the sun. With a jolt, I realized I hadn't said a word about my grandmother's invitation. This morning's conversation at Annie's Park felt like it happened a hundred years ago.

"Hey, so, it's funny that you came by because I was supposed to call you, per my grandmother's stern orders, and invite you to family dinner at her house tonight. Being that she's the nosiest person on the block, she found out about us from her hairdresser's son's friend, got mad at me for hiding the fact that I have a girlfriend who rides motorcycles, and is demanding you come over. Dean and Tabitha will be there too, and if we're lucky the rest of 10th Street will congregate outside, trying to listen through the front windows."

Her lips twitched. "I like your grandmother already."

"Great, because she's gonna love you," I said—and Charlie's cheeks went pink. "The summer months can be hard for her. You providing her some pleasant company is doin' me a huge favor."

She pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed me. "It's a date."

"Real or fake?" I asked quietly.

A lovely smile flew across her face. "Real...*cupcake*."

And I spent the rest of the day swaggering around like I'd just pitched a no-hitter in the World Series.



# CHARLIE

I parked my truck in front of Rowan's brick row home, fifteen minutes early for his family dinner because I couldn't stop pacing my hotel room. I'd casually changed outfits ten times, and on the eleventh video-called my dad so that he and Penny could tell me if I looked okay.

To my non-surprise, my dad told me that if Rowan's family didn't like what I was wearing, that was their *own* fault.

Meanwhile, Penny had pulled a face in the background and told me to ditch the hot pink lipstick and go with a blood red instead.

It had been the opposite of helpful. Though seeing their faces through the screen had given me a little bit of extra calm. Enough so that I went back to the first outfit, the one I'd liked the most—pleated black shorts, a white sleeveless top with a skinny black tie around the collar and my platform boots. I scrubbed off the lipstick, braided my hair over one shoulder, and then went back to pacing.

The hours that existed between Rowan kissing me to within an inch of my life and me parking my truck had been fuzzy and soupy. I'd floated back to the convention center, where apparently I gave two magazine interviews, Dempsey in tow, *and* had a meet-and-greet with fans.

What I said, did, or signed during those hours I had not a fucking *clue*. According to Dempsey, the interviews were a success and my fans had been lovely and gracious, as always. We'd even had coffee in the lobby after, the two of us sitting

like the eye of a hurricane in the middle of a popular trick exhibit I barely registered.

The real world—all my anxieties and fears and worries—couldn't pierce the hazy, languid dream of finally kissing Rowan and being kissed *by* him. Of blurting out some of my most guarded truths and having the same gesture returned in kind.

I'd never known anything like it. And anything that came close to this desperately happy desire always arose from my bike, from the joy of battling gravity and winning.

How was it possible to experience that kind of happiness from another *person*?

I stepped out of the car and pinched, tucked, straightened all the wayward pieces of my appearance. As I came around to the sidewalk, the door to Rowan's row home opened. There he was, leaning against it with his hands in his pockets, the perfect example of loose-limbed confidence.

His light blue shirt stretched across his muscular shoulders. A crooked grin flew across his face, dark eyes full of mischief as I slowly climbed the stairs of his front stoop. Rowan's gaze swept the length of my entire body, a languid perusal that made my stomach flutter in anticipation.

Showing up at his office to apologize hadn't been easy. I was terrified that I'd do it wrong. That I'd mess up what I'd practiced saying in the mirror.

That I would admit I'd made a mistake and he would decide I wasn't worth it. Certainly wouldn't have been the first person to do so.

The opposite had happened. Rowan had made me feel worthy.

*Every single time I walked into that bar, it was because of you. Every night I stayed late, it was because I wanted you. You were all that I cared about, and I thought I'd moved past it. Except then you showed up again, and it was like nothing had changed for me.*

“Maddox.”

“O’Callaghan.”

His smile widened, teeth flashing. “How was the rest of your workday?”

“Fine. But I was a little...distracted.”

“By what?”

I bit my lip. “Kissing my hottest friend, Rowan O’Callaghan.”

He laughed, rich and warm, and pleasure hummed through my veins.

“How about you?” I asked.

“After lunch, Dean told me I poured syrup into my coffee instead of creamer. Kinda gives you a glimpse into my frazzled mental state. Also, why the hell are we talking right now?”

Rowan looped his arm around my waist and tugged me against him, our lips meeting in a kiss as hot and hungry as this morning. I smiled into the motion, felt him do the same, shivering as his hand slid along my spine. He claimed my mouth with a focused intensity. I pressed up, seeking more of his taste, his heat, the powerful muscles shifting beneath that shirt.

This kiss, right now. *That kiss*, this morning. My body’s overwhelming reaction to these weeks of Rowan’s for-the-audience affection hadn’t been pretend, hadn’t been just a consequence of my recent dry spell. Because if I thought a few seconds of neck nuzzling was too hot to handle, being skillfully devoured by Rowan on that desk felt so perfect, so *right*, it scared me a little.

I’d always known it, hadn’t I? Why I’d said no to him all those years. Rowan thought I was behind that bar, playing it cool.

When I’d only ever been playing it safe.

Our kiss ended on a shared, shaky breath. I nudged the tip of my nose against his, something stirring in my chest when I realized that he was blushing.

“Syrup in your coffee, huh?” I whispered.

“Yeah, turns out I thought about you all the time before we kissed *and* can’t stop thinking about you after.” He stroked his thumb under my chin, eyes searching mine. “You’re still stopping me in my tracks, Charlie Maddox.”

The depth of my wanting was almost too deep.

“I, uh...” I bit the tip of my thumb. “This is my eleventh outfit change. I had to call my *dad* to ask him and Penny if I looked okay.”

Rowan winked. “You’re looking at outfit change number seven on me.”

I stepped down, smoothing my hands over my clothing. “I look fine though, right? I’ve never been asked to meet a boyfriend’s family before.”

“You look stunning,” he said softly. “Alice already loves you. I swung by the house after work to drop off a few things for dinner and she wanted me to use the computer to show her videos of some of your races. She’s edging close to *obsessed fan* territory already, so be warned.”

Now my cheeks were going red. “I tried to jot down some of the best bar fights I broke up at Jolene’s, in case she wants some juicy entertainment.”

He swallowed. “She’ll...yeah, any and all of your best stories will be like music to her ears right now. Speaking of, are you ready?”

I tried to peek around his massive shoulders into his living room. I spotted framed baseball posters and a massive, L-shaped couch before Rowan clicked his tongue and pulled the door shut behind him.

“But I wanna see your house,” I protested.

“You’re looking at my house, gorgeous,” he said. “Stoop, sidewalk lawn chairs for drinking beer and saving parking spots, and the Phillies.”

He pointed—hanging from one of the second-story windows was a Phillies flag, fluttering in the night breeze. The

brick was well taken care of, his windowsills a bright white, flowers looking freshly potted.

“*Inside* is what I meant.”

Rowan cracked a sinful smile. “I know what you meant. But we’ve got important places to be. And if you step inside my house, I’m dragging you into that bed.” He placed his hands on my hips, turning me around to the sidewalk as my toes curled in my boots. He nipped at my ear and whispered, “I’m gonna need all night and then some to show you why you’re all I ever think about.”

Goosebumps shivered across my skin. All my usual witty comebacks failed me, vanishing in the fire of my longing. So I mumbled out something like, “Sounds...sounds good.”

And he didn’t tease me through my flustered response either. Instead, he kissed me on the temple and squeezed his fingers in mine. A second later, I was finally walking the rest of the way down to the sidewalk, Rowan close behind.

“I can’t imagine why the dumpster fires you dated in the past never brought you around to meet people,” he said.

I tossed him an exasperated look. “They weren’t all dumpster fires, Rowan. *Some of them* were straight-up garbage.”

He laughed again and all the hair rose on my arms. “Their fucking loss.”

“What about you? Have you ever been brought around to charm a bunch of parents?”

His smile turned bashful. “Nah, I’m never ’round long enough to merit an invitation to something as respectable as a *family dinner*. But at least we’re both amateurs again. Levels the playing field.”

I felt a whisper of unease at the reminder that Rowan had never been the type of guy to hang around. That twice in the span of two weeks I found myself trusting Rowan far more than I usually trusted other people. There’d been a raw candor in all that he’d admitted to me this morning though, the worry he’d had that a part of him was broken.

It had surprised me, coming from a person who wore his confidence like a second skin.

“Speaking of amateur...” I fished my keys from my pocket and unlocked the passenger door. “I wanted to get flowers for your grandmother but couldn’t decide what she’d like so I bought, like, five different bouquets. Do you think these are stupid?”

I extended my hands, clutching a bizarre-looking variety of flowers, their multicolored heads bobbing.

“Actually, don’t answer that. It is stupid. She’s gonna think \_\_\_”

Rowan’s hands came around to cup mine. “I bring my grandmother flowers at least once a week because she happens to love them.” He swallowed. “Also, my dad used to do the same thing. Every Sunday. So it does mean something to her.”

My heart flipped around and around. “Your dad sounds like he was a great guy. I can see where you get it from.”

Our eyes held, an electric energy dancing like fireflies between us in the darkening summer night.

“I’m genuinely happy you’re here, Charlie,” he said.

“I’m genuinely happy you asked me.”

Hands entwined, Rowan and I walked toward dinner, our shoulders brushing, and I realized too late how casually I’d described Rowan as my “boyfriend” without adding the word “fake” in front of it.

And how natural it had been to take his hand without first having to stage it.

“Is this where you grew up?” I asked, gazing around at the connected brick row homes, the stoops, the cracked sidewalk. I could hear the low hum of city sounds, smell the scent of someone lighting up a barbecue.

He nodded. “Before I came here, my parents and I lived about ten blocks west. The street looked about the same though. But there’s always been somethin’ special about Emily Street.”



He pointed out a narrow lot with small trees, planter beds, string lights, and picnic tables. A wrought-iron entrance said *Welcome to Annie's Pocket Park*.

“Dean and Tabitha got the neighbors together to build that. After Annie passed away, that lot sat abandoned until we made it our own. She was like the block mayor, you know? Though now that's Eddie's job. In everyone's business, whether they like it or not.”

I returned a surprised wave to a woman who'd waved at me as she watered the flowers in her window box. A group of older kids loped by, calling out friendly greetings to Rowan before turning the corner.

“Are you sure you're not the mayor of this block?” I asked.

“Eh, I don't live on this block anymore. But maybe *spiritually*?”

“It's because of the rec center, isn't it?”

“That probably has something to do with it. I'm also Alice O'Callaghan's grandson and, well, you'll meet her and see why I'm popular by association.”

We arrived at a row home that looked the same as everybody else's, though small details were different. The worn lawn chairs on the sidewalk. The newly painted blue door that I assumed was Rowan's doing. The air conditioning unit dripping a few drops from the second-floor window.

“Home sweet home,” Rowan said.

The door swung open, revealing a pretty, red-headed woman with a toothy smile, wearing a tank top that said *Bisexual Icon*. “Not to be too weird right off the bat, but I'm Tabitha, Dean's wife, and also I've known Rowan since I was a kid and basically I'm super stoked to meet you.”

She looked over her shoulder, then whispered, “And I know your secret but I'll take it to my grave.”

Then she threw her arms around me in a hug that almost knocked me over.

“Um...hi?” I said, unsure of what to do with my own arms.

She pulled back, still smiling. “Rowan probably didn’t tell you this, but I went to film school with Rebecca Ortega, so I was a fan even before Rowan told me about you.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Are you serious? Rebecca did an incredible job with that short she made. Usually a lot of the stuff I say ends up getting cut, but she kept it in.”

“Because you were the best and most interesting rider, duh,” Tabitha said.

Warmth spread through my chest, tugging my lips into a genuine smile. “Oh. Thanks. That’s so nice of you to say.”

She cocked her head up the stairs. “Come on in. Alice is excited and a little nervous to meet you. Also, hey Rowan, you’re here too?”

He laughed and ruffled her hair as she tried to swat his hand away. “We’re only standing in *my* childhood home but sure, you welcome her inside.”

She sniffed. “I will, thank you.”

Tabitha pulled me up the stairs into a small, carpeted living room, walls covered with photos, figurines and frames covering the mantle. The furniture was neat but similarly worn. The curtains threadbare but well-maintained.

In the center of the room was a tiny, elderly woman with skin as pale as Rowan’s and bright white hair.

“My goodness.” She *tsked*. “Rowan O’Callaghan, you didn’t tell me that Charlie was twice as beautiful in person as she is in all those motorcycle pictures you showed me.”

Her Irish accent was strong and lyrical and it clicked into place for me why some of Rowan’s words had a subtle musical lilt.

He’d picked it up from the Irish grandmother who’d raised him.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you, Mrs. O’Callaghan.” I held out the flowers. “I wasn’t sure what kind of flowers you liked

so I bought all of them.”

Alice widened her eyes like this was the greatest gift she'd ever received, scooping them from my grasp and opening her arms for a hug.

“*And* you brought me a garden? I don't deserve it.” She patted my back as I released her. “Call me Alice, please. We're very relaxed and casual around here, Charlie.”

Rowan appeared next to us. “Just last week you told me this was a holy, God-fearing household and now we're casual?”

She tipped her head towards me. “The way my grandson tells a fib.”

Wrapping her arm through mine, she walked me back to the kitchen.

“I heard that some people on the news are picking on you for no reason.” She lowered her voice. “I never said no to a party back in my day. It seems like you work very hard, just like I did. Is it wrong for a girl to have a little fun?”

I breathed out a laugh. “It is not. I'm sure we would have partied together.”

Dean was standing over the sink, his side profile revealing a nose that looked like it'd been broken several times over. He set a pan down and extended a gigantic hand. “Hey, Charlie, it's good to meet you again. That was one hell of a race the other day.”

I grinned. “Thanks for coming and making all those glitter signs.”

He made eye contact with Rowan over my shoulder. “I only gave him a little bit of shit for that, I swear.”

Behind him was a framed picture of two tall, gangly, teen boys that were so clearly Dean and Rowan my heart did that bizarre flipping thing again. I averted my gaze, something about the wave of emotion that picture evoked in me sending up a warning.

Alice moved past us in the tiny, crowded kitchen with a steaming pan that Rowan immediately took from her hands.

“The rest of you, bring the drinks and side dishes. And Charlie, don’t you dare lift a finger to help or I will know about it.”

Tabitha brushed past holding a bottle of wine and five glasses. “You better listen to her, girl. Just lean into the hospitality before she hits you with a napkin for offering to clean a single dish.”

“Thanks for the pro tip,” I replied, following them to the dining room table, in a space barely big enough between the living room and the kitchen. There were candles. And cloth napkins. And Rowan, holding out the chair next to him, his expression boyish and charming.

Dean and Tabitha sat across from us, and Alice at the head of the table to our right, and I could *feel* the memories here. Everything from the ease of Dean’s body language in what I knew had been his second home to the scratches on top of the table. There were chips in the old chairs and height pencil marks on the wall next to me.

Our house, the one my dad was about to lose if I didn’t fix everything, hadn’t fared much better after years of rough-and-tumble use. We were constantly tracking mud and bike grease across the floor, scuffing up the walls or ripping up the grass.

Even after my mom left, and my dad and I were struggling, I always felt comforted by all the nicks and scratches. Evidence of a childhood well-spent even if I was lonely.

Plates were passed, portions were served, Tabitha poured large glasses of wine for all of us. Alice watched this domestic display with a look of fondness, and when her eyes lit on mine, my answering smile was sincere.

“It’s so thoughtful of you to have me over. I never get home cooking when I’m traveling like this. And I miss my dad a lot.”

Alice made a hush gesture. “If you knew how long I’ve been waiting for my grandson to bring someone home for me

to meet... Well, it's felt like forever. And let me say, I always knew the one for him would be a woman like you."

Rowan paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "You had this all figured out the whole time and you didn't tell me?"

Under the table, he slid his foot over mine and pressed down.

Alice sniffed. "Would you have listened? You never take a word of advice. Stubborn as your father."

"And just as handsome," he said with a wink.

"What kind of woman do you think I am?" I asked.

She looked back and forth between Rowan and me. "If you're anything like the way Rowan described you this morning, then you're brave, fearless, and determined." She cocked her head. "What else did you say?"

He nervously rubbed the back of his neck. "A fighter."

"You said that?" I asked.

"It's the truth. I would never lie about something like that."

I sensed the hidden meaning, buried under his words—all the truths connecting us that made our fake relationship feel effortless.

"I can already tell Charlie keeps you in line. Doesn't tolerate any of your nonsense," Alice added, chewing thoughtfully.

Rowan coughed into his hand, a light pink in his cheeks. I set my fork down and pinned him with a smirk. "Do I keep you in line?"

"Yes, ma'am, she sure does. Charlie's the one in charge," he said smoothly.

But under the table, his hand covered my knee. Squeezed.

"Your grandson has been a friend of mine for a long time now, and I'm not one to have a ton of friends," I said, hesitant. "The fact that he puts up with me is also appreciated."

I could feel the heat of Rowan's attention, but I stayed focused on Alice. She was beaming.

"Oh, I don't think he's putting up with much of anything, my dear," she said. "There's nothing tolerating about the way Rowan's looking at you right now. And I should know since I had a soul mate for a husband. And was lucky enough to see my son find his as well, in Rowan's very sweet and lovely mother."

Rowan was fighting the emotions scrawled across his expression. He managed to wrangle them and flashed a wide smile I didn't quite believe. "My grandmother is a saint. If she hadn't been here, who knows what would have happened to me and Dean."

Dean grinned. "My mothers would have sent us both to a terrifying boarding school. Then I never would have met Tabitha."

Tabitha clicked her tongue. "Don't you worry, Mr. Machine. Soul mates find each other either way. You think I would have let you go just because of a boarding school? You were always mine."

I swallowed around the lump that formed in my throat. I didn't know Dean or Tabitha all that well, but their love was obvious. And I never thought love *could* be obvious. Even when my mom was hanging around with my dad, it wasn't like they had the kind of healthy, affectionate relationship I saw between parents on sitcoms.

Being together seemed to exhaust them and annoy them in equal measure.

Truthfully, I felt the same way about the various men I'd picked up over the last few years. They were a way to pass the time, not a person I wanted to have family dinners with.

I wasn't so much confused by Dean and Tabitha's adorable banter as intrigued. And when I flicked a glance at Rowan, he seemed just as curious.

Under the table, his fingers tightened on my skin. I was extremely, extremely aware of every point of contact between

us.

“What’s your family like, Charlie?” Alice asked. “Have you introduced them to Rowan?”

“You know...uh, not yet,” I stumbled. “Not for lack of trying, it’s more because of my racing schedule. And Rowan and I just started dating. I don’t want to scare him off.”

“Charlie’s dad is a famous dirt bike racer too. He has a few more tattoos than Charlie does, but between me and the people at this table, she has a more sophisticated style.”

I arched an eyebrow his way. “Sophisticated? I’ve never heard it described that way. Usually people say I’m all brute force and poor track manners.”

“Manners are overrated,” Tabitha mused. “And while I’m a fan of brute force myself, I agree that you’re very graceful out there. After I saw that documentary, I went down a rabbit hole and watched, like, all of your videos.”

I gave her a pleased smile. “I hope the rabbit hole was interesting at least?”

“There was a two-week period where Tabitha told everyone we knew that she was gonna buy a motorcycle,” Dean said. “I think this was probably around the same time.”

“Happy to help you still do that, by the way,” I said.

Tabitha nodded. Mouthed *please* and I laughed.

Alice cleared her throat daintily. “Are any of your people left in Syracuse?”

I dropped my eyes to my plate, carefully cutting into the meat. “It was always me and my dad. And now his girlfriend Penny and their dogs. We’ve got aunts and uncles and cousins nearby, but we were never close. And my mom...” I cocked my head and kept cutting. “She left a long time ago. Turns out mothering wasn’t really her thing.”

Alice made a sound of sympathy but didn’t go overboard with the hand-wringing. I guessed, based on her own tragedies, she knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of sympathy so performative it was patronizing.

“I’ve got one of those too. A mom who just up and left, though in my case she was happy to find a new family to take care of.” Tabitha gave me a look full of understanding. “It *sucks*.”

Something shifted deep in my chest. Got noticeably lighter too. “It super sucks. And I don’t know why she left, because honestly? I’m super awesome. Seems like you are too.”

Alice hooted with laughter. Tabitha grinned and clinked her wineglass against mine. “Fuck yeah, we’re awesome.”

“Language, Tabitha,” Alice sniffed.

“I heard a lot of unholy words coming out of your mouth while watching the Phillies lose two nights ago.” Rowan pointed at her with his fork.

Alice clutched her chest. “I have *never*.”

I hid a smile behind my napkin. Alice pushed her chair back and walked over to a bookshelf overflowing with novels, knickknacks, photo albums.

“Whatcha doin’ there?” Rowan asked, tracking her movement.

She waved a hand. “I’m not lifting anything heavy. I wanted to...*here*...” She turned, waving a triumphant hand. “Charlie would like to see this.”

The picture she pressed into my hand had folds at the corners, the slightest of creases. A picture she looked at often then, and I knew why immediately—the happy young couple. The smiling man who looked exactly like Rowan. The chubby baby with bright red hair. And Alice, looking twenty-five years younger, standing next to a man I assumed was her husband.

“That was taken on the front stoop right out there,” Rowan said softly. He reached down, cupped his hand beneath mine as I held it. My stomach hollowed, breath fluttery. His thumb stroked across the image just once.

I didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know how to express what I saw reflected in his profile—something sweet.



Something loving. And a raw flash of heartbreak that made me want to cry.

“My parents moved here from Killarney in Ireland to build something new. And we did. We created something magical with our neighbors and it mattered. It was real.”

Alice reached for the photo—she didn’t look sad as much as wistful. “And you know what? All of them showed up when Rowan and I needed it the most. That’s not something you forget in this lifetime, that type of kindness.”

A look of pure mischief replaced her melancholy. “We all deserve a community like that. I hope your mother and other family are healthy and I wish them well. But it’s a pity for them, isn’t it?”

“What’s the pity?” I asked.

“That they don’t deserve to know you,” she said primly. “Such a shame.”

I laughed, totally surprised. “You might be right about that.”

“There’s no *might*. I know it,” she replied.

I remembered what Rowan had shared earlier, about the summer and how it affected Alice. I abandoned the raunchy bar stories I’d intended to share with her and opted for the truth instead.

“I’ve never told Rowan this, so...sorry in advance.”

I fixed my mouth into a fake pout. He brightened, twisting in his chair and dropping his elbow behind him. It allowed the tip of his index finger to rest on the ball of my shoulder and caress it.

“Are you about to divulge my secrets, Maddox?”

I ignored him and leaned past to focus on Alice. “I tease Rowan a lot about our days at Jolene’s. Because he was very, um...*popular* with women. But Rowan was also a natural at creating that type of community, and I could tell because the bartender always overhears what the patrons are talking about.”

I was keenly aware that Dean was studying me with his beer half-raised to his lips.

“He always took the rookies under his wing, even when he was one himself. One of the players got engaged to his long-time boyfriend, and Rowan threw them a surprise party in the locker room.”

Rowan rubbed the top of his head. “That stuff’s no biggie.”

