



DON'T LOVE

THE CEO

FROM #1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVA AVERY

AVA AVERY

DON'T LOVE THE BOSS

CEO Romance Novel – Sport
Romance

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About the author

Ava Avery is a Kindle #1 and Bild Bestselling author who writes compelling Sport and CEO romance novels. Her novels are regularly ranked in the Top 10 book charts. Ava's passion for Sports Romance originates from her career as senior manager for one of the world's most famous and successful sport teams of all times.

“Build your own dreams or someone else
will hire you to build theirs.”

Farrah Gray

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EPILOGUE – ALLEGRA

Chapter 1 – Allegra

“Hey sweetie, I’m glad I’ve found you! Fancy a coffee and the latest gossip?” My work colleague and best friend, Riley, greeted me as she entered the grand two-story motorhome.

I paused my work and conspiratorially lowered my voice. “That depends on the gossip you have to offer.”

“Operation ‘*Big Dog*’. Code Red.” She hissed meaningfully.

I pressed my lips together nervously. “Give me two minutes and I’ll meet you on the roof terrace. I’ll make us coffees.” I replied curtly and motioned for her to go ahead.

A short time later, I balanced the drinks tray as I climbed up the stairs to the second floor of the motorhome. The hospitality space was divided into an indoor section with tables and chairs and an inviting outdoor terrace.

Riley had made herself comfortable on the white lounge suite with her face turned towards the sun, which was already shining brightly in Barcelona in February.

We were among the first to arrive at the racetrack to oversee the setup of the hospitality and press areas for the *Titan Racing* Team. The rest of the team would arrive tomorrow, and this gave us the chance to whisper about operation ‘*Big Dog*’ without being overheard or observed.

I put the tray down with a clatter and handed Riley one of the steaming cups. “So? Out with it. Why Code Red?” I

asked curiously, sinking down next to her on the soft pillows.

“They did it,” Riley replied, narrowing her eyes. “The contract was signed an hour ago. I have to write the press release immediately and call a press conference for tomorrow.”

Speechless, I took a long sip of strong coffee and stared into the distance.

Unbelievable.

The deal had actually happened.

Titan Racing had changed hands.

After twenty years of ownership by the respected Italian Pellegrini family, the team had been sold to a nouveau riche American investment company.

“That really is ‘*Big Dog*’ news. Incredible.” I let out my breath.

“Toni wants to hold a team briefing at the hotel early in the morning. He has asked for you to arrange that.” Riley informed me as she vigorously typed on her cell phone.

I snorted contemptuously. “Right. Well, that is my job. Although the question is for how much longer?”

“Honey, they won’t fire us. Our jobs are safe.” Riley said soothingly.

“Where do you get that idea from?”

She confidently tossed her long, black hair over her shoulders and smiled reassuringly. “Well, because you are the best event manager and I am the smartest press officer in this

entire racing series. The new owners would be pretty stupid if they let us go.”

“I want to have your confidence.” I grumbled sourly.

“Honey, look at it this way. Either you hold your head up high and treat yourself to some vitamin D and a nice tan, or you bury your head in the sand, surrounded by creepy animals and complete darkness. I think the decision is fairly easy, don’t you?”

With that she stood up and stretched like a cat after a long nap.

“I’m going to write the press release and you should organize the team briefing for tomorrow. Let’s listen to what Toni has to say first and then we’ll see. Agreed?” Riley held out her hand to pull me up from the cozy couch.

I sighed in resignation and took her hand. “Agreed.”

“Allegra, are you nearly ready?” Toni, our team boss, asked me the next morning when he entered the spacious conference room of the team hotel. Almost a hundred team members would be arriving in a few minutes.

“Ready.” I confirmed satisfied and handed him the microphone. I had arranged ten rows of ten chairs and two long tables with orange juice, tea, coffee and croissants.

“Morning beautiful people,” Riley called, entering the room with a spring in her step. “The mechanics are on their way and I’ve already spotted the engineers.”

She sat down in the first row and opened her notebook. “Should I field the questions for you or will you manage it yourself, Toni?” She asked our team boss.

“If you could keep the wild pack in check, that would be good.” He replied, and Riley nodded satisfied.

“Consider it done.”

Our conversation fell silent when the first team members arrived and within minutes the room filled with excited murmurs.

At exactly seven thirty, I closed the doors of the conference room and asked everyone present to mute their phones.

I leaned against the wall next to the door, ready to get rid of uninvited visitors, and nervously crossed my arms over my chest.

“Good morning, everyone. I know you need to get to track right away so I’ll be brief. As you will probably have heard by now, the Pellegrini family sold *Titan Racing* to an American investment company yesterday afternoon. That decision was made for personal reasons that I do not want to explain further. This may come as a shock to many of you, but it doesn’t have to be. Apart from the ownership structure, nothing will change in the coming months. It’s no secret that the racing team is doing great. Last year we won the world championship once again. Our sponsors are satisfied with the returns we generate for them and we have two strong and extremely popular drivers. There is nothing to worry about.”

Toni looked encouragingly into the insecure faces that tensely stared back at him.

“With the sale of *Titan Racing*, Luciano Pellegrini is stepping down from his role as team manager. The new owners will provide us with someone to take on that post. The new team manager will get to know the team throughout the season and will decide on behalf of the new owners how things will continue in the next few years, so show him your best sides. He will not attend the upcoming test in Barcelona and will arrive in Australia for the season opener. Until then, everything will continue as usual. Any questions?”

‘*Questions*’ was Riley’s codeword. She jumped up from her chair in the front row and started directing the questions from our colleagues with a beaming smile.

Chapter 2 – Allegra

4 weeks later, Australia

Armed with my clipboard, I moved slowly through the trackside hospitality suite. This space would accommodate nearly two hundred guests every day over the coming weekend. I ticked off the completed tasks, checked that the tables, chairs and decorations were in their designated places, and inspected the buffet and bar area. Then I opened the glass doors to the outside space, which led to a sloping terrace with five rows of exclusive seats and a direct view of the track and the pit lane immediately below.

I let my eyes wander thoughtfully over the track. The season opener, which took place in Australia in mid-March, was one of my personal favorites every year. Whilst the weather in March in Europe was still cool and gray, it was late summer in Australia with temperatures close to thirty degrees. Here at the track, not far from the vibrant city of Melbourne, it was a beautiful sunny day.

The circuit, located in the middle of the green oasis of Albert Park, was calm and peaceful in the afternoon sun. Tomorrow the loud engines of the racing cars, perfected down to the smallest detail, would roar and make the air vibrate. The thought of the upcoming race weekend gave me goose bumps in anticipation.

There was no denying that I had gasoline in my blood. Racing was my drug. Watching twenty extremely fast cars battle wheel to wheel for victory on the track gave me an adrenaline rush every time. Even after all the years of traveling the world as the *Titan Racing* event manager, I didn't get tired of this crazy life.

On the contrary, it seemed like racing meant more to me with each season.

That was why the sale of *Titan Racing*, and the uncertainty that went with it, weighed heavily on my soul.

Even though Toni had claimed that everything would stay as it was for the time being, I had no doubt that the new owners would want to do their own thing. That's exactly what had happened to the other teams in the series when they changed hands in the past. I thought it was foolish to believe that we would be spared restructuring and layoffs.

It went without saying that the new owners would want to fill key positions with employees they knew and trusted to implement their personal vision and interests. That was just business.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with that, but what worried me was that the nouveau riche American investors had no idea about the sport and its soul. This wasn't NASCAR or IndyCar. The *Serie del Rey* was the best and most respected racing series in Europe. It had existed for over seventy years and harbored a tradition, history and following those other sport series could only dream of. Grandfathers passed their passion on to their children, who in turn passed it on to their

children and so on. Millions of people around the world have admired and followed the *Serie del Rey* for generations.

In other words, the *Serie del Rey* was a motorsport series like no other. Any attempt to make it look like NASCAR or IndyCar would fail miserably.

“Allegra?” The voice of Kenzie, Toni’s personal assistant, pulled me out of my gloomy thoughts. “Toni is on the way to introduce you to the new team manager. Can you gather your team together?”

I pushed myself off the parapet of the terrace with one last look at the idyllic Albert Park and moved past Kenzie into the spacious suite.

“Everyone, listen here. The new team manager wants to introduce himself. So, please stop what you’re doing for a moment and gather at the entrance to the suite.” I instructed my team, which consisted of two junior event managers and a receptionist who welcomed the guests at the suite entrance.

“What is he like?” I turned to Kenzie, while my girls mumbled excitedly, tidied up and got in line by the doors.

“The new boss?” Whispered Kenzie. “Damn hot.”

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. “I actually meant does he seem competent and approachable?”

Kenzie shrugged. “I didn’t pay attention to that.”

“Man, Kenz. You can’t be trusted!” I sighed.

“You wait and see,” she defended herself. “When you see this guy, you will understand what I mean. He’s so hot that when he stands in front of you, you’ll forget your own name. I

was too busy imagining him naked to worry about his professional competence.”

“Hmm.” I growled darkly.

Kenzie was one of my closest confidants but at times her carefree nature drove me crazy.

“Come on, Allegra. Stop grumbling and smile.” She smirked and pushed me towards the entrance, where the other girls were already waiting and giggling nervously.

“Here they come!” Kenzie squealed and hurried towards her boss, who was accompanied by a man who made my heart stop for what felt like an eternity.

I caught my breath.

I was dreaming. This couldn't be reality. It was impossible.

My heart started to race furiously. It felt like I'd just jumped out of a plane and I couldn't make the parachute open.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up when our eyes met, although he didn't seem half as surprised to see me as I did him.

I knew this man.

Or rather, I knew every inch of his body.

This man had screwed me like crazy six months ago at my sister's wedding. For two whole days and nights.

We assumed that we would never see each other again. That we only had these two unforgettable days and nights where we lived as if there was no tomorrow.

And now he was here. In Australia. In Melbourne. In my hospitality suite.

But why?

He couldn't possibly be the new team manager.

Because, from everything I'd heard, the new team manager's name was Byron.

And the man that gave me the best orgasms of my life in Capri had introduced himself as Hunter.

“Hello ladies. I see you are as energetic and cheerful as ever. May I introduce you to our new team manager?” Toni gestured to Hunter. “This is Byron King. From now on he will take over Luciano's areas of responsibility. This also includes the team's marketing and events. Byron, may I introduce you to the senior event manager, Allegra Sorrentino? She will report to you.”

Chapter 3 - Hunter

If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead on the spot. Allegra's eyes bored into my body so hard that it almost physically hurt.

As gallantly as possible, I held out my hand to her and tried to keep my tone casual as I said, "Pleasure. I'm looking forward to working together."

She stared at my hand like it was a venomous snake and when she finally took it, she squeezed so hard it actually hurt.

"The pleasure is mine, Byron."

The way she uttered my name left me in no doubt that she was confused and angry. No wonder - she only knew me by the name my friends had given me because of my reputation with the opposite sex.

Hunter.

In most cases the name wasn't entirely fair though. Normally it wasn't me who 'hunted' women, it was the other way around. Women chased me and I was all too willing to be their prey.

Allegra was the exception. I did hunt her.

Tirelessly.

Incessantly.

Unyieldingly.

In order to get her, I had turned down all other offers at my friend, Matteo Leone's wedding and had concentrated entirely on the pursuit of Allegra.

I knew from the first moment I saw her at the party that this woman would never usually have gotten involved with me.

She wasn't the type of woman for non-committal one-night stands.

Like the merciless sun in the desert, she was the type of woman who made men burn with her radiant smile, her sensual curves and her uninhibited manner, only to then die miserably of thirst and heat stroke when they realized she wasn't interested.

Not intentionally but because she was completely unaware of her devastating effect on the male species.

She was the type of woman that men were afraid of: sexy, determined, charismatic, successful and independent. She didn't need a man to live a happy and fulfilling life. Allegra managed all of this without any male intervention.

But the wedding of her sister, Carlotta, and my friend, Matteo, on the Italian island, Capri had been our personal Las Vegas.

In Vegas, you can live out your desires and fantasies with full anonymity, because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Allegra had come to enjoy herself. To celebrate. To live life. And to live it to the fullest.

From the moment I saw her standing at the altar as a bridesmaid, the hunt for her was on.

It had been a short, if phenomenally exciting, hunt.

Then I had killed my gorgeous prey with relish.

Over and over and over again.

As if in a frenzy.

For a weekend.

For two forbidden hot nights and days.

Without obligations and without expectations.

Just as I liked it.

It seemed unlikely that we would ever meet again. After all, her job required 250 days of travel per year. In

contrast, I usually sat on the fiftieth floor of a modern skyscraper in the Financial District of New York City. From there, I managed the economic fortunes of our American sports companies and holdings with my business partners across football, basketball, ice hockey, baseball and motorsports. Up until now we had concentrated exclusively on the American motorsport series: IndyCar and NASCAR. The expansion into European racing was a daring challenge, and me, of all people, had been entrusted with managing it.

Since I loved everything that was fast and loud, from now on I would manage not only the American racing investments but also the business interests of *Titan Racing* in the *Serie del Rey*.

That in turn meant that Allegra, my wild Las Vegas bridesmaid, would now be Allegra, my diligent event manager.

I had to concentrate hard to get rid of all the filthy and forbidden thoughts that had popped into my mind ever since I found out that she would report to me.

I was here to work.

To closely look at this racing team and identify and eliminate weak points.

I was able to enjoy myself away from the racetrack, and with women who did not work for me.

In an icy voice, Allegra introduced me to her team, who greeted me with flirtatious looks and girlish giggles.

“Thank you all for the warm welcome. Over the next few days or weeks, I will arrange individual meetings with each of you. Please be available for this.” I said.

“Of course. I know a bar in downtown Melbourne with a great view of the Yarra River...” chirped Kat, one of Allegra’s employees, which earned her a warning look from her boss. She fell silent.

“All appointments with members of the events team should be coordinated through me. I would like to keep an overview,” Allegra informed me and handed me her card. “My

work e-mail address and telephone number for *business* purposes.”

She emphasized the word “business”, which made me smile.

“Alright, Allegra, we will do it that way. However, since I am an advocate of simple channels of communication, let’s make the first appointment right now. As the head of the department, I would like to speak to you first. Come to my office in the motorhome. Shall we say in an hour?”

She eyed me critically with a mixture of discomfort, defiance, and suspicion.

“And please bring the guest bookings and preliminary staffing plans for the upcoming season with you.” I added to assure her that I wanted to have a professional conversation and did not want to pick up where we’d left things in Capri.

Because what happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas.

However, I had to admit that I missed Allegra, and our Las Vegas experience, more than I should in that moment.

Chapter 4 – Allegra

6 months earlier - Capri Island, Italy - Carlotta & Matteo wedding

The excitement made me feel jittery. It wasn't even my big day but my sister, Carlotta's. After so many nerve-wracking months, she had finally won the battle for her great love, the powerful and influential businessman, Matteo Leone. Today she would marry the millionaire mafia boss on his family estate on the island of Capri.

I should really kidnap her and stop her from marrying a man like Matteo. But the tough and bossy mafioso was hopelessly in love with my sister and acted like an innocent, cuddly little lamb in her presence. He would protect her forever and sacrifice his life for hers in a heartbeat. If there was such a thing as one great love, then that was what bound the two of them together.

I arranged the back of my sister's beautiful wedding dress with our cousin, Giorgia, and our friend, Mia.

"Ready?" I whispered in awe and took Carlotta's hand.

"Absolutely!" She laughed happily and pulled us into a hug.

Shortly afterwards, my sister walked down the aisle on my father's arm to *Umberto Tozzi's* world hit "Ti Amo". I followed her at the proper distance. This was her moment. She had more than earned it after her brave life-and-death struggle.

Matteo waited impatiently in front of an altar of flowers that had been built in the magnificent garden. Tears glittered in his eyes and the adoring look he gave my sister made my heart stumble.

There it was. True love. Close enough to touch and yet so far away.

Would my true love ever find me?

Or was it only reserved for a handful of people whose circle I wasn't part of?

To be honest, I didn't have time for love at all, and usually I didn't feel any need for it either. But seeing Carlotta and Matteo so incredibly happy triggered a wistful tug in my chest.

What the two had was unique. They completed each other. Two halves of the same soul that had finally found each other.

Maybe one day I would find it too, that great love.

One day when I have the time. Because right now, my life revolved around my job as event manager for *Titan Racing*, and I was more than satisfied with that. To be able to travel to more than twenty races around the globe and experience the vibrating atmosphere at the racetrack, the loud roar of the engines, the acrid smell of gasoline, the thunderstorm of flashing lights from the photographers when the stars arrived, the wild parties and the chic spa hotels: all of this filled me with pure happiness. I didn't need more than that to lead a fulfilling life.

At least not for now.

And then...

A handsome stranger caught my gaze as I looked at the assembled guests. My lips twisted into an alluring smile at the thought of how this attractive hunk would look naked.

I didn't have time for great love, but this weekend I had time for fun. A lot of fun, actually. And the mysterious

stranger, whose mouth twitched at the corners during our silent exchange, seemed to be the perfect partner for my project.

After the emotional ceremony, we found ourselves at a long table in the middle of the Leone family's vineyard and the wine flowed freely. I sat down with Giorgia and Mia, a few seats away from the happy couple and my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. In high spirits, we toasted love with a glass of red wine.

"How are we doing ladies? Did you start drinking without us? That's against the house rules," joked Leonardo, Matteo's cheerful cousin, as he approached us with none other than the appetizing-looking stranger in tow.

"Ladies. May I introduce you to Hunter? He is a college friend of Matteo and me. We used to hit up New York together."

"Hello Hunter." We cooed, already visibly tipsy and burst out laughing, which didn't seem to bother or unsettle the said Hunter.

Instead, he gallantly leaned down to Mia and Giorgia, pressed two kisses on both of their cheeks and then calmly walked around the long table to bend down and kiss me. His lips and hot breath accidentally brushed my ear lobe.

"Allegra," I cleared my throat, embarrassed. "I am Allegra. The sister of the bride."

"Pleased to meet you, Allegra, sister of the bride. Is the seat next to you free? I would like to keep you company, if you allow me."

Without waiting for my answer, he sat down next to me and put his arm naturally over the back of my chair. With the other hand he poured wine first for me, then for himself.

"Well, Allegra, sister of the bride. How are you? Are you enjoying yourself?" Hunter asked, lifting the glass to his lips and not taking his eyes off me for a second.

“Absolutely. And you?” I replied, because with the best will in the world, I couldn’t think of anything better.

“Now that I’ve met you, yes.”

What would have sounded trite and clumsy from anyone else sounded frighteningly arousing from his mouth.

Before I could reply, Don Mario, the head of the Leone family, stood up at the end of the table and the happy banter of the guests died down.

Everyone looked in awe at the head of the family, who was about to speak.

“Dear family and friends. I am delighted that you all came to the wedding of my grandson, Matteo, and his lovely wife, Carlotta. Rousseau once said: To write a good love letter, you must start without knowing what you want to say and end without knowing what you have said. This is what I’m planning to do with this short speech that I would like to dedicate to the bride and groom.”

The vineyard was quiet and only the distant rustling of the sea could be heard.

“We usually only recognize great love when we have lost it. This was also the case with my grandson, who left his great love Carlotta twelve long years ago out of a sense of duty to the family. When they met again six months ago, I hoped that fate would finally unite the two lost souls. But life is sometimes unfathomable and so their shared happiness was again brutally and deviously shattered. Despite all the events of the past months and years, we are sitting here today and celebrating the indestructible love that these two people have for each other. A love that is stronger than words could ever describe. A love that is more powerful than any intrigue will ever be. A love that is more permanent than the afterlife. True, pure and invincible love. The love between Carlotta and Matteo. Please raise your glasses. Let’s toast to Carlotta and Matteo. And the fact that love makes life worth living.”

Don Mario, visibly moved, raised his glass and we did the same. Once again, I secretly wished that one day I would

find it too, this true, pure and invincible love.

“I need to work out after this gigantic meal. Let’s hit the dance floor, ladies.” Urged Leonardo after the lavish main course, which consisted of handmade pumpkin ravioli in a light parmesan cream sauce as well as an assortment of meat and seafood with seasonal, grilled vegetables, and the traditional tiramisu dessert.

“We haven’t tried the wedding cake yet!” I protested, but he had already grabbed Giorgia and was pushing her towards the dance floor, his hand slipping suspiciously down her back.

Mia, too, had disappeared.

That left me and Hunter together.

“I’ll get a piece of cake for us.” He smiled and stood up.

A minute later he returned with a sizeable slice of the three-tier panna cotta cake with raspberries and vanilla sauce and held a loaded fork to my mouth.

I hesitated, but then I gathered my courage, looked straight into his azure blue eyes and closed my lips around the fork.

“Mmm.” I sighed, which he acknowledged with a boisterous growl.

I boldly took the fork from his hand, our fingers touching, and my skin started to tingle.

“Now it’s your turn.” I said and held the loaded fork in front of his wonderfully inviting mouth.

He leaned over to me and took it in his mouth with relish.

“Almost as tasty as you. But only almost.” He commented, winking at me.

“I don’t think I’m tasty.” I said, suppressing a grin.

“Oh no? What are you then?” Hunter replied with interest whilst he ran his index finger over my bare arm.

“Wild. Starved. Adventurous.” I managed breathlessly and watched spellbound as Hunter swallowed at these words. His Adam’s apple moved hard.

“Starved? Would you like to taste more of this fantastic cake?” His voice had given way to a harsh whisper.

“I think I’d rather taste something else tonight.” I was amazed at my courage. Never in my life had I been so forward with a man. That wasn’t my style at all.

But this ... well, this was an exception. In all respects.

Whatever happened in Capri that weekend would stay on that island, I decided. Hidden behind the massive, well-guarded and centuries-old stone walls of the Villa Leone.

This was my personal Las Vegas.

And I had just sat down at the roulette table, ready to play with fire.

Chapter 5 – Hunter

6 months earlier – Capri Island, Italy – Carlotta & Matteo wedding

For an hour now, I've been spinning Allegra tirelessly across the dance floor and enjoying the fact that I could touch her hips, waist and arms again and again without being disturbed.

Her silky, hazel-brown hair smelled flowery, and her fawn-brown eyes shone from the five glasses of wine, the fresh sea air and her exuberant laughter, which pierced the night as bright as a bell.

The live band played one hit after the next. The mood was at its peak, the dance floor was packed, and the guests were drunk with happiness. The newlyweds danced in love amid all their friends and family.

After another twenty minutes of energetic hits, the band swung in a gentler direction and started soulful ballads.

Without a second thought, I pulled Allegra into my arms and buried my face in her neck. She shuddered as my hot breath hit the delicate skin at the pit of her throat.

I clutched her tighter and was pleased to see how perfectly she fit in my arms. Her sensual curves fitted into my body like she was made for me alone. I caught my breath as her hands made their way up my back, my neck and to my head. She grabbed my hair and pulled my face down to her.

Her eyes were wide. There was a mixture of excitement, fear and nervousness in them.

“Tell me what you want, baby,” I whispered against her lips. “If you want me to kiss you, I'll do it right now. But you have to want it. Say it. I want to hear it from you.”

She blinked and nodded hesitantly.

“I didn't hear you.” I said in a husky voice.

Her sudden shyness turned me on. This woman wasn't a daredevil. She didn't throw herself at men and she wasn't easy to get. I was experienced enough to see that immediately.

Nevertheless, today she had plucked up the courage to embark on a passionate adventure. And God forbid, I wanted to be the man she had this adventure with. But I had to hear it. I had to know that she wanted it as much as I did. Because once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop. Not with her. Not with Allegra.

"I want it." She breathed shyly.

"What do you want, baby?" I kept poking her as I leaned over and bit her earlobe in a teasing manner.

A choked gasp escaped her in response.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" I whispered.

"Yes." She sighed willingly and pressed closer to me.

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to stay calm. This was good. Damn good. Too good.

"Where should I kiss you, Allegra? On the mouth? On the neck? Do you want me to kiss your breasts? Or between your legs?"

She groaned excitedly. She seemed to like the dirty talk as much as I did.

"What do you want, baby? Tell me and I'll do it for you."

"I want everything," she croaked. "Everything."

That's what I wanted to hear. That she wanted it. That she wanted me. That she wanted everything I would give her.

"Come on, let's get out of here." I whispered and pulled her with me in the direction of our unusual night quarters.

Although the Villa Leone was spacious and extensive, it could not accommodate all the wedding guests who had travelled to attend. That is why Allegra's sister had twelve glamorous tipi tents built around a romantic campfire in the

garden, which was where Carlotta and Matteo's closest friends were staying.

"This is my tent." Allegra stopped and pointed to the tent next to mine.

"And this is mine." I explained and grinned in amusement.

She giggled and fiddled with my shirt, embarrassed. "Do you want to come to me? Or do we go to you?"

"I'll follow you wherever you want." I said, running my index finger down her neck provocatively.

Allegra leaned down and unzipped her tent, which gave me a perfect view of her shapely bottom and my cock grew hard. She turned to me and made a clear signal for me to enter.

Oh yes.

I did the zip up behind us and looked around her tipi. It was as spacious and stylish as mine. You could even stand upright in the middle. Two rattan lamps that hung from the ceiling gave off a soft, golden light. An inviting, pristine double bed filled most of the space. A seat with a retro table and large mirror completed the minimalist furnishings.

Allegra stepped from one foot to the other and bit her lower lip, which made my cock harden impatiently.

"Are you alright?" I gently lifted her chin to meet her eyes.

"Yes," she uttered hoarsely. "It is only..."

"What? Tell me baby. It's OK."

She took a deep breath and met my gaze. "It's just that I don't usually do this. That's why I'm not familiar with the process."

"You don't usually go to weddings?" I purposely acted naive to ease the heated atmosphere. "Usually the bride and groom promise each other eternal love and loyalty."

Afterwards, people eat, dance and celebrate, although not always in that order. It's very simple you see."

Allegra punched me in the side with a sly grin. "That's not what I meant."

"I know." I smiled and pulled her close to me.

My plan worked. Her nerves gave way to anticipation and desire.

"I know you're usually not the kind of woman to pick up men at a wedding. But I can be your exception. You want a passionate adventure with no obligations. Ecstasy. Satisfaction. Fun. And I'll give you all this baby. Just trust me and let yourself go."

She nodded resolutely. "Ok. I want this adventure with you."

"Okay. Now go to the bed and take off your clothes. Slowly. I want to enjoy it." I ordered her.

Allegra's eyes widened and her cheeks turned a slight shade of red. Yet, she obeyed without resistance and strutted on shaky legs to the bed, where she unzipped her dress with trembling fingers.

I had suspected, but hadn't known for sure, that taking orders in the bedroom thrilled her. Seeing how much my commands turned her on filled me with satisfaction and desire in equal measure.

"Look at me, Allegra. I want you to concentrate on me alone."

She lifted her pretty face up and watched me with slightly parted lips as she stripped off her dress. It fell to the floor with a rustle. With an elegant movement, she stepped over it and presented herself in turquoise lace underwear that gave her the appearance of a mermaid, and high heels that I hadn't noticed before.

"Take off your underwear. Leave your shoes on." I demanded and unzipped my pants to free my pulsating manhood.

Leisurely I slid my hand up and down my erect cock and watched as she undid her bra and exposed two round, pretty breasts.

“Touch them, baby. Caress them.” I ordered her and groaned as she obeyed without hesitation and let her perfectly manicured fingernails wander over her breasts to her erect nipples and circled them provocatively.

I unbuttoned my shirt without taking my eyes off her for a second. Her sexy show sparked my imagination.

“Take off your panties and sit on the bed.”

Allegra did as I asked and showed me her bare, pert bottom as she strutted to the bed in her heels and sat down on the mattress. She crossed her legs shyly and crossed her arms awkwardly over her chest.

“I want you to make yourself comfortable. Lean back, support yourself on your forearms and spread your legs for me.”

She hesitated.

“Immediately.” I growled.

She gasped and studied me with startled brown eyes like a shy deer in the headlights.

After a moment she leaned back and spread her thighs, baring her wet, hot sex, which was framed by two long legs in heels.

Unable to hold back a second longer, I stripped off my remaining clothes, pulled a condom from my jacket, and walked over to Allegra, whose body trembled under my admiring gaze.

It was difficult for me to decide what I wanted to taste first: her lovely mouth with the full lips? Her luscious breasts with the hard nipples? Or her wet, clean-shaven center?

I chose the latter and got on my knees in front of her.

I blew gently into her heat, which she acknowledged with a tortured groan.

“Take it easy, baby, I’m only just getting started.” I whispered, lowering my mouth.

My lips slid leisurely over her accompanied by Allegra’s choked gasp.

“You taste as sweet as you look.” I mumbled between her legs and dipped my tongue inside her.

“Ahhh yes.” She moaned rampantly as I began to massage her clitoris with my tongue and penetrate her with two fingers at the same time.

She writhed under me and her breath became faster by the second.

As she jumped over the cliff, her insides tightened around my fingers. The animal sounds she made as the orgasm rocked her further fueled my passion.

“I should be a gentleman and let you enjoy the aftershocks of your orgasm in peace. But I’m a fucking asshole baby. I want to take what I need. Turn around.” I ordered her and opened the condom packet next to me on the floor with erratic movements.

Allegra licked her lips and rolled over on her stomach, her eyes obscured by ecstasy. She willingly stretched out her round bottom towards me. She still wore the high heels, the mere sight of which almost brought me to a climax.

I hurriedly put the condom on and entered her with a jerk. We had enough time over the next few hours and days to take things slowly. Now I needed it fast and hard. I wanted to come. Find redemption. In her.

I screwed her relentlessly with raw thrusts, clawing my fingers into her slender hips. She was incredibly tight, which drove me completely insane.

“You feel so good, baby. Made for me,” I gasped breathlessly. “Do you like the way I fuck you? Or do you need it harder?”

When I felt how she tightened around me at these words and began to groan my name uncontrollably under

another orgasm, I followed her on the spot.

