



**FASTER
SERIES**

OFF TRACK

MM SPORTS ROMANCE

LESLIE MCADAM

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OFF TRACK BY LESLIE
MCADAM

We're battling to be on top—in more ways than one.

Cristian Rivera and I have spent years locked in a contest to be the highest-ranked racing driver in the world. When he forced me off a track seconds from victory, it was the last straw: I confronted him in his hotel room, intending to teach him a lesson with my fists.

Instead, he kissed me, and now everything is tumbling out of control.

I thought I was straight. Now I'm *questioning*. And I can't seem to stay away from him.

Hooking up with Cristian is a terrible idea for so many reasons.

Our rivalry fuels sales, and if what we're doing gets out, we and our teams could lose millions in sponsorship money. We could even lose our jobs.

I'm the Ice Man, always calm and controlled, in line to the Swedish throne. Dating a fiery Spanish driver is the last thing the aristocracy would want me to do.

Most importantly, I can't fall in love. Open-wheel racing puts our lives at risk every time those engines roar. I can't afford to get attached to another driver. I couldn't bear it if someone I love got hurt—or worse.

Despite all that, when Cristian crashes, the whole world sees me race to his side.

Will our feelings for each other be stronger than the forces dragging us apart?

Off Track is a contemporary MM sports romance about race-car drivers. It features Cristian Rivera, Spanish racing royalty, and Jasper Nord, literal Swedish royalty. These guys secretly rendezvous in Swiss ski resorts, Singaporean gardens, and yachts off Monaco. Off Track is the first book in the FASTER series of stand-alones, which also features books from Victoria Denault and Regina Kyle.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

On content: *Off Track*, like most contemporary steamy romances, contains swearing and explicit sex. Cristian and Jasper are vers. The book also has threats of fistfight-level violence, a kiss without advance consent, and injury/hospital scenes, including a reference to an injury resulting in permanent disability (not a main character). While not everyone is a great person, this book does not have dark themes—it's intended to be sweet and sexy with lowish to medium angst.

On reality: While this story is obviously riffing off of Formula One and similar racing (Formula Two, IndyCar, etc.), it is not a documentary. Our fictional world differs from real life in many, many ways, including the last race of the year being in Singapore and there being a fall break. I was also unaware of a real-life royal driver when I wrote the book. Jasper is most definitely not based on him nor on any real Swedish royal.

On language: Jasper is Swedish, and the few Swedish phrases shown in the text are translated (because I'm guessing most people outside of Scandinavia aren't familiar with Swedish) or, I hope, obvious in context. I don't translate "Ja," which means yes, or "hej, Mamma," which means hi, Mom/Mum. I intentionally did *not* translate many of Cristian's Spanish words or phrases, in part to show his struggles with English. Almost everything Cristian says that is untranslated is a Castilian Spanish swear word, like "joder" (pronounced ho-derr, which means fuck), "puta" (essentially, bitch or whore), "hijo de puta" (essentially, motherfucker; literally, son of a whore), "coño" (essentially, fuck/shit; literally, something like pussy), and so on. I'm told modern editing does not italicize

non-English words to avoid “othering” them, which is why most of these are presented in plain text. Cristian says a few other things in Spanish that are untranslated, but it’s my hope that those are generic enough to be understood. If not, hopefully Google Translate can help you. Examples: “hola” means hello, “amigo” means friend, and “hombre” means man. There are no untranslated lengthy sentences in any non-English language.

If you find a typo, rather than report it to Amazon, please email me at info@lesliemcadamauthor.com.

Thank you for picking up this book!

BOOKS IN THE FASTER
SERIES

Off Track by Leslie McAdam

Close Quarters by Regina Kyle

Apex by Victoria Denault

FASTER SERIES

Welcome to *FASTER*. To create our own world, we *intentionally* departed from real-world racing schedules, track layouts, race lengths, rules, and so on. Our characters and teams are *not* based on real drivers/teams. While Formula One uses British spelling for things like “tyres” and “chequered” flag, we do not. To make the story easier to follow, here is a list of our teams and our race schedule. Happy reading!

THE FASTER TEAMS

(AS OF CURRENT YEAR)

ARETE GRAND PRIX

Yanni Castellanos

Lionel Hartt

LARUE MOTORSPORTS

René Savard

Grady Lewis

LIGHTHOUSE RACING

Cristian Rivera

Samantha Stevenson

MAYFLOWER RACING

Gabriel Allard

Sterling Samuels

MIRABELLA RACING

Billy James

Lucia Castera

SC RACING

Jasper Nord

Raj Singh

AND MORE...

PARTIAL RACE SCHEDULE

BAHRAIN

ABU DHABI

AZERBAIJAN

HUNGARY

AUSTRIA

BELGIUM

NETHERLANDS

MONACO

UNITED STATES (AUSTIN)

MEXICO

BRAZIL

AUSTRALIA

JAPAN

ITALY

CANADA

UNITED STATES (MIAMI)

UNITED STATES (LAS VEGAS)

FRANCE

SINGAPORE

PROLOGUE—JASPER

MARCH, PRESENT DAY

THE SPONSOR LOGOS lining the track blur as I speed round the Bahrain circuit. I engage the drag reduction system, which opens the rear wing like a letter box flap and boosts my speed by about seventeen kilometers an hour. With the DRS assist, I easily pass Rivera on the right and smirk inside my helmet, resisting the urge to flip him off.

Over the loud whine of the hybrid engine, a calm British voice in my earpiece says with aching precision, “Well done, Jasper, now you are P1, P1, with six laps to go.”

“Yes. Good.” I hit the paddle shifter on the steering wheel, and then I brake hard in the curve at the last possible second. I’m so *bloody* close to the finish line, I can feel it.

I *need* this win. Today’s the first race of the season, and I have a lot to prove. That little twat beat me for championship points last year, but it’s not going to happen again. I’m not going to let him win, plain and simple. Not today. Not all year. *Never*.

My goal this year is simple: be number one and make my team proud.

I’m not doing it just for them, though. I’m also doing it for the fans. My country.

And my family. Maybe.

Now I’m zooming like a bullet down the longest straightaway of the track, headed into the serpentine curves of the chicane. I’m focused on nothing but the race and the way

the car reacts to every nudge I give it. More throttle, brake as late as I can, steer sharply left, then hard right, and *gooooooo*.

Driving an open-wheel race car means that I'm a master of paying attention to everything at once and making decisions in an instant—or less than an instant. Championships have been won on the margin of a thousandth of a second.

I know there are spectators watching and talking heads narrating what I'm doing. Cameras are rigged up everywhere: in addition to multiple places on the car so fans can literally watch every move I make, there's one in my helmet recording what I'm seeing and one at my feet to show them dancing on the pedals. Any mistake by any driver gets replayed, turned into a GIF, and memed so it stays with us forever.

I ignore all that. I'm also not thinking about how much is riding on this race or the twenty-plus races before the end of this season, the hundreds of millions of euros I can potentially earn for the team. Yes, there are two drivers on each team, but I consider it my job to be first. Always.

For now, all I care about is that Rivera's at my back and no one's in front of me. I just need to do my work: shove all that noise aside and pay attention to the racing plan, to maintaining the lead, to monitoring the track conditions. I've managed my fuel levels and my tire degradation. I'm all clear to win.

That checkered flag is *mine*.

The flat Bahrain circuit is one of my favorites, because I won here as a rookie four years ago and followed it up the next season. Although two years ago ...

No. Not thinking about that.

Focus, Jasper. Focus on driving. Focus on *winning*. Focus on staying the course. Focus on remaining the fastest racer on the track. The fastest in the world.

Five laps later, the finish line is in sight. No matter what exercises I do to regulate my breathing, there's no way to keep my heart from thundering at a time like this. The heat and noise of the engine behind my back drown out most other

sensations, isolating me in my own world. A world where I *obliterate* all opposition.

Although I'm exhausted from more than two hours of near-constant exertion, I smile. I'm going to win this race.

It's so close. I can feel the heft of the trophy in my hands, the spray of champagne—well, in this country, it's a nonalcoholic rose water–pomegranate drink called Waard—on my face, the smooth surface of the podium under my feet, like I'm raised above everyone else. The pomp of the Swedish national anthem, the roar of the crowd, the pop of confetti raining down on us. The splash of LED signs everywhere displaying my face and my car in supercuts.

I see that beautiful black-and-white checkered flag waving overhead as I cross the finish line. My heart soars, and adrenaline surges through me. “Yes!” I yell into the mic, pumping my fist into the air. “Thank you! Ja! Yes.”

“Congratulations, Jasper,” the team principal, Maxine Ackerman, says in her jaded New York accent, and I smile, elated. “Nice, clean race. Well done.”

But as I slow the car down to do a celebratory lap, the square black digital signs along the track light up in a red flag warning.

“What happened? Did someone crash on the last lap?” I ask over comms.

“Affirmative,” Hendricks responds, his cool British voice calming. “We are investigating, but it seems that Rivera has rolled into the barrier at turn thirteen.”

Ice pours into my veins.

No. No no *no*.

“Is Rivera all right?” I ask, my body shaking more than it did while battling the g-forces of the track.

No response.

“What happened?” I say, louder this time. “Is he hurt?”

“We are checking on that, Jasper. Hold, please.”

I will not bloody hold. Absolute fear—horrifying dread—takes hold of me. Barely resisting the urge to scream, I make my way along the course in what was supposed to be a taunting victory lap but is now a slow crawl of terror. When I approach the scene of the accident, it's all I can do to not stop the car and race over to him.

Rivera's car is flipped, the wheels in the air and the weight of the vehicle balancing on the roll bar and the halo—the protective titanium wishbone structure surrounding the driver's head. I hold my breath.

I am going to get out. I'm going to get him. I can't let anything happen to him.

Hendricks's voice in my ear says, "It is not safe to remain where you are. Proceed to parc fermé, please, Jasper." He's referring to where the winning cars line up at the end of the race.

My logical mind notes that there are emergency vehicles everywhere, plus two cranes. A dozen track personnel are out assisting the driver, who appears to be trapped. Some have fire extinguishers at the ready, and others are poised with containers of kitty litter to clean up spills. I pass by slowly, being waved at by an official to keep going. I want to stop and help, even though I know I'll only make it worse. I'm backing up traffic behind me, too.

So I keep driving, the car even more difficult to control at reduced speed. These cars don't work well at slow speeds; they want to *race*. My arms are still trembling, from the exertion of the day but also from my current panic.

Is he safe?

The track is about to turn so I won't be able to see him, but in my side-view mirror, I catch a glimpse of his car bursting into flames.

No. No, no, no, no. I yell and brake, moving to unfasten my safety belts.

But of course cameras catch my moves.

“No, Jasper,” Hendricks says in my ear. “Do not go to him.”

I’m going to be sick. All I want is to pull him to safety. Save him.

I’ll run into flames for him. I’ll do anything for him.

I swallow hard. I’m so damn dehydrated it hurts. I usually lose one to two kilos of weight during a race, but it’s worse in these races closer to the equator. I’m worn out and scared when I should be elated.

“Jasper, do you copy? Proceed to parc fermé.”

“Understood,” I croak. The professionals have fire suppression equipment, and our suits are made of flame-resistant Nomex. But still ... I need to know he’s safe.

The problem, besides managing my soaring panic at how he’s doing, is that no one can know I care. No one can know that my insides are being torn up, my soul is being ripped out of my body, a massive tank is running over my heart.

I have to turn my back on Cristian Rivera.

For starters, he’s my sworn enemy—or at least my rival. Our clashes sell tickets. The pundits make much of how Jasper Nord’s and Cristian Rivera’s stats are nearly identical. We’re famous for our taunts—especially from him to me. Our fans detest each other. They buy merchandise—T-shirts, bumper stickers, mugs—with some of the pithier Nord-Rivera insults emblazoned on them.

Cristian Rivera, last year’s world champion, is my chief competition. He’s the one I’m always trying to beat. He’s the one I persistently bad-mouth, and he dishes it right back, his jeers delivered with his rakish smile.

As far as the world knows, we hate each other.

But Cristian is also the man who sucked my dick last night.

1 / CRISTIAN

MARCH, TWO YEARS EARLIER

I SIGH into the massage table's face cushion as the masseuse digs into my traps. My racing suit is unzipped down to my waist, and I've taken off my Nomex, so I'm shirtless. Annette is getting me ready for the next session: qualifying. That's the one that matters, because it determines race order on Sunday.

As she works on my back, I listen to the television coverage of the upcoming race. I'm supposed to be relaxing and concentrating on returning to the track, but I'm curious as to what they're saying. My English isn't perfect, but I'm keeping up with the press well enough to know the world's talking about me.

As it should.

"The story of this year yet again is shaping up to be the bitter rivalry between two young hotshots: the royal Swede, Jasper Nord, and Spanish racing royalty, Cristian Rivera," says one pundit, Nico Hilliard. He pronounces Nord's first name like "Yasper." I say it like "Hasper," but I think he's technically correct. At least he says my name right, "Criss-tee-ahn."

I'll stick to calling him Nord in my head. I don't usually talk to him directly.

"Between the two, who do you think has the advantage this year?" the other announcer says.

"SC Racing has come to Bahrain with engineering modifications, and they've had more time in the wind tunnel for testing, so if I had to pick, I think they have an edge."

If I were outside, I'd spit. Nord's team. Putas.

Instead, I groan as Annette hits a particularly sore spot. "Don't kill me before the race."

"You'll survive," she says, her Australian accent strong enough that even I can pick it out. "You always tense up after FP3." She means the third and final free practice, which we just finished.

I frown. "I don't tense."

"You do. And you need to be loose for qualis."

"This is true." I nod into the pillow.

I want pole position, of course. Always.

"But Lighthouse Racing is known for their innovation," one of the talking heads says. I grin. My team has always been on the cutting edge of racing tech. "They show up when it counts. Their rookie, Samantha Stevenson, is showing great promise this year."

Nico butts in. "She needs time to grow, though. Really, it comes down to the skills and unique attributes of the lead drivers. The true advantages of those two teams are that SC has Jasper Nord, who is cool and collected—"

"The Ice Man from the north."

I roll my eyes. I am so sick of Nord.

"Right. And Cristian Rivera Durá, the passionate Spaniard, who has impressed many on the circuit despite his young age."

"Young age," I scoff. I just turned twenty-five. "How come they talk about my age and not his? He's just as old, or young, as me."

Annette chuckles. "What does it matter? You like it when they talk about you."

"I do." Why deny it? When you're the best, people generally have good things to say. Although he's won two world championships to my one. This year, I have to outperform him.

She moves to my lower back as the announcers keep yapping. “The question is, who will be crowned victor in this year’s competition? For those of you new to the sport, there are two competitions, one for the drivers and one for the teams. Finishing in the top ten in a race earns points for both the driver and the team, and these are all added up to determine the winners at the end of the year. Every point is about a million euros.” I tune the discussion out and whine when Annette hits another sore spot.

Tuning out distractions when I want to is my superpower. Elite racing is filled with distractions, not the least of which are the fans who support my rival—also known as the fans who are wrong.

And of course, distractions come in the form of all the thousands of things to remember while driving, from how to clip the apex of a curve to which part of a track has more marbles, the bits of rubber that come off tires due to wear.

I’ve learned that there are only a few people I really need to listen to: mainly my trainer, the team principal, and the senior race engineer, who’s always in my ear during races. Oh, and my father.

Annette pats my shoulders. “Okay, you’re done. Get dressed.” She slips out, but not before the camera crew from the streaming service appears in the doorway.

I sit up and give them a “What’s up?” acknowledgment with my chin, my naked, oiled torso on display, my silver-and-teal racing suit dipping dangerously low. “Hola, amigos.”

“Cristian,” the man with the microphone says, “how are you feeling about the upcoming season?”

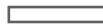
“As we say in my family, we must do one thing at a time. Right now, I’m going to be P1 in qualifying.” I point to my chest. “Actually, right now I put on my clothes. *Then* I will win.”

It’s not lost on me that they’re still filming, so I flex my ab muscles and grin. I’m good with being a thirst trap.

Then I shut the door in their faces, and I hear laughter. They love me.

Once I get dressed, I text Susanna, one of our HR staff, about whether she's available after qualis. She is. No, it's not weird that she's in HR and likes to get me naked.

I'll see her in my hotel room. Something to look forward to.



Twenty minutes later, I'm striding down pit lane and sucking on a hydration pack. The drink is currently cold, but it will heat up the second I step into the car, because the only space for it is right next to the engine. You get used to drinking what is essentially lukewarm tea.

I walk past Team SC Racing, their mechanics and engineers busy at work making adjustments, calibrating systems, and ensuring that the car is the shiny beast that it's expected to be. Their second driver, Raj Singh, is already strapped into the six-point harness and ready to go.

Even though I hate to admit it, the pundits are correct: SC Racing is our closest competitor. Of all the teams on the track, they're the ones to beat. Their car has been a monster on the straightaways and tight in the curves, and as much as I'd like to ignore them, I can't.

I also can't ignore their lead driver, Jasper Nord.

Hijo de puta.

Nord is tough to miss, fifteen centimeters taller than me, with white-blond hair. He looks like a movie villain, and he has the presence of one, too: larger than life and calculating as fuck. He's lounging against a wall, talking with his racing engineer, Hendricks, and seemingly at ease. But when he sees me pass by, he zeroes his hard, cold blue eyes in on me and sneers. It's subtle, not enough for anyone to catch on a camera, and his face is back to normal in an instant. But I don't miss it.

I want to do something. Shout at him or hit him. Wipe that haughty expression off his face. Anything to bother him. I do my best to get under his skin, and I'm never going to stop. I want him to be thinking of me when he's out there.

I pause.

Joder.

He got me off my game. Just by seeing his face, I'm off track, and there's no reason for it. He doesn't intimidate me. Not because he's a racer, not because he's aloof. Not even because he's a damn prince. I've dealt with plenty of royalty, given my parents' friendships in Spain. He's nothing but a pain in my ass. Time to recapture my power.

Taking a breath, I give him my biggest smile and blow him a kiss, and his eyes widen. Then I laugh and proceed to my own car, where we do the prerace checkup. My father is standing to the side, and while he's not saying anything to me directly, I know what he's thinking: that I'd better win.

When it's time to get in, I zip up my racing suit, put on the balaclava, helmet, and HANS device—which protects my head and neck—then place my foot on the side of the car, where I pause so someone can wipe off the bottom of my boot so there is no debris and it will be grippy on the pedals. Then they wipe off the other before I sit down and get strapped in. Someone hands me the rectangular steering wheel, and I fasten it to the dash.

Meanwhile, my team does its last-minute modifications. Like the SC Racing vehicle, our race car is treated like a thoroughbred horse. It's brushed and cleaned and petted and fed the best diet. The fuel techs, tire techs, vehicle dynamics specialists, and everyone else are checking its status. They're wiping dust off with a cloth and keeping the tires warm so they stick to the track.

My race engineer, Patrick Forrester, is in my ear as I ease out onto pit lane and make my way to the track. "How are you feeling today?" Paddy asks.

"Excelente. I'm going to be first. Just watch me."



I am not first. Not only am I not first, I didn't even qualify for the top ten starting positions after narrowly missing Nord on the first timed lap and going spinning into the tire barriers, majorly fucking up the car. Racing control decided the incident was my fault, and tomorrow, I'll start the race from pit lane as a penalty for swapping out damaged parts.

This is so fucked, and I'm steaming.

Once I tear off my helmet and head back to where there are no cameras, I blow up at Paddy. Not that what happened was his fault—I just need to vent. “That fucker pushed me off the track. *He* needed to back off. Not me.” It's Paddy's job to keep me calm, and he does a good job of it. He's a big, tall, midforties racing veteran from Alabama, which is someplace in America.

Paddy gives me a sympathetic look and opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, my father rounds on us and asks me in Spanish, “What the hell was that?”

“It wasn't my fault!” I throw my hands up.

My father, the famous Spanish driver Paco Rivera, is my height, and we look similar, but his dark hair is shorn, and he has wrinkles at the corners of his brown eyes. He's wearing neat jeans and a heavy leather belt, as well as a polo in Lighthouse team colors. The lanyard around his neck allows him access to the paddock, and right now I want to rip it off his neck and throw it away.

“You're the one who lost control,” he tells me. “No one crashed into you. That was absolutely your fault. You have to do better. You need to be in the top, no more than P4 or 5, to be able to score points tomorrow.”

“Don't you think I know that?” I snap. “It's always like this with you. Picking apart my performance.”

My father lifts his chin. “I only say these things because I care about your career. If you want to be the best”—like him,

he doesn't bother to say—"you can't afford to make foolish mistakes. You need to run a cleaner race. You were aggressive out there, but it didn't work out. You need to do better next time. Aggressive without errors is your goal."

"Thanks," I grit out, having heard this so many times I could recite it in my sleep. It makes me want to scream that he doesn't think I tried.

My father opens his mouth like he's going to say more, but he decides not to, leaving me to sputter at Paddy for a while longer.

Finally, Paddy pats my shoulder and smiles at me. "I know, Cristian. You'll get him tomorrow."

"I will," I vow. And I stomp off to go find Susanna. Maybe I can fuck out the frustration.

2 / JASPER

WE'RE fifty-three laps into the Bahrain Grand Prix, and I've been dominating since the start. With less than four laps left to go, this race is mine to lose. There's no one even challenging me. So long as I don't make any foolish mistakes or have any engine issues, the checkered flag will be waving at me.

Starting in pole position provides a strategic advantage, which is why I do my best to get there. That way everyone's chasing after me.

I'm probably supposed to feel guilty that I qualified P1 and Rivera didn't even make the top ten. But he turned into me. *He* needed to back off when we got too close. Not me.

Not my fault.

As if I'm being punished for letting that little punk cross my mind, Hendricks says, "Jasper. Rivera has new softs on and just hit the fastest lap. He's going to be within DRS zone in two or three laps if he keeps up this pace."

Shit. Those new tires mean he's at a distinct advantage. The soft rubber grips the road, making the car handle better. Softs don't last long, but if they're fresh this close to the end of the race, it doesn't matter. I can tell my own tires are wearing, but I don't want to box—go into pit lane to have them changed—because I'll lose valuable seconds. I got too complacent, dammit. I'm in an impossible position: I can't slow down if I want to win, but I can't go full throttle, either, because I'll have no rubber left at the end of the race.

"Copy," is all I say. Because yes, I understand, and now it's up to me to keep the Spanish bastard behind me. If he

came up from last place to second, he's going to get the award for Driver of the Day.

I focus.

In one of the speed trap zones, I now see him in my side-view mirrors, his car like a cheetah barreling toward me. I shake my head and target the tricky curves coming up. One wrong move, and you end up in the gravel.

"Time between you and Rivera is 1.2 seconds," Hendricks says in his cool manner.

Bloody hell.

If Rivera gets to under one second and opens up DRS, he'll be able to fly past me.

Still, I have a few tricks up my sleeve, and I'm not conceding yet. Not by a long shot.

He is the long shot. *I'm* the favored one. The reigning champ. I just have to maintain position. While the little shit is getting closer, so is the finish line, and if I can just hold on—

Before I can react, Rivera's front wheel is nicking my back one, and I clench my teeth.

"Tell him to back off," I snarl.

"Understood," Hendricks says. I know he's not going to tell Rivera anything—he can't, although my team could communicate displeasure to his team principal.

I need to stay clear of Rivera, but I don't want to give him room to pass me. And we're doing this battle at 300 kilometers per hour.

I'm sure the pundits are getting riled up, along with the crowds. This much action so close to the finish line draws everyone's attention.

But I'm determined to ignore the Spaniard and just keep going. I'm aggressive—so is he—but all I need to do is keep my figurative elbows out so he can't get past me.

We go around the last corner, and Rivera gets too close. Again.

He's too late, though. I can see the checkered flag waving ahead—except before I get to it, *bam*, something hits my rear left tire.

No, no. *No*. As he was trying to pass, Rivera's front tire tapped me, sending my car veering off the asphalt.

I spring into action trying to regain control, g-forces playing with my body like it's a rag doll. Despite my efforts, I go spinning off track into a gravel area, robbed of my victory by that Spanish bastard with the oversize ego. OhmygodIhatehimsomuch.

Thankfully, I rotate 360 degrees without hitting a barrier and get the car under control fast. I didn't blow a tire—Hendricks is on comms telling me Rivera just nicked fiberglass off the rear end—and I'm able to keep driving, limping to the finish line.

That accident costs me the podium, though. As I find out a few seconds later, not only did Rivera finish first, having pushed me out of the way like we were playing bumper cars instead of elite, open-wheel racing, but René Savard and Samantha Stevenson came in before I got the car righted. I cross the finish line in fourth, Stefan Meyer is fifth, and Raj Singh, my teammate, is sixth.

At the end of the season, that hit from Rivera will cost my team, what, €15 million in lost points?

Fuck.

I know that the whole world's eyes are on me—at least the whole racing world—so I'm not going to do anything rash.

But I can't contain my curse or the way I slam my fists when I get out of the car. After I stomp to the scales to get weighed, as required—they want to make sure drivers aren't undernourished—I'm sorely tempted to skip the media circus. We get fined if we don't attend, but the way I'm feeling ... the fine might be worth it.

Nope. I'm the good one. I take several deep, calming breaths and down an entire bottle of water. Then, slightly more settled, I go in front of the microphones. I have media training

from our team's PR, but that's nothing compared with how I was schooled at the palace. From a young age, I was taught to bottle up my emotions and be disciplined and presentable. So I swallow down my agitation, put on a neutral, controlled face, and respond politely to the questions thrown at me.

Yes, the incident was unfortunate. Yes, up to that point I was winning. Yes, I believe it was his fault, and I want a thorough investigation. Yes, even the best in the world crash sometimes. Or often. Yes, we only get to be the best if we push ourselves to our limits—and beyond. Yes, we're willing to take big risks for big rewards, and sometimes it doesn't pan out. Yes, I'll try again the next race. No, I'm not worried about my standings this early in the season.

Inside, though, I know I'm going to do something. I *have* to. There's no way I can let him get away with this.

I need to act.



The more I think about how close I was to victory—and how I was robbed—the angrier I get. The stewards ruled that what happened was simply a racing incident, so no penalty for Rivera. There was enough of an opening between my car and the track limits—the edge of the course—for him to pass, and he took it. When you're going as fast as we do, everything is a split-second decision, and sometimes a crash is the result. Because he didn't do anything illegal, his team gets to keep the trophy, the podium, the points, the money. The win.

A racing incident, my ass.

I'm known for being cool and collected, but I am fuming right now. I stalk down the hallway of the Empress Regent Hotel toward Rivera's suite. It's easy enough to find out the number when your manager is friends with his.

He's on the floor just below mine—the same suite, only I have a slightly better view. That gives me some small comfort, because I should be on top, and that's that.

My royal bodyguards came into the elevator with me, but now I hiss, “Stay back. I need to do something.” They eye each other warily, but they let me be.

My cell phone sounds. It’s a text from my mum, Princess Astrid. I don’t have time to discuss whatever state event she needs me at. Or, rather, I’m too upset and don’t want to let her know. I tap out “Jag kommer att ringa dig senare” (I’ll call you later) and slip the phone back into my pocket so I can concentrate on how to deal with Rivera.

How to punish him, more like.

I’ve relived the moment that he hit me so many times. That *spinning out of control, I can’t do anything about it, I’ve been robbed of victory* feeling.

It hurts.

It also doesn’t help that my crash is replaying on every screen around. That it’s the trending story on the racing app. That wherever you look, there’s that punk hitting me on the last lap and making me lose the race while he zooms to victory. I don’t know that I’ve ever been more angry.

Royals don’t show emotion. We don’t swear. We don’t step out of line. We serve the nation, our people.

But what happens out of sight won’t hurt the public. It might hurt Rivera, but the wanker deserves it.

When I get to his door, I pound on it.

No one answers, but I know he’s in there. He has to be. Now’s my best chance to confront him.

My bodyguards hang back as I pound on the wood again.

3 / CRISTIAN

THE HOT SHOWER relaxes me and releases some of my tension. I'm sore from driving and elated from winning, but I'm also questioning my actions at the end, to be honest. That was kind of a fuckup. Maybe.

No. It was *racing*.

I wanted to win, which meant pushing past anyone who was in my way. Including Nord. I'm proud of my performance today—and I have every right to be. I won after picking my way through the field and coming up from twentieth. From dead last, I made it to the podium. And it was all me.

I lather up with the eucalyptus-scented body wash.

Okay, it was me and my team, who tweaked the suspension and strategized on everything from how many laps to use which tires, to when I should push and when I should conserve fuel. But I made it happen. I won.

And if I perhaps kind of clipped Nord a little bit at the end there—well, that wasn't intentional. I was just trying to get past him. Getting past him is the entire point of racing. If there's a hole, I go through it, and if there isn't one, I make it. It's very simple. I'd passed everyone else—eighteen other drivers, and he was the last one left. It's not my fault he didn't make room for me to go by. Do I feel remorse about him spinning out? ~~Maybe a little.~~ No.

No, I don't. Not at all. Not even a little bit. Being pushed off the track sometimes is part of racing, and he needs to grow up. That's what my father would say. And papá was happy I

won. For a few seconds, anyway. If I succeed, he's all smiles before the cameras, but that doesn't last long.

When we left the track, he was muttering, "Make sure you don't oversteer and lock your brakes in the next race like you did coming out of the pit in lap twenty-seven."

"Can we just celebrate my win?" I asked.

"Of course we celebrate. You did well." He'd hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "But now you have to do it again."

I need to get out of my head and tend to my body. I shampoo my hair, wash my face, and rinse off.

That's better.

I've just stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist when there's a pounding on my hotel door like a barbarian wants to break it off the hinges.

¿Qué coño? Water still streaming down my back, I go and look through the peephole.

It's Nord. Uptight fucking prick. Guess the Vikings are raiding.

My heart starts beating faster, and a thrill goes through me, because he looks pissed. Unsurprising.

This should be interesting. We don't usually talk. Well, if he's here to yell at me, I can dish it right back, no problem.

I watch him a moment more. He's wearing a purple Team SC Racing T-shirt and tight jeans, and his hair is still wet from his own shower. Even wet, it's still white blond, only now it's sticking up everywhere, not in its usual controlled quiff. He's pacing, but his hands are balled into fists and it seems like steam is coming out of his ears. Oh, yeah. He's angry as fuck.

If he wants a fight, he'll get one. And that prissy ass will have to deal with my wearing only a towel.

I open the door wide just as he's about to start hammering again. I intend to startle him, and I succeed a bit too well. Instead of hitting wood, his fist meets empty air, and he lurches forward, crashing into me so we tumble to the ground.

His arms go over my shoulders, and his knee ends up between my legs. The back of my head thuds on the carpet.

For a moment, we lie there, his entire body stretched over my mostly naked one. He's rangy and kind of cold, while I feel superheated from the shower.

I sniff. He smells good. Like soap and maybe Bleu de Chanel.

"What the fuck?" he growls in his musical accent, and the door slams behind him as he scrambles to his feet.

I don't move off the floor, though I do adjust the towel to cover myself a bit better. I'm curious to see what he'll do. Will he kick me while I'm down? My father's told me ever since I was a toddler that when you see an opening, you go for it. No questions. No hesitation. Like what I did earlier today. After all, that's how he became the legendary Paco Rivera, three-time-consecutive rally champion: by grabbing every opportunity.

But rather than take the shot, Nord simply looms over me, eyes stony, one foot on either side of my ankles as I stare up at him. He looks dominant and, frankly, sexy. Is he straight, I wonder ... or is he more open, like I am?

Maybe I should poke the polar bear to find out.

"Got a problem?" I'm fully aware that my torso is exposed, and I know I look good. You can't throw a race car around the way we do without being extremely fit. I run a hand through my hair, and it seems to distract him.

Hmm.

He huffs. "Yes. You're the problem. Learn to bloody drive, you menace." Jasper's English is better than most native speakers', I've heard, and I believe it.

My English is ... not so good, but it's enough to manage. It's much easier for me to understand it than to actively come up with the right words and remember the ridiculous conjugations. "I know how. Do you?" It takes some courage to say this while seated on my ass on hotel carpet wearing nothing but a towel barely draped over my pelvis.

“Stop goofing around and get the fuck up here,” he says.

“Why? So you can hit me?”

The look on his face says that’s exactly what he wants to do, but my nudity has thrown him off. So to fuck with him further, I scissor my legs, and he trips, falling onto me again with an “Oof.” He quickly props himself up so he’s doing a plank pose over me.

Jasper’s clear blue eyes stare into mine, and his lips part. His breath is minty from toothpaste, and I can see the faded freckles on his nose.

Huh. I didn’t know he had freckles. And I didn’t realize how clear his skin is.

But then he moves so he’s straddling my bare belly, shaking a fist in front of my face. “You tapped me on purpose. It was not a bloody ‘racing incident’ or whatever the stewards said. Your actions were beyond unreasonable, and there should be consequences. You’re such an asshole.”

I scoff. “Whatever. It is ... regular. Normal.”