“Yes, he flirted a lot but...I know being on the road was tough for a lot of the players. Rowan was usually there listening to them talk about missing their families. Trying to cheer them up any way he knew how. When he got called up to the majors, everyone threw you a big party at Jolene’s, remember?”

His throat worked. “Yeah, I remember. That was a hell of a night.”

“It was, and when you were out of earshot, all anyone could say was how much you were going to be missed. Because you brought the team together.”

He tossed his grandmother a cheeky grin. “Pitchers. We love to boss everyone around.”

But Alice wasn’t falling for it. She patted his hand and turned back to me. “Rowan’s always been wonderful at bringing people together.”

Dean shifted in his chair, stretching his arms out. “Remember that time you pretty much talked me into converting the lot into a pocket park?”

“Eh, you did all the work,” Rowan said.

“That’s incredibly untrue,” Tabitha said. “Charlie’s right. It just comes so easily to you, you don’t realize you’re doing it. That’s why the rec center is lucky to have you. I see all kinds of toxic leaders at nonprofits in my day job, but that’s never been the case with you.”

Three sets of eyes landed on Rowan, who was blushing and bashful. “This is as good a time as any to let you all know

that Luciana called this morning, asking if I was planning on submitting my name for the executive director position. To replace Elaine, permanently.”

Rowan took my hand under the table.

“I told her I was interested, and she’s speaking with the board. Elaine thinks I’m the one who should do it, and I guess that carries a lot of weight.”

There were no words that could accurately describe the clash of memories at this news—how defeated and hopeless he’d looked in that hospital bed, how against my chest his shuddered question had been, “But what am I going to *do*, Charlie?” and I had no answer.

Four years later and here he was, tackling a new challenge, creating a *new* community.

The table erupted in excited chatter and plenty of hugs. Rowan waved it off, reminding them that nothing was official. Yet the pride on his face was more important than a formal job offer.

I grabbed his hand again with both of my own and squeezed, more than a little speechless.

“Now *this* is news worth celebrating,” Alice said. “Should we open a bottle of champagne with dessert?”

Tabitha pushed back her chair. “*Absolutely*. We can clear some of the dishes before Alice brings out the family movies featuring Dean and Rowan singing and dancing. That’s how I know she already likes you, Charlie.”

Alice was laughing and shuffling towards the kitchen. Tabitha joined her, tugging Dean close behind. My face was still fire-engine hot from the vulnerability of sharing so very much. I was nervous Rowan would think I’d been trying to embarrass him instead of the compliment I was sincerely giving.

So when I finally shifted to face him, I was unprepared to feel stripped naked by the longing in his eyes. His jaw clenched. The muscles in his forearms rippled as he picked up my hand and brought it to his mouth.

I let out a soft gasp. He let his eyes close and pressed his lips to the inside of my wrist. A sharp ache pulsed between my legs as his lips moved to my palm, the tips of my fingers.

“Rowan...” My voice was shaky. “Your new job, I’m so *happy* for you.”

His eyes opened. “Did you really hear my teammates say all that stuff about me?”

“I did. I was always paying attention to what people were saying. What stories people told about you.” I gulped. “I was always paying attention to *you*.”

He curled his body towards mine, stopping my heart. His mouth moved to just below my ear, and he kissed a spot that had my toes curling again. My chest rose and fell rapidly. His breath feathered over my skin. One big, calloused palm cupped the side of my head, keeping me there.

“Thank you for saying that,” he whispered. “It meant a lot to hear it, meant a lot that you noticed.”

“I always did. I always was.” I offered a tiny smile. “I was clearly pining for you too.”

He pulled back but his face stayed close, thumb moving to my lower lip. A slow, intentional drag of skin over skin. He stared at my mouth with an intensity that made me want, want, *want*.

“Will you come home with me tonight?” he asked.

There would be no going back for us after this. The second I stepped inside his house, I’d be hurtling toward love or hurtling toward heartbreak. I couldn’t know one way or another. That was the danger.

That was also the trust. So I listened to the gut instincts I relied on to tell me how fast to take a turn and the exact angle to hit a jump. Those instincts had always meant freedom to me. Speed, light, height, *flying*.

“Yes,” I promised.



## CHARLIE

*A*n hour later, Rowan was trying to—unsuccessfully—push me out of his childhood home.

“*Alice*,” he sighed, “if you show Charlie and Tabitha one more embarrassing video of us singing when we were kids, they’re gonna leave us. Then you’ll have two brokenhearted men laying around here, and I know you don’t want that.”

I was curled up on the couch, my limbs heavy with a loose relaxation I hadn’t felt in a while. My stomach ached from laughing at a series of ridiculous home movies, my chest ached from watching Alice dote on Rowan, and every inch of my body was painfully aware of Rowan’s physical presence.

Though that seemed intentional on his part. He’d sat next to me on the couch, his arm stretched across the back, his index finger teasing across different parts of my body. The nape of my neck. The curve of my shoulder. The dip of my spine beneath my shirt.

Every so often, Alice would peek over and smile to herself like she had a secret she didn’t mind keeping.

I was stumbling through that quicksand sensation again, feet slipping and unable to catch hold. But this wild lack of control was caused by how deeply this night was making me want a whole lot of things I never thought too much about. It was Alice’s gentle affection and these adorable home movies and the worn, soft couch beneath me.

It made me want to call my dad and bring him out here for dinner. Made me want to work even harder to save our house,

his home, the place like this that brought him comfort even with its share of bad memories. It threw all the budget motels and long drives I did into stark relief.

It wasn't racing that made me feel empty at all. Just all the lonely isolation that built up around my life without me realizing it, like high walls around a castle. Even my tiny studio felt temporary and impersonal—I spent so little time there that it was hardly even decorated.

Where was my actual *home*? Where was my actual community, like the way Alice described?

“Break up with you two? I won't hear of it,” she said, nose in the air. “Oh, Rowan, before you go, can you get down the new wine glasses I bought last week? I told Midge I'd bring them to kiddie pool night.”

He dutifully followed her into the kitchen, and though I couldn't hear what they were talking about, the rise and fall of their voices held a sweet comfort. Tabitha plopped into the empty seat next to me and nudged my arm.

“Do you wanna hang out before you leave the city?” she asked.

I pointed at my chest. “Me? But, uh...” I cocked my thumb towards the kitchen. “You know this is...we're not...well, I don't know *what* we are right now.”

Dean cleared his throat. Tabitha shot him a covert look, then said, “Things are sometimes complicated. I get it. But you're funny and cool, and we both have shitty moms, so that's already a lot in common. No matter what's *really* going on between the two of you, you're still important to Rowan. And he's important to me. By the transitive property, we're best friends.”

I was blushing like a nervous middle schooler at the cafeteria. “Oh. That would be...kinda cool to hang out then.”

“Girls' night it is.”

I held up a finger. “I do have a slight reputation problem right now. So perhaps...?”

“Wanna drink whiskey and gossip over bad TV in the privacy of my own house?”

“Hell yeah. And I could give you some pointers on motorcycles too, if you want.”

She peered over her shoulder. “You hear that, Dean? Your smoke show of a wife is getting a motorcycle.”

A smile played on his lips. “I never doubted you, Tab.”

A burst of music came from the sidewalk outside. Dean pulled the door open, grinning at whatever he saw there. “Yo, Eddie, did you get a cat-sized chair for Pam and Tiffany?”

A gruff voice yelled, “Yeah, and what’s it to ya? They can’t fucking *sit*?”

I pulled open the blinds and saw the same older gentleman with the kitten from two weeks ago. Plus a very short woman and a very tall woman, both with dark hair. All three of them had their bare feet kicking in an inflated baby pool in the middle of the sidewalk. “What’s going on out there?”

Dean waved me over. “Charlie, please meet the nosy people who casually sat and listened to our conversations through the window.”

“Dean Knox-Morelli, I’ve never been nosy in my *life*,” the tall woman said.

“That’s my mom. And my other mom. And that’s Eddie, who you know from the rec center,” Dean said. “Technically he works there, but Tiffany’s taking up a lot of his time.”

Eddie took a long drag of his cigarette. Squinted at me and nodded. “You’re Rowan’s friend who makes him all flustered. I remember you. How you doin’?”

I waved from the door. “Great. How’s the kitten?”

“*Thrivin’*,” he said with a nod.

Tabitha breezed past with a new drink in her hand and splashed on into the water. “Charlie, do you remember that thing Alice was saying about people being there for you when



you need them the most?” She waved her hands at the surrounding block. “Meet the people.”

Dean ambled over to his mothers, bent low so they could pat his face the way Alice kept doing to Rowan. There was something about the gesture that tugged at a place deep in my chest—*I see you. You’re here. Thank god.*

It brought up tender memories I rarely recalled anymore—my dad, pulling down my first helmet and tapping me on my nose, saying *go get ’em, tiger*. My rowdy cousins, still around and cheering for me from the sidelines.

My mom there too.

A second later, Rowan was behind me, his hand pressed to my back. The quicksand sensation increased—at this point, every stray touch between us was as sexual as it was romantic. Especially here, on this stoop, on this street, with the people who loved Rowan the most.

“I got the wine glasses and a stern talking to about treating you like a gentleman,” he whispered, lips quirked. “Alice O’Callaghan believes you are descended from heaven above.”

“Like an angel?”

“You got it.”

“Then she never needs to know what I used to say to threaten the Pain Machine.”

He mimed sealing his lips and winked. To the kiddie pool folks, he called out, “Come on, Charlie. I need to get you home before these drunk rascals make you stay all night.”

“What a lovely idea,” one of Dean’s mothers said. “But where’s your grandmother?”

“Right here, and I need a moment alone with Charlie,” Alice said, taking my hand. “Rowan? Get out please.”

He frowned. “Uh...?”

Alice shut the door in his face. I spun to face her, hands on my hips. “I see you don’t tolerate any nonsense either.”

“And I never have,” she said, though her eyes twinkled.

She took my hand again and pressed something into it—a small silver coin on a long chain. “This is one of my good luck charms, and I want you to have it. Rowan said you have an important race in a week. I don’t think you need luck, but I always like knowing that people are thinking about me.”

I turned my hand over, touched the metal. “Alice, this is so kind of you. I can’t...I can’t take this, what if we —?”

She closed my fingers over the coin. “Charlie, I tease my grandson about finding his soul mate all the time, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how the world works. Do you want my opinion?”

She sized me up and down the way I used to size up drunk bar patrons. “You’re it for him, my dear. And it’s clear to me you feel the same way.”

I swallowed hard, all the blood rushing in my ears.

“But I’m giving this to you as a friend. No matter what happens between you and Rowan. I know you were there the night he was hurt.” She squeezed my hand. “He told me. I’m so glad he called you and I’m so grateful you showed up for him.”

My cheeks burned.

“For the record, any reporter who says mean things about you should be illegal,” she continued. “Any mother who would leave you is a fool.”

I thought her eyes were watery, but they weren’t. Mine were.

“And any race you’re in should be yours to win. That’s why I’m giving this to you.” She touched the side of my face, and another jagged piece from the wall around my heart loosened and fell away.

“Thank you.” I slipped the chain over my head and tucked the coin between my breasts. “It’ll be here on race day.”

“And you’re going to win, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I bent to give her a gentle hug, wondering how I’d showed up at this house a complete stranger and was

now leaving with one of Alice's treasured items.

Except Rowan had already warned me something like this would happen on our walk over here: *you'll meet her and see why I'm popular by association.*

She opened the door, and we stepped back outside into the warm, slightly muggy summer night. The people around the kiddie pool cheered as she arrived. And Rowan extended a hand for me to take, which I did.

"Don't do anything too wild tonight," he said to his neighbors. "And thanks for being semi-normal around Charlie."

I waved again, too overwhelmed and...*happy* to do much else. Though I did laugh when Tabitha mimicked a phone at her ear and said, "Call me, girl."

We walked back along the narrow streets, the city buzzing with life, mirroring the electric charge that hovered between us. My body still hummed with the echo of his mouth on my wrist and his whispered request—*will you come home with me tonight?*

I glanced at his profile, so handsome beneath the purple shadows of twilight and the golden pools of the streetlamps.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight," I said.

He cocked his brow in disbelief. "You're thanking me? I was about to thank you for letting my family South Philly all over you."

I bit my lip with a smile. "I loved every second. It was one of the best nights I've had in a long time."

We reached his street, turning toward his front steps. My pulse tripled at the sight.

"Glad to hear it," he replied. "You cheered my grandmother up, Charlie. She'll be telling all of her friends the story of how she met you for weeks. It's the kind of distraction she appreciates in the summer."

I climbed the stairs to his door, Rowan at my heels, the butterflies in my stomach as big as the full moon hanging

above. I turned carefully at the top, pressing my back to his door. Our positions were flipped from earlier—the breadth of his body blocking my view of the street, one hand planted high on the wall next to me.

“Alice gave me something.” I pulled the chain free to show him. “She said it was a good luck charm for my race.”

He bent down to examine the small coin. After a second, his eyes shot to mine. “She gave this to you?”

I nodded, mouth suddenly dry. “Have you...have you seen this before?”

Rowan hesitated. “Yeah, I have. It’s from a set of coins her mother brought over from Killarney. I have one. My parents had two. She gave one to Midge and Maria the day they formally adopted Dean, and she gave one to him before his first amateur fight.”

“When did she give you your coin?”

He blew out another breath. “The first game I pitched in the majors.”

I closed my fingers around the coin, and he covered them with his hand. “It means a lot, Charlie. That she gave it to you.”

“I feel a little bad. She hardly knows me.”

“Alice has always been an excellent judge of character.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, then followed the thick length of my braid, tugging at the end. “You should keep it.”

I cleared my throat to smooth my voice. Every part of me vibrated in anticipation of what came next.

“Your grandmother thinks we’re gonna make it because she could see how important we’d become to one another.”

One side of his mouth quirked up. “And what do you think?”

“You should take me inside, Rowan.” I flattened my hands against his chest and dragged them to his stomach. A muscle

ticked in his jaw. “Let me show you how I feel about you. Let me worship *you*.”

He took my mouth on a low growl. But before I could deepen the kiss, he was pushing open the door and we were stumbling back into his darkened house. He kicked the door shut, bent at the knees, and lifted me against his waist using his non-injured arm.

I hooked my legs around his hips and squeezed as he walked us backward from his living room into the kitchen. I’d been curious earlier about what it looked like, but now I was too distracted discovering how erotic it was to run my tongue up the column of Rowan’s throat.

The taste of sweat, the taste of *him*. That husky, desperate hitch in his breath made me want to tear his clothes off.

He dropped me onto a flat surface that I realized, dimly, was a kitchen counter. That same golden streetlight filtered into the dark room, shadowing the angles of his face. I almost said, *you are so beautiful*, except his hands were cupping my cheeks, tipping up my mouth for a kiss.

Knees high on his waist, I twisted fistfuls of his shirt while being forced back against the cabinets by the power of his mouth moving on mine. This kiss had the same rough, passionate edges as our last two, but a wild fury thrummed beneath our movements.

There would be no stopping, no interruptions, no prior engagements to prevent us from finally finishing what had first sparked between us at Jolene’s.

We parted on a shared, ragged breath. I tore my shirt off and did the same to his. Rowan still cradled my face in his large hands but now our eyes roamed eagerly over new, exposed skin.

I reached for his broad shoulders. Caressed the wide expanse of his chest—freckled skin and reddish chest hair, his strong stomach flexing beneath my wandering fingers.

Meanwhile, Rowan kept staring at me, swallowing thickly, gripping my face. I felt both restrained and cherished, a heady

mix that had me tipping forward to steal a kiss.

He wouldn't let me.

"Charlie," he whispered. "Take off your bra. Now."

I did, eagerly and with a sly grin. The cool air caressed my skin, though the heat of Rowan's gaze was more tangible.

In a strained voice, he said, "Your nipples are pierced?"

My smile widened. "Why wouldn't they be?"

He seemed to be waiting for permission. I flicked my eyes downward, arched my back slightly. He dropped his mouth to my chest and gathered me close, one palm splayed between my bare shoulder blades while the other explored my extra-sensitive piercings.

My head fell back on a long, satisfied moan while his face pressed to the space between my breasts.

"You're a goddamn dream," he sighed. His thumb traced the metal bar twice, the sensation a spike of sheer pleasure. That alone had me on edge.

Until the wet heat of his mouth, his tongue, curled around my other nipple. I screamed and clutched at his hair. Rowan growled, lapping at the metal, the leisurely speed in direct contrast to the sexual energy vibrating through his muscles.

He closed his lips around me and pulled. Flattened his tongue again for large, greedy swipes, moving between both breasts with a rapacious hunger.

I dropped my hands to his shoulders, molding them over the shifting muscle but careful of his surgical scars. I was in awe of the broad expanse of his back, boxed in by his body but not crowded. Only held and admired, like I was the most precious thing in Rowan's world.

I became the object of his focus, his expertise, all that steady dedication of a former athlete. His tongue fluttered in small, purposeful circles over my piercing. I rolled my hips, rolled my body, floating on a suspended pleasure that felt close to snapping.

I knew what I wanted next.

I pulled Rowan's head back, and my heart lodged in my throat at his visible undoing. His hair was mussed, eyes wild, lips swollen. I ghosted my lips over his before nipping at his jaw. "Take off the rest of my clothes and get on your knees."

If I had any doubts that Rowan was up to the task of pleasing me—and I never had, not even once—the cocky grin that slid across his face just then would have destroyed them. It was the kind of smile that devastated, and I wasn't prepared to be so *swept away* by it.

His hands were pulling off my shorts and underwear in mere seconds, then he was exploring my mouth again in teasing licks and sumptuous bites. Tasting me, slowly. Sipping at my mouth, stroking his tongue, until I trembled from head to toe.

When he pressed his forehead to mine, I felt the weight of his ravenous gaze, exploring the length of my naked body. He blew out a few harsh breaths before tilting my head to bite the shell of my ear.

"I have spent whole hours of my life fantasizing about you shoving me to the floor and riding my mouth. Fully naked, just like this."

His hand slid down my leg and his fingers closed around my ankle, right above my black platform boots. "But with your heels still on."

I arched an eyebrow—unbearably pleased by this information—and dragged the toe of my boot up the front of his thigh. Lightly caressed the front of his cock, which had a slew of filthy words tumbling from his lips. Then I flattened it against his stomach. Pushed, just a little.

He grabbed my ankle again, jaw flexing, throat working on a swallow. The only sound in the room was our own rapid breathing.

I tipped back a few inches farther. The back of my head hit the cabinet above me. But it let me stretch a bit more, until my

foot reached his non-injured shoulder. I pressed again—a little harder this time—and he hissed.

“Okay?” I whispered.

“More than okay. You’re the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

I smiled at that. “On your knees, then, O’Callaghan. Don’t make me tell you twice.”

Rowan dropped. Pulled me to the edge of the counter while I propped my heels, carefully, on his freckled shoulders, and twisted his hair between my fingers.

He groaned as I yanked him between my legs. His eyes slid to mine – full of vulnerability – though there was a filthy twist to his mouth. He sent a long breath across my clit, and I jumped.

His tongue darted out, tasting me, learning my body in long, skillful licks.

After that, any coherent thought was impossible.





## ROWAN

*I*'d spent more nights at Jolene's than I could count, wanting to be used by Charlie Maddox.

Nights when she'd toss me a cool smirk over her shoulder, and I'd long to drop in front of her. Curl my hands around the back of her thighs and say: *Use me. For the love of god, I'm here every fucking night for a reason. Isn't it obvious?*

In my fantasies, I presented my body to her many needs—and she took it all, and then some.

I gave it all. And then some.

But those fantasies were flimsy compared to my reality: on my knees in front of Charlie, with her boots cutting into my skin and the wet heat of her cunt under my tongue. Her naked body was all smooth skin, curved muscle, and colorful tattoos. Her strong rider's thighs were splayed open for my enjoyment, the muscles flexing and jumping everywhere that I touched.

I was so hard, so fucking *on edge*, a light breeze was gonna send me off. But coming right now existed on the furthest edges of my mind. The only thing that mattered in my world was getting this woman off with my mouth.

Above me, her head was thrown back, lips parted. I circled her clit, around and around, and watched her pierced nipples harden. A deep flush spread across her chest. Her fingers pulled on my hair, and I groaned, licking her relentlessly in response.

“Oh my *god*, Rowan,” she panted. “You're good, so good, *too good.*”

I pressed my thumb to her clit and kept circling. “And you’re too goddamn beautiful, Charlie. After last call, I used to hang around and hope you’d shove me to the ground and ride my face, just like you’re doing now.”

She gazed down at me—full lips parted, cheeks flushed. “That’s...that’s what you wanted?”

“I wanted to make you come until you couldn’t see straight. You could leave me here on my knees after you ride my tongue tonight, and I’d be the happiest man alive.”

Charlie grabbed my hand and sucked two of my fingers between her lips, hollowing her cheeks. My brain went dark, blinking out, all thought replaced with sheer lust. When she released me, she said, “Not your tongue. Your fingers.”

I shifted up, bringing my hand between her legs, gently working my fingers through her folds. I pushed inside—tentative, testing—but I slid easily, sheathed inside internal walls already fluttering.

“You are so fucking wet, I’m gonna *lose it*,” I hissed.

I didn’t show her a bit of mercy. Just went to work. Happily. I moved my fingers in a steady rhythm while lapping at her clit, faster and faster. Her thighs shook. She moaned my name, over and over, and the sound was so husky and desperate it burned itself into my filthiest memories.

Her hips rocked the closer she got. I could feel it in the way she kept clenching around my stroking fingers. Could feel it in her hands, grabbing at my face. Her choked, breathless sighs. I reached up and lightly circled her nipple piercing, tugging on the metal.

Charlie screamed my name and fell apart against my mouth.

And it was the most beautiful, the most erotic, the most *honest* thing I’d ever seen.

I rested my cheek against her thigh, my chest heaving, and stared up at her in pure astonishment. “I need to do that again for you. Right away, if possible.”

“Really?” she panted. “Because I was thinking you could fuck me on this counter.”

My eyes closed, mouth open on her skin. Which became teeth—a nip, a bite. Then I was kissing her thighs like a starving man. “I’m hangin’ by a thread here, gorgeous. I won’t last.”

She pinched my chin and tipped my face up to look up at hers. “After last call, I used to fantasize about you hauling me up on the bar counter, just like I am now. Taking me, just like I am now. Hard and fast, like we were about to get caught.”

“*Charlie*,” I growled softly. “I would have. You have to know I would have.”

“I know.” She brushed a strand of hair from my forehead, and her green eyes softened in a way I’d never seen before. A way that made me want to say a bunch of things about what I was feeling in that moment—falling for a fake girlfriend I never had to pretend to be obsessed with.

“But I’m here now, Rowan. *Take me*.”

I kissed her furiously then, fusing our lips together as I pushed to stand. She sighed into the kiss, clinging to me, making me feel as powerful as the nights I spent on the pitcher’s mound. This time there was no audience, no cheering crowds, no team relying on my throwing arm to be perfect.

The power was there though, an electrifying surge racing through my limbs.

I cursed under my breath at the sight of Charlie perched naked on my counter, her skin rosy and flushed. I shot her a questioning look, like she was gonna wink and disappear. Nothing but a fever dream sent to ruin me.