Exhausted, I let myself fall on the bed and looked into her relaxed face.

“I think I like assholes.” She whispered with a cheeky grin.

I laughed and pulled her into my arms. “I’m a selfish asshole that has forgotten all of his manners at the phenomenal sight of you. I didn’t even kiss you before sticking my cock inside you. I hope you can forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” she whispered against my chest. “Under one condition.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“You kiss me right now and then we pick up where we left off.”

“You’re very greedy, baby.”

“Do you have a problem with that?” She asked, resting her chin on her arm.

“Absolutely not.” I smiled.

“What are you waiting for then? Kiss me and show me what an asshole you can be.”

Chapter 6 – Allegra

I knocked on the door of the team manager's office and waited for the signal to allow me to enter.

"Come in." The voice of Hunter, or Byron King, pierced me in the corridor.

I counted to three, took a deep breath, and turned the doorknob.

"You wanted to see me. Here I am." I announced curtly.

"Allegra," he smiled pleasantly, got up from his chair and pointed to the empty seat across from him. "Take a seat. We can save the introductions. After all, we already know each other, don't we?"

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stood stubbornly behind the chair he was pointing at.

"Do we? I don't know a Byron King. But I do know a Hunter. That's the guy I had crazy sex with for two days at my sister's wedding. And you know what? He looks very much like you. Do you have a twin brother? Or did you just lie to me?"

"Don't you want to sit down?" Hunter tried again.

"No." I snapped.

He ran his hand through his dark brown hair and sighed.

"Alright then. Listen. You are angry. That's fair. But maybe you will give me a chance to explain?"

"I'm all ears." I hissed.

"You think I lied to you? I didn't. My real name is Byron King. However, to my buddies, I'm Hunter. None of them call me Byron."

“Aha. Why do they call you Hunter when your name is Byron?” I asked, confused.

A slight frown crossed his face and he looked down. “That is probably due to my reputation when it comes to women.”

“I see.” I growled.

Hunter. The hunter.

Unlike me, what we did together in Capri was obviously not a first for him. He was a professional of the one-night-stand, or as in our case, two-day-and-night-stand.

Why did this knowledge bother me?

No idea. But it did.

Possibly because I didn't like being one of many. What woman wanted to be another notch on a man's bedpost? That had to be what was bothering me. And not the thought that Hunter had slept with dozens of other women since our passionate adventure last October.

“How should I address you now? Hunter? Byron? Mr. King?”

“You can choose, Allegra.”

“Thank you, Mr. King.”

“You really want to be so formal with me? After everything I've seen, touched and tasted of you?” He stepped forward from behind the desk and came up to me as sleek as a panther.

I instinctively pushed the chair between us. “That no-strings adventure is a thing of the past. We shouldn't talk about it anymore. Let's forget it. After all, from now on, you are my boss.”

He laughed in disbelief as he moved behind me. I did my best to keep breathing calmly and in a controlled manner.

“How could I ever forget about having sex with you, baby? Your long legs in those murderous high shoes wrapped around me. Your moans which accompanied your orgasms.

Your pointy fingernails that marked me. Your greedy lips that sucked my cock and drank me to the last drop? Sorry. I can't forget that. And I don't want to."

His mouth was so close I thought I could feel it on my neck. Tell-tale goosebumps crept down my back and I clenched my hands into fists.

Hunter walked around and fixed me with an unfathomable expression. "I will not forget it, but I can handle it, Allegra. I can separate life from work. How about you? Can you do it too, or do I have to look elsewhere for an event manager? Would you rather be transferred?"

"I'm not going anywhere. *Titan Racing* is my family! I won't let myself be driven away from here!" I exclaimed indignantly.

"Good. Because I expect full commitment. From every team member, not just from you. If we understand each other in this regard, I see no problem. Do you?" Replied Hunter.

"No."

"Wonderful," he said. "Now that we've clarified that, do you have any further questions for me, or do you want to get back to business?"

"Why?" I whispered, barely audible.

"Why what?"

"Why did you buy this racing team?" I put my question in concrete terms.

"Because it was for sale and it is a profitable investment."

"Naturally."

"Besides, I didn't buy it, my company did. My two partners and I make these decisions together. We own various clubs across football, ice hockey, basketball and many other sports. That's how we make our money."

"Why did they send you of all people to manage this?"

“Because motorsport is my area of responsibility.” He informed me with a shrug.

“Motorsport? What do you know about motorsport?” I snorted contemptuously.

“We have stakes in pretty much every American racing series.”

“There’s nothing American about the *Serie del Rey*.”

“I am well aware of that. However, there are certain parallels so I won’t have to start from scratch. I also have an extremely capable and, I hope, cooperative colleague who will be at my side in an advisory capacity to give me everything I need to know over the next few months.”

“And who is that supposed to be?” I eyed him suspiciously.

“You.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because, unlike me, you know everything about the *Serie del Rey* and *Titan Racing*. That is why you will act as my advisor. In addition to your duties as event manager.”

“And how is that going to work?”

He took his time with the answer and calmly sat down behind his desk. “You will have to report to me regularly anyway about the events and hospitality. We will extend those meetings by half an hour and talk about the questions I have. If I don’t have any questions, you can tell me what you think is important. If I need you beyond that, I’ll get in touch. You kindly gave me your business card so I have your contact details.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.” he replied curtly, and his voice left no doubt about his decision.

Chapter 7 – Hunter

Although it had been six months since our weekend in Capri, the memories of that adventure had not faded. I saw them in front of me today. I saw her in front of me today.

For the first time in my life, after a no-obligation affair, I asked myself how my playmate might have fared. How she felt. Did she think of me too?

Over the past few months, Allegra has been haunting my thoughts again and again. None of the beautiful women I had enjoyed since then could completely drive Allegra's image out of my head.

Ever since I'd found out we were going to buy the very team she worked for, I'd been imagining what it would be like to see her again.

Now I had my answer.

And I didn't like it.

I didn't like that she was mad at me. That she wanted to forget our time together. That she addressed me as "Mr. King". That she was obviously not a bit happy to see me again and the prospect of spending time with me in the future did not make her rejoice. Pretty much every other woman I've been in bed with over the years would have picked up where we left off by now.

Not so Allegra.

With her arms crossed in front of her chest, she stood angrily in my office and apparently wished for nothing more than for me to disappear from her life.

"Are you planning to fire people?" She hurled her next question at me. I was beginning to feel like I was being interrogated.

“I’ll find out in the coming months. I hope I can count on your help.” I confessed sincerely.

“I’m not going to help you find reasons to fire the people I care about.”

She had propped herself up on the desk to spit out her answers at eye level and was glaring at me belligerently.

The dark, dominant side awoke in me as I found it difficult to keep myself in check with this hot-blooded woman.

“What? Are you speechless or are you just wondering whether I might be the wrong person to be your spy?”

I leaned forward so our faces came dangerously close and I could smell her bewitching scent of night hyacinth. “I’m just wondering what it would feel like if I stood behind you now, pushed up your skirt and bent you over my desk to fuck you really hard. Maybe then you will come to your senses and moderate your tone towards me. Shall we try it out?”

She gasped audibly and screwed up her eyes. “No need, Mr. King. I’ll pass, with thanks.”

“Okay baby. If you don’t want me to grab your pretty bum and fuck you extensively, you should sit down now, stop arguing and start doing your work.”

She didn’t move. So I did. I pushed back the chair and stood up briskly. “One,” I started counting.

There was still no reaction from her.

“Two,” I circled the table.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Allegra whispered flatly.

“Try me.” I countered.

Only one more step separated me from her. I reached out to grab her hip, but she backed away shyly and quickly sat down on the chair in front of her.

“Let’s start with the bookings for this weekend.” She growled and stubbornly fixed her eyes on an indefinable point on the opposite wall.

“Go ahead,” I commented and took my place across from her again. “Tell me.”

When she spoke, her gaze was still fixed behind me. “We’re expecting a hundred and fifty guests on Friday. There are two hundred each on Saturday and Sunday. Most of them are sponsors with their current and prospective business partners and customers.”

“I want a list of the sponsors that will be present, and I want to know who of importance will be there. Significant sponsors, directors, CEOs and so on. Arrange for me to meet with anyone you think I should get to know. I also want to know which sponsorship contracts will expire this or next year and the status of those contract negotiations.”

“The latter is more a job for the sponsorship department.”

“Then organize a meeting for me with the man leading it.”

“He’s a ‘she’, Dakota Bennet, but yes, I will take care of it. Tomorrow evening there will be a season opening party on the roof terrace of the team hotel. Many special guests will attend. I think that’s a good place to shake a few hands.”

“Agreed. You will introduce me to people, which means that you will have to spend part of the evening by my side. Can you handle it?”

She pressed her lips together. “I am a professional.”

“I didn’t think anything else.”

I looked at my extravagant Swiss wristwatch, which had been given to me by one of our team sponsors. “We have ten minutes until my next meeting. Show me the bookings for the next two races and then I would like to know more about the planned event schedule for the hospitality suite this weekend.”

After Allegra left my office, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. There was something about this woman that got to me. Perhaps it was the conflicting signals she was sending out.

If I followed what she said, I would assume she couldn't stand me. However, if I judged how her body reacted to me, the little details that she was cleverly trying to hide, then I knew I wasn't leaving her indifferent. The goosebumps on the back of her neck, the clenched legs, the moistening of the lips.

All of this showed affection. Interest. Desire.

Yet she fought against me.

Why?

Because I had used my nickname in Capri and not my real name? Because I wanted to put the efficiency and organization of the team through its paces? Or because I was her boss now?

A knock on the door pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Byron? The drivers are back from the press conference. Do you want to talk to them?" Toni stood in the doorway and typed something on his cell phone.

"Thank you. I'm coming." I replied, getting up to introduce myself to the team's two drivers.

Juan Sanchez had won three world championship titles in the last fifteen years of his career in the *Serie del Rey*. His British team-mate Tom Clark, who was ten years his junior, won his first title last season. Juan was the experienced, seasoned driver of the team. He always delivered solid results. Tom was the youngster. Fast as the devil, but with more luck than brains. The driver pairing was chosen wisely and had contributed significantly to the success of *Titan Racing*.

Until now.

I was fully aware that Juan Sanchez could announce his retirement at the end of this season. At thirty-seven, he was one of the oldest racing drivers in the field. He'd done very

well for himself over his career and his wife Laura had given birth to their first child during the winter break. Juan would soon want to set other priorities. His contract expired at the end of the season and so far, he had made no move to renew it.

I wanted to use the coming weeks to get an idea of him and to talk openly about whether there was a need to look around for a new driver.

This was one of the many challenges of the *Serie del Rey*. It was the premier class of motorsport. There weren't even fifty drivers in the world who were able to win in this racing category and in this talented field. The few that could were off the market faster than the latest version of the PlayStation. So, if Juan was going to retire, I had to know as soon as possible.

It had been dark for a long time when I left the racetrack for the team hotel late in the evening. After getting to know the drivers, I met with all the engineers and talked to the mechanics. I tried to memorize all the names and areas of activity as best I could.

The people who signed up to work for a race team usually did so out of passion, not because of the money. It took heart and soul to constantly travel around the world every other weekend, sometimes even a couple of weekends in a row, work eighteen hours a day, and operate under the enormous pressure to not break down or make mistakes. The people who did this and had fun at the same time deserved my respect.

Judging by my first impression, *Titan Racing* seemed more like a family and less like a company. Everyone looked out for each other. So far, I had not heard a bad word, observed any quarrels or inattentiveness. Nobody had been lazy. Everyone worked in a focused and concentrated manner towards the start of the season.

Our chances of securing the constructors' and drivers' championship again this season were not bad. But our strongest competitors, the *Roaring Bulls* and *Racing Rosso*,

hadn't slept over the winter and had been upgrading their cars, if the results of the test days in Barcelona were to be believed.

My gut feeling predicted that the coming weeks and months would be anything but boring.

Chapter 8 – Allegra

Although we had already looked after guests during the pre-season tests in Barcelona, this was the first event of the season to take place away from a racetrack.

The guests would arrive in less than an hour. Until then there was still a lot of fires to put out. The event was taking place in the team hotel, a modern skyscraper in the center of Melbourne with an extravagant roof terrace, which meant I had to rely on the hotel staff for the catering, equipment and technology. And that left a lot to be desired.

My team and I worked at full speed to adapt the carelessly designed event area to the standards of *Titan Racing*. We should have been back in our rooms long ago to shower off the sweat of the stressful day at the racetrack and throw ourselves into our elegant evening outfits. Instead, we arranged canapes, flowers, and seating.

I was examining our setup when my cell phone started to ring. A look at the display told me that it was Toni, our team boss.

“Hi. Are you on the way?” I greeted him and tried not to let my stress show.

“There is a problem with the engine that’s got us worried. The engineers are evaluating the data from today’s practice sessions, and I have to stay on site until we can rule out the possibility of it exploding in qualifying tomorrow.”

I tipped my head back and stared at the starry night sky over Melbourne. One misfortune seldom came alone. No sooner had I put out one fire than the next one started blazing.

“We’re expecting around a hundred guests, Toni. And they, in turn, expect the team boss to give the first speech of the season at nine pm and assure them that we will win the title this year as well.”

“I know,” Toni sighed at the other end of the line. “There are still ninety minutes to go. Maybe I’ll be able to get to the hotel in time.”

“Maybe you can get here? And what if you can’t?”

Toni sighed again. “Then I’ll come up with something.” There was a rustle and Toni’s muffled voice could be heard indistinctly while he spoke to someone else on site. “Allegra, the data is here. I must go. Talk later.”

It clicked and the line was dead.

Annoyed, I kicked an imaginary stone off the roof with my toe.

“Everything is ready here. We’ll take a shower and get changed, if that’s okay?” My colleague, Mila, brought me back to the present.

“Go but be quick. I don’t want the guests to arrive without the team being ready.”

“Got it.” Mila tapped her forehead in acknowledgement and hurried to the elevator with her colleagues.

I did one last lap and mentally checked off the various items on my checklist. Then I also headed towards the elevator to get ready for the event. My watch told me that I had twenty-five minutes to go.

I was standing in front of the mirror trying to zip up my cocktail dress when there was a knock on the door. I frowned. I had to be ready on the terrace in five minutes. Whoever stood at my door would rob me of those precious minutes.

I considered not opening up and playing dead, but what about the event? What if more had gone wrong? In that case, I had to find out. Immediately.

With mixed emotions, I went to the door and opened it while holding my unzipped dress with my other hand.

“Hi.” Hunter greeted me, his hands casually in the pockets of his sleek suit.

“Hi. Unfortunately, I don’t have any time for you right now.” I uttered after I had recovered from the shock of seeing him standing in front of my door, hot as hell.

“Pity, I am your salvation.” He said with a shrug.

“More like my ruin.” I mumbled so quietly that he couldn’t hear me.

“Toni won’t make it to the welcome speech. He suggested that I do it for him.”

“You?” I looked at him with wide eyes.

“Yes, me. You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic?”

“I’m not. None of the guests know you, Hunter.”

“Then it is high time they get to know me. After all, I’m the new team manager. It’s the perfect way to introduce myself to everyone in one fell swoop. But if you have a better idea, do let me hear it.”

I leaned against the door frame and chewed my lower lip. He was right. Having Hunter deliver the speech was an excellent opportunity to introduce him to the sponsors and customers. And when I looked at my alternatives, my palms started to sweat pretty quickly.

“Do you know what to say? Have you done something like this before?”

“Welcome guests? Give a speech?” Hunter’s mouth curved upwards mockingly. “A couple of times, yes. Riley also gave me some pointers.”

If Riley had given him a crash course, not much could go wrong. I trusted Riley. She was damn talented at what she did.

“Alright then. Let’s do it. I’ll meet you on the terrace in two minutes.”

“Why don’t we go together?” He wanted to know.

I pointed to my arm that was holding the open dress. “The zipper has decided to make life difficult for me. I have to sort this first before I can go upstairs.”

Hunter pushed past me into my room and closed the door.

I looked up at him questioningly.

What was he up to?

What was he going to do with me?

“Turn around.” Demanded Hunter.

At his commanding tone, goosebumps spread on my bare arms, which he certainly saw.

Damn.

“Why?” My voice was more like the squeak of a guinea pig than a question from a confident woman.

“Because I’m going to fix your zipper. Otherwise, you’ll still be standing here in half an hour.”

I didn’t move. The words sounded prohibitively sexy from his mouth. My eyes were on his lips, which were moving, but I didn’t hear what he was saying.

“Allegra?”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“It’s your event. If you want to be late, that is your decision.”

I shook off thoughts of the naked, muscular Hunter in my bed. They were a thing of the past.

Without a word I turned to the door and showed him my partially bare back. When his fingers reached for the zipper and touched me, I instinctively pulled my hand away, causing the dress to slide down and reveal my entire torso.

I heard Hunter take a sharp breath and swear softly.

I quickly grabbed the fabric and pulled it up. “You do know how to work a zip right, Hunter?” I tried to use a condescending tone, but with moderate success.

“I’m better at undoing them,” he replied, amused, and pulled the zipper shut with a jerk. “Done.”

I slipped on my shoes and grabbed my clutch bag from the bed.

“Nice shoes.” Hunter commented casually, holding the door open for me.

I blushed at the memory of his soft spot for high heels.

On the way to the elevator, Hunter naturally put his hand on my back and directed me down the long corridor.

I wished his touch hurt, but it was so nice that I began to purr almost like a kitten.

“Tell me how this is going to work, Allegra.” He demanded as we entered the elevator and the steel doors closed.

This? Was he going to make a move on me in the elevator? My mouth went instantly dry and I cleared my throat.

“Nothing will happen here.” I replied coolly.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that what happened between us is over. The weekend in Capri was a no ties situation with no obligations or expectations.”

Hunter smiled amused. “It’s nice that we agree. I was actually asking how this event will go. What time will I give the speech? Who announces me? Where should I stand?”

My face turned red like a tomato and I groaned inwardly.

What had gotten into me that I kept getting lost in memories of our hot affair six months ago?

From the way Hunter spoke, he had clearly long since forgotten it. And so should I!

I was a fully grown, independent, determined woman who had embarked on a temporary sex adventure with him.

Why was I making such a big deal of this?

This was a thing of the past. It was over! Enough. The End. There would be no future.

“Around nine o’clock when all the guests have arrived, I’ll announce you.” I informed him quietly and stepped out of the elevator as the doors opened at that moment with a loud “ping”.

For the next half hour, I had my hands full welcoming our sponsors and their guests, overseeing the catering, and taking care of everyone.

The hustle and bustle distracted me a little from the nervousness that overcame me in Hunter’s presence and meant I was once again back in my element.

At nine o’clock sharp I motioned for Hunter, who was standing a little distance away with a group of guests, to be ready.

It was time for his performance.

Chapter 9 – Hunter

I waited beside the large marketing wall displaying the team and sponsor logos until Allegra announced me to the guests.

She greeted the guests with humor and charm, made them laugh and thanked them for coming. I used these minutes to study Allegra carefully.

She posed confidently in front of the photo wall, as if she was a top model and all the photographers wanted to get her picture in the latest dress. She exuded confidence and competence with every breath. She owned the attention of everyone on this terrace. She directed the conversation, led it as she wanted. She was the boss. Desired, popular and powerful.

Her long brown hair fell around her waist in gentle waves. Her alert, fawn-brown eyes shone with delight. Her burgundy cocktail dress reminded me of the Leone red wine from Capri, which, however, had not tasted half as sweet on my lips as this woman had done.

“May I please introduce you to Mr. Byron King, the new *Titan Racing* team manager.”

That was my cue. To thunderous applause, I stepped next to Allegra and took the microphone from her. Our eyes met and for a split second, I was no longer on the roof terrace of a hotel in downtown Melbourne, but on the dance floor in the garden of the Villa Leone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, our dear friends. I am delighted to welcome you tonight as team manager on behalf of *Titan Racing*. It is overwhelming to see how many of you have come to our event. An event that we want to dedicate to you, our dear friends. Because without your support, without your belief in the team, we would not be where we are today. Each and every one of you has contributed to this unique success story and continues to do so. Part of the world

title belongs to each of you. For this I would like to thank you on behalf of the team. Before we plunge into a new battle tomorrow with the aim of securing another world championship at the end of the year, we would like to raise a toast to what we have already achieved together. From tomorrow we start again from scratch. But tonight, we will take a moment to enjoy what we have achieved so far. So, let's raise our glasses and toast the story you've already written with this team and the story we'll be writing together in the future. To you, my dear friends and to *Titan Racing*."

With applause ringing around the room, I raised my glass, and the guests present did the same.

"That wasn't bad." Allegra commented shortly as she grabbed my elbow and directed me to a group of older men.

"Mr. King. May I introduce you to Ben Morrison, John Campbell and Josh Madden? Ben, John and Josh own Hawk Enterprise, our leading technology sponsor."

"Pleasure to meet you. Please call me Byron." I turned to the gentlemen and shook hands with them.

For the next twenty minutes, Ben, John, and Josh engaged me in a conversation about Silicon Valley, developments in the IT industry, and their company's five-year strategy. The fact that all three gentlemen were also Americans and that we were on the same wavelength made the conversation even more pleasant.

After getting to know the owners of Hawk Enterprise, an extensive chat followed with the ladies of the sporting goods manufacturer, Tiger, the country manager of the consulting firm, Roaming Minds, and the president of the luxury watch brand, Chasseur & Cie.

Around eleven o'clock, I tore myself away to order a drink at the crescent-shaped bar and refresh my vocal cords.

I spotted Allegra on a bar stool to the right of the counter. Her slender, tanned legs were casually crossed. The knee-length dress had slipped up to mid-thigh. In her perfectly manicured hand, she held a cocktail glass from which she

sipped occasionally while chatting animatedly with the man across from her.

Before I knew what I was doing and, above all, why I was doing it, I had joined them and leaned casually next to Allegra on the counter.

“Hi. I don’t think we’ve met yet.” I said to the guy who devoured Allegra with his eyes and had just slid his hand over her bare knee.

“This is Jax Slater, an Australian professional surfer and a huge *Titan Racing* fan. He enjoys our hospitality every year during the Australian Grand Prix.” Allegra explained to me and smacked said Jax on the thigh like a friend.

“I’m coming for you only. You know that babe.” Jax replied, which Allegra acknowledged with a girlish giggle.

“Mr. King, you must know that Allegra has her own fan club. Ask her how many men around the world come to the overpriced hospitality just because of her? She is a real bestseller, if you ask me.”

“Stop it, that’s bullshit,” Allegra laughed loudly and poked Jax in the side. “You really love the sound of your own voice.”

“Babe, I would love to do very different things with you than just talk. A word from you is enough.”

Allegra was laughing with tears in her eyes and Jax grinned from ear to ear.

With a tense jaw I reached for the beer I had ordered and watched the exuberant banter between the two.

Before I could rejoin the conversation, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

Kenzie. Toni’s assistant.

“Byron. Hi. Toni has just arrived and would like to introduce you to a few people. Can you come with me?”

With one last look at Allegra and Jax, who were deep in conversation about Australia’s most beautiful beaches, I

pushed off the counter and followed Kenzie, albeit reluctantly.

“Well, did you have a good time tonight?” Riley asked when we had said goodbye to the last few guests. I had finally got around to checking the text messages that had been coming in on my cell phone over the past few hours.

“Fabulous.” I muttered absently as I opened a message that made me frown.

“You did really well for a rookie. Come on, let’s celebrate with a drink.”

I wanted to decline because I urgently needed to make a call about one of the messages I’d just received, but I reminded myself that it was important to connect with my team. This invitation was a casual way to do just that.

“You already know Allegra and Kenzie. This is Dakota, the head of the sponsorship department.” Riley introduced me to her colleague.

In addition to Allegra, Dakota would report to me from now on too. I shook her hand in delight. “Dakota, nice to meet you. I’m looking forward to working together.”

“Thank you and likewise.” Dakota replied and clinked her glass against mine. She seemed sad but was trying her best not to let it show.

“The guests stayed at the party for a long time. You and your team did an excellent job, Allegra.”

“Thank you, Mr. King.”

“Ladies, since we’re all together, how about we drop the “Mr. King” and you all just call me Byron? I’m sure I’m the only one on the team not called by my first name.”

“Right,” Riley chuckled. “We can do that, Mr King. I mean... Byron.”

“Thanks. So, from now on, I’m Byron.” I smiled encouragingly.

“Riley.”

“Kenzie.”

“Dakota.”

The three girls waited and looked at Allegra, who pursed her lips and didn't seem at all enthusiastic that her plan to keep me at a distance with her formal address was not going to work.

“Allegra.” She sighed resignedly and gave me an angry look.

We chatted for a few minutes, and they told me funny anecdotes they had experienced at the racetrack over the years.

Just as Kenzie was about to start another story, my cell phone rang. I looked at the display and my expression darkened suddenly.

“Oh. A call from Maddie. Is that your girlfriend?” Riley wiggled her eyebrows meaningfully.

“Riley! Don't be so nosy.” Dakota warned.

“I have to be nosy. That's part of the job description.” Riley defended herself. “Looks pretty, this Maddie. Quite young. Men prefer them young and perky though, don't they?” She winked at me.

Riley certainly spoke her mind, but from what I'd heard about her, she was damn good at her job as press officer and never at a loss for an answer.

I gave an effortless smile as I said, “Maddie is more than a friend. She is someone who is very close to me. Will you excuse me? I would be happy if we could continue our conversation at one of the next races. I'll invite you. Agreed?”

“We'll hold you to that,” Kenzie joked. “We usually like to drink cocktails, just so you know.”

“Message received,” I chuckled. “I'll see you at the track tomorrow. Good night, ladies.”

I raised a hand in greeting and turned to go.

When I caught Allegra's unfathomable gaze, I wondered what was going on in her pretty head before the

phone rang again and distracted me from my guesswork about Allegra.

Chapter 10 - Allegra

“Come on. Come on. Come on.” I mumbled quietly to myself, while I stood on the top step of the hospitality suite balcony and let my gaze wander again and again from the start and finish straight in front of me to the oversized TVs behind me.

From the sloping rows of seats on the balcony you could only see part of the racetrack: the last corner, the start and finish straight, and the first corner. What happened during the rest of the 3.5mile lap and remaining fourteen corners had to be watched on the television.

It was the final few minutes of qualifying and with it the chance to secure pole position or at least a place on the front row.

Juan and Tom were both still in the running for first place on the grid. But the drivers of our toughest competitors, the *Roaring Bulls* and *Racing Rosso*, had also set rapid lap times.

The TV camera panned from the cars on the track to the *Titan Racing* pit wall, where the strategy engineers were concentrating on their computers and using their headphones to instruct the drivers about where they could save a few hundredths of a second.

In addition to Tom’s race engineer, Juan’s race engineer, the sports director and the team’s chief strategist, the team boss and the team manager were also sat on the pit wall.

When the camera faded in on Hunter, who was concentrating on watching the action on the umpteen high-tech monitors in front of him, I blinked in surprise. I was used to seeing Luciano sitting there. It was only then that I really realized that Hunter would take this position from now on.

To my annoyance, Hunter looked so good in team uniform. The white shirt with the sponsor logos stretched

tightly around his muscular arms. He had undone the buttons on his wrists and rolled the shirt up to his elbows, which emphasized his sinewy forearms.

“Hot guy.” Commented Dakota, who had just brought a group of guests from the garage back to the hospitality suite.

This tour was one of our most exclusive program items. During the racing, we whisked our guests away to the team’s garage, where they could sit on comfortable armchairs in the back of the room, just like in the cinema, and watch what was happening up close. The garage, also known as the box, was a large space immediately adjacent to the pit lane and it was divided into two sections. The left side was assigned to Juan. The right side to Tom. In the middle was a sea of monitors and computer screens, at which strategy, tyre and racing engineers stood diligently evaluating the data that hundreds of sensors on our two cars spat out every second. Tyre temperature, tyre pressure, tyre wear, temperature of the brakes, downforce and balance were just some of the important pieces of information that needed to be quickly and precisely evaluated and adjusted in the race for victory or defeat.

When Juan and Tom’s cars were on the track, the mechanics in their full protective gear set up folding chairs in the garage so that they could watch the race on the flat screens on the walls of the garage and, if necessary, set up at lightning speed to be able to react to a collision or a flat tyre. Through the headphones they were wearing, they received the necessary instructions within seconds.

From their seats located in a dedicated prime spot in the garage, the guests had a direct view of the coordinated hustle and bustle in the garage. When the cars came into the pit lane to change tyres, they could comfortably observe it from their seats. The small flat screens that were attached to each seat ensured that they could also see what was happening on the racetrack right in front of them. Through the headphones attached to the armchairs, there was live commentary from trained experts whom we employed just for this task.

I was proud of this innovative and unique guest experience that I designed and implemented with Dakota. The other teams were miles inferior to us in this regard.

Whenever the guests came back to the hospitality suite from the garage, their cheeks were flushed and their eyes glistened with fever. Experiencing million-dollar racing cars with more than 1000 horsepower in front of their eyes fulfilled lifelong dreams of many of the guests who visited us.

“No comment?” Asked Dakota, since I hadn’t responded to her.

“Who do you mean? Who’s a hot guy?” I purposely pretended to be stupid.

She rolled her eyes. “What do you mean, who? *The King!*”

“*The King?*” I repeated her words in disbelief.

“Byron. Byron King. The new team manager. You remember?”

“I see. Byron. Hmmm, he’s okay.”

“Only okay?” Dakota exclaimed indignantly. “Are you nuts?”

“Psssst,” I hissed annoyed. “Lower your voice. You shouldn’t be shouting like that in front of our guests.”

“I’m sorry, but Byron’s more than okay. Surely you can see that or did you become a lesbian overnight?”

“No. I would just like to concentrate on qualifying.”

Dakota held up her hands in defense. “Alright. Alright. I’ll leave you in peace.”