“Fucking unprofessional,” he sneers. “And certainly not sportsmanlike.”

“What the hell do you know about being professional?” I ask. “You would’ve done the same thing. Admit it.”

“No. I would’ve won fair and square. I *was* winning fair and square until you decided to be a total dickhead on the track.” He rubs his face and groans. “I want to fuck you up so bad.”

“Sure you want to fuck me up, not fuck me?” I tease, and we both still.

I look up at him in challenge. His ass is on my dick, and I don’t hate it. In fact, joder, I’m getting hard.

And, well. So is he.

He glares at me, and I glare back at him. He makes a move to get off me again, so I do the natural thing.

I jackknife up and kiss him.

4 / JASPER

WHAT THE BLOODY hell is going on?

I came here to give Rivera a piece of my mind—and possibly my fist—and instead, his hot tongue is invading my mouth.

Rivera smells like body wash, and his skin is tan and smooth. His lips are soft, and he hasn't shaved, so his cheek is rough against mine. I'm almost sitting on him, and he's practically naked.

And he's goddamn kissing me. He kisses the way he drives: aggressive, dominant, gives-no-fucks. He's taking charge ... but that's not the way I roll.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm kissing him back hard, just to show that I can. To show that I'm in control, not him. Our teeth clang, and it's a battle, like we're animals clashing midjump. Off the ground, claws out, aiming for each other's jugulars. Only in this case, jugular apparently means trying to swallow his tonsils. We're biting each other's lips, and I draw blood, the metallic tang flooding my mouth. Then I shove him. That'll leave a bruise.

“What the bloody hell was that?” I sputter, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

He shrugs, infuriating as ever. Rivera is all dark, messy hair and dark brown eyes—they're almost doe-like, so big and innocent. But there's no way he's bloody innocent. It's an act.

Still. What did we just do?

“I thought this was a, what do you say? A booty call? Yes, a booty call.”

“Fuck you,” I sneer.

He shrugs again. “If you want.”

What is he saying? Is he ...

My jaw drops, and I stare at him, shaking my head. I’m straight. As far as I know, he’s straight, too.

Except ...

We’re adrenaline seekers. We both need the thrill of going fast, of pushing limits, of doing things ordinary people don’t do. And god help me, I now have the idea of fucking him in my brain, and I can’t let it go.

Is Rivera ... bisexual?

Ignoring that thought, I say, “You intentionally pushed me off the track, and it was a terrible thing to do.”

He gives me that calm, maddening shrug one more time. “So I’ll suck your cock and make it up to you.”

My dick fills more in response to his words. Ugh. My fists clench. I don’t know what to do with this guy.

Does he ... ?

He’s kidding.

He’s fucking with me. I push up off him and stand, my dick half-hard. “An orgasm doesn’t make up for losing points.” But I’m looking at Rivera sprawled out on the ground, and he’s completely erect under that towel, his cock tenting the terry cloth fabric.

“It could.” He grins.

“What kind of gay chicken are you playing here?” I ask. “I’m not into men.” As I say the words, which don’t feel totally true, I can still feel his tongue in my mouth.

Rivera presses his lips together, and then his tongue swipes out to clear away the blood. “You’re missing out.”

He rises, but he doesn't bother with his towel. It falls to the floor, and now I can see all of him.

I'm not into guys. But I can tell that Rivera's objectively beautiful. His dick is long and lean and stands proud against a trimmed thicket of hair. He grabs it and gives it a few pulls. His abs are toned, and he has the same V-shaped Adonis belt I do.

I look away. "What the hell are you doing?"

When I don't get a response, I peek at his face, and he does that ever-maddening shrug.

That's enough. "Piss off. I'm leaving."

I reach behind me for the doorknob, but Rivera catches my wrist. Racers have reflexes like no one else. We have to, to be able to make it off the starting line in a fraction of a second.

"Hey," he says, and the quiet sincerity in his voice makes me pause. He's normally so arrogant and mocking. "I fucked up out there. The crash was my fault, and I'm sorry."

I blink at him. That's the last thing I was expecting Cristian fucking Rivera to say. And something about the vulnerability in his eyes or the fact that he's actually being honest with me makes me snap.

I'm on edge from almost winning and having that podium taken away from me by this jackass.

This *naked* jackass who kisses like he races—like he has to prove to the whole world that he's good enough. Except he already knows he is.

I open my mouth to tell him off or shove him or make him put clothes on or announce (again) that I'm leaving, but instead, I find myself grabbing his nude ass and kissing him ferociously.

The globes of his butt are firm and round, the skin soft, and his hard dick rubs up against my belly. I'm getting a full-on boner, too.

What the actual hell?

He grunts and then tugs me to him as he walks backward toward his bed. His sumptuous bed, with piles of pillows and a crisp white duvet.

I don't know what's going on here. It's an alternate reality, where for some weird reason I'm not pushing him away.

I'm noticing how nice he feels, all warm skin and strong, lean muscles, and his big brown eyes hold a different expression than I've ever seen before. Contrite, but also ... wanting. Lusty. *Fuck*.

"Did you hear me? I said I'm sorry," Rivera repeats between kisses, his fingers clutching behind my neck. "You deserved the podium. Let me make it up to you." He scrambles under me and flips us so he's on top. Then he starts undoing my pants.

Whoa. I hold his hand to stop him. "That won't do it."

"No?" he asks. He has a teasing grin on his face. It's not the jeering expression I'm used to from him, but a gentler one. One that's apologetic but also saucy. Like he's getting his way, and he's happy about it, but he's also not being an asshole. I hadn't realized that was possible. "Do you want my mouth on your ... your cock anyway? Have you ever done this before?"

"With *women*," I splutter.

"Not with a guy?"

I shake my head. "I had a threesome but didn't touch the guy." Even though I'm now remembering I maybe wanted to. "Have you?"

"A ménage à trois? Yes. Touch the guy? Yes."

"Are you gay?"

Rivera snorts. "I do not know the name. I like sex. It does not matter to me who it is with."

I blink at him. "I think it matters to most people who they have sex with."

"My English is not so good. I mean the type of person. The ... the gender." His hands are tracing down my torso, and his

sexy Spanish accent is beguiling. “Try it. I think you want to. No one has to know.” His voice is as sweet and smooth as honey and as dangerous as the bee.

I give him a curt nod. God help me. Because as I lie back on the bed, my jeans undone and my erection bobbing up, he’s pounced on me in a flash.

“You don’t have a camera going in here,” I grit out, suddenly worried, my head whipping around.

Rivera lets out an incredulous laugh. “Hombre, no.”

“All right,” I relent. This feels obscene. I’m fully dressed, but my dick is hanging out of my pants. Meanwhile, he’s naked and stroking himself off. It feels like he’s in the more vulnerable position, and yet he’s entirely in control.

I can imagine this is a woman. Or I can think this is my enemy doing penance. I can—

Oh, *fuck*.

His hot mouth encases my hard dick, and I let out a low groan because *ohmygod*, that feels *outstanding*.

As he licks and sucks, taking me into the wet heat of his mouth, I have the presence of mind to acknowledge what’s truly going on here: Cristian Rivera is giving me a blow job, and what’s worse is, he’s not bad at it.

This is *Rivera*. My absolute rival. The one that the media loves to pair me up against. The one I’m always fighting with. The man who fucking pushed me off the road this morning.

That man has his mouth on my cock, and he’s sucking deeply.

He’s not just “not bad.” Rivera’s actively good at this, because of course he is. He’s good at everything. He’s sucking in a way that would make me fall down if I were standing, and he’s keying in on the extra-sensitive part under the head. Then he goes as deep as he can until he gags, and repeats.

I’m ... overwhelmed. But it’s not just physical. I came here steaming, and Rivera’s thrown me off course. He’s confused me, and he pisses me off and is somehow arousing

me at the same time, which is the ultimate in frustration. My ire feels like hot licks of flame, but my impending orgasm feels like that, too. It's very disorienting to be turned on and angry at the same time.

The only thing I can do is pay attention to what he's doing. Well, I suppose I could leave, but ...

I don't want to. And that realization stuns me more than anything else since I set foot in his hotel suite.

Rivera targets the tip, sucking like he's going to draw my brain out through my cock. The blow job is as intense as our kiss earlier, but it's not as violent. He's not using his teeth. He's not squeezing too much or pushing me at a weird angle.

Between his suction, the warm embrace of his mouth, and his firm lips moving up and down, I'm done for. I don't usually lose control, but Rivera has me so hot and bothered that I don't know what is coming out of my mouth. It's a mix of Swedish and English, I'm pretty sure. There could be some French or German or Norwegian or Italian in there, too. Or even the bit of Spanish I know.

All I know is that my rival is giving me the best blow job I've ever received.

I shouldn't be here. I should've just roughed him up a little and left.

I should leave now.

But I really, really want to come. The sweet release of orgasm is different when it's at someone else's hands—or mouth. It feels like more of a gift, and one that's even more special for me, because it's hard for members of the royal family to have interesting sex without someone leaking it to the media.

Since it's Rivera giving the gift, I'm concerned this is going to turn out to be part of some kind of fairy-tale bargain. Like a poisoned apple, a pinprick, a lost voice, only in blow job form. He takes my come, and in exchange, what? He wins?

Nope.

But before I can return to my senses, he sucks harder, keeping a steady rhythm, and tips me over the edge.

I yell loud enough to raise the roof, and my entire body quakes. My brain blacks out. I come, breathless, into his mouth, and he swallows it, then throws his head back and shuttles his hand up and down his cock until he comes, too, spurting all over the duvet below us.

We stare at each other, and a lazy grin appears on his face.

Oh my god. What have I done?

Panic overcomes me, and I scramble off the bed. I hadn't even taken my shoes off. With a hasty tuck, I zip my pants up and am out the door before he can say a word.

"Bye," I call, flustered and still angry.

Motherfucker.

I can hear him chuckling at my back.



My bodyguards let me go into my room alone, and as I pace in my suite that looks so much like Rivera's, my thoughts are whirling around my head even worse than they were before. Did touching him awaken something inside me? Bottom line is yes, I think it did.

Am I ... bisexual? I haven't been attracted to men before. Have I?

There were guys in school I thought were good-looking. But I talked myself into thinking that I wanted to look *like* them or *be* them. Not be *with* them.

So ... yes. I have been attracted to men. I just never acknowledged it to myself, much less acted on it.

In college, I knew men who were openly gay. Some of them even hit on me. But I barely got together with any *women* for fear of ending up in the news. That one threesome was with royalty from other countries. We all knew the rules.

It's more than the fear of my sexuality getting out in the press, though. I must have some internalized *something* that thinks it's not acceptable. It's not because my country wouldn't approve. But maybe because of my job.

Except motorsport has come a long way. No one's out, sure, but it's more diverse than ever before.

So what's the problem?

The problem is that, of all people on the planet, I'm attracted to Cristian Rivera.

Fuck. No. Why him? Why couldn't it be someone easy?

Hopefully this was a one-time, one-off thing. Something that we did in the heat of the moment and will never do again.

I can live with that.

I run my hands through my hair. This introspection is a huge distraction.

And that makes me even more pissed at Rivera. The fact that he's got me off my game—has me paying attention to *him* rather than focusing on what *I* need to do.

I need to win races. I need to cross the line first, or as high up in the driver standings as possible. I need to not make mistakes. And I need to make sure whatever the hell just happened between me and Rivera never gets out.

Throwing myself onto my huge bed that's identical to the one we were just in, I can still feel his dried saliva on my skin. I'm still flushed and panting. I still feel the lightheaded ease of a post-orgasm haze.

I'm in so much trouble.

5 / CRISTIAN

THE FLAVOR of Nord's salty, bittersweet release lingers in my mouth as I flop around on my bed, still naked, and wonder what the hell I just did.

I usually trust my impulses. They've made me tens of millions of euros. They've allowed me to jump first and ask questions later—a strategy that often works, because I usually find a parachute somewhere.

Not with what I just did. I'm free-falling. What's worse, I have no idea why I did it.

I beat my fist on the pillow, fluffing it up, and then spread my arms and legs out like a starfish. My spent cock lies to the side, happy and temporarily sated.

Maybe I reacted the way I did because Nord was here to beat me up, and my instinct was to charm him and disarm him since—as my father has reminded me since I was young—I'm so small that I won't win a fistfight. Instead, I have to use my wits.

That's a rational explanation. After all, I'm scrappy, but he's bigger.

Everywhere.

Maybe I just wanted to fuck with him. That's the kind of person I am. If you give me a choice between truth or dare, I'm team dare all the way. Truth would lead to shunning from my father. Better to risk my body than who I truly am, deep down inside.

Except now, when I'm by myself, some truths come out. Like ... I enjoyed what we did. I got off on it, harder than I have in a long time. Those ice-blue eyes of his are ... beautiful.

Mierda.

Now I'm finding my rival hot. Something about his expression—the hatred mixed with wanting, hating himself because he liked what I was doing, hating me because of how the race ended—made it even more delicious. At some point, his body took over so that there was nothing except the physical connection between us. We were together in a race car barreling down a track, full throttle, no brakes. The only choice was for him—us—to cross the finish line together.

I've never had any hangups about my sexuality. I *am* sexual, period. I've never worried about a label for it, although I've been with more women than men.

I rub my belly and turn over. I'm not one to self-analyze. So I blew Nord. Big deal. I enjoyed it.

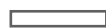
Nord and I have always been linked in the media. Growing up in karting together, constantly at each other's throats, taking turns as to who came in first ... we've been dancing around each other our entire lives.

But I've barely spoken to him. We're not friends. I don't know what he likes or what he thinks about anything other than racing.

Although now I know he likes the way I suck his cock. So I have one up on him, and I'm going to use that information against him.

All I have to do is get on the podium ahead of him so I can see that wild, angry look in his eyes. When I win on the track, I'll blow him again to soothe him.

It can be his consolation prize.



Except at the next race, in Abu Dhabi, I don't end up on the podium due to mechanical issues, coming in eighth to scrape out a few points. Nord's not on the podium, either, having been penalized five seconds for exceeding track limits—having his wheels outside the driving area too many times. When I look for him after the race, it seems like he's going out of his way to avoid me.

Have I gotten to him this much?

We're still both ahead of the rest of the field in terms of total points, but I'm getting daily lectures from my father. "You need to work on your reaction time," he says. "You can do better." And "Spend more time visualizing and walking the track so you can anticipate the turns."

As if I don't do those things already. I want to scream at him to stop coaching me—I know what to do.

But he's the veteran. I'm still new, even though I grew up karting. I do my best to not let papá get to me, but it's very difficult.

Nord is a much better distraction.

In April, at the Grand Prix in Baku, Azerbaijan, I will admit to watching Nord when he's walking ahead of me in his racing suit, his ass cradled in the material. Sometimes, when he turns, I can see the outline of his junk.

But we don't talk.

I spray him with champagne when I get first and he gets third, and I enjoy the way the suit looks plastered to his biceps and torso. "Miss me?" I whisper.

"You wish," is all he says.

When we're cleaned up and in the press conference, Nico Hilliard asks me what I think of the view of the Caspian Sea. I tell him the best view is Nord in my side-view mirror. Nord glares, but there's no time to find him in a hotel room before my team heads off in the jet to the next location.

At the Grand Prix in Hungary, I'm first and he's fourth. At the press conference, I say, "Maybe Nord can turn his car on."

We missed him on the podium.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’ll see me up ahead of you in Austria.”

These exchanges become a thing. I miss him, weirdly. It gets so bad that, late at night, I even think about sabotaging him in some way so that he’d have to confront me—except I’m not a cheater.

I also don’t invite anyone else into my bed. I haven’t since Bahrain.

That’s not like me. But no one’s felt right.

As we speed into summer break, after Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, at all of which Jasper has placed P1—damn him—there’s still been no opportunity to talk to him. But that’s going to change tonight.

The entire slate of racers meets before the Monaco Grand Prix for an annual party on a yacht owned by the founder of the largest oil company in the world. I’m sure his ethics are spotless. Since he’s the head of the organization that runs our sport, this is a mandatory appearance.

The summer evening is clement, even though it’s breezy out on the dock and the wind catches the hems of dresses and makes our tuxedo jackets flutter. It’s going to be nice onboard, like wealth makes the weather bend to it, rather than the other way around. We board the enormous yacht just before sunset, greeted by servers carrying trays of champagne.

But whoever decided it was a good idea to get all the teams together informally has a sick sense of humor, since the infighting is legendary. We’re the worst kind of gossips imaginable, and it tends to be very mean-spirited. If you can’t deal with snide comments, you shouldn’t be in motorsport.

It starts immediately with Bob Johnson, co-owner of Mayflower Racing, and Maxine Ackerman, team principal of SC Racing, calling back to the Azerbaijan Grand Prix ruling two years ago, and it gets worse from there. I should grab some snacks and enjoy the show like I’m watching a movie. Or a UFC cage fight.

The party extends over multiple levels of the ship, with most people on the various exterior decks or in the ballroom. I'm greeted with a slap on the back by the rookie Sagan Sachimo, who is basically an overgrown puppy just excited to be here. I don't blame him. This is as high-end as it gets. As he discusses the upcoming race, I can't help but look for Nord. He's supposed to be here. But even as I walk through the different crowds, I don't see him. I do see Edmund Fairfax, team principal of Lighthouse, and I greet Samantha.

Finally, I make my way up to the top deck and glance around. Nord's not here, either, and I can't deny my disappointment. Or the flare of anger. It's not like him to be late. If anyone's going to flout the rules, it'd be me.

I look back to shore. The gangway is being moved aside, and we're under way. I head back down to the large ballroom. Maybe I missed him.

The moment I reenter the room, I'm aware of Nord's presence. My skin prickles, and I know he's here.

It doesn't take me long to spot him. Nord is tall, but this room has high ceilings, so he's not ducking down like he does in some places. His pale hair is slicked back, and like almost all of the men here, he's in a tuxedo.

I whistle under my breath. He looks good.

It unnerves me, having him so close after not speaking for weeks. He takes a glass of sparkling water instead of champagne, because of course he does, and he lets his cool gaze travel across the room. Since he's number one in the points, you'd think everyone would be lining up to talk to him, but funnily enough, no one does. It's like he's so cold that everyone leaves him alone.

I wonder if he's lonely or if he likes it that way. I also wonder why I care.

It'd probably cause a scandal for me to walk over and talk to him. I weigh the options. Downing my drink, I excuse myself from the person next to me and make my way to Nord.

When Nord sees me, his impassive eyes betray nothing, but I don't miss the way his nostrils flare.

Huh. I affect him. I lift my chin, deciding whether to taunt him or proposition him. But before I can say anything, Billy James, the Australian driver for Mirabella, interrupts me. "Hey! Cristian!"

"Hola," I say.

Billy talks to me about the changes to the racecourse, and I can't get Nord's attention.

Maybe I should quit trying. The next time I look for Nord, he's disappeared.

We're seated for dinner at large tables throughout the yacht, and Nord isn't assigned a spot anywhere near me. I guess whoever created the seating chart didn't want to create an international incident if they could help it.

Oh well.

I wonder what would've happened if Nord and I hadn't been interrupted. If I could have gotten him to talk.

I don't know why I'm thinking so much about him. I should just go find some willing person and fuck them. Instead, I spend the evening chatting with Stefan Meyer, the cocky German driver sitting next to me, and being paraded before our major sponsors.

When we come back to port, I'm a little tipsy but not drunk, and I haven't taunted Nord at all. I find myself ... disappointed. Empty.

I'm about to depart the yacht when a hand in the crowd claps my shoulder. Expecting it to be one of the sponsors, I turn around with a huge grin, which fades immediately upon seeing it's Nord.

A different part of my body grins, though. And I'm not sure that's anything I want to analyze too closely right now.

I should've known it was him by the waft of cologne that I like so much. We're surrounded by people, many of whom are

taking notice that he and I are talking to each other, since Nord doesn't really talk to anyone.

"Can I help you?" I ask. I shouldn't be so haughty, given that I came here tonight intending to talk with him. I can't explain it. This guy always brings out the asshole in me.

Nord inhales sharply. "Sorry, this was a stupid idea."

"What was? Saying hello to me?"

He nods. "Yes. Never mind."

Nord turns to walk away, but I put a hand on his bicep and spin him. "You're not getting away with that. What's up?"

"I was just wondering ..." He takes a deep breath and bends to speak in my ear, and his voice is barely a murmur. "If you've thought about Bahrain. Since then."

Every fucking night. But I don't give out truths that can hurt me. Plus, I never want him to feel like he has one up on me. I'll take every advantage to win on the track. I give him a cocky grin. "Nope."

His face starts to fall, but then he remembers his backbone, and he sneers, "Bullshit." I think I hear a camera click. But they don't know what we're talking about.

I shrug. "Just because it was different for you ..."

He shakes his head. "No. You simply don't have the guts to admit it. Never mind. I'm not sure why I bothered you."

His admission does something to me. I want to talk more with him.

I want to get him naked again.

Now I'm doing a mental scan for places we could go to be together. There has to be somewhere we could hide. Maybe on this yacht. It's huge, and there are so many bathrooms and rooms in general. It's like a hotel on the water. It's going to take some time to clear everyone off. Or maybe we make plans to meet up at a hotel.

But before I can open my mouth, he turns and walks down the gangway, and I'm left thinking of all the things I should've

said to him.

6 / JASPER

IT WAS RECKLESS. I shouldn't have approached Rivera in front of the leaders of our sport. In front of other racers. In front of the media and bloggers.

Because I'm already getting social media alerts where I'm tagged in photos of the two of us, and I don't want to read the captions.

I have nothing to say to Rivera. I do my talking on the track, and that's all.

Except ... I did want to speak with him. I want to know if I'm not alone in the things I've been thinking for weeks now. Whether he was as affected by our hookup as I was—having his bare body wedge its way into every daydream that isn't related to racing ... and some that are. Whether he's thought about the taste of our tongues entwined anywhere near as often as I have.

Whether he's wondering if we can do it again.

And that's the point. I want to do it again. I want to get Cristian Rivera naked and make him come. I want his mouth on me. I have no idea why that fucking Spaniard is commanding my thoughts, but he is.

It's nothing new for him to dominate my thoughts on track. I'm always trying to outmaneuver him to beat him. Most of the time I *do* outmaneuver him. I *do* beat him.

But now he's also worming his way into my brain for other reasons, and that's troubling.

Reasons like labeling my sexuality.

I leave the boat, my security trailing behind me, and walk along the water's edge. I need to talk to someone, and there are very few people I trust. Before I overthink it, I fumble with my phone and call my brother, Erik, who is something of a night owl.

"Jasper?" he asks. "What's going on?"

I'm quiet for a moment before replying. "I'm coming from a party for work. I just needed to talk to someone from home."

I don't know who else to turn to. I've been struggling for weeks now, and I'm coming to some answers I'm not totally comfortable with—but I don't think there's any other conclusion. Looking back on my life, some things now seem inevitable.

I can hear his smile. "You can always call me."

"Yes. I know." I take a breath. "I've been having all kinds of weird thoughts these days."

I pause again to gather my words, but he's used to me and waits silently.

Over the weeks since Rivera gave me the best blow job of my life, I've been consumed not only with the idea of beating him. I've been consumed with *him*.

What I really want to ask my brother is what would happen if I'm not straight. If I were to come out to anyone, it would be him, since for my entire life, it's been Erik and Jasper. He's the only one who's understood me, even though we're very, very different.

"How do you make decisions for your future?" I ask finally, not able to voice the questions I want to. Like, what does it mean that I kissed Rivera? That I want to do it again. That I find myself in team meetings thinking about the curves of his face and the shape of his body. Or that when I go to press conferences, instead of being annoyed by him, I find him sexy.

Erik clears his throat. "Well, we have to take into account our position—in the family, in the eyes of the nation. So when you think about your future, you have to concern yourself with

your legacy. Why the introspection tonight? Did someone say something to you? Are you thinking of giving up racing?"

And not be able to see Rivera? Or only see him on a screen? "No, not at all. I guess I'm just wondering what happens after it."

"You can always do the traditional thing and start a charity."

"Charity work isn't a bad idea," I concede. There are so many worthy ones. But would I be brave enough to champion a cause that truly matters to me rather than the ones I'm supposed to care about?

And that's making me think of words I've never dared to call myself. Like *queer*. Because I'm pretty sure I'm not simply Cristian-sexual, even though he's the one who has forced me to examine my own feelings.

"What's really going on, Jasper?" he asks after I've been silent longer than usual.

"I'm feeling a little lost," I admit.

How can I not have realized that I liked guys? In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm gay. Just plain gay. Looking back on my sexual experiences with women, none were very satisfying—whereas when I think about Cristian, I'm filled with a consuming need of a sort I could never have imagined.

Which is inconvenient, to say the least. There are no gay men in my family. At least none who have been out, although I imagine the historical rumors are true.

"Everyone goes through periods when they feel lost," Erik says. "You don't have to figure everything out right now. You can take some time to find yourself. You're still young."

"Hmm. Maybe." I talk with him a little bit more before saying good night, still with a nagging feeling inside that something is off.

What I know to be true is that I've jerked off time and again thinking about the look on Rivera's face when he sucked my cock. It wasn't just a taunting expression—it was sexy. He

wanted me. He was letting me see what got him riled up, and that got me hard. It was more than I could handle, honestly.

I've taken to fleeing when I see Rivera, so I can go stroke off in the bathroom before anyone notices my erection in my racing suit.

As I head from the marina to my hotel, I decide that there's nothing I can do about Rivera. I'm not going to be able to touch him again, so I need to put him out of my mind and beat him on the track.



While we've been pretty lucky with conditions in most places this year—except for the notoriously rainy Spa, Belgium, of course—it decides to dump down at the Melbourne Grand Prix in July.

Driving on the slippery track with the heavy-duty wet-weather tires sucks. Visibility is down to virtually nothing, no matter how many transparent tear-offs I go through. Everything becomes blurry, which is frightening when you're going 200 kilometers per hour or more.

Somehow I find a relatively dry racing line on the track and therefore have decent traction. Even though I started P11, by the time we begin the last lap, I've made it all the way up to P2. "Only Stefan Meyer in front of you, and the interval between you is down to three seconds," Hendricks informs me.

"Understood," I say, excitement thrumming through me despite my fatigue from the race. I just need to hang on, which I know I can do.

We're coming up on the final turn of the last lap, headed to the finish line, when I have to brake fast and swerve sharply, because Meyer has plowed into the wall. I manage not to spin, and I straighten the car, avoiding him. I'm across the line before I realize, as the checkered flag waves for me, that his DNF means I'm now P1.

Except this isn't how I wanted to win.

When I get out of the car at parc fermé, the ambulances are on the course. I can hear the quiet murmurs of the crowd and the whispers of people around me, all trying to get information on Meyer's status.

"Is Stefan all right?" I ask the person nearest me, who is Ben Carpenter, the race engineer for Arete, Meyer's team.

His face is drained of blood, and he's watching the video replay, shaking his head. "I—I don't know. I hope so. Dammit, I really hope so. Oh, god."

Fifteen minutes later, when I step onto the podium, we still don't have answers. While crashes are common in open-wheel racing, serious injuries are relatively rare. Word that Meyer is being helicoptered to the hospital puts a damper on any celebration. It's not until much later that we all learn this is a career-ending injury for Meyer, who will need to use a wheelchair the rest of his life.

That's one of the risks we take every time we go out on the track: that we might not make it off in the same condition—or at all. While it's a choice we all make willingly, it still feels awful when something bad happens to someone I know.



It's October, and as the racing season nears its end, Rivera and I are neck and neck. I have more points. He has more podiums, weirdly. And our teams are only a few points apart. This final race will decide the championship. It also affects all the engineers and behind-the-scenes people who put this on. Thousands of jobs and incomes.

So, no pressure.

My parents come to Singapore to watch the race, and I know the cameras are on them in their special box designated for royalty.

The engines are too loud for my mother, and she always tells me she wishes I'd picked a proper sport like polo or

rowing, even though she let my nannies take me to karting races. My dad secretly likes the noise, I think, but he's under my mother's thumb.

And my grandma's. Since she's the queen.

I'm the younger son of the youngest daughter, and my mum has four siblings, each with children, so there are more than a dozen people before me in line to the throne. I'm not becoming king of Sweden. My cousin Gunnar probably will; he's my oldest uncle's eldest child. He's getting married this winter, and most of our recent familial conversations have had to do with arrangements for the wedding. Even with all the attention Gunnar and his fiancée are getting in the press, there are still eyes on me. Everything I do reflects on the crown. Hence why I have my outbursts in private, if at all.

But after that uncomfortable but soaring experience in Rivera's hotel room, when I let my anger erupt and let someone else see it, I've been wanting to do it again ... and that's even more uncomfortable.

I've never been that way. I've always kept everything concealed. Like an iceberg: no one sees the majority of me that exists beneath the cool, glacial surface. I'm supposed to not have any reactions. No feelings. I am cold and apart from everyone.

I only wish I knew what to do with all the emotions coursing through my veins.

What's worse is, Rivera seems to know, and he seems to be paying more attention to me. For the past few races, wherever I am, he shows up. If I'm outside on pit row, he walks by. With a news crew, sometimes, unless the news crew is with me.

Our respective fan bases are at a fever pitch, fed by the reporters. They keep bringing up our rivalry, and I do my best to ignore him. I mean *it*. I ignore our rivalry. I don't need to ignore Cristian Rivera, because he doesn't matter to me. There's no way I'm attracted to him, either. He's the bane of my existence. That's all.

I'm a liar, and I know it.

The rivalry isn't just because we're so close in points. Rivera's been saying shit that the media has been loving. Like "Nord's going to be topped, and I'm the one to do it. Just wait and see." "I'm going to strip away Nord's advantages." And so on.

All I hear is *topped, stripped, do it*. All I hear is Rivera offering me sex.

Of course, we're required to talk to the media. So when they ask me for my responses to his schoolyard taunts, I give the canned answers taught to me by racing PR and years of training in the palace.

Except for one time. One time, I couldn't help it. It was too much—his face, his voice, his eyes, his mouth. I rolled my eyes at gossip-hungry Nico Hilliard, who seemed delighted at the prospect of a sincere reaction. "Rivera will get what's coming to him," I sneered. "He's nothing but a bunch of talk. He needs to put his mouth to better use."

And now Rivera won't let me forget it. He refers to it in backhanded ways and lets me know that there's still tension between us.

"For god's sake," I exploded that day. "Why is everyone so obsessed with Cristian Rivera? He's nothing. I'm the one who's going to be champion."



Except today, after sixty-two rounds on the Singapore track, I am not the winner; Rivera is. That means we each have two world championships.

It also means I'm going to double down and win next year. I'm going to up my training. I'm going to improve my reaction time.

And I am *not* going to let Rivera get under my skin again.

My parents pose for pictures but leave without saying much. I mean, I came in second, in a sport they don't really

support. I guess if I'd come in first, it would be acceptable, but second? No.

That evening, I lie in my hotel room in the Marina Bay Sands hotel. I know that Rivera's staying in the suite above mine, because I overheard it when he checked in. Part of me wants to go up there, but that's madness. I do not need to see him. I do not need to talk to him. I don't need to interact with him in any way.

If I go up there, I will want to have the same experience as last time. I will want his mouth on my dick to make up for him winning. And that's a fucked up way of thinking.

I need to not let him control me.

Instead, I spend too long watching reruns of the most popular show about racing, pausing repeatedly to replay Rivera's comments like I'm reviewing race tape. Fixating on the way he grins at the camera, listening to the things he says, absorbing his actions. My heart does a weird little flip when I see him, every time, and I want to tell it to knock it off. My heart does not need to be having a reaction to him.

I need to hate him. Or at least I need to think of him as I always have: an annoying little shit.

But as I watch him on the screen, my hand goes to my dick, and I'm thinking about the way he looked with his mouth on my cock, the way he was completely into it. All these months later, god help me, I want him still.

Hell, he's just messing with me. Rivera always messes with me, and I need to not let him. This is why I came in second. After I stroke myself to a climax thinking of his face, I look at the mess on my hand with disgust. I need to get my act together.

Thirty minutes later, I've taken a shower to clean up, and I'm restless. I decide to go for a walk. Most of the time, I can't—I'll get mobbed—but it's late at night, and if I put on a hat and don't wear team colors and stay on hotel grounds, I should be safe.

I step out of my room in jeans and a hoodie, telling the bodyguards in the hallway where I'm going and that I want some privacy. I agree to call them if I need help and push the button to call the lift. When the door opens, Rivera is inside, dressed similarly to me.

I stare at him. I take a step back, intending to get the next car, but he hits the button to keep the door open. "Get the fuck in here, Nord."

I sigh and step in, conscious of the security cameras. I stand toward the front, facing the doors, while Rivera is behind me. But I can tell he's smirking, like I have some sort of sixth sense.

After a few seconds, he asks, "Miss me?" I can hear the mirth in his voice.

I snort. "No."

"I don't believe you," he says. And he steps closer, whispering in my ear. "Come find me in the Gardens by the Bay. In the Supertree Grove."