She grabbed the top of my jeans and dragged me back between her legs. With one finger hooked into my waistband, she said, “May I?”

I swallowed roughly. “Take me, Maddox,” I echoed.

Charlie unhooked my jeans and shoved them off with a look of pure feline sensuality. Down came my black briefs,

and then her fingers were wrapped around the base of my cock and my vision dimmed.

She worked her hand along my length and glanced down.

“Damn, Rowan,” she said, eyes widening. I was already so gone I couldn’t boast, couldn’t flirt, couldn’t do anything except bury my face in the side of her neck and kiss a hot path up to her ear.

“Please don’t ever stop touching me,” I whispered.

She moaned, and my hips punched forward, my whole body seeking friction now. She kept stroking me slowly, learning the shape of my cock, what I liked. I pressed our foreheads together so we could both watch. And maybe I was gonna come right there, like this.

Then she pushed me back a step and dropped to her knees on the floor. She pulled the rest of my clothing down and sent me a sexy smile, full of mischief.

“I need a taste, Rowan,” she murmured. “Just for a minute. You’re too beautiful not to.”

I blinked, too dazed to understand what was happening. Until she took my cock between her lips, and the world stopped. I wasn’t sure who groaned louder—me or Charlie—but the wet heat of her mouth felt so fucking good my head fell back.

“Holy fucking hell, Charlie,” I said through clenched teeth. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Her hum of amusement vibrated through my cock. Had me spearing my fingers into her braid, now falling out in tangles around her face. I flexed forward. She moaned again, took me deeper. Her hands grabbed at my ass, and her nails bit into my skin. I slapped my hand against the counter and gasped her name, over and over. Everything was frantic—our clothes strewn across the floor, our skin slick with sweat, the desperate sounds we made together.

“Up. You have to get up,” I commanded. Her eyes were glazed over, lips red and wet. “I need to fuck you. Now.”

She half-pushed to stand, but I was too impatient. I scooped her up again and practically threw her back on the counter, pushing her knees wide and stepping between them. Charlie reached for me, our mouths sloppy now, our breathing too rapid.

I fished a condom from my jeans, tore open the package and rolled it on with trembling fingers, and pressed the tip of my cock to her pussy. Everything balanced on this, a sliver of a moment.

“Yes?” I asked.

“*Please,*” was her gasped reply. I grabbed her hips, steadied myself, and pushed inside of her. Covered her mouth with my palm as she cried *yes, god, yes*. Her heat enveloped me, the clenching pressure washing all the way to my toes.

Charlie had asked for a quick, rough fuck against a counter, and I was grateful she had—weeks of tension, weeks of flirting, weeks of dark lust and feral urges roared out of me. Demanded I work my cock between her legs fast and deep.

My lower body slapped against hers, and her nails bit into my ass, urging me on. She met me thrust for thrust, our eyes locked together over my palm. At one point, she shook it off only to kiss me.

This kiss bruised, scorching through me. Her fingers twisted in my hair, mouth opening wide for me. I tilted her hips a fraction of an inch, and my cock slid even deeper.

“You feel so amazing,” I groaned, “so hot, so goddamn *tight*. I’ve imagined this...you...so many times and I never got enough, Charlie. Never, *ever*.”

Her head fell back, and I closed my teeth around the spot where her neck met her shoulder. Fucked her so furiously I wondered if we’d fall through the damn wall, but I didn’t care. Charlie was all that mattered.

“I’m...*Rowan*...you’re gonna make me come again.” She grabbed my ass again, rolling her hips. “Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t...”

“Never,” I repeated.

We moved together in a fast, dirty grind—gripping, biting, scratching along our fevered skin. The second she started to flutter around me, I slipped my hand between us and found her clit. I circled it roughly. Her legs jerked against my hips. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of her neck, and I licked it up.

“That’s it, you’re so close,” I whispered, lips brushing across her skin. “I can *feel you*, Charlie. Let go and take me with you.”

She dropped her head to my shoulder and wailed through another climax. I fucked her even faster, almost erratic, and a few seconds later an orgasm detonated, tearing through my body so intensely I got light-headed. I could only ground out her name like a prayer, my cock still inside of her, the pleasure subsiding with each final thrust.

We clung to each other on the counter for the first few seconds after. Our ragged breathing stayed in sync as it slowed. I gently cupped her cheeks so I could kiss her temple, the crown of her hair, her neck. Her hands stroked soft patterns up my spine, and then she was kissing the top of my slightly tender shoulders.

“Did I hurt you here?” she asked, brows pinched.

“Not at all. I would have told you if it did, I promise. I’ve been dreaming about you bossing me around with these damn boots on from the first moment I saw them.” I nudged our noses together and whispered, “You can step on me whenever you’d like, Charlie Maddox.”

She bit her lip with a smile. She was all teeth and freckles, her eyes beautiful beneath her messy hair.

“Yes, sir,” she said, cheeky.

“Yes, *ma’am*,” I shot back, nipping at her neck while she laughed. I gathered her in my arms, both of us naked in the middle of my kitchen, and my first coherent thought was *Charlie Maddox is adorable*.

“I want to take you to bed, gorgeous. Again. And I want to do it by heroically carrying you up the stairs in my arms.”

“Well, that’s a unique list of wants.”

“Didn’t think you’d appreciate getting tossed over a shoulder and carried off to a mystery location without your permission,” I said.

“Usually not, but for *you*?” She tilted her head and my heart tilted with it. “I’ll make an exception.”

I rubbed my hands together and winked. “Prepare yourself for heroism.”

Her eyes darted to my injured shoulder. “Will it hurt?”

“A little,” I admitted. “But sometimes I’m okay with a little bit of pain if the reward is worth it.” I leaned in, stole a kiss. “You’re the reward.”

Charlie nodded with red cheeks and looped an arm around my neck. When I scooped her up against my chest, warmth exploded through my entire nervous system. And expanded when she let her head rest against me.

“It’s rather brave of you to be standing, let alone walking, after what happened between us in that kitchen of yours,” she said.

I climbed the stairs, careful of her boots. “Thank you for noticing my courage.”

She huffed out a short laugh.

I kissed the top of her head and said, “Are you okay, though?”

“Better than okay, Rowan. I can’t even feel my toes.”

We reached my bedroom. I walked her over to my king-sized bed, propping my knee up so I could drop her down gently. Then I reared back and began unlacing her boots for her. She watched, propped up on her elbows with a haughty grin.

“At your service, remember?” I drawled. Anything to help me from falling into a trance state at the sight of Charlie in my bed. Naked and sinuous and wearing an expression of sleepy satisfaction.



“Yes, sir,” she teased. Though her breathing hitched when I dropped her shoes to the floor and prowled up her prone body. I lowered myself on top of her, skin to skin, and experienced a sharp jolt of lust twined with affection. The jolt deepened when her legs wrapped around my back and every part of us was bare and free.

“Are *you* okay?” she asked breathlessly, tilting her neck as I explored that sweet curve with my mouth. My tongue. Lazily, taking my time.

“I also can’t feel my toes,” I murmured. I blew a cool breath under her ear, and she shivered, giggling. “And my brain is having a hard time catching up to the fact that this is real.”

I kissed between her breasts. “That you are real.” Nuzzled along her collarbone. “I fantasized about this moment with you for a long, *long* time and now that you’re finally in my bed, I’m fucking speechless, Charlie.”

I held her just under her rib cage, keeping her still so I could lap at her pierced nipples again. I leisurely pulled one, then the other, between my lips, and Charlie arched gracefully.

“*Rowan*,” she groaned—low, needy, rough with emotion. I flicked my gaze to hers, wanting her to see me like this. Worshiping. Pining. *Obsessing*. She hissed out a breath. Her fingers twisted in my sheets.

I went lower still.

The tattoos that covered her rib cage danced beneath my tongue and the nipping of my teeth. She tasted like salt and summer sun, every caress bringing me closer to her pussy. And by the time my head was back between her thighs, she was trembling from head to toe.

I inhaled the sweet, earthy musk of her cunt and growled with a possessive rumble. I dove my tongue deep inside of her. She cried out, fingers flying to my hair.

I stroked my tongue in and out of her with the same liquid rhythm, teasing out this moment. The kitchen had been fast

and raw and hot as hell—but I needed this too. This unhurried discovery.

“Rowan...*fuck*...roll over,” Charlie panted.

I lifted my head. “How do you want me?”

“On your back so I can sit on your face.”

I had never moved so fast in my fucking life. I twisted, my back hitting the mattress, and she eagerly lowered herself over me. My world shrank and sharpened, became the heat of her body, her thighs pressed to my ears. I palmed her ass and squeezed. Rocked her against my mouth, though she was already rolling and grinding her clit against my tongue.

“God, this feels incredible,” she sighed. “This mouth should be illegal, Rowan.”

I couldn’t respond—for a couple reasons—but the compliment had me groaning raggedly. I fisted my cock, too turned on by the idea of getting to jerk off while Charlie ground against my tongue.

My hips thrust off the bed as my hand worked faster, squeezing from the root to the tip. Above me, Charlie’s nipples were hard and her head was thrown back, and though I couldn’t see her face I could imagine that wicked grin of hers, the one she’d occasionally flash me at Jolene’s when I flirted with her.

She was always laughing it off while I’d sit there on my barstool, ready to crawl on my hands and knees for a chance of experiencing *exactly* what we were doing right here.

She lifted away from my mouth. I swallowed a snarl, managed a strangled, “I need to see you come.”

She wiped her thumb across my lip, and I caught it between my teeth. “And I need you to fuck me. Where are your condoms?”

I kept our eyes locked and reached behind me, into my bedside drawer. I fished out the first packet I found and grinned when she snatched it from me. Ten agonizing seconds later, she was finally rolling it down my cock then lowering

herself—her palms flat on my chest, her strong thighs straddling my hips.

She took me deep inside of her body at the same speed that I'd fucked her with my tongue, inch by inch. The only sound in the room was our heavy breathing and the blood roaring in my ears.

Even like this—rocking on top of me—she felt too far away. I pushed to sit up, one hand planted behind me and my other arm wrapping around her. I bottomed out inside of her and moaned with gratitude against her breasts. But Charlie had other ideas. She yanked at my hair, tilting my face up, and kissed me.

We stayed like that—lips connected, lower bodies connected, nothing but her easy grind and our sweat-slicked skin.

“Beautiful,” I said, stroking my tongue against hers. “You are so *beautiful*, Charlie.”

She whimpered, starting to move faster on top of me. I dipped my head to lick circles around her piercings. Sighing my name, she arched toward me. Begging. I sucked and caught the metal with my teeth, and Charlie released a guttural moan. I let my lips roam—her chest, the ball of her shoulder, the curve of her breasts. Up her throat, over and over, the fire between us burning to a fever pitch.

“More...I need...more,” she panted. And I flipped her onto her back. Succumbed to the sharp edge of wanting her, driving my cock between her legs while she cried, “Yes, harder, *yes*.”

I gave it all, gave her everything, already knowing it had never been like this with anyone else. Already wondering why I'd waited so long to tell Charlie the truth.

She clenched rapidly around my cock, and I hissed between my teeth. So on edge. So close. When she reached between her legs to touch her clit, my vision went hazy at the edges. There were too many fantasies coming true at once and

no more barriers between us. We were a friendship that was always more.

A relationship that was never pretend.

“With me, Rowan,” she begged. “Come with me, please, I need to see you.”

And the very second she arched off the bed and screamed, I was right there with her. If that first orgasm was a detonation, this was a wave of pleasure that never seemed to end. I shuddered and gasped while she held me close, so close I could hear her heart beating when I pressed my face to her chest.

Time was sweet and hazy after that. And I must have dozed, because the next thing I knew the lights in my bedroom were off and I was under the covers with Charlie sliding across to join me. Her fingers sifted the hair off my forehead. Her lips ghosted across my ear.

“Rowan,” she whispered.

“Hmm?” I was too busy gathering her naked body against my chest in a hug for coherent answers.

“That was a pretty good first date...first real date...for two people who don’t know what they’re doing.”

I blinked my eyes open and laughed. The sound started as a low rumble, but the combination of exhaustion and euphoria kicked in, and suddenly I couldn’t stop laughing. Charlie was beaming down at me, biting the tip of her thumb, and all I could say was, “Yeah, I think we did all right.”

“Can you feel your toes?”

“I couldn’t tell you my name if I tried, gorgeous.”

She stroked the side of my face. “My precious cupcake.”

I smiled through her kiss, then contemplated running victory laps when she curled up on top of me a second later. Her breathing slowed, limbs growing heavy against mine. When she whispered, “You’re all I ever think about too, Rowan,” it was so soft I could have dreamed it.

I held her close, my lips in her hair, thinking about anvils.  
And glitter signs.

Thinking about my parents. Dean and Tabitha. All the  
times I worried I would never know what this felt like, only to  
realize I already did.

We just hadn't found our way back to each other yet.



## CHARLIE

“Tell me again why you want to leave this bed?” I asked. Sighed, really. Because I was on my side with Rowan’s broad chest pressed to my back, his fingers stroking lightly—skillfully—between my legs.

His hot breath caressed the shell of my ear. “We’ve been here since last night.”

He circled my clit with the perfect amount of pressure. I sighed again, tilting my head, and he responded with open-mouthed kisses down the column of my throat. I hummed, happy. Sleepy. Wrung out and deeply satisfied yet somehow still desperately turned on, all at the same time.

“Time has no meaning to me anymore.” I sighed. An approving rumble came from his chest. His other hand cupped my breast, my nipple pebbling against his palm, while he kept moving behind me. Rocking into my hips, teasing my clit, running his tongue up the nape of my neck.

“I’m worried we’ll get scurvy,” he said, the amusement in his voice clear. I didn’t miss how hoarse he sounded either, but then again, we *had* spent the entire night reaching for each other every few hours. Fucking each other senseless in the dark, our muscles sore and skin salty with drying sweat.

And then we’d collapse into an exhausted, satiated sleep until the next time.

“If you’re so worried you shouldn’t have...*shit, that’s perfect, Rowan...* shouldn’t have...”

“Shouldn’t have what?” he murmured with a bite. He was using two fingers to circle my clit and two fingers to circle my nipple, and my thoughts had gone hazy again. “Am I distracting you?”

“...turned an innocent spooning session into...into...” He flexed his cock, sliding the head through my slick folds. “*Oh god*, don’t stop.”

“I won’t, I promise,” he whispered at my temple. My heart flipped and spun at the tenderness etched into his words. The tenderness he’d demonstrated all night, from carrying me up the stairs after our wild kitchen sex to the way I kept waking up to him holding me against his body like he was worried I would simply float away.

All of this was new to me, and my body and voice weren’t the only things feeling raw after my first night in Rowan’s bed—after our first true date, which was absent any of the usual verbal tap-dancing we both did the second we felt vulnerable.

This type of pleasure felt like freedom.

This type of craving felt like seeing and being seen.

And even if we had given in to our flirtation back in the day, part of me knew it wouldn’t have been like *this*. It was everything we’d done together *before* that made us this wanton. That made me feel like I would never, ever get enough of Rowan.

And therein lay the terror. Because if he decided to walk away from this, like I’d seen him do so many times before, I wasn’t sure I’d ever recover.

Behind me, he rolled on a condom before nudging the thick head of his cock at my entrance. His palm slid around to my knee, propping it on top of his thigh, opening me wide for him. His thrusts were sweet and deliberate and let me adjust to the delicious, aching sensation of being filled by him.

“Every time, it gets better,” he groaned. “How is that possible?”

I turned my head to kiss him sloppily, the angle not quite right, but perfection wasn’t my goal. This wasn’t a race I



needed to win so that I could pay my bills. Wasn't some grueling training session pushing my muscles past their limits. Our bodies could be imperfect here, could be messy, could have no outcome other than mutual pleasure.

This kind of sleepy, grinding morning sex felt like a liberation from the constant pressure of being *the best*.

His fingers landed back on my clit, sparking the banked embers of what felt like one night-long orgasm. He rolled his hips, every thrust deliberate and thorough. Every hot breath at my ear was a rough-edged groan that made goosebumps erupt across my skin.

I'd spent hours watching Rowan's cocky charm fall away, replaced with harsh pants and shuddering muscles. I'd licked the sweat from his neck as he gasped, heard him growl my name against my skin as he fucked me so deep, I saw whole galaxies.

Rowan O'Callaghan, ruined and undone, was too good to be true.

"I'm close already," I whimpered. He hissed and sped up his motions, one hand coming to wrap around my throat to hold me still. I was trapped against his hard body, completely at his mercy. The muscles of his forearm flexed as he worked my clit.

When I dropped my gaze to watch, the sight of his big hand covering my pussy sent me hurtling over the edge.

"I'm almost there, I'm almost there, *more, please,*" I begged.

A second later, I was on my hands and knees. His fingers were vice-like on my hips, yanking me back, his cock hitting an angle that made me sob with pleasure.

Rowan fucked me from behind with the short, fast strokes he now knew I needed to finish. I screamed into his pillow as I came. A few seconds later, Rowan's groans went rough and then he grunted, "*God, you're incredible, you're fucking incredible.*"

Breathless and dizzy, I pressed my cheek to the bed and grinned at the naked, broad-shouldered ginger kneeling behind me. He scrubbed a hand across his face and released a strangled laugh.

“We have to leave this bed...” he panted, “...or you’re gonna straight up kill me, Maddox.”

I flopped over onto my back, laughing as he crashed his body beside me. “At the very least we should figure out a pulley system to get food and water *into* the bed.”

I danced my fingers over his bare chest. Let my eyes linger on the glorious sight of Rowan naked—the etched muscles of his abs, the thick splendor of his thighs. At some point in the night, I’d gotten so turned on while we were having sex that I *bit* his right butt cheek.

I slid down to examine it, pushing at his hip until he shifted.

“Are you wondering if you bit my ass last night? Because I can confirm yes. Yes, you did.”

“Oh my god, I left a *bruise*.” I stared up at Rowan. His smile was adorably lopsided, and his dark red hair stuck out at every angle. He stroked the top of my head, and my stomach went hollow at his effortless affection.

“Pitchers are famous for a lot of things, gorgeous.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Having a biteable ass?”

“I won’t lie to you.” He paused, gaze full of mischief. “It’s where all our power comes from.”

“You tasted delicious.”

“All those years of squats have led me here. To this moment.” He pulled a mock-serious expression. “The bad girl of motocross, sinking her teeth into my butt. What a time to be alive.”

I dropped my head to his thigh and laughed. “Now you know where the nickname comes from.”

I straddled him, studying him from this vantage point—the arm flung carelessly behind his head, the freckles on top of his shoulders, the auburn-colored stubble shadowing his jaw.

“You know I liked it,” he murmured.

“What did you like about it?”

Rowan pushed up onto his elbows and crooked his finger. I leaned in for a kiss, unable to resist. “Wanting you, Charlie. And being wanted by you. I thought I knew how badly...” He hesitated, swallowing hard. “I couldn’t have known. I’ve never experienced anything like this before.”

I gave him a giant smile. “Will you come with me to the championship gala in a couple days?”

His brow furrowed. “Wasn’t I always coming with you to the gala?”

Anxious nerves fluttered through me, a realistic effect after a night of such reckless desire. I’d been jumping dirt bikes from impossible heights for twenty years—there were consequences at the end of a free fall.

The ground rose to meet you, whether you were ready or not.

But Rowan kept gifting me pieces of his trust. Kept being truthful in these tender moments. Even scared, I wanted to meet him in the middle, free fall or not. Here in his bed, naked and happy, surrounded by warm sheets and summer sun, how could I not see this next part as inevitable?

“You were but I’m uninviting you,” I finally said. “I don’t want you there as my pretend boyfriend. Not for show or to help my reputation. I want *you*, Rowan. To be there, with me, for real.”

He cupped my face, stroking his thumb across my cheek. “I would love nothing more.”

I blew out a relieved breath. “Good. If not, I’d have to bust out that cardboard cutout I had made of you two weeks ago and I *think*, though I can’t be sure, everyone would eventually notice.”

He reared up to catch my mouth in a scorching kiss. “The only one taking you to that damn gala is me, Charlie. The real me.”



# CHARLIE

A drink arrived as soon as I sat at the bar.

I took the martini glass by the stem and said, “For me?”

The bartender shrugged. “The group of folks over there clocked you as soon as you came in and wanted to send it right away. I figured they were fans of yours. Anyway, cheers.”

She stepped away, cocktail shaker in hand, and I reached into my wallet to leave her a giant cash tip. I sipped the martini—vodka, three olives, *perfect*—and waved down at the women who’d sent it.

It was from Riley and Quinn.

They were otherwise occupied by their people chatting with them. From the looks of it, team members from Archer’s Angels and some stray, overly excited fans. But I swiped open Instagram and sent them both a message in the text chain we were in.

*Thanks for the drink. Should help with my pre-gala nerves. Also, how did you know I was a martini girl?*

I watched the three dots beneath my message. Riley sent: *We’re coming over to say hey if that’s okay?*

A pause and then: *We knew because you’re fucking cool.*

I glanced up and waved, feeling shyly awkward when they walked up together with matching smiles. Awkward but also hopeful. I’d been chatting with Riley, Quinn, and the rest of their teammates ever since they approached me after the last

race and hadn't expected to feel nervously excited about their attention, like I was the new kid at summer camp.

I clinked my glass against both of theirs. "Happy championship gala. You both look amazing."

Quinn squeezed her arm around Riley's waist—she wore a short, sparkly dress while Riley rocked a blue pantsuit. "Hey there yourself, cool girl. Is your closet comprised of only fabulous jumpsuits?"

I recrossed my legs and winked. This jumpsuit was cut similarly to the one I'd worn at the press event, but instead of black, it was a deep shade of plum, the straps crisscrossing over my chest to tie around my neck. I was *obviously* wearing it to impress Rowan—my *very real date* to this dinner—and was just grateful it wasn't noticeable that five panicky outfit changes had preceded this one.

"You're not far off," I said. "My closet is essentially this, racing pants, and mud-splattered boots."

"You're a moto fashion icon," Riley said, pale cheeks growing as pink as her hair. "And yep, now here I am, once again coming on too strong and sounding like a weirdo."

I shook my head with a laugh. "Please. Everyone in this room is trying to be totally chill around *you*. Including me. Or another possibility is that we can be weirdos together?"

"I'll take weirdos, please," Riley said, while her girlfriend beamed and finished her drink. "You know, whether or not you ever join our team, I'm glad we got to meet at the very end. Will you be at the race in Miami the first weekend in September?"

I hesitated, realizing with a start that I was scheduled to be and had planned to float rumors there that Rowan and I had broken up, per the terms of our fake relationship. I'd been deliriously happy and *extremely* distracted the past couple days, between meeting Rowan's family and then embarking on our day-long sex fest.

Though I did allow him to drag me from his bed on three separate occasions for food. And once for a long, sexy shower.

Our conversation throughout had been as breezy as ever, and Rowan made it his mission to have me laughing nonstop. It was like as soon as I'd broached the topic of scrapping our fake dating, any remaining limitations had fallen blissfully away.

What we were going to do *after* the championship race, however, hadn't been discussed at all.

I gulped my martini, and the vodka burned on the way down. I wasn't sure what was making me more uneasy—knowing that what happened next between us was still up in the air.