She turned away and I felt guilty. Dakota couldn’t help that I was bothered by Hunter’s presence. After all, she didn’t know that we had a history and I wasn’t about to tell her, or anyone at all. Why would I? It was over between us. And it didn’t mean anything anyway.

Maddie was the best proof of that. The woman who had called Hunter so late last night, and who allegedly was so

close to him, seemed to be his newest flame. Maybe even more than that.

A hum went through the crowd, followed by excited murmurs. I looked up to see the cloud of dust that had formed on turn sixteen.

What happened?

At that moment, a repeat was shown on television. One of *Sun Chaser*'s cars had gone off the track and crashed through the gravel into the tyre wall.

The marshals waved the red flag.

Termination of qualifying.

A look at the remaining time told me that the starting line-up would not change any more. With less than two minutes remaining, race control would not allow qualifying to continue after the destroyed racing car had been salvaged and the parts removed from the track. That left the line-up for tomorrow's race as it was now. For us, that meant we would start the race from positions two and three. Not ideal, but definitely within striking distance of the faster of the two *Racing Rosso* drivers in first place.

I waited until the crashed driver climbed out of the wreck by himself and put his thumb up in the air, which confirmed that he was fine. Relieved, I tore myself from the track and turned to the guests to amuse them for the next two hours.

Chapter 11 – Hunter

When I parked my car in the reserved space in front of the hotel after a busy day at the racetrack, I met Allegra, Riley, Kenzie, Dakota and another woman standing in the lobby. They were accompanied by at least ten men of various stature and ages.

“Byron, wow you stayed at the track until late. We’re going to town for some food. Do you want to come with us?” Kenzie greeted me happily.

“That’s nice of you, but I’m afraid there is still a mountain of work waiting for me.” I declined with thanks.

“You seem like a very busy man. Why don’t you indulge in a little fun every now and then? Life is too short to work all the time.” Riley interjected.

“Thanks for the advice,” I laughed. “I’m having fun, believe me.”

“Right,” Riley broodingly put her index finger on her cheek. “That’s what Maddie is for.”

“Riley.” Dakota and Kenzie moaned in unison.

“I think Hunter made it clear that he doesn’t want to come with us, so let’s go and not hold him up any longer.” Allegra intervened from the background.

“Who’s Hunter?” Asked Riley and screwed up her eyes.

“Byron. I meant Byron, of course.” Allegra pressed her lips together, caught out.

“Why do you call Byron Hunter?” Questioned Kenzie.

“I mistook him for a guest who resembles him. Long day. I got it mixed up.”

“Which guest? I would have noticed him for sure.”
Puzzled Dakota.

The corners of my mouth twitched treacherously, and I had to exert the utmost control not to laugh out loud and expose Allegra’s mistake.

“Well then, girls, I wish you a nice evening. Don’t overdo it.”

“We won’t,” Riley winked cockily at me. “We’re always good. Honest.”

“You don’t look like the twelve apostles at their last dinner to me.” I smiled.

“That’s because we are women, Byron. We are the female version of the twelve apostles: the five apostles.” Riley informed me in her you-ask-really-stupid-questions-tone, which was usually reserved for annoying journalists.

“Funny, I don’t remember any mention of them in the Bible.” I teased.

“You can imagine why the Bible was censored at that point.”

“For the good of humanity?” I advised and chuckled in amusement.

“More likely for the benefit of the Catholic Church.”

I shook my head at Riley’s amusing joke and watched the chattering group walk away until they turned the next corner and disappeared.

After taking a long shower and reviewing my urgent emails and calls from New York, I headed down to the lobby to order a quick dinner and drink at the bar while I finished off my work.

It was damn hard to manage an empire worth nearly half a billion dollar in New York City and analyze and

evaluate a racing team in Australia at the same time. The fourteen-hour time difference was the least of my problems.

After two more hours at the bar, my eyes burned and my brain went into rest mode. Sighing, I closed the laptop and ordered a scotch.

“You look tired.” I heard an all too familiar voice next to me.

Allegra climbed onto the bar stool to my left and ordered a scotch as well.

“What gives me the honor?” I openly displayed my surprise.

“The others are still out. I just came back, I’m a little exhausted.” She replied with a shrug.

“I’m surprised. When you spotted me sat here, I would have expected you to take the elevator in the hotel next door, jump from their roof terrace to ours and use the staircase to get to your room. Just to avoid meeting me.”

She giggled. “Now you are exaggerating.”

“Really? Am I?”

“Yes. I would have taken the elevator from the roof terrace and not the stairs.”

I grinned into the glass that I had raised to my lips and drained it in one gulp.

“Hunter. Seriously. And I ask you to tell me the truth. Are you planning to fire people?”

I sighed wearily. I didn’t need a barrage of questions right now. “I intend to put the team through their paces. This includes finding weak points and eliminating them. I cannot confirm or rule out layoffs at this point, Allegra. Time will tell. But the way I see it, the team is run extremely efficiently otherwise it would not have achieved so many victories in the past few years and the atmosphere would not be as friendly and motivating as I’ve seen so far.”

“I would be very grateful if we could work together and find a way that everyone can keep their jobs. Reorganization instead of layoffs, if it should actually come to that.” She said quietly.

I glanced sideways and caught her pleading look.

“The people on the team are extremely important to you.” It was a statement. No question.

“They’re like my second family, Hunter,” she explained. “I fight for them and I protect them because they would do the same for me.”

Her words made me wince.

“Did I say something wrong?”

I cleared my throat and ordered another scotch. “No. You are absolutely right. A family is a precious treasure. Losing it is excruciatingly painful. An ugly wound that never heals.”

The bartender handed me the scotch and I quickly drained it.

“What you are proposing sounds reasonable, Allegra. I will involve you and we will work together to find a solution should I find any inconsistencies. Now please excuse me. I want to be well rested for the race tomorrow.”

I carelessly threw a few bills on the table and fled towards the elevator before Allegra could think of any more awkward questions that I didn’t want to answer.

Chapter 12 - Allegra

I sat on the plane from Melbourne to Tokyo pondering the strange ending to the conversation I'd had with Hunter in the hotel bar two nights ago.

He had literally run away from me. What were his cryptic statements about the painful loss of family?

I couldn't figure it out, which is why, for some inexplicable reason, the thoughts just wouldn't leave me alone.

Despite his bizarre exit, I had taken a giant step forward in my mission to save every single person on this team from firing.

Hunter had agreed to work with me to find a suitable place on the team for each member. This was great news and definitely better than what I had hoped for from talking to him. However, that also meant that from now on I had to spend even more time with Hunter than my job as event manager already required.

The prospect of that filled me with mixed feelings.

Hunter seemed to be a very capable boss. He and his friends ran a hugely prestigious business in the heart of New York City. There was no successful American sports team in which Hunter's company did not at least have a stake. Hunter came from a modest background, so he had built it all out of nothing.

How did I know?

I hated to admit it, but I had researched him. In order to fill the waiting time until boarding, I surfed the Internet and at some point, purely by chance of course, typed Hunter's name into the search engine. What I found only confirmed what I already knew. Hunter was a very wealthy, influential American businessman who made his living in the sports marketing industry.

In contrast to his professional activities, almost no information was found on his private life. He was always spotted with different women at events. I only found one sentence about his family status and his origins, which said that Hunter was originally from North Carolina, the home state of American motorsport.

The man was a mystery, which in today's digital age seemed almost impossible.

On the one hand, I was looking forward to working with and learning from such a capable and talented boss. On the other hand, I knew from my own experience that Hunter's talent wasn't just business-like. In the bedroom, too, he would become a multimillionaire in record time if there was payment for every phenomenal orgasm, he gave a woman.

My body responded to him and I was unable to do anything about it. It was as if he had implanted a chip in me in Capri six months ago which he could use to control my emotions at will.

That was what seriously worried me. I found it hard to look him in the eye without thinking that this man had groaned my name uncontrollably as I climaxed on top of him. In contrast, the memory of me didn't seem to bother him.

"Shall we go over the event schedule now or do you want to get a few hours sleep first?"

Dakota's question made me jump.

Most of the team had flown back to the factory in Italy after yesterday's race in order to continue working on the development of the cars until the next race in Fuji in two weeks' time. Dakota and I were the exception. In order to oversee two sponsorship events with the drivers in Tokyo this week, we had travelled directly from Australia to Japan.

"Whatever you'd prefer." I replied, concentrating on my friend and work colleague in the adjacent business class seat, instead of the forbidden hot American who had given me the most pleasurable adventure of my life.

“Then let’s go through the records first so we can send a preliminary report to Byron on the stopover in Singapore.” Suggested Dakota.

My plan to stop thinking about Hunter turned out to be frighteningly difficult under the circumstances.

I hadn’t spoken to him after that conversation in the bar. The guests on Sunday kept us all busy, so that I hardly had time to breathe, let alone watch the race happening. I only watched the last lap out of the corner of my eye and was satisfied that we were able to secure first and fourth place despite a chaotic race full of accidents and collisions.

It took hours before we said goodbye to the last guests, monitored the dismantling of the hospitality suite and prepared the freight from Melbourne to Fuji. I fell dead asleep in my hotel bed around midnight and only found out at breakfast this morning that Hunter had already left yesterday evening.

For New York.

He hadn’t mentioned it to any of us. Usually as a team we kept each other informed of our commitments so that we could plan efficiently. Although, he did not owe us any account of when and where he was going. After all, he was our boss, not the other way around.

“Agreed, Dakota. Let me start my computer.” I said and tried to focus on the most important thing right now: my job.

Chapter 13 – Hunter

After a long night flight from New York, I landed in Tokyo early in the morning and drove on to Fuji with the team shuttle.

Before I left for the racetrack, I wanted to clear my head with a decent run in the fresh air.

The morning temperature was still relatively fresh in Japan at the beginning of April and after tens of hours in a tin can above the clouds, it was a welcome wake-up call for body and soul.

I ran out of the densely populated part of Fuji in the direction of the Kawaguchiko, one of the five famous lakes. From the bank, there was an incredible view of the famous snow-capped mountain, Mount Fuji. Impressed by the view, I slowed down my running pace.

Mount Fuji lay behind the Kawaguchiko, its flat dark blue surface glittering like a thousand diamonds in the light of the rising sun. The water was so calm that the mountain was reflected in all its glory. Countless pink cherry blossoms framed the scene and I felt like I had jogged straight into a postcard. I had completely forgotten that the cherry trees were blooming across Japan in April and the landscape was a dreamy pink.

Fascinated, I went closer to the bank when I heard a rustle a few steps in front of me. I paused instantly and peered through the branches of a cherry tree.

At the edge of the lake, Allegra stood in a yoga pose that I had seen hundreds of times on TV and on the internet. She stood on her right leg, with her left leg bent like a triangle and her foot resting on her right thigh. She had raised her arms above her head, her hands touching each other as if in a prayer.

She looked so peaceful.

I felt like an intruder invading her privacy, but I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Her sportswear, consisting of pink, skin-tight ankle-length leggings and a matching crop top, emphasized her sensual curves. She had her long brown hair in a braid.

I didn't know what turned me on more; the pink clothes that made her appear delightfully feminine and delicate, or her beguiling curves that had felt so perfect against my body.

My legs moved independently and before I knew it, I was standing next to her.

At the sight of me she winced and staggered. I stretched out my arms to her and at the last moment I caught her bare waist, preventing her from falling into the cold water of the lake.

My fingers prickled on her cool, supple skin and I succumbed to the temptation to pull her close.

"Hello." I whispered, my face just inches from hers.

"Hi." She murmured, out of breath.

"Did I scare you? That was not my intention."

She didn't reply, just stared at me, her eyes wide open.

"What are you doing here so early and so alone?"

"Yoga. I try to find my inner balance before the chaos starts all over again." She whispered shyly.

"And? Did you find it?"

Her face broke into a grin and she freed herself from my grip. "I was nearly there when you attacked me."

"I'm sorry." I replied and took a step towards her.

"It's alright. I probably wouldn't have managed it anyway. Every time I close my eyes, I lose my balance, but with my eyes open I can't calm down." She shrugged her shoulders, embarrassed.

"If you want, I'll help you."

She nibbled her lower lip thoughtfully, a habit that betrayed her nervousness, and looked me up and down. “You’ll help me? How?”

“I’ll stand behind you and hold you tight. Then you can close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing.”

“That’s not a good idea.” She said as if shot from a pistol.

“The way I see it, I’m your only option. Either you let me help you or you fail trying to do it on your own. And I don’t think you’re a woman who likes to fail.”

“You’re right. Still, it’s not a good idea.”

“Why? Because you’re scared of me? Afraid that you might like my hands on your body?”

“Definitely not,” she hissed angrily. “Your ego is almost as big as your bank balance, if not bigger.”

I laughed heartily at her comparison. “You’re not wrong about that. So, what’s the problem? If you don’t care, you can let me help you, right? Prove it to me.”

“Okay,” with a short nod of the head, she turned to the lake and went back to her yoga pose. “What are you waiting for?”

I stood behind her and cupped her slim waist. “I got you. Close your eyes.” I whispered in her ear, which caused tell-tale goose bumps to form along the crook of her neck.

I desperately wanted to kiss them.

She enjoyed my touch. Even if she vehemently denied it, her body spoke a completely different language.

“Relax, baby. Deep breaths in and out. Let yourself fall.” My lips brushed against her ear and drew a choked gasp from her.

She arched her back slightly and let her bottom fall against my crotch. Slowly she began to rub against me.

I gritted my teeth and tried not to let my hands wander over her body.

“I thought you wanted to find your inner peace, baby. If you want me to find your inner center instead, I’ll do it right now.”

A gust of wind swept through the trees and a sea of pale pink cherry blossoms swirled through the air and trickled into the lake. The fruity cherry scent enveloped us like a cloud of perfume.

Allegra tore herself free with a startled jerk and brought distance between us. “I’m sorry. I ... I don’t know what got into me.” She buried her face in her hands, ashamed.

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” I said soothingly and grabbed her hands, gently pulling them from her face. “Look at me,” I demanded gently but firmly. “There’s nothing to apologize for.” I repeated once more when I was sure of her attention. “Let’s run back to the hotel. It’s getting late and we don’t want to miss the shuttle to the track.”

Chapter 14 – Allegra

I hadn't seen Hunter since the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne eleven days ago.

Until yesterday.

Until the moment he appeared at the lake.

How in the world could I have known that someone besides me was crazy enough to jog the three miles from the hotel to Lake Kawaguchiko at half past six in the morning?

Although we were in regular email contact, due to the enormous time difference between Tokyo and New York, we had only talked to each other twice on the phone during that time. Always purely professional. Polite. Distant.

Seeing him unexpectedly in such a private moment hadn't brought me closer to my inner peace. On the contrary, it had overturned any attempt to find it. His warm, strong hands on my waist had clouded my common sense. Seduced me to press against him, to rub against him.

It must have been a temporary short circuit to my brain. I still went red whenever I thought about it.

I avoided looking at him on the way back to the hotel. I had stared stubbornly at the street. Not a word was uttered. I wished the damned hotel was three hundred feet away and not three miles.

It had been the longest three miles in my life. And the fastest too. Because I had covered it at a brilliant record pace.

That was yesterday and therefore a thing of the past.

Although.

The coming week looked like it was developing in a similarly disastrous direction as yesterday. Tomorrow, Saturday evening, the president of one of our largest sponsors

had announced, at the last minute, that he'd be attending with his invited guests. Fifty people would attend a conference in Tokyo and then wanted to have fun in Fuji.

None of this would be a problem if I hadn't only found out about it two hours ago and that two of my three employees were currently out of action in their hotel rooms with bad stomachs.

Only my hospitality suite receptionist and I were present on site.

Thank goodness Dakota had offered the sponsorship team's help, so that at least at peak times, I wasn't completely alone in the suite with well over a hundred guests. Still, I couldn't divide myself into four, but that was exactly what I should have done today to look after everyone and get tomorrow's event off the ground at the same time.

Of course, I would rise to meet the challenge. Years of experience in this job ensured that I could deal with time pressure and uncertainty. I wasn't nervous or scared. I was just stressed but tried to smile happily and be careful not to show any hint of my restlessness.

I was a professional. Through and through.

And that's exactly what I repeated like a mantra whenever I was on the verge of exhaustion.

Between the first and the second practice sessions, Hunter had called me to his office for a meeting. He wanted to go through the plans for tomorrow's event.

With shaky legs from what felt like the several miles I had already covered that day at track, I came to a stop in front of his door, took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in." Came his authoritarian voice, which caused goosebumps on my body every time.

"Hi." I greeted him.

He sat behind his desk and examined the papers scattered in front of him.

“Please come here and tell me what you think of this.”
He instructed me without looking up.

I closed the door behind me and crossed the room to his desk. Reluctantly, I stepped up next to him. “The layout for the new motorhome?”

“What do you think of it?”

I stepped from foot to foot impatiently. I really didn’t have time to look at the design plans for the new motorhome, which would be used from next season. I really had enough other worries today, and I wouldn’t be able to form an opinion on the design of a multi-million-dollar project from just a quick look at a pile of papers.

“You seem tense?” Hunter looked up at me lazily from his chair.

He looked gorgeous in team uniform.

Hot, authoritative, and powerful.

I quickly shook off the lustful thoughts that were absolutely out of place here and concentrated on the essentials.

“I’m a little stressed, so I don’t think I am able to give you a meaningful opinion about the layout. I would need more time for that.”

“Time is something we never have enough of, Allegra. It all depends on how we use it. This project is my priority. Everything else is secondary. Look again.”

His tone brooked no resistance, so I propped myself up on the desk and examined the myriad of documents.

It would take me at least an hour to go through them thoroughly. I didn’t have that.

I was running my hand nervously through my hair when I suddenly felt Hunter’s hand sliding up the inside of my bare thigh.

Since we had an extremely sunny and unusually warm race week in Japan this year, I was wearing my team skirt, which finished at my knees, without my pantyhose.

My ruin. Or my reward, depending on how you looked at it.

As Hunter's hand slid further and further up my skin, which was particularly delicate and sensitive at this point on my body, I had the feeling that I was suffering a complete cardiac arrest.

I turned my head to him, but he wasn't looking at me. He studied the documents in front of him.

"The entrance area speaks to me. Stylish but not too extravagant," he said casually, so that no one would have guessed that his index finger slipped under my panties and greedily touched me at the same time.

"Do you agree with me?" He asked, still looking away.

I swallowed hard as he began to slowly massage with his hand.

"I ..." I started but broke off because at that moment he dipped a finger inside me.

"You?"

"I think I like it." I croaked and closed my eyes.

"You think you like it? That's a pretty vague statement, Allegra."

His dexterous fingers caressed me, teased me, pushed me so that I couldn't hear or see.

"I damn well like it." I gasped, both of us knowing that I wasn't talking about the entrance area.

"Yes, me too." Hunter's tone was calm and indifferent, as if none of this was his business, which only turned me on even more.

I began to let my hips circle on his fingers and to push myself towards him.

"And the conference room? Large, white areas like this can often appear hard and tiring."

“I like it hard.” I breathed heavily and cried out hoarsely when two of his fingers thrust into me forcefully.

“Really?” Hunter asked innocently.

“Indeed.” I choked.

“You wouldn’t see the dirt so quickly on a dark floor. That would be an advantage because I can imagine that it can get really dirty at times. Right?”

“Very dirty.” My voice was little more than a whisper.

“Especially when it’s wet. Or hot and humid, like the night race in Singapore.”

“I love the race in Singapore.”

Hunter drove me crazy. His touch made me feel like I was standing on the edge of the cliff, but he wouldn’t let me jump. Every time I tried to let myself go, he slowed down, easing the pressure on his hand. It was an ordeal. An unbearable agony.

“Do you like it hot and steamy?”

“Yes,” I groaned. “Yes, damn it.”

“In Singapore, the track is said to be terribly narrow, I heard.”

“That’s correct. Very tight.”

“Hot, wet and tight. That sounds like an exciting combination.” He growled and finally looked up from the documents, straight into my face. Fire burned in his eyes. He was enjoying this just like me. The difference was that I was about to explode like a shooting star in the sky. To melt like a rock under the sizzling hot lava.

The knock on the office door made me startle.

I opened my eyes and clapped my hand over my mouth in disbelief.

Damn crap.

What the hell was I doing here?

I was in my boss's office, which guests, drivers, engineers, mechanics or even journalists could walk into at any time, and I was letting him touch me.

Had I lost my mind?

"Come in." Hunter called commandingly.

He had taken his fingers out of my panties and instead stroked the inside of my thighs, which were covered by my lustful wetness.

I tried to step aside, but Hunter held me. His fingers unyieldingly cupped my thigh, making it unmistakably clear that he alone decided when and where I went.

Simon, our sporting director, stuck his head in the door. "Am I interrupting?"

I looked up at the ceiling and prayed my face wouldn't turn red.

"You're never interrupting, Simon. How can I help you?" Hunter greeted him in an admiringly casual manner, while his fingers brushed the waistband of my panties.

The desk was up to my waist and paneled towards the front so that Simon couldn't see what obscene scenes were going on behind it.

Luckily!

Still, the fear that Simon might unexpectedly approach and look over the edge of the table drove my adrenaline levels high.

"The team boss of *Racing Rosso* is with Toni and wants to meet you. Do you have time?"

Hunter circled my clitoris, and I pressed my lips together tightly so as not to groan from the pleasure he was giving me.

"That's good. We finished here anyway, aren't we, Allegra?" Hunter smiled wickedly and withdrew his hand from me.

Before I came to my senses and had a chance to reply,
he and Simon had disappeared.

Chapter 15 - Allegra

That damn bastard. That sneaky, mean, cursed bastard!

What the fuck was that supposed to be?

Together with my hospitality suite receptionist, I said goodbye to the last guests of the day, putting on a smile.

Outwardly.

Because inside I was seething with anger. I was like an earthquake that would raze New York City to rubble.

That Hunter dared to cross the professional line and reach under my skirt was one thing. The fact that he then brought me to the point of unconsciousness, only to starve me to death at the peak of pleasure, brought the barrel to overflowing.

I wouldn't exchange another word with this man. I wouldn't look at him again. From now on he was a red rag to me.

Taboo. Dead. Buried.

And I would bury myself right next to him if I allowed myself to indulge in his touch one more time.

Although I'd likely need to be buried very far underground. Or on another continent. Otherwise this wretched bastard would probably still tempt me beyond death.

“That’s it. Done for today.” Pippa, my suite receptionist, groaned and plopped down on one of the chairs. “I have more blisters than toes on my feet.” She moaned and took off her shoes.

“You did very well. Give yourself a break before we prepare for the evening event tomorrow.”

She groaned again. “I was suppressing that! I can’t do anymore. Please don’t talk about tomorrow.”

I patted her encouragingly on the shoulder and took a seat across from her, armed with my computer, pen and pad. “We’ll be off work in three to four hours. The end is in sight.”

“Slave driver,” she muttered and chewed on a granola bar that she had pulled out of her backpack. “Tell me, Allegra, have you already made an appointment with Byron King?”

“An appointment?” I frowned. “An appointment for what?”

Pippa wiggled her eyebrows meaningfully. “Well for us girls. He wanted to get to know each of us and there are some who can’t wait to meet *The King* alone.”

“Is that so?” I asked pointedly.

“I think we all have a little crush on him. Don’t you?”

I froze. Crush? On that guy of all people? Not a chance!

“No. Not a bit.” I shook my head emphatically.

“Are you seriously trying to tell me that you are immune to his striking face, sexy smile, strong muscles and insane charisma?” Pippa eyed me as if she was seeing a person for the first time in her life.

“You’ve taken a real close look, haven’t you?” I commented mockingly.

“Of course! Haven’t you?”

“No.” I lied. “I am a very busy woman with enough fires to fight. I hardly have time to breathe, let alone to check out men.”

“Well,” Pippa giggled. “Somebody like Byron would be perfect as a firefighter.”

“I have no idea what you want to tell me, Pippa, and I don’t know if I want you to explain in more detail.”

Of course, my objection just spurred her on. I should have stayed quiet rather than respond. Now it was too late for that, because Pippa was already taking a breath to go on chattering cheerfully.

“You are always so stressed, Allegra, you never allow yourself a break. You run from one fire to the next. Why don’t you let someone like Byron save you from the flames? Let yourself sink into his protective arms and enjoy how he carries you tightly against his chest out of the flames. I bet a firefighter like Byron has a big, bulging hose that could take your mind off your stresses.”

Pippa grinned from ear to ear at her suggestive comparison and I couldn’t help but do the same.

“I am clearly giving you too little to do if you have time for such ridiculous fantasies. Do I have to come up with something to keep you busy? Counting glasses? Hauling boxes? Unravelling the cables?” I laughed and raised my index finger threateningly.

“Please don’t,” Pippa squeaked and pressed her hands together pleadingly. “I’m allowed to dream! But joking aside, what I wouldn’t give to get to the hotel after a stressful day like this and having a hot man take care of me properly. The best stress reliever, so to speak.”

“That’s what the hotel’s gym is for.” I countered, digging my fingernails into my palms to suppress the image of Hunter waiting for me in bed in Capri. Naked.

“You prefer a gym session to sex?” Pippa wondered.

“That’s exactly what I intend to do when we return to the hotel. Let’s start so that we can get to the hotel before the gym closes.” I declared, to finish this absurd discussion.

It was already after ten o'clock when I slipped into my sports gear, grabbed a towel and took the elevator to the fitness area of the team hotel. Pippa had zero motivation to join me on the treadmill, so she had gone to the bar for a drink, and was I left alone.

There was nobody but me in the small windowless room in the basement. The gym was more like the sparsely equipped exercise room in my apartment than a real studio, but it served the purpose. I would be able to work out with both the treadmill and the barbell. There was also a floor-to-ceiling mirror so that I could correct my posture when using the weights.

I got on the treadmill and began a hilly cardio program to take my mind off the busy day, and to get rid of the memories of Hunter's hand in my panties that made me wet every time I thought about it.

After half an hour my muscles were burning. Sweat ran down my neck and collected between my breasts, which were pushed together in my tight sports top. My breath rattled. But I wasn't ready to stop. I wanted to work out, punish myself for my obvious weakness for Hunter.

"Who are you running away from?" I heard a deep voice behind me, which almost made me fall off the treadmill in shock.

Hunter.

Shit.

He was standing stand behind me and made no move to come any closer. The thought of him looking at my bum as I ran up the simulated hill like a sweaty maniac made me hit the emergency button. The treadmill immediately stopped.

I grabbed my towel and wiped my face. Then I jumped off the treadmill in one leap but stumbled because my legs hadn't got used to the sudden stop. Hunter bridged the distance between us and grabbed my arms.

"I didn't expect such a greeting, but I'm ready to catch you whenever you want to let yourself go, baby." He chuckled.

His eyes were dark and overcast. Before I could even think of breaking away from him or wishing him to hell, he put his mouth into the crook of my neck and bit into it.

I cried out in pain, but not a second later, the pleasure shot like liquid lava between my legs.

Hunter pushed the strap of my sports top over my shoulder and began to press a hot stream of kisses and bites from my neck to my shoulder blade.

With a jerk he picked me up and pushed me against the wall behind us, putting his face into my neckline, between my breasts, and licking my salty skin.

“Baby you’re so damn hot. My cock is so hard that it hurts.” He muttered and cupped my breasts with his hands, massaging them roughly through the lycra top.

I felt how his cock pushed through the sports pants and almost choked on my breath as he let his hips fall forward and rubbed his cock against me.

With an effort I suppressed a pleasurable whimper and instead concentrated on what I had set out to do at noon, namely to avoid these situations.

What was that again? Hunter is a red rag for me? Taboo? Dead? Buried? Where was the resistance when you needed it?

I should end this here.

Immediately.

Should get rid of him.

Order him to stop.

And I would.

Oh yes, I would.

In one minute.

Hunter’s hands slipped into my tight pants, clasped my bare buttocks and pushed my body closer to his hard cock, which he rhythmically pushed against my sex.

Although we were both fully clothed, I felt his contact as intensely as if we were naked, skin to skin.

My resistance waned, but in a last-ditch attempt to save myself from ruin, I recalled how he provoked me in his office at lunchtime and then scorned me.

This sobering realization gave me the strength to put my hands on his muscular chest and pull myself away from him.

“What’s this supposed to be? Do you want to start something again, only to not finish it?” I hissed and slipped under his arm, bringing the urgently needed distance between us.

“You’re angry.” He stated.

His voice was amused, which enraged me even more. Did he find that funny? Was this just a game for him? First heat me up and then let me fall? To drive me out of my mind?

“I’m not angry. I just don’t think much of men who do things by halves.”

Hunter laughed out loud and walked towards me like a lithe predator, but I signaled him to stop.

“Let’s get one thing straight: I don’t do things by halves. You have no idea how violent your orgasm will be after I denied you your climax earlier. I don’t do anything for no reason. Believe me, Allegra.”

Defiantly, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Too bad that we will never find out if that’s true.”

He raised an eyebrow. “We will not?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I got the impression that you really wanted it, baby.”

“You were wrong about that.”

Hunter cocked his head and studied me closely. I held his gaze, even as I shook inside. Finally, he shrugged and walked past me to the treadmill.

“Whatever you want. I’m not doing anything that you don’t specifically ask me for. See you tomorrow. I wish you a good night.”

Hunter plugged his headphones into his ears and turned on the treadmill. Then he started a quick run without turning back to me again.

I left the studio snorting, agitated and deeply unsatisfied.

He had ruined all my efforts of the past hour in just a minute.

What an arrogant asshole!

Chapter 16 – Hunter

I clapped Toni and the engineers on the pit wall when Juan crossed the finish line with a phenomenal time and secured pole position for tomorrow's race.

The guy was on fire. He was eager to fight for the world title for a fourth time after his teammate had snatched the glory away from him last season.

Tom Clark, our second driver, had at least got a place in the top five by securing fourth place, even if he did not meet our expectations.