I want to tell him no. I want to tell him to fuck off.

Instead, I nod.

I take off the moment the doors open, striding fast, but he doesn't follow me. I hear him saying hi to some people in the lobby.

No one says anything to me, which is the way I like it.

I step out into the warm night. I don't need the hoodie, but it's useful as camouflage.

Instead of beelining to where he said to meet, I take a roundabout path, walking through the hotel's huge grounds, past the pool and along the waterfront. I pass a few couples on their way from or to a late dinner or event. When I get to the gardens, I can see why Rivera suggested this location. There are tons of places to hide. I pass one couple making out.

Am I here to make out with Rivera? Part of me thinks I'm here to punch him. I sigh and scrub my face and almost turn to leave.

Except it's a beautiful night, and even with the lights around me, I can see some stars. The scent of flowers is in the air, and it's really damned romantic.

Is that what I want? Romance?

No. I want to fuck him.

Rivera isn't the first man I've been attracted to. He's just the first man I've done anything about it with. And I want to do more.

I hear footsteps crunching over gravel, and I turn around and Rivera's there. He's shorter than me, and his lips look plump in the moonlight.

Why do I want to kiss him? Why do I want to shove him up against a tree and fuck him? I want his back scraping against the bark, but I also want him howling in pleasure.

Rivera's hair is slicked back, less wild than it normally is, probably due to a recent shower. Which reminds me of the last time I came across him just after he took a shower—wearing a towel and nothing but. How he kissed me and tasted my come.

"Hey," he says, interrupting my thoughts.

"Hey." I shove my hands in my pockets. I'm not used to talking with him. I'm used to talking *about* him. About his *racing*, more like. I open my mouth to say something more, not sure what, but he grabs both of my upper arms and kisses me.

I want it, and I was ready for it, but I'm still startled, and it takes me a moment to react. Me, with the fastest reaction time on the field, so I'm always the quickest off the line because I can put a pedal to the metal faster than any person currently racing in any league.

Then I'm kissing him back hard. Because this is what I want. I want to attack him. I want to devour him. Maybe punch him and then do some very bad things to him while he writhes in pain-pleasure.

It feels like our tongues are daggers. Like we're trying to stab each other.

I'm not thinking about sword fights. I'm not.

We break apart, panting. I want to say something to him. Anything. I'm not sure what.

I open my mouth, but instead of words, I find myself kissing him again, desperately. Our hands are all over each other's bodies. I'm gripping his ass, and he's grinding against me. Part of me wants to shove him away, but the other part is in total bliss. I want to get off with him, and then I want to kick his ass.

This is so fucked up.

He's pushing against me, and I'm letting him. Rivera backs me up until my ass is against a low brick wall. I sit on it and spread my legs, and he slides between them, his dick rubbing against mine, my hands tugging him to me. His hands grip my biceps so tightly it hurts. He's going to leave bruises.

I think I'm going to leave marks on him, too, and a sick part of me likes that.

"What are you here for?" I finally ask when we pause, panting.

I can see Rivera's smirk in the moonlight. "I won the championship. I figured you deserved a prize, too."

"Oh, fuck you." I move to leave, but he grabs my hips, holding me in place.

"Yes. Let's do that."

And before I can react—again—he's undoing my pants and shoving his hand down there, finding me hard. My jerk-off session earlier did nothing to reduce my response when I'm around the real thing. I'm pissed and turned on, and I want to hit him.

But I also want to get off.

Rivera spits in his hand and starts jacking me, and it's just this side of painful. It's also bliss.

Normally, my brain is taking in every input and calculating the best move in the shortest period of time. Usually my

calculations are spot-on.

Right now, my internal computer is broken or offline. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm overwhelmed, and I want to just *feel*.

This is what Rivera does to me. He makes me want to feel.

“You know you want this,” he purrs. “I do, too.”

If his damned Spanish accent weren't so alluring, I'd tell him to shut up. His words are annoying as hell, but the way he delivers them makes them hotter than an engine. Hotter than the sun.

Rivera shuttles his hand up and down my cock, using my leaking precome to lube me up, and I'm swearing, mostly in Swedish, but some in English. “Fuck, fuck. No. Yes. Fuck,” I pant, and after an embarrassingly short time, I'm coming all over his hand.

He pulls on me just a little too long, then smirks and licks his palm clean. Before I can say or do anything, he spins on his heel and leaves me there in the garden in the moonlight, dick out and spent, yet again wondering what the hell just happened. Or more importantly, *why* it just happened.

7 / CRISTIAN

I MEANT to stay away from him.

I failed. Oh well.

As I walk back toward my hotel room, my dick harder than an exhaust pipe and the taste of him on my tongue, I wonder what came over me.

I don't like Nord. I don't want to talk to him. And yet the look on his face when he's coming is one that I want to imprint on my memory. He doesn't look at me like he hates me. He looks at me like I'm astonishing.

I grin, kicking a pebble as I walk. Before I go far, someone grabs my arms and spins me around.

While my instinct is to defend myself, I know immediately it's Nord. His eyes are wild.

He kisses me roughly, not saying anything.

Guess we weren't done.

I like the way he kisses me. Like he's angry. Like I've insulted his family and pissed on his grave. He kisses me like he can't stop doing it, like he hates himself for it but does it anyway. I know the feeling, because that's how I feel, too.

And while I liked having the last word earlier—getting him off and leaving—I'm not hating this.

Nord pushes me into a dark alcove. It's exactly what we need. No one's nearby anyway, but the extra privacy is good.

Before I can blink, he's unzipping my pants and, madre de dios, he's dropping to his knees. He pauses. "When's the last

time you were tested for STIs? I'm negative."

"STIs?"

"Have you been tested for sexually transmitted infections?"

"Yes," I say. "I am negative. I've been tested since the last time I was with someone." We are tested a lot for work, but given my reputation for sleeping around, it makes sense that he would ask. What he doesn't know is that I haven't been with anyone since that first time with him.

"All right." His voice goes husky, and he braces his shoulders.

Then Jasper Nord licks a long stripe up my hard cock, and I shudder and swear. He's gripping my hips tight. He swallows me down, his teeth grazing my length, and something about the edge of pain sets me off.

I groan loudly as he sucks on my tip. He uses his hand to stroke me as he bobs up and down. Then he fondles my balls, and I take over stroking while he sucks on me. It seems like only seconds before I come hard.

Nord doesn't pull away, and I feel his throat working. When he's done, he gets up, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, brushes off his knees, and turns to go.

"Espérate. Wait," I say.

He stops, his back to me, then looks over his shoulder, not saying anything.

"Um." I fidget. "You were pretty good at that." I don't know what else to say.

"I'm good at everything." Again, he starts to leave.

"Stop, coño. Fuck. Give me a minute." I hastily right my pants and wipe my hands on my thighs. Nord waits, not so patiently. "I just wanted to ask what the fuck we were doing," I finally say.

He bursts out laughing. I've never heard him laugh like this before. It's a nice sound, joyous, not cynical. "Of all the

things I thought you'd say ...” He shakes his head. “I have no bloody clue what we're doing. All I know is I can't seem to help myself.”

“Do you want to keep doing it?”

Nord's look turns serious, and I can see the twitch of his jaw in the moonlight, now that he's stepped out of the dark alcove. For a long moment, he doesn't answer. Finally, he says, “I don't think we should.”

“That wasn't what I asked. I asked if you wanted to.”

“It's hard to find someone who isn't going to blab to the press.” He gives me a wry grin. “You're not going to.”

I shake my head. “Neither are you. But, again, do you want to keep doing this?”

“Again, we shouldn't.”

“You not answering the question tells me you want to.”

“Yes,” he whisper-shouts. “I bloody want to keep doing this. But it's a bad idea. Anyone could spot us. I don't want to be part of some kind of sex scandal. It would be very uncomfortable to explain to my team and the fans what we are doing.”

“True. But what if they don't find out.”

“They will. These things always have a way of coming out.”

“I don't know,” I say slowly. “I bet most people fuck without it becoming public knowledge.”

He startles. “Is that what you want to do? Fuck?”

I grin. “Why not?”

Nord shakes his head and lets out a gusty breath. “I just can't with you sometimes, you know?”

“Well, you're not brave enough to answer the question, so I will. I want to do this with you. I hate you, but I also think you're sexy.” That's a lie. The hate part, not the sexy part.

“Piss off.”

“I ... how you say? I call it like it is. So if you want to get off while on tour next year, anytime you like, let me know.” I don’t know why I’m offering myself so freely, but I can’t seem to stop.

Not that I really want to try.

“Cristian,” Nord says, and I think it’s the first time I’ve ever heard him use my first name. He pronounces it correctly, and that warms me inside. But his next words give me a chill that has nothing to do with the weather. “It’s a really bad idea. I don’t think we should do it.”

Jasper turns and leaves.

I call after him, “But you want me, right?”

“Yes,” he mutters. “Still a bad idea, though.”

I grin at my feet.

Too bad it’s the end of the season. I’ll just have to wait until next year.



When I get home to Spain, I decide that in addition to my usual off-season training, I’m going to learn English better. I took it in school, but I need to improve. I’ll never learn any other language, like, say, Swedish.

So, for the foreseeable future, I have a tutor come to me every day after my trainer. This will help me talk to the press better. No other reason.

8 / CRISTIAN

IN JANUARY, I'm skiing in Gstaad with my family, and who do I see on the lift in front of me but Jasper Nord. I know it's him under the goggles and puffer coat. I'd recognize that white-blond hair anywhere.

I study him. When he turns, I see those distinctive cheekbones. And his lips. I have to talk with him.

At the top of the hill, I ski over to him and turn at the last minute to spray him with snow. "Going last down the hill?"

He looks at me in surprise, wiping snow off his sleeve. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm skiing. Unlike the terrible moves you appear to be doing."

I don't know why I'm trying to provoke him. He actually is good at skiing—at least based on what I've seen on TV. Not that I've watched a documentary about the Swedish royal family that featured them doing winter sport, including him skiing down hills, all graceful curves and swaying hips. Or YouTube videos on him. Much.

He just bugs me. There's something about those piercing eyes and that shock of hair. About the arrogant way he looks down at me. So I, of course, want to poke him until he bursts. That leads me to think about poking him another way.

But he scoffs and goes to head down the run, following whoever he is with.

"Wait," I say. "Ski with me." The words are coming out easier thanks to all the time I've spent with my tutor. Does

Jasper notice?

He shakes his head. “No, I’m here with my family. My brother is on the slope already, and I’m sure he’s wondering where I am.”

“Then have a drink with me tonight,” I blurt out.

He looks at me as if I have racing flags hanging from my ears. “What? No. Absolutely not.”

I must look hurt, because he seems to soften. “You don’t truly want to hang out with me.”

I shrug. “I’m sick of my family. Come join me instead. I would enjoy being around you again.”

He rolls his eyes and studies me for a very long moment. Finally, he says, “Your English is a little better.”

“It’s always been good.” Although it hasn’t, and his praise makes me feel warm inside like I’ve drunk a shot of whiskey. I know I’m a hard worker—that’s how I’ve gotten this far in life—but I never thought Jasper’s opinion would matter so much to me.

“Hmm.”

“We can talk more English tonight,” I say.

I can see the instant he relents, and it makes my heart soar. “Where are you going to be?” he asks. I tell him the address of my chalet, and he enters it into the notes on his phone.

“Will you come?” I feel like I’m in school again. “After dinner.”

Jasper sighs. “Maybe. Where is your family going to be?”

“My parents have their own space. I wanted my privacy.” In case I hooked up with anyone.

Except I haven’t done so, because I’ve been so hung up on the man in front of me. Why do I want so badly to spend time with him?

Because I’ve dreamt about his face. Because I want to know if the two times we’ve been together were flukes or if

they were as hot as I remember. Because I want to find out what would happen if we actually got in a bed together. Because I want to know if he's thought about me as much as I've thought about him. He's certainly been the reason for every English lesson, although my father seemed to believe me when I said I was doing it to sound better in the press.

Spending that much time on Jasper isn't something I'm proud of. I usually occupy my brain with engines and ways to go faster. But when I'm jerking off, his hot, tight ass comes to mind. And I'm not going to pass up a chance at the real thing.

"You will come," I say.

He groans. "Either I'm going to punch you, or I'm going to fuck you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Okay."

He shivers.

I lean in to whisper. "Meet me there at nine."



When I get back to my chalet, I race around, cleaning up my mess. Sure, there are cleaning staff, but they won't come until tomorrow, and I want this place to be nice for Jasper.

I don't know why I care.

Then I take a shower and fuss over my appearance. I know I look good in general, but for some reason, I want to be irresistible to him. I shave carefully and dress in white jeans and a tan long-sleeve T-shirt under a dark tan cashmere sweater.

I order in snacks and drinks. The kitchen is stocked already, but I order more. I want to have whatever he wants.

And my family promised that they aren't coming over tonight. This will be only me and Jasper. I don't know if we're going to beat each other up or beat each other off.

Either one is a possibility.

Once everything is ready, I pace around the room, wondering if he's going to show. Chastising myself for being pathetic about it, but not able to stop.

I want to see him. That's the bottom line.

I want to spend time with Jasper in a place where no one will catch us, so I don't have to explain why I'm hanging out with him—whether or not we're wearing clothes. I want to see what he's like with no one around to tell us who we're supposed to be.

Because I think I might like him. I think I might *understand* him.

Then I talk myself out of it, convinced he isn't going to show. That I've gone to all this trouble for nothing. That this was a bad idea. That I shouldn't get involved with my rival. That I just want the unknown or the forbidden. That I should leave—

There's a knock on the door, and my heart leaps out of my chest. *He's here.* I smooth my hair, breathless.

"Hi," I say, opening the door wide with no concern for the cold air coming in.

"Hi," he says, stamping his feet to get the snow off and blowing on his gloved hands. He waves at a black car behind him, which I assume is his driver.

"Come in."

Jasper's eyes are bright and clear, and his pale cheeks are tinged with red from the cold. He's wearing stylish winter clothes like a good Swede, and the snow seems like his natural habitat.

He's *delicious*.

Jasper steps inside and looks around. I don't know why he looks impressed. He lives in a bloody castle or something.

Still, the chalet is nice, I'll admit. Like a fancy chocolate box.

"Where are you staying?" I ask.

He gestures over his shoulder. “Not far. The Alpina.”

I nod. “This is a little more private.”

“Right, no one knows if you’re coming or going here.”

We stand awkwardly, looking at each other. I have my hands in my pockets, and so does he. I half expect him to kiss me. That’s what we’ve been doing when we’re by ourselves, after all. But he doesn’t. I couldn’t say why I don’t. I just don’t.

Instead, I remember my manners. “Would you like something to drink?”

Jasper lets out a breath, and I think he’s relieved that I broke the ice. “Sure.”

We walk over to the liquor cabinet, and I see a brand of schnapps I recognize. “That?”

“You want to drink schnapps with a Swede?” Jasper raises his eyebrows. “Sure, but it’s your funeral.”

He pulls out two glasses and pours each of us a small drink. We down them, and he pours us each another, which we also drink fast.

I think we both need it. We need to loosen up, because while the tension between us is normal, tonight the awkwardness is pissing me off. I’ve seen the brief slivers of time when he’s all soft and lax, when he laughs in a nice way. And that’s what I want to get to—him like that. I hope he can’t tell I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.

I step forward to kiss him, but he presses a hand against my chest. He makes a soft noise, perhaps a groan. “Wait.”

I freeze.

“I mean, yes, we can do that, but ...” He shrugs. “Want to play cards or something?”

“Cards?”

He nods.

Not what I was expecting. But okay. Let’s go with that.

I'M NOT sure how I came to be sitting on the floor before a fire in Switzerland with Cristian Rivera, drinking schnapps and playing cards, but here we are.

Naturally, we're both so competitive that we're playing an extra-cutthroat game of go fish. We played poker at first, but I won too many hands, so he asked to switch to another game.

I suggested go fish, thinking he'd refuse, but he didn't.

Now that I'm on my fifth drink, everything is soft and hazy around the edges, and Cristian is kind of, I don't know. Fun?

He's funny.

He's also fascinating to look at. He has this mop of dark hair. Over the years he's had different haircuts, from it being shorn close to his head to falling below his shoulders. Right now it's curly and lush. It suits him. It's kind of impish. And so is he.

And what the hell am I doing thinking of Cristian Rivera as impish?

It's weird. We're not friends. We don't talk. We don't do anything but taunt each other—or make out and get each other off.

But I'm fine with that.

Also, somewhere after the last time he sucked me off, he became Cristian, not Rivera, and I can't seem to think of him as anything else.

“It’s getting late,” I say while shuffling the deck. I may be more drunk than I realized. “I should go.” I think I can find my place. I’m sure I can. Wait, I can get my driver to come back.

“Just stay here. You don’t want to go out into the snow.” Cristian blinks his big, beautiful eyes at me.

I snort. “I’m used to the cold.”

“Of course you are, you ... you ... *Swede*.” He touches my thigh.

I laugh. “Is that supposed to be some sort of insult?”

“Not at all. It’s the truth.”

Only now he’s looking at me funny, and I realize he may be drunk, too.

“Can we talk about that first night?” Cristian finally asks.

I don’t need to ask him which one, but I do anyway. “What do you mean?”

He gives me a look. “In my hotel in Bahrain? The first race this year?”

“After you intentionally pushed me off the track?”

Cristian groans and wipes his face. “For the last time, I apologized, and even though it was my fault, it was still just a racing incid—”

“Yes,” I say softly. “I think about it all the time. And Singapore.”

He takes his hand off my thigh and picks at the rug. “Do you think about what would happen if we let ourselves, you know...”

He gave me crap when I tried to discuss this with him in Monaco. Now the tables have turned. So I shake my head. “I don’t know. What are you asking?” Of course I know what he’s getting at, but he’s such an asshole, I’m going to make him say it.

He sighs, exasperated. “Never mind.”

Ugh. Fine. I'll let him win this one. "Are you asking what would happen if we slept together?"

Cristian raises an eyebrow. "I don't want to sleep."

"Yes, I know. The expression doesn't mean actual sleep. I don't know it in Spanish."

"You want to fuck. Is that what you want to do, Sr. Nord?"

I shrug. The liquor is pulsing through my veins. My whole body tingles. This is a dangerous conversation.

I live my life in danger. We face death every time we go onto the track. But this conversation feels like it has the potential to cause more damage than anything else I've done this year.

"I bet you wouldn't, even if you want to," he scoffs.

"Do what?"

"Fuck me."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not letting you bait me into that."

"Bait?"

"Like fish ... never mind. I'm not letting you trick me into sleeping with you on some kind of dare or bet."

"So I'm right: you wouldn't do it."

I wipe my face with my hands. I can tell that my cheeks are burning red. "You are so infuriating. Everything is a competition."

"It is with you, too," he challenges.

"This is true," I have to admit.

"But you ran away from that kiss—"

To keep him from saying any more, I lean over and press my lips to his. Unlike our kiss in Singapore that was like a knife fight or the one in Bahrain that was like a battle, this one is soft.

I start to pull back, because he's not responding, but he grabs me behind my neck, tugs me to him, and kisses me so

slowly and carefully that I'm not sure what to do.

He tastes like the liquor we've been drinking and also snow and sunshine. I inhale and take in some fragrant soap or cologne, plus the warm scent of his body.

Before I know what's happening, he's straddling me, and we're making out in front of the fireplace. He's grinding down on me, and I'm now kissing him like we have all night, and bloody hell. I may be too drunk for this.

Except I'm not. I'm goofy-limbed, but I know what I'm doing. I can pull away. I can stop.

I don't want to.

His tongue is essentially making love to my mouth now, and I'm doing the same to him, and Cristian's hands slide up under my sweater and shirt to my bare skin, and it feels really bloody good.

And suddenly I'm so horny I can't hold back. It doesn't matter that I've never fucked a guy. I want to do this with him.

"Get undressed," I growl. He startles, then grins like he's won a championship and shucks off his sweater and shirt in one movement.

I stare at him.

I've seen his chest before. Lots of times. We're always having to change into T-shirts for sponsors or whatever. And every driver has a pretty cut torso. We have to, between being lean enough and strong enough to fit into the car.

This is different, though. It's just the two of us here, so I don't have to pretend to look away. I can appreciate his beauty.

He tugs at my sweater, and I pull it off, then hastily unbutton my dress shirt. He shakes his head, because I'm always more dressed up than other people if I'm not in team gear. But he leans down and latches his mouth to my neck, and it feels so good.

"No marks," I say.

He nods and moves down to my nipple, and I groan.

How did he know I'm sensitive there? I didn't know it. But what he's doing is making me harder than ever.

With a wicked smile, Cristian presses me back into the rug, and with fumbling fingers, we unhook my belt and undo my pants.

So. We're really doing this. I knew we were going to the moment I saw him on the slope, but there's usually a difference between my fantasies and reality. I'm liking reality quite a bit right now.

My hard dick springs out, and Cristian studies it. I open my mouth to tell him he doesn't have to do anything, but he leans down and licks all the way up the underside. I arch off the ground. "Holy shit. Do that again."

I can't believe I'm ordering him around. I can't believe he has his hands on my bare skin.

I can't believe I'm finally back where I've craved to be: with Cristian doing his messy best to suck my brain out through my cock ... and I must say, his enthusiasm is certainly a turn-on.

So is whatever the hell he's doing with his tongue.

I thrust a little too hard—who could blame me?—and he gags and pulls off, wiping his mouth. "Give me a moment."

I shake my head and lean down, tugging at his pants. He gets the idea and undoes them, then lies down next to me. His head is on his arm, and I'm up on one elbow, exploring his body with my other hand. He's so warm. And smooth. He's got very little body hair, and what he does have is groomed nicely.

I grip his cock the way I like to be held. Now it's his turn to groan. He's leaking precome, and I move my hand over his tip to gather some of it and use it as lube. Then I add some of my own spit and start stroking him. "Is this what you want, you menace?" I growl.

"No more menace than you."

That makes me laugh. "True."

He nods, and then he seems to snap out of a daze and reaches for me so we're stroking each other off.

I lean back and groan again. "This is so hot."

"De acuerdo." Something about his Spanish accent gets to me. I love the way he says the vowels. "Come to my bed."

I follow him into the bedroom, where we slide between the cool sheets and the warm duvet. He pushes me onto my back and gets between my legs, lining his cock up with mine.

We're frothing together, hot and slick, and I'm hit with overwhelming need—not just for my own orgasm, but to see him let loose.

Between the friction and how aroused I still am from his blow job, I'm going to come quickly, and I warn him. He doubles down, and now it seems we're racing to get off faster.

Because of course we are. Everything we do needs to be *faster*.

Fuck it. I let go. I come, and it's with a shout and then almost a sob. I don't know how long it goes on, but he's jetting against me, coming hard, too.

Then he collapses next to me.

We're both panting.

Oh my god. What have we done?

And why do I feel closer to him than I've ever felt to any other person?

“HOW LONG ARE you here in Gstaad?” I ask, once we’re both back to normal. Well, we’re cleaned up and lounging naked in my bed. A fire flickers in the gas stove in here, too.

Why does this feel so comfortable?

I have no idea, but I know I like it when he envelops me in his arms. I like how I feel comforted.

I’ll never admit that aloud. But I can admit it to myself.

“I’m staying a few more days,” Jasper says. “You?”

“Same.” I clear my throat. I’m proud that intensive study has improved my English, but it doesn’t make it easier to talk to him. “Do you want to meet up again?”

His face falls. “I’m not sure ...”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.” I don’t know why I said that. It would crush me if he didn’t want to do this again. Not that I’m being melodramatic or anything.

Because it felt like more than sex. It also felt new and exciting in a way that sex hasn’t felt since the first time I got laid. It’s been more about the thrill of the hunt for a long time. Once I pursue and capture, there isn’t much more for me.

With Jasper, I felt a little like *I* was being hunted. Also, it felt so deliciously forbidden. Jasper and I aren’t supposed to be together. Our roles are defined. We’re supposed to be rivals, even enemies.

We’re not supposed to be friends, and we’re certainly not supposed to be lovers. That doesn’t fit the narrative that has

been created for us. That we've helped create, I admit.

"It's not that. I do want to." He shakes his head. "I have no idea why, but you're getting to me. I like what we do when we're together. It doesn't feel this way with anyone else."

"No," I say quietly. "It doesn't."

"But I don't know how much I can get away from my family. We have to pose for *Hello!* magazine or some such thing. I don't have much free time."

"You should be able to do what you want on vacation."

"What a nice fantasy. I don't want to answer questions from them or the press. But I have to be realistic. It's one thing to say I'm going to hang out with a friend for a night." He chuckles ruefully. "Though we're not really friends."

"No." I don't know what we are, but it's not that. "It's nice to have a break from my family."

"Do they like that you're in racing?"

I snort. "It's the only thing my father ever wanted me to do."

Jasper turns onto his side. "What do *you* think about it?"

I shrug. "It's okay." Is that all it is to me? Or is it more? "What about you?"

He sighs. "Racing is the one thing I've ever asked for, for myself. My parents hate it. They wish the extent of my sporting career was playing a bit of polo or rowing at university. Skipping uni was not in their plans for me."

"They don't approve?" I ask.

"It's not that. It's ..." He pauses. "No, they don't approve. They think it's too dangerous for someone like me to do."

"It's dangerous, true."

"I know. But that's not what I think about when I'm behind the wheel. All I think about is how good it feels to be guiding all that power."

“Yes,” I say. “I wish it could be just that, without all the pressure, sometimes.”

“Me, too.” He rolls into me, and I cuddle him, and as the snow falls outside and the fire flickers and his breathing evens out, I know I don’t want to go anywhere else or be with anyone else.

I want to see where this goes with him.

I’ve done plenty of scary things in my life, but that might be the scariest.

He gets up early, while it’s still dark, and gets dressed, then leans down to kiss me. “I’d better go back.”

“Meet me to go skiing later?” I ask, feeling hopeful. I don’t want him to leave.

“Yes, good,” he says.



In the early afternoon, I meet Jasper on the slopes. Because we’re both wearing snow goggles and hats and are all bundled up, no one has any idea who we are. His iconic hair is covered. We can be out in public together without attracting any attention.

While I knew he’s a great skier—being Swedish and all, I think he’s partly made of snow—my skill surprises him.

“How come you’re so good?” he yells after one black diamond run. “Is there skiing in Spain?”

“Yes, growing up, I’d go in the Sierra Nevada by Granada. Or we’d come here.”

We keep pace with each other, and it’s fun to carve down the hills. What is more fun is that I can push him, tease him. I can get close. I can taunt him.

And as long as we keep our hats on, no one will know that it’s us.

There's a snowed-over road partway down the slope, before some huge moguls. Nobody else is around, and we pause to catch our breath.

Jasper skis close and kisses me, superfast. It's over in a moment, but the boldness, the brashness of it. The fact that it's in public in broad daylight. That does something to me.

I don't even know what to say. I just stare at him through my goggles, my lips parted. Then he grins at me, that rare huge smile, and takes off. I end up chasing him. As I often do. When we make it back down to the bottom, to the crowds, I'm exhilarated from the downhill run, and I'm turned on from the kiss. And I want to do it again.

Without saying anything, we ride the ski lift back up to the top. We sit closer than most guys do, but we can't make out, because the people behind us could see.

But they can't see that, as we swing high above the ground, Jasper Nord holds my hand. He lets go when we get to the top, and we carve our way down the hill again. And again.

I don't know how much longer our luck will hold. How long it will be until someone figures out who we are.

We seem good for now, though, and it's an amazing day. When we call it quits, we can't do anything but say goodbye. There are too many people.

"Come over tonight," I whisper.

"Yes, all right." His easy assent makes me warmer than any schnapps.

I'm looking forward to seeing him again. My body is sore from the exercise, but I want to exercise other muscles in a different way.

When I get back to the villa, my parents call, and I meet them for dinner at a restaurant we all like. Since my father retired from rally car racing, they pretty much do whatever they want, and we meet up when it's convenient. "We're going home tomorrow," my mother says. "What are your plans?"

"I'm going to stay a little while longer. I found a friend."

“A girlfriend?”

“No, he’s a man.”

“Ah, a friend friend.” No, not really, but that’s okay.

They don’t have to know what I’m doing at all times. They learn enough from social media and the regular press.

When Jasper comes over, I don’t waste any time attaching my mouth to his. If these stolen moments are the best we can get, I’m going to grab every one. See the chance and take it. As usual.

This is the way we have to do things, I guess.

IT'S my second night with Cristian in his villa, and we're making out in the living room again. I swallow his kisses whole. God, he feels good in my arms. I hoist him up and press him against the bar, so his ass is on the low counter. He wraps his legs around me, and we're both hard.

We attack each other's mouth. There's no other way to describe it. Our tongues battle. It's a fight.

There's something softer underneath it, though. Maybe a kind of respect or need? I don't know.

But I do know that I want him.

Cristian's hands snake down my torso, and he gives my dick a stroke over my clothes. I groan and demand, "Do that again."

He gives me a cheeky grin, like he's going to say something smart-alecky, but instead, he fumbles with my pants—which is awkward, because we're still kissing. Then he undoes his. When both of our cocks are bared, he grabs them and strokes us together.

God, this sensation—my dick against his. His head catches on the underside of mine, the notch under the crown, and it makes me even harder.

"Fuck," I whisper. "Do it. Get us off."

"You're so hot," he murmurs back, and I surrender. I surrender to him making us feel good. I surrender to his hands and to his kisses. I surrender to rutting against him.

I let myself enjoy him—his warm, velvety skin and his toned body. I like how dirty this feels—both of us almost fully clothed, but our dicks out and rubbing.

“Coming,” he whispers, and warm spurts soak my skin as he groans. I love it. I also love how he uses his hot come to get me off, tipping me over the edge into an overwhelming climax.

I don’t even care that it was fast. I’m glad it was. I didn’t want to wait. This takes away the roughness and tamps down the need.

The need that was there all day. And maybe all year, if I really think about it.

After we catch our breath, he gives me one more kiss. Then he chuckles, hops down from the counter, and washes his hands. I find a paper napkin and wipe myself off, then tuck myself away.

“Now. Cards?”



“Where were you last night?” my brother Erik asks when I meet him for breakfast the next morning.

“With a friend.”

He shoots me a grin. “What was her name?”

I shove his shoulder. “It wasn’t like that. Just a friend.”

I’m not telling him that I had the most fulfilling sexual experience of my life, yet again, with a man.

A man who’s my rival. A man I’m not supposed to be with.

“Make sure you wrap it up,” my brother says. “Don’t want you to have some kid out there. Lord knows Mum and Dad would pass out.”

“I’m telling you, there’s nothing to worry about. Though it’s not as if there aren’t accidental royal babies.” I glare at

him. “Or you’ve never had a pregnancy scare.” I’m enjoying this turn of conversation, because it keeps us off the topic of my own hookup with Cristian Rivera.

I shiver. One touch from Cristian, and it was all over. I wanted nothing but to be with him.

“We’re not talking about me,” he says. “We’re talking about you and the ‘friend’ you’re hanging out with.” He pauses. “Wait, is this friend a guy?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Are you sure you weren’t getting laid?”

I squint at him to hide my wince. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you’ve been out all hours, and you look awfully satisfied.” Erik stares at me. “I notice you’re not denying it.” He tilts his head. “Does that mean ...? Are you—”

I meet his gaze, not saying anything. If he wants to have this conversation, he needs to lead it.

“You’ve been with a man?” Erik finally asks.

Do I want to admit this to my brother? I have no one I can trust besides him. “Maybe. Yes.”

“No shit?”

I shrug, my heart beating fast.

He gives me a tight smile. “Don’t worry. I won’t say anything. And this doesn’t change anything between us. I mean, I’ll still look at you the same.”

I thank him, though a part of me is thinking *If it won’t change anything, why do you feel the need to say that?* “Tack så mycket.”

“But I don’t think you should consider seriously pursuing a relationship with a man.”

My cheeks heat, though I don’t know if it’s from embarrassment or anger. “Why is that?”

“Come on, Jasper. Society is progressing, and I’m good with not everyone being straight. But we represent an

established institution. Have your fun if you must, but don't let it distract you from your real purpose."

Scoffing, I say, "What are you talking about? Racing? It's not like Mum and Dad support that."

"I mean your duties as a prince. People look up to you, to us."

"And you think my sexuality will make them not do that anymore?"

"No," he says slowly. "But you can't be too careful. We don't want any scandal detracting from Gunnar's wedding. Don't steal his limelight."

While I feel freer having come out, at least partially, to someone, I'm left with a heavy weight on my shoulders: that of pleasing my family and the public. There are no out race drivers. And certainly no out Swedish royals.

I'm not sure I'm willing to be the first.

I'm definitely sure I'm not willing to tell my family who I've been involved with these past few days. That's a recipe for disaster.



For the rest of the trip, I keep to myself, not really talking to anyone. I can't believe my parents don't catch on, but they have their own concerns—like Gunnar's wedding next month.