Or realizing how desperately I'd looked forward to seeing Rowan's smile every day. How desperately, *painfully*, I was going to miss being here in Philly. It wasn't my home, but it was the first place in a very long time that made me feel...that made me feel...

*Loved.*

That word—love—swept through me with the force of a fragrant summer storm.

*You're it for him, dear*, Alice had said. She'd known me for all of one dinner and understood why I'd kept Rowan at arm's length. He'd always been the one for me.

"Charlie, are you okay?" Quinn asked, interrupting my frazzled thoughts. "Is it something with the September race?"

I forced a smile, brushing the bangs from my eyes. "Sorry about that. I *will* be there in September and would love to hang with you both. I'm just anxious tonight because of the awards ceremony." I fluttered my hand at the scene around us—the convention center rooms had been transformed into sleek, upscale dining complete with a stage, a podium, and servers circulating with champagne flutes. "Between you and me, I dig meeting the fans and hanging out with other racers. But the snooty corporate events have never been my thing. Especially right now, when the only award I'd be up for is 'most number of embarrassing pictures online.'"



Riley snorted. “Fuck ’em. That reputation stuff is toxic, and I hate seeing it become part of our motocross culture. At least, with a team, there’s a built-in support that comes with it. You’re not just a single bull’s-eye for social media to focus on.”

I shot them a wry look. “The fans like you guys though.”

“Because we’re super fucking cute,” Quinn added.

I laughed and clinked their glasses again. “Cheers to that.”

“They like you and your boyfriend too,” Riley said. “What’s his name again? That hunky redhead?”

I shifted on the barstool and felt a delicious burn between my legs, courtesy of that hunky redhead.

“His name is Rowan, and he *is* very hunky, thank you.”

Dempsey walked up to us then, sporting a silvery suit and a freshly buzzed head.

“Speaking of fashion icons,” I sang.

She raised a tattooed finger at the bartender before turning to the three of us. “Ladies. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Riley and Quinn seemed adorably flustered by Dempsey’s presence—I knew part of it was that she was an actual icon. But I hadn’t told Dempsey about Archer’s Angels sniffing around my status yet and wasn’t sure if she’d be flattered, like I was. Or pissed because she’d make less money off of me long-term.

Either way, the couple made a smooth exit a minute later, and I promised to return the martini favor at a future date. Dempsey tapped her nails on her glass of whiskey and cocked her head.

“Did they buy you a drink?” she asked.

“Yes, they did. My *agent* hasn’t even done that. And I got second place and *everything* for her at my last race.” I plopped my chin in my hand and sighed.

She rolled her eyes playfully and called out for another martini from the bartender. “You’re lucky you’re cute. I’ll be

there at the championship race and have it on pod authority that you're a fan favorite."

"After one second-place prize?"

She squeezed my hand. "People are rooting for you, Charlie. Did it feel amazing?"

I nodded, much too emotional to speak. My second cocktail arrived, and the vodka loosened the grip of my throat. "There's nothing like it, is there? Feeling like you're finally back where you belong?"

"No, there isn't. And when you get first in a couple days, it'll feel even more magnificent." She released me. Took a step back and examined me from head to toe. "Also, you're glowing."

I shrugged. "Cool."

She moved close, like she was about to *smell* me. I laughed and shoved her back. "What's happening? Are you unwell?"

"You have a hickey." She sipped her whiskey imperiously. "That's why you're glowing. It's Rowan, isn't it? Your hot baseball friend?"

My hand flew to my neck. "I used a *ton* of makeup to cover it up."

"No one will notice. I only did because I invented the hickey cover-up in high school." Another smile flew across her face. "I was very popular with the cheerleading squad."

"*All* of them?"

"I was." She frowned. "Until I wasn't. But I got what I deserved, since I was dating quite a lot of them. At the same time."

I narrowed my eyes. "And you're giving me shit because Rowan's making me glow?"

"Just a teeny bit. But it's nice, Charlie. Seeing you happy. Like *legitimately* happy."

She shook the ice in her glass, a line forming between her brows. "Can you come with me tomorrow morning to meet

with Bettencourt? Some of the reps are in town for the championship, and they offered a face-to-face for both of us.”

The sweet, sultry pleasure of the last two days vanished in a surge of anxiety. “A face-to-face? Is that good or bad?”

She lowered her voice. “The video of you and that reporter, James, is going a little viral. Within the community, but I’ve seen other athletes sharing it too. The guy was clearly proud to be flaunting his love of the double standard in pro sports, and you called him on it. I think it’s great, and you come off looking like a queen.”

“But?” I asked, stomach dropping.

“A *family-friendly image*, in Bettencourt’s mind, is probably less combative. Their perspective, not mine.”

“Ah, okay. Women should just shut up and take it, huh?”

She studied me closely, and all I could see were eviction notices and dwindling bank accounts. “You did the right thing. If we were able to go back in time, I’d tell you to do the same thing, all over again.”

I sniffed, toeing my boot against the floor. “If I was able to go back in time, I wouldn’t have said *yeah, who cares?* And then gotten drunk in all those bars the night before my first race here.”

“Oh, Charlie.” Her face contorted in sympathy. “It’s *not* confirmed. But when I saw the email request come through, I don’t know. It felt ominous to me.”

I nodded, releasing a long, shaky breath. “I’m glad I know we’ve got a battle ahead. At least tomorrow we won’t be walking in unprepared. I, uh...didn’t tell you, but my dad’s being evicted. I technically *always* need money, but I need more money now and a significant source of it to keep him in his house. Our house.” I blew another breath. “It’s been a lot of pressure lately.”

She studied me over her glass. “You’ve been here before with him, haven’t you?”

“Sure, yeah. Off and on, from when I was a teenager. It’s been hard on him, all the changes.”

“Hard on you too. Harder if you believe you have to fix all these problems by yourself,” she said simply. “I adore your dad, Charlie. He’s one of the best of us, and I learned so much, training with him. And he *loves you*.”

I pressed the heel of my palm to my right eye before a tear could escape. “Course he does.”

“And also...that’s a lot of responsibility for a kid. I don’t think it was fair for all of it to fall on you.”

She found my hand again while I composed myself—why I was crying, in public, about money was beyond me. When *wasn’t* I stressed out about money?

“Do you want to work with Bettencourt?”

My gaze snapped back to hers. “Yes. Why?”

“It’s okay to use them for money. It’s even okay to use them for money and not like them very much. Plenty of times I had to wade through that murky gray area.” She glanced back at Riley and Quinn and her lips curled into a secretive smile. “I pushed you to sign with them, Charlie. And you haven’t seemed happy since. Not happy like you’ve been the past three weeks.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that—except she was right. Hadn’t I admitted to Rowan that I’d been flustered and out of it on the racetrack since Bettencourt came on the scene?

Hadn’t I felt uncomfortable about working with a sponsor whose values didn’t align with my own?

“It’s a lot of cash,” was all I said. In a tone of voice that would convince *no one*.

“And you and I have cozied up with worse people for less. Bills are bills. But you’ve blossomed here, babe. Yelling at shitty reporters, winning races again, getting *positive* press?” She tapped my nose. “It’s something to think about.”

The compliment had me smiling. “Did you say I blossomed like some kind of...*flower*?”

She pursed her lips. “Like a muddy, badass, dirt bike flower.”

“Decent save.”

She suddenly stared past my shoulder, then huffed out a laugh. “Speaking of flowers.”

I spun to find Rowan, dressed head to toe in a dark navy suit, his dress shirt open at the collar. He prowled through the crowd like a big cat in the jungle—confident, dangerous—and I wasn’t the only person watching him with their jaw hanging open.

I’d had this man every filthy way imaginable, and my mouth *still* went bone-dry at the sight of him.

Our eyes locked, and I blushed *everywhere*. Then I noticed what Dempsey had been pointing out. The slender bouquet of sunflowers in his hand.

My heart spun like my bike when I whipped it through the air.

Dempsey leaned in to whisper rapidly, “Okay, I’m gonna go. Have fun with your hot baseball player and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, but actually, that’s a whole lot.”

She left. And there was Rowan O’Callaghan, standing in front of me in a damn suit, presenting me with a bouquet of cheerful sunflowers.

The audacity I had to assume I could pretend with this man was *laughable*.

He pulled me close and rumbled a greeting at my ear. Pressed a kiss to the side of my neck that had my knees weakening. “I wanted to bring you flowers for our date. But don’t worry, I also nervously bought out the rest of the bouquets and now my kitchen looks like a garden.”

I managed to squeak out, “For me?”

“It’s always been for you, Charlie.”

And there I was, sunflowers in hand.

Glowing.



## ROWAN

The fact that I could walk after spotting Charlie at the bar was a fucking miracle. I'd had better luck moving my lower body after baseball practices that were nothin' but wind sprints.

It'd been twenty hours since she'd left my bed. And the second my gaze connected with hers through the crowd, I was a goner.

The need to touch her was what finally propelled me forward in the end. She sat balanced on a barstool in a purple jumpsuit that had my eyes roving over her exposed collarbones and the delicate slope of her neck. My fingers twitched at my sides.

All I could think about was what she tasted like there, what that column of golden hair felt like wrapped around my hand.

She was no more beautiful than the first night I saw her at Jolene's. But everything between us was different now. Charlie had cried out my name and fallen apart beneath my tongue. Had snored softly on my chest and laughed with her head under my sheets.

Around her, I was *insatiable*.

"It's always been for you, Charlie," I said, presenting the bouquet of sunflowers. "And you look absolutely, incredibly gorgeous."

She stepped back to examine me with her hands on my lapels. She arched a single eyebrow and said, "Holy shit, you look hot in a suit."

I chuckled and raised a finger at the bartender for a beer. Settled onto a stool, facing Charlie almost exactly the way I had two and a half weeks ago, at a bar in the suburbs where we learned how to touch each other for our fake relationship.

“See, at a certain point, it’s like I don’t even have to flirt. You’re doing it for me.”

She settled back with a sly grin, eyes sweeping me from head to toe. It made me seriously consider wearing one of these every day if it made Charlie this happy.

I crooked a finger with a wink. She tipped her upper body forward and hovered her mouth over mine. “I missed you.”

“Same,” I said. “My sheets smell like you now.”

“That sounds like a delightful problem to have.”

“Oh, it definitely is,” I drawled. “Luckily, Dean came by and shook me by the shoulders a few times until I snapped out of it.”

I tugged on my left cuff link. “You can thank him and Tabitha, by the way. They did all of this since I don’t own one of these myself.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For putting on a suit for me. And coming as my date. My real one.”

I took her hand and brought it to my lips for a kiss. “Thank you for asking. So what is this shindig all about?”

There’d been signs everywhere when I walked in—all the sponsors of the convention seemed to be out in numbers, as well as racers, their trainers, and agents. It wasn’t exactly black tie, but it was fancy enough to remind me of the dinners we went to when I played baseball, charming the owners and their staff.

I’d spent those nights itchy and uncomfortable and yanking at my tight collar. I knew Charlie felt similarly and could spot the pro athletes around us based on their stiff body language alone.

“The galas are a big deal,” she said. “Especially for the fans. It signifies the end of the convention and gets everyone



amped up for the championship race.” Her smile widened. “I used to go with my dad to events like this when I was little, before he got hurt and he didn’t mind putting on an outfit without holes in it. I would steal all the shrimp cocktails and eat them in the corner. Wondering if I’d ever get to have fans the way that he did.”

“How do you feel being here tonight?”

“Grateful,” she said. “Always grateful.”

“And how do you feel about the race?”

A quick grin. “I’d love to say something cool like *that championship is mine for the taking*. The truth is, I don’t know if I’ll win. I’ve been competing against some of the most talented women in my field and they want it as badly as I do.”

Her throat worked on a swallow. “But how I *feel* is way different from when I got here, way different from how it’s been for these past months. More focused, more aware of my body, less scared and anxious when I think about competing. Does that make sense?”

I stroked my thumb across the top of her hand. “Nothing beats a victory. And nothing beats knowing that you deserve to be out there, winning or not. It’s powerful, remembering the joy of it. I can tell you feel differently. It’s pretty obvious to me. And”—I lowered my voice— “for what it’s worth, that championship *is* yours for the taking.”

Her response was a pretty smile that spun my heart around.

I wanted to ask about Bettencourt. When we’d shaken on our agreement at that suburban bar—*fake dating for a couple of miracles*—she’d hoped to be back on their good side by now.

Something in me hesitated to poke around the strategic side of this partnership, the pretend parts tied to money and outcomes. Like bringing it all back up again would rip a hole in the dreamy paradise of the past couple days.

Charlie stepped close and loosely draped her arm around my neck. I curled my hands around her waist, and the skin-to-skin contact made my rush of concern vanish.

“More importantly...didn't you say this morning that Luciana and the board were coming by today?” she asked. “Did they formally offer you the job?”

I pressed my lips together, trying not to break. But it was pointless. She gripped my face, I burst into a grin, and she said, “*Rowan*. Did something amazing happen? Tell me, tell me.”

“Yeah, something amazing happened,” I said slowly. “Luciana spoke with the board after our call and to Elaine as well. Who said that hiring me as her replacement was the smartest move because no one was as dedicated as I was. That no one would work harder for the folks that relied on us. Then they officially offered me the position as executive director. And I...said yes.”

Her jaw dropped. Then she pulled me in for a hug, and I sank fully into it, grateful for her affection.

“Are you scared?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah, I am,” I admitted, resisting the urge to shrug it off and crack a joke. “I want this new role. Want this new challenge. But life happens and it's random. A car accident in the middle of the night took away my parents. The first pitch during my sixty-first game in the major leagues took away my dreams. Sometimes hoping for new, happy things feels dangerous to me. It can so easily disappear.”

She stroked my hair before pulling back to look at me. “Does it feel safer not to take risks? To stay where you are?”

I smiled, grabbed my chest. “Bullseye. How'd you know?”

“When my dad's racing career ended, he didn't know what to put his energy into,” Charlie said. “He had so much anger. So much rage and grief. And he was a man used to beating his emotions into submission through physical activity. Riding the track in our back woods for hours, until he was exhausted. Without that outlet, he was so sad and stagnant.”

Charlie propped her elbow on the bar and set her chin in her hand. “There's not a right or wrong way to handle this stuff. My dad's experience just *was*, and that's okay. I know

you had a lot of rage and grief too. But you also found something that made you just as fulfilled, found something that's made you and your neighborhood *better*. And I've always admired that about you, Rowan. It's like you feel your fear but you don't let it hold you back."

I bent to kiss her cheek, lingered there for a moment. "Thank you for always getting it. I can't tell you what it means to me."

She blinked, her eyes shining, but then she was smiling. "Rowan O'Callaghan, executive director. You couldn't stop being a leader even if you tried."

"You got me there, gorgeous. Now I just need a cleaning crew to overhaul Elaine's office. I love that woman, but walking into that chaos every day is a struggle."

She hummed. "Just one of the many amazing things you'll do."

I almost suggested we get out of here—not because I didn't want to see Charlie celebrated at a fancy event. But I desperately wanted her all to myself.

Above us, the lights flickered. Charlie said, "That means it's dinnertime. Come on, I've got a surprise for you."

Inside the gala room, we spotted our table, where two people were murmuring over their program. They looked up as we approached, and Charlie brightened.

I squeezed her hand in shock as soon as I recognized them.

"You must be Leonard and Gloria Wilkinson," she said. "I'm Charlie Maddox."

The woman, Gloria, stood and took Charlie's hand. "Oh, we know who you are. According to the staff, we have you to thank for sneaking us into the best table in the house, right in front of the stage."

"Please, it's my pleasure. You do a lot for motocross *and* you do a lot for Philadelphia. Consider it a tiny show of gratitude for your generosity."

Charlie pulled out our chairs and indicated I should sit. I did, though not before shaking hands with Gloria and Leonard.

They were a middle-aged couple in their mid-fifties, at ease with each other and thrilled to be in Charlie's presence. Leonard was a Black man with dark brown skin and a warm smile. His wife, Gloria, was white with pale, silver hair and giant diamond earrings.

Charlie had orchestrated this table setup so that I was sitting next to one of Philadelphia's most famously philanthropic couples.

It wasn't only their deep family roots here in the city that made Elaine always refer to them as "dream donors." It was what they were passionate about—from Meals on Wheels to elder healthcare, the Wilkinsons cared about neighborhood senior programs more than anything else.

My brain yelled something like *holy fucking shit*.

"Rowan O'Callaghan," I said, flashing a smile. "How do you know Charlie?"

"We know *of* her, but we've never met in person," Leonard said smoothly. "You're one of our favorites, by the way. But don't tell the others."

Charlie blushed. "Happy to keep it a secret. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've got...two kids who race dirt bikes, right?"

Leonard beamed back at her. "We've got four kids. Three daredevils and one very studious bookworm, who clearly takes after me. Our oldest son and youngest daughter race dirt bikes —"

"And our daughter said if we met you, could you please sign this?" Gloria added, sliding a motocross magazine with Charlie's face on the cover across the table.

She pulled a pen from her pocket and said, "Always an honor. Can I ask what the daredevil kid you didn't mention does?"

“They’re a snowboarder,” Leonard said, “and talented too. We spend winters up in the Poconos so they can practice but then summers down here for the dirt bike racers—”

“And our bookworm daughter is happy all four seasons as long as she has a book to read or a test to study for,” Gloria finished, turning her head towards me. “It’s how we got involved in motocross. We’re new to the community, but our son and daughter said it was good for the sport, to see it expand and grow. And anything that makes them happy makes us happy.”

Charlie finished signing her name with a flourish. “Tell both of your dirt bike racers they can message me any time. I wrote my email address on the inside, as long as that’s okay with you both. They don’t have to race pro, but if they do and have questions, I’m happy to answer them.”

“She’ll be overjoyed,” Gloria said. “She’s trying to get us to go to Miami for the race you’ve got that weekend in September. You’ll be leaving for it soon, I’m sure?”

A clammy chill raced down my spine at the reminder that Charlie didn’t live here. That she lived the life I used to—on the move, on the road, going where the money and competitions were.

Yet she’d crashed back into my life and cracked my heart wide open. I tried to picture my days without Charlie by my side, and my mind went completely blank.

Was this why Dean looked mildly unhappy whenever Tabitha was out of the room for more than five minutes?

“I’ll be there, so if you do go, come find me,” Charlie replied. “After Miami, I think I’m in...Atlanta? Then back to New York for a bit, and then there’s that huge exhibition race in Arizona before the holidays.”

Gloria and Leonard nodded before sending a questioning glance my way. Charlie laid a hand on my arm and said, “Rowan’s my boyfriend, in case you’re wondering.”

“It’s rather obvious,” Gloria said kindly. “Rowan, do you travel together? You must miss her when she’s gone.”

I realized I didn't have to make up some story that benefited Charlie's reputation. I wasn't sitting here as her *fake* anything. So I told the truth instead.

"I miss Charlie constantly," I said, feeling the tension in her hand where she touched me. "But travel I'm used to. I played baseball when I was younger and being away is just the reality. I'm pretty comfortable with it."

I sensed the weight of Charlie's attention on me. I shifted my arm to take her hand, curling our fingers together.

"And what do you do now?" Leonard asked.

"I'm the..." I hesitated. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Charlie start to smile. "I'm the executive director of the South Philly Recreation Center. Do you know it?"

"No, but I grew up in West Philly, and the rec center was like my second home," Gloria said immediately. "What do you provide there?"

"Community, mostly," I said. "Programs for kids, cooking classes, we've got social workers on staff and public health nurses. And a couple years ago I helped start a senior food program."

Leonard's brow furrowed. "Like Meals on Wheels?"

"Similar, yep. We kept seeing that our elderly neighbors weren't getting connected to the services they needed. We had neighbors with nothin' to eat in their fridges, but they'd never say a word. Never ask for help. I realized it had more to do with trust than access. So I hired two people to oversee it, with the goal to build trust one-on-one with neighbors we couldn't reach before."

"Amazing," Leonard said. "You tailored a program to fit the unique needs of your neighbors and not the other way around."

I grinned. "It's South Philly, you know you can't tell us to do nothin'. *But* folks know what they need, as long as someone's honestly interested in the answer."

Gloria returned my smile. “I felt that way growing up about the community we built around the rec centers. There was always something special that wasn’t easily replicated.” She touched me lightly on the arm. “I’m happy to know that kind of work is being done all over. Being the director’s a tough job, but it seems like the right fit for you.”

It’d been a hot August night, a lot like this one, when Elaine dragged me into her office and asked if I had any extra time to help out around the center on a part-time basis. She said she’d seen Alice at church, learned how I’d been cut from the Mets and was home for good, and had I ever considered community work?

I’d muttered something noncommittal—*sure, yeah, I can help*—never realizing that she’d been giving me a lifeline, a purpose, something bigger than my injury to focus on.

“It’s tough, but maybe it’s the ballplayer in me.” I tossed a covert wink at Charlie. “I’ve always loved a challenge.”

The crowd started to applaud as a woman took to the podium, introducing herself as one of the convention coordinators. The lights dimmed most of the way, and the audience started to still. I was turning in my seat when Leonard tapped me on the arm.

“Gloria and I would love to come for a visit and learn more about your program,” he said, slipping me his business card.

I barely managed to keep my cool. “I’d love to have you down.”

There was a presentation happening on stage, but I was too busy feeling victorious. Because I knew—knew it the way I used to catch a runner trying to steal—that Gloria and Leonard were the miracle donors the food program needed. They were locals who’d grown up in rec centers and who seemed to already get why ours was special.

I leaned in to Charlie, whispered, “They’re interested in coming on a tour.”

She suppressed an actual squeal and kissed me hard on the lips. I laughed softly against her mouth and let the kiss deepen for all of a second. Any more than that and we'd be finding a utility closet somewhere.

"I know what you did for me tonight. What would people do if they found out this bad girl was a secret softie?"

She held a finger to her lips. "Don't blow my cover, O'Callaghan." Then her expression shifted, growing serious. "You're going to do incredible work as the director. Your parents would be so proud of you. I'm...I'm proud of you."

I couldn't reply, at least not verbally. But I kissed the top of her hand and let her see how strongly those words affected me.

"Now, of course, we'll be doing awards all night in between our program," the woman on stage said cheerfully, "but this wouldn't be the championship gala without the fan award. Presented to the dirt bike racer that fans have voted on as their *favorite* for the year. It's an indication of the rider to watch, the one whose racing style and technique has captivated our base of supporters."

Surprised, my eyes darted up to the stage. "Wait, you didn't tell me there'd be *awards* tonight."

"Because it's no big deal," she whispered back. "I mean, it *is* a big deal, but it's mostly a popularity contest, and I've never been about that life."

I arched a disbelieving brow. "Even though your fans are obsessed with you, and you're also a two-time X Games winner with *Bettencourt* printed on the back of your jacket?"

She fidgeted with the straps of her jumpsuit, averting her gaze. "That doesn't necessarily mean—"

"And we are so happy to announce that this year's winner is none other than *Charlie Maddox*," the announcer yelled.

The applause that erupted was instantaneous. Charlie froze in her seat with her mouth wide open.

"Oh my goodness, *congratulations*," Gloria exclaimed.



“Charlie?” The announcer peered at us from the stage. “Would you like to come up?”