I reminded myself that this was only the second race weekend of the season. Eighteen more would follow. While Tom still had some time to build on his form from the previous season, he had to be careful not to lose touch with his teammate in the drivers' championship.

And even more importantly, there was the evolving fight for the constructors' championship.

In contrast to the drivers' world championship, in which only the number of points gained by a single driver counted, the total number of points from both drivers added up when determining the best constructor. The winner of the team or constructor world championship was rewarded with a double-digit million Euro bonus. A sum that I really wanted to secure for us.

With this money we'd be able to drive the development forward, maintain the advantage over our competition, and continue to afford two top drivers. Because one thing was certain: Should Juan decide to throw in the towel after this season, we would have to replace him with a seasoned, experienced driver. And in contrast to youngsters like Tom, they were ambitious with their salary expectations.

A camera team headed for the pit wall and asked for a live interview with Toni and me, which we gave under the supervision of Riley.

I glanced up at the outdoor terrace above the pit lane, which housed the various hospitality suites for the teams.

My gaze caught on Allegra, who was leaning against the parapet, talking to one of the guests.

She smiled at what the older man had told her and turned to the track to convey something to him, outstretching her arm in the direction of the start and finish straight.

The guest pointed to the pit wall and appeared to be asking another question. Allegra looked down at us. When she noticed me, her smile faded. I waved cheerfully to her, whereupon she pressed her sweet lips together and frostily raised her hand in greeting.

She was mad.

It was easy to see.

She was fighting a fight with herself that I couldn't help her with. She would have to decide whether to surrender to me and to give in to the wishes of her body, which was obviously responding to me, or to keep pushing me away.

As for me, I wanted this woman, employee or not.

Allegra did her job damn well. I had no complaints, and I would have none in the future either. She was experienced, reliable and competent.

Although I was her boss, I hardly ever had to be involved in her work. She did her job conscientiously, met her goals and delivered on time. I enjoyed working with her. The mutual exchange inspired me.

Nothing would change about that, whether we slept together or not. As a manager, I treated all employees equally.

In my bed, however, I preferred Allegra.

Sex with her in Capri had had an intoxicating and extremely satisfying effect on me. I wouldn't mind continuing

this no-strings affair. Without obligations. Without promises. Just sex.

How she felt about it remained to be seen. I couldn't make sense of her contradicting signals, which both aroused and frustrated me.

“You're coming to the Masahi Corporation event tonight, Byron? Allegra and her team actually managed to get everything up and running on time.” Toni informed me after we had finished the interview and went back through the garage to the motorhome to discuss the qualifying session with the drivers and engineers.

“I'm coming, yes. Mr. Masahi asked me for a personal meeting. He probably wants to introduce me to a couple of his business partners.”

Allegra had outdone herself. The event looked so well organized, as if it had been planned well in advance. Nobody would have guessed that she had only been given thirty-six hours to plan and execute. Even more impressive whilst she was looking after well over a hundred guests at the racetrack and half of her team were sick in bed.

Mr. Masahi and his business friends looked enthusiastic. The evening was a great success.

When I had said goodbye to him and his entourage and sauntered back to Toni to talk to him about tomorrow's race, I made a stop at Allegra, who was chatting to another woman I recognized from the track catering team.

“Good evening, ladies,” I greeted them. “We don't know each other yet. I'm Byron King.” I said to the blonde woman with the blue eyes that Barbie could easily compete with.

“Good evening, Mr. King. I'm Skye,” she replied shyly. “I work in catering at the racetrack and supported Allegra's team tonight.”

“That’s very nice of you, Skye. Many thanks for your help. And please, call me Byron.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. King, um, Byron. I’m getting Allegra and myself something to drink. Would you like ... would you also like a glass of wine?”

I politely declined and waited for her to move a few steps away. I quickly leaned down to Allegra and whispered so softly that only she could hear, “Nice work. Mr. Masahi was very impressed. You’ve earned a reward. Room 1024, in case you want to collect it later.”

Just as I had made my offer to Allegra, Skye returned with two full glasses, and I said a friendly goodbye to her and the woman whose scent of night hyacinth flooded my senses.

Chapter 17 – Allegra

The hairs on my forearm stood on end and my throat felt like sandpaper.

'You earned a reward' he had whispered in my ear as his breath tickled my earlobe.

With trembling hands, I peered after him and watched as he casually sat down across from Toni.

Suddenly he looked up. Right in my eyes. As if he sensed that I was watching him.

Damn.

“Are you okay, honey? Did Mr. King, Byron, not like the event?” Skye asked worriedly.

“Yes, yes.” I said hurriedly. “Everything was to his satisfaction.”

So much so that he invited me to his room and wanted to reward me for my work.

It goes without saying that the reward was not going to be chocolate from the minibar.

“I’m delighted for you. If you don’t mind, I’ll say goodbye now. I’m dog tired and the catering team drives back to track at six am tomorrow to prepare breakfast for the team.”

“Of course. You go. Pippa and I will do the rest,” I assured Skye. “And a thousand thanks again for your help. You saved us.”

When Skye disappeared shortly afterwards, Pippa and I worked side by side to clear away the last traces of the event.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Toni and Hunter had got up and gone to the elevator.

I deliberately turned in the opposite direction so as not to let Hunter catch me staring again.

“Sleep well.” Pippa waved as she disappeared into her room, which was a few doors down the same corridor.

“You too.” I called and opened the door to my safe space.

I literally tore off my sweaty clothes and stood under a jet of warm water in the shower to relax my tense shoulders.

The worst part of the weekend was over. I wasn't worried about looking after the guests during tomorrow's race. My team would finally be complete again.

I had every reason to feel good and relaxed.

But the tension of the last few days did not decrease.

Neither in the shower, nor when I applied the orange-scented cream from the Amalfi Coast to my body, nor when I slipped into the fluffy bathrobe that the hotel made available to its guests.

I was jittery. Restless. Nervous.

Even if I didn't want to admit it: Hunter's suggested reward kept my mind preoccupied.

Of course, I wouldn't go to him and ask for it.

Because I could guess what it would be.

On the other hand...

Pippa was not wrong in her claim that good sex helped you feel more relaxed.

And in the mood I was in now, I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway.

I ran my hand through my hair and wrestled with myself.

Sex with Hunter. I knew how phenomenal he was. I would never forget how perfectly he filled me up and made me explode.

At the thought of our adventure in Capri, my hands grabbed the first thing they found, my skirt which I had laid out for tomorrow.

In the heat of the moment, I passed on the panties.

I carelessly put on a long-sleeved shirt and left off the bra.

That saved time.

I wanted to spend as little time as possible with Hunter.

I wanted him to give me redemption. No more and no less.

It would go like this: I would walk to room 1024, knock, claim my reward, and leave. Then I would fall into a deep, restful sleep and show up on the track tomorrow in top form.

Determined, I grabbed a baseball cap, pulled it low over my face, and went to the elevator.

Hunter opened on the first knock. He stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. His brown, shiny hair hung on his forehead. He had swapped his suit pants for faded, ripped jeans. A white T-shirt played around the muscles of his torso.

Even in a slouchy look, this man was extremely hot.

Life wasn't fair.

"Hi." I said in a firm voice.

"Hi." Hunter echoed and made no move to let me in. He looked at me lazily and waited for me to continue, but I didn't.

"How can I help you, Allegra?"

I straightened my shoulders, trying to sound as indifferent as possible. "I'm here to get my reward."

He raised his eyebrows. The corners of his mouth twitched treacherously. "Well, if that's the case, come in."

He stepped aside and I walked past him into the spacious, luxuriously furnished room.

Hunter went to his desk, which had an open laptop and dozens of papers next to an expensive-looking bottle. He took the bottle and poured me a glass of the bronze-colored liquid.

“Here please. The best scotch in all of Scotland. I rarely treat myself to it.”

I looked at him in disbelief.

My reward was a glass of scotch?

Seriously?

“You look like you expected something else.” He stated as he handed me the glass and his fingers seemingly randomly brushed the back of my hand.

I drained the glass in one gulp and shuddered as the burning liquid hit my throat.

“Thanks for the reward. Good night, Hunter.” I put the glass down and turned to leave when Hunter’s voice interrupted.

“You did an excellent job, Allegra. I want you to know that. I would never share this scotch otherwise. It’s too good for that, but you deserved it today.”

“Thanks.” I replied curtly.

“As for the rest of the reward...” Hunter stepped behind me and pushed my hair aside to give him direct access to my neck. “I could help you relax.”

He massaged my tense shoulders and I let out a tortured groan.

“Does that feel good, baby?” He whispered in my ear.

“Oh yes.” I gasped breathlessly.

“You are terribly tense. We have to make sure that you let go.”

Hunter directed me to the wall and pushed me to put my hands on the cold wallpaper. The sound of the zipper

opening on his jeans and the crackling of the condom wrapping made me sigh.

“You’re lucky that I have nothing else to do tonight than take care of you. It’s going to take all night to help you relax.” He whispered in my ear, while his hand went under my skirt, and he let out a hissing breath when he realized that I wasn’t wearing any panties.

“Do you always walk around without panties?” He asked as his fingers massaged me.

“No,” I croaked, writhing under his circling fingers. “Never.”

“Then why did you come to me without them?”

I remained silent and swallowed hard.

“Tell me,” he demanded threateningly. “I want to know.”

I was still unable to answer him.

“Did you want me to give it to you, baby?”

I nodded.

“Allegra, I want to hear it. Tell me that you want it.”

“I want you to give it to me.” I demanded, choked.

Hunter let out a growl and pushed me full-length against the cold wall. With the other hand he pushed up my skirt and spread my legs. Then he positioned his cock against my wet opening and thrust inside me deeply.

Under the intensity of the touch, I dropped my head and screamed.

“You like that, don’t you? This is your reward, Allegra. So, tell me how you want it. Hard or gentle? How should I fuck you?”

His wicked choice of words alone brought me to the verge of orgasm. The anticipation of what I already knew was to come did the rest.

I came like a rocket while groaning Hunter's name in agony.

"Who allowed you to come?" Hunter hissed in my ear as my ground-breaking orgasm slowly subsided.

"I'm sorry." Apologetically I looked up and over my shoulder straight into his fiery eyes, which had a depth of passion that scared me.

"As a punishment for your selfish behavior, I will now decide what happens next, baby. Hands on the wall and legs apart." He ordered gruffly.

"I need a break, Hunter, I can barely stand." I pleaded, but Hunter didn't answer me.

He penetrated me again and began to thrust into me so hard that I lost sight and sound.

"You think you can come without my permission? This will teach you to obey me."

It was terrifying how well Hunter knew what I needed.

Every day I had to be the boss, sometimes make difficult decisions, achieve top performance under time pressure, manage and train people. I was expected to always decide where to go. That I could relinquish control in the bedroom and let myself be guided for a change excited me a lot.

As primitive and cheap as it sounded, sometimes all a woman needed to relax was to be banged hard and purposefully by a man.

And Hunter did an excellent job.

He dominated me because he knew I wanted it. That I surrendered myself to find salvation.

He knew my body almost better than I did myself.

This time too, Hunter whipped me restlessly towards my next orgasm, drove me on with brutal thrusts, provoked me with raw dirty talk. It wasn't long before I jumped over the cliff and crashed into the rocks, screaming loudly. Hunter

followed me, judging by his roar, no less intense, seconds later.

My legs gave out and I slid down the wall, threatening to fall to the floor. Hunter grabbed me and lifted me into his arms, carrying me to his oversized bed.

“Are you feeling a little more relaxed, baby?” He asked, as if he had just innocently rubbed my shoulders and slid off his bulging condom.

“A little, yes.” I replied, pressing my lips together to keep from giggling.

“Only a little? That’s unacceptable.”

“Then you’ll just have to take better care of me.” I smiled and freed myself from my skirt and shirt.

Hunter let his gaze wander over my body in admiration and bridged the few steps to the bed.

He leaned over me and clasped one of my nipples with his teeth, bit down, and eased the pleasurable pain with his tongue.

“Then I’d better start right away.” He muttered between my breasts and climbed into bed with me.

Chapter 18 – Hunter

Allegra laid peacefully next to me sound asleep. The effort and stress on her face had given way to an expression of satisfaction and deep relaxation.

I had taken good care of her needs that night.

The reward I had promised her hadn't been selfish at all.

Allegra challenged me. Always wanted more. Pushed me to my limits. She was starved. Wild. Relentless. Allegra was just as insatiable as she had been during our brief affair in Capri.

She literally burned with passion, and at no point did she hide the pleasure I was able to give her. She let it out. Shouted it out. Groaned it out.

There weren't enough words to describe how much I liked her abandonment. How much she turned me on. How insane it was when she hoarsely called my name.

The thought of her last orgasm made me stiff again.

If my thoughts continued like this, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.

I resisted the urge to wake her up and dive into her again. She really deserved her sleep.

Instead, I let my hand slide up and down my cock and relieved myself while I ceaselessly absorbed the sight of the bewitchingly sensual woman lying next to me.

I didn't want this one night to be all I could get of her. On the contrary, this should just be the beginning. The first night of many.

Tomorrow I would talk to her and try to negotiate a deal.

When my alarm clock rang a few hours later and I turned to Allegra, she was gone.

I almost thought I felt something like disappointment, but that couldn't possibly be the case. I was never disappointed when a woman left after sex. I was usually happy because it saved me the forced post-sex small talk, which I wasn't particularly good at. Just like cuddling.

Why should I feel any differently in this case?

There was no reason for it.

I've been single for years. For good reason. Neither Allegra nor any other woman on this planet would change that.

Allegra was an extremely attractive, intelligent, and wild woman who had piqued my sexual interest.

I wanted to sleep with her.

As often as possible.

But nothing more.

I resolutely shut off the persistent voice in my head that wanted to assert the opposite and declared the discussion over.

I stretched and jumped out of bed to prepare for the day ahead.

Today was race day!

In contrast to Melbourne, the Fuji race this year brought few surprises. Juan managed to clinch a start-to-finish victory almost effortlessly, while Tom fought his way to third place.

We currently shared first place in the team world championship with *Racing Rosso*, sitting on equal points. That was a reason to be happy, but the fact that the red cars were so close on our heels this season made me think. We would have

to be on our guard to emerge victorious in this neck-and-neck race at the end of the year.

Under the winner's balcony, which held the podium for the top three drivers, I discovered Allegra, who had gathered a few guests around her.

All of them waited with shining eyes for the drivers to cheerfully jump onto the podium, to receive the oversized trophies and to splash around with champagne after the national anthem of the winner and the winning team.

I made my way through the crowd and alerted her to my presence by gently placing my hand on Allegra's lower back.

A tremor went through her body and for a split second she closed her eyes.

I enjoyed how much and how obviously she wanted me.

"Hi baby," I whispered indiscernibly. "You didn't say goodbye."

She gave me a quick sideways glance and looked back to the award ceremony that had just started. "I had to work. After all, I'm not here for pleasure."

"It definitely sounded different last night."

Allegra flushed at the memory of her unbridled behavior and grimaced. "Please don't tell my boss about it."

"That depends." I teased her.

"On what?"

I casually stood closer behind her in the jostling crowd, so that her graceful body touched mine.

"I will keep quiet if we repeat what we did last night in the future."

"You want to do that again?" She screwed up her fawn eyes in surprise.

“Oh yes baby. I do. You and me. No obligations. No promises. No accountability. Just a lot of fun. Like last night.” I growled and clenched my hands into fists, so as not to throw Allegra over my shoulder like a caveman in front of all the guests and dozens of international TV cameras and start having fun on the spot.

“We help each other relax? With no obligations? No expectations?” She reassured herself hesitantly.

“Completely without obligation. Without expectations. You don’t owe me any explanations about what you do. And vice versa. I don’t want to take any of your freedom.”

Allegra pursed her lips and thought. I was afraid she would refuse, but when Juan’s jet of champagne hit her and she fell back into my arms, she gave her consent.

Chapter 19 - Allegra

It had been two months since the race in Fuji. The time passed even faster this year than in previous years. During the day, the guests kept me busy. In the evenings, I oversaw events. And at night Hunter demanded my full attention. I couldn't remember when in my life I had slept so little and was so energetic at the same time.

The deal with Hunter was that no one would find out about our arrangement. We met secretly. And never outside of our rooms. At the track, we were distant and behaved professionally. It had not escaped my notice that he occasionally gave me more than a straight look, but I ignored it. It got harder for me from race to race. Still, I had managed to stand firm so far.

In the five races that had taken place since Fuji, the pressure on *Titan Racing* had grown steadily. We were still in first place in the team standings but *Racing Rosso* and the *Roaring Bulls* didn't give up. If we made a mistake, they were there immediately, ready to attack.

This created a tense atmosphere amongst our successful team as we were no longer used to losing.

Earlier today, on Wednesday morning, the team landed in Montreal, Canada, where the eighth race of the season would be held at the weekend.

"Are you worried that the *Roaring Bulls* will win again this weekend?" I asked, my head resting on Hunter's bare chest.

"Not at all. I'm looking forward to the duel."

“Do you think we will win the world championship this year?”

Hunter laughed out loud and pulled me towards him. “You ask me that at every race.”

I cocked my head and winked at him. “Does that mean we see each other too often? Maybe we should reduce contact.”

“Absolutely no way. You can ask me anything you want as often as you want, as long as you’re naked.” Hunter began to move under me. His eyes darkened and my body tingled with anticipation.

“Then I’ll ask you whether Juan has already signed a contract for next year.”

“Nice try, Allegra.”

“Hey!” I protested. “You said I could ask you anything I want if I’m naked. So?”

He lifted my hips and slid inside me, which made me gasp in surprise.

“You can ask me anything you want, that’s true. But I never said that I would answer your questions.” Hunter teased me while he slowly moved inside me.

“You scoundrel! You set me up!” I shouted indignantly and giggled.

“I’m not a scoundrel, I’m a businessman.”

“What’s the difference?” I joked, leaning forward to cover his mouth with a kiss that he greedily returned.

Chapter 20 – Hunter

I closed my eyes to soak up Allegra's sweet kiss. I had never felt the need for such an intimate touch with a woman before her. But Allegra's lips tasted like paradise. When I was inside her and she kissed me hungrily, I struggled not to explode in the same moment, like a complete beginner.

“Let's go out to dinner tomorrow night.” I whispered before realizing what I was saying. And before I realized I was breaking my own rules.

She rode me slowly and deliberately, enjoying how my cock filled her completely.

“I can't,” she breathed. “I already have plans.”

At this rebuff, a muscle twitched in my chest.

She already had plans? With whom?

Our agreement, the rules of which I made myself, forbade me to ask her about it. She didn't owe me any explanation about what she did when she wasn't with me. Nor with whom she did it either.

For the first time in my life, I cursed my rules.

“Will you come to me afterwards?” I grabbed her pelvis and moved her in time with my thrusts.

She threw her head back with pleasure and stretched out to me, panting. “I think it will be late. So, I'd rather not, no.”

“If that's the case, I better use the time I have with you.” I grumbled, annoyed.

I was angry.

Mad at her. Angry that she seemed to be enjoying herself without me.

And I was mad at myself. Angry that it bothered me if she refused me. Angry that I let myself be carried away into breaking my own rules.

I tossed her onto her back with a flourish and laid down on her, in order to have her completely, at least for this fleeting moment.

When I drove back to the hotel with Carl, Juan's race engineer, on Thursday evening, he spontaneously invited me to the informal dinner he was hosting tonight in downtown Montreal for his upcoming birthday.

"It's nothing big. Just an evening with colleagues and friends. We're celebrating my birthday in a very unspectacular way. If you have nothing better to do, come over."

I accepted the invitation with thanks. Since Allegra had other plans and I had been racking my brain too intensely since last night about who she might be spending the evening with, I could use some variety. It would also give me the opportunity to get to know some of the guys better in a relaxed environment.

Shortly after nine o'clock I entered the quaint *Magic Montreal* Bar, where about twenty people from the team were already sitting around a long table at the end of the bar cracking jokes loudly. Carl waved me over and as I got closer, I also spotted Riley, Dakota, Skye, Kenzie and Allegra chatting carefree with Juan's mechanics.

So this was her appointment: Carl's birthday party.

I frowned at the feeling of relief that flooded me at the realization. Before I could think any more about it, one of the tyre engineers ushered me into the vacant seat next to him and engaged me in a conversation.

During the evening I kept glancing at Allegra, who didn't seem to pay any attention to me. She joked with the tipsy mechanics and engineers, laughed with her friends and

had a great time. She paid me little attention, which bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

Sam, the mechanic who sat on my right, collapsed into his chair with a snort. “Explain women to me.” He grumbled and took a generous sip from his beer.

“Trouble at home?” Joked Carl.

Sam waved it off. “She didn’t believe that I was at a harmless birthday party and assumed that I was on the prowl.”

Nic, a red-haired mechanic with freckles, patted him on the shoulder encouragingly. “Be happy. My wife doesn’t care if I’m in a bar or a strip club. She’s happy when she has peace from me.”

“I can totally understand your wife. You’re a real pain in the ass.” Carl teased and got a nudge with his elbow for his cheeky remark.

“How about you, Byron? Do you have a girl waiting for you at home?” Sam wanted to know.

“Nope, I haven’t,” I replied with a shrug. “And from what you guys have been saying, I should add, fortunately.”

Carl grinned boyishly. “That depends entirely on the woman. If you find the right one, like me, you’ll feel like a rock star every day of your life.”

The boys roared exuberantly and pounded macho slogans on poor Carl, who had got married last year and who appeared to be deeply in love.

“Well, it looks like I haven’t met the right one yet.” I replied without commitment, so as not to further deepen the conversation.

“Things can always change. You should talk to the girls sometime. Hey Riley, Allegra, you know a lot of hot ladies who are looking for love. Why don’t you give Byron their phone numbers so he can see what’s on offer?” One of the engineers called.

Riley tossed a napkin at him and stuck her tongue out. “The way you talk about women, it’s no wonder you never get

one, Shawn.”

“What? I just want to help Byron. He said he has not met the one yet, so we’ll help him. I’m just being helpful. And that’s what women are into, right?” Shawn defended himself, which Riley acknowledged with an annoyed roll of her eyes.

“I thought you were dating that Maddie you told us about, Byron?” Riley questioned me.

Allegra had averted her eyes and tugged disinterestedly at her napkin.

I groaned inwardly. Maddie was a subject I didn’t want to talk about. With anyone. Why did Riley have to keep bringing it up?

“No, Maddie and I don’t date.” I said, hoping that would end the subject. Meanwhile, I should have known the cheeky press woman, who didn’t mince her words, better.

“So you just sleep together?”

“Riley.” Dakota hissed, making a warning face.

“What? We are outside of work hours. Besides, Byron isn’t my boss. Unlike you and Allegra, I am allowed to ask such questions. We’re here with friends.”

“I’m not sleeping with Maddie, no.” I sighed.

“But with other women? Or are you abstinent?” Riley really did not give up.

“Yes, I have sex with other women, Riley. I am not a monk. No prayer in the world can be as satisfying as having great sex with a hot woman.”

The men at the table roared in agreement and raised their glasses. “We’ll drink to that!” They shouted and cackled tipsy.

“So, you’re the type who prefers a string of women rather than a steady relationship?”

“Is this going to be an interrogation?” I countered, leaning back uncomfortably in my chair.

“Not at all.” Riley looked innocent. “I’m just trying to get to know you better to understand which of my friends would be best for you.”

“Thank you for your generosity, but I’m not looking for a steady girlfriend.”

“So you’re more: Why eat a single apple when you can try the whole bushel?”

My face broke into a grin. “You could put it that way, yes.”

Riley chewed her lip and seemed to be thinking. “Understood. I know a couple of women who meet your criteria. Shall I introduce you to one of them?”

“I would definitely accept that offer!” Shawn whispered to me. “Riley knows really hot women. And she has never offered to introduce them to me.”

I was starting to wish I had turned down the invitation to this birthday party. Because if I said that I didn’t want to get to know Riley’s girlfriends, she’d keep digging and want to know why I turned down her offer. This would expose me to the risk of her sticking her nose into my business and possibly finding out about Allegra.

If I accepted her offer, Riley would finally quit hassling me, but Allegra might get the wrong impression.

We had agreed that we owed nothing to each other, but since I met her, I’ve had less and less desire to spend the nights between race weekends, usually in New York City, with other women.

The whole thing was a lose-lose situation. Whichever answer I chose; it would be the wrong one.

So, to protect Allegra, I said as casually as possible, “That sounds good. Introduce me, Riley.”

Chapter 21 - Allegra

“Sounds good. Introduce me, Riley.”

There was an uncomfortable ringing in my ears when I heard Hunter’s answer, which sounded so natural it hurt. His remark was like a slap in the face. He couldn’t make me understand more clearly that I wasn’t enough for him. That I couldn’t satisfy his hunger.

This realization hurt me more than I wanted to admit and more than was good for me.

I wasn’t surprised that Hunter was seeing other women in New York. I had no illusions about this.

But the fact that he wanted to spend time with other women on the weekends when he was traveling with the team brought tears to my eyes.

I apologized curtly and went to the toilets to calm myself down.

Why did it upset me so much that I wasn’t the only woman Hunter wanted? I understood our agreement and I had deliberately accepted it. So what was the problem?

When the door to the toilets opened, I hurriedly turned to face the wall.

“Everything OK?”

I winced caught out.

Darn it! What on earth was Hunter doing here?

“This is the ladies toilet.” I spoke out with difficulty and tried to swallow the tears.

“I know. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

I took a deep breath and crossed my trembling fingers. “Everything’s fine.” I lied, still facing away from him.

“If so, you won’t mind looking me in the eye and repeating that again. And then you can tell me why you’ve acted like I don’t exist all evening.”

I closed my eyes and bit my trembling lower lip.

“Allegra?”

I didn’t respond.

“Everything is fine, Hunter. And I’ve treated you like I would treat anyone I only vaguely know. That’s exactly what our agreement says, if I remember correctly.” I hissed more sharply than intended.

Before Hunter could reply, Dakota’s surprised voice rang out.

“Sorry! I don’t want to disturb you.”

“You didn’t,” Hunter hurried to say. “I just wanted to remind Allegra of our meeting.”

“Yes, he was.” I assured her as matter-of-factly as my fragile voice would allow.

The ringing of Hunter’s phone broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Maddie.” Dakota stated soberly.

“Please excuse me, I have to take this.” Hunter mumbled and hurried away before answering the call.

Dakota watched him leave the bathroom. Hesitantly she stepped further into the room and leaned against the closed door.

“What’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?” I put on an innocent smile that failed to be convincing.

“What’s going on between *The King* and you? And don’t you dare answer ‘nothing’. The tension between you two is ridiculous and I doubt it has anything to do with work. More likely Riley’s suggested dates, right?”

I sighed.

Damn.

Dakota had been my friend for years. I had never lied to her before and now was not the time to start.

“Can we discuss this somewhere other than the *Magic Montreal* Bar bathroom?” I whispered, warning Dakota to keep her voice down.

“Of course. Let’s toast Carl’s birthday and we can slip out at half past twelve.”

When we got back to party it was five minutes past midnight and I saw Hunter hurry out of the bar.

Alone.

The phone was pressed to his ear and he had an unfathomable expression on his face.

“Did our boss have to leave already?” Dakota asked Carl casually, after warmly congratulating him on his birthday.

“Yes. An urgent matter, he said.” Carl shrugged apologetically.

“Great. When the shepherd’s away, the sheep will play!” Dakota winked and gave Carl another hug.

Half an hour later, Dakota and I quietly left the little private party. It had picked up so much that our departure would hardly be noticed. I sent a quick message on our group chat so Riley, Skye, and Kenzie wouldn’t worry. Then I turned to Dakota, who eyed me curiously.

“Let’s walk back to the hotel.” I asked.

The team hotel was not far from the center of Montreal, one of my favorite cities that charmed me every year.

In June the air smelled of summer. I enjoyed strolling through the Ile de Montreal at night, past the St. Lawrence

River, to the old town, the Vieux-Montreal, with the basilica and the dreamy historical buildings that stood out against the modern skyscrapers in the background. From the Tour de l'Horloge, the ancient clock tower on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, there was a wonderful view of the quay and the old port. Last year I managed to climb the 192 steps and enjoy the view in peace, even if only for a few minutes. Now, late at night, the tower was unfortunately closed. The view of the city lights would certainly make a great picture.

“So, you and Byron, what’s going on?” Dakota tore me from my thoughts.

I rubbed my face wearily and said, “We had a brief affair.” Next to us flowed the St. Lawrence River, which had assumed a ghostly orange-bronze tone thanks to the city lights. It’s monotonous rippling encouraged me to continue. “At my sister’s wedding.”

“What?” I could literally hear Dakota’s jaw drop to the floor. “Why didn’t you tell us about it?”

“Because it didn’t mean anything. What went on between us was over the moment we left Capri. Besides, I didn’t think I’d ever meet him again.”

“But when Toni announced him as the new team manager, you must have known that was no longer the case?” Objected Dakota.

“At the wedding, he introduced himself to me as Hunter. His buddies gave him that name because of his reputation with women. I didn’t know his real first or last name. So no, until the moment when he suddenly stood in front of me in Australia, I had no idea who he really was.”

“And then you picked up where you left off in Capri?”

“Not right away, no, but eventually we did.” Caught, I wrapped my arms around my body.

“And what is it between you? Sex? Love? Friends with benefits?”

“We have a deal.”

“A deal?” Dakota dragged the words out suspiciously. “What kind of deal?”

“We sleep together on race weekends. Without obligations. Without asking any questions. Just sex.”

“It didn’t look like ‘just sex’ to me in the toilet earlier, Allegra,” remarked Dakota doubtfully. “You looked like a pile of misery, honey. No woman behaves like that when she ‘just has sex’ with a man.”

“What do you mean by that?” I looked up and met Dakota’s sparkling eyes, which regarded me appraisingly.

“That *The King* has turned your head.”

“Nonsense!”