I can't see Cristian again while I'm here, and when we get back to Sweden, it's dark and cold. I find myself thinking of sitting with Cristian in front of a fireplace, drinking schnapps. I find myself thinking about his warmth.

I find myself missing him. He's a total pain in my ass, but I miss him. He makes me laugh. He gets me.

I stay in the royal residence, but there's nothing I want more than to fly down to southern Spain and walk in on the bastard who has hijacked my thoughts.

I know that's a pipe dream, though. So instead, I work out. I swim. I practice on the simulator. I do everything I can to stay in shape for the upcoming season. I go over the specs of the new car and do my best to be the best racer I can be.

And I maybe brush up on my Spanish.

I'M STAYING AT MY PARENTS' expansive house near Córdoba. It's late January, and I'm sitting on the patio drinking tea with my mother. It's a chilly day, but it's sunny, and the view of the hectares of olive orchards my father bought with his racing money is lovely. I'm trying not to think about Jasper, and failing.

I shouldn't be like this, thinking I'd give a limb for a chance to be with him again, but I'm starting to get kind of desperate. I've never been with someone that *into* me. I'm watching Jasper's socials, but since he doesn't post often, I'm mostly doing my best not to accidentally like any old posts. It's not as if I have his cell phone number and can get in contact with him. Because we didn't exchange numbers. Facepalm.

"What's wrong with you?" my mother asks. "You're moping."

My mother is an exceptionally beautiful woman in a country where the women are gorgeous beyond belief. She's dark haired and dark eyed, slim, and always dressed nicely. Even today, when she's relaxing, she's wearing white jeans, a thick leather belt, and a light blue cardigan sweater. She sips her tea out of a thin, gilt-trimmed porcelain mug.

"I'm not moping."

She raises an eyebrow. "You've been lying around since you got here, and usually you can't stop moving. You are usually playing tennis or golf or running or heaven knows what else. You can't sit still unless you're playing the guitar."

“And your point is?”

“Something is wrong.”

I sigh. “I guess.”

“What is it? Is it a girl?”

“No, mamá.” I pause. “Well, sort of.”

“Sort of a girl? Or sort of a problem with one.”

I sigh. “It’s a guy, actually.”

She blinks. “I did not know that about you.”

“Yes, well. Don’t tell papá.”

“I don’t keep secrets from your father, but I will let you tell him. I don’t think he will have a problem with it. And you know it doesn’t really matter if he does. You have the right to your own life.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I mutter. “It feels like he’s in charge of everything.”

“Oh, Cristian. That’s because you’ve let him be. But you can do things your own way. I think underneath it all, you like racing. If you didn’t want to do it, you wouldn’t. You’d do your own thing.”

Her words take me by surprise. I’d thought that I was only doing this for my father, but ... is she right? Maybe. I wouldn’t put this much into it just to prove him wrong.

Maybe I *am* doing this mostly for me. Or at least it’s a huge part of it.

That makes me feel better, though it doesn’t solve whatever tangled-up feelings I have for Jasper. I miss him. I don’t want to be missing him. It makes me angry that I’m missing my rival. My handsome rival who looks at me like I’m necessary for his life. Who understands what it’s like to be in this position. Who feels the pull of racing. Who I think has the same degree of family pressures I do, even if the details are different.

I should've gotten his number. I want to have access to him, and I don't. Which is ridiculous, because I've had the most access to him of anyone on the planet.

I wonder if he's missing me. And I feel like I'm a lovesick teenager swooning over a photograph in a magazine.

Speaking of which.

I've bought all the sports and racing magazines I can find. I did it under the pretense of reading about myself—which I do. But I also look at the pictures of him. He's broad shouldered and peering out at the horizon, like a captain on a ship. He's gripping a steering wheel, looking like he's going to kick ass. Those intense blue eyes get to me every time.

My mother's been reading the magazines, too. "The Swedish crown prince is getting married," she muses, picking one up. "We're invited. You, too." That's not surprising. My dad's met a lot of royalty, being Spain's greatest rally car driver, and he's leveraged his connections to get invited to many events.

While my mother loves gossip magazines—she's often in them, as the wife of Spain's most famous race car driver who isn't me—most of the time I tune her out. But Jasper is related to the prince, so I pay attention. "When is the wedding?"

"February."

We don't start racing until March.

She folds open *Hola!* magazine and shows me an image of the royals, posed for their engagement. I glimpse Jasper with his family in a large formal shot that seems to include every blond person on the planet, but she flips quickly to a page showing Sweden in winter. It looks like a winter wonderland.

I bite my lip.

"It seems as if many people are going to attend, even though it's so cold there," she continues.

"Uh-huh," I say. It's not like I care. It's not like I've spent weeks wondering what Jasper was doing.

I'm not tempted by the wedding. I'm not.



So, I'm in Sweden for the wedding of the crown prince. Thankfully, my mother didn't seem to connect our conversation about my interest in a man with my willingness to attend an event that, in the past, I might take or leave.

I don't even want to name a certain Swedish prince in my head. Whenever I do, all sorts of things happen in my body. Things that aren't appropriate, based on my present location.

The ceremony is in a large, rather austere church with restrained natural motifs on the walls instead of the gilt and scenes I'm used to in a Catholic church. It's full of people wearing suits and morning dress. But my eye is drawn directly to Jasper. It's more than the fact that he's tall and blond. Most of the people in attendance are taller than me, and there are more blonds than I see back home. Even among the attendees, though, there's a glow about Jasper that makes me focus only on him.

I shouldn't be doing that. But obviously his magnetism is what brought me to Northern Europe in the cold of winter.

I could be training, and instead I'm sitting with my parents. Oh, and the king of Spain.

I don't know if Jasper knew that I was coming. I don't know the kind of involvement, if any, he had with the guest list, since this stuff is all heads of state, and since it's not him getting married. Still, part of me wishes he'd turn his head and see me. Know that I'm here.

But he doesn't.



I'm in some palace on an island in Stockholm, seated in a huge room that's lined with gilt mirrors, having dinner with a few hundred people. I hear a smorgasbord of languages being

spoken, no pun intended. But there is a lot of English that I mostly understand.

Sweden is much different from Spain at this time of year. The winter day is mostly night, and unlike Spain, where there may be a hook for a jacket in a home, here the coat room is its own continent. But I guess all this cold air is good for my blood.

This room is Sweden's answer to Versailles, but it's much smaller and not as excessive. I mean, it's fancy, sure, but there's a certain restraint to it that matches what I know of Jasper. Speaking of which, though I've told myself not to look at him, I'm not doing so well at it ... and I'm okay with that. He's toward the middle of a long table in the center of the room. I'm seated at the end of one of the other extremely long tables, which feels like a very royal way of seating, with whoever is closest to the king being most important.

Jasper and I are facing each other, though at quite an angle. When he notices me, he does a double take, then stops and looks at me, the sparkling lights of the chandeliers above him making his hair even brighter.

He shoots me a quick, private smile, then returns to his conversation with his companion, who I think is one of his cousins.

It's tough to tell. They all look the same. Well, except Jasper. I could pick Jasper out of a crowd anywhere.

My father whispers into my ear, "Are you going to show that Swede again who is the best on the track?"

I grimace. I want to win. I've spent my whole life trying to prove to my father that I am worthy of his name. That I can be the fastest. That his racing legacy has not gone to waste.

I mean, I won the championship two years ago as well as this year.

But Jasper has two wins, also.

"Obviously," I say, which is a little obnoxious, but so is his question.

“Good.”

I CAN'T BELIEVE Cristian is here in Sweden right now, at my cousin's wedding at Drottningholm Palace. If I talk to him, I may cause an international incident.

Or at least a racing incident.

Even after all we've done together, I still can't decide if I want to slug him ... although since Gstaad, not so much. More likely, I want to hear him make those sexy noises. I want to let him make *me* make those noises, too.

My whole body's on alert, but it's not fight or flight. It's *fight or have sex*, although with Cristian, those things could be the same. Fight *and* have sex.

I decide there are so many people at this reception, it's easy to get lost in the crowd.

When dinner is over, I excuse myself and slide by Cristian's table. He stands up, hands in his pockets, and lifts his chin at me. This is normal. We work in the same league and know each other. I'm trying to ignore how many people are taking our picture. While they confiscated phones for certain parts of today's events, right now is a free-for-all with press and cameras galore.

But Cristian and I have been in plenty of photos before, so this shouldn't be a big deal.

"I didn't know you were coming," I say. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Cut the crap, Jasper, and find us a place where we can talk," he murmurs. His tone of voice makes me shiver, because

I don't think he actually wants to talk. That's fine with me.

I nod. I know this palace inside and out, having grown up in the south wing—at least some of the time. My family has other residences, too, but I always considered this to be home, such as it is. There are rooms accessible to the public on tours, but the royal quarters are private. And I know a few nooks where we can go hide.

I tilt my head and then mutter directions to him. “Out the last door, down the hall to the end, open the door, go right, then there's a bathroom.”

It's a small one farther away than the designated restrooms, and it's in the private quarters, so most people wouldn't be able to use it.

I shake his hand, then take off in the direction I indicated, stopping to exchange pleasantries with a few people. Without looking over my shoulder, I can tell that Cristian is following me, but he's doing it subtly. He's smart, no question about that.

There are no other guests in the hallway, just as I predicted. The guards nod to me. I pause. “If my racing colleague comes through, it's all right. I need to show him something,” I say in Swedish.

One guard's eyes widen a fraction, but he quickly schools his countenance, discretion incarnate. They are under such tight NDAs, and they know not to question. This one might be a racing fan, though. “Yes, sir.”

I shove my hands in my pockets and stride down the hall, then keep going to my destination. Not long after I enter the bathroom, the door opens, and Cristian falls into my arms, kissing me fiercely.

Fuck. *Yes.*

I lock the door behind him, and he scrambles back to me, like he can't get enough. Like he wants to consume me. Rip my body apart but also worship it.

I want to do the same to him, frankly.

“Wait,” I say, our dicks rubbing together through the fabric of our clothes. “This is going to get messy really soon.”

“Take your dick out,” he says, and grins.

I look at him.

“I mean, if you want. We don’t have much time.”

I sigh. “Agreed.” And I start undoing my pants. Before I can get them all the way down, Cristian’s on his knees. He’s kissing his way up the underside of my dick, and it’s *so* hot. He’s laving my dick with his tongue, caressing it, getting it wet, and I’m both right at home and completely overwhelmed. *This* is what I’ve been missing for weeks.

“You look so beautiful,” I blurt, my brain having left the building.

He grins and keeps licking my cock. The radiator behind him knocks as it turns on. Drafty old palace.

“This isn’t going fast,” I complain. But I’m not really complaining, because this is what I want: time with him, even if it’s only a few stolen moments in the middle of an international wedding.

Soon he’s sucking the tip of my cock and taking me deeper little by little, getting into a rhythm. I’m entranced by what he’s doing and by the way he is putting his all into it.

“Cristian,” I say. He looks up at me with big, trusting brown eyes, and something moves in my chest. “Cristian, I’m going to come.”

He nods, and I let go, cresting over into the bliss of orgasm, releasing into his mouth. He sucks on my dick until I’m done, until I’m oversensitive, and I want him to stay there, keeping my cock warm.

No one else focuses on me like this.

“That was ...” I say, as I zip up my pants, but then I haul him up and kiss him hard.

Cristian kisses me back just as fiercely. “I had to do that,” he says, when we break apart.

“Let me return the favor.” And now I’m dropping to my knees, tearing at his pants, and taking his hard, glistening cock into my mouth. He’s so ready to go that it doesn’t take long, but I revel in his scent—soap and musk but also a hint of cologne. I like it.

I like the taste of him down my throat. I also like having the power to make him come. It’s a funny sort of power, one that I gave to him and now he’s giving to me. The balance makes me feel better.

We are always balanced, he and I. Like warriors wielding the same weapons. We’re on equal footing. I want to say I’m better, and I’m sure he’d say the same thing about himself, but the truth is, we are two sides of the same whole. We are yin and yang. And I’m starting to think that we belong together.

After he comes, he slumps against the wall, panting. Then he drags me into his arms, and instead of kissing me, he hugs me. His body feels so good against mine.

“We can’t spend much more time together,” I say. I want to see him again before the racing season starts next month, but I can’t figure out an excuse. We’re not friends. There aren’t any other major events that we can both go to. Besides, we need to work with our teams. And we can’t chance our families finding out about us, as they surely would if we were to arrange to visit each other. I live in a palace. He stays on his family compound, I believe. Neither is particularly conducive to privacy. “Can we?”

“We could figure something out.” Cristian’s hopeful expression rearranges my insides. “Do you want to?”

“Yes, I want to. But do you think it’s a good idea?”

“No. It’s a terrible idea. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it.” Cristian fixes his clothes and goes to open the door. “I could just stay here a little longer. Do you want to give me a tour? I came all this way, after all. I’m sure it’s, um, what is the word? Diplomatic.”

I nod, arranging my face so I look serious. “Sure. I’ll be diplomatic with you. Come on, let me show you some of the

private rooms.”

I WANT to keep kissing Jasper. I want to strip him down and do what we did in Gstaad. Or more.

But when we go back out to the reception, I can't be touching him. I should barely be seen getting along with him. I need to get my public face on and rejoin the party.

Except ... I don't want to let him go. Not yet. I clear my throat and follow him. He gives me his unreserved smile. The one that melts my insides like he's taken a match and lit a candle—and then that candle lights up a whole cake.

I want to find out more about him, and I realize that's not because I want to get one up on him. I just want to get to know him. I'm not sure what to make of that, but I'm going with the flow and operating on instinct, as I usually do. I look up at him.

He's watching me.

Before he opens the door, he leans down and kisses me tenderly—a lover's kiss, not a desperate, warrior-in-battle kiss, then nods a few times. "Come on."

He turns the doorknob, and thankfully there's no one in the hallway. Instead of turning back toward the wedding reception, we go deeper into the private quarters. Jasper starts up a commentary as we pass through the various rooms. "This is the blue sitting room. I forget what this one is called—a drawing room, I think. This is the library."

I snort, glancing at the walls of books, none of which look like they were printed later than about 1850, and the fancy

furniture. “So, no royal Ikea?”

Jasper grins. “No royal Ikea.”

“How Swedish are you really, then?”

He snorts. “I can trace my lineage back a little bit.”

“Hundreds of years?”

“Something like that.”

“That means it’s thousands.”

“Something like that.”

As we pass through room after room done in a restrained but elegant style, it dawns on me how different our worlds are. My father made plenty of money, between the racing and endorsements, so we always had a nice house and the freedom to do what we wanted. But this? This is generational wealth on a scale I can’t really imagine—but more than that, it’s *status*. Power. Jasper’s family is a symbol. An institution. And let’s not forget he grew up in a castle.

So... what is he doing with the likes of me? I’m a big deal in racing, but take me out of that environment, and I’m nothing. I mean, sure, my family is friends with Spanish royalty, but not in this “trace your family back to the Vikings” way.

That’s sobering. Then again, one of Jasper’s cousins married her bodyguard—yes, I have been scouring the news and gossip sites—so maybe us getting together isn’t that big a deal.

I pause in a room of pale blue paint, white furniture, and gilt-framed portraits. Why the hell am I thinking about marriage?

Well, I suppose I am here for a wedding.

“How often are you here?” I ask, wanting to distract myself.

“Not that much anymore.” He bites his lip. “How often are *you* home?”

Fair point. “When I’m not at headquarters, I usually stay with my parents instead of at my flat in Madrid. I like being around people. Too quiet at my own place. For you, is this ‘home’?”

He rocks one hand in a “so-so” gesture. “Sort of. I mainly stay in a different residence that’s a little quieter. This can be a bit ... much.”

I agree. I have no idea how many rooms we go through—I lose track after a dozen or so. This castle is a maze, designed to impress but not made for comfort. The floors creak, the radiators are inadequate to keep off the winter chill, and the whole place is stiff. With the hundreds of pieces of furniture, there’s no couch that you could throw yourself on and watch some sports on television. At least not that I’ve seen. It’s all so ... formal.

And this explains Jasper to me more than anything else. No wonder he’s so reserved. Growing up like this—uncomfortable and in the spotlight—of course you’d be withdrawn. That realization makes me have some softer feelings toward him. It’s not “poor little rich boy.” But guy who maybe never got what he needed from the people around him—I know something about that. Racing provided an outlet. A way to rebel.

Instead of saying anything, I take his hand, my heart racing. I realize we’ve barely ever held hands. Only that one time on the ski lift, as far as I remember.

I like holding his hand. It makes me feel like we’re joined in a simple way, more than individuals.

We haven’t come across anyone else during this “tour,” which makes me think that most people are still enjoying the reception. Maybe Jasper and I were too hasty, finding a bathroom to get off in. We might have had a whole night in a bed.

That thought makes me pause. Because I’m hungry for him even though I just had him. But I also want to know what makes him tick.

“What do you think of the racing life?” I ask. “Do you ever get tired of it?” He fascinates me. It’s like he’s parallel to my world, but in some very big ways he’s perpendicular.

Jasper shakes his head. “No. Racing is my favorite thing. I like going to all the locations around the world. Not having to stay in Sweden in the cold and dark. You?”

“I like Spain. But I also like the travel. It can get tiring if you let it—so I don’t let it.”

“It can be tiring to stay still, too,” he says, and I smile.

“Exactly. If I don’t do something, I have too much energy.”

We stop at a room that holds a large Steinway piano, as well as various instrument cases and cabinets along the walls. “Do you play?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Not piano. I play guitar.”

That gets me an eyebrow raise. “You do?”

“Why are you surprised?”

“I don’t know.” He goes to one of the cabinets and pulls out a guitar case. “Play me something,” he says, handing it to me.

I scoff, but then realize he’s serious. “Okay.”

Opening the case, I take out the guitar and check the tuning. Then I begin playing something I learned a long time ago—a classical Spanish guitar piece that I’ve always liked.

In a way, the music is for him. It’s saying things I can’t articulate in any language, let alone one Jasper understands.

But maybe he can get what I’m trying to communicate.

While my focus is mainly on my fingers, I glance up and notice that Jasper has closed his eyes to listen. I make a few mistakes, but nothing horrendous, and when I’m done, he smiles. “Very nice” is all he says, but I don’t think it’s my imagination that he seems a little breathless.

“Do you play an instrument?” I ask.

“Piano.”

I grin. “Then play *me* something.” I echo his words on purpose.

Jasper seats himself at the piano, opens the keyboard, and poises his fingers above the keys. And then something glorious begins pouring out of him. I think it’s Bach, the sound loud and angry but also complicated. The music washes over me in a way I didn’t expect. It—he—entrances me.

There’s something about watching music being made. Not merely listening to it, but watching the person making it. Knowing that you are experiencing what they are doing.

This is more than that.

It’s Jasper Nord. I didn’t know he was into music like I am—though it shouldn’t shock me that he has other talents—and I’m filled with warmth that he can make something so beautiful out of nothing.

Every moment I spend with him one-on-one surprises me, and I want to find out more.

In the same way that I told him my feelings with the complicated fingering of classical Spanish guitar, I think he’s told me something as well. Something that I can’t put words to, so I don’t try. “Super guay,” I say, applauding when he finishes.

He watches me, looking for sarcasm, but he’s not going to find any. A lot of us drivers have multiple talents—from surfing to golfing to knitting. I think we are competitive in everything, so if we are going to do it, we are going to do it well.

It just so happens that music holds more emotion than, say, knitting.

I glance around. I don’t see anyone else, and I don’t hear any footsteps. I can’t help myself. Jasper turns on the bench, and I straddle his lap and kiss him.

At first he’s surprised, but he kisses me back. Then he pulls away. “I want to, but not here. Not where people could see us.”

“I know,” I say. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Jasper gives me one more kiss, then moves so I have to get up.

I want to hold his hand again. I settle for having my shoulder brush against his as we walk through yet more rooms.

These fancy, impersonal rooms that are as cool as I used to think Jasper was. “So, really, what was it like growing up in a castle on an island?” I ask.

He shrugs. “It was fine.” Then he stops and studies my face and realizes I want a real answer. We’re in a room that is full of wooden furniture. There’s no place to plop down and read a book. There’s certainly no television with video games. “We would arrive by boat when it was time to stay here. It was very formal. I don’t know how to be otherwise. We sit up straight, keep our private selves very private, and don’t make a fuss.”

I grin at him. “I wonder if I can help you make a fuss.”

Jasper rolls his eyes. “You are excellent at that.” He sighs. “I really only had my brother and cousins and my governesses and tutors. We’d see my parents at meals, especially at dinner. But otherwise, it was school or other types of instruction.”

“Don’t you want a break sometimes?”

“That’s what racing is: a break. I mean, sure, there’s plenty of discipline involved. You know that as well as I do.”

I nod.

“But there’s so much freedom.” He sounds wistful.

“Did you have a room of your own?”

“I have suites in many of the residences.”

“But are any of them *yours*? Do you ... personalize them?”
I press.

He shakes his head. “I keep some clothes there, and books. But I didn’t get to decorate.”

“That sounds lonely.”

He reaches out his little finger and hooks mine, just for a moment. He doesn't say anything, but it's almost as if he did.

And I think I understand the Ice Man a little better. What would he be like if he'd grown up with places to play and be messy? To let himself not be so controlled sometimes?

Maybe I could be the one to help him loosen some of that control. That idea warms me inside.

My phone buzzes with a text, and I check it. It's my mother asking where I am. "I have to go back." I open my mouth to say more, but Jasper holds up a hand.

"Come over tonight. Stay with me. Do you think you can get away?"

"Sure," I say. He gives me a time and tells me how to get past the royal guards with their bayonets and shiny helmets.

"I'll meet you then."

I nod, and we walk most of the way back together before Jasper sends me on ahead to the party. I don't watch him as I leave, but I know he's watching me.

CRISTIAN SHOWS up with a bottle of champagne and two glasses, his bow tie undone around his neck, his hair unkempt. I've never seen anything sexier.

This is such a bad idea.

In Gstaad, I could blame it on the drink. Or hormones. Or the fatigue of skiing, I don't know. Here, there's none of that.

And not only is there none of that, it's extra risky to hook up, because there are so many people here for the wedding.

No one can ever find out about us. Cristian knows this, and I know this, and we don't need to discuss it. I tell myself that if someone sees us, it wouldn't be totally unusual for us to be hanging out at an event, even if we are rivals.

I'll just be hanging out in less clothes than most drivers wear when they're with others.

"I should really punch you," I tell him. "It would be much easier to explain."

"Go ahead." Cristian gives me his cockiest grin, setting down the bottle and glasses, then shrugging off his jacket in his customary careless yet elegant manner.

I shake my head. "I don't want to hurt that jaw, because I want you to wrap your lips around my cock."

And I bound forward, grasp his face, and kiss him.

He kisses back, stepping in between my legs and reaching around to grab my ass.

He's pushing my clothes aside, and I'm toeing out of my shoes, and we're soon standing only in our underwear. He's wearing small black briefs, and I'm in similar, but when our cocks rub together through the fabric, we both pause and groan.

"Bloody hell," I say, "it's just as good as the last time."

"I know," he murmurs, his lips against my neck. He's sucking hard, and he's probably going to leave a mark, but at this moment, I don't care. I'll find a turtleneck to wear tomorrow. It feels too amazing to stop.

I lead him toward the bed. But he's feisty. He doesn't go willingly. He's fighting me with his mouth and his body, though I know he wants to do this. He's rubbing himself against me and kissing me violently.

When we make it to the bed, we look at each other, and then he whips the duvet off and we both tumble in. First I'm on top, but he flips us. We lose our briefs, and I'm naked and making out with my bitter rival in my own bedroom.

If this came out on social media? The world would end.

"Do you want to fuck?" I ask.

"Sure. You?"

"I mean, people seem to like having a dick up their ass, so there must be a reason."

Cristian laughs, and it's a nice sound. Rich and sincere. I reach down and stroke us both, and he hisses. "I took a long shower," he says. "Before the party. Do you have"—he pauses for the word—"lube?"

I reach under the pillow where I'd stashed a bottle earlier and hand it to him, hoping that my hands aren't shaking. This is farther than we've ever gone before.

I want to do it, though.

"You all right?" I ask.

"You invited me here to fuck. We should fuck, no?"

“Yes,” I murmur, prickles of awareness running along my skin. I put some lube on my finger and then pat his hip. “Turn over.”

I hold my breath, because I think he’s going to argue. But to my surprise, he quietly turns onto his stomach, giving me my first good look at his ass.

It’s small but, like the rest of his body, beautiful. He looks like a classical statue. I run my finger down his crease until I get to his hole. “Have you done this before?” I ask.

He grins. “I have done it to other people. But I have never had it done to me. You?”

“I’ve only done it with a woman, and no, I’ve never bottomed.”

I breach his hole with the cool liquid on my fingertips, and he hisses. “That stings.”

I start to pull out, because even if we have this weird relationship, I don’t want to hurt him. But he says, “No, stay,” so emphatically that I press deeper. He’s hot inside, and I imagine it’s a foreign feeling for him. I’ve never fingered myself—or rather, the one time I tried, I gave up trying to find any magic button.

I’m determined to find that spot for him. I slide my finger again, and he gasps. I grin against his back and stroke my own cock. Then I squeeze out more lube and put another finger in his ass.

His body begins to loosen, and he whines, muttering things in Spanish.

I understand enough to know that he’s getting impatient. “You ready?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to put on a condom?”

“We don’t need one,” he says. “I’m still negative. And I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

That surprises me. “Since Gstaad?”

“No.” He swallows. “Since Bahrain.”

Holy fuck. I don't have time to process that. Me going for months without sex is nothing unusual, but Cristian's reputation is very different. Right now, though, I have more important things to do than think.

But I have never, ever, ever, had sex with someone bare. I have never finished inside someone, either—possibly because I wasn't really into the sex before, because I was denying this part of me. Now, I want so badly to come inside him. I want to see my seed trickling out of his ass and down his leg. It's an earthy image, nothing like what the Ice Man “should” want, and my core muscles clench with desire in response to the idea.

“How do you want to do this?” I ask. I figure I should be a gentleman, since it's his ass I'm screwing. Plus, I am a literal gentleman, current desires notwithstanding.

“On all fours. I think it might be easier.” He scrambles to move and gives me a look over his shoulder that sets me aflame.

Oh my god. We're really doing this.

“You look gorgeous,” I murmur, unable to be a wanker to him when he's about to let me fuck him.

“Thanks,” he says softly. “Now hurry up.”

“Jerk.” I settle behind him and line up my cock. With a deep breath, I start pushing, and it's heaven. His body at first wants to keep me out, but I shove in more and he gives way, accepting me, the heat and pressure divine.

Cristian makes a pained noise, though, and I still. “Are you all right?”

He doesn't answer.

“Cristian?”

He sighs. “It's okay.”

“We don't have to do this,” I say.

“No,” he says, his pride coming through. “Just give me a minute.”

I do. I don’t know why I ever imagined he might quit on me. We’re both competitors to the core. I let him adjust and then press another centimeter into him.

“Now?” I ask.

“Yes. This is weird. But I think I like it.”

I let out a breath. I didn’t want him to hate it. I didn’t want to hurt him.

“Are you almost in?”

“No.” I laugh and then groan. “You have a lot more of my cock to take.”

“Joder,” he hisses.

Slowly, I press more. And more. And more. Until my pelvis hits his ass.

I take a moment to look around. I’m in my bedroom with my dick up the ass of my fiercest competitor.

This is not how the script is supposed to go. This is not what my life was supposed to become. But I have no complaints. Because I’m loving how he’s moving under me now, trying to fuck himself on my dick.

“Move, coño.”

I laugh and pull out, then do a tentative thrust back in.

“Just fuck me,” he whines.

I grip his hips and start to rock in and out of him with force. He’s moaning and groaning and swearing up a storm in Spanish. But he seems to be doing all right. Better than that.

This is the sexiest thing I’ve ever done. Anal sex with the man my fans would call my mortal enemy but I’m beginning to see as something more than a fuck buddy ... or even a friend.

“Fuck me, Jasper.” I like the way he says my name, his accent making it a little rougher, less proper, and I do as he

asks.

We're very lubed and very sweaty. And he's so expressive. I can tell when I catch the right spot with the head of my dick, because he lets out a loud moan that makes me smile against his skin.

I do it again. And again. And again.

I'm determined to make him come. I'd like to be able to do it hands-free, but I'll take what I can get.

I keep thrusting, working on him, trying to read his body, trying to make him writhe in pleasure.

And I get my wish—without a hand on his cock, he clenches around me and spurts onto the bed, and I'm flushed with endorphins. *I did that*. It's a high like racing. It's a high like winning. I peak, my orgasm taking over my body, and I shudder and almost black out, fucking into him and staying there. My cock pulses, and it feels as if he is mine.

I know he isn't. I know this is us acting out. I know nothing will come of this.

But, for just tonight, we have ... something. No one else has ever seen him this way. No one else has done this to him.

And I will always have been the first.

Carefully, I pull out, and a rush of fluid follows. I'm fascinated. I've marked him. I've left a part of me inside him, and he looks so damned sexy I can't help but stick a finger in it and play with it. It's warm and slick, and seeing it is even hotter than I expected.

Then I tackle him and kiss him, and he kisses me back. His curls are damp from sweat, and he looks like an angel. He's so soft and smooth and velvety.

"You all right?" I ask, looking into his deep, dark brown eyes.

He nods. Being Cristian, he doesn't back down, but squares his shoulders and meets my gaze. Then, for some reason, we both bust up laughing. He howls under me, holding my bare body to his, and we're a total mess.

When we finally calm down, he says, “I could do that again.”

“Me, too,” I say, and clear my throat.

We clean up and talk, and eventually he gets dressed to go back to his own hotel. We kiss at the door, and he sneaks out at about three o’clock.

When I wake in the morning, all the endorphins have vanished, and I wonder what the hell I’ve done. What would the open-wheel racing world do if they knew that the number one and number two drivers for the past few years fucked each other? It’d cause a riot.

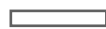
I wonder if they’d even think that the sport wasn’t for real—that we were letting each other win, or that it was scripted, like wrestling.

But that couldn’t be, right? Lighthouse and SC Racing are so dominant that we don’t have much real competition. Everyone else is competing for third or below.

Anything that calls into question the integrity of the sport and our competition has the potential to get very ugly. This could backfire spectacularly if anyone found out.

So we have even more reasons to keep it secret.

Still, as I shower, I know I can’t wait until the racing season starts up again.



I meet Erik for a late breakfast. When I sit across from him and dig into my eggs, he squints at me. “What’s that on your neck?”

I’m wearing a turtleneck, but it couldn’t hide everything. I think of ways to get back at Cristian. And I remind myself that Erik is the only person on the planet besides Cristian that I can talk to about this. “Um. A hickey.”

“And who gave you that hickey?”

Besides Cristian, Erik's the only person I've ever told my secrets to. And keeping everything to myself is weighing on me so much that I might explode. My sexuality, my relationship with Cristian, my competitiveness—like a duck's webbed feet moving rapidly underwater, my thoughts are turbulent where they can't be seen. I've been keeping my calm veneer, but only just.

It's a risk telling Erik, but I don't have anyone else.

I finally whisper, "Cristian Rivera."

"What the hell?" Erik hisses, setting down his coffee. "You hooked up with *him*?"

"Keep your voice down." I shrug. "I mean, yes."

"Tell me it's only been one time. A mistake."

"The first time was a mistake." Maybe.

"The first time," he screeches. "How many times has it been?"

"Um, well, the second time was another mistake."

"Have there been more? Was he the one you were with in Gstaad?"

My silence is the answer.

Erik shakes his head. "No. No, Jasper. One time you can excuse. And two times, fine, we all make mistakes, and sometimes things need to sink in for them to hit. But if anyone finds out about this, it'll be everywhere. The only way this would be even remotely acceptable would be if you're headed to a formal relationship."

I stiffen. "I do not have a relationship with Cristian. We're just hooking up." I don't even have his phone number.

"Then you'd better stop before anyone finds out. My recommendation is to find someone more suitable to the family."

A flash of anger sears through me.

I'd been worried about my lover being a man and that the entire world of racing sport would misinterpret our history.

For my family, though, the issue is that he's not royal. That's going to be the big hang-up. They wouldn't care that we'd be a same-sex couple—not that Cristian and I could ever be a couple. But in their minds, he's not even in the running, because my life partner should be as blue-blooded as they are.

“I should've guessed that this would be how the family would react, but I'd expect to hear it from Grandmother, not from my brother.” I groan. “I wish you were more supportive.”

Erik relents. “Don't get the wrong idea. I want you to be happy. I'm just looking out for you. As you say, there's no way Grandmother would approve. Remember Uncle Johan?” Erik's referring to our grandmother's brother. Long before Erik and I were born, Johan fell in love with—and married—a flight attendant. He's been a cautionary tale our entire lives. We never see him except in the gossip magazines. “And since she won't, you know that this would look really bad if it ever gets out.”

“Then I'll make sure it never does.”

Although I have no idea how to pull that one off.