Charlie glanced at me with an expression of pure astonishment. I grinned at her, nudging her knees. “They’re calling your name, Maddox. Go give the people what they want.”

She rose from her seat as if in a dream, slowly climbing the stairs to the podium on stage. I couldn’t have turned away from her even if I tried. She took a shaky breath, and I swear I *felt* it.

People hooted and whistled as Charlie accepted her award. “Thank you...*so* much,” she said, speaking into the mic. “To say that I’m...*stunned* is an understatement. This sport, this community, these *fans* are everything to me.”

She swallowed and gripped the podium. “When I was five years old, I asked my dad if he could teach me how to fly. And the next day, he had me on a tiny dirt bike in our backyard. I don’t remember much except that from the moment I started, I never wanted to stop. Malcolm Maddox is a legend in this sport, but he’s also my dad, and he never, ever gave up on me. Whenever I worried there was something I couldn’t do, he was there to remind me that I was unstoppable.”

Long applause followed this mention of her dad. Then Charlie looked directly at me.

“And to my boyfriend, Rowan. Having you here tonight as my date is an honor. Thank you for always seeing me, for seeing the real me. You are extraordinary in every single way.”

The audience clapped again as she finished and took pictures with her trophy. Meanwhile, my body was in a euphoric *crisis*—palms sweating, skin clammy, breath shallow.

The realization dawned so easily. I was in love with Charlie. Like, *run through the streets yelling about it* kind of love. And that wasn’t the part that was scary.

I’d been in love with her for a long, long time.

It was realizing that now I had to tell her.

And hope beyond hope that she loved me back.



## ROWAN

Two hours later, the dinner wrapped up and I walked out into the lobby with my arm slung around Charlie's neck, wearing the goofiest smile imaginable.

A bunch of other shit happened after Charlie won her award, but I barely took it in. I was too focused on touching her, whispering jokes in her ear, watching her bask in the glow of fans wanting pictures and autographs.

I was gonna tell her tonight. I had to—even now, the words crowded the back of my throat, making it tough to swallow. It'd be easy, right? *Now that we're not fake dating anymore, I figured it was the best time to mention that I'm in love with you and have been forever.*

My stomach twisted into knots so fast I worried I might puke.

"I still can't believe I won this," she murmured, stroking a finger across her name on the gold plate. "I sent a picture to my dad and Penny, and they lost their minds over it."

"It's a big deal. *You're* a big deal."

She pinched two fingers together. "*Maybe* a little. But I don't want to brag too much and make you feel bad."

I laughed, pressing my lips into her hair. I was just about to say something corny like *you wanna get the hell out of here?*

But then Dempsey walked up to us—mouth set in a grim line—and we froze.

"Dempsey, hey...what's wrong?" Charlie asked.

“Can I speak to you for a second? In private?” her agent asked.

I gingerly removed the award from Charlie’s hands. “I can hold this for you. I’ll be right over here, okay?”

She didn’t respond. She was walking quickly into a side hallway, tension radiating from her body already. I raked my hand through my hair and tried to look anywhere else, not wanting to spy. It was impossible though—my focus was glued on Charlie as she listened to whatever it was Dempsey was telling her.

Shock exploded across Charlie’s face. Then a gradual, creeping anger. That wasn’t what had pain shooting through my chest—it was the way her shoulders hunched forward in defeat.

Dempsey pulled her in for a hug, Charlie nodding at what she said. In a flash, she was walking away, away from me and the crowd and deeper into the hallway next to her.

I was on the move immediately. Stalked right past Dempsey without even saying anything and barely made it to the small room Charlie slipped into in time. The door was slamming shut, but I caught the side with an inch to spare. I slipped into what looked like a small conference room with dim lighting and office chairs stored in a haphazard pattern.

I set her award down gingerly on the closest table. Charlie was in the middle of the room. Her arms were wrapped around her waist, and she was crying.

“Charlie, what —” I said, reaching for her.

She sniffed, swiping angrily at her cheeks. “Oh, Rowan. Hey. What are you doing here?”

I took a few steps closer. She took a few back.

“I saw Dempsey give you what looked like really bad news and I...” I bent, tried to catch her eye. “I wanted to see if you were okay. But you don’t look okay at all.”

She was trying to hide her face, like she didn’t want me to see her tears. “Well, I was supposed to have a meeting with

Bettencourt tomorrow, me and Dempsey together. And I was hoping things with them were getting better, because you and I \_\_\_”

She trailed off, biting her lip.

“I was helping you with your reputation,” I said pointedly.

“Right. It was working. Or I thought it was, but Dempsey told me they haven’t been happy with that video of me going around where I got into it with that reporter. And while we were at the dinner, she got some email from their lawyers in preparation for tomorrow. The email had legal documents attached to them, dissolving my contract. So... I’m officially fucked.”

My body sagged with the news.

“I’ll get paid what they owe me for the rest of the month, but after that, I’m without any income. Which means my dad definitely gets evicted.”

I blew out a breath. “The threat of getting cut can’t compare to knowing that you’re finally being let go. It’s agony. Charlie, I’m so sorry. You know I’ve been there. For what it’s worth, they’re assholes for doing this to you.”

She was still avoiding my gaze, practically skittish. My instinct was to go to her, hold her while she cried, but every time I moved closer, she moved away.

“It’s okay.” She wiped her eyes again and set her shoulders. “This isn’t on you, Rowan. You...you’ve been incredible. You even agreed to help me when I asked you to tag along as my fake boyfriend. But this whole mess is my fault and always has been.”

I swallowed roughly. “You can still ask me for help. I’m here.”

She was shaking her head. “I don’t talk about my mom a lot because she wasn’t a nice person. My dad and I were like inconvenient pit stops for her, an annoyance more than anything else. But when my dad got hurt, I found where she was living. Reached out for help because I was so scared I

didn't know what to do. I called and sent emails. Sent a letter, and she never replied to any of it."

Her eyes finally shot to mine—greener than I'd ever seen them, practically emerald, and red around her lashes. "I fixed everything then, all by myself. I'll fix it now."

I was silent for a minute, letting this new knowledge about her mother sink in. It painted Charlie's extreme self-sufficiency in a whole new light, all that confidence coming from a person who'd learned at a young age how to survive on her own.

So I finally said, "That's a lot of pressure on you. Shouldering the burden all alone."

Her face softened. "It isn't. Rowan...look at what you went through as a kid, losing both of your parents and having your world destroyed when you were so young. This is...this is only money. Legal stuff and contracts. It's nothing."

"Losing them was the worst possible thing imaginable," I admitted, "and also, I had people that helped us. A lot of people. They didn't make me feel bad for needing them either. Just showed up when they could, as many times as they could. Doing that on my own wouldn't have been possible."

I lowered my voice. "And you're not alone either because I'm here with you. Charlie, gorgeous, you drove five hours in the middle of the night to sit with me when I was in the hospital. I asked and you came. It didn't make me weak for asking either. It *did* help me realize that I could rely on you."

She was chewing on her lip so much I was worried she'd cut herself. Every muscle in my body urged me to *go* to her, but not when she was staring at me like this.

"Rowan..." She cleared her throat. "Can you leave?"

I frowned. "What?"

"I don't know how to say this without sounding like an asshole, but I need to be alone right now. I've gotta figure out what to do next, where my dad and Penny are going to live." She shrugged, clearly lost in her thoughts now. "They can crash at my studio for a little bit, but it's so small."

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Don’t push me away, Charlie. Please. I can see what you’re doing.”

She cocked her head. “And what is that?”

“This...getting vulnerable and then running from it. It’s what happened after the day and a half we spent in the hospital. You were there with me for one of the worst moments of my life, and we barely talked after. I didn’t see you for four *years* until you randomly walked into my office.”

She was swallowing rapidly. “What do you mean? I texted you, checked in on you.”

“You held me while I cried my eyes out and lost the dreams I’d had since I was just a kid. Charlie, it was...it was *intimate*. It meant something to me, and I know it did for you too. After, it was like we were polite acquaintances at best. It put all this space between us instead of bringing us closer.”

She propped her hands on her hips. “I thought you would want some space. Any time I open up like that with someone, it makes me want to run away. I assumed—”

“That I would run?” I interrupted. “Push you away like you’re doing now?”

Irritation sparked in her gaze. “Why am I solely to blame here? It’s not like you were reaching out to me either. Whenever I did, you were back to cocky jokes and avoiding the truth. I don’t know...it felt like you were shutting me out. Because you do the exact same thing as me, Rowan. Put walls up so people won’t get too close.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Released a frustrated breath. “You’re right. I made every fucking mistake in the book when it came to you back then. We *are* the same. We won’t tear down those walls because we’ve lost too much.”

I kept my focus solely on her. Tension rippled in the space between our bodies.

“So let me be very clear. I am in this for real. I am in this *for you*. And I’m not running this time.”



A long beat passed. Then another. She finally gave me the smallest of nods—and one side of her mouth hitched up. It was the most minor of positive gestures, but I'd take it.

“Thank you for saying that.” She pressed her palms to her forehead, grimacing. “I'm not...I'm not great with this stuff, Rowan. And I want to talk more about what you said. Want to and need to. But I actually do need you to go home. Go out with Dean, go out with your friends. You should be celebrating your new job. Not here, watching me have a breakdown. I'm fine, I swear.”

I was silent, staring at her, because a sneaky voice in my head was warning me that if I left now, she was gonna leave forever. What had I *just said* to Charlie back at the bar?

*Hoping for new, happy things feels dangerous to me. It can so easily disappear.*

She stepped a foot closer, though she still wasn't touching me. “Rowan. This is what I was trying to tell you earlier, after my race at the track.” She waved a hand between us. “Faking a relationship is easy. Pretending makes it so that all the tough and complicated parts fade away. Truly being with someone is complicated. Can you trust that I'm asking for what I need?”

My gut churned—another direct hit from Charlie because I realized I *didn't*. I wanted to barrel my way through this and fix it for her. Anything to keep her close.

“Okay, I'll go,” I bit out. “I'll call you tomorrow, see how you're doing?”

She nodded with a—small—watery smile.

Then I spun on my heels and left her there. Walked the two and a half miles back to South Philly because a nasty combination of regret and confusion was giving me a burst of adrenaline I didn't want.

In the end, I'd done the same thing I'd done before—not tell the whole truth, avoid the scary edges out of fear. I should have admitted why I was so afraid to call her after I got hurt. Should have admitted that I was more than just *in this*.

I loved her, all of her. But it was the hesitation on her face that held me back in the end. She was doing the thing she did best. The thing *I did too*.

Run away.



# CHARLIE

The next morning, Dempsey took one look at me and winced in sympathy.

We were at the small coffee shop across the street from the convention center. And my stomach flipped every time my gaze landed on the sign for Reading Terminal Market, forcing me to think about the morning Rowan and I spent there, laughing over breakfast. The way he'd kissed my hand like a prince in a fairytale and my traitorous knees had gone weak.

*I was always into the warrior girl on the horse. Obviously.*

I pushed my mostly untouched latte away with one finger. “Do I look that awful? I dressed up and everything.”

“It’s not your clothing, it’s your”—she waved a broad circle around my body— “aura.”

I rubbed my eyes, gritty from lack of sleep. My temples throbbed. My throat was sore and raw from crying. And I was tired all the way down to my bones. “What color is it?”

“Whatever ‘I’ve been up all night with food poisoning’ is.” She tilted her head to the side. “Is it the Bettencourt news or something else? We didn’t get to talk after I found you.”

“It’s everything,” I said miserably. Then looked around to gauge if any fans were watching us. “After I told Rowan about my contract termination, we got into a fight, and now I’m... sad.”

Dempsey sat next to me, brows knit together in concern. “I’ve seen you upset plenty of times before. But it’s usually

more *fire-breathing dragon* or preparation to tear someone's face off. Sad is new."

It might have been new, but I didn't have another word to describe that our argument had left me feeling hopeless and out of sorts—and that was on top of my genuine panic over my loss of income. But everything Rowan had said last night kept spinning through my thoughts, one of the *many* reasons I'd spent it tossing and turning.

*It was like we were polite acquaintances at best. It put all this space between us instead of bringing us closer.*

I hadn't been lying about needing to be alone after realizing what was gonna happen to me and my dad. I needed to sit with the news and process, needed to put a plan together so that when I called him, I'd have ideas and solutions.

I also needed a good old-fashioned rage-cry.

Which I did, and it helped, but then after a few hours, I missed Rowan. Was too much of a coward to pick up the phone and say, "*I'm sorry I pushed you away again.*"

If our argument was any indication, we still didn't fully trust each other. And *that* was a whole other complicated knot to untangle if we wanted to move forward.

"It's new because I don't usually like guys the way I like Rowan," I admitted.

Dempsey studied me over her coffee. "I noticed. He's the real deal, isn't he?"

I nodded. "He had me over a few days ago to meet his grandmother for the first time, and I got so nervous I brought her, like, seven bouquets."

Dempsey's expression was kind, but there was a subtle sharpness to the tilt of her chin. "You know what's interesting? In the beginning, before I met him, I'd been thinking that your new, PR-friendly boyfriend was a tad...convenient. Timing-wise, that is."

We entered a mini stare-off—with me trying to project wide-eyed innocence.

And failing horribly.

After thirty seconds, I dropped my head in my hands, too tired to keep up the lie.

“Please don’t hate me,” I mumbled, then lifted my head, “I thought it might help, given how disastrous the situation was. The thing is, the two of us dating was fiction, but the rest of it—the back story, how we met, our long friendship—was true. Until it got slightly *complicated* when all the pretend stopped being pretend.”

“How long ago was that?” she asked.

I blew my bangs to the side. “I don’t know. Five days ago?”

“Huh.” Her smile was secretive. “I would have said way earlier than that based on how you acted around each other. Though I’m guessing that’s the complicated part.”

I dropped my gaze, fiddled with my coffee. “We’ve cared about each other for some time. Cared very deeply. And I knew that going in but didn’t want to admit how many years I’d been pining for Rowan without realizing it.”

I paused and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Dempsey. You’re my agent but more importantly, you’re my friend and I lied to you. It was not one of my better ideas, and now here I am, still about to lose my sponsor, having dragged Rowan into a whole mess.” I reached for her hand and took it. “I should have told you the truth. Asked for help. Something I’m apparently pretty bad at doing.”

“Yes, you should have asked for help,” she said simply. “I *am* your agent and am *extremely talented*, babe. I’ve got your back even when you piss me off and get your picture taken drunk off your ass. And I know why you did it, why you’d do anything for Malcolm. But it’s worth noting that you *did* ask for help. You asked Rowan. Not me, not your dad or Penny. You’re better at it than you think. The fact that you chose him is why he’s so special.”

*It’s always been different between us.*

I dropped my chin into my hand. “You’re right. You always are.”

“You should tell me everything so I can fix it before it becomes a problem, okay?” She glanced past my shoulder and grimaced. “Shit, the Bettencourt rep just got out of a cab. What do you want me to do?”

I shrugged, completely unsure. “I need money. A lot of it. But I haven’t thought past panic mode, to be honest. What do you think my best option is?”

She passed a hand over her shaved head. “I can negotiate, see if I can’t wiggle out some extra cash in your last check. We can also go all-out on trying to get them to keep you. I’m not sure I can work any miracles over coffee, but if it’s what you want, I’ll hunt them down at their offices in New York until they give me the right answer.”

I glanced behind me and spotted the guy. My stomach twisted with that same unease I’d felt since the day I signed. The unease Rowan had pointed out the day I’d gotten second place—*maybe it’s trying to tell you something*.

“Tell me the truth. Is their sanitized, ‘family-friendly’ image being used to hide how ugly they are?”

Dempsey chewed this over for a few seconds—which was already a red flag. “You shouldn’t have to tie yourself to a place that doesn’t celebrate who you are. Or tie yourself to a place where your public image is so heavily scrutinized in such a hypocritical way. And I’m not talking about them being angry at those pictures of you drunk at the bar. Even *exceptional* sponsors wouldn’t be happy about that. But if they’re serious about pulling the plug because you were outspoken and put a man in his place for being a dick...”

She trailed off, and I sensed that the rep was close behind me. Dempsey was standing and re-buttoning her jacket, pasting a fake smile onto her face. “How can you trust they won’t do it the next time you stand up for yourself? The next time you use your voice, and they claim you’re ‘combative’?”

She finished speaking just as the rep arrived—a flashy-looking man in his mid-thirties with an expensive suit and a cunning, blue-eyed gaze behind his glasses.

“Dempsey McKenna, it’s nice to meet in person,” he said, then turned to shake my hand. I’d never been fired from a contract before so didn’t know whether to smile placidly or give him the finger.

I managed a grimace he didn’t seem to notice.

“Charlie, it’s nice to meet you too, albeit under these somber circumstances. I’m Marcus Preston.”

He took a seat, and Dempsey cleared her throat. “We received the documents late last night, and I’m assuming you’re here to confirm that Charlie’s three-year contract with Bettencourt Industries is being terminated early?”

I took a steady, calming inhale and pictured Rowan walking toward me in his suit last night—sunflowers in hand, a shy smile on his face.

Marcus pressed his lips into a thin line. “I’m afraid so. The termination should be all above board, per the documents from our lawyers. We’re sorry it didn’t work out, but we’re sure you have a long career ahead of you. Oh, and congratulations on the award you won last night. That must have felt pretty special.”

I sat forward in my seat. “Can you clarify why you’re terminating our contract? So we’re clear? You’re right—I did win an award last night. Took second place a few days ago and am favored to win the championship. What’s the problem?”

“It’s somewhat...delicate.”

“Good thing my client and I are not,” Dempsey replied.

Annoyance flickered across his face. “Your continued absence at our events is, frankly, reason alone. As is your rather poor performance recently. Some...issues with your personal life haven’t been up to par, though as we expressed to your agent, romantic relationships play well in the realm of public opinion. We were pleased to see it.”



I shifted, uncomfortable. I'd been so desperate to find a solution to help my dad I hadn't stopped to consider what it would feel like, being sponsored by a place that valued me *more* for having a boyfriend and *less* when I didn't.

"But, popular or not, the situation with James Clark was the last straw. It's not the first member of the media you've had run-ins with, and he's always been a supporter of Bettencourt athletes. He was very embarrassed and continues to be because of *you*."

"He's a well-known sexist who takes pleasure in embarrassing women in public," I shot back before I could stop myself. "This isn't the first time he's done it either. Why should I let him belittle me? All it does is let him keep being the worst in the name of...of *politeness*."

Marcus sent me a look of sympathy that barely reached his eyes. "You're entitled to your opinion on that, Charlie. Certainly, you are."

Dempsey's annoyance was as tangible as mine was.

"We as a company can't have our name associated with athletes who are so *outspoken*. When it comes to sponsors, Bettencourt is elite in every way, and many of our sponsors have gone on to compete in the summer and winter Olympics, multiple times. With as much money as we put towards their careers, we expect our athletes to be"—he frowned—"palatable to the general public. Women with agreeable reputations make money. Others do not."

My cheeks flushed hot with anger. "*Palatable*? This is women's dirt bike racing. The whole point is to take up space in a world that prefers us small and silent. If you want some perfect, polite princess why the hell did you choose me? And why did you choose motocross?"

Marcus stood and re-buttoned his suit jacket. "I'll be blunt. You were a risk for us from the beginning. And a mistake. You have a bright career ahead of you but, just between us, getting into dirt bike sports was an experiment. However, I don't believe we'll be continuing in the motocross space. Bit of a compatibility issue. Best of luck to you though."

Dempsey and I watched him walk away in a kind of furious shock.

I turned to my agent, who looked absolutely murderous. “I’m not sure the, uh, *motocross space* will miss them.”

“I’m not saying this as your agent,” she began, “but as a queer dirt bike racer who’s loud as hell...fuck ’em if they want palatable.”

“Cheers to that,” I said dryly. “Except here I am, once again *losing you* money. Based on *that* interaction, I’m glad I’m out. But if you think we should fight to get them to keep me...”

“I don’t think that,” she said firmly. “Yes, this makes my job—and your life—a little more complicated. But I’ve been sitting with this for weeks now, trying to convince myself it was okay for the contract. It’s not okay, that *guy’s* not okay, and demanding you stay quiet and amenable is the sort of bullshit we keep having to put up with.”

Her brow arched. “And they would never say it explicitly, but what do you guess the odds are that Bettencourt wouldn’t support Riley and Quinn as a couple?”

“Very, very high,” I admitted. “Would probably cover up their homophobia by claiming they don’t want their athletes to *get political*.”

I raised my latte and tapped it against Dempsey’s cup. “To reiterate, fuck it and fuck them.” Panic burst through my righteous anger. “Oh my god. I do need money. *Shit*, I need so much money.”

I sagged forward and dropped my head back in my hands. Dempsey patted my hair—awkwardly, like I was her dog—but I still appreciated it.

“I can call the owner of Archer’s Angels, you know.”

I glanced up, surprised. She shot me a bemused look. “I have spies everywhere, duh. I know they approached you about joining, and they’d be stupid to pass up the opportunity to snatch you while you’re suddenly a very free agent. Unless you want to go back to privateering?”

“Privateering suddenly sounds very stressful and very—” I hesitated. “Lonely.”

Dempsey was already working magic on her phone, pivoting fast to the next option because she really was the best agent around. “One of the team owners is an old friend of mine. And for what it’s worth, I adore Riley and Quinn, and they seem to genuinely like you too.”

Her fingers paused, gaze rising to mine. “The lesson here is that when you’re confronted with two choices and one is working with a stodgy corporation and the other is a team of fearless, bloodthirsty women...”

“Go with the fearless, bloodthirsty women every single time,” I replied.

And the relieved smile that flew across my face as soon as I said those words was the final indication I needed that my instincts were correct.

“You bet.” She stood without taking her attention off her phone. “If I’m calling you later today, it’s because I’ve got good news on the team front.” She tapped a second more before slipping her phone away and resting a hand on my shoulder. “Being on a team will be different for you, Charlie. They’ll be relying on your performance. But also, you’ll be relying on them.”

“Helping one another,” I said.

“How do you feel about that?”

I hummed under my breath, thought about what Rowan had said yesterday—all the vulnerability about asking for help, but also the reward. *You drove five hours in the middle of the night to sit with me when I was in the hospital. I asked and you came. Didn’t make me weak for asking either. It did make me realize that I could rely on you.*

“I *feel* like...” I drew out the words as my mind raced. “I should give this whole asking-for-help thing a shot.”

Dempsey winked. “That’s my girl.”

She spun to leave, then seemed to change her mind. She dropped a hand to the back of her chair, nails drumming across the top. “I’m not speaking as an agent here, but as a retired rider. What your dad’s gone through is much too common in this industry. His pain and depression. His listlessness. Even his struggles with money, though I know Malcolm hasn’t always made the smartest decisions when it comes to his finances. But it’s like we take our last turn around that track, and the world is zapped of its color.”

She bit her lip. “I don’t even have to tell you how hard it will be when that time comes for you. You lived it with Malcolm. Our bodies can’t do this forever, and the only way I could prepare for that day was to have a plan for my future.”

Heat flooded my face. I’d said something similar to Rowan last night, about how much I admired him—an athlete who’d come out the other side of retirement without losing himself.

