

NICOLE DYKES

THE HOTSHOT
VS. THE REPORTER

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Please remember, showing vulnerability doesn't mean you're weak. It's being human. You deserve that break when you need it. You deserve someone you don't have to be strong for. Fight when you need to, but let others back you up when you need that too. You don't always have to be the strong one or the one to play a part. Sometimes it's okay to lean on someone else.

Give yourself that grace.

CHAPTER 1

ROYAL

“Are you kidding me? What part of *behave* do you not understand? Do you need me to treat you like a toddler? Because I can.”

I try like hell not to shrink back as Jenny, my agent, lectures me because I don't back down. I'm Royal Goddamn Dutton. The hotshot *on* the track, but just as mouthy and badass *off* the track too.

Still, despite my agent being pint-sized and beautiful as all hell, I'm a little afraid of her—I'm not going to lie. I'm man enough to admit I often have nightmares about the woman kicking my ass.

And while it's kind of hot, I have no doubt she could take me. And not in the fun way. No, this woman wants nothing to do with me sexually, as she's informed me on many occasions. Still, it's kind of fun to flirt with her when she's not fuming mad like she is right now.

“What exactly are you angry about? I just won the fucking race.” Her eyes meet mine, cold and downright terrifying. I wonder for a moment if Jenny is going to throat-punch me right here on the track.

“Watch. Your. Mouth.”

I shouldn't say it. I know I shouldn't, but I can't back down. People are watching and listening, and I'm Royal Dutton. Twice as much of a smartass as the Bad Boy—a/k/a my best friend, Axel Lennon—and if you ask me, twice as charming too. “Oh Jenny, you know I'm far too busy watching that pretty mouth of yours to watch my own.”

Yup, she's not amused. Not at all. Damn it all to hell. Why did I move my contract from my last agent to her? He was a pansy and totally boring, but he rarely called me on my shit. Not like Jenny. All she does is call me out.

I should be celebrating right now, but no, I'm dealing with this damn she-demon. “Why are you so upset?” I ask slowly, putting on my smooth Texas drawl.

“You hit his car.”

I unzip my firesuit because it's hot as fuck out here today. Where are we? Atlanta, I think. Yeah, we're in Atlanta. “Look, I rubbed his car. Rubbin' is racin'.”

Again with the death glare. “Do not quote *Days of Thunder* to me.”

I drop my shoulders, wishing I could move on from this part. I know it wasn't exactly the smartest move out there. “Look, he hit my car first.”

She quickly interrupts me, which for the record, I'm not at all surprised about. “What are you, in kindergarten?”

I ignore her and go on with my point. “If he wants to play with the big boys, he's going to have to learn. He hit me, so I passed him and rubbed his car. It went into the wall. He didn't have the control he thought he had, and I won the damn race.”

She huffs, and I know it isn't over, but she manages to keep her cool as the media swoops in. I hate the goddamned

media. Always have and always will. They put these roles on us.

The Bad Boy. The Pretty Boy. The Hotshot. The Pro. The Rookie. The Ace. And all the others. They give us these stupid names, and we play into them because with social media being the king, we have to play up our roles even more than win on the track.

Our reputations are everything.

I turn on the charm and answer all their questions the way I've been trained to do from day one. I don't apologize for putting one of the new—frankly, pretty insignificant—racers into the wall in order to win the race.

Instead, I play the cocky hotshot role, even though the adrenaline is spiking through my system and causing my damn hands to shake because I know it could have been bad.

I know it was a risky, stupid move, but I couldn't lose. I can't go back to being that sick kid no one wanted.

Fuck. Is this damn interview over yet?

Thankfully, Leslie Phillips, Axel's agent's wife—that's a mouthful, but that's what she is—and a badass reporter chick lets me off the hook, and I haul ass out of there. If there's one good reporter out there, one who actually cares about the subjects of her stories, it's Leslie.

Maybe it's because she's married to Cash—the racer turned sports agent. Or maybe it's just Leslie, I don't know, and I hardly care as I make my way to my car.

I know my discussion with Jenny isn't over, and when I get out of the shower at my fancy hotel suite, I'm not surprised to see her sitting calmly in the living room, drink in hand.

If I had to guess, I'd say it's scotch.

"No, please. Make yourself at home," I chide, drying my hair with one towel, the other wrapped around my waist. I don't bother getting dressed. Jenny's probably seen me far more naked than this, pulling my hungover ass out of bed one too many times over the two years she's worked with me.

I settle into one of the other chairs in the room and get a little uneasy when she doesn't say anything. She doesn't move.

"What?" I finally give in and ask her because I'm not used to Jenny being quiet, and I don't like it.

"Your reputation is in the toilet. You get that, right?"

I feel my body tense as I try swallowing away the lump in my throat, but it doesn't work. I hope she can't see my hands trembling as I try to play it cool. "Isn't that the point? To have a bad reputation. To be a bad boy? The Hotshot?"

"No," she answers instantly, leaning forward and putting her glass on the table before straightening her back and eyeing me intensely. "People aren't rooting for the villain anymore. They don't want the bad boy. They want justice. They want good to win. And you, my friend, are playing on the wrong side."