IT'S MARCH, and we're all in Bahrain to prepare for the first race of the season. How do I walk around the hotel and not make my intentions obvious? When I went to yell at Cristian after he pushed me off the track last year, most of the press had already packed up, heading for the next city. Now, we have a few days before the race, so everyone is milling about.

I'm pretending that I have someplace to be as I stride across the grounds, taking in the fountains. My bodyguards are following me, but they're being discreet. The sound of Spanish guitar wafts through the air—someone's listening to it on the radio, I think. I like it. It sounds rich and fulfilling. I stop for a moment to listen.

The music reminds me of Cristian, passionate and impetuous. It also reminds me that it's been a while since I practiced the piano.

My phone starts buzzing.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Can you get here?

JASPER

Who is this?

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Who do you think?

I roll my eyes.

JASPER

What did I do the last time I saw you?

UNKNOWN NUMBER

You don't want that in a text

JASPER

All right, Rivera

UNKNOWN NUMBER

How did you know it was me?

My god, I can even hear his fake-innocent voice. I smile at my phone ... and then straighten my face, because no one ever expects me to smile.

JASPER

How did you get my number?

CRISTIAN

Raj. I told him I needed to razz you.

JASPER

Oh god.

CRISTIAN

Come see me

JASPER

I'm having trouble figuring out how to meet up.
Too many people around.

CRISTIAN

Should we get a different hotel room?

I scoff. We both have hotel rooms, but should we get a third one somewhere so no one sees us together? That seems like a waste. Then again, what are the monarchy and motorsport if not wastes?

JASPER

Want to see me that bad?

CRISTIAN

I do.

It's been too long

I shudder. That's true. We haven't seen each other in an intimate capacity in weeks, and it's wearing on me. I miss him, and I'm done pretending I don't.

JASPER

Where and when. Because here and now isn't going to work. Too many people around.

CRISTIAN

Okay, hang on let me find us a room.

I turn on my heel and head back to the hotel as if that had been my plan all along. A few people nod in greeting, but no one really stops and talks to me. I'm not a chatty person, and everyone knows it. I don't believe in false smiles or in trying to make the other person feel good. It's up to them to feel good, not for me to prop them up.

No wonder Cristian is so beloved, with his exuberant personality. He makes even me smile. And he makes me want to make him smile.

When I don't want to beat him up, that is.

I shouldn't meet up with him. I have plenty of training and exercises to do, and I can always benefit from a nap. Races can turn on the tiniest of things. When we're competing to within hundredths of a second, a poorly timed yawn can mean disaster.

But before I get through the lobby, my phone buzzes yet again.

CRISTIAN

Room 3234

JASPER

When

CRISTIAN

Now

I don't want to seem too eager, but ... sod it, I am eager. I'm horny, and I want to see him. I keep thinking that one more time will be enough, and then I'll get sick of him. But that's not the way it happens.

"I'm seeing a friend," I say to my bodyguards, who just grunt at me and get in the lift.

When I get to the room, I knock quietly. The door is whisked open a moment later, and a hand darts out, grabbing my wrist. I stumble inside, and the door slams behind me, leaving my bodyguards a few paces down the hall.

I sigh into Cristian's mouth as he attacks my lips, clearly not wanting to talk.

Fine by me. He tastes delicious. Minty, but not too minty. Not like a dentist. Just clean and fresh.

His tongue swirls against mine. He may have taken me by surprise, but now I'm taking over. I'm taller and bigger, and I walk him backward, scrabbling at his clothes until his

Lighthouse Racing shirt is off. I love seeing his bare torso with its defined musculature.

I shed my own shirt, too, and I can't help but smile at the symbolism of it.

In here, in this room, we're not our teams. We're not our sponsors. We're not labeled in any way. We can do whatever we want.

An enormous sense of freedom comes over me, and I push him onto the bed and climb between his legs. He kisses me thoroughly, his hands reaching down to fumble at my belt.

"Hey," I whisper. "Slow down a second."

"What?"

I don't blame him for being confused. I'm a bit surprised myself. In our past encounters, I've liked it hot and heavy with him—and I'm sure we'll get there soon enough. But ... "I don't often get to see you like this. I want to, you know." I shrug and gesture down his body.

"Savor it?"

Yes.

He shrugs, that insouciant Spanish shrug that gets me every time. Only here, when he's acquiescing to me, is it cute.

"Okay," he whispers, and he smiles at me.

It's not one of his public smiles, not the taunting one or even the wide one that lights up the room.

No, this is a shyer smile. One that says he knows I'm watching him, and he's all right with it.

I'm all right with it, too.

We lie in bed, still clothed from the waist down, and explore each other's body. I kiss him, yes, but I also run my fingers through his hair, and he almost purrs. I kiss all over his face, his neck, and down his torso. I tongue his nipples, and he gasps and arches up off the mattress.

He's so much fun. I'd never admit that out loud, though I think he knows how I feel. In here, in private, I can enjoy him. I can enjoy how he's into what we do. How he's into ... me.

Cristian's hands run across my back, over my arm, making the hairs there rise. He does a silly thing where he pretends to crack an egg on my shoulder and lets his fingers trickle down like the liquid inside.

"What am I going to do with you?" I murmur. To myself, although I know he hears me.

"Puedes quedarte conmigo," he replies. *You could stay with me.*

When I reach down to cup him through his jeans, he's rock hard. I love how aroused I make him. Because he's doing the same thing to me, and it's reassuring to know I'm not the only one affected.

"Okay?" he whispers.

I nod. "Enough for now. Get naked."

We both shuck off our pants, and when our bodies meet again, our hard dicks rubbing up against each other, I groan loudly. "I hope these walls are soundproof."

He shrugs. "I rented the rooms on either side."

My jaw drops. "You did not."

"I almost got the whole floor, but a few rooms weren't available. I said I didn't want to be disturbed." Cristian's rough hands knead my ass cheeks, and I arch into him.

"You want to be on top?" My heart pounds as I offer, because I've never done that before.

He shakes his head, then thinks about it. He cocks his head to the side, and it's so cute I want to kiss him. "I want to ride you, so yes, on top."

"Meaning you inside me, or me inside you?"

"I'm sorry, my English—"

"Is getting even better." I give him a small smile.

“Gracias. I mean I want your cock in me while I am on top of you. And your arms around me. My back to your front.”

“Got it. We can do that.” I grip his hips tight and kiss him again.

He groans. “Dios, I missed you.”

“Me, too,” I whisper.

He hands me a bottle of lube from under the pillow, and I smile. Pouring some fluid on my fingers, I slick up my dick and then reach to his hole to get him ready, too.

Except a naughty grin takes over his face, and when I reach his ass, I find out why. I tap gently on the butt plug, and the noise he makes sends my heartbeat revving like a race car engine.

“I see you’re ready,” I murmur, and he exhales loudly when I slide the plug free. I put my lubed-up finger inside him only to find him warm and loose and soft. I take a deep breath. “All right,” I say as I sit up on the bed, my legs on the side, my hard cock bobbing against my abs.

He crawls over to me and climbs into my lap, facing away from me, lining up his body with my erection. Before I press in, I lean around and kiss him—because I can’t not.

He kisses back, and in the process, the head of my cock slips in and we both groan.

“Good?” I ask.

Cristian gulps. “Yes.”

I keep pushing my cock deeper and deeper inside him as he slides down until I’m fully seated. The pressure on my dick is delicious and intense, and I wait for him to let me know when I can start thrusting. It seems like he is straining to accommodate me, and I don’t want to hurt him, especially not while doing something so intimate.

When he nods, I pull out and rock into him slowly from underneath, watching the way his ass swallows my dick. We both groan again. “Damn, you feel so good,” I mutter.

“Yes. So, so good.”

I stroke his cock gently, trying to keep him from coming too fast but wanting to make him feel amazing. As I keep moving back and forth inside him, he meets me thrust for thrust, and I realize if we keep this up, I’m going to be the one coming in about thirty seconds.

I pull out, and he whines, “What’s wrong?”

“Too good,” I mutter. “You feel too good, and I want this to last. Here.” I pat his hip and stand up, urging him to do the same. “Bend over the bed.”

Every time he hastens to comply with my directions, it amazes me, because my understanding of Cristian Rivera is that he does whatever the fuck he wants to do, when he wants to do it. When he listens to me, I feel powerful.

But with that power, to quote Spider-Man, comes responsibility, so I want to make sure that not only does he get off, he gets off on my cock, with my cock only, and that I ruin him for any other person.

Because I’m like that. Because I want to dominate, to win.

Now, though ... I want to win *him*. Or at least win him over.

When he’s positioned the way I want him, his perky ass popped up and his hands braced on the mattress, he looks over his shoulder at me, and his expression makes me dizzy. It’s so trusting. It’s so heated. It’s a look that no one has ever given me before, one I don’t know that I will ever get from anyone else.

So I kiss his lips, lean down and kiss the smooth skin between his shoulder blades, and slip inside him again, both of us moaning.

“So good,” he whispers.

“Yes,” I say as I hump into him. With this angle, I think I’m going to be brushing up against his prostate more, without making myself get off too fast. That’s the idea, but it doesn’t

work that well, because I find myself clenching to avoid orgasm yet again.

Still, I can be intentional with my thrusts. I don't want to pound into him like I've lost control. I want to be precise. To make him feel like he's going to come over and over and over again.

He starts cursing, a steady stream of Spanish. At least, I assume it's cursing. At any rate, it's musical and guttural, and it arouses me even more. I grip his hips to gain more leverage for my thrusts, and I'm glad we can be noisy without worrying about anyone overhearing. It makes me so fucking hot to be able to do this to him.

I pat his hip again. "Ride me again. But this time, face me."

"Okay." He nods a few times, and I pull out, then lie down on the bed. He straddles me, then sinks down on my cock, and now he's turned the tables. I'm helpless as he takes over, driving our pleasure. He leans down to kiss me, then sits back up, his cock bouncing. His expression is utter bliss.

"I'm coming," I moan, and he nods like he's satisfied. I thrust up into him and stay there, pulsing, and I think that sets off his own orgasm, because he throws his head back and roars, his hot release splattering on my stomach.

My whole body is alight, and I don't want to do anything else for the rest of my life. I just want to be fucking Cristian.

Except that didn't feel like fucking. It felt like ... something else. Like we were taking care of each other. Like we were competing to be the best lover.

I think Cristian and I may be competing for that our entire lives.

That thought shakes me, but then, I've always been competing against him. Since I was little. What makes me think I'd stop anytime in the future?



The following morning, our entire team is in a strategy meeting with the team boss, Maxine Ackerman, at our HQ on site, but for once my mind is not on racing. My mind isn't even in the same room. Instead, I'm thinking about Cristian and his body. On the sounds of the music he plays and the way he talks. My fingers itch to touch him.

I scold myself to pay attention to minute details about the track temperature, the weather reports, and the adjustments to the car that have been made since the last test drives, but no matter how hard I try, I can't keep my mind on doing the one thing I've dedicated my whole life to.

"Can we take a break?" I blurt, and Maxine looks at me, startled. I never ask for breaks. I never ask for anything, really.

"Sure. You and the other drivers have a photo shoot for the new season of the streaming series in fifteen minutes anyway. Hair and makeup are waiting for you."

I sigh. I've gotten used to the grooming, but I'll never enjoy it. People touching you, making you look better for the camera. While the helmet hides a lot of sins, I still have to think about these things. Thankfully we wear hats a lot of the time.

I make my way over to where a photographer is waiting. As expected, the hair and makeup people fuss around each of us. The streaming service is filming, always filming. They never know when something off-the-cuff will be documentary gold.

I try not to look at Cristian and fail miserably. Has he always been this good-looking? This cute?

He's *really* bloody cute.

Cristian's grinning and joking around with his teammate, and as I watch him, something possessive spikes in my blood. I want to be the one talking to him, but I know that's a terrible idea.

We can't joke with each other. That would ruin the narrative. If we interact, it needs to be taunting. Being civil is boring, and the camera does not want boring.

So I stay my usual aloof self. That's easier, anyway.

Nico Hilliard comes up to me and asks if I'm still upset about Cristian running me off the road here last year. I give him my patented cool gaze. "No. This is a new year, and we've returned with a better strategy."

"But what about Cristian beating you last year. Doesn't that bother you?"

He's baiting me, and I have to give him something to keep the rivalry fueled. I pretend to think about it. Then I smirk. "Still nope."

"And why is that?"

"Because it doesn't matter what Rivera is doing. I'm better. I just have to be patient. I trust the car."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cristian perk up. He's listening to me, even if he doesn't want to admit it.

"Okay, we're going to arrange you by team," the photographer's assistant calls. He has us, with our teammates, go to marks on the ground, but we have to stand in two rows so we can all fit in the photo. It's challenging to arrange us because we're different heights, even among team members, so it takes time to set up the shot.

Of course they put Cristian in front of me. If this were last year, I'd ignore him, because I know that would infuriate him the most.

Instead, I subtly reach a finger out and poke at the soft skin under his ear.

"Quit it," he hisses, but he gives me a huge smile before he remembers where we are. "Hey, Nord," he says, loud enough that the microphones will pick it up. "Do you like this position?"

"What the hell are you doing?" I whisper.

He grins. "You'd better get used to it. You're always going to be behind me."

A bunch of people around us snort, and I scoff, catching on to what he's doing. "You wish," I mutter.

"Hmm," he murmurs back. "I do."

While they tell us to smile for the camera, I'm pretty sure only Cristian and a few others obey. For the rest of us, it's not in our image to smile, so we give our tough stares.

I make it through the photo shoot without getting an erection. It's shaping up to be a good day.

Except when it's time to get on the track, I lose qualis and end up P8.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE RACE, I'm in bed with Jasper again in the extra room I rented—the one where neither of us is supposed to be—and we're naked and sweaty, panting into each other's mouth. I can't get enough of him. I don't want to think about why that is or what will happen in the future. Right now, all I want is for Jasper to touch me.

He touches me like it matters. Like *I* matter.

I pretend that time with him is just a series of meaningless fucks, but it's not. It does something to me.

I like the way his icy eyes soften as he enters my body and how he can't hide his arousal—on his face or anywhere else. His pale skin flushes, and he gets these cute little pink spots on his cheeks like he's in a cartoon. Only he's *real*.

When we're together like this, I can tune the outside world out. I don't have to prove anything to my father, my team, or the press. I don't have to beat him. I can just be myself. And it doesn't matter that we're in this fancy suite. I'd be happy with him on the beach or in a cardboard box.

Jasper is a generous and surprising lover, one who doesn't try to race me to the finish line but instead slows us down so we can see the scenery. He makes every thrust, every gasp, every caress a moment. I want to capture them so that I can relive them when I'm alone. It's too much all at once, and I want a highlight reel.

I'm so used to my life being dissected on video. *Rivera passed Samuels on turn twelve. Nord and Rivera are neck and neck. Rivera stands on the podium and hoists the trophy.*

None of these encounters with Jasper are being recorded for me to view again, and that makes them even more special.

It may seem irrational that having sex feels more important than what I'm known for: winning races and earning millions of euros. But being with Jasper nourishes the side of me that likes to savor and sip. Jasper seems to know this instinctively, and maybe that's another reason why we get along. We speak different primary languages, and yet I know what's going on inside him better than he knows himself, I think. We can communicate without comms and without even speaking. It's instinct—the same instinct I rely on when I'm on the track. Somehow I know how to touch him to make him moan and how to drive him wild with need for more, always more.

After we've worn ourselves out and cleaned up, we lounge on the suite's couch—the bed is wrecked—in our briefs. I'm leaning into him, drawing my fingers up and down his forearm, while he's nibbling on my neck.

“You know something?” I ask.

“What's that?” He licks along the outline of my ear, and I shiver.

“You might be the only person in the world who understands the pressures of being at the top of this racing league—”

“Because I'm in the same position myself,” he finishes.

I nod.

“I get it.” He stops his nuzzling. “Do you think that's why we were always at loggerheads?”

“Logger-what?”

“Why we were always fighting? Because we're similar?”

I shrug, and he tightens his arms around me. “Maybe.” Because when we each let our guard down, we're very compatible.

“I have to trust you, you know?” he says. “I mean, with all this.” He waves a hand, and I take it to mean not just where we are now, but everything we've been doing since last year.

“Yes.” He doesn’t have to explain. If I thought he might stab me in the back, I wouldn’t be doing any of the things we have been. “I trust you because you have honor,” I say. “I know this because of how you have always been on track. You would not have your team cheat or use something between us to your advantage.”

“Because I want to win on my own merit.”

“Exacto.”

“That’s right. And I trust you,” he whispers.

Because of his honor—and, yes, also because if a story about us got out, it would blow back on him just as much as it would on me—Jasper is the safest person on the planet for me to be with.

Lucky for me, he’s also beautiful. His body is lean and long, and while he’s a little tall to be a racing driver, he gets the job done. (Understatement.) But it’s more than the shape of his body or his pedigree that makes him beautiful.

Inside, Jasper cares. And I think he cares about me.

His Ice Man facade is gone when he’s with me. “You’re as passionate as a Spaniard, do you know that?”

He kisses my nose. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t,” I promise. Because I want him for myself. I don’t want anyone to wreck this thing between us. This thing that matters more to me than I could ever have imagined. I’m going to protect us if it’s the last thing I do.

Eventually, he needs to go back to his room. He seems reluctant, but we can’t be seen leaving together in the morning. We share a shower first, just to have another chance to touch each other. At least, that’s why I do it, and I assume it’s the same for him, since he caresses me as well.



Sunday night, at race time, my hands are gripped on the steering wheel, and all my attention is overhead, watching for

the signal to start.

The stands are crowded for the first race of the season. We drivers have gone through the opening ceremonies, and after one warm-up lap around the track to get the tires going, now we're waiting with anticipation. The five red lights overhead will illuminate one at a time, and when they turn off, we'll hit the gas as fast as humanly possible. I've been in this position dozens of times in professional racing; hundreds if you count karting.

But I've never been in this position with the memories of what happened here last year. Or last night. My mind replays what the little divot on Jasper's hip bone feels like under my fingers. The way his Adam's apple moves when he swallows. The sweat on his brow from exertion when he's fucking me.

I have to keep from daydreaming. I want to repeat my win from last year—hopefully without clipping Jasper again, although I can't say I regret it if it brought us to where we are now.

Our lovemaking last night was amazing. As we lay together afterward, I asked him, "What are you going to give me when I win tomorrow?"

"I think you mean what are *you* going to give *me* when I win, as I would have last year if not for you running me off the road."

I scoffed. "Please."

"You know what? Whoever loses has to do whatever the winner says in bed."

"I can live with that," I said. So that's our new deal— whoever wins a race chooses our sex positions that night.

I grin behind my helmet, and *mierda*. I miss lights-out.

I hit the throttle hard and do my best to stay out of the way of the bottleneck of cars, the engines sounding like angry bees. The first few curves of a race are always a mess of vehicles, everyone jostling for the best position. Crashes happen, and if you're not careful, it's easy to be taken out. I scold myself for getting distracted by Nord.

Nord. That's what he has to be when we're on the track. I can't think of him as Jasper, and I can't think of the way his face looks when he's about to kiss me. I don't have to hate him like I did before last year, but I certainly can't cede anything to him. I have to stop thinking about how he looked last night and focus on racing. I have to beat him.

As I make my way around the first few turns, I'm conflicted, because I'm starting to realize that Jasper is the person for me.

I want to be with him, but I also want to beat him.

I have to, because my appreciation for Jasper is overshadowed by my father's voice in my head telling me that I'm a disappointment. That I shouldn't be a Rivera if I can't be a multiyear champion.

It doesn't matter that I have two championships. So does Jasper, and a tie isn't good enough for Paco Rivera. And while I can confide in Jasper to some degree, since he's the one I must beat to be able to show my face around my father, there's a limit to what I say. Even if I wish I could tell him everything.

For now, though, I concentrate on this race.

“I DON’T WANT to hear it,” I say, holding up my hand as I step inside Cristian’s secret hotel suite. He clears his throat, and I cut him off without looking at him, my fingers clutched so tight around the key card he gave me that it might break. “No. Seriously. I can normally take it, but not now. Not like this.”

Cristian doesn’t say anything, and I finally glance over at him. He’s lounging on the couch with an ankle on his knee, his phone at his side, like he’d been playing with it before I arrived. His expression is not triumph or pity or anything I’ve ever seen on his face before. Instead, the kindness in his eyes and his slight nod signal understanding.

And it makes my heart crack in two.

“I know this is simply how things go—one person wins, another loses—but ... today was crushing.” I’m having difficulty keeping my voice steady. “Do you really want to listen to this?” I ask, in case I’m reading him wrong.

“Try me,” he says gently.

And for some reason, I do. He scoots over, and I take a seat next to him, setting my head against his shoulder. Words spill out of my mouth. “We all dream of being number one, the best in the world at *something*, but few of us actually do it. I’m one of those few.” I touch his knee. “I’m fully aware that you know this, but I need to express my feelings.”

Again, he nods.

I blow out a breath. “So when I fail, it feels like what was supposed to happen ... didn’t. That something is wrong in the

grand scheme of things. That the universe is out of order. Worse, I've lost here twice. And to me, anything less than being the best feels like failure. Even though I know that merely being an elite racer is something very few people in history have done, and only twenty people can do this year. It's tough to have perspective when my expectations are so high."

Cristian sits silently while I get this out of my system. Thoughts that have been unprocessed and unexamined. Things that I have long felt but lacked words for.

He just spreads his arms, and I don't hesitate. I know that the entire racing world would look down on us for comforting each other this way.

But I'm human, and I'm disappointed. I want a hug from my lover. Or boyfriend. If, indeed, Cristian is that.

Which I kind of think he is.

I sit, clutching him, trying to control my breathing. Our position isn't sexual. It's just comfort, reassurance, and it reaches me somewhere deep inside.

Now that I think about it, I didn't get many hugs growing up. I thought I didn't need things like that. I thought I was fine on my own. But this feels so good.

Cristian still isn't saying anything, and that might be the best gift of all: just listening to me. He's not trying to convince me that I shouldn't feel what I'm feeling, and he's not trying to take over by talking about how he's felt the same way. I realize that, by listening quietly, Cristian is helping me to express my emotions. That he's making it safe for me to be vulnerable.

That makes my eyes sting even more, but after a while, the anger subsides, and I feel like the road after a rain: clean and fresh and ready to go. Unburdened. I'm still disappointed, of course, but it's no longer overwhelming.

Eventually I release him, and he releases me. He picks up my hand and kisses my knuckles, and my heart thumps faster.

Dammit. This man gets under all my defenses.

I bring his hand to my lips and kiss it in return, smiling. “So, you won.”

He gives me the patented Cristian Rivera grin. The one that’s featured on every racing sizzle reel. “Yes. It was an excellent race. I had good competition. Winning is not satisfactory when the competition is less than the best.”

That’s nice of him to say. “That’s true, I suppose.” Then I voice something that’s been bothering me for years. “Don’t you sometimes think the competition is artificial? I mean, we’re just *making this up*. The ... race. The game. The sport. We want to have a competition so that there’s something to fight and talk about.”

“That is true. Racing is very artificial. We love it anyway. Maybe it comes from when we had to survive in caves,” Cristian says. “If we didn’t show that we were the best, that we could get food and keep ourselves safe, then we didn’t survive.”

“You may be on to something. It does seem like I won’t live if I’m not number one. Racing, being number one—it feels like survival.”

“I understand,” Cristian says. Then he stands up and tugs me toward the bed, starting to undress.

“Are you claiming your prize?” I ask. “What will it be? Do you want me to bottom?”

Cristian chuckles. “Whatever you like. You are my prize.”

My breath seizes as his words settle inside me. Every race, we are trying to win a prize. But I’ve never been someone’s prize.

I like it quite a bit.

When we’re both naked, and his gorgeous cock is standing at attention, I drop to my knees. “Will this be a suitable way of celebrating your win?”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.” He smirks, then inhales sharply as I suck him deep into my mouth. His knees wobble, and he starts muttering Spanish curses.

Doing this—blowing him—is taking my mind off the loss. It’s centering me in this moment, where there is only him and me and we are together and nothing else matters.

It’s late, though, and racing is exhausting. I pull off him and get to my feet, holding his erection in one hand as I kiss him. “I’m just taking a breather. I’m bloody tired,” I moan.

He laughs weakly. “Me, too. That was a difficult race.” He walks me to the bed and falls backward onto it. I climb on top of him, then flop to the side, where he snuggles into me, burrowing his head in my chest. “Are we too worn out to fuck?” he asks.

“No. You’ll have your prize in full. But ... give me a minute.”

“Sounds good.”

We lie there, naked and breathing hard. He curls into me even more. “I wish we could be like this in public. Not naked. Just ... together.”

“But we can’t.”

He shakes his head against me. “No.”

“You know what we should do,” I muse, trailing a finger up his side.

“Hmm?” Goose bumps pebble his skin, and I’m starting to get a second wind.

“We should go somewhere else. Like, open-wheel racing is not as popular in the United States. We should take a trip to America when we’re on break. We could rent a convertible and drive in the American Southwest. Good roads. Wide-open spaces. I bet no one would recognize us there. Or at least nowhere near as many people as in Europe.”

Cristian smiles against my skin. “Hmm.”

“Is that a hmm of agreement or a hmm of ‘What a ludicrous idea’?”

“Agreement.” He sits up. “I will go to America with you on holiday. But who is going to drive?”

I laugh. “Whoever gets the other one to come faster the night before.”

He gets a wicked glint in his eye and nods. “Deal.”



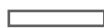
He and I don't get to spend as much time together as we'd like in the following weeks. Other racers are nipping at our heels, and I spend a lot of time with my trainers, going faster and getting better.

Cristian and I do start communicating more in press conferences, though. For example, in Belgium (I won, he came in second), Hilliard asks me what the race was like, and when I say that there was “stiff competition,” Cristian has to stifle a snort. Then Hilliard turns to him to ask what he thought was funny, and Cristian simply says it's time for him to be on top.

I think most people interpret that as our usual rivalry, but I take it as an invitation. That night, I find out I was right.

We've been trading wins, which means we're trading who picks what we do in bed. It's upping the stakes as we go along and making this year even a wilder ride than usual. The pundits have picked up on it, noting that he and I have been more ferocious than ever before. Our comments more biting.

But he's been more tender in bed than ever, and I'm not sure what to do with myself.



June is the annual yacht party in Monaco, which this year is doubling as a retirement party for one of the team principals. Of course Cristian is here.

... with his arm around a woman I don't recognize. What the hell? She's beautiful, and she looks Spanish.

I tell myself to calm down and think about this rationally. He and I don't have any agreement about being exclusive. He

can still fuck women—or other men, I suppose.

It pisses me off, though. I thought we had something ... special.

It's a free-flowing party and quite crowded. No one would notice if I said something to him. I feel like I need some extra courage, though.

I usually keep to a strict regimen of no alcohol during the racing season, but tonight I'm willing to bend that rule, because I want to say something to him, even if I'm not really sure what I want to achieve by it.

Actually, that's not true. What I want is for him to ditch that woman and haul me by my elbow into some shadowy corner so I can do very dirty things to him.

I can't be thinking like this. I need to change the subject in my head. I need to get out of this room as fast as I can.

But for some reason, I grab a drink from a server's tray and sit down at a table where I can easily see Cristian. He laughs at something his date says, and a flash of anger sears through me. I don't know what I'm doing. Pining for him? That's ridiculous. We aren't a couple. We just make each other come when it's convenient.

I don't need to follow him around like a lost puppy. I don't need to be thinking about him.

I don't need him.

I swallow down my drink and take another from the next server who goes by.

“THIS PARTY’S BORING,” my cousin Silvia says.

She’s kidding. She loves these kinds of parties, and I’m her ticket into them. She just likes to pretend she’s too cool for everything. “Do you want me to have a shore boat take you back?” I whisper into her ear.

I catch a flash of jealousy on Jasper’s face, and at first I feel satisfied that I put it there, even if I didn’t do it intentionally. But then I see how wounded he looks, and I know I have to fix it. A little jealousy is good, but I don’t want to hurt him.

A server glides by with a tray of champagne, and I take two glasses, one for Silvia and one for me. I clink with her, but I glance at Jasper as I do it. He frowns.

Okay, enough. I need to get him alone.

“Come on,” I say, throwing an arm around my cousin’s bare shoulder. She’s in a tiny, glimmering silver dress and mile-high heels. She’s mostly here so she can talk with Raj Singh, Jasper’s teammate. She has a crush on him. I steer her past Jasper, muttering a bunch of nonsense in her ear as we walk by. That’s for everyone else—to make them think I have a date and throw them off what Jasper and I are doing.

When we get out to a quiet part of the deck, she spins on me. “What the hell was that? Are you just trying to get into Nord’s head?”

I grin. “Would I do that?”

“You might.” She looks at me thoughtfully. “But he’s not really my type.”

I realize she thinks I was trying to set her up with him.

Ah, well. I don’t feel like clarifying. I kiss her on the cheek. “Go dance with Raj. I need to talk to Nord.”

Silvia smiles and nods. “Fine. I will meet up with you later?”

“Please.”

I escort her to the dance floor and then head back toward where I last saw Nord. I find him skulking by himself, and I catch his eye, then deliberately go outside.

I scold myself, because I don’t do this. I don’t chase after people. I have them come to me. And yes, technically, I’m waiting for him to come to me right now, but in a way, it’s still me chasing him.

I should be brave and tell him how I feel. If only I knew what that was.

This is so messed up.

I stroll up a staircase to an upper deck. It’s a bit windy, and no one is out here, which is what I want. Anyone could come by, though. If they ask me what I’m doing, I can say I had to take a phone call. Or I needed to get some air.

I pull out my phone to make it seem realistic.

Just then, there’s a tap on my shoulder. I startle, and Jasper looms up next to me, his hair shiny in the moonlight. I can’t quite see his expression, so I step closer.

“Hola,” I say.

“Did you want to talk with me?”

I nod. “I don’t want to play games with you. I was playing one in there with my cousin—”

“That was your cousin?”

“Yes. She has a crush on Singh. I wanted to throw people off of us. Not that I’ve heard any rumors, but just in case.”

He lets out a sigh, which I interpret as a sound of relief.

“I take it you didn’t want me to be with a woman?” I ask.

“I don’t know that I have the right to say anything like that.”

“I care about you. A lot,” I blurt.

Jasper stumbles, perhaps from the gentle rocking of the boat. “You do?”

“Yes, I do. I like this.” I gesture between us. “What we do when we’re together. I like that you know our world. I *like you*.”

Jasper is quiet for so long, I think I’ve misread things. I think I’m going to get rejected. I think he’s going to laugh or perhaps finally punch me. He’s threatened that often enough.

Instead, he leans in and kisses me so sweetly, it’s tough to believe this is the same guy who for years regularly taunted me in the media and still races against me more than twenty weekends a year.

I kiss him back, enjoying his presence, his scent, his warmth. The velvety softness of his lips and how he tastes like champagne and chocolate.

“Does this mean you like me, too?” I ask. And yes, I sound like I am twelve. In my defense, it would be so much easier to say this in Spanish. English, I’m not sure I’m getting the sentiment right.

“Yes, Cristian Rivera Durá. I like you. God help me, but I do,” he says, chuckling. His gentle laugh does something to my insides. It’s such a rare sound, but I love hearing it.

Warmth blossoms in my chest and spreads throughout my body. I glance up at him and imagine him with his arm around some elegant Swede. The idea makes me see red, and I understand how he felt earlier. “Don’t see other people when you’re not with me,” I say.

He stares at me, and I instantly feel defensive.

“I mean, I’d like it if we were exclusive. I know I have no right to ask—”

He cuts me off. “Of course you have a right to ask. And ...” He swallows thickly. “Bare is amazing. I don’t want to mess that up.”

I heave a sigh of relief, though I don’t know why I’m so worked up about this. Sex is fun. It’s pleasurable. It’s relaxing. It’s perfectly fine for people to have casual relations with whoever.

But the reality is, I haven’t been attracted to anyone but him for more than a year.

Maybe longer. Maybe what we were doing all those years in karting was circling each other. I remember one time when he won, and the pure joy on his face, at age fifteen, was something to behold. Even though I’d lost, I still remember feeling happy for him—until my father berated me for coming in second.

My heart is thumping wildly, because it feels like we’re talking about more of a commitment than simply being monogamous fuck buddies. “So are we agreed?”

“Yes.” His tone calms me. “We’re together until ... until we agree otherwise. If we want to see someone else, we tell each other. That way, for now, we can keep not using condoms.”

He sounds unconvinced by our mutual excuse, and that makes me happy.

I think he may be my boyfriend. But baby steps.

We kiss again, until I hear the distinct sound of a door opening and the music gets louder. Jasper stands back and straightens his bow tie. “Right. See you around,” he says. “I’ll go first.”

He turns to go, but then gives me one final kiss—this one more daring because someone might be coming out here—and then walks away with his easy, loping stride.

It feels like he takes a part of my heart with him. He doesn't even know he has it. He has no idea that he has that kind of power over me.

But there you go.