“You don’t have to have it all mapped out, but starting to accept that reality will help, Charlie. Joining a team is the best next step, but what comes after that will be up to you.”

I stood and hugged her. “Thank you for saying that. I wouldn’t want to do any of this without you.”

“Same here, babe. Now, time’s a’wastin’. Go get your man.”

Dempsey walked away, leaving me at the table with half a latte, one less sponsor and—hopefully—an entire team in my future. And when I reached into my bag for my phone, my fingers closed around plastic instead.

Curious, I fished it out and realized it was a raspberry Ring Pop. Rowan must have slipped it in there at some point when I wasn’t looking. I couldn’t even be surprised by the gesture.

*We were always doing things for each other, back at Jolene’s, weren’t we?*

I held it between my fingers. My entire body was suddenly so buoyant I thought I might float away, up into the blue summer sky, over the skyline of the city Rowan loved with his whole being.

If I had to base my understanding of what falling in love felt like, it'd be something dramatic courtesy of the romantic comedies I'd been slightly confused by as a teenager—realizing you were in love was like being struck by lightning, or swept away by a tidal wave, or devastated by a hurricane.

I'd convinced myself I wasn't in love with Rowan because I couldn't point to the one moment when I felt struck by lightning. The hot, frenetic attraction between us was always on the “instantly devastating” side of things, but our emotional connection was more like the steady growth of flowers blooming in a garden.

It grew and grew, bolstered by our friendship, our tentative trust, all the times we took care of each other in ways that felt natural to me.

I'd shown up in Philly, stumbled back into Rowan's life with a bizarre request, and then been shocked at the intensity of my feelings for him, even after years apart.

But I shouldn't have been. I was only stumbling back into the wild, abundant garden of our love. Reaching for the sun, reaching for *more* no matter the season.

I curled my fingers around the candy and pressed it to my lips with a smile. Then I grabbed my phone and dialed a new number.

Tabitha answered with a cheery greeting. “I've been *waiting* for you to call. Are we doing a girls' night? I can make myself free immediately. Listen, that's the sound of me shoving my work into a trashcan.”

I laughed. “Yes, to a girls' night, but before we do that... can I call in a girls' favor?”



## ROWAN

“*D*id you sleep here last night?”

I blearily opened my eyes—it took me a second to realize it was a) morning and b) I’d crashed on my grandmother’s couch. Which explained why my entire body felt like crumpled-up death—it was a foot too short for my legs.

“Yeah, I didn’t wanna wake you,” I grumbled. “It was late, and you were sound asleep.”

My grandmother clicked her tongue and placed her hand on my forehead the way she used to when I was sick. “Are you all right, dear?”

I pushed myself to sit, knocking off all the pillows in the process. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was out late last night at this event with Charlie”—my stomach pitched like I was seasick— “and when I got back to my place, it felt a little lonely. Want me to make us a pot of coffee before I go into work?”

I swung my sore legs to the floor with a wince. She sat next to me on the couch, still in her bathrobe, and fixed me with a stare. “No need. Dean’s coming by in a minute with coffee and that breakfast casserole Midge makes so well.”

“Oh yeah? That’s nice of him.”

“It’s *for* you,” she said. “The whole block is talking about it.”

A chill raced down my spine. Someone probably overheard my argument with Charlie last night or saw me

walking home looking like Charlie Brown post-football, and now half of South Philly was gonna think we broke up.

*Faking relationships is easy.*

When I'd finally fallen into a restless sleep, my dreams had been fractured and weird and full of Charlie.

"Talking about what?" I asked.

My grandmother wrapped her arms around my side. "Your new job being *official*. My grandson, the executive director."

It took me a moment to remember I'd shared the good news with Alice and Dean before heading to the gala. "Right, *right*. I got a new gig. Kind of a big deal too."

"Don't I know it," she said proudly. "Oh, I can't *wait* to tell everyone at church on Sunday."

I grinned. "You mean brag."

"Yes, I do."

I went to stand but she stopped me with her hand. "It *is* a big deal, Rowan. The whole neighborhood is talking about it because we're so proud of you."

I rubbed the space between my shoulder blades and felt the rigid tension there. But beneath everything that had happened after our argument, there was still the conversation I had with the Wilkinsons that felt like a legit victory. There was that sense that I was suddenly in the right place, at the right time, with the right—new—job.

"I'm happy. Beyond happy. And I think mom and dad would be too," I said.

She beamed. "Having a career that includes major league baseball as well as directing a nonprofit is quite the accomplishment, dear. There's no doubt they'd be as happy for you as I am. Which is saying something, because I'm over the moon."

"That's what I like to hear," I said. "At first, I was so sure I was the absolute wrong guy—inexperienced, too much of an amateur. But now I can't picture doing anything but this."



She patted my knee softly. “Taking risks feels like too much of a gamble when you’ve already lost so much. But even after losing your parents, you never stopped living—though I know so much of it can be scary. It certainly has been for me sometimes. Your mom *and* your dad were two people who embraced change with wide-open arms. They were...” Her voice caught. “They were extraordinary together. Just like you.”

Charlie had said the same thing last night.

Her face softened as she examined the picture I’d been looking at—the honeymoon trip photo, where my parents were posed on the hood of their car with the Grand Canyon behind them.

She took it from the coffee table and smoothed the edges down. “You always did love this picture. Used to carry it around with you instead of a stuffed animal sometimes.”

My throat felt too raw, so I dropped my head to her shoulder instead.

“The summer months are hard on you too,” she murmured. “I forget that sometimes. You do such a nice job of making sure that I’m okay that I sometimes forget to do the same for you.”

“I’m missing them a lot lately,” I said simply.

“Me too. Every day.”

“On bad days, when I look at this picture, I imagine that they live there. That this is some recent postcard they’ve sent us from their new life in Arizona.”

“If only it was,” she replied. “If only.”

She let me sit like that for a minute, stroking my hair. When I finally sat up, I pressed my palms into my eyes and sniffed. I expected to find Alice watery-eyed too, but she was smiling, oddly enough.

It was a secretive smile, an *I know something you don’t* vibe that had me perking up, curious.

“What’s that look for?” I asked.

She waved her finger in a circle around my face. “You look like an anvil just dropped on your head.”

I scoffed, then raked my hands through my hair. “I’m sleep-deprived and in need of coffee, you mean.”

“It’s because of the anvil.”

“Last night I slept on a couch made for a child.”

She stood and started to putter around me, tidying up. “Say what you want, Rowan. Your father tried to deny it too, at first. After he met your mother. I knew it from the moment I met that Charlie of yours that she’s the reason why you’ve been floating around the block looking so bewildered. So as much as I love when you stay here, you should fix whatever happened between the two of you. And fix it fast.”

I opened my mouth to argue but stopped when I caught sight of myself in the mirror. My red hair stuck out at every angle. I had half a beard on my jaw, and my eyes were bleary. I already knew that I was hopelessly in love with Charlie Maddox. Suspected, at times, that the whole *anvil on my head* thing was happening to me.

It was something else entirely, seeing the actual effects.

“I’m in love with Charlie,” I said over my shoulder. The words, out loud, sent my heart into fucking *overdrive*.

“Yes, I know dear, that’s what I *just said*.”

I laughed into my hands, half exhausted, half wired. A second later, I heard the screen door open and Dean’s voice.

“Yo, I got food here,” he called.

“He’s in there,” Alice said, in the loudest whisper I’d ever heard. “And he and Charlie are in love. He needs your help. Oh, look, your mother is here, and she looks like she has gossip.”

Dean strolled into the room, whistling. In his hand was a plate of breakfast casserole—eggs, cheese, bacon—and a large cup of coffee.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” I asked.

He set the food and coffee down and motioned me to stand. I did and he immediately pulled me in for a fast hug.

“I’m happy for you, Rowan,” he rumbled, then slapped me on my non-injured shoulder. “I’m sad to see Elaine go but also so glad you’re taking over.”

I sank back onto the couch, feeling like shit. Feeling *guilty*. And it must have showed on my face. Dean handed me the coffee and said, “What’s wrong, you don’t want the job now?”

“Nothin’s wrong. I, uh...I feel bad because I’ve been keeping a secret from you for weeks. Thought it was the right call but now I’m not so sure it was.”

“You mean because the board wanted to cut my job and the food program?”

I paused with the cup halfway to my mouth. “You knew?”

He shrugged. “Not officially, but I kinda guessed. Also, I’ve been guarding this knowledge about you for my entire life but...” A grin spread across his face. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“Me? No way. *What?*”

“You’re not the worst I’ve ever seen? But you’re not great either. And I’m not stupid, Rowan. I’m the newest hire at a nonprofit with funding issues and whenever I brought it up, you’d always change the subject too fast.”

“Well, I’m sorry that I did,” I said. “Your job is secure, by the way. Yours, Eddie’s, and the rest of the food program. But until I knew for certain, I thought I’d be worrying you for no reason.”

I passed a hand over the stubble on my jaw. “Except if the board had forced the issue, they could have cut you at any time, and I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself, having you be surprised like that. I shouldn’t have done it.”

Dean sipped his coffee in silence, mulling this over. “I wasn’t worried. Or mad. I knew it would work out okay. You’re my brother, Rowan. We’ve been looking out for each other since we were four years old. Even if you had to move

mountains with your bare hands, I trusted that you'd protect my job. Protect the program we've poured everything into."

I tossed him a smile. "You're givin' me a whole lot of credit."

"Yeah, but that's what you did, wasn't it?"

I nodded after a second. "I kept telling Luciana that cutting you, cutting Eddie, eliminating the program wasn't an option. She agreed. The board did too, but it didn't seem like there was a way to save it. When they asked me to apply, I told her that I wanted the job. *And* that you had to stay. I'll need a few months to pull together an actual plan to refund the program, but I met Leonard and Gloria Wilkinson last night, and they asked if they could come out for a visit."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Those Philly donors that Elaine was always trying to meet? Damn, how'd that happen?"

I swallowed roughly. "Charlie introduced us."

"Ah, I see. Remind me to thank Charlie the next time I see her." He considered the couch and the disheveled pillows. "If Charlie did something cool, like set you up with one of the best donors in the city, why the hell did you sleep here last night?"

I settled back onto the couch with a heavy sigh. "We got into a fight. She and I tend to do this thing where we get vulnerable and then push people away. Or, in my case when it comes to dating, I never even *start* to let people in. I felt like she was running...from this, from us...and got scared. Then I might have pushed her a little too much without owning everything I'd done wrong too."

I cast my eyes to the ceiling. "I'm not some saint now or anything, but when Charlie met me, I was, what, twenty-one? Twenty-two? It was peak fucking around time for me. She saw a lot of shit, and I wish I could go back in time and change it. But I can't. I know that Charlie trusts me, know it 'cause I can *feel* it. When it comes to dating and being serious though? I can't blame her for worrying I'll bail when it gets hard. I'm worried *she'll* do the same thing."

I flashed him a grim smile. “We share a similar relationship pattern. When we were faking it for her reputation, it was easier to ignore all these little ways that we’d hurt each other in the past without realizing it.”

Dean sipped his coffee, nodded thoughtfully. “All the real-life issues are a challenge, that’s for sure. You’re starting to share a life together. There’s gonna be compromises and disagreements. Ways that you’ll miscommunicate and hurt each other. The difference is how you show up when it happens. Because if Charlie *is* like you, then she’s used to bouncing whenever things get complicated.”

I mentally tallied up the microscopic info I knew about her dating history and love life. “Yep. Yep, that sounds about right.”

He slowly spun his wedding ring. “For me, marrying Tabitha didn’t change much. Wedding or not, I’m committed to her forever. And if that’s the way you feel about Charlie, then you’ll figure out all the complicated stuff. The communicating and the compromising. You just have to stay and face it all together. One day at a time.”

A clever grin appeared on his face. “Have you reconsidered how many breakfasts you’d cook her in the morning?”

I huffed out a tired laugh. “I have and I swear to god, it’s like...a million. A million breakfasts. How do you get anything done now that you have Tabitha?”

“I stopped getting shit done like, six months after we started dating.” He inclined his head. “No offense to my new boss. Speaking of, should we head to work?”

I scrambled around for my phone. “We should because I guess I’m in charge now. But I should call Charlie first, right? I’ll call her now. Wait, should I though?”

Dean was pressing his lips together like he was desperately trying not to smile. “Let’s get to work first and then strategize your forgiveness tour. I would also take a shower and change,

if I were you. You look like a damn anvil just fell on your head.”



## CHARLIE

“*W*hat do you think?” I asked, holding up the door-sized poster. “Too cheesy? Or just cheesy enough?”

Tabitha peeked out from under Elaine’s—now Rowan’s—desk and flashed me a double thumbs up. “When it comes to little kids drawing signs, is there genuinely such a thing as *too cheesy*? Also, how did you get them to draw all of that so last minute?”

I peered down the hallway. The group of mostly third graders peeking at me from the playground shrieked with laughter and ran away. “It turns out there are tiny dirt bike racing fans everywhere. I walked out there to say hey, and a whole cluster of kids recognized me.”

It’d been almost too cute to handle, watching them draw their names and color in around the message. Because these kids were regulars here at the center and neighbors of Rowan in South Philly and clearly adored him. When they were done, the butcher paper read *Congratulations Mr. Rowan!!!!* in big block letters. Around it, kids scribbled messages and designs, and even other staff came through, clearly delighted by the news.

By the time I made it back to the office to show Tabitha, my cheeks hurt from smiling.

“That sounds about right,” she said, voice muffled as she dusted across the top of the blinds. “You saw Rowan at Alice’s house the other night. He’s all swagger until it’s something he



truly *wants* and then he turns bashful. But he's practically the mayor here and won't ever admit it."

She turned and tossed me the feather duster with a wink. "That's why he's gonna love this surprise, Charlie. You done good, girl."

I assessed the room, which was already looking a ton better even after an hour of cleaning and organizing. Last night, Rowan had described the state of Elaine's office as a kind of chaotic struggle that stressed him out. As soon as we'd walked in here with cleaning supplies and framed photos, I understood why.

This office situation was *dire*.

It was a tiny gesture, but I'd enlisted Tabitha to help me make Rowan's first day as the *official* executive director as welcoming as possible, complete with the giant, kid-drawn welcome sign. We made sure not to disrupt anything that was already out, but we'd opened the windows and scrubbed every surface, and I'd placed a large bouquet of sunflowers on the table by his desk.

Tabitha had even swung by Midge and Maria's house—they had an overabundance of pictures of Rowan, Dean, and their families—and I'd quickly framed a few, placing them on his desk and bookshelf. The office was beginning to straddle the line between honoring Elaine's important legacy...and helping Rowan see that this new leadership role was fully his.

"Let's hope so," I said. "He made the past few weeks of this convention feel pretty fucking celebratory for me. And I feel bad." I fell back onto the couch with a sigh, the lack of sleep catching up to me. "Getting this job was a huge deal, then I found out about Bettencourt and went into full panic mode. I just want him to get a chance to celebrate his accomplishment too."

Tabitha sauntered over and fell back onto the couch with me. She pulled the collar of her shirt up to her nose and sniffed. Grimaced. "I smell like sweaty Windex. But I *look* amazing."

I laughed. “You’re sweet to do this with me since I’m basically a stranger.”

“That’s not true. We watched O’Callaghan home movies together so we’re soul bonded now. And as I said the other day, any person who’s important to Rowan is important to me. But our next girls’ night will involve dancing and *drinking*—I don’t care what the tabloids say.”

I extended my hand, and she shook it. “You’ve got a deal.”

“We need to stick together anyway,” she added. “Our moms left us. Most people feel sympathetic to that. Not everyone *understands it*. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I get the sense that you’ve got a cool dad, like me? Super close?”

I smiled at that accurate description. “We were always inseparable, even when my mom was around. I basically begged him to take me to his races, and he was happy to. He taught me how to ride. We trained together, worked on our bikes together. Growing up, my childhood was a little unconventional but also...it worked for us. Mom leaving made us tighter.”

“Mine too,” Tabitha said. “We’re so close, and he’s such a *good dad* that missing my mom or wishing they’d get back together felt like a betrayal. Like I shouldn’t think about her at all.”

I grabbed her hand. “I felt the same exact way.”

She twisted to prop her elbow up on the back of the couch. “They’re supposed to love us unconditionally, but my mom didn’t. So I internalized this feeling that it was all my fault. Internalized feeling unlovable. It made falling for Dean terrifying at first. My most urgent and persistent worry was... when is *he* going to leave me?”

I blinked through a surge of hot tears. “That sounds... relatable.”

Tabitha chewed on her lip, eyes darting across my face. “Feel free to tell me to shut up if I’m being too presumptuous. But you are lovable, Charlie. You *do* deserve it. Letting yourself be loved isn’t easy with the experiences we’ve had,

but if anyone's up for the task of loving the *hell* out of you, it's Rowan O'Callaghan. The guy can barely remember his own name whenever you're in a sixty-foot vicinity."

I laughed, surprised. "Can Dean remember your name though?"

She shook her head. "He and I have been head-over-heels for each other for a while now, and it only gets better. It only becomes more natural, being loved. Loving in return. I'm living proof."

Her phone buzzed and she peeked at the screen. "Speaking of, Dean said he and Rowan are walking in now."

"Great," I croaked. "I don't feel nervous at all."

"Nervous means you're telling the truth, right?" she said, before scrambling off the couch to hastily grab our cleaning supplies.

Meanwhile, I was glued to the couch, *super* nervous, and thinking about fake dates and authentic love. How easy it would be to stay with the safe, comfortable option—never vulnerable, always on the move.

Opening myself up to love might be harder in the beginning, but the reward was *Rowan*.

Was there anything sweeter?

When Dean arrived for the surprise, Rowan in tow, I was still sitting. And then stunned into stillness at the sight of him—his broad, playful grin and the sound of his cheerful laughter when he realized what we'd done.

"Surprise!" Tabitha cheered. "Happy 'you're now an executive director' day!"

"Holy *shit*," Rowan said, hand on his chest. "Yo, you did this all for me? Dean was in on it too?"

Dean shrugged a shoulder. "I told you to shower for your big day. And because—"

He nodded at where I sat on the couch, somewhat out of sight. When Rowan saw me, an electric charge shot through

my body, sending a goofy smile across my face.

“Charlie,” he said, sounding astonished.

“This whole thing was her idea,” Tabitha said. “She even got the kids to make you that.”

Rowan stared at the poster, stared at me, then back to the poster. He bent for a closer look and laughed behind his hand. “I’ve got no less than fifteen fingers in this drawing of me. Incredible. The kids did all of this?”

“You’ve got a whole center of people thrilled with your new job title,” I said. “Kids included.”

“And me included,” Dean said. He pulled Rowan in for a quick hug, and all I could think about was that framed picture in Alice’s kitchen of Dean and Rowan as teenagers, gangly arms around each other’s shoulders, smiling next to a baseball field. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, big guy,” Rowan said. “We’re gonna keep doing good here. I’m ready for whatever comes next.”

Dean nodded, slid an arm around Tabitha. “Every day is our chance to make this city better. You helped me remember that. Now we get to keep doing it together.”

Tabitha gave me an exaggerated wink. Then said, “We’d all love to keep talking about this amazing and emotional occasion. But later. After...uh, well *after*.”

I hid a smile. Mouthed *thank you*. Dean gave a discreet nod my way before they disappeared, closing the door behind them.

Leaving Rowan and me alone.

He rubbed the back of his head, his gaze rising to mine with a shy anticipation. “You did this for me?”

“You found your home, Rowan,” I said. “Found your community. After everything that you’ve been through, after knowing how scary it is to hope for what you want...you took a chance. And I meant what I said last night. I’m so proud of you.”

He glanced around the office, his throat working. Smiled when he saw the pictures and the sunflowers. “It feels more like mine, more like something I deserve. Especially with you in it.”

Pleasure suffused my limbs, sweet and liquid as honey. “Can you come here?”

Rowan was sinking onto the couch a moment later, and we were hugging a moment after that. My arms wrapped around his neck, my cheek pressed to his, those strong pitcher’s hands slipping around my waist.

Every single one of my loud, dissonant worries went as still and quiet as a snowy winter field.

He turned his head to kiss my forehead.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I pushed you to open up last night when you clearly needed space.” He pulled back—there were dark shadows under his eyes. “I do trust you to ask for what you need. If it’s not obvious, I’m out of my mind for you, Charlie. It feels like I’ve waited a lifetime to be with you, and the thought of this ending, of us running scared again the second we’re vulnerable, had me panicking.”

His smile was hesitant and slightly crooked. “I should have listened to you, respected what you needed. Not been the asshole. Again.”

I shook my head, my hands gently cupping his face. “I was pulling away though, even if I wasn’t aware of it at the time. But I went home to rage-cry by myself, then ended up missing you and was too cowardly to call. Having people see me at my messiest isn’t easy. Leaving people before they can leave me is.”

I shot a glance at the closed door. “Per Tabitha, who, it turns out, has a mom just like mine, relationships require a lot of trust. I grew up thinking I was easy to leave behind.”

“You’re not,” he said firmly. “I spent one single night without you and I’m goddamn miserable, Maddox.”

I laughed, pressing my forehead to his. “How do we stop this cycle then? Of keeping people at arm’s length when they

try and get too close?”

“By being ourselves, even if it’s messy,” he said. Then passed a hand over his mouth, jaw flexing. “After my injury, I was in a bad place. Hiding my pain and grief from everyone except Dean, as cocky as ever. As avoidant as ever. I knew even then we could have been something, Charlie. But I felt like I had nothing to offer you anymore—just my anger and hopeless disappointment.”

His eyebrows knit together. “Meanwhile, your career was taking off in the best way, and every time I saw you on the cover of some sports magazine or the ESPN website, looking strong and confident, bringing you into what I was going through seemed like dragging you down. You’d already taken care of one athlete who’d lost it all. I couldn’t get over this dread that you...that you wouldn’t want me. So you were right—I’m just as much to blame for the distance between us. I ran away.”

It felt like a dull knife was twisting beneath my rib cage. I shut my eyes, shaking my head, and when I opened them, they were full of tears. “I have never, ever felt that way about you. You are not a throwing arm and you’re not your injuries either. You’re not just a body, Rowan, deemed *worthless* or *worthwhile* based on your ability to earn money. I wish I’d done better by you after you got hurt, wish I’d been there and not put my insecurities first. But I did and I’m still sorry about it. You cried with me that night, and I would have broken the world apart with my bare hands to make you hurt less.”

I laughed, the sound ending on a half-sob. “It terrified me, wanting you that badly when I was so convinced you’d only leave. I talked myself out of telling you the truth and I shouldn’t have. Because the same thing that happened to you happened to me. I saw you again, and my feelings hadn’t softened or gone away. In fact, they keep getting stronger.”

Tears tracked down my face that I didn’t try to hide for the first time. Rowan swiped one gently.

“I love you, Rowan O’Callaghan,” I whispered urgently. “You’re the one for me and always have been.”

Then I pressed our mouths together in a kiss of pure, reckless joy. I felt him smiling, felt the rumble of his relieved laughter, the kiss frantic and passionate and real.

We parted, breathing hard. His lips caressed my forehead. My hair. “I love you so much, Charlie. I’ve loved you since I was trying to make you smile with my stupid jokes at Jolene’s. All those times I felt broken and really...I was only waiting for you to come back to me. Am so fucking *happy* you came back to me.”