"There will always be room for the villain," I try to argue.

"No." Her eyes pin mine, sending a shiver through me, and a coldness I'm not sure I'll ever overcome sweeps over me. "There won't. They don't want the loudmouth jackass to win. Your merch sales are down. Your sponsorships are dwindling, and you need to pull your head out of your ass and listen to me."

I work my jaw in irritation but otherwise remain still.
“What do you want me to do? I won the race.”

“And you won it the dirty way. That’s not going to fly anymore, Royal. If you win, it has to be the right way. With integrity.”

“I have integrity,” I say, hating the way what she said hurts.

“I believe you do.” Her gaze softens just a bit before it hardens again. She stands up, pulling her blazer down to smooth it out. “You have to start showing it. We have to find a way to soften you to the fans.”

I cringe at that. “I’m not soft.”

“You better find your softer side and soon, Royal.” She starts toward the door, her heels clacking on the floor. “Or your career is going to be over sooner rather than later, while the nice little rookies come in and steal your spotlight.”

“That’ll never happen.”

I sense her eyes rolling, even though I haven’t moved from my seat. The door clicks when she lets herself out, and I curse my racing heart and sweaty palms. My career isn’t close to over.

It can’t be.

CHAPTER 2

SOREN

I can't believe I'm here. I mean, shit, I shouldn't be. Of course, Jenny had to catch me when I was home in Kansas City, and I'm a terrible damn liar, so I couldn't say I wasn't here.

Not to mention most of my life is fully documented on social media. Damn Plaza last night. Why did I have to post pics at the fancy restaurant.

Oh. Right. Comped dinner.

That was nice.

I've made a damn good living so far in my twenty-five years. Not only by becoming a sports reporter in Kansas City, but my lifestyle/sports blog and social-media presence has quite the following.

Still, I'm here as a favor to my cousin, Waylon. I haven't seen the guy for years, but blood is blood, and we share it. My mother would kill me if I didn't take his call, and she'd have been super angry with me if I'd told him there was no way I would meet his friend Jenny.

In memory of my sweet mother, who left me when I was only twelve—the result of a horrible disease she fought hard against and lost—I'm here. Waiting for Jenny, one of the top sports agents in the country.

I've met her a few times in passing, but I don't remember ever actually speaking to her. Truth be told, the woman kind of scares me. The definition of fierce. She's strong, but I'm sure she's had to be.

Women agents aren't taken seriously in the sports world—about as seriously as they take full out and proud gay men who are sports reporters. But my point is she's had to be tough. There's no doubt in my mind.

Still, nerves swirl through my belly, wondering what the hell she could possibly want from me. I go through the roster of her clients in my head and all the insults I've thrown their way on my podcast and Insta Live.

Shit. She's going to murder me.

I start to get up to run for my life when I hear the clicking of heels and find myself in Jenny's presence, her eyes calmly assessing me. "Soren."

I nod my head, even though it wasn't a question. "Jenny. Hello."

She sits down next to me at the bar, her movements graceful and sure. "Thank you for meeting me here. I know you're busy."

"I doubt I'm anywhere near as busy as you. You have your hands full."

A small smile graces her lips at that as she waves down the bartender in the swanky downtown KC bar. "You have no idea." She puts in her drink order and shoos the bartender away before her eyes narrow on me. "Did Waylon tell you why I needed to meet?"

I shake my head. I know Waylon and Jenny are the best of friends, having met when Waylon's rockstar client Grady Bell

hooked up with Jenny's professional baseball client Ryan Bailey. But that's about all I know. "It was a quick text exchange."

She nods and takes a drink of her martini. "I need your help."

My right brow shoots up in curiosity. I don't know what the hell I could ever help her with. I'm just a sports reporter and social-media influencer. She's the high-powered and likely highly paid agent.

"I need you to do a story on Royal Dutton."

My jaw hits the damn floor when she says that name. Obviously, I knew he was one of her clients running through my mind earlier. He was at the top of the list. His arrogance and recklessness are frequent topics of mine.

"The Hotshot?"

She gives a curt nod. "Yes. I want his reputation modified. I don't want him to be the arrogant hotshot anymore."

I think my brow is now touching my hairline because she's got to be kidding. "Yeah, I don't work miracles. I think you have the wrong guy."

"No. I have the perfect guy." Her eyes show no playfulness or mirth. Only seriousness. "You hate him."

"I don't know him."

"You hate him." A devilish smirk falls over her lips. "And that's why you're perfect."

I have no idea what she's talking about, and I don't hate him, for the record. I don't know the man. I just hate everything he stands for. The macho, toxic, arrogant fucks of the world who assume everyone owes them everything.

“I . . .” I struggle. “What exactly do you want me to do? I won’t lie. My articles and posts are always 100 percent honest.”

“I know that. That’s another reason you’re perfect.”

“I’m not following you.” I hate the way my voice shakes, but this has to be a mistake.

“Listen, I need you to do a whole series of stories on him. Really get to know him. Find the lighter side of Royal Dutton.”