I *like* Jasper Nord, racing driver and Swedish royalty, and I told him. And he told me the same thing.

I have no idea what to do with this information.



So, life has gotten a little more interesting this year. From Austin to Mexico City to São Paulo to Melbourne, hooking up with Jasper has become a constant I look forward to. But I don't think it's affecting my racing. I'm still qualifying and consistently finishing in the top four. Most of the time I'm first or second, which is how it's always been.

Whenever he makes it to the top of the podium, my heart does a little leap. Like, even though I wish it could be me, part of me is proud that it's him.

If my father or my team heard those thoughts, they'd explode. I'm not supposed to be thinking of anyone other than myself, anything other than my own race. Instead, I want Jasper to do well, too. That's a secret we need to keep between us.

To the rest of the world, I want to be the one on top.

But where Jasper's concerned, sometimes it's good to be on the bottom.

It's race day in Tokyo. The team straps me into the vehicle and hands me my steering wheel. I'm surrounded by mechanics, techs, and the team principal, but no one talks to me unless they need to. They know to leave me alone and let me study the car stats.

I have a lot of fans here. I have no idea why I'm so big in Japan, but I can see a whole contingent of spectators wearing my purple Team SC Racing shirt. Holding signs consisting of nothing but my face, super huge. I've seen banners with marriage proposals.

I can't be distracted by any of that. I need to focus on winning.

I know that when this race is done, I'll be getting a release—win or lose.

But I'd better win.

Only now I'm sad, imagining Cristian losing.

Our agreement is that we each do our best on the track. And if I win, he can't. It's the definition of competition. There is only one. I'm pretty sure that's in a movie somewhere.

Except ... the pure joy on his face when he wins is something to experience. I like it when he wins, even at my expense, and even when I'm pissed about losing, because ... it's starting to feel like he's part of me.

Now isn't the time for thoughts like that. So I get my game face on, so to speak. In reality, under my helmet, I'm going through my prerace checklist in my head. I visualize the entire

track—I know it well. I visualize the lines I need to take to clip the apex on each curve. I visualize when I need to step on the throttle and how long I can wait until I brake. This mental run-through before the actual event soothes me.

We're sent out of pit lane to do a lap to warm up the tires, and then we go out on the grid. I'm at pole position. To my left and a car length back, René Savard is in second. Cristian is directly behind me in third. And the rest of the field is behind them.

I need to focus on one thing: keeping them all behind me.

The lights go out, and we're racing. The first few turns have the potential, always, to be a total calamity. We're all jostling so hard to get into position that we can send some cars spinning out of control.

Thankfully, I get a good start off the line and stay in first. I know I have to do the work, finish the fifty-three laps, get this done. Focus on one at a time.

But before I'm really getting into the flow, we get a yellow flag.

“What is it?” I ask over comms.

“Danielsen went into the barrier in sector one,” Hendricks says.

“Understood.”

Everyone reduces speed, and we make our way around the track in our current order. Before long, the yellow flag is lifted—thankfully there wasn't debris on the track, so they didn't need a safety car—and we take off again.

I have to pay attention to so many things—my tires, fuel consumption, how the engine is doing—in addition to, you know, normal things like going fast and putting my elbows out to keep the other drivers from passing.

Cristian is still in my side-view mirror, and I have to stay at least a second ahead of him so that he won't get in DRS range and be able to pass me. I want to go as hard as I can, the

entire race, but it's not possible on these hybrid engines. Every other lap, we have to recharge the battery.

"Watch out for Rivera," Hendricks says. "He's getting close to DRS."

"I know," I say irritably. I push my car to the limit, needing to prove to myself that I can still win, even though I have ... ugh ... feelings. For him.

Cristian passes me.

Shit.

"You can get him," Hendricks says, oblivious to where my brain has gone.

Now I really do have to get myself together. Bad enough that people might think this year's races were rigged if they find out we are lovers. A thousand times worse if they'd be right.

Savard passes me.

That's unacceptable. I have great mental strength and ability, and I know how to dig in. It's time to do it now.

From somewhere, I find focus. I'm not thinking about Cristian. I'm not even thinking about myself. I'm just visualizing the next turn and doing it. Then doing it again. And again.

I overtake Savard. Soon I'm within DRS zone of Cristian, and I pass him. All this work has taken a toll on the car, but Hendricks assures me we're in good shape. Now I need to go back to tire management mode. That's fine—it's part of every race—but I can't be doing Cristian management mode, otherwise I'll lose.

And that's a sobering thought. I can't lose because of my feelings for him. My entire purpose in life has been to win races. To prove to my family that I have value. That I can stand out just as much as any of them.

Except ... it's lonely out here on the track. Just me and Hendricks, essentially. Sure, there are nineteen other drivers, but ideally I only see them when I lap them.

And again my thoughts have wandered, and Cristian is again near me. My body braces, reacting, and then I push, despite needing to recharge the battery.

I'm not letting him beat me. Bottom line.

I remember something I've heard about flying: that the plane is off course most of the time, but it makes little adjustments throughout the flight and ends up where it wants to be.

If this is how it's going to be—if I have to keep dealing with intrusive thoughts about Cristian—I'm just going to course correct and get back on track to win.

And I do. Somehow, I manage to get to the top of the podium, but it's one of the most grueling races I've ever experienced. Not physically, but emotionally. Because I had to block Cristian out. I had to block out the feel of him when he's naked, his soft, warm skin next to mine. The way we can talk about everything and anything. The way he understands me.

But when Cristian sprays me with champagne from the number two podium position while the Toreador March from *Carmen* plays to celebrate my win, all I can think about is taking his suit off him.



When Cristian enters our secret suite, he doesn't even talk to me. He just starts stripping and kissing me like he's starving.

I'm the same way.

"So wrong to see you out there and not touch you," I groan.

"Same."

"I kept thinking about what we've done. And what we're going to do. It threw me off my game."

He grins in delight. "Really?"

I nod. “I don’t know why I told you that,” I admit. “You’re my rival, after all.” I guess because I wanted to find out whether he has the same weakness.

But Cristian’s approach to racing is much different from mine. I am cool precision. He is wild passion. Don’t get me wrong—he is incredibly smart and knows his way around the track like he knows how to breathe.

He looks hurt. “Really? Are we still rivals?”

“We always will be, won’t we?”

He sighs. “Technically, I suppose. At least on the track. But off track? I’m not a fan of it.”

“I agree.” I smile at him, wrapping an arm around his bare waist. “Want to know what I am a fan of?”

Cristian shakes his head.

“Sucking your cock.”

He laughs.

“I swear that’s what I was thinking about when you passed me.”

“En serio?”

“Okay, I was thinking about my feelings for you. But I hoped I’d get you naked.”

“I’ll have to make you daydream more often.”

“Don’t you bloody dare. We have to be able to show people that we are at the best of our game. That whatever we’re doing behind the scenes does not matter at all when we are talking about the race standings.”

Cristian’s expression goes very serious. “I know. You are right.”

I kiss him again and squeeze his ass.

“Come here. Come to bed.” He tugs me to the bed and lies down on his back, so I climb up over him. I bend down and kiss him, and it feels like coming home. Like I’m where I

belong. He runs his hands down my spine, and I shiver. I rub my cock against his, and we both groan.

We make love for hours, my sleep schedule be damned. Cristian is my reward for all the bullshit we put up with. Even if it's only for tonight.



Walking into pit lane in Italy, I nod to Cristian when I see him. But I didn't do it as discreetly as I should have.

Raj whispers, "What's up with you and Rivera?"

I bristle. "What are you talking about?" I try to keep my face calm, but I'm sure I'm frowning.

"You guys have always been at each other's throats, but now it seems like you've cooled off. There are no choice headlines of things you've said. Not for a while."

"Huh," I say. He's right.

Maybe Cristian and I need to stir up some controversy to throw everyone off our game. Then again, we don't want our lives to consist of scripted antics.

"He'll piss me off again," I say, sure of it.

And I'm right.

The next race, Cristian comes up on my ass, too close. We're doing wheel-to-wheel action, and one of us has to give. We have only seconds to make a decision, and I'm not backing down.

He's not backing down, either.

This is a *Thelma and Louise* situation where we're both going to go off a cliff. But on the other side of the cliff is the championship, and neither one of us can see anything but that.

He gives up, easing off, but then the next turn, he's at it again.

“Little fucker,” I mutter into comms. I’m sure they’ll bleep me out on camera.

I can almost see his expression of single-minded concentration. He gets it when he’s trying to make me come fast.

I win the race, but it’s close, and I’m pissed off that the little shit practically ran me off the track.

“You should be grateful you didn’t spin me out,” I tell him in the paddock.

“You’re responsible for your own car,” he says, in his infuriating amused voice. Like he thinks I’m being prissy.

For the hundredth time, I wonder whether this can work in the long run. Are we too alike? We’ve agreed to compete as vigorously as we can during races, but it’s my understanding (and correct me if I’m wrong) that you’re supposed to compromise in relationships.

Are Cristian and I ever going to compromise? How can you compromise when only one person can win?

IN FRANCE, after summer break—when Jasper and I couldn't see each other because of prior obligations—Edmund Fairfax, my team principal, sits me down in one of our temporary offices on track to go over the stats for the season so far. The bottom line is that Jasper and I are neck and neck (which I already knew). Our points are nearly identical, and while we've each had a few slipups, for the most part the two of us are dominating the track.

Except he's winning. And this is irking our sponsors. My team. My father.

"Cristian, we need to improve," Edmund says. "You are so close. You must beat him."

I want to roll my eyes. *Don't you think I've tried?* What does he think I'm doing? Sucking Jasper's dick?

Oops.

I stiffen. Am I not trying as much as I should? Underneath it, somewhere, am I letting Jasper win?

"I'm doing my best," I mutter. Then I straighten my shoulders. No. I need to be proud. Because I *am* doing my best. "I want to win fair and square." I'm not happy I won that time in Bahrain when I hit Jasper, and I'm not being as ruthless as I have been in the past. "Is that a problem?"

"No, of course not. It feels like you're just so close to being a champion again. Why can't we get you to get to the finish line faster than Nord?"

Because he's been faster, I want to say. Because this is a tough industry. Because we are talking differences that you can barely measure. "Ask the engineers. I'm pushing the car as fast as it can go."

"You're still losing, Cristian."

Losing. I'm coming in second. That's hardly *losing*, especially in this kind of racing where the top ten drivers get points. But the difference in points means millions and millions of euros. I need to stay focused and do what he says.

"I'm doing the best I can. Nord is just faster."

He gives me a look. "Your sponsors pay obscene amounts of money to back a winner. There are jobs on the line. The fans expect you to perform. Got it?"

I nod.



The following week, in Britain, I lose. Or, rather, I come in third.

I'm pissed. I want to scream.

When Jasper comes to our room, I ignore him. Usually we're on each other right away, but I don't even want to talk to him. I couldn't come near him on the track, and I don't want to think about why.

"Do you want me to come back later?" he asks. "Or not at all?"

I shrug. I don't know what I want.

He seems to understand. That I can't articulate what I want, because I don't *know* what I want. He also seems to understand that I don't want to process or talk about it. I don't want to fucking feel my feelings.

"Then fuck me," he offers.

I shake my head. "In the mood I'm in, I could seriously hurt you."

He gives me a skeptical look. “I’d stop you.”

“No, Jasper. I’m saying no. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“What if I want you to hurt me? What if I want you to use me? Take out all that aggression and disappointment.”

I fly toward him, fists out, and end up beating on his chest. I pull back so I don’t really hurt him, but I get in his face. “Fuck you,” I say. “Joder, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did I say talk? No. I said fuck. Like we say, get your dick out.”

Before I can do anything else, Jasper is on his knees in front of me, sliding my sweatpants down, exposing my semihard dick. It’s not fully hard, because I’m pissed, but it tends to swell anytime Jasper is around. Like this, he can take me in all the way to the root.

And it feels so good that it distracts me from the shit going on inside my brain. From the loss and the talking-to from my coach. From everything. I look into those glacial-blue eyes, and then I tilt my head back and sigh loudly. “Fine,” I mutter. “Blow me.”

He laughs around my dick, and something about that gentle noise turns me on more. He can do anything to me, and it turns me on. And that’s funny.

My gentle grump cheers me up. Even if he’s also the cause of my frustration—since if he’s ahead of me on the track, I’m not winning. But I’m never going to admit that, so I’ll settle for letting him suck my dick.

He pops off. “I can finish you like this, but I was serious about you fucking me.”

I scramble to take off my shirt and shove my pants down my legs, then sprint to the bed, and he starts laughing again. As he glides toward me, shedding his shirt, I inhale sharply at the sight of his broad shoulders and toned torso.

Damn, he’s beautiful.

He drops his pants, and he’s erect, his long dick bobbing against his lower belly.

“Either take your time to open me up, and then you can go as hard as you want,” he says, “or go in now, no prep, and let me get used to you.”

I don't want either of those options. I know he said to use him to get out my aggression, but I don't want that.

I pull out the lube, which I'm now buying in bulk, and put a generous amount on my fingers. He and I have figured out a lot of this gay sex stuff, and I know there aren't any shortcuts. Since I love bottoming, I do it most of the time, but today I want something different, and apparently so does he. I find his entrance and breach him, and he stiffens, hissing. I immediately pull my finger out.

“No, it's fine,” he says. “I'm just not used to it. But I want to do it.”

“Not going to hurt you.”

“It's fine,” he says firmly. “Just take your time.”

So I do. I wiggle my finger around, stroking him, opening him up, until he starts to relax. He takes longer than I do, and I take some weird comfort in that. I'm better than him at this—bottoming.

Then I insert another finger, and he hisses again. I'm fully aware of the burn of invasion, so I take my time, letting his ring soften, letting him get used to having someone in there. Then I try for another finger, but that third one is harder, and he's getting impatient.

“Just fuck me,” he says. It's the first time I've heard him whine.

A surge of feelings rushes through me. Not just lust or attraction, but something deeper and darker. Something excavated by our competition on the track.

Without another word, I enter him, and he jolts, tensing up against my intrusion. I may be cocky, but my dick isn't pornstar big. It's ... normal. But if you aren't used to taking it up the ass, anything feels big. And while I am feeling a little mean, I meant it when I said I didn't want to hurt him, so I wait and give him a moment to adjust.

When his breathing stops being so labored, I do an experimental thrust in, then pull out.

He nods, and I do it again. And again. And again.

My thrusts soften, though. Little by little, my emotions ease. I started behind him, but I shift so we're facing each other. Before, it was too much to look into his eyes, but now I want to see him.

"You feeling better?" Jasper asks quietly.

"So much." He lifts his legs so I can enter him again, and I can't stop watching him. Seeing the softness and vulnerability in his eyes. Seeing how much he's trusting me.

I take it slow, fucking him deliberately, wanting to enjoy this connection with him. He distracts me from my thoughts, from the race, from everything but him.

At the end of our lovemaking, I kiss him. "I can't wait to have uninterrupted time with you in America." Fall break can't come fast enough, and I want the anonymity of America so I can pretend that we could be out together and no one would care.

IN OCTOBER, we touch down in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which is about the furthest thing you can get from Sweden. Not just in terms of its location on the globe, but also how dry and open it is. The tall, red Sangre de Cristo Mountains are stunning.

I'm full of giddy anticipation.

Cristian and I exit the private jet, squinting into the sunlight, and are led to a waiting car that shuttles us to where our rental—a new, red Mustang convertible—is waiting. I know we could get a more discreet car, but I wanted the classic American experience, and I'm not worried about being recognized. After all, the reason we picked this region is that open-wheel racing isn't as popular here.

Cristian whistles. "Super cool," he says.

We throw our duffel bags into the trunk and then eye each other for who is going to drive first. Thankfully the people at the rental car agency either don't know who we are or are too discreet to say anything. Either way, I feel anonymous, which is not an experience I have in Sweden, or generally in Europe. There, my every move is watched. Here, it feels like there's some freedom.

On a wild whim, before starting the car, I lean over and kiss Cristian, safe in the knowledge that literally no one is around—even my security is around the corner, tracking me with GPS.

He startles and swivels his head, then relaxes when he realizes that no one can see. Then he attacks my mouth back,

and I feel like I'm flying—the same soaring feeling I have on a racetrack. Like no one and nothing can stop us. Like I can show my ...

Oh my god.

My *feelings* for this man. And I *am* beginning to have feelings for him. Or maybe I've had them for a while. After all, they say there's a fine line between love and hate. While I don't think I'm in love with him, and I never really hated him, we've had a powerful reaction to each other for years now.

Since a year and a half ago in Bahrain, we've been having a powerful reaction to each other's body. But now I'm having a powerful reaction to him. All of him.

Before the kiss gets too far out of control, I start the engine, and we grin at each other. "Top down?" I ask.

He nods. "Top down."

I adjust the convertible top. We both have on sunglasses and baseball caps—not ones from our sponsors; we're off duty. And we take off down what's marked as Historic Route 66.

Cristian fiddles with the radio, and we find all sorts of stations we don't have in Europe. Spanish-language stations that he lingers on, listening for a moment because the accents are different than he's used to. Country music. Lots of stations of people talking. I know we could just plug in a phone and put on a playlist, but listening to the local music feels like part of the experience. While the wind whipping by does create noise, I'm surprised that the convertible isn't louder. Cristian sings along with the radio when he knows the song, and his voice is soothing. I should've known he'd have a good voice, since he plays the guitar so well. He's got music in him. Just having him here by me, out in the open, with no one to bother us, is absolutely wonderful.

I've been to the United States before, of course, but never like this. Never without a royal entourage or an entire security team. The relaxed circumstances tempt me to hit the gas hard, but I pace myself, forcing myself to go exactly the speed limit.

“Not used to that,” I say, when a truck goes around us.

“What?”

“Letting people pass me.”

Cristian cracks up. “Eh, this isn’t a race.”

“No, it’s not.”

We drive down long highways. Sometimes we see modern strip malls and businesses, but those are punctuated with places that look like they’ve been here since cars were invented. Which is new for Sweden, but old for this part of the world, I think.

We drive out in the desert for a while, and when we come upon a little town, we slow down to look around. I pull to a stop at a barbecue place. “I want to try this,” I say. “Is it all right—”

He holds up a hand. “Yes. Yes, we eat here.”

I feel wind-whipped and desiccated as we step out of the car. “You should put on sunscreen,” Cristian says, fussing over me.

“I did.”

“More. On the back of your neck.”

I sigh, exasperated, but I do as he tells me. Part of me secretly loves the fact that he’s paying attention.

Inside, the place is the opposite of fancy. There’s a counter with display boards behind it, a station where a man is cutting up large pieces of meat, and a young woman taking orders. I read the signs, but I have no idea what some of these things are. I don’t know what tri-tip is, or slaw. I shrug and ask, “What should we have?”

The girl behind the counter smiles. “It’s all good, but if you want what we’re best at, get the ribs.”

“Fair enough.”

“Do you want it ———?”

I blink. She said something very fast, and it sounded like *foreertago*, which makes no sense. I'm having trouble contextualizing what she's saying, too. While my English is very good, it's being put to the test.

"Sorry?"

She smiles again and repeats herself slowly. "Do you want it for here? Or to go?"

Now I understand her words, but I'm still not clear on what she's asking.

Cristian slides up to me. "We don't want takeaway."

"Ah. Yes. We would like to eat here," I say.

"Excellent," she says.

We order food and get a couple of beers and then find our way to a booth with plastic seats. It feels a little sticky, but the table is still damp with whatever they used to clean it off, so I think we'll be all right.

"This is a different world," I say, looking around at the linoleum floor, neon signs, and customers in jeans and hats of all kinds—from baseball to cowboy. "I love it."

The food is delivered to our table with no fanfare a few minutes later, and it's on paper plates. The woman hands us cutlery wrapped in paper serviettes, along with a few packets that I realize have moistened cloths in them.

"You're supposed to pick the ribs up," Cristian says, and he does so. He gets red sauce on his face, and I don't think he's ever looked cuter.

Well, again, I'm pretty sure no one recognizes us. I gingerly pick up the meat and take a bite. Back when I was a kid, my mum would lecture me for eating this way, but when on Route 66 ...

The ribs are delicious. I moan, and Cristian gives me side-eye. "Don't make a noise like that when I can't do anything about it."

I laugh and take another bite, then sip my beer.

Life is very good right now.



A while later, we are back on the road, full of food, hastily cleaned up in the bathroom, and ready to see more of the American Southwest. Again, security follows, but they're keeping their distance so I can almost pretend they're not here. We stop at something called a trading post and see all kinds of jewelry and dolls. It's supposed to be from the Native Americans, but I can't tell what is genuine and what is not, since I pick up one item and see it was made in China. Other things look authentic, and it's all interesting to me. I want to learn more, and we buy a few books.

We switch drivers, and now, for the first time, I'm a passenger in a car with Cristian Rivera behind the wheel. There are likely *millions* of people around the world who would do anything to be in this position. He's so charismatic, with his doe eyes and his wide, impish grin that hide how he's a demon on the track.

For now, although he peels out in a cloud of dust, he immediately slows down to the speed limit, allowing us to look around. I'm used to kilometers per hour, so the numbers are all wrong, but I can tell that he is being responsible.

"This is fun!" he chirps, and his childish enthusiasm is catching. I find myself loosening up. I think, when I was driving, I was still on alert. I'm always looking for the next thing to do. The next challenge.

Right now, I have no challenge, and the only thing to do is look at New Mexico. I settle back and enjoy the ride.

When Cristian pulls up in the gravel driveway of a motor court, our first night's destination, I'm entranced but tired. This place had been disused, but new owners rehabilitated it into a luxury place to stay, far removed from its humble beginnings. The rooms are still small, but we have an entire little cabin to ourselves.

Once we get inside the room, I set my bag down on the floor and find my arms full of Spaniard. “Do you know how hot you are?” he whispers. “In those tight jeans? Your arms getting tan in the sun? Mierda, so hot.”

He attacks me with his tongue, and I give it right back to him. Soon we are stripping off our clothes and find ourselves on the bed, stroking our cocks together, because we need to get off, *now*.

When we’re covered in come and panting, lying on our backs, we look at each other and laugh. “Come on,” I say. “Let’s wash up and then find a place for dinner.”

In the shower, the soap gets everywhere, and we end up coming again. Relaxed and sated and clean, we drive into town.

Sitting across from each other, crunching on French fries with ketchup—no mayonnaise for some reason—and eating hamburgers, we enjoy our meal, although I get some funny looks for eating with a knife and fork. I just can’t do the hands thing for more than novelty.

When we’re done, we stop into a convenience store and buy a small cooler, then load it up with ice, water, dried beef jerky, fruit, cheese, and crackers, so we’ll have snacks for tomorrow. And not a single person has said, oh, are you with SC Racing? Lighthouse Racing? Is that you, Jasper? Cristian?

Thank god.

In our cabin, Cristian sleeps spooning me, even though he’s shorter. We’ve slept together before, but it still feels new and different, because we can’t do it that much.

It also seems like I’ve been doing it every day of my entire life, because it feels so right to be in his arms.

“Today was fun,” I murmur as I’m drifting off.

“It was. I’m glad we’re doing this.”

“Me, too,” I say.

All in all, it’s one of the best days of my life. I can’t wait to see what we do tomorrow.



For the next few days, we travel on parts of Route 66 and investigate every roadside stand. We take detours, stop for picnics, and pull over at each vista point. For once, we are not driving to get anywhere. We're not being competitive.

We simply want to spend time with each other. That's a weird concept, but I begin to get the hang of relaxation.

I laugh at his jokes and help him with his English. He teaches me Spanish curses that make no sense when translated, like "me cago en la leche." *I shit in the milk.* I tell him about the monarchy, which feels as far away as the moon.

We buy tacky souvenirs and T-shirts. We try more barbecue, which is pretty good, and fast food, which is a mixed bag—except the tacos, which are excellent.

We also take a hundred photos of each other that we don't do anything with. We don't text them to each other, we don't upload them to social media, we don't send them to friends—not that I have many outside of the monarchy, but he has many.

So now I have a photo on my phone of Cristian jumping on a bed in his underwear. A selfie of us both shirtless, him behind me grinning wide, his arms over my shoulders. One of us snuggled in bed, kissing. I know that one is dangerous, even more than the others. If Cristian and I get photographed together, we can explain that we're friends. Newsworthy, perhaps, but not the end of the world. If a photo of us *kissing* gets out ... that will be a much bigger story, one that will come with a lot of difficult questions.

I'm not sure I want to know what the answers are, but I'm getting too close to him to care. Which I know is a risky fantasy world to be in. Soon I'll need to go back to reality. But not yet.

Every night we stay in old, renovated motels. It's the least fancy I've ever lived, and I'm loving it. I'm experiencing an independence that I've never felt before.

Cristian is reacting the same way. Even though he's not part of a royal family, in Spain and in the racing world he's so well known that he can't move a muscle without everyone knowing about it.

But more ... I'm feeling so close to him. I want to celebrate every moment we spend together. He makes me feel like we're a unit. Like there's something real happening between us. Like he's my boyfriend.

Is that what is happening? Are we falling in love?

And why am I all right with that?

THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST is an interesting place. It's red, though not the same red as Extremadura, which is fairly near where I'm from. Here the earth is more of an orange-red; at home, the red is deeper, bluer, and the landscape is also red from the poppies. So New Mexico and Arizona feel like they're not home but home-adjacent. Adding to that home-adjacent feeling is that so many people speak Spanish, but it's a different Spanish than I'm used to.

But I don't really care where I am, so long as I can be with Jasper without having anyone bother us. It's truly a special time.

And he's starting to feel like a home to me no matter where we are. Like he's an essential part of my life.

"I'm amazed that no one has recognized us so far," I yell at him over the wind whipping around us, after we've been in the United States more than a week. We're both used to driving in an open-air car, obviously, but normally we have helmets and special suits on. Doing it in shorts and a baseball cap is a different experience. I throw my arms out and enjoy the wide-open spaces.

"Don't curse us," Jasper says. I glance over at his profile. He's driving, and he's so serious when he's driving. It's quite a turn-on.

Normally we can't see each other when we're driving. We can't see expressions on faces or have any clue what the driver is thinking, except what they express over the comms when it gets replayed to everyone. But now I can see everything he's

thinking. The way he processes information. I know it's a challenge for him to go slow.

Well, slow being the speed limit, which—compared to our regular race pace—is a crawl.

Jasper follows the signs toward the Grand Canyon National Park, asking if we want to stay at some historic lodge or another. The idea makes me nervous. A historic lodge sounds like it will be bigger, more crowded than the places we've been staying.

“I think we should find a little motel somewhere,” I say. “How many international visitors are here? I bet a ton. What if we're recognized, and they wonder what on earth we are doing here together?”

Jasper gives me as long a look as he can while still driving, then nods once. “Yes, all right. Do you mind finding something?”

I book us a reservation at a motel and then settle as we wait in the line of cars at the park entrance. I'm assuming wearing hats and sunglasses will help disguise us. Plus the fact that no one expects us to be together or here. But we'll have to watch how we interact, which I don't like. I've been enjoying the ability to touch each other without repercussions.

Oh, sure, we get a few looks from people who aren't fond of same-sex couples, but for the most part we're treated well.

Jasper parks the car at the visitor center, and we get out, his security following at a distance. If you didn't know they were his security, you wouldn't assume they were watching him at all, which is nice. If he were mobbed, they'd come to his defense, but it's not needed here, and them staying visibly close would be the opposite of helpful—it would only draw unwanted attention.

Inside the visitor center, I leave my sunglasses on, which might make me stand out a bit, but I think Jasper is more eye-catching, with his bright hair and his height. Still, no one approaches us or seems to be aiming cameras our way. In my head, I hear “... yet” at the end of that sentence. Because it's

only a matter of time. It seems part of me is okay with that. Part of me is reckless and willing to do whatever I want. And what I want to do ... is him.

I'm starting to want the world to know what he means to me. Even though the idea also terrifies me.

"You all right?" Jasper asks, as I still, lost in my feelings about him.

It takes me a second to answer. "Yes. Just thinking about something."

"Going to share?"

"I like being on this trip with you," I say.

"Me, too." Jasper holds out his hand to take mine, then thinks better of it. So instead, we walk outside. Signs point to an area that says it has a view, and we step up to where the crowds are and look.

"*Wow*," Jasper breathes.

"De verdad."

I had no idea of the actual grandeur of the Grand Canyon. Yes, the word is in the name, but I'm used to Spanish overstatement. We'll say something is *estupendo*, and we mean it's okay. This ... it's gorgeous and awe-inspiring.

"This is amazing," he continues. "It's just so *big*."

"That's what he said," I mutter, and he laughs.

It's so good to hear him laugh. I'm not sure I knew he *could* laugh before we started seeing each other.

We hike along the viewpoint, behind a fence that keeps us away from the edge. I'm grateful for the precaution. While race car drivers are thrill seekers, I don't like taking risks where I don't know the potential consequences. This isn't the controlled environment of a racetrack—it's out in nature, and there's no safety harness.

I'm getting more cautious these days. I'll have to watch that when racing starts up again.

Jasper's hand brushes my hip now and then as we walk, and I have to resist the urge to grab it. I want to hold his hand the way we have been in the small towns we've traveled through, but I hear people speaking Italian behind me, and German, and I can't take the risk. It's bad enough that we are vacationing together. But being seen cuddling?

That could cost us everything.

So I do my best to stay away from him, even though I don't want to. Instead, I take a video of the sights. I take a longer video of him, because damn, is he sexy with that tight ass swaying as he walks in front of me.

And then we continue our trip.



When we walk into the motel room, I want to get my hands on him, but I also want to take my time.

"You were driving me wild out there, you know that?" I say.

He kisses me deep and slow, holding my face to his. "Same." He sighs. "I wanted to touch you, and I knew I couldn't, so I just kept it all in."

He's good at that. Me, not so much.

I lean up for another kiss. "While I want you to fuck me, I'm covered in dust. Want to take a bath?" I waggle my eyebrows. "This place is supposed to have a whirlpool tub."

"In the desert?"

"Apparently they have other water conservation measures. Or there's a spring. Something."

He nods. "Lead the way."

We strip slowly as the tub fills, the scents of sage and desert rose in the air, and he climbs in first, opening his legs so I can climb in and sit in front of him.

I lean back against him and he wraps his arms around me, and I don't know that I've ever felt more at ease. It's funny. I went from thinking he was a cold, arrogant jackass to now feeling like I can't live without him.

The question is ... do I tell him? I'm pretty sure he's feeling something similar. I often catch a gentle look in his eyes when he is talking to me.

But what does it mean for our teams, for our families, for the sport, if the two top racers are secretly sleeping with each other?

We've been doing it for a while. So maybe the answer is ... it means nothing to anyone besides us.

Pretty sure we won't stay this lucky, though.

IT'S time to go home. Me to Sweden, Cristian to Spain. While we've made plans to meet up again, if we are going to keep our relationship on the down-low, we can't see each other as much as we want.

That thought makes me angry. *Why* can't we see each other as much as we want? What would it really harm?

A lot, a voice says. A lot of people would have a lot to say. On a variety of topics.

I'm grateful that our sport isn't as homophobic as some others. I'm also grateful that it's made great strides in opportunities for women and minorities. But I'm afraid the sport would not be so open to us showing what we feel for each other.

Even if I could articulate what that is.

The private jet ride to Heathrow is uneventful, except that once security squirrels itself away in a back room, Cristian spends the rest of the flight in my lap. Straddling me. Kissing me. Keeping me hard even after I've come, because it's him. He makes me feel sexier than I ever imagined I could.

Cristian is starting to feel like *my person*. And I'm hoping he feels the same. I think maybe he does.

I grin and kiss him. He tastes like the spearmint gum he's been chewing, and he smells like himself. Which I love. I love the way he feels in my arms and his weight against my body.

"I don't want to leave our own little world," I mutter against his neck. "I want us to keep doing this."

“It’s nice, no?”

It’s more than nice, but I think that’s his limited English. Sometimes I have to decipher what he really means. I just hope my interpretation is right.

“Are we ... boyfriends?” Cristian asks.

“Do you want to be?” My heart feels like it’s lodged somewhere in my throat.

“Yes.”

“Me, too.” I tilt my head. “This isn’t just so we can go bare with each other, is it?”

He shakes his head and kisses me. “No. It’s not.”

I close my eyes and savor his warm weight on me until we have to land.

We separate at Heathrow. I’ll be taking the jet back to Sweden while Cristian gets on his own plane to Spain. We stand on the tarmac, looking at each other, knowing that the freedom of our time in America is over.

I give him a nod, then hold out my arms, and he hugs me briefly.

“See you soon?” I whisper.

“I hope so, yes.”

I watch his back as he walks away.



When I walk into my rooms in Drottningholm Palace, Erik corners me before I’ve even had a chance to plug in my phone. “Jasper, what are you thinking, spending all this time in America with Rivera?”

I glare at him. “How did you find out?”

“Security. So you’re ... dating him?”

It must say something that I don’t even think about denying it. Instead, I nod. My brother already knows that

Cristian and I hooked up, but ... it's more than that, now. "I am."