His voice roughened. “I know we have a lot to figure out about our lives together and how we live them. I’m still in this though. For good.”

I was nodding, tracing the shape of his lips with my fingers. “Me too. No running this time, only worshiping. I’m here for it, here for *you*.”

Rowan’s eyes searched mine for a few sweet seconds. “My grandmother swore that when I fell in love it’d feel like an anvil dropped on my head. And wouldn’t you know, I’ve been walking around stunned since you asked me to be your fake boyfriend.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Oh my god, can we never talk about that again?”

“Sure. As long as I’m your real boyfriend.”

I peeked out through my fingers, too happy to do much else than vibrate against him. “That would make me your real girlfriend then?”

He growled softly at my throat, pulling me into his lap. “Damn right it does.”

I kissed him for so long I got dizzy, kissed him for so long there was no ending and no beginning to our shared breath. We were weightless and liberated together. An arc across the sky as sure as the sunrise.

And who knew that falling in love would feel this much like flying?





# CHARLIE

Later that night—after Rowan’s first day as the director and my last training session before the championship—he finally carried me into his bedroom with a look of possessive determination.

I tore off my clothes, then his—completely without ceremony. He threw me backward onto the bed, and I was treated to the sight of him, naked in front of me. Big and brawny, one hand already fisting around his cock.

I arched a single brow and spread my legs wide. His eyes roamed over every inch of my body, a hungry curl to his lips that had my fingers twisting into the sheets in anticipation.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth, Adam’s apple bobbing. “This has been the longest eight hours of my fucking life. Waiting for this. Waiting to be here, with you. I can’t believe that you’re mine, Charlie. *All mine.*”

“Believe it.” I crooked my finger. “I’m here to stay, Rowan.”

He dropped to the bed and pressed his face to my stomach, exhaling a harsh snarl. His teeth nipped at my skin. His mouth descended onto my breasts, and I was already gone. I cried out under his tongue, the devastating pressure of his lips on my nipple, the tug on my piercing.

“I need to be inside you more than my next breath,” he whispered. “Need you every single way I can have you.”

“Do it, Rowan, *please*. I want all of you,” I begged.

His hands came around my waist, and then he was flipping me onto my stomach. Hauling me onto my hands and knees and reverently kissing up the backs of my legs. His mouth traced a hot path to my pussy, and the strangled groan of gratitude he made had me arching back. Pressing into his face so eagerly his groan became a growl, his big hands squeezing my ass and spreading me.

Rowan dove his tongue inside me, licking, licking, *licking* so deep I was lost in pleasure, could only blissfully succumb to it. He kept up his thorough devouring, adding his finger to my clit. Circling while he groaned, sounding insatiable.

“Oh god, Rowan, I’m close already,” I panted. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*”

I bucked my hips against his mouth, and he sped up his motions, increased the pressure so skillfully, all I could do was sob and clench around his tongue and those long strokes.

“Almost,” I moaned. “Almost, *so close.*”

He stopped and replaced his tongue with two fingers which he moved rapidly in and out of me. My knees started shaking. He licked the swell of my right ass cheek and nipped me there, keeping me balanced on the edge. Keeping me primed and waiting for the climax only he could give me.

“You wanna use me again, gorgeous?” he whispered against my skin. “Fuck my mouth until you come?”

I nodded and pleaded and bucked my hips out of sheer desperation. I felt him shift, felt his shoulders land on the bed and his head appear under my legs. With a snarl, he dragged my pussy down to his eager tongue and my vision started to darken.

I sat up, speared my fingers in his hair and let my instincts take over. Back and forth I rocked on Rowan’s mouth as his tongue lashed at my clit. The animalistic sounds he made vibrated through my sensitive skin. His strong fingers around my waist held me up, helped my hips move and sway as I frantically chased my orgasm.

My climax tore through me—sharp and sudden—obliterating my ability to remain upright. I collapsed off his face, my chest heaving. He was there a moment later, smoothing the damp hair off my forehead and kissing up my throat.

“Good girl,” he soothed. “So good, so perfect, *all mine*.”

I was smiling, fully blissed out, when his mouth finally reached my ear. Goosebumps rose at every spot where he sent breath along my feverish skin.

“Again, Charlie,” he said. “You’re going to come for me again.”

With a wicked grin, Rowan flipped once more, yanking my hips back against his muscular thighs. I heard him opening a condom, rolling it on.

His palm caressed up the length of my spine to the nape of my neck. He squeezed firmly.

“Yes?” he whispered.

“Give me everything, Rowan.”

I turned to stare at him from over my shoulder and was stunned by his expression—part wild lust, part intense love. My heart galloped in my chest. His fingers twisted in my hair, and then his hips punched forward. The blunt thickness of his cock stretched and filled me, and I was only capable of crying his name.

“You feel so *amazing*,” he hissed. Pulled all the way out then reentered, deeper this time. Harder this time. He banded an arm around my chest and lifted so that my hands could grab the headboard. I did, the angle letting me work myself against his cock, rolling and grinding.

Rowan tugged gently on my hair so he could kiss my throat, close his teeth around my ear and whisper my name on a jagged breath.

We moved together in a sweet, sweaty rhythm. I was so out of my mind that when his fingers nudged my clit, I came

immediately—on and on, intense waves that brought him right along with me.

“I love you,” he grunted, “I love you, *I love you, Charlie.*”

And I tipped my head back and laughed, going limp against his chest as we floated back down to earth.

I captured his mouth in a lingering kiss. When I opened my eyes, his were hazy with satisfaction.

“I love you so much,” I whispered.

He nuzzled at my temple, wrapping his arms around me. “I’m not sure I can ever get tired of hearing you say those words.”

“Happy...first day of being an executive director day,” I murmured.

He laughed. “Not what I expected when I took the job, but I’d be lucky as hell to start and end every day like this. With you.”

He traced the contours of my body—firmly, deliberately—and his gaze tracked his movements. I arched into his wandering fingers, wanting him again already. But when I tried to pull him in for a kiss he dodged me, cocking his head toward the window where the start of a summer sunset peeked out through the curtains.

“If you kiss me again, we’re gonna have another one of those *stay in bed and fuck* marathons.”

“Great, sign me up. Should I schedule a food delivery just in case?”

He pressed kisses along my jawline. “To be clear, that is my plan the second we get home. But I’m taking you on a date first.”

I hummed happily. “What’d you have in mind, cupcake?”

Rowan cracked a boyish smile, and my heart spun like a Ferris Wheel. “Let’s go play baseball.”



## ROWAN

*I*t was a beautiful night for a ball game.

I stepped one foot, then the other, onto home plate. Ground the bat in a neat circle across the top and squinted out onto the field. Yellow lights lit up the freshly cut grass. The air was heavy with the smell of dirt, sunscreen, and popcorn.

All around me, at adjoining fields, crowds cheered as Little League teams played. The hard metallic *smack* of a bat connecting with a ball turned my head on pure instinct.

A girl, no more than ten, had hit a ground ball right through second and third. While the outfield scrambled, she sprinted to first and rounded onto second, her helmet flying off as she slid.

I whistled under my breath and joined the audience in clapping. It was a hell of a hit and by the look on her face, she knew it too. I'd always known, even that young.

Certain things felt natural when your body ran on baseball instead of blood.

"You think I'll ever be as talented as that, coach?" Charlie said next to me.

I chuckled and dropped the fraying Mets hat I brought for her on top of her head. She winked at me as she pulled the visor down. "I'll have you swinging like a home-run hitter in no time."

She fingered the material of my jersey. "The uniform's a nice touch, by the way."

I looked down at my old Syracuse Mets jersey, which had *O'Callaghan* and the number 18 in blue box lettering on the back. I'd shaken it loose from the back of my closet, where it hung with the rest of my uniforms.

I had a dim memory of Dean helping me shove a lot of this shit out of sight during the first few months after my surgery. When all I could seem to do was prowl around my house like a caged animal, hungry for a future I was never gonna have.

The idea to put it on for a date with Charlie had come as a surprise. I was in a different place now, a way *better* place, but I didn't wade around in painful memories on purpose.

Tonight, I dropped the jersey over my head for the first time in years and felt...peaceful.

"I figured you'd appreciate the call-back to our Jolene days," I said, hooking a finger into the waistband of her running shorts and yanking her in for a kiss.

Her lips lingered and her eyes fluttered open to gaze at me with pure love before she stepped away. And I was back to thinking about anvils again.

I nudged the bag at my feet, which held bottles of water, bags of chips, and two cold beers. "Now if you're a *very* good girl, I've got a special cheesesteak delivery arriving in an hour."

"I make no promises. But I am"—she bit her lip—"so fucking happy to be here with you. Wherever here is."

"FDR park, one of the largest parks in South Philly, and *the* place to play baseball for most of the kids here." I used the bat to point out the three fields surrounding us. "*That* is the field we used when I played middle school ball. *That* is the one my high school used and where I was scouted for the minors. And *this* is the field where my dad used to play. My grandmother would sit on those bleachers to cheer for him and also do some light-to-moderate threatening of the umpires if they didn't call things in my dad's favor."

She arched an amused eyebrow. "She did for you too, didn't she?"

“Oh yeah. It was always awkward to bump into the umpires at church after Alice O’Callaghan put the fear of god in them.”

I handed Charlie the bat.

Her eyes tracked along my arm, then back to my face. “How does it feel, being out on a field like this?” she asked.

I toed a streak of dust across home plate. “Being on a field is...new. Not something I do anymore. But it’s been a great day. The best day, really.”

“Any reason why?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m here with you.” I lifted the brim of her hat and kissed the tip of her nose. “And I can feel you starin’ at my shoulder, but I promise I’m okay to be out here. We just won’t go to the batting cages over there, because if I’m holding a bat, and a baseball comes flying at my face going seventy miles an hour, I’ll swing for it out of instinct.”

She gave me a cheeky salute. “Sounds good to me. So what *are* we gonna do?”

I took a step back from home plate and waved her over. “Practice makes perfect, so show me what that swing looks like, gorgeous.”

“Question.” She tapped the bat in the dirt. “If I’ve seen *A League of Their Own* at least a dozen times, does that make me an expert?”

I laughed as she stepped close. “A Rockford Peach if I ever saw one.”

I turned her gently so we faced the wide green of the outfield—the Philly skyline rose past the chain link fences, the busy streets, the hundreds of row homes. “Is it okay if I move you around a bit?”

“Do your worst, O’Callaghan.”

I dropped a kiss to the top of her shoulder. Smoothed my palms to her waist and adjusted so she faced the pitcher’s mound. I touched her knees, encouraging her to bend. Placed



her feet shoulder's width apart and raised her right elbow with the tip of my finger.

I stepped in front of her to get a better look and caught the loose smile playing on her lips.

“Okay, show me this swing of yours.”

She did, in slow motion, and the sight of the bat slicing through the air gave me a jolt of excitement.

“Do you miss it?” she asked softly.

“Always,” I said roughly. “Anyway, that was pretty good.”

I went to stand behind her and wrapped my arms so I was gripping the bat with her, hand over hand. I ran my nose through her hair, inhaling the scent of her shampoo right at the nape of her neck. Charlie arched back and wiggled her ass against my cock.

“*Someone's* not gonna get a cheesesteak,” I chided.

She dropped her head back on a laugh. But I only used it as an excuse to hold her closer, bringing our bodies together into one long, seamless line.

“When the ball comes, you'll twist your hips before hands. Hips, then hands.”

I turned us to demonstrate, and the bat swung along with our motion. My cheeks hurt because I was smiling like I'd won the fucking lottery. And maybe I had—yeah, I was never gonna pitch again, but I had a life I loved and I was currently playing baseball, for fun, with Charlie. The woman that I loved who loved me back.

Felt like a win to me.

We did it again and again. Arcing up, swinging down. I peeked around and said, “What are you grinning at?”

“This. All of it. Being here with you.” She twisted her hips forward like a pro. “It's *fun*.”

“Ain't that the truth.” I paused our movements for a second and hovered my mouth at her ear. “Can you see it? The

pitcher on the mound, the ball behind his back. Focused on you like a laser.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “I’m gonna hit it so hard.”

“Hell yeah, you are,” I said. “There he goes. Winding up. Releasing. And you—”

We swung as one. The bat slid past us, and I made a *clock* sound with my tongue. “And there it goes. You hear the crowd going wild for you?”

Charlie dropped the bat and spun, facing me with an eager expression. “Can I do it for real now?”

I gave her a wink and pulled the visor of my hat low. “Let’s do this, slugger.”

I turned and jogged out to the mound. There was no denying that a combination of grief and joy warred in my chest. There was nothing I could do except embrace it.

Once there, I scuffed my toe at the dirt before a memory slammed into me like a tidal wave. Another summer day, here at this same park, when I was thirteen or fourteen. Playing a game of pick-up baseball with a bunch of friends from the neighborhood—even Dean had joined in, slapping his hand in a catcher’s mitt and flashing me made-up pitch signs that kept making me laugh.

The memory vanished as soon as I remembered it. I couldn’t recall who won or if we even kept score. When I turned and faced Charlie though, scooping up a ball from the basket next to me, the same feeling flooded my entire body.

Freedom.

Charlie tapped the bat and yelled, “I wish I knew enough about baseball to trash-talk you.”

I grinned back. Fell into an overly exaggerated pose just for her, loving how delighted she seemed. I had the ball in my left hand and was prepared to lob it softly, underhand, though my body yearned for the wind-up. Yearned for the overextension and the release, all the parts of pitching that made it so unnatural and dangerous.

I breathed through it, until the ache quieted and I could focus on Charlie. My first throw sailed through the center of the batter's box, and Charlie swung so forcefully, she spun around in a circle.

She laughed, head in her hands. I clapped and whistled. Yelled, "*Shake it off, batter.*"

"Okay, okay, I can go again," she finally said, back in her stance.

"It's only the first one. You'll get it," I called out.

I rocked back and forth on my heels and pretended to glare at her from behind the ball. Leaned forward for another underhand throw. And this time she swung clean, missing the pitch but looking strong.

I grabbed the third ball and slid my fingers along the seams. The evening breeze cooled the back of my neck. Charlie traced the brim of her hat, cocky as a cowboy, and went still.

"You ready?" I yelled.

"Born ready, babe."

"You only needed those two swings, huh? And now you're major league?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're chatty for a pitcher?"

I laughed under my breath. "All the damn time. Good thing you love me."

I tossed the ball, aiming right for the center of her bat. I delivered it sweet and easy, waiting for that sound. That glorious, golden *thwack* of connection.

Charlie swung and hit.

I ducked and just barely managed to avoid getting hit. It sailed smoothly between second and third base and struck the back fence.

I yelled out a triumphant "*Holy shit,*" and ran toward the back fence. There wasn't anything much better than this, that thrum of muscles locking back into place, remembering

*exactly* how to scoop up a ground ball with one eye on a runner.

Though in this case, there was no one to throw to when I scooped it up. But the runner—a gorgeous badass who enjoyed ruining me on a daily basis—was making a break for second base.

I jogged toward her. “Are you trying for a triple?”

“There’s no *trying* about it,” she taunted. “I’m running home.”

And then she was—half running, half laughing as we chased each other around the bases and the long stretch to home plate.

She crossed, arms raised in victory, and I was there a second later, snatching her up.

“Baby’s first home run,” she cheered.

We tumbled into the soft grass together, and I pressed my back to the sun-warmed earth. Propped my head up with one hand behind me and stared up at Charlie in wonder. Her hat was crooked, the field lights a golden halo around her head.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, coach,” she sang.

I kissed her, sliding my fingers through her hair and knocking the hat off. “Just remember me when you’re famous? The humble baseball player you once pretended to date?”

She hummed. “More like the man that I’m madly in love with.”

“I like the sound of that.” I nudged my nose against hers.

Charlie smiled down at me, her fingers moving my hat so they could drift across my forehead. She pressed on the line between my brows, smoothing it away. “What’s got you so deep in sudden contemplation?”

I shifted onto my back, not sure how she’d receive what I’d been mulling over all day. “You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about your dad and his financial situation.”

“What about it?”

“How complicated it is when family and money intersect,” I admitted. “I would do anything for my grandmother. *Anything*. So I fully get wanting to protect your dad and save your home. But I also know...” I rubbed a strand of her hair between my fingers. “He put you in a tough spot, making a teenager feel responsible for every unpaid bill. No wonder you feel like it’s your job to fix everything on your own. But maybe...maybe, it’s not your job.”

Her eyes closed, but she eventually nodded, cheeks turning pink.

She didn’t say anything, so I kept going. “You talk a lot about how your dad felt back then. Charlie, how did *you* feel?”

She cast her gaze out over the field before finally turning back to me. “Um...really scared. Exhausted. Worried that we’d end up out on the street and it would be my fault. I had horrible nightmares around this time, and I wasn’t sleeping that great.”

She swiped at a single tear. “I was pretty lonely.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It really wasn’t,” I said softly.

She laughed, wiping her cheeks again. “I’m starting to learn that my independent, stubborn streak can go too far. “

“Hey, I love that stubborn streak,” I said. “I just hate seeing you continue to shoulder this responsibility when your dad is a grown man who also needs to do his part. Listen, until I became the director, having conversations about money was part of my job. Building trust, meeting people where they are. You’ve met Eddie and Dean. I hired them because they understand someone like your dad. They *are* your dad, in a whole lot of ways. Folks with not a lot of money but who are way too proud, who refuse to be a burden—”

“Their pride can be a burden for others though,” Charlie said. “I’ve felt that with my dad. Angry when he won’t let himself be helped, but then a lot of times, I’m the one cleaning up the mess.”

I let her sit with that for a moment, chewing on her thumbnail. Staring out at the field. Finally, she said,

“Bettencourt officially cut me this morning. So even if I wanted to give my dad the money, I couldn’t. I don’t have it.”

I exhaled sharply through my nose. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“Their rep kindly advised me that the general public prefers women who are quiet and palatable. Since I am neither, I’m no longer a fit for them.”

Fury had my jaw clenching. “So they’re terrible.”

She nodded quickly. “They are, and honestly, good riddance. But I’m back to being broke again, and I think that’s okay. I can’t help my dad but someone else could.” Her eyes darted back and forth between mine. “I know we’re far from Sweetwater, but...do you know of any organizations that could help my dad not lose his house?”

I brought her fingers to my mouth and kissed the tip of every single one. “I would love to look into that for you.”

She dropped her mouth to mine for an actual kiss—long and sweet and then steadily more passionate. When we parted, I whispered, “I’m sorry you had so many nightmares, Charlie.”

“It’s okay. If I have them now, at least I’ll be waking up next to you,” she whispered back. “Oh, and you haven’t even heard the best news. A couple of the women from Archer’s Angels asked if I’d be interested in joining their racing team and I’m going to say yes. I’ll make a little bit less money, but there’s more support. More consistency and a less grueling travel schedule. Meaning I could be home, in one place, more.”

Her lips tipped up into a smile. “I was thinking of trying my hand at teaching dirt bike riding to all these cool kids I met at the South Philly rec center. I met a few tiny daredevils when I was there this morning, and I didn’t expect to feel so inspired being around them.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline. “For real? Charlie, I can already think of a dozen kids who’d do anything to ride bikes

with you. You would be an incredible teacher. We'd have a waitlist a mile long."

Her smile widened. I chucked her under the chin before the full impact of what she'd said hit me. "When you say home...?"

"Dempsey brought up an interesting point with me at our meeting. I won't be able to race competitively forever, and the sooner I start planning for the next stage in my life, the easier the transition will be. Teaching here could be that first stage." She cocked her head. "Though I'm not done yet. You and I will have to figure out how to make things work when I'm on the road for half the year."

"Interesting, interesting. Because I just became the boss at my job and already made a deal with Luciana that I could work from all over if need be. Per my girlfriend's schedule, of course."

She swallowed, eyes shining bright. "That would be a dream come true."

"And where's home for you, Charlie?" I murmured.

"Here, in South Philly. If you'll have me," she said.

My throat tightened. "Yes. That's my dream come true."

"And on the road, traveling to my races." She lowered her face to mine, held my hand over her heart. "Wherever we're together, that's our home."

She kissed me, and it felt like a promise. I kissed her back, and it was a declaration.

That I would happily love Charlie Maddox for the rest of my life.





# CHARLIE

*Three days later*

Showing up at the championship race with Rowan was the best decision I'd ever made in my life.

He released me as soon as we got there, giving me a passionate kiss and whispering, "Come meet me in the stands for a surprise in a minute. Have fun with your adoring fans, gorgeous."

I turned to reply, but then those fans descended, and even a few media outlets. A banner hung from the bleachers that read *Welcome to the Annual Women's Moto Championships!*

The buzz around me was tangibly thrilling. I signed autographs and took pictures, my nerve endings jittery. Though it was less anxiety and more the lingering euphoria of these past days with Rowan—tangled and sweaty in his bed. Laughing together on his stoop. Drinking beers with the neighbors on kiddie pool nights.

It was the exact opposite from how I'd felt on that first race, when I was hungover and panicked. Sure, I'd been kicked off of Bettencourt, but in a few weeks, I'd be officially signing on with Riley and Quinn's team of fearless, bloodthirsty women.

And it felt right in a way that Bettencourt never had.

Our bikes were already lined up at the start gates—mine had been tuned up and triple checked by the mechanics, the metal gleaming beneath the summer sun. I signed my last autograph then went to go find Rowan in the stands.

Though it wasn't Rowan I bumped into first, but Alice. She was clutching a lemonade and a soft pretzel, beaming around at the racetrack like she'd never seen anything so exciting.

"Oh, *Charlie*, happy race day, dear. You look so lovely with all of your gear on."

I gave her a surprised hug. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see *you*. Are you wearing your charm?"

"Wouldn't leave home without it." I pulled the chain from around my neck to show her.

She admired it, then winked at me. "You won't need any luck though. You're all heart. So are you surprised? Rowan had the lovely idea to invite everyone along."

I followed her gaze to the stands, just as he appeared by my side, slipping an arm around my waist. Pink glitter signs flashed bright, a whole handful that read *Charlie Maddox is #1!* They were held by Dean and Tabitha. Dean's mothers and Eddie. And Dempsey, in a black-and-white suit. She blew me a kiss, then cheered my name.

"They came for me?" I asked around a lump in my throat. "I never had a cheering section before."

Alice touched my hand. "What else is community for? And I adored meeting your father. What a charmer he is, all that hair and those tattoos."

I blinked. "My...who? What?"

"Your dad." She pointed to the parking lot, where I spotted a very familiar man with long gray hair, faded tattoos, and a leather vest. He raised his hand toward me excitedly.

Rowan leaned in and whispered, "Surprise."

When I gawked up at him, he shrugged. "I made a secret trip up and back to Syracuse last night when you were out with Riley and Quinn."

Tears sprang to my eyes. Alice waved as she walked off, with a cheerful, "Make South Philly proud!"

The second she was gone, I grabbed Rowan by the collar and dragged him in for a kiss. “You brought my dad to see my race?”

“I sure did. You should go say hi. He’s super happy to be here with you. He was mobbed immediately by fans when we got here early, but he gave them strict instructions to leave him alone until he could see his favorite daughter.”