“Don’t you *nonsense* me! You should have seen your face when Riley offered to introduce him to her single friends. Indifference doesn’t look like that.”

“I don’t like the thought that I have to share him with other women during the race weekends. That’s all.”

“And the thought of having to share him with other women outside of the race weekends? Honest answer?”

I drew small circles on the floor with the tip of my shoe and pleaded guilty. “I also like that less and less with each passing week. But what should I do, Dakota? I agreed to this deal. I enjoy being with Hunter. If I confess that I want him to myself, he may end the whole thing and then I won’t see him at all. I can’t risk that.”

“So you’d rather share him with other women?”

I shrugged discouraged.

“Sweetheart don’t do that. With this attitude you’ll plunge headlong into disaster. Talk to him. Tell him you don’t want to share him. Maybe he feels the same way.”

“And if he doesn’t? You heard yourself that he’s got a lot of women. And then there’s this mysterious Maddie who keeps calling him in the middle of the night. What role does she play in his life?”

“Ask him, Allegra. He alone can answer these questions for you.”

“What if he doesn’t feel the way I do?”

“In that case, it is better to rip off the band aid immediately. It hurts, but the pain goes away. Otherwise, you’ll drive yourself crazy thinking about him with another woman every time he’s not with you.”

“You are probably right.”

We walked side by side in silence for a while.

“Are you judging me for sleeping with our boss?” I whispered.

Dakota stopped and put her arm around my shoulder. “We can’t choose who we fall in love with. So why should I judge you for something you have no control over?”

“I’m not in love. Don’t exaggerate.” I protested.

“You at least have a crush on him. You shouldn’t lie to yourself any longer.”

“Hmmm,” I mumbled in agreement. “Yes, perhaps. All I wanted though was a no-obligation adventure.”

“Well, if you watched the Indiana Jones movies with me more often, you’d know that adventures tend to take on a life of their own. That is also why they are called adventures. Let’s see if you can get the treasure in the end.”

Chapter 22 - Hunter

After the Thursday night call from Maddie forced me to leave the bar in a hurry, I hadn't had an opportunity to chat again with Allegra. The contract negotiations with Juan, which Toni and I had opened during the Austrian Grand Prix four weeks ago, were in full swing and he was keen to extend his driver contract for another year. The sooner we signed the contract, the sooner we could focus all our attention and energy on the current season, which was keeping us on edge.

Friday and Saturday had passed by without my noticing. Hours of conversations with our lawyers and Juan's management kept me so busy that I didn't hear anything from the outside world. I holed up in my office to get this deal done without delay and on the best possible terms. This morning at two o'clock the lawyers had sent me the final version for review, which I had checked by four o'clock and then forwarded immediately. The approval from Juan's management came a few hours later, so that after today's race, which would start in a few minutes, we would finally sign the contract.

Most of the top drivers were now under contract for the next season and beyond, so I couldn't take a deep breath until Juan had signed the document. If he changed his mind at the last moment, we would be faced with a huge problem. But there was no reason Juan should back down. The contract met almost all his wishes. So, there was nothing to fear.

Although.

I knew only too well that motorsport was unpredictable.

On the way to the pit wall, I greeted Juan's wife Laura, who had come with her tiny baby daughter Matilda to support Juan.

It was the first time since Matilda's birth in December that she attended a race.

"Okay guys. Let's bring this thing home," I heard Toni say through the headphones. "There are seventy laps of this race. Plenty of time to fight your way to the top."

The adrenaline rush that grabbed me before every race started to flood through my body. I took my place on the pit wall and heard the roar of the engines waiting for the green light a few meters from me on the start and finish straight.

While Tom secured second place on the grid in qualifying, Juan had to start from twelfth place due to gearbox damage and the penalty associated with changing parts. The pressure on Juan to fight his way through the field and get towards the front as quickly as possible in order to not lose touch of the leaders, and thus his chances of winning, was enormous. But Juan was a professional. He would be able to handle it.

The roar of the engines evaporated as the 1000 horsepower cars set off for the formation lap. The last chance to take a deep breath and get the tyres up to temperature.

When the cars returned to their starting positions on the grid less than two minutes later and the lights went out, I held my breath.

The start phase was critical in every race. Dramatic collisions could mean an early end to the weekend and cause damage running into the millions. Especially in the midfield, where Juan was placed this Sunday, there were often tussles.

Fortunately, Juan maneuvered the car skillfully through the first and second corners. Within seconds he had made up two starting positions. In the second sector of the track, he passed another opponent. In the third and last sector of the first lap, he took two more positions.

If it continued like this, he would catch the leading group in a few laps.

I followed the action with fascination and listened to the routine exchange between Juan and Carl, his race engineer, over the team radio. Carl spurred Juan on, guided him through the traffic, past one car after the other.

“Okay Juan. You are only 0.435 seconds away from Luca Taborelli. On the start and finish straight you’ll be in the *DRS* window and can attack him.” Carl prepared Juan for the next attack.

On the monitors in front of me I watched carefully as Juan drove closely behind Luca through bends thirteen and fourteen before they accelerated to over a hundred and eighty miles per hour and raced down the straight. Juan swerved and attacked. Only a few meters separated the two opponents from the braking point to the first corner. My heart pounded as the two raced side by side. But then Taborelli unexpectedly pulled to the left, touched Juan’s right front tyre and, albeit unintentionally, pushed him off the track.

Although it all happened in a matter of seconds, I experienced it in slow motion as if my brain didn’t understand what was happening. Perhaps it was my brain protecting me from the horrible images unfolding in front of me. However, the effect didn’t help. It made my blood run cold.

On the fastest part of the route, Juan’s car crashed into the fence with no brakes at two hundred miles per hour, bounced off, flew several feet through the air, overturned and came to a standstill on the track in different parts. A murmur went through the crowd, followed by red flags, which meant the immediate termination of the race and that the remaining cars had to brake so as not to collide head-on with Juan’s destroyed car.

“Juan? Juan? Are you okay? Please answer. Juan? Juan! Answer me, Juan!” Carl’s voice was usually so calm but now sounded panicked as he radioed Juan in vain.

“Juan! Can you hear us?” Toni intervened.

There was a painful groan on the other end of the line. “Yes, but I’m stuck. I can’t get out of here.”

“You landed upside down, Juan. The marshals are on their way and will get you out soon.” Carl reassured him.

“Carl?”

“Yes?”

“I smell smoke.”

Crap!

My gaze flicked from Carl back to the monitor and there I saw it; the gasoline leaking from Juan’s car had caught fire. Flames blazed at the stern, eating their way in the direction of the cockpit, in which Juan was trapped like a tiger in a steel cage, unable to free himself.

“Damn shit, where are the marshals? Where’s the fire brigade?” Toni radioed to the race management, beside himself. “He’ll burn alive.”

Meanwhile, Carl spoke to Juan as calmly as if he was ordering a salad in the restaurant. Presumably he was trying to get Juan to stay calm. “You’re right. Your car has caught fire. I want to be honest; you don’t have much time before it reaches you. You have to get out of there immediately, Juan.’

“Shit, I can’t die, Carl! My daughter is not even a year old! I’m only just getting to know her!”

“I know. That’s why we’re doing this together. Undo the seat belt. Can you do it?”

“Yes.” gasped Juan, hearing the fear of death.

“Can you remove the steering wheel?”

“It’s stuck! Damn it is stuck!”

“Juan. You must keep calm. Try it again.”

By now the flames had eaten their way to the cockpit. I couldn’t make out Juan under the smoke.

While Carl tried to help Juan escape the hell of flames, Toni kept radioing the race management. In the meantime, fire trucks, ambulances and marshals had arrived at the scene of the accident.

“It’s off.” Juan coughed and choked. “Shit Carl, I can feel the flames. They’re burning through the suit.”

“Throw the steering wheel out to the side. It’ll show the marshals where you are. Then put your arm out to the same side.” Carl instructed him.

I followed the dramatic scenes on the screen. Saw the almost \$100,000 high-tech steering wheel fly out of the thick billows of smoke and a glove pushed out of the flames.

A firefighter in full safety gear rushed to the glove and grabbed it.

A second man held a monstrous hose in the same place and tried to push the flames back for at least a moment.

It seemed like an eternity to me, but in truth only seconds passed. Then Juan was free. The fireman pulled him out of the blazing flames onto the tarmac, where a third man grabbed his other arm and they frantically dragged him away from the hellfire.

Juan sank to the ground at a safe distance, feeble.

“Do the shitty TV cameras all over the world have to film this or can we give the poor guy a breather?” Toni radioed angrily to the race management.

Less than five seconds later, the cameras panned away from the scene of the accident and towards the busy pit lane where the other race cars were parked. Drivers, mechanics and engineers bustled around trying to understand what had just happened.

“Byron, can you go to the medical center with Juan’s wife and make sure Juan gets the care he needs? I suppose they’ll take him to the hospital. Can you sort it out?” Toni asked me calmly. “I have to stay here for the restart. As soon as the debris has been cleared away, it continues. The show must go on, as wrong as it feels.”

“No problem, I’ll take care of it.” I assured him and made my way to the motorhome, where Skye was holding little Matilda in her arms, while Laura paced back and forth in

front of the TV monitors like a madwoman and Kenzie talked soothingly to her.

“Laura.” I tried to get her attention.

She spun around and ran towards me. “How is he? Where are they taking him?”

“They’ll take him to the medical center first. If you want, I will accompany you there.”

Laura nodded vigorously and shook out her trembling hands before Skye carefully placed Matilda in her arms. Laura hugged her little daughter comfortingly and breathed in her innocent baby scent. “Let’s check on your daddy, Matilda.”

Chapter 23 - Allegra

In all the years I'd worked for the team, I'd never celebrated a sadder victory. Out of respect for Juan, who was in hospital with severe burns, the award ceremony took place without a champagne shower and cheers. When the last guests had said goodbye, we silently packed the boxes in the suite, which would be flown to the next race at Silverstone in just a week from now.

I hadn't seen Hunter since he left the pit wall shortly after Juan's accident and the TV cameras showed him walking into the medical center with Laura. Shortly afterwards, one of the helicopters left the racetrack for the hospital. I suspected Hunter was also in it.

By the time most of the team left for the airport after the podium ceremony, they still had not returned.

I wanted to make sure he was ok. Such a brutal near-death experience left its mark on the soul of every human being.

As I checked in my suitcase and went through security at the airport, I wrestled with myself. Eventually during the boarding process, I decided to send Hunter a message. He could read it when he found the time.

"I'm thinking of you and Juan. Call me if you want to talk. Doesn't matter when. My flight to London is in 30 minutes. I'll land in six hours."

His answer followed immediately.

"That's kind of you. He will be back, but it will take time. I have to deal with Plan B now. Have a good flight. Hunter x"

There was no chance that Juan would be fit to drive by the next race of the season. I didn't know exactly how serious his injuries were, but definitely too serious to get back into a race car in five days.

That is why Hunter's Plan B would need to come into effect and our replacement driver would be called up. Each team had a substitute driver who stepped in for one of the two regular drivers if they fell ill or were seriously injured. It was so rare that I couldn't even remember the last time this happened at *Titan Racing*.

Our reserve driver, Ben Collins, was a nice guy and a good racing driver. But he hadn't competed in the *Serie del Rey* for two years. Since he last drove one of the cars, the technical development and the demands of the cars had advanced rapidly.

Did he have what it took to fight for victory with our fiercest opponents and to keep our position in the teams' standings after we lost valuable points today in Juan's accident?

We would find out in a few days.

The seat belt signs on the plane flashed on and the flight crew asked us to turn off all electronic devices.

Sighing, I leaned back in my seat and tried to get some sleep, which was anything but easy under the circumstances.

The race weekend at Silverstone came very quickly and before I knew it, the British Grand Prix was just around the corner. The media hype that prevailed in Silverstone was almost inhuman.

The reporters crept around the team like vultures in search of victims, as if there was nothing more important in the world than the enormous weakening of *Titan Racing* by the accident of Juan Sanchez. Poor Riley couldn't rest for a

second, she was so busy keeping the wild pack of reporters lounging around the motorhome and in front of our team hotel in check.

All outsiders assumed that Ben Collins was not up to the pressure that was on him. And to my shame, I had to admit that I couldn't disagree with the journalists and the experts. Still, I hoped that Ben could convince me and the rest of the world otherwise during the two practice sessions this Friday.

Apparently, Hunter hoped that too, because I had never seen him as tense as today. His jaw was grinding hard and his eyes were fixed on the Ben's car pulling out of the garage when the TV cameras faded in.

Chapter 24 - Hunter

“Byron, Carl? A word in my office.”

The second and final practice session on Friday ended a few minutes ago. The result could be described as sobering at best.

Ben’s performance wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t good either. His times were in the midfield and therefore not within striking distance of the *Racing Rosso*, *Roaring Bulls* and *Tom Clark* drivers. It seemed unlikely that this scenario would change in tomorrow’s practice session and the subsequent qualification.

Carl and I followed Toni into his office, which was also in the motorhome. The press besieged the entrance of the garage and the outside area of the motorhome. Everyone wanted to be the first to get an opinion from the team boss. But Toni waved them off and made his way through the jostling crowd.

“Do we agree that what we saw today is enough to activate Plan C?” Toni immediately got to the point as he closed the door of his office behind him. “Or do we want to wait for tomorrow?”

“It won’t change anything. Maybe he can improve by one or two tenths per lap, but that will only lift him from twelfth to eighth or ninth place in qualifying.” Said Carl with a scrutinizing look at the data records in his hands.

“And the race is long. He lacks the necessary skill to make it into the top five. He may not even be able to stay in the points.” I pointed out.

Toni nodded. “I agree. So, let’s move on to Plan C and hope it works out. Byron, can you leave today and take care of it? Discreetly?”

“Of course.” I promised him.

Since Juan's accident five days ago, I hadn't had a second to breathe and it looked like that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

What we were now hiding under the cloak of absolute secrecy was that Juan would be absent for at least two months. In the best-case scenario, he would be back again at the beginning of September after the summer break. With Ben as a substitute driver, we would have as good as lost the world championship by then.

Another driver had to take over.

A winning driver.

A driver like Juan. Someone hungry, experienced and fast.

Currently there was only one driver in the whole world who could check all those boxes. It was up to me to persuade him to start for *Titan Racing* from the upcoming race in Germany and to collect world championship points for the team.

I had less than two weeks for this mission, which some would describe as impossible and completely insane.

Two weeks to make the impossible possible.

Two weeks to get a thousand things going in the utmost secrecy.

Two weeks to give the team at least a realistic chance of the constructors' title.

On the way out, I met Allegra, who was leaning against the counter in motorhome hospitality, talking to Skye.

"Are you done for today? So quickly?" Surprised she let her gaze wander from my briefcase to me.

"Not just for today. I have a few things to do, so I won't be coming back."

"What? Forever?" The shock was written on her face.

Unobtrusively I pulled her into a quiet corner with me and tilted my mouth to her ear so that only she could hear me.

“I have to go to South America and I can’t explain why in detail now. If everything goes well, I’ll be back for the German Grand Prix in two weeks. Can we talk then? Just you and me? Quietly?”

Longingly, I pushed a strand of hair behind her ear that had come loose from her braid and touched the delicate skin of her cheek, apparently casually.

“South America? You’re flying to the other side of the world? Right now? Just like that?” She stared at me in disbelief.

“You mustn’t tell anyone, do you understand? I have my reasons and I will explain to you. Soon.”

“Okay,” She squeezed my arm in agreement. “I trust you.”

Her words sounded so honest that a smile crossed my face.

“That means a lot to me. I’ll miss you, baby.” I whispered and left the motorhome with an uncomfortable tug in my chest.

Chapter 25 - Allegra

After the race at Silverstone, I took a short vacation at my family's place on the Italian Amalfi Coast. My grandparents lived in the small mountain village of Ravello. They ran a cozy restaurant which offered breath-taking ocean views. The tables under the gnarled olive trees in the garden looked out over the wide, azure blue sea.

My sister, Carlotta, lived not far from Ravello, on the lemon island of Capri. After her wedding to Matteo Leone, the heir of the powerful Leone clan last year, she was now six months pregnant. A few months ago, my cousin Giorgia opened her own restaurant on Capri. So, there were several reasons for me to travel to the Amalfi Coast and take a breather.

Each of the seven days that I had already stayed here proved again and again that it had been the right decision.

"Can you take the order from table five and deliver food to table three?" Asked Giorgia, who was carrying a loaded tray with used dishes into the restaurant.

"Right away!"

In the last few days, I had helped out Giorgia in her restaurant, the *Il Sorrentino di Capri*. Although she had only opened the Capri branch of our family restaurant, the *Il Sorrentino* in Ravello just three months ago, the small restaurant with its authentic Italian dishes created from local ingredients was fully booked every day. She could use every bit of help, especially in the summer months.

After the last guests had left the restaurant satisfied and happy, we drove Giorgia's sun-yellow Vespa to Villa Leone, which was enthroned like a fortress on the rocks high above Capri.

The sun was shining in the cloudless July sky and our light summer clothes were blowing in the mild wind as Giorgia swept along the winding road. To our left was the shimmering turquoise sea, marked by the occasional bobbing sailing boat. Steep rocks protruded from the water, giving the Capri coast its unique character.

As we turned through the massive gate into the driveway of the grand Italian villa, Carlotta came towards us. Her husband Matteo and Leonardo, Matteo's cousin and Giorgia's boyfriend, followed her, waving.

"Did you bring me the spaghetti aglio olio?" Carlotta greeted us impatiently. "I'm dying for it. These hunger pangs are unbearable!"

"I have it with me. Go to the pool. I'll warm it up and bring it to you." I gently stroked her bulging stomach.

"You're my favorite sister." She giggled and kissed me on the cheek.

"That's not saying much, you only have one!" I winked and shooed the group towards the pool.

I spent the first four days of my vacation with my grandparents in Ravello. Since I'd been on Capri, I've lived with Carlotta and Matteo in the ridiculously luxurious villa that could have housed half a continent. Thanks to that, and of course the wedding celebrations that had taken place here nine months ago, I knew my way around the property.

It was impossible not to think of Hunter while remembering the wedding reception at this place.

What was he doing?

I hummed thoughtfully to myself as I put the pasta in a pan when the unmistakable voice of Matteo made me startle.

"Damn! I almost spilled your wife's pasta on the floor. Do you want her to kill you? And me too?"

Matteo laughed darkly and approached me as smoothly as a leopard on the hunt.

"How's it going with Hunter?"

“Hunter?”

“Yes, you know - the man you couldn’t keep your hands off at the wedding.”

“Oh that,” I pretended to be stupid. “It was ages ago, Matteo.”

“Allegra, I think you’ve forgotten who your sister is married to. Do you really want to play this game?”

I swallowed. My throat suddenly felt terribly dry. My sister was the only person on this planet who could withstand Matteo Leone’s steely gaze. She was the only one who could tame this terrifyingly authoritative man.

“What do you know about me and Hunter?”

“Everything.”

“Then you know a lot more than I do,” I replied with an ironic undertone. “He’s in South America. Why? No idea. He’s not exactly a talkative guy who reveals a lot about himself.”

“He’s not like that for no reason.” Matteo defended his friend.

“Would you like to give me this reason?”

“No.”

I snorted contemptuously. “I thought so.”

“I cannot share his secrets. You must understand that. If he means something to you, you should do everything to find out for yourself.”

“Assuming he means something to me, how should I know that I mean something to him too? As far as I know, I’m just one of many women in his bed.”

Matteo shook his head. “Maybe you were in the beginning. But when I met him before the Canadian Grand Prix in New York, he kept talking about you.”

“He told you about us?”

“I’ve known Hunter for fifteen years. We studied together. Lived together. What do you think?”

“And what exactly did he tell you?”

“You’re trying to get my secrets out of me again. Almost as clever as your sister.”

“Come on, Matteo. You can’t tell me that he talked about me and then not say what exactly it was. I’ll make sure that my sister puts you on sex ban.” I threatened and tried in vain to remain serious.

“Your sister is way too greedy for that,” he chuckled. “But of course, I don’t want to take the risk. Therefore, you should know that Hunter has not dated any other women besides you for a long time. In a sense, this is a first for him. Do I have to say more than that?”

“I…”

“I didn’t know that you had to import the pasta from the mainland first.” Complained Carlotta, who just entered the kitchen.

“Your husband distracted me. It’s all his fault.” I giggled.

Carlotta eyed Matteo critically. “If that is the case, I must punish you for your foolish behavior.”

My giggle turned into a hearty laugh. “*You* are punishing *him*? *You him*? Don’t let the people outside of these four walls hear that, otherwise the dreaded Leone family will no longer rule southern Italy.”

Matteo pulled Carlotta to him for a deep kiss. “I love it when you punish me.” He mumbled against her lips.

“The pasta is ready,” I interrupted the lovebirds and held the plate out to Carlotta. “And now let’s go to the pool, lounge around and soak up the sun. Or do you two have to make a stop in the bedroom first?”

Carlotta and Matteo looked at each other and nodded. Although neither had said a word, they had reached a silent understanding.

“Go ahead, Allegra. We’ll be right there.” Carlotta smiled mischievously and pushed her hands under Matteo’s shirt, who closed his eyes with relish and put his head back.

“Your husband is right; you are greedy.”

Carlotta shrugged apologetically. “It’s the hormones.”

Chapter 26 - Hunter

“How can you do this to me? You must be completely out of your mind! No, I’m wrong. You are crazy. Completely crazy! And if you want to fire me now for being disrespectful, go ahead. You’d be doing me an enormous favor.”

“Nobody’s going to fire you, Riley.” Toni soothed her.

“But why not? I beg you!”

“No way. We need you now more than ever.” Toni resolutely rejected her request.

“Then I want a raise. Minimum twenty-five percent!”

“Nice try, Riley.”

“I’m going to age years in a matter of weeks if I have to play nanny for this guy. A salary raise is the bare minimum. Dying all the gray hairs that I’ll grow because of him costs money. Lot of money!”

“We’ll find a compromise. Besides, it won’t be as bad as you’re making out.”

“Byron, I respect you very much, but unlike you, I know Dante Di Santo aka *Il Diavolo*. And if I can assure you of one thing, it’s that there is nobody in the world who has a more inappropriate surname than this guy.”

I pressed my lips together tightly so as not to smile. Riley was right. Dante’s surname meant ‘saint’ and he was the complete opposite of that. The guy lived up to his nickname ‘*Il Diavolo*’, the devil, in every way.

“Dante’s a hell of a good driver, Riley. We can turn things around with him and stay in the race for the world championship until Juan returns.” Toni explained the obvious.

“Dante is also the only driver available with the talent to turn things around. Do you want to win or not, Riley?”

“Of course I want to win, but at what price? Yeah, okay, this guy can do it. He knows how to drive a car. But everything about him is a total PR disaster. I’d give it twenty-four hours before he starts a fight in some brothel, sits drunk behind the wheel or pees naked out of his window on passers-by.”

“If those are the worst stories you’ve heard about me, honey, you’re an even worse PR manager than I thought.”

Toni, Riley, and I turned to face the person that the sneering, chuckling voice belonged to. Dante had entered my office unnoticed and was leaning casually against the door.

“Those are the only stories of yours that I will speak out loud. Because your other escapades are too X-rated.”

Riley did not let herself get distracted by Dante, who looked at her disparagingly. On the contrary, she was just getting started.

One thing was certain; the two were going to be an explosive combination.

“Oh sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting.” Allegra looked up from her documents and froze when she saw Dante leaning in the door. “Dante Di Santo. So the rumors are true.”

“What are those rumors, sweetheart? That I’m even sexier in real life than on TV?”

“Do you see! That’s what I mean!” Riley moaned. “He has no respect. No decency. He doesn’t know when it’s best to shut up. The guy’s a ticking atomic bomb and I don’t want to be in the room when it goes off. Damn it, I don’t even want to be in the same country when it happens.”

“Enough now.” It was time to put an end to this. There were clearly too many clowns in the room, and this wasn’t the circus.

“Riley, you’d better get used to Dante replacing Juan until he has recovered and Dante, you should try not to get stabbed by our press officer on the first day because otherwise you won’t get to enjoy any of the considerable chunk of

money that we will pay you. Right, now that we've got that sorted out, the two of you should pull together and work on your PR strategy. The press conference is in two hours. Then the whole world will know that Dante is our new substitute driver. Make sure that you know exactly what nice things you want to tell the journalists out there and, above all, smile at the cameras as if you love each other very much."

Riley and Dante looked at each other as if they were venomous snakes about to fight to the death.

"If you have any questions, please ask Toni and I now. Otherwise, get out of here so that I can talk to my event manager about tomorrow's CEO event in peace."

Chapter 27 - Allegra

“You flew to South America to sign Dante Di Santo?”

Dante Di Santo was the bad boy of the *Serie del Rey*. The guy was probably more talented than the rest of the field combined but he lacked discipline. The thirty-two-year-old, half Italian, half Argentine, could have secured the world title umpteen times during his *Serie del Rey* career. He never made it. Because every season he did something catastrophic that cost him head and neck and with it the title at the same time.

When his fourth team dropped him at the end of last season, nobody wanted to sign him anymore. Di Santo left the series and was said to be enjoying his retirement to the full at Copacabana. It was easy to live there with the millions in his bank account.

Time and again, unflattering photos of him, often involving women, had surfaced in the tabloids.

That he should drive for us now shocked me deeply. There had been rumors in the paddock and in the press for days and they persisted. I didn't believe it until I saw Di Santo's manager at the counter with Skye.

“Di Santo is our only chance,” Hunter replied and closed the door. “Ben's eighth place at the British Grand Prix is not enough to keep up with *Racing Rosso* and the *Roaring Bulls*. Ben knows that himself and agreed without hesitation when we suggested putting someone else in the cockpit.”

“That's very daring, Hunter.”

“Nothing ventured nothing gained. And while we are on the subject of daring, I would like to say something else. You're in New York City for two days before the Texas Grand Prix to manage the event with Tom and the professional basketball player in Times Square, aren't you?”

“Yes, I fly on Monday morning, the event is on Tuesday and I’m going to Texas on Wednesday.”

“Will you go out with me after the event on Tuesday evening?”

His unexpected invitation made my aching heart hop up and down hopefully. “You will be in New York too?”

Hunter gave me a disarming smile. “I happen to live in New York. So yes.”

“Well, in that case, I have high expectations. After all, I don’t want to waste my precious time in the city that never sleeps.”

“So you agree?”

“Yes, I do.”

Hunter surprised me once more by breaking his fierce rules a second time within minutes and pulled me against him. “I’m looking forward to spending time with you.” He whispered before giving me a promising kiss that turned my knees to jelly.

“How was Capri? Matteo told me that you spent the last few days there.” Hunter asked when he released me after two more deep kisses.

“It was nice. Although Giorgia had a breakdown which upset me very much.”

Hunter nodded sympathetically. “I know. Secrets can be extremely stressful. It was certainly not easy for Giorgia to keep her secret to herself for so long.”

“That sounds like you speak from experience?” I dared to gently probe.

Hunter’s eyes became veiled as if a curtain had been drawn. “Maybe, yes.” He ran his hand through his hair, agitated. “But let’s talk about more enjoyable topics. I can’t wait for tonight. It feels like forever since we last spent time

together undisturbed. There's also one thing I've wanted to clarify with you for weeks."

"I can't tonight, I'm sorry. Tonight's Chasseur & Cie event is 30 miles away. Since it won't finish until after midnight, I'll be spending the night there with Dakota. Tomorrow I'm free."

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to make tomorrow evening because I have to discuss the rule changes for the next five years with Toni and a couple of the other team bosses, and I'll be flying back to New York on Sunday evening. How about Saturday?" Hunter suggested optimistically.

"Saturday I'm meeting my parents who are coming down from Munich. That means that we won't have time for each other until we are in New York." I stated soberly.

Hunter grimaced in agony. "That'll be six damn long days."

The German Grand Prix was one of the most popular events of the season, which is why we accommodated more than two hundred guests in the hospitality suite every day and employed additional staff.

The world had been turned upside down since the team officially announced the signing of Dante Di Santo. The media pounced on the story like vultures and the audience ratings had shot up. It almost seemed as if the whole world was watching to see if *Il Diavolo* would fail with his comeback in the *Serie del Rey*.

For a moment during qualifying on Saturday I forgot that I was part of the staff. Instead, I looked for a free spot on the grandstand that was specially reserved for hospitality guests. Amid the guests, I watched the action on the racetrack, mesmerized.

Tom and Dante both made it into the top 10, meaning they'd reached the final part of qualifying and were about fighting for pole position.

With bated breath, I followed the cars as they zoomed past us on the hunt for the fastest lap time. A look at the timesheets told me that none of the *Racing Rosso* and *Roaring Bulls* drivers could improve their time on the final fast lap. Tom and Dante were the only ones who had not yet crossed the finish line. So far they'd been in third and fourth place. Would they be able to beat it?

At that moment Tom shot past the black and white checkered flag with a new personal best.

Pole position!

I jumped up and cheered, but then the impossible happened: Dante had a bad second sector. His chance for pole position seemed to be gone. The TV broadcasters were also convinced of this, because the cameras switched to Tom, who drove his cool down lap at a slow pace.

I was already making my way through the crowd back to the suite when the excited voice of the commentator over the speakers made me pause.

“Dante Di Santo secures pole position with a new track record. What a spectacular debut! *Il Diavolo* is back and it almost seems as if he was never gone!”

A murmur went through the crowd.

Dante Di Santo on pole?

Impossible!

The cameras replayed his braking mistake in the second sector, which I had seen play out on the screen opposite. But what no one had seen was what happened afterwards. In the third and final section of the track, *Il Diavolo* performed magic and almost let the car fly around the track. Fast enough to grab the best spot on the front row for the next day's race with a tenth advantage.

“Dante, this is Carl. You've got pole!” The euphoric voice of Carl came through the loudspeakers. Loud cheers followed from Dante's cockpit, accompanied by a thrusting winner's fist, which the cameras caught on turn six. Since the TV stations had access to excerpts of the radio messages from

all teams, they were able to share the emotional scene with their audience.