Erik pinches the bridge of his nose. "I had hoped you'd gotten that out of your system by now."

I bristle. "He's not a virus, something to get over as quickly as possible."

"He's also a commoner. And a man."

I put a hand on my hip. "So?"

"He's not an appropriate match for you."

"Don't you know that telling people who they can and cannot love doesn't work?" I roll my eyes. "I'm done fighting my feelings about Cristian, and I'm not going to let the family take him away from me. I have someone I care about, and I already have to hide him from so much."

Erik sighs. "I'm not telling you that you can't love him."

I stiffen, realizing what I said. *Do I love Cristian?*

"I'm telling you that you *shouldn't*. Even if you keep him as a lover, you need to have a royal marriage."

"No, I bloody don't." My voice is raised like it's never been in the palace. But I'm fed up with having everyone tell me what I can and cannot do or feel. "I'm not going to marry someone for political gain. We're a modern monarchy, and Cristian and I are going to have a modern relationship. I'm not close enough to the throne for it to matter, anyway."

"It always matters."

"What matters?" My mother appears in the doorway, looking alarmed. I guess my outburst has caused a stir.

I walk over to her. "Hej, Mamma."

She holds out her arms, giving me a stiff hug. "Hello, Jasper. How was your trip to America?"

"It was very nice."

"And you traveled with your friend?"

I try not to fidget. “Yes, Cristian and I traveled together.” Erik clears his throat behind me, and I figure I might as well spill. “Mum, I need to tell you that Cristian isn’t just a friend.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“He’s my boyfriend. And if I’m not permitted to be with him, I’m not going to be with anyone.”

She looks shocked. Not shocked about my being with a man, shocked that I’d have such vehement emotion.

My family doesn’t do this. We don’t say what we mean, and we certainly don’t get upset where others can see. From early childhood, we’re taught to keep everything on an even keel.

But Cristian is helping me to become more comfortable with my feelings by letting me be angry or sad and holding me after—and more, he’s letting me see that this is natural and normal.

I don’t want to be the Ice Man anymore. I want the passionate world of my Cristian. I think perhaps that’s why I went into racing to begin with—not for Cristian, at first, but to have a place where it was all right for my heart to beat faster. I want to go full throttle. I want to live.

Cristian helps me to live.

“Mum, I’m truly able to be myself when I’m with him.”

My mum looks aghast. “Jasper. We never said you couldn’t be who you truly are.”

“Maybe you didn’t say it, but that’s what you’ve always modeled. We always uphold decorum. We keep things private.”

“That’s because so much of our lives are public. It’s protection.”

“But it also keeps me from being fully alive.”

“Being with him is still a bad idea,” Erik says. “Grandmother could throw you out of the family.”

“Erik!” my mum says. “That’s not true. What has gotten into you?”

“It’s happened before. Look at Uncle Johan.”

My mum bristles. “That was something else entirely. My uncle walked away from the monarchy on his own; he was not thrown out. And besides, things were different back then.”

Erik furrows his brow. “I thought he was excommunicated.”

She shakes her head. “He chose to leave the family, saying he would be happier living away from the pressures of public life.”

“Hmm,” Erik says, chewing on his lip. “I still think there’s a risk.”

“Of course there is, but it may not be as big as you think.” Mum sighs. “Let’s talk with your father before we bring it up with your grandmother.” She leaves the room and returns a few moments later with my father, who looks confused as to why we’ve summoned him.

“Jasper wishes to tell you something,” Erik says.

I can’t believe I have to do this before I’ve even changed out of my travel clothes. But fine. Better to get it over with. “I’m dating one of my ... coworkers,” I say.

“Oh? Who?” my father asks.

Here goes. My heart beats faster, but my voice is steady. “Cristian Rivera.”

My father blinks. “Rivera, the racing driver.”

“Yes. He’s my boyfriend. We’re together, and we’ve been together for over a year.”

Erik sighs. “I can see we aren’t going to talk you out of this.”

I shake my head. “Why are you so opposed to it?”

“We just want what’s best for you,” Mum says.

“No, you want what’s best for the family,” I say.

“And sometimes what is best for the family *is* what is best for you. You just don’t know it,” Erik huffs.

“Do I have to go tell Grandma?” I say. “Because I will.”

Erik looks absolutely horrified. “I don’t think ...”

My mother looks thoughtful. “I suppose you should. If she doesn’t like it—”

“She doesn’t have to like it.”

My parents and brother all stare at me. Finally, my father says, “You must really be in love with that man, to risk your entire future. Not just in racing, but with the family.”

Until this conversation, I hadn’t really considered whether I was in love with Cristian. But now that my family has put it that way, I think I very well might be.

Regardless, “I’m not risking my future,” I say. “I’m creating it. With him.”

I’ll tell my grandmother when the time is right. For now, I’m going to unpack.

AFTER I RETURN FROM AMERICA, the team and I are back at work on the circuit, with just a few more races to go before the final showdown. Jasper and I are battling it out, so every point matters—neither one of us is running away with the win this year, and the final few races are *thisclose*.

When I cross the finish line first in Singapore again, I get to celebrate. Now I've won three championships and Jasper has won two, and if that doesn't make my father proud, I don't know what will. Jasper celebrates with me privately in our suite after the race, but as we leave the next day, we haven't set plans for when we're going to see each other next.

"Come stay with me over winter break," I whisper, as I kiss him goodbye for now.

He smiles. "I will." He takes a little bit of my heart with him when he walks out the door, back to his own world. All I can do is pack up and leave for mine.

When I enter my parents' house in Spain, my father gives me a big hug. He normally goes to the races in Europe, but Singapore is a bit far.

"Congratulations, son. I am proud of you," he says. Words I was longing to hear, but they feel hollow. Is this what I've been working so hard for? A sentence or two of approval, now that I have more championships than my contemporaries?

Then he continues. "You just have to tie with the greatest of all time, now," he says, "A few more seasons and you should have it."

My stomach drops as everything comes into focus.

My entire life has been based on something I might never be able to attain—and wouldn't find satisfying if I did. Not if the only reason behind it is to gain his approval.

“Papá,” I say. “Thank you, but I'm realizing something: I'll never be enough for you. I cannot achieve enough, and I can't make you think that I'm worthy on my own, and now I have to stop trying. Because otherwise I'll never be done.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but I hold up my hand, my voice cold and terse. “I'd thought that I was racing at this level for you, but no. I'm doing it for me. And I don't care anymore what you think.”

My father puffs up his chest. “This is how you celebrate? By getting angry? That makes no sense.”

I've held back from this confrontation for years, but his casual dismissal makes me explode. “It makes all the sense in the world,” I tell him. “Because you've done nothing but put pressure on me, ever since day one, and when I do what you ask, it still isn't enough.” I shake my head, hot tears stinging my eyes. “That's it. I'm not listening to you anymore. I don't want you to come on my comms—don't even come to races. I'm taking away your lanyard. I'm going to race next year because I love driving, but I'm going to be doing it for me, not you.”

My father looks at me with his mouth open, and I excuse myself, needing to calm down and process what I just said.

Because I think I always knew I could never live up to my father's standards. But what if I can't live up to my own, either?

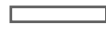
I pick up the phone and call my boyfriend.

“Hello, Cristian,” he says, and no matter how many times he says my name, hearing it with his accent always makes me melt. “How are you?”

“Not so good. I had a fight with my father.” I tell him what happened, and how I might actually be racing for myself—and how that is the scariest thing of all.

Jasper listens but doesn't offer any advice. He seems to know I need to be listened to, not talked at.

And my heart cracks open a bit more.



My father and I cool off, and my mother, always the peacekeeper, tries to involve me in conversations. Except I'm not feeling it. I end up slumping around the house and texting Jasper at all hours.

"What's wrong?" my mother asks. "I know you had that fight with your father, but remember that racing is part of you."

"That's not it," I say. "Or not all of it."

"Then what has you so upset, mijo?"

"I'm in love, mamá," I admit. "And it's not with someone you would choose for me. I'm not ashamed of this person. Not by a long shot. But I know that it's not going to go over well with papá."

She looks at me for a long time. "Is the fact that you didn't say this person's name or use a pronoun important?"

I nod. "It's a man."

My mother smiles. "That's okay. Paco isn't prejudiced. You've stood up to him, and he respects that. He'll come around. Why don't you invite your boyfriend over. I'd like to meet him."

"Sure."

I immediately text Jasper, who is as eager to be with me as I am with him, especially after I told him about the argument with my father. A week later, after he fulfills some royal function or other and meets with his team, he shows up at the door, his security in place behind him.

I don't even hesitate. I drag him in, kissing him, and he kisses me back. His security team must know we're together,

and if they didn't before ... they certainly know now.

“Well, that's a way to welcome me,” Jasper says, breathless, when we pull apart.

“I'm so happy to see you,” I say. I take his hand, wanting to get this over with. “Come meet my parents.”

We find my mother in the living room, and she looks up, smiling. Her smile morphs as she sees my kiss-stung face and the fact that I'm holding hands with Jasper Nord.

Her hand flies to her mouth. “You? And him?” she asks in Spanish.

“Yes, mamá. Jasper and I are together,” I reply, also in Spanish.

“No. It isn't possible.”

“Why not?” I say. “I am not good enough for a royal?”

“No. He is not good enough for you. He said mean things about you, repeatedly, in the past. He is not kind to you.”

“Mamá, he understands some Spanish.” I turn to him. “Right?”

He nods. “I've been learning it, yes,” he says in Spanish.

Her jaw drops, and her look of shock would be comical if I weren't so pissed off. “Don't be rude to my boyfriend,” I tell her.

She takes a deep breath and switches to English. “I am so sorry, Jasper. My name is Mari Carmen. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Jasper is so well-mannered, he utterly ignores her previous rudeness. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Sra. Rivera.”

They exchange a few more pleasantries, and she ushers us in and brings us each a drink. But then my father appears. “Papá,” I say, “I know you know Jasper Nord, but he is here not as a competitor, but as a partner.”

“Partner?”

“Would you prefer the term lover? Boyfriend?”

My father blinks. “Him? And you?” His face turns red with anger. “No. No. This is unacceptable.”

“What’s unacceptable?” I say harshly. “That I am with a man?”

My father makes a *ptth* sound. “That, modern times. It is fine. But you cannot be with *this* man. He has beat you on the track before. For two championships!”

Jasper is trying to hide a smile.

“Shut up,” I say, pushing his bicep. Yum. I love his muscles.

My father looks simultaneously livid and confused. “But you two ... together? How can you two be lovers?”

“You, of all people, should understand, papá. Because we know the pressure on the racing circuit. Jasper knows what it is to want to win. To want to prove something to yourself, your family, and the world.” I shrug. “And, you know. I like him. Underneath that Ice Man exterior is someone who is actually kind of funny. Sometimes.”

“I know this is a shock,” Jasper says. “But we did not want to hide from our families anymore. We need to hide from so many people.”

“Of course. The public cannot know. It would endanger the future of the sport.” My father huffs.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I start to say.

“The fact that he’s a man is not the problem. The fact that he is your rival? That is a big problem.”

I fear that he’s right, but I don’t want to admit it. So I say, “It has not affected our performance so far.”

My father shakes his head. “Maybe, maybe not. But you can’t prove it. Wait until your fans find out. You will never hear the end of it.”

I shrug. “That may be true. But Jasper is worth it.”

The fond look on Jasper’s face makes my heart thump. He squeezes my hand.

My father still shakes his head. “I do not like this at all. But I will say something. I respect that you came to me with your head high and your shoulders back. You did not shrink. You are honorable in that you are not sneaking around.”

“Well, we had to sneak around at first.”

He sighs. “Then never mind.”

“It’s difficult to tell people you care about that you are doing something that they won’t approve of,” Jasper says. He turns faintly pink, and I’m sure he’s thinking of the dirty implications of “doing something.”

“This is true,” my father says. “Cristian has honor. Will you live up to that?”

Jasper smiles. “I will do my best.”

My father turns back to me. “This means that you will still fight. Right? On the track, even if I am not pushing you, you will not let him win?”

I throw up my hands. “What do you take me for? I just won the championship!”

“And I made him work for it,” Jasper says.

My father looks at us, and I get the sense he is really processing what he is seeing. His anger seems to have drained away, and now he is working through what all this means. “I suppose that is true. And I would be insulted if someone suggested that my son was not doing his best.”

“I don’t know,” my mother says. “Cristian is a romantic.”

“Mamá!”

“But he would not throw a race. He has too much pride,” she continues.

“Exactly. We both have honor. If we don’t try our utmost, then what is the point of racing at all?”

“I still think this is going to blow up.”

I look at my father, and I realize—for the second time in my life—that he doesn’t have to approve of what I do.

Thank god.

Jasper and I spend much of the winter holidays together, but then it comes time to train. Once we each return to our team headquarters, I barely have time to text him, but late at night, we do find time for video calls that end up being rather sexy.

I can't wait for the season to start.



“Fuck my face,” I whisper, after I’ve come all over my chest. It’s the night before the first race of the new season. I’m lying on my back in bed. After a lingering kiss, Jasper moves to straddle my upper body, feeding his dick into my mouth, and I swallow him down greedily. We’re in my suite in the hotel in Bahrain, the same room where we first got together two years ago.

Fond memories.

I smile around his cock, but then he chokes me with it, and I sputter.

“Sorry,” he whispers.

I pull my head back to speak. “Don’t be. I love it when you do that.”

Jasper gently thrusts his cock into my throat, and I suck before he pulls out. When he pushes back in again, he puts a hand on my throat. I’m not sure he can feel how deep he is, but it’s sexy as hell to have his big hand on my skin. He gives me a break to breathe, but I want him to use me. I clutch his ass, encouraging him to go harder, faster. I’m gagging a little bit, but it’s awesome.

Qué maravilla.

“Fuck, Cristian, I’m going to—”

I love it that he warns me, but even without that, I can tell when he’s tensing up and about to unload. His body takes over, and the pulses of his orgasm hit my throat, the warm,

bitter come flooding my mouth. He goes to pull out, but I follow him, chasing him, wanting to keep his dick warm and inside me for as long as possible.

Finally, he chuckles and moves to lie beside me. We stare at the ornate ceiling.

Jasper reaches to hold my hand as we lie shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip.

“Do I ask?” he says. “Who is going to win tomorrow?”

I scoff. “Me, obviously.”

“Whatever.” He shifts to his side, and with a finger he traces my profile, from my forehead down the slope of my nose, across my lips, down my chin, and over my throat. “While I want to win, I wouldn’t mind if you did well.”

“How noble of you.”

“I mean, I am nobility.” We both laugh. “So may we have the best race we can tomorrow. And may the best racer win.”

“Yes,” I say. “And that will be me.”

For once, I’m racing for myself and no one else.



The following day, I’m doing all right, but there’s a lot going on. We have a redesigned car this year, and it’s taking some getting used to. Last year’s car drove like a dream. Like it was part of me. This one is more difficult.

But I’m more than halfway through the race, and things are going smoothly.

Paddy is in my ear. “Right now you’re P5.”

“Tire status of everyone?” I ask.

“Everyone ahead of you needs to box.” So I have the freshest tires. “Including SC Racing, but they have a big enough margin it doesn’t matter.” That means they should be

able to do a pit stop and get back on the track without losing their position in the race.

While part of me is grumpy about it, part of me is proud that Jasper is doing so well. He's a great driver. Even I can admit that.

This is when my father would normally get on comms and pressure me, telling me I have to win.

But now it's my own voice in my ear, my own inner determination.

This is for me.

"You need to push. Now is the time," Paddy says in my ear.

"Copy," I say, and accelerate.

I love this. I love racing. I love the feeling of freedom, of going faster than any human should. I think about whether I would be racing even if my father hadn't wanted me to, and yes. I would, and I know that I can motivate myself to perform without his nagging. I can focus and pay attention and pass cars and get myself to the checkered flag.

Twenty-five laps later, we're on the final lap.

A need comes over me to race like I never have before. While some part of me is telling me to back off, that instinct *has* to be wrong. I know this race could be mine if I just go a little faster.

I step harder on the throttle. Jasper is ahead of me on fast tires, and I need to catch up.

The finish line is just around the next little curve. I can do this if I give it my all.

Paddy is in my ear, and then I clip the curve wrong and I've lost control of the car.

Mierda, mierda, mierda.

My vision goes dark. We have neck protection, but I'm getting spun and snapped, and I realize I'm truly fucked.

This is bad. I end up upside down, the six-point harness keeping me in place so my helmet isn't shredded across the track. The car keeps sliding, then comes to a hard stop against some kind of barrier.

It all happened so fast. I just hope I didn't hit another driver.

I'm dangling in the wreckage of the car, wondering if I should undo my harness. I'm worried about fire.

I hear sirens, and crew are there within moments. "Are you okay?" someone calls loudly.

"Yes," I croak.

"We're going to get you out of here. Hold on."

I'm surrounded by bodies, but then there's a boom and everything gets really hot, and all I can think is that I was so busy trying to win that I forgot to tell Jasper that I'm in love with him.

CRISTIAN'S CAR is in flames, and I feel like I'm the one dying.

He cannot be hurt. I will not let him be hurt. If he got himself hurt, I will find him and kill him myself.

Nothing is allowed to happen to him, because no one understands me the way he does.

I launch myself out of my car, barely remembering to step on the scale so my race counts. When I take off my helmet, there are microphones in my face for the mandatory post-race interviews, but the only thing I say is, "Where's Rivera?"

Unfortunately, I don't get an answer. Instead, I get a press of people yelling "Jasper! Jasper!" at me. I'm shaking so much I can't even get a bottle of water to my lips, and I worry I'm going to collapse.

Hendricks comes over. "Jasper—"

"Get someone to take me to Rivera," I snap. "I don't care about the win."

"He's going to be okay," Hendricks assures me, ever calm. "The latest word is that they are taking him to the hospital solely as a precaution."

I glare at him, and I don't care that we have an audience of, what, millions? "Do you know that for certain?" Hendricks looks away, and I nod. He's managing me—which is his job—not necessarily telling me the truth. "That's what I thought. Get someone to take me to him."

No one bothers to tell me that I'm going to get fined for skipping out on post-race interviews, because it's obvious I

couldn't give a shit. Hendricks must make magic happen, because within a few seconds, a driver on a moped comes over to whisk me out of the racetrack area, and a shuttle car is waiting for me just outside the cordoned-off area along with a female PA I recognize. Everyone's watching me—I'm skipping the podium, and I haven't even taken my purple racing suit off—but again, I couldn't care less.

It's nighttime, and I can't read any of the road signs in this flat desert land except a few that are also in English. Like, thankfully, the one for "Hospital."

The PA is calling ahead, she tells me. "I'll find out what room Rivera is in," she says, and I'm so grateful I could cry. I don't even know her name. She has a quiet conversation over the phone in several languages and finally ends the call. "He's in the first-floor ICU."

"ICU?" I croak.

She gives me a sympathetic look. "Hang in there, Jasper. He's going to pull through." She opens a bag, scribbles something on a Post-it note, and hands it to me. "Here's his room number." She checks the map on her phone. "We're six minutes away."

The longest six minutes of my life. For someone who measures time in tenths and hundredths of a second, six minutes is an eternity.

I'm barely able to sit still. All the adrenaline from the race is still coursing through my body. If anything, it's gotten worse—I'm more keyed up from Cristian getting hurt than two hours of bending my body through g-forces.

When the driver skids up to the hospital entrance—which is guarded by soldiers, I might add—I leap out of the car and burst inside, heedless of the spectacle I must be making in my lurid racing suit.

The PA follows me—I can hear her footsteps—but I scan the numerals on the walls and find his room relatively quickly, skidding to a stop outside.

The large door is open, and at least five people in scrubs surround the bed. There's a massive amount of equipment—tubes, beeping machines, IV bags—which scares the shit out of me.

“Okay, you found him,” the PA whispers. “They’re working on him. Come on, go sit down, and I’ll find out what the protocol is from the nurse’s station.”

It’s fairly obvious I’d get kicked out of his room anyway, and all I can see when I crane my neck is my lover in a hospital bed with an oxygen mask over his face. Then a nurse pulls a curtain around so I can’t even see that.

Before I crumple to the floor, the PA slides in under my arm, then shoulders me down the hall and deposits my ass on a hard plastic seat. “Stay,” she orders.

I take a better look at her. “What’s your name?”

“Diana,” she says. “Let me figure this out, all right?”

Without any other plan, and not wanting to do anything that might get in the way of Cristian’s care, I nod.

By this time, a reporter or two, along with a few photographers, have shown up and are taking photos of me sitting in the waiting area. I’m not sure how they got past the dudes with the machine guns, but it’s not long before someone comes to escort them away, and then it’s just me and a woman who is watching TikTok videos in what I assume is Arabic on her phone. She ignores me, and that’s the way I like it.

While I wait for Diana, I’m able to slow my breathing and think a bit. Of course, the majority of my brain’s processing capability right now is devoted to worry about Cristian.

But I calm down enough to realize that I probably just caused a scandal, racing out of the track like that. As far as everyone knows, Cristian and I are bitter rivals. There’s no reason for me to go to this extent—with this urgency—to see him.

Did I just out us?

And, perhaps more importantly, do I care?

Finally, I wonder what the hell any of us is doing in this sport.

Every driver knows what can happen out there, but that's in the abstract. Coming face to face with a crash like this is the scariest thing I've ever experienced, and I'm not even the one who is hurt. But maybe having someone you love in danger is scarier than being hurt yourself.

I'm in love with Cristian, and now I don't know if racing is worth it. Putting our lives in danger chasing after points. Trophies. Money.

I'm imagining my boyfriend possibly covered in blood or burns, and I'm thinking about racing differently than I ever have before. Trophies aren't important. Neither is how we're ranked among others. None of that matters.

All that matters is that we find happiness within ourselves ... and maybe with someone else we can love.

I'm worried that my rivalry with Cristian caused him to push too much tonight. Even if it wasn't me specifically, is there something dark and desperate inherent in competition?

While I'm mulling these thoughts, the doors at the end of the hallway open, and six racing drivers come striding down the hall, all still in their racing suits, too. They make a pretty impressive sight. There's Cristian's racing teammate, Samantha Stevenson, plus a rookie he's befriended, Grady Lewis, along with drivers from Arete, Mayflower, and a couple of other teams. Following close behind are some of the team principals. I think I even see Cristian's masseuse.

"We got here as fast as we could after interviews," Samantha says. "We all saw the footage."

Cristian's masseuse nods worriedly.

My heart leaps, and I realize that these people, this job, racing—this is my life's work. This is what I love to do.

And it's all gone to hell in an instant.

Should I quit? I know there will be repercussions. I'm under contract. I'm the second best in the league. I'm making

the team hundreds of millions.

But none of that matters if I can't have Cristian.

That's a rash thought, but that doesn't invalidate it. I don't want to live in a world without Cristian. I don't want to live in a world where he's going to get hurt, and that's a possibility at any future races.

The drivers gather around me, taking seats. Everyone is more subdued than usual, and they stop talking entirely when they see my face.

"How's he doing?" Grady asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know. I'm waiting for a report."

"That was quite a crash," Samantha says. "I was right behind him when it happened."

Grady looks at me. "I thought you and Cristian didn't like each other."

I bite my lip. How much do I want to tell them? How much have they figured out from me leaving the track? "That's an act," I finally say. "We like each other just fine. We are close friends."

"Is that all?" Samantha asks. As Cristian's teammate, she may have seen more than I realize. Then she shakes her head. "Sorry, that was rude of me to ask. And it's none of my business."

Are they all going to find out anyway? Should I tell them?

These people aren't really my friends. I don't confide. I barely talk to them unless I need to. I focus on winning, and that's it.

Can I tell them that I'm in love with Cristian before I tell *him*? Before I even know if he's going to be all right?

Can I tell them *anything* without his permission?

"Yes. Friends," I bite out, and they sit with me quietly, waiting for news.

I OPEN my eyes and am at a loss as to what's going on. I'm in a hospital room, that's clear, but which hospital? And what happened?

My immediate reaction is to seize up and panic. Am I okay? Did I lose a leg or something? I fumble my hands quickly down my body, and all my parts seem to be here, although I have some bandages, and there's an IV in my arm.

"Hello? Where am I?" I croak in Spanish. Then I remember I'm in Bahrain, so I say it again in English.

"Shh." A nurse comes in, since my movement has triggered all kinds of beeps and buzzes from the machines that surround me. "Relax. You're in the hospital, but you are going to be fine."

"How do you know?" Why does my voice sound so scratchy?

"Because we are just keeping you here as a precaution. You had a bad crash, but you have no serious injuries." She gives me a kind smile. "I'll have the doctor come so he can explain what happened."

"Can I see my boyfriend?"

The nurse pauses and gives me a pointed look. "In this country ..."

"Sorry. I mean my *friend*." I clear my throat. "English is not my first language. I said the wrong thing."

She nods curtly. "Yes. I understand."

With everything that has been happening between me and Jasper, I forgot one crucial fact. While we'd worried that racing fans might be outraged about us getting together, we haven't discussed the fact that in some of the countries where we race, it's illegal for him and me to be together. I need to be more careful.

I think we're relatively okay in Bahrain, though. At least, I believe LGBT acts are not criminalized here. Dios, I need to do more research.



I doze off, and when I come to, a different nurse is there, a burly man. "Who are you?" I ask.

"The day nurse. You've been asleep for twelve hours."

"Oh my god. Jasper. My family. I need to tell them—"

He holds up his hands. "We have told your friends and loved ones that you are fine. You just needed to rest. You were very dehydrated, and you had some minor burns and abrasions and the possibility of a concussion."

"But I am all right?"

The smile he gives me is reassuring. "Yes, you're very lucky. We still need to run a few more tests before you're discharged, but so far everything is looking very positive."

I swallow and nod.

He pauses for a moment before saying, "A friend of yours is here. Do you want to talk with him?"

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. He is a tall blond man."

"Send him in," I say.

After he takes my vitals, he leaves and Jasper steps in. He looks utterly wrecked. Bags under his bloodshot eyes, gray skin. He runs his hands through his hair, and I'm pretty sure

that's all he's been doing since whenever he got here, because it's a mess.

"Hey," I say quietly. "Hey, are you okay?"

Jasper gives me an incredulous look. "Am I okay? You're the one who has been in the hospital all night."

"I'm sorry about that." I look him over again. "Have you been here since the race?"

"Yes." He steps closer and studies my eyes. "You're really going to be all right?"

I smile and nod.

The look of relief on his face takes my breath away. "I was so scared."

I hold out my bandaged hands. "Jasper, I'm so sorry that I scared you. But see? I'm fine. The Nomex worked."

Jasper sits at the side of my bed, careful not to jostle me too much. But other than a few aches, I really do feel fine. The safety equipment they have these days means that we can sometimes walk away from crashes that would've been deadly before. Not always, but I got lucky.

"I can't wait to be discharged," I say.

"Has the doctor told you any restrictions? What does this mean for the rest of the season?" Jasper asks. "Are you going to keep racing?"

"Of course I'm going to race. Why would I not?"

"But you could crash. Or I could." I can see the anxiety rising in his body, on his face.

I cluck my tongue. "One, you are not going to crash. Two, I am not going to crash. And three, whoever wins every race gets to pick ... you-know-what." I waggle my eyebrows at him, but his worried expression is gutting me. "What is it?" I finally ask.

"You're making light of the fact that you had a spectacular crash, but it terrified me. Do you really think this is worth it?"

“What are you talking about?”

“Racing.”

I frown. “Of course it’s worth it.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt. I know you said we won’t crash, but ...” He gestures to the room we’re in, the hospital bed I’m lying on. “You can’t promise that.” His blue eyes, filled with concern, bore into me.

I sigh. “No. I can’t. But you and I are both excellent drivers. You know that. And we have excellent safety equipment. Yes, this was a scary event. But despite that, I’m fine. I don’t even need to be in here—they were just being overly cautious.”

“Cristian, you have no idea what it was like watching your car roll and catch on fire.”

“Well, I know what it was like being inside it.”

“That isn’t funny. I thought I lost you.”

“Hey,” I say, reaching out the arm that doesn’t have an IV in it. “Tell me what’s going on.”

He wipes his face with his hand. “I thought I lost you,” he repeats.

Oh. Now it sinks in.

If I were in his shoes, I’d be panicking, too.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” I say. “I can’t imagine what it looked like. But I am fine, I’m okay.”

“Except you being in that crash was not okay. Especially because I didn’t have a chance to tell you something important.” He lowers his voice. “I love you.”

I blink. “What?”

His cheeks go red. “You heard me.”

“I did, but *what?*”

Jasper looks me in the eyes. “I love you, Cristian. And the thought of you dying out there because of some sporting rivalry made me go ballistic.”

I scoff. “Well, I’m not dying because of our rivalry.”

“Close to it.”

“Jasper, you are overreacting. I know that this was scary, but look at me. I’m right here. Not even a little bit dead.”

He huffs, then studies my body, head to toes, as if he’s making sure I really am all right.

“And I love you, too,” I say in a small voice.

Jasper looks up, and his eyes are shining. “You do?”

“Definitely.”

He grins and squeezes my hand. Then we both look at each other. We have a lot to figure out. Before I can open my mouth, there’s a knock on the door, and Jasper pulls discreetly away. I don’t recognize the woman standing there, but she doesn’t seem surprised to see him, and she says, “Hey, Jasper, Cristian. I’m checking on you both.”

“Thanks, Diana. We’re good, but I think I’m going to head out. I have a meeting with Maxine I’m not looking forward to.”

“Go do that,” I say, shooing him. “We’re going to be fine.”



Before I’m discharged, my father calls. “How are you, son? That was a scary crash.” He sounds shaken.

“I’m fine. They’re going to discharge me in a little bit. And I’m going to come home for a few days before the next race.”

“Good.” He pauses, then says, “When you said you were going to push for yourself, I did not want you to get hurt like this.”

I want to reassure him, just like I wanted to reassure Jasper. But I don’t know how to do that outside of telling him, again, that I’m fine, so I soften my voice and say, “I’m not hurt, papá.”

“You know what I mean.”

“It’s a risk of the sport. You know this.”

I can hear him swallow. “I do. But I’m changing my mind. Given the choice between my son or a champion, I’ll take my son every time.”

BACK AT SC Racing HQ over at the racetrack, Maxine Ackerman looms over me. I am not going to feel small, though. I'm not going to be held down. I'm not going to let her or anyone else intimidate me.

"Can you please explain why you went tearing off to the hospital when your rival was in a crash? Because your behavior looked like more than professional concern."

Here goes nothing. Or here goes everything. "It *was* more than professional concern. Cristian and I have been in a committed relationship for a while now."

Her jaw drops, and she blinks several times. "You? And him? Together?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Yes. Cristian and I have done nothing wrong."

"That's not what it looks like."

"Look," I say, not bothering to hide my exasperation. "Don't you think I've thought about this? What the perception would be like? Trust me when I say I've considered every angle that you have, and probably more."

"And you still decided to be with him."

"Yes," I say. "Because we're in love with each other."

She stares at me. And stares some more. Slowly, she seems to realize I'm not going to back down, or change my mind, or whatever she might have imagined. "You're serious."

“I am. He’s it for me. It’s taken us a long time to figure it out ourselves, but he’s the one I want to be with. We understand each other.”

“Are you willing to tell the world that?”

“Yes, I am.” No hesitation. “I need to talk with him about it, and if he’s on board, about timing. We’ll tackle that once he’s recovered and back home. And at some point, you and I are going to discuss what countries are on the schedule for next year, since I’m almost certain he and I are going to be out.”

“Is this going to change how you treat each other on track?”

While I want to scoff, her question deserves a careful answer. “We’ve been together for some time now, and we’ve been competing as intensely as ever. I didn’t hand him last year’s championship without a fight. However, yesterday’s crash did affect how I see things. I will still give every race my all, but I can see myself backing off to avoid a situation that’s too dangerous. I think that’s going to be the way I race from now on against *anyone*, not just Cristian. My boyfriend isn’t the only person whose life is precious.”

“I have to get used to you calling him that.”

“You do. So, yes, there are going to be some changes. I know I have to be aggressive, but I’m not going to take chances that jeopardize someone’s life.”

“How can you tell out there what is going to do that and what isn’t?”

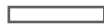
I shrug. “I’m not sure. You’re just going to have to trust my split-second decisions.”

She gives me another long look. “You know, Jasper, I think I already do.” She sighs. “I also trust that you’ll be loyal to the team and not spill any secrets.”

“Of course. I have never shared confidential information, and I never will. Cristian and I don’t talk about those kinds of things.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what you do talk about, but I’ll accept that for now. I’m going to put together a press team so we’re ready if you go through with some kind of announcement. You meet up with Cristian, let him heal, and let me know what you decide and when you want to move forward.”

“Deal.”



We thankfully have two weeks before the next race, so I fly with Cristian to his parents’ home in Spain. While we’re in the air, we end up talking about the changes we have made recently and are going to continue to make—him racing for himself, not his father. And me racing for myself without guilt.