I grabbed his face. “I love you so much.”

He kissed my forehead. “Love you more, gorgeous. Now go fucking *win*.”

Grinning, I made my way through to the parking lot with about ten minutes to go. My dad opened his arms, and I fell into them for a hug I hadn’t known I needed. He smelled like bike grease and worn leather.

“Hiya, honey. I sure did miss you.”

I sighed. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“I had to see you win, didn’t I?” he said. “Plus, I wanna stick it to those Bettencourt assholes if I see ’em.”

“Don’t worry. Dempsey’s already scared them off. Did you walk the track earlier?”

He cast his gaze out over the dirt and jumps. “That stair set on the third curve will be killer. If you keep your grip loose and the throttle light, you’ll sail over it like a star.”

I made a mental note and said, “Got it. And did Rowan really drive you the five hours to Philly?”

He chuckled. “That’s one hell of a guy you got there. And I’m not only saying that because we did, in fact, spend five hours together. But he talked me through some of the nerves I had about the financial program I’m signing up for. I felt so much more comfortable by the end, honestly I did. I’m grateful that you told me about it.”

After I’d asked Rowan for help, he’d asked Elaine’s advice. She had colleagues in Syracuse working on a pilot program that mitigated evictions for seniors, a program that acted as a mediator between the homeowner and the mortgage

company. It would require a lot of work, and a longer payment plan, but if all went well my dad would keep the house—all on his own.

“I’m glad, Dad. Money stuff is so frustrating and confusing. But Rowan and Eddie and Dean are experts in helping people through programs like that. You’re gonna do great.”

He was nodding but holding my hand with a more serious expression from him than I was used to. He sniffed, looking around, then said, “Charlie, I...all this stuff with the eviction, talking to Rowan, it’s making me think about things, about memories that are difficult to go back to.”

I blinked, remembering Rowan lying in the grass, the compassion on his face as he said *how did you feel?*

“What kinds of memories?” I asked.

“Oh, well...how challenging it is as a parent, when you get older, when you have to live with the mistakes that you’ve made. I made a lot of mistakes with you, Charlie, and sometimes I avoid talking about them because it’s tough.”

He passed a hand over the top of his gray hair. “There was a long stretch there when you weren’t my priority and should have been. I know what you did for me, honey. Know how hard you worked to keep a roof over our heads when you were nothing but a kid. I can’t undo that, though I wish every day that I could. But I can work on the stuff I’m not good at.” A sheepish grin. “Like money.”

I laughed a little, squeezing his hand. “Okay, it’s...never been your strong suit.”

“It’s not. And over time, I put a lot of pressure on you to fix everything, like it was your job. It’s not your job. Though you’ve got a big heart for always trying and it’s one of the reasons why I love you so much.”

I was surprised at how stunned I was, shocked by the sensation of a weight lifting from my shoulders. An understanding between the two of us that wouldn’t be

immediate, but now we had a *chance*—a chance to be open, a chance to change.

“I love you too, Dad,” I said. “Maybe we can keep talking about some of these tough memories? Because I would like that.”

“I would love it.” He bent to rummage in a bag. “And don’t think I couldn’t come all this way without a gift.”

He pulled out a slightly faded racing jacket that was in great condition. He shook it out and showed me the back. Our last name was spelled in all caps in large white letters with orange flames decorating the sides.

“What do you think?” he asked. “It’s a classic.”

I laughed, delighted, and held out my arms for him to pull it on. I tugged the zipper up and did a little twirl. “Oh, Dad, I love it. Why not race around that track in style?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” he said, now holding up my helmet. I let him place it on my head the way I had as a kid. His eyes were wet. So were mine. “I can’t change the past, Charlie, but I can tell you all of this”—he waved his hand around at the commotion surrounding us—“all of this was nothin’ compared to how proud I was to be your dad. How proud I am every single day.”

I bit my lip, trying not to cry too hard before the most important race of my career. “I’m always proud to be your daughter. Because I love you.”

He tapped me on the tip of the nose. “I love you too. Now go get ’em, tiger. Let’s show all these people that the Maddoxes know how to fly.”

The five-minute countdown started, sending all of us to our bikes behind the start gates. I swung a leg over the seat, snapped on my goggles, and pulled on my gloves. I saw Riley down the line and waved. Engines roared, dust flew up, and the flag was poised to fall.

Past the thundering bikes, wild and rowdy in the stands, my community was screaming my name. I grinned, catching Rowan’s eye and holding it, basking in his love.

In fact, I was so focused on my ginger hunk that when the flag fell, I thought for sure that I'd lose.

I didn't.

I won.

I knew why—it was a combination of Alice's good luck charm, my neighbors cheering in the stands, and the fact that I was just that incredible. And at the finish line, Rowan was waiting, arms wide and an ecstatic smile I would remember for the rest of my life.

I leapt into those strong arms, and he spun me in a circle, a rain of rainbow confetti falling all around us.

Dimly, I heard an announcer call, "*This year's championship winner is Charlie Maddox.*" Fans surged forward, the crowd pressed close, but Rowan and I were lost in our own world together.

I knew that real, authentic love wasn't always spinning in a sea of confetti—though that's how he made me feel every single day. All the tough and complicated parts wouldn't disappear. But it sure did feel easier confronting them together.

It was like soaring my bike off a jump—accepting the fear also meant welcoming the exhilaration. Rowan *was* my exhilaration. The person who made me feel weightless and dazzling.

And finally, finally free.

# EPILOGUE

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## ROWAN

*Two years later*

*W*e were playing the game—and I was definitely losing.

Both of us were laying across the hood of Charlie's truck, drowsy and relaxed under the heat of the shimmering Arizona sun. I kicked my bare feet against hers. She stroked her fingers lazily through my hair.

And our matching wedding rings glinted a shiny gold.

"What about this one?" I said.

She arched an eyebrow. "Try me."

"Knock, knock."

She wrinkled her nose. "Do I really have to—"

"Are we playing or what, Maddox?"

She traced her tongue across the front of her teeth and sized me up. "Who's there?"

"A broken pencil."

"A broken pencil who?"

I shrugged. "Never mind, it's pointless."

Her lips twitched, but she stayed strong. "There's been a lot of trash talk going around for someone who hasn't been able to get me to break *once*."



I rolled onto my elbow, gazing down at my old friend, my formerly-fake girlfriend, and my very real wife. I traced a finger through her hair, along the shell of her ear, stroking. “You’re saying I haven’t done anything on this honeymoon to make you smile?”

“I can’t recall,” she said airily, teasing me on purpose now.

I replaced my finger with my lips. “I knew my wife was a bad girl. I didn’t know she was such a little liar.” Then I darted my tongue out to soothe the bite mark I’d left on the side of her throat, evidence of the passionate sex we’d had in the hotel shower this morning. She shivered and I grinned against her hair. “Are you reconsidering your position?”

She smacked her lips together into a firm line. Narrowed her eyes.

“What did the ocean say to the beach?”

“Hmmm, what?”

I winked. “Nothing, it just waved.”

Her expression was playful, lips quivering. “I could go all night, O’Callaghan.”

I clutched her waist and kissed her high on her neck, right below her ear—a ticklish spot that had her laughing not a second later. “Gotcha.”

“Oh my god, you *cheated*.” She pushed to sit up, blowing the hair off her face with a toothy smile. “Let the record show.”

“No one’s keeping score,” I teased.

“There’s no way two people as naturally competitive as we are aren’t keeping score,” she pointed out. “And I know that because since we first started this game at Jolene’s, I’ve won ninety-five percent of the time.”

My head fell back on a laugh. It felt nicer than I could say, lazily basking in the sunshine with the view of the Grand Canyon stretched out in front of us. We’d arrived for our honeymoon five days earlier—blissed out from our block

party wedding—and had been engaged in some combination of hot sex and long hikes ever since.

We'd had 10th Street transformed for the reception, hiring a live band and dancing until midnight. All the neighbors were there, plus everyone from the rec center and most of Archer's Angels, Charlie's racing team.

Dempsey had driven Malcolm and Penny in from Syracuse. Her dad tried, and failed, not to bawl his eyes out when he first saw Charlie in her wedding dress. Though, to be fair, there hadn't been a dry eye during our ceremony, myself included.

Dean and Tabitha had both given speeches, of course. And Alice had been tickled pink to remind all of us—mostly me—how I'd sworn up and down that I'd never fall in love, when I knew Charlie was my soul mate all along.

After Charlie joined her new team, her career had never been better—she was winning nonstop while also being home more. It was a tricky balance, combining her travel with my work schedule, but we made it happen in all the ways we knew how. We were lucky—between her upbringing and my baseball career, we were experts at accepting that the long drives and random hotel rooms were all part of the gig.

The easy days we got through together. The challenging days we got through together too.

But for those six months when she was home in South Philly, in the row home we had made our own, she was teaching dirt bike lessons to kids and loving it.

I was loving it too, as much as I was loving the joyful chaos of leading the rec center. After saving Dean and Eddie's jobs, and the food program, we'd been steadily and thoughtfully expanding. Reaching more people than ever, mostly with the help of the Wilkinsons.

Taking every chance we had to make our city better.

Best of all, after months of hard work, Charlie's dad had avoided eviction and kept his house. He even came down to help her teach the kids twice a month. And after, she always

brought him around for family dinner at Alice's house, where my grandmother treated him like a guest of honor.

I glanced over at Charlie's pretty profile, her golden hair blowing in the gentle breeze.

She turned, our eyes meeting, and she leaned in for a kiss. "Hello, brand new husband."

"Hello, brand new wife."

She brushed her lips over mine. "I'm reconsidering my earlier position. You've made me smile a lot on this honeymoon."

"Oh, I know, babe," I murmured. "Even after all these years, it's still cute. Watching you pretend you don't love this game."

"It's only because I love *you*...cupcake."

"Not as much as I love you—"

"Don't say it—"

"Kitten."

Now it was Charlie's turn to laugh, the sound growing as I tossed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against my chest, placing loud, smacking kisses on the top of her head.

"Stubborn," I said with a kiss. "Mischievous. Adorable. *Cuddly*."

A man strolling past stopped in front of us, probably because of our happy commotion. Charlie sat up and held out her hand. "Oh, excuse me? We've been waiting for someone to come by to take our picture. Would you be able to do that for us?"

"Happy to," he said. "What brings you to the Grand Canyon?"

I grabbed my phone and placed it in his hands. "Charlie and I recently got married, and we're on our honeymoon. And it just so happens that my parents had their picture taken, right at this spot, also on their honeymoon."

Charlie slipped her hand into mine and squeezed gently.

I grinned at the man. “We figured we couldn’t come all this way and not get a picture, for my grandmother at least. She’ll have it framed immediately.”

“Well, isn’t that nice?” the man said.

Charlie kissed my cheek. “I love you, Rowan. Will always love you.”

I cupped the back of her neck, remembering what my grandmother had said. That people were fools when they fell in love—and I understood it now. The devotion. The dedication. The goofy euphoria that flooded my body whenever she was near.

The way the sound of her laughter still made my heart race. Or that catching sight of her in a crowded room always stopped me in my tracks.

And maybe, just maybe, I cooked this goddess a lot of breakfasts on the weekends. In between making a whole lot of glitter signs.

“I love you too, Charlie,” I whispered. “And I always have.”

The man called, “Say cheese!”

We posed together and smiled, and when he handed us the camera to peek at the picture, I already knew what I would find. A happy couple on their honeymoon, leaning back on their car and far from the streets of South Philly.

This picture caught us with our hair blowing, our smiles delighted, the red rocks of the canyon behind us. It was an ordinary moment. It was a special moment.

And it was all ours.

Loving Charlie, and being loved by her, was the greatest gift I’d ever been given.

\* \* \*

Thank you for reading OFF THE MARK! Want a peek into Rowan and Charlie's future? [Click here to download this bonus scene.](#)

\*\*If you are having any trouble tapping on the extra scene please type "[twsspub.com/bonus/knotm](http://twsspub.com/bonus/knotm)" into your phone or computer browser.\*\*

## WHAT TO READ NEXT?

You can read Dean and Tabitha's sweet, steamy love story in [ON THE ROPES](#) – this friends-to-lovers/grumpy-sunshine romance is free in KU!

(Their book takes place two years before OFF THE MARK)

If you loved OFF THE MARK and are looking for a book of mine with a similar vibe, I can highly recommend [NOT THE MARRYING KIND](#). The cocky, tattooed bad boy falls hard for the marriage-obsessed good girl in this steamy standalone.  
Free in KU!

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading OFF THE MARK – I hope you were as obsessed with Rowan and Charlie’s love story as I clearly was!

Dirt bike racing is an incredible feat of strength and skill, and after months of research into this sport I remain in awe of their amazing abilities. I want to say a *huge* thank you to my friend Audio Dan who provided truly valuable input and background on motocross, the fans and the very real issues and injuries that make this such a challenging sport. Just a note that for this story – and for plot and pacing purposes – I either changed or invented certain aspects of competitive racing to move the story along. Most notably – motocross races are thirty minutes along with two bonus laps...which was *not* the case in this book.

I also want to thank my beta reader Jodi and my baseball-loving-husband Rob for all their help in the fine details of Rowan’s baseball background. The issues faced by Rowan in his minor league career (low pay, lack of quality housing) are very real and after a lot of hard work, Minor League baseball players have officially unionized and will be advocating for better working conditions. I like to think Rowan would be proud.

If it’s not obvious by now, I can’t get enough of writing friends-to-lovers romances, but jam-packed full of fraught history and enough sexual tension to power a jet engine.

Friends are one thing. Friends with *history* – flirty, charming, tender history – could inspire me for years.

And Rowan and Charlie had a *lot* of flirty history. From the moment that hunky playboy Rowan swaggered onto the page in the opening scenes of ON THE ROPES, my heart went *uh-oh*. Because yes, I'm obsessed with sexy friendships but there's something about the confident, cocky hero (*who never stays the night!*) falling so damn *hard* for his soul-mate that he literally doesn't know what to do with himself. For all of Rowan's smooth-talking ways, he is at his core, just a nice boy from South Philly who wants to make his community better.

So of course I had to pair him up with a bad-ass biker babe who couldn't care *less* about his sexual advances (or so she says...) If writing Rowan was my everything, writing Charlie was everything *and then some*. Charlie's tough, fearless facade was as enjoyable to explore as her inner, secret wounds – her loneliness, her lack of community, her fear of vulnerability (which matched Rowan's in every way).

I've been lucky enough to write athletes (current and former) in a few of my books now and have learned so much about how we monetize bodies, the way we place performance over autonomy, the unique way in which these careers can be flashy and yet deeply, deeply lonely. It was a joy to bring together Rowan's lost dreams with Charlie's current ones, knowing that their friendship was stronger because they understood the unique pain and pleasure of having their bodies not feel fully their own.

What an absolute *dream* these two were – their voices and banter, their strengths and flaws, spilled out of me with ease. It wasn't that writing this book was easy – they're never easy – but these two demanded their story and I was so happy they chose me to tell it.

I've got a *lot* of favorite scenes and moments, including: Rowan and Charlie's silly 'can I get you to smile' game; when Rowan says "we were always doing things for each other back at Jolene's, weren't we?"; every scene exploring the night Rowan hurt his shoulder and Charlie sat with him while he



cried; hand-holding practice at the shitty suburban bar; that first kiss, when Rowan told Charlie he never had to pretend to worship her and Charlie *finally* kisses him!; Alice giving Charlie the good-luck charm; Dean giving Rowan shit about making all those glitter signs; Charlie being so nervous about meeting Rowan's family that she buys too many bouquets; Charlie's dad saying *go get 'em tiger* before her big win; THE BASEBALL SCENE OH MY GOD; Rowan saving the kitten from the tree...

*Whew*, okay that's enough of me proving yet again how feral these two made me feel!

Part of that feral intensity has to do with the dedication in the front of this book – those in know will recognize those lines from the last episode of HBO's queer pirate romantic comedy, 'Our Flag Means Death', which I was obsessed with for the entirety of plotting and writing this book. It would take a lifetime for me to explain what that show means to me – from queer joy, to authenticity, to gender expression and tender vulnerability and expansive gay love and just *everything*.

But it also taught me a vital, vital lesson — our stories deserve to be told, no matter if others declare them too strange or niche or not 'marketable' or too weird. There are fans for every story and in this world it is our right to take up as much brilliant space as possible. Rowan and Charlie are both straight, and yet as a queer person I know that this story is my most authentic yet. I know that this story *feels* like me in ways I can't fully explain.

Though I guess that's why I'm so very happy you read this book. So here's to getting – and staying – free. Go roam, my darlings. This world is yours for the taking.

Love,

Kathryn

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

OFF THE MARK wouldn't exist without the support of my writing community:

For Faith, my best friend, story editor and the most bad-ass babe around! You were as obsessed with Rowan and Charlie as I was and working on this book with you was even more fun than usual. I'm counting down the days until we get our matching best friend tattoos. Love you, roomie!

For Jessica Snyder, my story and line editor, whose ability to put together all the missing puzzle pieces in a plot continues to amaze me. Thank you for getting Rowan and Charlie right from the start and understanding what they needed to make their characters truly shine.

For my beta readers – Jodi, Julia and Bronwyn – thank you for your continued friendship, guidance and romance wisdom! The beta editing process can be intense and emotional and you three walk me through it gracefully every single time. I couldn't do it without you.

For the Hippie Chicks (the coolest biker babes around!!), Tim, Rick and Dan (the best publishers a girl could ask for), Joyce and Tammy (the *literal best*) and the community of authors who support me, listen to me vent and know *exactly* what I'm going through (Lucy, Stephanie, LJ, Avery, Claire and Pippa)...this writing gig would be so lonely without this found family of romance-lovers, writers and readers. I'm so grateful every single day that I know you.

As always for Rob, my real-life romance hero and the husband that still makes me laugh, blush and feel fluttery even twelve years after we first met. You have *always* made me feel like my freest, most authentic self. Roaming this world together has been the greatest gift I've ever received.

# HANG OUT WITH KATHRYN!

Sign up for my [newsletter](#) and receive exclusive content, bonus scenes and more!

I've got a reader group on Facebook called **Kathryn Nolan's Hippie Chicks**. We're all about motivation, girl power, sexy short stories and empowerment! [Come join us.](#)

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## ABOUT KATHRYN

I'm an adventurous hippie chick that loves to write steamy romance. My specialty is slow-burn sexual tension with plenty of witty dialogue and tons of heart.

I started my writing career in elementary school, writing about *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* and inventing love stories in my journals. And I blame my obsession with slow-burn on my similar obsession for *The X-Files*.

I'm a born-and-raised Philly girl, but left for Northern California right after college, where I met my adorably-bearded husband. After living there for eight years, we decided to embark on an epic, six-month road trip, traveling across the country with our little van, Van Morrison. Eighteen states and 17,000 miles later, we're back in my hometown of Philadelphia for a bit... but I know the next adventure is just around the corner.

When I'm not spending the (early) mornings writing steamy love scenes with a strong cup of coffee, you can find me outdoors — hiking, camping, traveling, yoga-ing.

## BOOKS BY KATHRYN

### STRICTLY PROFESSIONAL

Edward Cavendish III and Roxy Quinn couldn't be more different. He's a polite, wealthy hotelier from England. She's a scowling, bad-ass tattoo artist. But when a night of heartbreak brings them together, their chemistry – and connection – is electrifying. Seeing each other romantically is not an option – until they meet again under *strictly professional* circumstances.

### NOT THE MARRYING KIND

Fiona plans to be married to her soul mate by the time she turns 30. Unfortunately, she agrees to plan a benefit concert with Max, a cocky bad boy who swears he will never settle down. But when romantic sparks fly between these two friends, will they let their rules get in the way of true love?

### BOHEMIAN

Shy, nerdy Calvin inherits his grandfather's bookstore in funky Big Sur, but has no idea whether to sell the bookstore – or take on the challenge of keeping the store's literary legacy alive. When a bohemian-style photo shoot brings famous super model Lucia Bell to Big Sur, sparks fly between these two total opposites.

### LANDSLIDE

Gabe Shaw has the perfect life in Big Sur. He's the third-generation-owner (and bartender) at The Bar, the only place in this funky small town where the quirky locals can drink in peace. A hopeless romantic, Gabe's only lacking one thing: his soul mate. And when a sudden storm traps a sexy, funny make-up artist named Josie in Big Sur, one night of searing passion turns into much more. Too bad Josie doesn't believe in falling in love.

### RIPTIDE

Avery Dacosta is an ambitious property developer, intent on building a luxury hotel on Playa Vieja's last untouched beach. And she has no time for Finn Travis, the laid-back, hippie surfer who decides to protest this hotel – and her workplace – every day. Unfortunately, Finn's not only the most aggravating man she's ever met – but sexy as hell. Can these two enemies-turned-lovers ever find a middle ground?

### SEXY SHORTS (VOLUME 1)

A sweet, dirty collection of fourteen sexy short stories.

### BEHIND THE VEIL

Private detective Delilah Barrett is entirely unprepared for her new assignment: hunt down a stolen rare manuscript that's hidden within Philadelphia's glamorous high society. The only catch? Delilah must go undercover as a fake married couple with her new partner Henry Finch — a devastatingly handsome librarian. But as the danger intensifies...so does the temptation to let their fake desire become real.

### UNDER THE ROSE

To infiltrate a secret society, private detective Freya Evandale and FBI agent Sam Byrne must go undercover as a pair of thieves in a dangerous world of shifting alliances. But can these lifelong rivals close the case...without falling in love?

### IN THE CLEAR

While chasing a famous book thief in London, two private detectives work together while dodging danger at every turn. But can aloof, serious Abe and charming, mysterious Sloane resist their instant attraction to one another? Or will passionate temptation risk this case – and their careers?

#### WILD OPEN HEARTS

Luna's cheerful, hippie reputation is ruined when her billion-dollar company is caught in a scandal. And only a burly, dog-rescuing biker can help her. As these opposites give in to their electrifying attraction – will their differences keep them apart? Or will they learn to trust their wild hearts?

#### ON THE ROPES

Former pro boxer Dean Knox-Morelli is shocked when his new neighbor is Tabitha Tyler – his childhood friend and the woman he's had a secret crush on for years. But when flirty filmmaker Tabitha tries to tempt Dean into a sexy, summer fling, will he finally get the girl? Or will she only pack her bags and leave him heartbroken?

#### OUT OF THE BLUE

When famous surfer Serena Swift is provided a bodyguard by her new corporate sponsor, she's pissed to find it's her ex-husband, Cope McDaniels, tasked with keeping her safe. But these two ex-lovers soon find themselves in the midst of corporate espionage, and the only thing more dangerous than the secrets they uncover is letting the simmering sparks of their second-chance-attraction burst into flames.

#### RIVAL RADIO

Popular radio host Daria Stone despises her romance-obsessed adversary, Dr. Theo Chadwick. But when these workplace rivals are forced to share an on-air timeslot to save their radio station, will their sparks burn everything to the ground? Or can they play nice and save the day...without falling in love?

#### OFF THE MARK

When dirt bike racer Charlie needs a reputation fix before the biggest race of her career, she asks her friend Rowan – cocky ex-baseball player and flirty playboy – to fake date her for the cameras. But what happens when Charlie falls for the one man she knows will break her heart?