If I wasn't dreaming, we'd just secured the front row and Hunter's plan might not be as crazy and outlandish as I thought after all.

Chapter 28 - Hunter

On Sunday evening, I boarded the jet that would take me from Germany to New York City. For the first time in weeks I allowed myself to take a deep breath. Tom had won the race with confidence and Dante, who crossed the finish line in second position, completed the one-two. Although Dante had not sat in any of the *Serie del Rey* racing cars for eight months and did not have the same fitness levels as his competitors, he had still delivered a terrific debut today.

Hopefully he would maintain this energy and determination in the races to come. At least until Juan was on his feet again and could return to the cockpit of his car.

When the jet took off, I leaned back in my comfortable seat and poured myself a glass of my scotch. I really deserved it after the hardships of the past few weeks. Now that the competitiveness and thus the profitability of the team seemed secured, I could finally focus on what I had missed more often than I would have liked in the past few weeks: Allegra.

When I returned to my empty apartment after a long day at work, I felt the need to talk to her about my day. I wanted to lie with her on the couch with a glass of red wine, look at the lights of the New York skyline and inhale her sensual scent while her warm body snuggled into my arms.

I hadn't dated any other woman in nearly two months, and although it was weeks since my last night with Allegra, I had no intention of doing so. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been abstinent for so long since discovering the wondrous world of women.

But when I sat alone on the terrace in the evening and looked back on the day, I no longer felt the urge to roll around in bed with women I hardly knew. The anonymity and superficiality that had given me plenty of satisfaction over the years now really repelled me. I didn't want to fuck an empty

shell anymore, no matter how beautiful it was. What I wanted was to take possession of Allegra's body. To look into her soul when I penetrated her deeply and firmly.

I didn't want to share Allegra anymore. With anyone.

The fact that she might be seeing other men bothered me more than it should.

It distracted me.

She distracted me.

She distracted me when she was standing next to me and when she was thousands of miles away.

This creeping realization unsettled me. Because apart from Allegra, it was only Maddie who had this effect on me, albeit in a completely different way.

The prospect of having Allegra to myself in forty-eight hours sent a pleasant tingling sensation over my skin. A gentleman would take her to the most impressive restaurant in New York and show her more of this incredible city. But I wasn't a gentleman. After so many weeks of not touching her, I wanted to have her to myself and make up for all the lost time.

That's why I would cook for her myself. At my home. In my penthouse on the Upper East Side, which hadn't hosted a woman before except Maddie.

While I couldn't pinpoint the reason for it, it didn't seem right to take Allegra to my second home in Tribeca, where I usually hosted my female acquaintances.

Most of Monday was spent in meetings with my business partners, going through the results and returns of our investments in the first half of the year. My job was my top priority. When I was working, I usually blocked out everything around me. I was fully focused on business.

But when we analyzed the hospitality income of our sports teams and *Titan Racing* was able to show a substantial profit, I smiled at the thought of the woman we owed this to. Allegra wasn't just attractive, passionate and wild. She was also intelligent, had business acumen and worked hard.

The anticipation of finally meeting her again tomorrow and having a couple of hours together put a smile on my face when I left the office at 10 pm.

Chapter 29 – Allegra

Tired, I rolled my head back and massaged my throbbing temples. I hated messy events where the work was sloppy and everything was done at the last minute. To my regret, the event in New York fell into exactly this category. If I had hoped to go on a little sightseeing tour on Monday evening, I was bitterly disappointed because I didn't leave the Times Square location until the early hours of the morning to get just a few hours of sleep in my hotel.

Today, Tuesday, was no less stressful and a few minutes after the event had ended, an unpleasant headache had settled in. But that was not all. My grumbling stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten since six o'clock this morning when I'd bought a protein smoothie on my way to Times Square.

From behind, warm, strong hands came down on my aching shoulders and squeezed hard.

"Hmmm." I closed my eyes and enjoyed the touch of the talented hands that kneaded my shoulders.

"You're very tense, baby."

Hunter's voice rolled over my body as gently as the summer waves over a fine sandy beach.

"I would commit murder for a hot bath." I groaned in resignation.

"Tough day?"

"Best not ask," I waved it off. "Instead, it would be better to tell me how the rest of my day is going to be spent."

Hunter took my hand and brought it to his mouth. "How about we go to my place, I let you relax in a bath and cook something for us?"

"Really?" I beamed at Hunter.

“Really. Unless you’d prefer a city tour of New York at night?”

I sighed morosely. “I did actually intend to see the city but I think my legs have stopped working. You have no idea how many miles I’ve covered today to scare everyone into doing their jobs.”

Hunter lifted my chin and captivated me with his blue eyes. “What do you think of a little sightseeing tour by car?”

“That sounds interesting. Do I have to choose between the tour and the bubble bath?” Suspiciously, I pushed my eyebrows together and Hunter laughed in amusement.

“We can do both. This is the land of unlimited possibilities, remember?”

“Then let’s go!” I cheered and followed Hunter outside.

There was a lot of activity in Times Square. The day had turned into night and the colorful lights of the large neon signs flickered on the walls of the skyscrapers. The numerous theaters advertised their upcoming shows with flashing signs lived up to the world-famous name of Broadway.

I stopped in amazement and turned on the spot.

This place was completely overstimulating. So many things happening in one place, accompanied by the wild horns of the yellow New York taxis trying desperately to make their way through the crowd.

Hunter’s limousine was parked around the corner on a quieter side street. He held the back door open for me and I gratefully slid into the back seat. Hunter sat on the other side.

“Morton, before we go to my apartment, I’d like to show Miss Sorrentino a little more of the city. Let’s drive down the West Side to Brooklyn and then up the East Side to my penthouse.”

“Very well.” Hunter’s chauffeur replied and discreetly pulled up the partition.

Hunter leaned over and ran the tip of his nose up my neck. “Do you know how much I would love to kiss you right now, baby?” He couldn’t hide the excitement in his voice.

“Then why don’t you just do it?” I breathed, running my thumb over his lips.

“Because I fear that we will get debauched very quickly and if we do it in the back seat of my limousine, you will not notice anything on your sightseeing tour.”

“I don’t care.” I whispered, trying to put my lips on his, but he avoided me.

“Allegra, I want you so much,” he croaked hoarsely. “I can’t wait to be inside you. Firm and deep. Fast and hard. Wild and raw.” Hunter nibbled my ear and pulled me onto his lap. “But first you should get the sightseeing tour that you wanted.”

I snuggled up against his muscular chest and enjoyed the touch of his fingers, which he had slipped under my blouse and ran lazily over my back. Fascinated, I looked through the tinted windows of the limousine at the skyline of the majestic city.

“The Empire State Building!” I exclaimed enthusiastically as the famous skyscraper, whose dizzyingly high summit lit up alternately in red, green, purple and blue at this hour of the night, slid into sight.

Hunter had his chin on my shoulder and was explaining to me the specifics of Chelsea, Greenwich Village, Soho, Lower Manhattan, Tribeca and the adjacent Financial District where Hunter’s office building was located, while his fingers continued to slide over my spine.

The car stopped in a quiet corner of Battery Park.

“Do you think your legs will carry you to the railing?” Hunter pointed to a lookout point in the park.

“No, I don’t think so.” That wasn’t true, but I felt so incredibly comfortable on his lap and in his arms that I didn’t want to break away from him.

“Then I’ll carry you.”

When Hunter opened the door and got out with me in his arms, I realized that he really meant it.

“I’m way too heavy! Put me down! You’ll hurt yourself.” I shouted in protest and wriggled helplessly in his arms.

But Hunter shook his head, hugged me and walked on undeterred.

He set me down at the parapet, turned me towards the Hudson River, and stood right behind me. He locked me in between his arms, which leaned against the railing to my right and left.

“Look.” He whispered in my ear and pointed to a small island in front of us.

“The Statue of Liberty!” I squeaked excitedly. It was the first time I was able to admire the famous symbol of freedom in real life. “It’s so beautiful!”

Even if Liberty Island, the land on which the statue stood, was some distance away, Battery Park offered an impressive view of this splendid structure. Especially now, at this late hour, the lighting of the statue meant it could still be admired.

I was absolutely fascinated by the sight.

A tempting smell filled my nostrils and, as if at the push of a button, my empty stomach, which I had completely forgotten during the past half an hour, began to growl loudly again. I looked around hungrily and saw Hunter walking towards me with two hot dogs in hand.

“Original New York hot dogs. We have to make sure that you stay strong for what I plan to do with you tonight.”

My fingers brushed his as I accepted the delicious smelling food and I blushed at the thought of the night still to come.

“Let’s go.” I asked with flushed cheeks.

Hand in hand we walked back to the car while in the other hand I held the hot dog, which tasted just as delicious as it smelled.

“The bar for your culinary skills is high after this.” I joked as he opened the door for me and slid into the car behind me.

We crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and Hunter suggested we stop in Brooklyn Bridge Park to see the phenomenal view of the Manhattan skyline and its Financial District. To my own surprise, I declined with thanks. As much as I enjoyed the city tour, I was getting jittery and impatient with every minute.

I wanted Hunter. Everything from him. His hands, his mouth, his manhood.

“I want to go to yours. As fast as possible.” I whispered and gave him a meaningful look, which he acknowledged with an impatient growl.

“Morton, please take us to my apartment on the Upper East Side.” Hunter instructed the driver via a hidden button in the door.

The car crossed the Brooklyn Bridge again, this time in the opposite direction. The sea of skyscrapers in Manhattan was drawing closer and I greedily sucked in every view.

We drove along the east side in the direction of Central Park, past the imposing Chrysler Building and the Rockefeller Center.

Eventually, Central Park came into view and I craned my neck to see something in the darkness of the night. Finally, the car stopped and Hunter got out.

“Are you coming or have you changed your mind?” He stuck his head in the door and looked at me questioningly.

Had I changed my mind? How could I! But unlike Hunter, I was well aware of the meaning of this moment. So far we’d only met for sex in our hotel rooms. This was the first time we’d done anything together that was beyond the physical need. And now I was about to enter Hunter’s home.

About to dive into his world. About to meet the man I've had hot sex with for months.

My stomach fluttered at the thought. Was it only me who realized that we were breaking the rules that Hunter had so uncompromisingly laid down, or was he aware of it too?

Did this evening, this night, possibly have more significance than I dared to hope a few days ago?

I took a deep breath and managed to smile. "I'm coming."

Then I got out and let him put his hand on my lower back as he directed me past the doorman to the elevator.

When the elevator doors closed, he turned to me, pressed me against the wall, and gave me a long kiss, the intensity of which made my ears ring.

"Sorry," he whispered breathlessly as he let go of me. "But that couldn't wait any longer."

Chapter 30 - Hunter

When the elevator doors in my penthouse opened and the dimmed lights came on automatically, Allegra paused, intimidated.

“You’d think, after all these years in the midst of ridiculously rich people, I’d have gotten used to what money can buy.” She mumbled and stepped inside.

“It’s just an apartment.” I reassured her.

“If this is just an apartment, I live in a shoebox.” She replied dryly.

I laughed heartily at her wry sense of humor and pushed her into my kitchen, where I opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of white wine.

“Let’s toast that you are here. That’s pretty much the only thing that interests me now.”

Allegra pushed her full glass against mine and I watched spellbound as her delicate neck moved as she took a sip. It was unbearable how much I wanted this woman. But I had made up my mind not to act like a reckless asshole for once and to be a gentleman instead for at least one evening. Why I felt the need to take care of Allegra was a mystery to me. It would be so easy to fuck her right now on the kitchen island, on the couch, on the damn floor, or in my bed. Then I could order something to eat and then fuck her again. And again. And again. But the dark circles under her eyes aroused my protective instinct.

She should enjoy it as much as I do. I would have to be patient, as difficult as it was for me.

“I’ll cook spaghetti alfredo for us. You like it, don’t you?”

“How do you know that?” Surprised, she eyed me over the kitchen island.

“A good businessman does not reveal his secrets.”

“Since you are not a businessman but my chosen lover tonight, you could tell me your secrets.”

“You can try to get them out of me.” I winked and took the ingredients out of the cupboards.

“I’ll help you.” She said and came around the island.

“No, no, I have other plans for you.”

“Oh yeah?” She raised her eyebrows and grinned. “Should I undress and dance naked for you?”

“Is that an option?”

“No,” she grinned a bit wider. “Unless you tell me your secrets.”

“Nice try, baby,” I chuckled. “Come on.”

I pulled her behind me into the spacious white marble bathroom with floor-to-ceiling windows and a view of Central Park and the skyscrapers beyond. I stopped in front of the bathtub, which also doubled as a jacuzzi.

“Oh. My. God.” Allegra marveled and hurried to the window. “I’m dreaming. Definitely.”

I turned on the water and went to undress her. I opened her blouse and let it slide over her shoulders, which I covered with small kisses. I then went to the hooks on her bra and bit her neck gently as I slid the straps over her arms. I forced myself with all my might not to touch her plump breasts. If I did that, the evening’s good resolutions would be over once and for all.

My arms wrapped around her waist and turned to her tight suit pants, which emphasized her round bottom and slim legs.

I opened the button and pulled them down her legs to her ankles while I knelt behind her and slid my fingers along her bottom to her ankles.

Allegra carelessly kicked her heels into the corner and got out of her pants.

“Will you take off my panties too or do I have to do that myself?” She peered over her shoulder with a lustful look.

“Turn around.” I demanded harshly, because I knew how much she liked it when she could give up some control and just let go.

With flushed cheeks, she looked down at me with lowered lids.

“I need you.” She gasped as I grabbed her panties and took them off.

“You will get me,” I promised. “Later.”

I got up and turned off the water.

“It’s...” I turned to tell her she could get into the bathtub, but the words got stuck in my throat when I saw her sitting with her legs apart on the counter of the sink.

“Not later. Now.” She demanded.

Her tone brokered no arguments. It always excited me to see her so dominant and demanding, although it also drove me crazy.

“Immediately, Hunter.”

I closed the gap between us and dropped to my knees in front of her. She groaned even though I didn’t even touch her.

“So impatient.” I whispered between her legs and lowered my mouth.

Allegra clawed her hands in my hair and gripped me. She got hotter and more unbridled with every second that my tongue slid over her clitoris. This was going to be extremely fast, as sexually starved as she was. Apparently she hadn’t let off steam since our last night together either. This realization filled me with satisfaction and relief at the same time. Tomorrow morning, when both of our desires were satisfied, I would make sure that I kept her to myself in the future too.

I slipped a finger inside her and felt her muscles contract, heralding her imminent orgasm.

She came, loud and unrestrained. Just as I loved it.

My manhood pulsed so hard it hurt. Under normal circumstances, I would have opened my pants now and not even bothered to slide them off before my rock-hard cock penetrated her. But again I reminded myself that for once I was putting my needs on the back burner this evening.

I detached myself from Allegra's throbbing body and lifted her into my arms. With a stoic expression I carried her to the bathtub and watched her bewitching body disappear inch by inch under the bubbly water.

God knows it wasn't easy being a gentleman. That's probably why there were so many assholes in the world.

I handed Allegra her glass of white wine and turned away from her with one last kiss on her bare neck.

"Where are you going?" She asked, tilting her head back.

"I'm making this damn spaghetti before I don't have the will anymore." I said and hurried out of the room.

Chapter 31 – Allegra

The aroma of spaghetti in butter and cheese sauce woke me up from my half-sleep. I had been dozing off after the orgasm that Hunter's skillful mouth had given me. The warm water has loosened my tense muscles and relieved the slight buzz from the alcohol on an almost empty stomach.

Hunter handed me a plate of steaming pasta and stepped into the tub across from me.

Questioningly I looked from the plate, which made my mouth water, to the naked Hunter, which made my mouth water even more.

"You don't seem to want to get out of the tub, so I thought we'd just eat here."

"Really?"

"Unless of course you prefer to get out of the water, dry off and sit at the kitchen counter?"

I shook my head. "Under no circumstances."

"I thought so," Hunter smiled contentedly. "Bon appetite!"

After we had finished our very generous portions, I put the plate on the shelf behind me and enjoyed the way Hunter rubbed my battered feet and looked at me with watchful eyes.

"Looks like we have to get out of the tub after all." I stated as my foot felt his erect manhood.

"Why?" He replied thickly.

I crawled over to him and sat down on his lap. "It's time I settle the bill for the food and the wine," I whispered

against his lips and rubbed my toned body against his. “Show me where your bedroom is, Hunter.”

“Why don’t you settle the bill in the bathtub?” Hunter nibbled my lower lip, lost in thought.

“You want...”

“I did my check-up last week. I am healthy. Besides, I haven’t slept with any other woman in a long time, and certainly not without a condom.” Hunter interrupted me.

“And I haven’t slept with any other man in a long time.” I replied quietly.

I didn’t have the courage to admit that I hadn’t slept with any other man since our weekend in Capri. The official reason for my abstinence was that I didn’t have the time. Unofficially, I didn’t want another man to blur the memory of the phenomenal sex with Hunter, because any man who came after him would have been a disappointment.

“Are you taking the pill?” Hunter tore me from my thoughts.

I nodded. “For many years.”

“Okay baby. If you trust me, we’ll do it without a condom.”

Hunter brushed a strand of hair off my face and looked at me expectantly.

“I trust you,” I whispered. “And now don’t make me wait any longer.”

His eyes darkened and with an excited hum he cupped my breasts, which had been waiting for this very touch for weeks.

I arched up towards him, whimpering and watched from lowered lids as he alternately roughly kneaded my breasts and then caressed them again tenderly. This rollercoaster of feelings triggered an impatient throbbing inside me and I greedily rubbed against Hunter’s cock.

“Let me in, baby.” Hunter gasped against my lips and let his tongue slide into my mouth, which I willingly opened for him.

I lifted my pelvis, grabbed his throbbing cock and took it in painfully slowly.

“You’re so damn tight,” Hunter hissed strained. “I’ll come like a rocket if this continues.” He grimaced and breathed harshly.

It was no different for me. Hunter’s considerable manhood made me breathless and I had a hard time getting used to his size. It had only been a couple of weeks that I’d had to go without him. Why did it feel like it was years?

Hunter grabbed my waist and requested another kiss.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and bowed my head to let his gifted tongue in again as I rode him leisurely, my hard nipples rubbing against him.

Hunter’s tongue in my mouth moved in time with our thrusts, giving me double the pleasure.

His hands wandered up my waist to my breasts and stroked my erect nipples.

This tender touch made the barrel overflow.

I moaned my orgasm into his mouth, called his name, and clawed my fingernails into his shoulders. As the waves of my climax rolled over me, Hunter shuddered and poured himself deep inside me with an animalistic, possessive groan.

Completely out of breath, he let his forehead sink against mine.

“From now on you can always settle your bills with me like this.” The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement, and he turned me in his arms so that I leaned my back against his chest and felt his fast heartbeat on my shoulder.

“Spread your legs, baby,” he said. “Unless, of course, you want to keep it in you. I wouldn’t have anything against that.”

I loved his ownership over me. “You caveman.” I said to mask my joy at his behavior.

“I’m not a caveman, I’m a businessman, Allegra. We already covered that.”

“What are you selling?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, if you are a businessman, you have to earn your money with something, so I would like to know what you have on offer. Maybe I’m interested in the range and I’ll buy something.”

Hunter burst out laughing. “Is there a specific product or service that might interest you?”

I put a finger to my cheek and pretended to think. “Let’s see. I’m looking for something that will help me relax.”

“If that is the case, then I have just the thing for you. Why don’t we dry off and go to my bedroom? I can show you there in peace.”

“That sounds like a sensible idea. Before I buy, I need to test it out extensively. I have high standards, you know?”

“Oh yes baby, I know.” Hunter growled, sliding his hand between my legs.

Chapter 32 - Hunter

Allegra had spent me. It couldn't be said any more accurately. She had squeezed me down to the last drop, robbed me of all energy.

I slept deeper that night than I had in many years.

As if there weren't any demons in my life that kept haunting my subconscious and sapping my nerves. As if the world was actually a beautiful place. As if life was something to be enjoyed with ease. As if it was the most normal thing in the world to fall asleep with a smile on your face.

When the sun rays shining mercilessly through the window woke me that July morning, Allegra was no longer next to me.

I sat up with a jerk and felt the bed for a note. She wouldn't have left without saying goodbye or at least leaving me a message, would she?

I jumped out of bed and searched my apartment, not taking the time to look for my boxer shorts or at least to pull on some pants.

I was relieved to see Allegra in the kitchen. She stood in the door of the refrigerator with a towel tucked around her body.

I crept up to her quietly and wrapped my arms around her hips. I caught her putting a spoonful of tiramisu from the deli shop around the corner into her mouth.

"Was that necessary? You scared me to death." She scolded, but the smile on her face told me that she wasn't really angry with me.

"You snuck out of bed. That's against the rules."

She snorted and closed the refrigerator behind her. "Haven't we broken all your rules by now?"

“Not all, no, but almost all of them,” I smiled. “You took a shower?”

Allegra looked down at herself and shrugged apologetically. “I don’t have the opportunity to shower overlooking Central Park every day and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to enjoy that magnificent view in the bathroom with you.”

“Because you would be too distracted by my body and thinking about your next orgasm?”

“Your ego knows no limits,” she grinned. “But yes, something like that.”

“You are probably aware that showering without me is also against the rules?”

“Is that so? Well, I didn’t know that. So, what now? What do you suggest?”

“Well, I’ll have to make you dirty again so that we can clean up together afterwards and obediently follow the rules.”

With a yank, I pulled the towel off her body and carelessly tossed it on the floor. I lifted her fiercely onto the kitchen island and Allegra leaned back without resistance, ready for me to take possession of her. Her submission sparked an irrepressible passion in me.

I positioned myself in front of her and grabbed her thighs when the sound of the elevator doors opening made me stop.

Not a second later came an annoyed voice through the room. “You aren’t serious, Byron, are you?”

Maddie!

Damn crap!

What the hell was she doing here?

Thunderstruck, I let Allegra go and bent to hand her the towel before half-turning to Maddie with a petrified expression.

“You should be in Boston. What are you doing here, Maddie?”

“That’s a really nice greeting. How about you put something on first?”

She looked appraisingly at Allegra, who looked back and forth between me and Maddie with a confused expression, the towel wrapped tightly around her body.

“I didn’t know you were bringing your hookers home now. Don’t you have the apartment in Tribeca for that?”

“Madison King! That is enough! Moderate your damn tone, because I don’t like it at all.”

“Now you sound like my mother,” she commented scornfully. “Oh pardon, you sounded, because she just pissed off and left me behind in this shitty world.”

“Don’t you dare talk disparagingly about Hazel, Madison.”

“Or what? Or you’ll send me to the next boarding school? No problem. Just see how fast I can get out of there. Or do you want to turn off the money tap for me? Just do it. I can find other ways and means to get money.”

Allegra sucked in a sharp breath beside me. She disliked the conversation as much as I did. Uncomfortably, she pulled her towel tighter around her.

“Sit on the couch. I’ll be right there and then we’ll talk.” I instructed her and pulled Allegra with me without bothering to wait for Maddie’s answer.

“If you have to fuck her first, hurry up. I don’t have forever.”

Allegra involuntarily winced at Maddie’s inappropriate words.

I closed the bedroom door behind us and gave Allegra an apologetic look. “Looks like you’ve just met Maddie. Sorry. That went pretty full on.”

“Is she your daughter?” Allegra asked flatly.

“No.” I took a deep breath and held it.

This was exactly the conversation I never wanted to have. With anyone. Thanks to Maddie’s unexpected appearance, I had no other choice now. I would have to tell Allegra about Maddie. The short version. Just what she absolutely needed to know. The rest was my business alone. Me and my demons.

“Maddie is my sister Hazel’s daughter. She died four years ago. Since then I have been Maddie’s guardian because she has no one but me. Hazel and I grew up in a children’s home. We never met our parents.”

Allegra reached out to me and gently squeezed my hand. “I’m very sorry about your sister, Hunter, and that you had to grow up without parents.”

“Thank you. It’s okay. And Hazel’s death was a while ago.”

“It may have been, but the pain of the loss lasts a lifetime, doesn’t it?”

I nodded silently.

“If Maddie was living with you, you should have warned me, Hunter. None of us enjoyed the fact that she caught us having sex in the kitchen... to put it mildly.”

I rubbed my face in resignation. “Maddie goes to boarding school in Boston. She’s only in New York on vacation and that doesn’t start for a week. I have no idea why she’s here or how she even got here because she doesn’t have a car.”

“How old is Maddie?”

“She turned eighteen three months ago. She should have graduated from high school this year, but she has moved between more boarding schools in recent years than I can count and otherwise shows little interest in school, even though she is incredibly intelligent. She is currently repeating the year.”

“I understand, and what do you want to do now?”

“I want to find out if she managed to get kicked out of this boarding school too. If so, I’ll send her to a camp for difficult-to-educate kids by return mail.”

“Military academy,” Allegra suggested dryly. “I heard that it’s really brutal.”

“Good idea. I’ll have a look at that.”

“Hunter?”

“Yes?”

“That was a joke.”

“I know. Still very tempting.” I sighed. “Maybe they’d be able to tame Maddie. She’s so cheeky and rude that she makes the Bronx street gangs look like the Seven Dwarfs.”

Allegra sat on the bed and tapped the empty space next to her.

Without a word, I sat down next to her and fixed my eyes on the wall.

“How about we talk to her together? I have a feeling you could use a little help.”

“She thinks you’re a whore, Allegra.”

“Am I a whore to you?”

I turned my face to her and couldn’t suppress a grin. “When you sit on the sink with your legs apart and ask me to lick you, yes. Then you are my dirty little bitch.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” she punched me playfully in the upper arm. “Not everyone has what it takes to be a hooker. It requires skill and experience.”

“I absolutely agree with you.”

“Anyway, we digress.”

“If you think there is anything you can do with Maddie that will keep her from causing trouble again, I will gratefully accept your offer.”

“Alright then. My flight to Texas doesn’t leave until the early afternoon anyway. Let’s get dressed and talk to her.”

Chapter 33 - Allegra

Hunter and I went back into the living room, which was directly off the open kitchen. While Hunter sat down on the couch across from Maddie, I stood a little away in front of the window so that the two of them could size each other up. And to digest what Hunter had just confessed to me.

“So, Maddie, what are you doing here? The summer vacation doesn’t start for a week.”

Maddie crossed her arms and glared defiantly at Hunter. “They kicked me out of school.”

“That can’t be true,” groaned Hunter, clapping his hands over his head. “What did you do this time?”

“Nothing at all. I haven’t done anything. That was just a joke but thank you for your obvious trust in me.” Maddie snapped angrily. “A water pipe burst last night and it made all bedrooms uninhabitable. That’s why they sent us home early. How about next time you put me in a modern school instead of some stuffy elitist hellhole?”

“It’s one of the best private schools in the country, Maddie.”

“The place is full of spoiled snobs, standoffish failures and annoying talkers.”

“Sounds like it was made for you.” Hunter replied coolly.

Maddie gasped in disgust, and I decided it was time to step in before the cockfight between the two hotheads escalated.

“Maddie, sorry that you caught us at an inconvenient moment before.” I started and approached the lounge.

“Do you know that my uncle has laid half the women in New York City?” She spat poisonously.

I gave her a sugar-sweet smile. “It has not escaped me that your uncle has a lot of experience. Mainly because he’s really good at it. Perhaps I should thank the women of New York City for helping him perfect his skills given that it’s rewarding me now.”

Maddie stared at me jaw dropped. Apparently, she hadn’t expected that reaction.

Did she think she was the only one who would tell it like it is?

Well, she thought wrong.

Now the lines between us were clear.

“I’m Allegra and I work in the same racing team as your uncle. I’m glad to get to know you.” Invitingly, I held out my hand to Maddie, who took it timidly.

“Your uncle told me that there will be two months of summer vacation from today before your final school year begins?”

“It’s hard to believe that my uncle knows so much about me. He’s not shown any interest before.” Maddie scoffed.

I ignored her snipe. “Have you planned something for the vacation?”

“I booked her a place in summer school so that the tutors can help her work on the areas that need improving and can start preparing her for university applications.”

“I’m not going to university.”

“We already talked about this, Maddie, of course you will study. You can even choose what and where.”

“As long as it pleases you. Law, politics or business administration. That sucks.” Maddie snapped. “I’m eighteen, Byron. I can do what I want.”

“And what do you want to do, Maddie? What is your plan? Hm? Tell me!” Hunter’s voice trembled. “You have no practical experience because you have been thrown out of

every internship and every holiday job that you have had in the last three years.”

Maddie pouted. “I’m working on it. I’m staying in New York for the holidays and I’ll think about it then. Can I have your apartment in Tribeca if you bring your women here now?”

It was the second time Maddie had mentioned the Tribeca second home. What was that all about? I would ask Hunter about it in a quiet moment but first it was necessary to defuse this charged situation.

“You can’t stay in New York alone, Maddie.” He didn’t elaborate on the pointed remark about his affairs.

“And why not?”

“Because I will hardly be here to check on you in the next few weeks.”

“You don’t trust me a bit.” Maddie stated angrily.

“Does that surprise you? After everything you’ve done?”

“Okay, you two. We’re not getting anywhere like this.” I gave Hunter and Maddie the signal to time-out and, to my surprise, they actually fell silent. “In the coming weeks there are a few races where I will need additional staff in the hospitality suite. Why don’t we use Maddie as a waitress? She sees something of the world, you have your eye on her the whole time, and she gets practical experience that will be useful for her university application or whatever she plans to do after school.”

“Service staff? That sounds terrible.” Maddie grumbled.

“Allegra, you have no idea what you’re suggesting. She is unreliable, disrespectful and has never finished a thing that she started in her life.”

“I can hear you, Byron.” Maddie growled.