“Are you ever going to be comfortable with the fact that you’re taking your own path?” he asks. “That your family just isn’t going to be excited about you being in motorsport, no matter how well you do?”

I swallow. “I don’t know, is the truth. I guess a big part of me wants them to love and accept the real me.”

“For some people, that’s never going to happen, or it’s never going to happen in the way you’d like it to happen. In fact, I think most of us weren’t loved the way we needed. We didn’t get to ask for the kind of love we wanted as babies and children—we couldn’t communicate it to our parents. So they didn’t know.”

“I suppose.”

“Perhaps what we’re both experiencing—it is just part of growing up.”

“Separating from our parents?”

“Well, yes.”

I nod. “It seems like it. I guess I need to work through the discomfort of knowing that they don’t approve of what matters to me—and I’m going to keep doing it anyway.”

“Doing me?” He winks.

“Well, I meant motorsport, but also you, yes. Although I think they should like you. I mean, you are the reigning world champion.”

Cristian grins. “I am.”

My brain turns to a different topic, though not an easier one. “Don’t you hate that being queer is something that other people have to ‘deal with’? Why do they have to ‘deal with’ it? It’s not like it truly affects them—they could just mind their own business and not worry about what other people do. I’ve made an appointment with the president of our governing body to talk about the racing schedule—specifically about the laws against homosexuality in many of the countries on the tour. I long for a world where discrimination like that no longer exists.”

“Maybe when you’re on the throne, you can make some changes.”

“I’m never going to be on the throne. And even if I were, Sweden doesn’t decide the laws for other countries. I kind of wish it did.”

He makes a gesture of acknowledgment. “But you do have the ability to speak from a public vantage that many people don’t have.”

His words make me think.

I can use this privilege I have. I slowly nod. “I didn’t get here without my ancestors likely stepping on a lot of toes. There’s nothing I can do to change whatever misdeeds they may have committed, but at least I can try to do something good with the fruits of their dubious labors.”

Cristian looks at me. “I think you’re getting it. Start by speaking up.”

I smile at him. “Is that what you want to do? Come out to everyone? Because I wasn’t exactly anonymous when I was in the hospital waiting for you.”

“I want to tell the world,” Cristian says. “I’m proud to be yours.”

“Likewise.”



The SC and Lighthouse PR teams have been talking to each other, and a press conference has been announced for while we’re visiting his family.

Cristian and I walk into the hastily set up press room in Madrid, and it goes silent immediately. We are each wearing our respective team’s polo shirt.

We sit down at the table with the microphones and look at each other. Then I start talking.

“You have seen the footage of the way I reacted after Cristian’s accident. And you may have wondered what was going on.” I take a deep breath and stare down the hydra of reporters. “Cristian Rivera and I have been in an exclusive relationship for the past two years.” Shocked noises reverberate throughout the room, but I keep plowing on. “Our biggest fear was not that we would get found out, but what the story would do to confidence in the sport. We were concerned people might think that the race results are scripted, that we’re not really competing.” I grin. “But the basis of our relationship *is* competition. I love nothing more than to beat this man on the track in a fair fight.”

Cristian blows a raspberry. “You are not so great.” The room erupts into laughter.

I roll my eyes and clear my throat. “As you can see, we are more good-natured about the way we fight now, but it does not tone down our rivalry on the track one bit. And, at the same time, I’m in love with him. I believe I always will be.”

Cristian clears his throat. “Jasper’s English is better than mine, but the same. I am in love with him. But that does not mean I let him win. It hurts my pride to say this, but every time he has beat me, it has been fair. Well, there was that one

time when the stewards made a bad call in Azerbaijan.” More laughter.

“We put ourselves in danger every single time we get in those cars. Cristian almost got killed six days ago, which is why I reacted so emotionally.” I stop to take a breath, my heart pounding at the mere memory of that explosion. “While I want to beat him, I cannot imagine life without him. And he has given me a worthy opponent to fight for the rest of my career.” Time to wrap up. “We know this announcement may come as a shock to some fans, but we want to assure you that we will continue our rivalry on the track. And we will continue to give it our best.”

“Are there any questions?” Cristian asks.

The room explodes with people standing up and waving microphones, cell phones, notepads.

I look at Cristian and grin. We knew it would be like this. I reach over and clasp his hand, and all the cameras go off. He’s mine.

“WELL, THAT WAS VERY FOOLISH,” my father says, as Jasper and I walk into my parents’ home the day after our press conference. “Telling the world about your relationship. Now they are going to question everything you have ever done. They are going to think that you did not win on your own merit.”

“Or they can believe us,” I tell him. “We addressed that.”

He pinches his nose. “Ay ay ay. You have no idea the way the world works. You are so naive.”

My mother opens her mouth to defend me, but I cut her off. “No. I’m not. I understand that this is a difficult situation. But there are more important things than public opinion. Like telling the truth about what matters most to me. Jasper isn’t temporary. He’s it for me. Punto. I would not put my career, my relationship with the press, my relationship with you in jeopardy otherwise. He is worth it.”

My father puts his hand down and gazes at me for a long moment. Finally, he says quietly, “You are serious about this man.”

“So serious.”

He swallows and nods, then walks out of the room. Jasper and I look at each other in confusion, and he pulls me close. Maybe my father will never understand me. And maybe I have to be okay with that.



About an hour later, my father returns. I'm sitting on the couch watching coverage of our press conference, because I can't not. I need to know what people are saying about us. While not every reaction is positive, I am heartened by the supportive comments about Jasper and me being together. Not that anyone gets to vote on our relationship. Still, I can't help wanting to be popular—that's always going to be part of me.

"Son," my father says grandly, "I have decided to support you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Um. Good. What caused the change of heart?"

"I went for a walk and thought about everything you have said these past few weeks ... and months. At first, I believed you were throwing away your career, and I did not want that for you. But then I thought about it, and I realized you were *claiming* your life the way you wanted it to be. And there is no higher achievement. No more bravery than to live the way that is right for you, despite the fact that no one else seems to appreciate it." He sits down across from me. "I never told you that your grandparents hated that I raced. They didn't understand why I would want to get in a dangerous car week after week, day after day, and risk everything. I could have a normal job. Be a government worker or own a shop like they do. But it wasn't my passion." He nods. "I see that I was behaving just like them, and I don't want to do that. You have found your passion. And while part of that is racing, I think?" I tilt my head in confirmation. "The other part is with your man. So ... I am proud of you."

I don't know where his words are coming from, but they make my chest swell until I think it's going to burst. They make me want to cry. Instead, I swallow hard and manage to say, "Gracias."

Jasper beams, and my father reaches over and shakes his hand heartily. "Welcome to the Rivera family, Jasper Nord."



“I think we need to secure her blessing in person,” Jasper had said, so here I am walking into the Royal Palace in Stockholm with my boyfriend. I’m wearing a dark gray suit with a silver tie and nervously adjusting my collar. He’s dressed in a neat navy suit with some insignia that I’ll have him explain to me later. He reaches out a hand to help me with my collar, pauses as if he’s debating whether he should get so close to me where others can see, then decides to go ahead. His breath ghosts across my cheek, and it grounds me. His familiar smell, presence, voice are all helping calm my anxiety.

Though I have good reason to be anxious. Because, as has been Jasper’s concern, what if Erik is right and she says no?

As we enter the enormous stone building, we pass stoic guards who look younger than me. They’re wearing shiny silver helmets and blue jackets. Something about how still they are in contrast to how turbulent I feel makes me want to act out. I lean over and whisper into Jasper’s ear, “Can I scare one of them? Yell ‘Boo’?”

It’s a testament to how far he’s come that my childish comment doesn’t annoy him. Instead, he gives me a fond look and my hand a squeeze and simply says, “Nope.”

“Too bad. You royals need something to liven up this place.”

“I rather think that’s your job,” he whispers in my ear, and I grin.

As we make our way down a series of hallways into the queen’s private quarters, escorted by one of her aides, my stomach is churning more than it ever has before a race. “I’m nervous,” I admit in a low voice.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Jasper murmurs. “She’s my grandmother. She loves me.” It sounds like he’s saying it as much to himself as to me. When we finally enter the large, ornate sitting room, we’re both as keyed up as when we’re waiting for five lights to turn off. I’m wondering if the queen is going to kick us out or have the guards lock us up in a tower or something. Not that my imagination is going overboard.

“Wait here, Jasper, please,” says the aide, giving us both a professional but kind smile before excusing herself. Jasper gestures toward a light blue upholstered sofa, and we sit down, leaving about twenty-five centimeters of space between us. It feels like an ocean.

Right on the dot of the hour of our appointment, Jasper’s grandmother enters the room, and I rise as he told me to. The queen is wearing a pale gray skirt suit, pearls, and low heels. Her hair is perfectly coiffed. She has a warmth about her I wasn’t expecting, and I breathe a little easier.

“Jasper,” she says in a cultured voice, coming over to us. “How lovely to see you.” She turns to me. “And this is your ... boyfriend?”

“Yes, Grandma,” he says, swallowing hard. “Please meet Cristian Rivera Durá. Cristian, meet my grandmother, Her Royal Highness Queen Estelle.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty,” I say, hoping I did that right and watching closely for her reaction.

Queen Estelle’s smile doesn’t waver. She sits gracefully in an elegant chair near the sofa and gestures for us to sit down again. It’s clear that she’s used to people not knowing how to act around her and is skilled at putting them at ease. “It’s always lovely to see you, Jasper. Is there a particular reason for this visit?”

Jasper looks at me, squares his shoulders, and blurts out, “Grandmother, I’m here to seek your blessing. I’m in love.”

I fight to hide a smile. This is not what we practiced. He was going to talk about how progressive Sweden is and what it means to have a monarchy that welcomes the future. Maybe I’m not the only one who is a bundle of nerves.

The queen studies me, and I realize Jasper inherited his startling blue eyes from her. I clear my throat. “I’m very much in love with your grandson, too.”

She does not respond immediately, but instead fixes her cool gaze on the two of us for what feels like a decade. Finally, she says, “It was brave of you to say how you feel about each

other, both at your press conference and to me right now. Especially given that there's no one else in your sport who is openly LGBT, correct?" Jasper and I look at each other, and my anxiety dissipates significantly. Maybe she isn't going to banish us to one of Stockholm's ten thousand islands.

"Thank you. And correct. At least, no drivers that we know of," Jasper says.

I nod.

"I don't believe that anyone, regardless of title, can dictate who falls in love with whom, but to the extent you desire my blessing, you have it," the queen says, and she gives us an unreserved smile. Not the smile of a monarch, but one of a grandmother. "When I saw your announcement, I was surprised, to say the least, but Sweden prides itself on being a modern society. You will be forging a new path, but I think you have leadership qualities, Jasper." She turns to me. "I do not know you, Cristian, but if you make my grandson happy, that is enough for me. It would have to be serious between you for Jasper to step forward so publicly. I trust him."

"Thank you," Jasper whispers. "That means a lot."

"Gracias," I say.

"It is a mistake to think that just because someone is older, they do not understand ... or that they cannot change," she chides gently.

"Yes, ma'am," Jasper says. "I'll try not to let that happen in the future. Although I think it was mostly Erik in my ear."

"He may have his own reasons," she says.

Jasper tilts his head. "Oh?"

Queen Estelle gives him an enigmatic smile and turns to me. "Cristian, how is your recovery progressing? That truly was a horrifying crash."

"I'm feeling great," I say, as Jasper and I look at each other with wonder. Is that all there is to this?

The three of us talk some more about racing, and at the end of our allotted time, the queen squeezes our hands. "You boys

appear to be well-suited for each other. I'm glad to have met you, Cristian."

"Are you sure it doesn't matter that I'm not aristocracy?" I ask, because apparently it's my turn to blurt out something I'm concerned about. Jasper had told me how his brother had objected to me on that basis, and I need to know if that's going to be an issue.

"While certainly we would prefer members of the royal family to maintain certain connections, in this day and age, for the monarchy to remain relevant, it needs to be modern. So no, Cristian. It does not matter that he's a prince and you're a commoner. All that matters is that you are in love."

And with that, she leaves us. Once the door closes, Jasper collapses into me, his head on my shoulder. When we break apart from our lopsided hug, his eyes are misty. "I'd hoped she'd support us, but I didn't know for sure. I'm so damn happy I feel like I could do anything."

"Except win in Abu Dhabi," I say.

He shoves me.



As I walk past the press before the next race, in Abu Dhabi, I'm swarmed. There's no other way to describe it. I'd feared that I'd be a pariah, that everyone would treat me like a bad smell. And then I'd feared that they'd be grilling me about my relationship with Jasper. But that's not what is happening.

Jasper and I agreed to be more discreet in risky countries, because we could be in danger now that we've made our relationship public. We agreed to celebrate only once we get somewhere safe, as much as I hate being apart from him. But we're going to work on making changes at a higher level.

"Cristian, how are you feeling?"

"Do you expect your accident to have any effect on you or your driving, going forward?"

“What is your prediction for today?”

I am astonished. I’d thought that everyone would be rehashing what had happened or gossiping, and instead, we are talking about the future. Which is where I like to focus. So, I turn, grin at the cameras, and shrug. “I feel good. No injuries, no strategy changes. My thanks to the team that supported me and helped me. And my prediction, as always, is that I will be first on the podium.”

Everyone smiles. I let out a breath.

But then it comes. “And do you care to comment on your relationship with Jasper Nord?”

“Jasper Nord is my greatest rival, and the love of my life.” There’s a pause, and then the questions come so fast, I can’t tell one from another. I just smile and say, “Thank you, I need to get in my car.” And I turn and walk away.

I’m trailed by reporters, but staff push them back, and I’m able to get to my car and put in comms. I don’t need them yet, but I want to drown out the noise.

I start doing what I do before every race: visualizing it. I go through the entire track in my mind, feeling the g-forces of the curves and when it’s time to brake. When it’s time to accelerate. While I do this, the team of mechanics babies the car. They make last-minute adjustments while I wait, helmet on.

I also realize that flutterings of joy are going through me. While I suppose I could be scared—and flashbacks of the crash do haunt me—I’m working through it. And I love driving. It’s not to prove anything to myself or my dad. It’s not even to beat anyone else on the field, let alone Jasper.

It’s because I love flying down the track at 300 kilometers per hour, feeling like I’m the fastest man on earth.

I love the boost I get when the engine comes to life, the way I can maneuver like no one else.

I love racing.

And while I may love Jasper more, that doesn't stop me from loving what I'm doing in this moment: getting ready to drive as fast as I can.

IN AUSTRIA, Cristian and I are sharing a hotel room—a large suite, actually. It’s strange. I’m used to sneaking down the hallway or to a different floor to see him.

Now we don’t have to sneak—at least in accepting countries. We can simply stay with each other. I’m sure we were the worst-kept secret anyway, because hotels have surveillance everywhere. There are cameras in hallways and records of who opens doors.

Still, it feels good to not have to hide. It feels good to be able to just come in at the same time and flop down on the bed together, cuddling and kissing. My family was never affectionate, so I have a lot of it to catch up on.

Cristian is nothing but affection, nuzzling into me, kissing my neck, sucking on my ear, touching me everywhere. He reaches around me and pulls me to him. He loves making me the little spoon, and I like it.

Earlier, Cristian won the Grand Prix, fair and square.

“Some races are like that,” I said, as the microphone was shoved into my face the moment I took off my helmet. “I put it all out there on the track.”

“Some people suggest you let him win.”

I scoffed. “I’d never—and he wouldn’t want me to. It’s the opposite. I want him to win only if he beats me at my best. I want to have tried and given my all, and then, if he wins, congratulations to him. And I know he feels the same way. Because that is a victory worthy of celebration.” I shrugged.

“What is there to celebrate if there is no challenge to overcome?”

My phone chimes with the tone that indicates a message from my grandmother. That’s unusual enough that I interrupt our cuddles to look at the screen. I find a link to a YouTube video, and when we click on it, we see her in all her elegant glory sitting at a desk.

“Some of you may have heard that my grandson Jasper is dating a man. I am delighted that he has found someone to share his life with, and I want to state clearly that it is the position of the modern crown, as well as modern Sweden, that all people have rights, and that we support every consenting adult’s intrinsic human right to choose who to love. We back not only my grandson and his partner but all same-sex couples, with the fullest extent of the crown’s powers.”

While I don’t like it that my rights are subject to being politicized, I am nevertheless grateful that she took a stand to support not only me and Cristian, but other queer people as well.

So why was Erik so convinced she would be opposed to us? I hit his number on my phone.

“Jasper?” he asks. “Hey.”

“Did you see Grandmother’s video?”

“Yes. It’s ... interesting.”

“She was very supportive. Why did you think she wouldn’t be?” I ask, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

I can feel the huge sigh that comes across the line. “Perhaps I was projecting,” he mutters.

“Oh?”

After a pause, he says, “There’s this person I like ...”

Oh.

As my brother tells me in fits and starts that he has a crush on his bodyguard, my irritation at him eases.

After we hang up, I turn to Cristian. “It seems Erik was warning me off because *he* was scared.”

“Is normal, no?” Cristian says.

“Yes,” I say. “And now it’s time to celebrate you.”

We slowly shed our clothes: my shirt, then his. Our shoes were discarded when we walked in, but now socks. Then his pants and mine.

Cristian parts his legs, and I roll onto him in my underwear. We kiss, his hands roaming over my bare skin, his hands dipping under the waistband of my boxer briefs to cup my ass. My hard cock rubs against his, and we keep kissing.

“Missed you,” I whisper.

“I saw you this morning before we went out on the grid.”

“I still missed you.”

He smiles against my lips. “You’re actually sweet under that hard exterior.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” I suck on his neck, and he moans. Then he starts shoving at my underwear, saying, “Off, off.”

I chuckle and take them off, then flop so I’m lying on my back on the bed. My cock is leaking precome. I want this so badly.

He takes his own boxers off, then moves so he’s between my legs, his nose on my balls. He licks up the length of my cock, and I shudder and arch off the bed. That first touch of his tongue on my sensitive skin always makes me wild.

“I did not know before,” he says between licks and sucks, “how much”—suck—“I like cock.”

I glare down at him. “All cock, or only mine?”

“Yours ... *mostly*.”

“What?” A lick of jealousy starts up my spine.

“I like my own, too.”

Laughing, I gently shove his shoulders. “You dick.”

“You like my dick.”

Cristian always makes me laugh. He makes my heart lighter than it is with anyone else. He brings out my competitive nature, but that makes me better. A better person, a better driver, a better competitor. Better overall. He brings out the best in me, and I think that’s what a partner is supposed to do.

I lose my train of thought when he swallows me down, sucking me deep and his mouth working around my dick. He gets into a rhythm, and I start making noise. Groans, moans, sounds of satisfaction.

“You’re so good at that.”

He lets me slide out from between his lips. “I know.”

I shove his shoulders again. “You’re so conceited.”

“I know that, too.” He shrugs. “But I only choose to spend my time with the best.”

Such a Cristian-type compliment. Still, he is a spectacular person. His racing is legendary, second only—on occasion—to mine. And often he’s first. Not just on the track, but also in my heart.

“Come here,” I mutter, pulling him up so I can kiss him. Our pricks rub against each other. Then I reach down and start jacking us.

“I want you inside me,” he whispers. “I’m ready.”

“When did you get ready?”

“When I took a shower. I put a plug in.”

I reach around him, and sure enough, he’s got a hard bit of plastic there. “Oh my god.” I tug on it, and after a little bit of resistance, it comes out so I can probe inside him. He’s lubed himself up already.

I put some more lube on my dick, then line up and slide inside him easily.

He’s wet and warm, his grip on me delicious. I kiss him as I rock into him. He’s got his knees up—an advantage of being

an athlete, and a smaller one at that, is that he's super limber.

I thrust in and out as he gasps and moans. I keep adjusting my position until the bliss on his face tells me I have it just right. He grabs my arms and holds me to him as I fuck him.

"Fuck, there," he whispers. "Yes." He curses in Spanish, and I chuckle, because I like it when he loses control.

"I'm not going to be able to hold on much longer," I warn him.

"Me neither," he says between kisses.

He jacks himself off, lost in pleasure as I nail his prostate, giving him as much pleasure as I can. Trying to show him how much I love him.

I feel like I'm flying. I feel like nothing in the world exists except me and him. Like everything is drilling down to this moment where we are one. One body, one relationship, one union of spirits. We are joined in all ways possible: physically, emotionally, and with our souls. Our hearts.

I love this man. He is worth giving up everything—my career, my title, my money, my reputation—because he gives me so much more. He gives me *myself*. A self that I didn't have before I knew him.

As it turns out, I don't have to give up anything. And best of all, I get to keep *him*. For the rest of my life, if I have anything to say about it.

"I love you," I whisper, and he arches up and comes, gushing all over his hand and his belly.

His climax sets mine off, too, and he whispers, "I love you so much, Jasper," while I'm experiencing the white-out bliss of an orgasm.

I keep pumping into him, but I gentle my movements as the aftershocks hit both of us.

"Our love is forever, don't you think?"

"It is. I love you always."

MY FINGERS CLENCH the steering wheel as I focus on the five red lights overhead, signaling the start of the Las Vegas Grand Prix six months after my accident. My engine is revving high, but I think it's okay. I'm in pole position, and Jasper is second. He might actually have a better line than me on this track, but it doesn't matter. I don't need any help to beat him or anyone else. I can do it on my own.

The red lights illuminate one after another, and there's the moment where all five are lit up—and then go out, and away we go. We are racing around the Strip!

I get a good start off the line, and I don't even need to focus on the scrum going on behind me because I'm clear of it.

My engine roars, and I press the gas hard, doing my best to go faster, faster, faster. I want to make it around turn one, into turn two, and then down the straight, so I can get away from everyone else.

Of course, that's a dream, because Jasper is challenging me already.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

When we finish the race, for once the gossip is not focused on us.

“Did you hear? Gabriel Allard married Axel Walsh.” That's the driver for Mayflower Racing and his PR person.

I'm sure there's a story there.



When the racing circuit is done for the year, we spend some time in Sweden together. I'm curled up in Jasper's arms on his couch (I made him buy one from Ikea as a joke, but it's very comfortable), and we turn on the streaming show.

"Are we ready?" he asks.

I nod, but I can tell that both of us are a bit apprehensive about what this season is going to look like. Because ... I'm pretty sure no other racing documentary has had two racers fall in love before.

As we watch the initial sizzle reel, yes. Okay. There we are. There's my crash. It ends with the press conference where we declare our love for each other, and then me hoisting the trophy at the end of the season.

"Do you really want to watch this?" he asks. Then he shakes his head. "Wait, you love watching yourself."

I shrug. "It's true."

He laughs and tugs me closer. And we watch as the world gets more and more glimpses of our love. While some of the details are wrong, much of the footage is from interviews with me and Jasper, both individually and together. So we were able to set most of the record straight.

"Whoa. We are really out there," he says.

I nod. "You know, I used to say I never did truths. Only dares. But I suppose this was one big truth."

"It was a dare to tell the truth," Jasper corrects. "Kind of."

I can feel my eyes light up. "I like that."

It turns out, though, it's not only our love story that the show is telling. This year has been exceptionally interesting on the love front.

But soon enough, the focus will swing back to racing. I'm sure of it.



The following month, we are in Spain, and we often join my family for dinner on the patio. One night, my mother has lit a bunch of candles, and a string of lights shine overhead. My father puts on old Spanish guitar on the radio, and we listen. Then I pull out my guitar and play for a while. We move inside when it gets chilly, and Jasper plays the piano. This makes my mother happy.

I look at Jasper in the glow of the evening and think I am very lucky to have such a man by my side.

It's even better when I take him to my suite. Thankfully it is at the other end of the house, far enough away from my parents that we can make as much noise as we want.

We kiss like we have all the time in the world, and that might be the most decadent thing I've ever done. Usually, we are so rushed and passionate. It feels like an extravagance to kiss and caress this long.

“Jag älskar dig,” I say.

Jasper does a double take. “Wait, was that Swedish?”

I nod. “Jag lär mig Svenska.”

I've been secretly taking Swedish lessons on my phone, wanting to surprise him. After all, Jasper can speak some Spanish. I wanted to be able to speak some Swedish for him.

He grins. “You love me enough to learn Swedish?”

“I do.”

“I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE—JASPER

SPRING, ONE YEAR LATER

“HEY, COME TAKE A LOOK AT THIS,” I call to Cristian, who’s buying ice creams.

He bounds over, a sea of ceaseless energy, and hands me one. “What is it?”

I snicker and kiss him. “Nothing.”

He shoves me. “You are so juvenile sometimes.”

“But I’m not the ice man you thought I was.”

“No, you’re not.”

We’re in Lake Como, on a tiny slip of beach by our hotel. It’s a glorious, sunny spring day, and the water is sparkling. Bright red and purple bougainvilleas climb up trellises.

The hotel is exclusive, but we’re not the only people here. I don’t need to worry, though, because Cristian and I can be seen together.

Not only can we be seen together, we can do things like kiss. In public. I still sometimes wonder if this is really my life. We stroll along the shore, pausing to stop at a low stone wall, not unlike the ones where we made out at in Singapore.

I cherish the moments like this. When we’re not competing with each other or busy with our various obligations. When we can just enjoy each other’s company. It’s miraculous. And I decide, why not try for another miracle?

I hold my breath and ask. “Do you want to make this official in some way? Be my consort?”

The grin that I adore lights up his face, and his eyes sparkle. “Is that a proposal?”

Why is my heart beating so fast? “It could be. Do you want to get married?”

Cristian shrugs. “Now that you mention it, I do.”

“So do I. And do you want to get married to me?”

“Yes.”

Taking a deep breath, I get down on one knee, holding an ice cream in one hand and his hand in the other. “Then, Cristian Rivera Durá, will you marry me?”

“Yes, however many times you ask me, I will tell you yes.” He laughs, and I stand up and kiss him.

I take his hand, and we walk, enjoying our ice creams, along the landscaped path down to the water, and I feel giddy with the afterglow. I’m going to marry the love of my life.

“You keep smiling like that, and everyone will know you’re happy,” Cristian says.

“I am very happy,” I admit.

“I know.” He kisses me. “Me, too.”

We pass by other hotel guests, some of whom turn and gawk at us. In this neighborhood, there are many racing fans (and owners), and we’re often recognized. It’s nothing like being in the desert in America.

But I feel comfortable and safe. I feel like I can do anything with Cristian by my side.

My PA signals to us. “Are you two ready for your interview?”

“Is it that time already?” I turn to Cristian. “¿Listo?”

“I’m always ready for an interview.”

We walk, still holding hands, back to the hotel. We finish our ice cream by the time we spot a door ahead of us, and we look at each other. Then we both take off running, seeing who can get to it first.

He beats me, but not by much.

“Ha!” Cristian laughs, and so do I.

“I’ll get you next time,” I mutter.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he says, and squeezes my hand.

“There they are,” Nico Hilliard says as we enter the room where the video equipment is set up. “The terrible duo.”

“We aren’t terrible,” Cristian says with a grin.

Nico looks at me. “I agree,” I say.

The pressure of the racing season hasn’t started yet. The first race isn’t for another few weeks. Right now we can simply enjoy each other’s company. Oh, sure, we have lots of training to do, and our jobs are demanding. But luckily, Cristian and I get to work in the same cities around the world.

After we answer a long list of questions, Nico asks, “What about future plans, apart from racing?”

“Jasper has started a charitable foundation,” Cristian says.

“Oh? Tell me more about that,” Nico says, turning to me.

“I took my trust fund, since I don’t need it, and created a foundation with the goal of helping youth who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity—supporting them in becoming who they really are. I can relate to their struggles, and I believe if we help young people understand that what they are feeling is perfectly normal, the world will be a better place.”

“That’s honorable of you.” Nico for once gives me a genuine smile, then checks his notes. “Any other news?”

“We’re getting married in the winter,” Cristian says. “We like the snow.”

I’d once have been furious that he’d blurt something like that out—including making up details we haven’t discussed. Now I simply smile, remembering a day in Gstaad that opened up my world.

“Married?” Nico says. “Is this new?”

“It’s an exclusive scoop for you,” I say. “We just got engaged earlier today.”

“Oh, wow.” While Nico can be a pain, he looks honored that we told him first. “Have you decided where the wedding will take place?”

“Not yet,” Cristian says. “I’m sure our families may have some comments.”

“And then are you going to go on a honeymoon?”

“Of course,” I say, before Cristian commits us to something else. “We’re going to go someplace secluded and private, and there will be no exclusive scoops on that.”

Nico chuckles. “Sounds lovely. How do you two navigate a relationship as well as being on the track?”

“There’s a clear difference between when we are on the track and when we are off. Off track, we know to compromise. We know to give. We let the other person win sometimes,” I say.

“On track?”

“Not a chance. I win. The end,” Cristian says.

“In your dreams.” But I’m smiling. In fact, I’ve smiled more in the past year than ever in my entire life. I’m going to lose my nickname if I keep it up.

I’m all right with that. I’ve found my place in the world: at Cristian’s side.

On or off the track.



To read about Grady Lewis and Ben Carpenter, the hotshot rookie and the grizzled crew chief, pick up *Close Quarters* by Regina Kyle. For the love story of Gabriel Allard and Axel Walsh, who wake up married in Vegas, please check out *Apex* by Victoria Denault.

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CLOSE QUARTERS BY REGINA KYLE

I left racing for a reason.

But when team owner Jacques LaRue offers me a chance to try to make amends for my best friend's accident, I find myself back on the circuit hand-holding rookie driver Grady Lewis. We're miles apart, and not just in age. He's the sunshine to my grump. The fresh-faced newcomer to my jaded veteran. The friendly free spirit to my solitary recluse.

And if I want to help the man who I put in a wheelchair fund his new charity, I'm stuck being Mr. Sunshine's race engineer for the rest of the season. The voice in his ear on race days. The link between him and the rest of the team. Which means we'll be practically joined at the hip.

Strangely, despite our differences, the relationship works, on and off the track. And it's the off-track part that's the problem. Sure, we're hot for each other. I mean, who wouldn't want Grady? The guy is seriously smoking, with his California surfer boy good looks. But hooking up isn't just a terrible idea, it's potential career suicide. For both of us.

And falling in love? Well, that would be a disaster of epic proportions. Every time he goes out on the track, his life is in my hands. The last time I was responsible for someone I cared about, he wound up paralyzed, and I almost drowned myself in a bottle of Jameson. My head is telling me there's no way I can risk that happening again.

But it seems like my heart has other ideas.

Close Quarters is a contemporary mm sports romance about open-wheel race car drivers. It's a grumpy-sunshine, age gap

love story set against the glitzy backdrops of Monaco, Brazil, Mexico, Australia and more. Close Quarters is a stand-alone book in the Faster series, which also includes books by Leslie McAdam and Victoria Denault.

APEX BY VICTORIA DENAULT

Red flags only count on the track. In real life, I ignore them.

My name is Gabriel Allard, and I'm the only heir to a billion-dollar fashion empire and a rookie with Mayflower Racing. I know what everyone thinks — that I don't deserve to be in the driver's seat. And worse, that I mistreat people because my father will bail me out and fix things. None of that is true, but I've never been able to sway public opinion, so I've stopped trying.

Dad hasn't though. In an attempt to save my image and my seat on the race team, he hires me a boyfriend. Because the universe loves a good joke at my expense, he accidentally hires a guy I shared a scorching kiss with years ago. A guy who, instead of trying to use me like everyone else, ghosted me.

Axel Walsh is nothing like me. He's levelheaded. Shy. Disinterested in motorsports. He wants to keep this professional. Since I love a challenge, I try to change his mind. The next thing I know we're fake married, and Axel is in my bed. But is he really mine? It's getting hard to tell the truth from the lies.

The public starts to buy my cleaned-up image, and I'm getting better results on the track, but privately I feel out of control. My life is on the line every time I strap into my race car, but I've never put my heart on the line, until him. I hope Axel and I can survive this publicity stunt and make it to the finish line without breaking each other's hearts. Just like everything else in my life, the odds are against it.

Apex is a contemporary mm sports romance about open-wheel race car drivers. It's a fake dating, fake marriage, slightly second-chance love story set against the glitzy backdrops of Monaco, Vegas, Paris, Greece and more. Apex is a stand-alone book in the Faster series, which also includes books by Leslie McAdam and Regina Kyle.

ALSO BY LESLIE MCADAM

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Love in Translation series (m/f)

Sol

Sombra

Standalone novella (m/f)

Lumbersexual (audio narrated by Tor Thom and Charley Ongel)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie McAdam is a California girl who loves romance and well-defined abs. She lives in a drafty old farmhouse on a small orange tree farm in Southern California with her husband and two children. Leslie's first published book, *The Sun and the Moon*, won a 2015 Watty, which is the world's largest online writing competition. She's gone on to receive additional literary awards and has been featured in multiple publications, including *Cosmopolitan.com*. Her books have been Top 100 Bestsellers on both Amazon and Apple Books. Leslie is employed by day but spends her nights writing about the men of your fantasies.

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