“I know. That’s why I said it. You won’t last a week. In contrast to the two hundred people who applied for the two

vacancies Allegra mentioned and who would give anything for this opportunity.”

“That’s right, Maddie,” I agreed with Hunter. “We actually have had over two hundred applications from extremely capable, motivated and open-minded young people who would chop off an arm for this position. You don’t often get the chance to travel around the world with one of the most successful racing teams and look after famous guests every day.”

Maddie looked from Hunter to me. The wheels rattled in her head. The spontaneous plan that Hunter and I had just worked out in silent agreement seemed to work.

“I can work hard when I want to.”

“In your dreams.” Chuckled Hunter.

“What do you know? You’re never there and you don’t care at all.” Maddie snapped angrily.

Her accusation made me sit up and take notice. What she said, and more so how she said it, roused maternal instincts that I didn’t even know I had. There was anger in her voice, a lot of anger. But there was something else too: grief and mortification. They mingled with the blind rage that seemed to be bubbling away in a dangerous cocktail of seething emotions, threatening to boil over.

The relationship between Hunter and her was strained, almost shattered. But why? What had happened that made the two of them drift so far apart?

I decided to find out exactly that.

“So you think your uncle is wrong, Maddie? Do you think you have what it takes to be a service staff? It’s a tough job. Long working days, a lot of running around, lots of stress and hectic pace. No walk in the park.”

“I can do it if I want.” Maddie grumbled.

“And do you want to?” I asked.

“Yes.” She mumbled, barely audible.

“I didn’t understand your answer.” I replied.

“Yes.” Maddie announced loudly and clearly in this second attempt.

I clicked my tongue in satisfaction. “Good. As I am the boss of the event team, I am responsible for the service staff so you’ll work for me. If you have no problem with that, pack your suitcase now and fly to Texas with us today. The next race of the season will take place there this weekend. I’ll let you try out and if I like what I see, I will hire you as an intern and you will continue to travel with me.”

I could see an excited glow in Maddie’s eyes, even though she tried to appear indifferent and disinterested.

“Sounds okay. I’m going to pack.”

Chapter 34 - Hunter

I sat with Toni and Simon at a table in the corner of the motorhome and drank my morning coffee. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Allegra enter the motorhome with Maddie at her side and take a seat at one of the free tables. Kenzie, Dakota, Skye, Riley and about ten other members of the team followed shortly afterwards.

“Before we begin today’s briefing, I’d like to introduce you to Maddie. She will support us in service this weekend and possibly also work for the team at the following events.”

The team members greeted Maddie in a friendly manner and told her about their job roles and how long they had worked for *Titan Racing*.

For the first time in a long time, Maddie looked cheerful and open-minded. She had a funny, almost charming manner that I didn’t know about her.

The fact that she apparently felt at home in the team so far took a load off my heart. I was afraid that, as so often in the past, she would behave completely inappropriately. But ever since Allegra took her under her wing after our arrival in Texas yesterday, she seemed to really blossom. I was curious to find out whether this state of mind would last or whether she would soon revert to her usual behavior.

“Maddie will be helping Skye in the motorhome today to get used to the processes and demands of the job. Tomorrow, on Friday, I would like to have her in the hospitality suite.” Allegra informed those present.

Skye nodded and smiled encouragingly at Maddie.

“Good, so that’s settled. Next, let’s discuss today’s schedule.”

When I entered the hotel in the evening, Allegra and the rest of the girls came towards me. I was surprised to find that Maddie was also part of the group. She chatted animatedly with Riley, gesticulating wildly. The two giggled mysteriously and poked each other in the side as if they'd known each other forever and not just for a day.

“Hi.” I casually raised my hand in greeting, so as not to let my irritation show, and tore my gaze away from Maddie.

“We’re going out for the obligatory Texan steak. Would you like to come too?” Kenzie asked cheerfully.

I wondered if it was necessary to accompany the group and make sure Maddie didn’t screw up. But something deep inside gave me confidence that I could trust Allegra. That I knew Maddie was safe with her and that maybe there was nothing wrong with Maddie indulging in some girl time without her feeling like I was watching her.

“That’s nice but I’m out for today.” I said gratefully.

“No problem. Another time then. You still owe us drinks anyway; we haven’t forgotten that.” Kenzie winked at me and walked away with a wave.

As the group followed, I faintly brushed Allegra’s arm and nodded my chin at a quiet alcove not far from the exit.

“Thanks for taking care of Maddie.”

“That goes without saying.”

I shook my head. “No, it doesn’t.”

“She did well today. I am happy with her. Let’s see how she can cope with the increasing pressure over the next few days.”

Lost in thought, I ran my thumb over Allegra’s wrist. “Will I see you later?”

“Gladly.” She whispered and closed her fingers around mine.

“I…”

“Yes?” She looked at me expectantly.

I wanted to tell her that I was very lucky to have her in my life and that I enjoyed every minute I spent with her. Instead, all I managed to say was, “I’ll see you later.”

A flicker went through Allegra’s fawn eyes and I almost thought I read something like disappointment in them. But that was nonsense. Why should she be disappointed? To the best of my knowledge, I hadn’t done anything to trigger such a reaction.

Shortly before eleven o’clock there was a knock on the door. I bounced up from my chair at the desk and opened it.

“Finally.” I gasped and pulled Allegra into a tight hug.

I had no idea why I had kept looking at the time and typing impatiently on my phone for the past few hours. If I didn’t know better, it almost felt like I’d missed being close to Allegra since we left New York yesterday.

I released Allegra from my arms and looked at the door. “I should check on Maddie. In case she secretly sneaks out of the hotel and goes partying alone.”

“To be honest, she almost fell asleep over dinner. I’m pretty sure she’ll spend the rest of her energy brushing her teeth and falling into bed.”

“Do you think so?” I stepped from one foot to the other doubtfully.

“You are afraid that something could happen to her. You’re worried about her.” Allegra smiled amused.

“Nonsense,” I dismissed her claim energetically. “I just don’t want her to cause trouble again. She is extremely talented at that.”

“Why do you think that is the case?”

“What do you mean?” My eyes rested on the sensual woman who snuggled up to me like a cuddly cat.

“Why is she causing trouble? Why is she getting expelled from her boarding schools? From her internships?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I brought her from North Carolina to my home in New York City after her mother’s death. She was so silent, didn’t say a word. Not a tear shed. No emotions. Nothing. At that time, the company was in the midst of expansion. I was out and about a lot and didn’t want to leave Maddie alone in the empty apartment in her condition. She was only fourteen after all. So I sent her to the best boarding school I could find and believed that she would be better off there with girls of the same age and trained staff than with her uncle, who has no idea about children.”

“And then she got kicked out of there?”

I sighed. “Not immediately. The problems only started when she told me over the Christmas break that she would rather live with me in New York City, which for the reasons I mentioned was out of the question. After that it went rapidly downhill. Within three years she has been kicked out of six boarding schools and four internships. Fighting, being rude and constantly running away were almost the order of the day for her.”

“Wow,” Allegra commented. “She’s got a lot of power.”

“I don’t understand how she could slip away from me so much. She had everything she needed for a good life.” I mumbled and kissed Allegra’s head.

“Hmmm,” she murmured thoughtfully. “I have some thoughts about that. But we won’t be able to find out whether I’m right tonight. Let’s postpone this discussion for the time being.”

“Agreed. How about we pick up where we left off yesterday?” I whispered, leaving a trail of hot kisses on Allegra’s neck.

She slipped her hands under my shirt and scratched my back with her long fingernails. “That would be fantastic.” She whispered and let me carry her to the bed.

Chapter 35 - Allegra

It was still dark outside when I dressed quietly, preparing to head back to my room to shower and get ready for the track in peace.

Hunter sat leaning against the headrest of the king size bed and was already busy answering his emails at this ungodly hour.

The man was unbearable.

“I’ll see you later.” I said goodbye as naturally as possible and went to the door.

I hated this part of our deal.

The post-sex part, to be precise. The part when I would like to snuggle up to Hunter and fall asleep in his strong arms. The part where I just wanted to exchange tender, innocent kisses with him. The part where I wanted to whisper to him under the covers that he made me happy when we were together. The part where I couldn’t do any of this because the rules of our deal forbade me.

“Baby, wait a minute,” Hunter called, closing the laptop. “I want to discuss something with you.” He walked up to me and pulled me into the armchair that stood by the window overlooking the illuminated Austin Capitol.

“Our deal is that we will not be held accountable for what we do when we are not together. So basically, it’s none of my business if you sleep with other men.”

I avoided Hunter’s gaze so as not to embarrass myself by admitting that he was the only man who interested me and who was allowed to touch me.

“Would you agree if we change our deal?” Hunter grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him.

“How do you want to change it?”

“I want our deal to be exclusive. That you don’t sleep with any other man and I don’t sleep with any other woman. We only sleep together.”

“Why?” I breathed, hoping fervently that my violently beating heart wouldn’t jump out of my chest with excitement.

“Because I can’t stand the thought that another man is allowed to touch you.” His gaze bored into my eyes at these words, dark and angry. It took almost all my strength to withstand it.

“Why not?”

Hunter took a deep breath. “Don’t make it so difficult for me. I’m not good at this.”

“Not good at what?”

“You already know...”

“No, I do not know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“I like you, Allegra. So much so that I don’t want to share you with anyone. So much so that I’m ready to change all the rules for you.”

“You want to change the rules?”

“Together with you, yes. Let’s make new rules together.”

“What if I don’t want any rules? What if I just want to be with you? What if I want to be loved by you? Not just physically, but also with your heart.” I didn’t know who looked more shocked at my unplanned confession, Hunter or me.

Me, because I had no idea where I suddenly found the courage to confess my true feelings to him.

Or he, because...

I stopped. Because what? Why did Hunter have such a shocked expression? Was he shocked because he felt the same way? Or because he didn’t feel that way?

“I don’t think I’m suitable for a relationship, baby.” He broke the crushing silence between us.

“We won’t know until we try it out.” I desperately clung to the tiny blade of hope that remained.

Hunter pressed his lips together and looked at a fixed point on the door. “What if I fail at that too? Like with my relationship with Maddie? If I can’t even build a friendly relationship with a teenager, how am I supposed to make you happy?”

I pushed myself into Hunter’s field of vision and ran my fingers over his cheek. “You’ve been doing that for a long time. I am happy when I am with you. So incredibly happy.”

Hunter stroked my back in silence. “You deserve a gentleman, Allegra. And you know that I’m the opposite.”

I jumped off his lap and let out a resigned breath. It felt like all the energy and air was escaping my body.

So here was the answer to the question I hadn’t dared ask for weeks. I’d imagined this conversation in my mind so many times that I thought it couldn’t be as bad as in real life.

But no.

This was worse.

Much worse.

“I decide for myself what I deserve and what I don’t, Hunter. But I will not force myself on you. Apparently, my feelings for you are stronger than what you feel for me. If you feel anything for me at all. That hurts, but at least now I know for sure.”

I looked at my watch and tried to blink away the tears that were gathering in my eyes. Trying to be strong, to retain my last grain of honor, but it was so darn hard.

“I have to go. I’ll see you this weekend.” I said, remarkably composed.

Hunter didn’t reply. Not a word. No sound. No contradiction.

It was so quiet in the room that I thought I heard my heart break when I opened the door and left the room in which I'd been so happy just an hour ago.

How quickly the tides turn in life...

"You are very quiet today." Dakota stood next to me in the hospitality suite and eyed me suspiciously from the side.

"I did not sleep well."

"Because you rolled in the sheets with him last night or because you didn't roll in the sheets with him?"

"Where did you get the idea that he has something to do with it?"

Although we didn't say Hunter's name, we both knew who "he" meant.

Dakota shrugged. "Maybe because the melancholy expression he had at our sponsors' meeting this morning looks just like yours."

I watched Maddie skillfully balance a tray of champagne flutes and hand out the sparkling drinks to the guests with a beaming smile.

The transformation she had made in the past forty-eight hours amazed me. Maddie was like a different person: hard-working, inquisitive and helpful.

The angry, defiant, and unhappy teenager from New York had transformed into a pretty, lovable, and humorous young woman.

"What do you think of her?" I asked Dakota, raising my chin towards Maddie to change the subject.

I didn't want to think about Hunter and me, let alone talk about us.

"She's doing well, trying hard. Speaks to the guests in a friendly manner. Is she one of the summer interns?"

“Yes, she is.”

“But shouldn’t they only be there from the next race?”

“She is a special case.”

“Which means?”

“She is Hunter, so Byron’s, niece.”

“Really?”

When I didn’t go into the details, Dakota poked me in the side. “Are you going to let me die of curiosity or will you tell me what this is all about before I spontaneously combust?”

“Her mother was Hunter’s sister. She died a few years ago. Hunter has been taking care of Maddie ever since. She goes to a boarding school, but there was water damage there and since Hunter didn’t know what to do with her, I hired her as a probationary intern.”

“Really?”

“You’re repeating yourself, Dakota.”

“Do I also repeat myself when I tell you that I want to cut the bastard’s throat? What do you think? Nice, slow and bloody?” Riley had joined us unnoticed and was typing vigorously on her phone.

Dante regularly drove her to fury. Today was apparently no exception.

“Did you forget you can’t stand the sight of blood, Riley?” Grinned Dakota.

“I could stand his, believe me,” she replied, annoyed. “But I don’t want to waste another word on this idiot. Instead you better tell me the latest gossip I need to know.”

“Maddie, our probationary intern, is Byron’s niece. She’s the daughter of his late sister.” Dakota babbled on.

“No!” Riley exclaimed.

“Yes. He is her guardian.”

“Wow! That sweet, innocent creature lives with *The King*?”

“She is attending boarding school.” Dakota informed her.

Riley grimaced in disgust. “Why am I not surprised? Deporting children is easier than dealing with them.”

Dakota and I made no reply to her pointed comment. Because like Maddie, Riley had spent her youth in boarding school. A time she was reluctant to talk about. Riley’s parents had been too preoccupied with their political careers to give their daughter the love she deserved and needed so badly at the time. This pain haunted her to this day.

“To be honest, she didn’t seem cute or innocent when I met her in New York. She was more angry, defiant and aggressive. I don’t understand why she’s suddenly trying so hard. I was actually expecting her to cause trouble.”

“For once I am ignoring the question of why you met Maddie in New York and especially *where* you met her in New York, since I already know the answer to that. Remember, Aunt Riley sees everything. Even the invisible, as you know. But that doesn’t mean that the subject is off the table, understood?” She gave me her infamous This-Is-Not-Over look, which made even the seasoned journalists trembled.

“Got it.” I peeped, caught.

“Angry, defiant and aggressive, you say?”

“Yes, it almost seemed to me as if she hated Byron the way she fought him in New York. And now look at her. She works so hard as if this was her life and not a test job. It’s completely illogical.”

Riley shook her head. “It’s not illogical. Not a bit.”

Dakota and I raised our eyebrows in surprise and eyed Riley with interest.

“It’s not?”

“No, it is not. She doesn’t hate him, Allegra. What she hates is that he doesn’t give her the attention she wants. And she doesn’t fight *against* him. She fights for him. She fights for his love, more precisely for his affection. That is why she’s

trying so hard here. She wants to keep the job because it's her only chance to be close to Byron and to secure his affection."

I stared at my friend in disbelief.

"Well don't look so surprised. I know what's going on with Maddie because I've lived it myself."

Before I could dig any further, a guest tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to join the group at the table to talk about the results of the second practice, which ended ten minutes ago.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Riley answer a call and disappear. The conversation with her would have to wait.

Chapter 36 - Hunter

“Have a seat, Riley.” I pointed to the chair across from me and waited for Riley to sit before continuing.

“How are you?”

“You never ask me how I am. What’s wrong?” She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“I can’t ask about your well-being without having ulterior motives?” Although I tried to sound unimpressed, I couldn’t help but grin in amusement. Riley was too astute for her own good.

“Maybe. But you don’t. You’re too busy for that. So, what’s up?”

“How are the other girls?” I asked vaguely, not wanting to burst the bomb before Toni had joined us.

“By the other girls do you mean Allegra? Or Maddie? Or both?” She whistled innocently.

“Is there a particular reason you mention those two girls, Riley?”

“Should there be a reason?”

“You tell me.”

“If you want to know how Maddie is doing, you should ask her, Byron. The same goes for Allegra. As a team manager, you have your hands full of course, but you must set priorities in life. You alone decide who or what qualifies as a priority.”

I eyed her in silence and thought about her words for a moment.

“Why is Riley so peaceful?” Toni winked at me as he sat down with us.

“Why shouldn’t I be peaceful? I am always very zen.” Riley countered, tilting her head to one side.

“Of course,” Toni scoffed. “So you haven’t told her yet, Byron?”

“Told me what?” Riley jumped up from her chair as if stung by a bee and clenched her hands tightly into fists.

“I thought you wouldn’t want to miss the show.” I announced, unable to hide the ironic undertone in my voice.

“How nice of you,” Toni chuckled. “I think you are afraid that Riley will break your neck and wanted to wait for reinforcements to be on the safe side.”

“If that was the case, I would have rounded up all the mechanics, because you alone will hardly be able to tear her away from me when I tell her the news.” I joked.

“Okay, that’s enough. I want to know right now what is going on here.”

“Juan told us he is finishing his career. Not at the end of the season, but with immediate effect. During the accident in Montreal, he realized that his life is no longer just about himself. If he dies, he leaves behind a little daughter who would never get the chance to meet her father. She would never know how much her father loves her and how proud she makes him. With this paralyzing fear, he no longer feels able to get into the cockpit and risk his life to win.” Toni summarized the almost two-hour long telephone conversation with Juan in short sentences.

“But...” Riley broke off and swallowed. “But if Juan stops, that means...”

“... that Dante moves up to become a regular driver.” Toni finished the sentence for her.

“Oh my god,” Riley sank limp into the chair. “You’re just teasing me, right? This is a bad joke, isn’t it? Toni, please pinch me. I have to wake up from this terrible nightmare as soon as possible.”

“No joke and no nightmare.” I assured her.

“That’s too much. I need some fresh air.” Riley croaked and disappeared from my office without another word.

“That went better than I expected. She didn’t physically attack either of us.” Toni smiled.

“Who says she won’t get a Kalashnikov right now and shoot us all down?”

Toni laughed and left my office shaking his head.

I was left alone and finally allowed myself to take off the poker face I had been wearing since the phone call with Juan, so as not to show anyone how much this situation really bothered me.

I didn’t mean the consequences that Juan’s immediate retirement would have for the team, but rather Juan’s remarks about death, missed opportunities and lost time.

I knew exactly how he felt and the demons he was fighting against.

My sister and I grew up in a shabby home and then with loveless foster families in North Carolina. We never got to know our birth parents. We had nothing but each other. At eighteen, thanks to a scholarship for gifted orphans, I made the leap out of the shithole we lived in and moved to New York City to study. Six months after I moved, Hazel, in a desperate search for love and a better home, got pregnant by a married man who kept promising her he’d leave his wife, only to ditch Hazel when he found out that she was pregnant.

I was plagued by a terribly guilty conscience because I left Hazel alone and was thus, to a certain extent, partly responsible for her situation. But Hazel didn’t want to hear it. She insisted that I keep studying and go my own way.

Before I graduated, I founded my first company with two college friends and an investment from Matteo Leone’s family. I was making good money pretty quickly and wanted

to bring my twin sister over to me. But Hazel refused to move to New York. She stayed in North Carolina and got by with her job as a cashier at the grocery store. She didn't want my money or my support. Hazel was too proud and too bitter to admit she needed help.

Over the years our contact decreased, and we drifted further and further apart. Still, I kept a close eye on her and her daughter, Madison.

At least that's what I thought.

I supported them financially without their noticing and made sure that they could lead a reasonably safe and secure life. Until the day I learned that Hazel had died from not taking good enough care of her health, because I didn't pay enough attention to her.

The Ashertown police called me, Hazel's only living relative, on a snowy January evening to inform me that my sister had died while at work. It was discovered later that she had been sick but carried on working anyway. The exhaustion had damaged her heart and led to a sudden heart attack.

In a daze, incapable of feeling anything, I'd got on the jet to North Carolina, picked up my sister's belongings from the hospital, organized the funeral, and closed the house. And then there was this scared girl too old to be a kid and too young to be called an adult. She had stared at me with wide eyes, no longer understanding the cruel world in which she lived.

The lady from the youth welfare office had come to us and asked me whether I wanted to put Maddie in a home or take her in with me. Without hesitation, I applied for guardianship and took Maddie with me to New York, only to find that I was overwhelmed with all of this and had no idea how to comfort this girl when I was beside myself with my own grief and guilt.

I had told myself that a first-class boarding school could give her the care she needed. That she would get over her grief better with girls of the same age, an impressive array of sports and recreational activities, and a safe, stable

environment in the rural Hudson Valley. That I could give her a bright future full of prospects and she could shape her life in any way she liked. That I would keep her from working herself to death like her mother had done. I was convinced that I'd given Maddie everything she needed to have a good life. But after Juan's call, I wondered if that was actually enough.

Chapter 37 – Allegra

“Hello Allegra.”

When Hunter’s voice rang out from behind me, I closed my eyes for a short moment to stop the overflowing emotions he aroused in me.

As calmly as possible, I turned to him. “What brings you here?”

Hunter usually never came into the hospitality suite. He stayed almost exclusively in the paddock, in the motorhome, in the pits or on the pit wall. As such, I was surprised by his visit.

I had avoided him since leaving his room in a hurry on Friday morning, and since the Texas Grand Prix kept us all busy, it turned out to be easier than I first thought.

In addition, Hunter had already informed me a few weeks ago that all employees of the team would keep their positions until the end of the next season. Another reason not to cling on to him any longer as I’d got what I wanted. At least on one point.

I tried to ignore my heart, which yearned for Hunter, and forbade my lustful body to want him. Without success.

“I wanted to check on Maddie before the rush of race day starts. How is she doing?”

Today was Maddie’s fourth and most stressful day at the track so far. On a Sunday race day, our hands were always full.

“See for yourself.” With a nod, I pointed to Maddie, who, together with my receptionist, welcomed the guests and gave the impression that she had been working in guest relations for years.

“Maybe you want to go over and talk to her?” I dared to venture. “She would definitely like that.”

“I don’t want to disturb them at work.” Hunter hurried to say.

“You won’t disturb them. The guests can do without them for a minute.”

“What does Riley actually know?”

I looked at Hunter with a confused expression. “How do you mean?”

“Does she know that we sleep together? And does she know who Maddie is?”

“Yes.” I replied curtly.

“I would have preferred that no one knew Maddie’s true identity.”

“Because you are ashamed of her?”

“No. Because I want to protect her. I don’t want her to be accused of being favored just because she is my niece.”

“Don’t worry about that. Maddie is doing her best. Nobody questions her diligence and her will to prove herself. She does everything to make you look good. To meet your expectations.”

“I have absolutely no expectations of her.” Hunter stated emphatically.

“Because you’re too busy wondering when she’ll screw up next?”

“Is that so unfair?”

“No, it is not. But you might be surprised if you gave her a chance to prove to you that she can do it differently if she wants to.”

“*If she wants.* That’s the point. I have no idea what she wants and why she’s suddenly so committed.”

“You know, Hunter, maybe she is just a girl who wants to be loved by you because there is nobody else in this world

who loves her. Have you ever thought about that?”

Hunter’s face dropped as if I had just revealed to him that John F. Kennedy was still alive and would be one of our guests today, together with Elvis Presley.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again he had regained his composure. “Are you satisfied with Maddie’s performance?”

“Yes, very much so. I want her to work for us at the next races as well.”

“If you are sure about that, then I agree.”

I nodded and turned to go, but Hunter held on to me. “What about us?” His voice was little more than a low whisper.

“What about us, Hunter?”

“When will we meet again? I have to go back to New York after the race, but how about in Mexico next week?”

“Leave Maddie with me and the girls if you want to. She can fly to Mexico with us on Tuesday. We can use every helping hand to prepare for the Mexico City Grand Prix.”

“You did not answer my question, Allegra.”

I pressed my lips together and blinked away the tell-tale tears. “You know I have feelings for you, Hunter. Sex with you is no longer enough for me. I want all of you or nothing at all, do you understand? I want everything from you. I want to fall asleep with you, wake up with you, talk to you about my day, laugh with you, cry with you. I can no longer pretend I just want to sleep with you. That’ll break me.”

“Allegra, I...” Hunter didn’t go on.

“I know my feelings are one-sided and I don’t blame you. You never gave me false hopes, Hunter. The rules of your game were clear and I accepted them. The basic rule of the game was no feelings, but how am I supposed to continue playing your game when I’ve broken the key rule?”

“Do you want to end it?”

“Do I have a choice?”

The ringing of Hunter’s phone broke the silence and denied me an answer to my question.

Chapter 38 - Hunter

July had passed me by without a trace of summer mood. Since Allegra announced the end of our affair in Austin four weeks ago, our contact had been limited to business matters. And Maddie.

Maddie hadn't received any negative feedback in the past month. On the contrary, even Toni had praised her zeal.

I owed this mainly to Allegra and her friends because they took a lot of time with Maddie and treated her not like a teenager, but like one of them. Although Allegra always asserted that they did it simply because Maddie was a talented employee to be nurtured, I knew they had secretly taken the tough girl with the hard shell and the soft core to their hearts.

Her remark that Maddie might just want to be loved by me because no one else in the world did, had shaken me up.

Maddie fared like Hazel and I when we were kids. The only difference was that Hazel and I had each other and therefore didn't feel completely alone. Maddie, on the other hand, must have believed since Hazel's death that she was completely alone in this world. Without anyone to love her. Without anyone to care about her.

Of course, that wasn't true because Maddie was the apple of my eye. But I couldn't blame her for thinking like that. Because I never told her I loved her. I never showed her.

Why? Because I didn't know how to.

How do you know how love works if you have never been loved yourself? Hazel and I had loved each other without knowing what love meant. We had taken care of each other and comforted each other. As twin siblings, we knew what we meant to one another through our inner connection. It had never been necessary to say it out loud. But unlike Hazel, Maddie couldn't have known that I loved her.

I should have told her when she needed someone to love her so badly. Someone to comfort her. To give her courage. Over and over again.

Ever since Allegra opened my eyes to this, I tried to make it up to Maddie.

After today's Grand Prix in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the summer break would begin. The next Grand Prix would take place in three weeks, which meant all team employees in the *Serie del Rey* would take two weeks' vacation.

I found out from Kenzie that Allegra would leave for Capri today.

Since *Titan Racing* was able to achieve solid results with Tom and Dante in the previous races, we were in the fight for the world championship title together with *Racing Rosso*.

The *Roaring Bulls* had fallen behind in the constructors' championship due to an accident and an engine failure and, at least for the moment, were no longer any direct competition. One less thing to worry about.

Maddie and I had dinner together last night. We'd been hanging out together now on a regular basis and, to my delight, each time we managed to have more of a normal conversation.

Maddie had expressed the wish to go to the seaside for a few days during the summer break, as she had never lain on a beach and sunbathed in all her eighteen years. This realization shocked me and reminded me painfully of my own childhood.

My sister and I were denied what was normal for most children: new clothes when we had outgrown the old ones, presents for our birthdays or for Christmas, a sandwich with Nutella or a trip to the seaside.

Maddie shouldn't be wanting for anything. I swore that to myself when I found out about Hazel's pregnancy and that hadn't changed in all these years. I would grant her this wish

and take her for a long weekend to Cape Cod, 250 miles away from Manhattan.

But first we had to complete the last race before the summer break began later today.

Dante started the race from second position, immediately ahead of Tom, who had secured third place on the grid. It was definitely possible to get the victory if our strategy worked.

As there had been repeated armed robberies and incidents on the way from the team hotels to the racetrack in Sao Paulo in the previous years, the team had rented armored SUVs with tinted windows, which were driven by trained security guards.

There was space for ten people in each car: the driver, an additional bodyguard in the passenger seat and eight team members. The SUVs usually drove in a column, one behind the other, with a police escort, which made a robbery difficult.

Today, I went to the racetrack with Maddie and Allegra's closest colleagues.

Kenzie and Riley sat in front of us. Allegra sat in a row with Maddie and me. Behind us were Skye, Dakota, and another intern.

Allegra and I had Maddie between us. Not because we used her as a buffer but rather to be able to better protect her in the event of an incident.

An incident I hoped would never occur.

Against all hope, however, that Sunday morning, a few minutes after we left the team hotel, exactly that happened.

Our SUV was at the back of the motorcade. An inconspicuous police escort in the form of two motorcycles followed us.

Then everything ensued very quickly.

I heard the pounding sound of machine guns, and when I looked over my shoulder, I saw four hooded men on motorcycles, dressed all in black, had gunned down the

policemen. With one hand they steered their bikes in the direction of our car. In the other hand they held an AK-47, which they aimed at the car.

“We’re being attacked,” I shouted, alarmed. “Four men on motorcycles. Behind us. Everyone down immediately.”

Startled screams mixed with frightened whimpers.

I threw myself over Maddie and reflexively grabbed Allegra’s hand. “Have no fear. Nothing will happen to us.” I whispered to the two women whom I wanted to protect at all costs at this moment.

“I don’t want to die,” Maddie cried. “We wanted to see the sea together. I can’t die without ever having been to the sea.”

Allegra reached for Maddie with her free hand and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “You won’t die, I promise. Your uncle is right, nothing will happen to us. No machine gun in the world can break through this car. You will see, it’ll be over in no time.”

Maddie began to breathe frantically, and I realized she was about to have a panic attack.

“Hey Maddie, have I misheard, or have you actually never been to the seaside?”

Allegra’s voice sounded calm and reassuring, as if she was having a coffee and chatting instead of being chased by four armed guys on motorcycles through Sao Paulo. The only way to tell that she was afraid was the trembling hand that was clutching mine.

“I’ve never been to the ocean,” Maddie sniffed. “But I would love to see it and swim in it. New York and the Hudson River don’t count.”

“I’m flying to visit my family in Capri this evening. It’s an island in southern Italy. Your uncle has also been to Capri. Last year. It’s really nice there. Azure blue sky, turquoise water, fragrant lemons and oranges, fantastic food and over thirty degrees with twelve hours of sunshine every day.”

“That sounds like paradise.”

Allegra laughed. She laughed!

My admiration for this woman rose to an all-time high.

“It is paradise on earth.”

“I would like to see that.”

“Well, that’s simple. You have two weeks’ vacation just like me. Why don’t you visit me in Capri? I’m staying with my sister. Their place has more rooms than our team hotel, so you could live with us without any problems.”

“Really?” Maddie’s trembling voice and gasp had given way to a euphoric whisper.

“Really!”

“Byron, may I fly to visit Allegra in Capri?”

Her fear of death seemed blown away in that tiny moment of excitement.

“Of course you can.” I promised Maddie and squeezed Allegra’s hand a little tighter.

I would have allowed Maddie to tattoo every inch of her body in bright colors at that moment if it helped her physically and mentally survive this attack unscathed.

I’d never experienced the paralyzing fear of losing a loved one like in those minutes when the car was racing through the city at top speed and the security guards tensely radioed for reinforcements and the police. This fear, multiplied by two, was almost unbearable. That’s because next to me sat two people whom I didn’t want to lose under any circumstances. Two people I loved dearly.

“The police are surrounding them! We’ve got rid of them and the circuit gate is in front of us.” Announced the bodyguard from the passenger seat.

The car passed the security gate and all occupants breathed audibly.

The danger was averted.

The people I loved so much were safe.

Chapter 39 - Allegra

It had been three days since the incident in Brazil, which had given us all a bit of a shock.

The day, as terrible as it began, took a pleasant turn within hours because Dante and Tom had achieved a one-two result. It meant *Titan Racing* went into the summer break with a comfortable lead in the world championship.

As a result, the terrible incident took a back seat and at the end of the day felt more like a bad dream than a real event. The team members said goodbye for the holidays in a celebratory mood and I, too, concentrated on the relaxing two weeks that lay ahead of me, instead of the previous weeks which had noticeably sapped my nerves.

Now I was waiting with my sister, Carlotta, at the port of Capri for the ferry from the mainland to dock. It was bringing across Maddie after her arrival in Naples.

Hunter had kept his promise and allowed Maddie to visit me on Capri.

“How about a large ice cream?” Suggested Carlotta and pulled me in the direction of the ice cream parlor, a light blue painted house on the busy promenade.

We ordered two strawberry gelatos, sat down on the soft sand on the beach and quietly watched the colorful fishing boats in front of us swaying gently in the waves.

Today was one of those days when I could hardly believe that Capri was a real place and not a product of my imagination. The cloudless sky seemed endless. Lush green shrubs and bushes adorned the rugged cliffs of the hilly island. The water of the sea shone so turquoise that even the islands of the Caribbean would turn green with envy.

I took off my shoes and waded into the refreshing water to cool off from the heat of the bright sun.

Little green fish swam around my feet. The water was crystal clear so I could see to the bottom.

Capri was a place of longing. A place where you could relax and enjoy life. In Capri it seemed effortless to understand how precious life was and to enjoy it anew every day.

“I think she’s coming.” Carlotta called from behind me and pointed to the blue and white ferry that was approaching the island at a rapid pace.

We went to the pier and waved to Maddie as she impatiently jumped off the ferry and turned enthusiastically in circles.

“You haven’t exaggerated! This is paradise on earth! I’ve never seen anything so wonderful, so beautiful! Can I stay here forever?”

It took a few minutes until Maddie had calmed down enough that I could introduce her to Carlotta, who drew her warmly into her arms and we got into the car that took us to the Leone family home.

“I thought my uncle was rich but compared to the Leone family he is as poor as a church mouse.” Maddie marveled as we drove into the driveway of the ostentatious property.

Matteo strolled over to us from the terrace, greeted Maddie and kissed his wife so deeply it was like he hadn’t seen her in years. We were only gone an hour.

Leonardo and Giorgia also joined us holding hands.

At the sight of so much boundless love, my heart was heavy in my chest and I felt guilty immediately. I should be happy for Carlotta and Giorgia, and how incredibly content they were. Both had to fight hard for their happiness. It had been an eventful year, especially for Giorgia. Still, it made me painfully aware that the person I wanted to be hugged and kissed by was not reciprocating my feelings.

Before Maddie's arrival in Capri, I secretly hoped that Hunter would come with her and surprise me. Since the incident in Brazil, I had longed so badly for his protective, strong arms that it hurt physically.

But Hunter hadn't come.

Maddie had said while driving from the harbor to Villa Leone that he was working on a large project in New York and that he could not tear himself away.

The fact that he possibly used the teenager free apartment during Maddie's visit to Capri to have fun with other women tore an even deeper wound in my already battered heart.

"Earth to Allegra! Did you hear a word of what I just said?" Leonardo looked at me reproachfully.

"Sorry. I was distracted." I protested, gritting my teeth.

Carlotta gave me a pitying look and discreetly formed a heart with her hands.

Chapter 40 – Hunter

“Not so fast, Maddie! Otherwise, I won’t even understand half of what you’re saying.” I laughed at the eagerness with which Maddie told me about her stay in Italy on the phone.

She had been in Capri for three days and seemed to be very comfortable with the Leone family. I had never seen her so happy and balanced before.

Perhaps these were Maddie’s first truly carefree days since her mother’s death. The thought that I wasn’t there, and that I was on a different continent to her, made me wistful.

“Giorgia lent me her Vespa because Leonardo doesn’t want her to ride it in her condition. So I rushed to the chairlift in Anacapri on the Vespa and was on Monte Solaro ahead of all the tourists! You don’t believe what an incredible view you have from up there. The Faraglioni rocks look very small, although they are actually huge!” Maddie chattered without taking a breath. “Today I’m visiting a hidden bay with Allegra, Carlotta and Giorgia, where, according to Matteo, there are even dolphins.”

“That sounds fantastic. Send me a photo of the dolphins if you see any. How is Matteo?”

“You should ask how Allegra is doing.”

“Maddie...”

“What? I know you like her. You should be here with us.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’s not? She likes you and you like her. Yet she is here, and you are in New York. It’s pretty obvious to me that you’re in the wrong place.”

“I have to work, Maddie. I’m sure at some point in the future we will all spend time together.”

“Mum always put me off with work when I asked her if we were going to do something together. And then she was dead overnight. Just like that. Gone. Forever.”

There was an embarrassed silence over the phone.

“All I have left of Mum are the memories of the time together. And even if I were the richest person on the planet, I couldn’t buy more memories with her because money can’t bring someone back.”

I was silent and thought about her words.

“Life is not for sale, Byron. For anyone. Not even for you.”

I couldn’t disagree with her arguments. I hadn’t noticed that my niece was a little thinker. I had missed so much about her...

“We should talk again about your studies. Harvard has an excellent philosophy faculty.” I steered the conversation in a direction that I knew would distract Maddie.

My plan worked because she snorted indignantly.

“Under no circumstances! What am I supposed to do with those nerds?” Maddie exclaimed indignantly.

Over the phone I heard a knock on Maddie’s door, which she answered with “Come in”.

“We want to go right away. Are you ready?”

Allegra.

At the sound of her voice, my heart contracted with longing.

“I’m on the phone with my uncle, but we’ve said everything there is to say anyway. Do you want to say hello to him?”

“I...”

“Here please. I have to quickly find my beach bag.”

I heard Maddie giggle. Then a door opened and was closed again shortly afterwards.

“Hello Hunter.” Allegra cleared her throat on the phone.

“Hi. How are you?” I tried to be casual.

“I’m fine, thanks. And you?”

“I’m good.”

This stilted conversation between us hurt my soul. We talked like two strangers. But I didn’t want to be a stranger to Allegra. I didn’t want her to talk to me like someone who asked her directions. I wanted her to talk to me like I was the only man in the world that interested her.

That our relationship was so complicated was entirely my fault. I had pushed her away because I was unable to talk to anyone about my feelings and my demons.

But she wasn’t just anyone. She was so much more than that. So much more that it took my breath away when she was not with me. Because she was the air I needed to breathe. The air without which I couldn’t survive in the long run.

I had come to this realization during the hell ride through Sao Paulo. The cold fear of losing her forever, which I had felt in those excruciatingly long minutes, was still in my bones.

One sentence from Don Mario’s poignant wedding speech had crossed my mind during the rough ride through Sao Paulo; *we usually only recognize great love when we have lost it.*

It was only at that moment of life and death that I realized how right he was.

“I’d better help Maddie find her bag. Carlotta and Giorgia are already waiting. Take care of yourself, Hunter.”

“You too, Allegra.” My longing for her got the better of me and I added quietly, “I miss you.” The monotonous whining on the other end of the line told me that she had not heard my confession.

Chapter 41 - Allegra

We spent the day on the mainland. In the morning we walked through the dreamy village of Positano, built into the hill. Maddie admired the pastel-colored houses and the winding streets that made this almost unreal place so special.

After a big lunch, we took the bus to the sleepy mountain village of Ravello in the early afternoon to pay my grandparents a visit.

Due to her condition, Giorgia had stayed in Capri with Leonardo, so only Carlotta, Maddie and I had set off for Positano. Matteo had accompanied us to the mainland, but then drove on to a business appointment.

Now we sat in the shade of a gnarled, old olive tree in my grandparents' restaurant garden and looked at the dark blue waves with the white sea caps that washed up on the beach deep below us.

The last of the lunchtime guests left a quarter of an hour ago, satisfied and full, so that we didn't have to share the garden with anyone.

Maddie and my grandmother had picked oranges and lemons from the lushly draped trees, and Maddie was now in the kitchen learning how to turn this wonderfully fragrant fruit into a refreshing cocktail.

That gave Carlotta and I the opportunity to talk in peace.

"Maddie is an amazing girl."

"Yes, she is. When I met her six weeks ago, she was so full of anger and pain. And now look at her. It's hard to believe how much a little love, attention and understanding can do."

"Riley, you and the girls did a really good job. How did you do that?"

I shrugged my shoulders. “We helped her find her lost self-esteem and encouraged her. She thought for all these years that Hunter didn’t want her in his life. That she was a burden for him.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Of course that’s nonsense. But tell that to a frightened girl who suddenly loses her only caregiver and shortly afterwards finds herself completely alone in a boarding school where she doesn’t know anyone.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Hunter probably thought she would be better off there than with him. Trained therapists and girls of the same age instead of an uncle unable to talk about his feelings. Big meadows and green forests instead of permanent city noise and bad air. Trained ‘around the clock support’ instead of a career-obsessed person who is never at home.”

“Does Maddie have no other family besides Hunter that wanted to take her in?”

I shook my head. “Hazel, Maddie’s late mother, and Hunter are orphans. They grew up in a home and with foster parents. I don’t know the details. In retrospect, however, I think Hunter has been struggling a lot with his past. I think he was never allowed to experience love or affection. Maybe that’s why he’s so careful to keep everyone around him at a distance. Feelings overwhelm him because he cannot control them.”

“You’ve really thought a lot about Hunter and Maddie.” Carlotta stated and stroked her rounded stomach thoughtfully.

“Riley and I had long conversations with Maddie and I think that helped her understand Hunter’s motivations. The relationship between the two of them has been completely different since she started traveling with us to the races. Hunter has concentrated on it and spent a lot of time with her. I’m not sure what exactly changed his mind, but he tries extremely hard to show her that she is important to him.”

“What about you and Hunter? Are you sure that he doesn’t reciprocate your feelings?”

“He had so many opportunities to tell me that he felt something for me too, Carlotta. But he didn’t. Not a word. He accepted my decision to end our affair without a word.”

“Just because he doesn’t say anything doesn’t mean that he doesn’t feel anything. Less than two minutes ago you told me that he cannot talk about his feelings and that he may not even be able to understand what he feels because it is new territory for him.”

“I know.” I admitted gritting my teeth.

“If you know for sure that he can’t, why do you expect him to anyway? That doesn’t seem fair or logical to me.”

I stared at Carlotta as if she had just reinvented the theory of relativity.

She was right.

She was absolutely right.

“But if he can’t tell me how he feels about me, how will I know what’s going on between us? How am I ever supposed to make sense of him?”

“Let him show you his feelings, Allegra. Don’t pay so much attention to what he says or rather, what he doesn’t say. Pay attention to what he is doing. To what he does for you. You can’t only express feelings through words, you can also *show* them through your actions. In many ways.”

Chapter 42 – Hunter

The conversation with Maddie and the arduous exchange of words with Allegra kept me busy all day. Instead of focusing on my work, my gaze wandered again and again to the floor-to-ceiling windows and the high-rise skyscrapers behind it.

Life is not for sale, Byron. For anyone. Not even for you.

That sentence had inexplicably burned itself into my brain.

Maddie's voice constantly echoed through my thoughts, accompanied me through the day, never letting go.

When dusk fell, I threw my pen on the desk in frustration and did something completely out of character. I took a vacation.

The first real vacation in four years.

Not just a long weekend where I still worked on all my emails.

No, I instructed my assistant to cancel all appointments for the coming week because I would take the jet to Italy tomorrow.

Without my computer.

You didn't need a computer for what I wanted to do in Italy.

When I arrived at Villa Leone in Capri the following afternoon, the housekeeper Cosima greeted me. I had called Matteo, who said my trip was "about time" and insisted that I should stay in the luxurious Villa Leone like Allegra and Maddie.

Matteo had gone to the mainland that morning with Carlotta, Maddie and Allegra, where he attended business appointments, while the three women visited Positano and Ravello. They would be back by evening.

I asked Matteo not to tell Allegra or Maddie about my visit. Instead, I was relying on the element of surprise and hoped that by that time, I would find the courage to face Allegra and tell her that I wanted to be with her.

After Cosima showed me to my room and I had taken a cooling shower from the August heat, I decided to stretch my legs around the spacious property. Maybe if I took a walk I could sort my thoughts and come up with a reasonably understandable justification for Allegra that made it clear why I couldn't talk about my feelings.

I strolled aimlessly through the endless rows of the Leone vineyard without noticing where I was going. At some point the vineyard ended. In front of me were the steep cliffs that fell almost vertically into the rushing sea, which broke against the rocks far below the Leone fortress. Seagulls circled in the sky and the rays of the afternoon sun made thousands of glittering diamonds dance on the surface of the water.

Don Mario, the head of the Leone family and grandfather of Matteo and Leonardo, sat on an old wooden bench in front of me. He had closed his eyes and rested both hands on the stick he was holding between his knees. As always, he wore a flawless three-piece suit, and looked elegant and powerful even in these sweaty temperatures.

Careful not to disturb him in his afternoon rest, I quietly withdrew.

“Hunter. Nice that you came, my boy.” Don Mario opened his eyes and looked straight at me.

It was a mystery to me how he could have noticed me with his eyes closed. But Don Mario had not ruled for decades as the head of one of the most important Mafia families in southern Italy for nothing.

“Sit down with me.” Although he smiled pleasantly, his voice brooked no contradiction.

Reluctantly, I complied with his request. Because I had been friends with Matteo for fifteen years, I had also met Don Mario on various occasions, but this was the first time we spoke alone.

For a while we sat side by side in silence and looked out at the deep blue sea. The sailing boats, which in the distance looked more like splashes of color than actual boats, moved away on the horizon towards the mainland and heralded the end of another summer day.

“Thank you for letting Maddie spend her vacation here.” I finally managed when I couldn’t stand the silence between us any longer.

“She is a nice girl. A real whirlwind.”

“Like her mother when she was young.” I sighed lost in thought.

“Is that why you couldn’t bear to have her around you?”

I peeked at Don Mario, who was still staring at the sea.

“Maddie is so much like her. She reminds me of Hazel every second.”

“And the fact that Hazel has passed.” Said Don Mario.

“I let her down.” I whispered.

“Who? Hazel or Maddie?”

“Both. I failed with Hazel and Maddie.” Saying out loud what I had been carrying around for years made my throat constrict.

“Maddie is a lovable young lady who is good-natured and has an enviable temperament. It may be that in the past four years you haven’t been able to give her the love and attention you think she needed, but sometimes we do our best and that’s still not enough. We’re fallible, Hunter. That makes us human.”

“I should have been there for her instead of sending her away...”

“How are you going to be there for another person when your own pain eats you up?”

“I am the adult. I should have had the strength to deal with it and take care of Maddie.”

“Hunter. You took care of Maddie in the best way you knew how. When Hazel died, the only person you thought had ever loved you was suddenly gone. Forever. From one moment to the next you were completely alone in this world. You felt responsible for her death, even though you are not to blame. It is understandable that it took you time to get over this. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“But Maddie...”

“You have the rest of your life to make up for lost time with her. What are four years? Look at Matteo. He threw away twelve years with the love of his life. A full twelve years. But instead of crying after this lost time, he and Carlotta now live their life together twice as intensely. They are aware of the value of time in every moment of their existence and only look ahead. What happened happened, my boy. Even if you want to tear yourself apart with feelings of guilt, it doesn’t change the past. All that matters is the future.”

“Carlotta loves Matteo very much. She makes him a very happy man.” I smiled at the thought of the two lovebirds.

“Yes, the young Sorrentino women are an extraordinary gang. It’s a shame that there are only three of them. But as far as I know, one of them is still available.” Don Mario winked at me mischievously.

“Allegra deserves better than me. Someone who messes up less. A gentleman. A prince who delivers on her every wish and treats her like a princess.”

“And yet she wants you of all people, my boy. What does that tell us?”

I eyed Don Mario questioningly.

“That tells us that you should spend the rest of your life becoming the man you just described to me. Try to become a better version of yourself every day of your life to get a little closer to the man you think she deserves.”

“I let her go when she confessed her feelings to me. She left me because I couldn’t express what I feel for her. Maybe because I wasn’t even aware of my feelings for her at the time. I didn’t know what love felt like. I didn’t realize that I had long since fallen in love with her. Something terrible had to happen first... something that could have killed her. Something that would have ended our time together forever before it could even begin.”

“And yet you are both here now. Intact. Alive. Healthy. There is no reason why your time together should not start here and now.”

“What if Allegra can’t forgive me...”

Don Mario gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze and stood up. “You know my boy, the Sorrentino women are amazingly strong and extremely kind. They have big hearts. If they love, it is unconditional. That also includes forgiving the people they love. I wouldn’t worry about Allegra forgiving you because she will. Instead, think about how you can go about making her the happiest woman in the world. You are in excellent company with Matteo and Leonardo, who do just that every day with Carlotta and Giorgia.”

Chapter 43 - Allegra

We left the mainland later than planned because my grandparents insisted on preparing a sumptuous three-course meal for dinner with Maddie. Since my grandparents could now afford to only open the restaurant five evenings a week, even in high season, we had the entire garden to ourselves.

Carlotta sat snuggled close to Matteo and hadn't let go of him all evening. The two were absolutely crazy for each other and couldn't wait for their daughter to be born in two months.

At the sight of the two lovers, I longed endlessly for Hunter. For his incomparable fragrance. His strong, protective arms. His hard, satisfying thrusts. His wicked laugh in my ear. His hot breath on my neck. His watchful eyes. His irresistible smile.

The delicious menu, which consisted of a Caprese salad with sun-ripened tomatoes and juicy Buffola mozzarella, pasta with melted cheese and prosciutto, and mascarpone with Barozzi cake, only temporarily distracted me from my heartache, which had noticeably worsened since today's conversation with Carlotta. Even with an ice-cold Aperol Spritz, it couldn't be drowned.

And so I was happy when the speedboat from the mainland docked at Capri and we entered the Villa Leone shortly after ten p.m.

Maddie had already fallen asleep on the crossing and said goodnight, yawning and exhausted from all the memories she had made during the day.

Matteo and Carlotta also disappeared, giggling, so I decided to end the day with a glass of wine on the small balcony in my room.

In the kitchen I stole a bottle of the exquisite Leone red wine and poured myself a generous glass of it on the balcony. Lost in thought I stood at the balustrade of the balcony railing and allowed myself a generous sip of the award-winning wine, while I gazed at the jet-black star-filled sky.

I spotted a falling star and closed my eyes, wishing from the bottom of my heart and soul that Hunter was here with me. That he wrapped his strong arms around me and gave me what I longed for.

I missed him so much that I thought I felt his touch, seemed to smell his masculine scent. A mirage. A dream image of the man I wanted so badly but couldn't have.

“Hi baby.” A gentle voice whispered in my ear.

My skin started tingling. My heart was pounding in my chest. My breathing quickened. My pulse was racing.

This wasn't a mirage.

I spun around and bumped into Hunter, who was standing close behind me, burning me with the blazing fire in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I managed to breath.

“I am here because you are here, and I want to be wherever you are.” He whispered and ran his index finger over my hand, which was on my heart.

“I'm sorry that I couldn't tell you before how much I feel for you, Allegra. I find it difficult to understand my feelings and to talk about them. It's because the people in my life who mean something to me, and to who I mean something, have been few and far between.”

“I'm sorry that I cornered you and wasn't more patient. I was so sad and hurt that you didn't say anything. I thought you don't want me,” I breathed, choked with tears. “And the thought was almost unbearable. I didn't mean to fall in love with you. It just happened like that.”

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me, Allegra. You are the missing part of my soul. You complete

me. After a life full of restlessness, emptiness and doubt, I finally feel like I've arrived. At home. With you."

I sniffed and forced a smile. "For someone who can't talk about their feelings, you're laying it on pretty thick."

Hunter raised the corner of his mouth. "Once I start talking, I can't stop it, it seems. Baby, I'm sorry it took me so long to understand that I'd lost my heart to you. If I'm honest, I've felt it for a long time, but I only really became aware of it during the incident in Brazil. In the end, we owe it to the kick up the ass that my precocious niece gave me on the phone yesterday to help me find the courage to come over and tell you."

"She is special, Hunter. Depending on the mood, a tough rebel, a sweet magical elf or a bright whirlwind."

"Just like you," smiled Hunter. "I still believe that you deserve a better man than me, but since I am an incorrigible egotist, I will take advantage of the knowledge that you have fallen in love with me and ask you for a chance."

"A chance for what?"

"A chance to give you all of me. Without exception."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"Does that mean..."

"That means I want you in my life. I want to fall asleep with you, wake up next to you, bathe with you, cook for you, laugh with you, massage you, tell you about my day, find out everything about your day, go out with you, kiss you, trust you with my secrets..."

"What about your body, do I get that too?"

Hunter grinned. "Everything means everything, so yes. You're terribly unromantic, Allegra. Now you've destroyed the moment."

"All of a sudden you talk so much," I glared mischievously at Hunter. "I still have to get used to it."

Fortunately, I have the rest of my life because I don't plan to ever let you go again."

"I'll do anything to make you happy, baby. I promise you. But I ask for your patience, because I will not be able to speak openly about my past and my feelings overnight."

I weaved my fingers into his and pulled him towards me. "I'll give you the time you need. Together we will do it. And until then, I suggest you just show me how you feel about me."

I took his other hand and placed it on my heated body, which was only covered by a light summer dress.

While our eyes got lost in one another, I directed his hand up my bare arm, along my bare shoulder, over my breasts, down my taut stomach to my throbbing center. There Hunter's fingers became independent and found their way under the hem of the thin fabric.

"Show me how you feel, Hunter." I asked as his finger dipped into me and he lowered his lips to my neck.

"Show me that you understand how much I need you." He gasped desperately as he entered me shortly afterwards in the glow of the moonlight.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pressed my mouth to his as if my life depended on the kiss.

Sometimes words weren't enough to express what you felt. You had to feel it to understand the depth of such overwhelming feelings that eclipsed everything that had come before.

Some would call this precious feeling true love.

Epilogue – Allegra

Four months later

I stood under the podium with Hunter on my right and the recovered Juan on my left. Juan was enjoying his retirement to the full. His wife Laura was pregnant for the second time and overjoyed that her husband had turned his back on the dangerous sport.

We cheered Tom and Dante on the podium above us as they had secured the Team World Championship with a hard-fought one-two finish in today's race in Abu Dhabi.

It was mid-December and the end of a long, tiring, and incomparably exciting season.

Even though we were able to secure the world championship title in the last race, *Racing Rosso* and the *Roaring Bulls* were uncomfortably close to us this season. They were hot on our heels, which meant the team couldn't rest on their laurels over the winter if they wanted to win again next season.

Dante would also drive for *Titan Racing* in the coming season. He and Riley hadn't killed each other yet, although they had got close on several occasions and were very fiery together. In all respects.

Dante's manager seemed to have his eye on the shy Skye, who was difficult to lure out of her shell.

Kenzie had been spending a lot of time with the *Racing Rosso* team lately, which puzzled me. I would have to get to the bottom of that. Because even though there's the saying 'keep your friends close, and your enemies closer', I had to find out who was close to who and why.

And Dakota, well Dakota had revealed a secret to me that shocked me to the core.

It never got boring in the *Titan Racing* Team.

Hunter and I would spend three more days in the United Arab Emirates. We planned to sunbathe in Dubai, enjoy the undisturbed togetherness and relax for a few days before we flew to snowy New York City to spend the pre-Christmas season with Maddie.

Ice skating in Central Park, admiring the huge Christmas tree at the Rockefeller Center, strolling past the brightly decorated shop windows on 5th Avenue and having a hot chocolate at the Christmas market in Bryant Park, it was all on our list.

Two days before Christmas the three of us would fly to Italy and spend the Christmas season with my family in Ravello and Capri. For the first time I would meet Carlotta's sweet daughter, who I'd only seen photos of so far. Giorgia had also made great strides.

While Maddie and her friends left for skiing in Austria over the New Year, Hunter kidnapped me to a glass igloo in Finland, where we would watch the Northern Lights lying in bed. It had been one of my secret dreams that I'd only revealed to him recently and he'd surprised me for my birthday.

The new year also marked a new chapter in my life. Because I would give up my apartment in northern Italy and move to live with Hunter in New York. That meant we could be together not only during the races, but also in the weeks in between. Every now and then I would have to travel to the factory in Italy, but the reallocation of duties meant that my responsibilities were mainly focused on racing activities now.

Maddie was about to graduate next year and wanted to study Event Management at New York University. The internship at *Titan Racing* had left a lasting impression on her, so she wanted a future in sports management. Hunter was

more than pleased with her decision. Because that way he could continue to spend time with her on a regular basis and he suggested that after graduation, if she wanted, she would join his company.

She would be moving into Hunter's second home in Tribeca. Hunter had wanted to sell it because he thought the memory of his past would bother me. It didn't. Because it was just as much a part of him as his present and future. And since I wanted everything from this man, I would also carry the remnants of the past with him.

Hunter and Maddie had had many conversations about their past over the last few months, including the years before Hazel's death. Now, they rarely looked back and instead focused on all the possibilities that lay before them.

Hunter had accepted that while his sister was gone forever, she had entrusted him with the most precious gift of all, and her spirit lived on in Maddie every day.

And as for Hunter and I, we enjoyed every minute of each other, alternating between talking and showing how we felt. Sometimes we did both at the same time, when Hunter was helping me relax by whispering all his dirty fantasies in my ear, and in response I groaned his name uncontrollably into the pillow.

"Baby, did you get sunburned? Your cheeks are suspiciously flushed." Hunter eyed me worriedly.

I shook my head and suppressed a grin. "I was just thinking that you did a great job of showing me how you feel last night."

Hunter pushed me against the side of the team's pit wall and bent his face down to me. "Do you want me to tell you how I feel about you, baby?"

I nodded and moistened my dry lips. I couldn't hear this sentence from Hunter's mouth enough. Every time it seemed like a miracle to me.

My own personal miracle.

Thanks to him, I'd discovered that sometimes miracles actually happen.

“I love you, Allegra Sorrentino.”

“And I love you, Hunter Byron King.”

The End

Follow me on Amazon to stay tuned on the upcoming publication dates. To do so, simply click on the “+ **Follow**” button next to my author photo on the Amazon product page. You’ll find it right under the book cover.

Part 2 of the *Titan* Team, the story of Riley & Dante, will be available from May/June 2022.

The story of Riley & Dante is the second book of the sexy Titan Racing series from #1 bestselling author, Ava Avery.

A compelling sports romance with a highly explosive protagonist pairing:

This guy is a real pain in the...

I can't stand him.

Not one bit!

He's a massive troublemaker.

And I need to bail him out.

All the time.

Over and over again.

What am I? His babysitter? Surely not!

I'm the bloody Communications Director of the Titan Racing Team.

And I worked hard to get there. Very hard.

Spoiled, egoistic, impulsive star racing driver, Dante Di Santo, doesn't give a damn though.

He's determined to make my life miserable.

He gets on my nerves whenever he senses a chance.

He creates major chaos and drags me right into it.

We are like fire and water.

Or like a spark and dynamite...

He lights me up and I explode...

Professionally speaking, of course.

Not sexually. Heaven forbid!

I mean...okay, he is damn hot.

He looks like Jon Bon Jovi in his thirties.

And I have a massive crush on Jon Bon Jovi in his thirties.

But that's just in my head.

A dirty, little fantasy.

Besides...I'm thirty-two years old.

And I want to become a mum one day soon.

One day when I find the right man for the mission...

Dante surely isn't this man.

He jumps from one affair into the next.

He gets through women like I get through chocolate.

He is immature, unreliable, irresponsible and selfish.

He is everything but a candidate for loving husband and dad.
In short, he is everything I don't need.

I know all of that.

And I know that I hate this guy.

And I know that this guy hates me.

Problem is we need to work together.

Because I'm not only the Comms Director.

I'm also Dante's press officer. I manage his PR.

That means we have to spend time together.

A lot of time.

Too much time.

Way too much...

And that's when silly things happen.

Things that you will deeply regret...

This book is an explosive, captivating standalone.

Part 3 of the *Titan* series, the passionate story of sponsorship manager Dakota Bennet & commanding mega CEO Grayson Parker, will follow in the fall.

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