I don’t want to piss her off, but is she kidding? “I’m not sure there *is* a lighter side to him.”

“If there is, you’ll find it,” she says confidently. “And the fact that you’re honest and you hate him just adds to the story, if you do find any redemption in him. It could be an epic turnaround.”

“This is Royal Dutton you’re talking about. There’s no redemption.”

She sighs heavily and plays with the toothpick in her drink. “There has to be. Or his career is over.”

I don’t believe it’s that dire. Despite his personality flaws, the man knows what he’s doing out on the track. Still, there’s something about Jenny that makes it difficult to say no.

“I don’t see him welcoming me.”

“No.” She shakes her head with a slight laugh. “He’s a total shithead and will be a pain in the ass, but we’ll wear him down. He has to do this, Soren.”

I study her calmly for a moment, contemplating every possible angle. I have no idea how I can make him look like a decent man.

Sure, he volunteers with a lot of the other racers, but he's always on. Playing up his charm and being a cocky asshole.

I don't see any redeeming qualities whatsoever.

"Maybe you should just play the hot angle," I say, totally serious because as repulsive as his attitude is, the man is beautiful. Dark golden hair and bright hazel eyes that mess with my head.

A hard body usually hidden by racing gear and a firesuit, but it hugs him tight enough to know he's built. Not to mention the online vacation photos of him swimming in barely there briefs.

"Hot doesn't do it anymore," Jenny says easily. "Personality is king."

"He's fucked then," I say all too bluntly, but she doesn't seem offended by this.

She shrugs. "That's why I'm the absolute best at my job and why I recruited you. We're going to make him likable."

I think about the man who slams into other cars on purpose. Who hits on any woman in his vicinity. Who swears like a sailor on camera and flips off the fans who boo him. Who gets into fistfights on the regular.

There's no way to make him likable.

Not. Going. To. Happen.

CHAPTER 3

ROYAL

Shit. Goddammit. That race was shit.

Tenth place?

I don't think I've done this horribly in a long damn time. Maybe ever. I'm pretty sure I just started out in first place all the damn time. Fucking Jenny. I know this is her fault with all that *reputation* bullshit.

She got in my head.

Axel wraps his arm around me, and I have to force myself not to push his ass away. "Why are you so damn happy? You didn't win either."

He only chuckles at that, married life making him all whipped and happy. "My husband did."

I roll my eyes at that, but deep down I want to be happy for the Pretty Boy—or Sebastian Harris. He's worked hard to get here, I know that. He deserved the win, but I can't push away the creepy-crawly feeling under my skin at another loss.

And an embarrassing one at that.

"Come celebrate with us," he says joyfully.

I shake my head. "Nah. I'm going back to the hotel."

Sebastian launches himself into his husband's arms, uncaring about the cameras all around us as he should be. I'd known Axel was gay long before I knew that he was very much into the Pretty Boy, and it hadn't bugged me at all.

I mean, why should it?

I may have grown up in Texas, but who people love or sleep with isn't any of my concern. Never has been. Axel is one of the best men I know. Has been since I met him when he was sixteen and just an angry foster kid.

God, did I understand that anger. I'd felt it for so damn long before I figured out how to push it away and channel it into charm. I played the game, and I've done it well.

Until today.

Today, I just want to get the hell out of here.

"Come have dinner with us," Sebastian tries.

A slight warmth moves through my body as I look at them together and see how happy they are, but it's quickly washed away by the coldness running through me, thinking about that shitty race and how badly I just fucked up.

How none of the cameras are on me now. Instead, they're on Sebastian and Axel. And if one of them had lost so poorly, the reporters still would have cared about the story. But me?

I might as well be dead and buried.

They barely acknowledge me.

"I have to go," I say and wave to them as I head out, not waiting for any arguments. I need to get away from the crowd and the track, which is messed-up because for so long, it was my only safe space.

The only thing that quieted the noise in my head.

I get to the hotel and decide to walk into the swanky bar right off the lobby instead of going to my room.

Big mistake.

Because instantly, I see someone I recognize.

Someone who hates my guts and has never even met me. And he's looking right at me.

Soren something.

Adamson? Adams?

Yeah, I think that's it. The guy works with Leslie and has some sort of podcast or blog or something. One where he trashes me as often as he can. What the hell does he want?

I know instinctively this isn't a coincidence and walk over to him. He's wearing a suit and tie, fitted just right, and his dark hair is sleekly styled, even though the top is longer than the sides and his hair is kind of wavy.

"No press," I say, stopping a foot away from him. I have a good six inches on him, and the guy has a smaller frame, but he doesn't look intimidated at all.

"Why exactly would I want an interview with you after that race today?" His demeanor is cold and calculated as he watches me after his direct hit.

Fuck, that hurts. I don't want it to. I wish it didn't. But it does. Because he's not wrong. No one wanted anything to do with me after that shitshow of a race.

"Then why the hell are you here?" I finally manage to ask.

His eyes aren't on me though. They look past me, which makes me follow his gaze, looking over my shoulder. I curse

out loud when I see my agent walking into the bar. “Fuck. Me.”

“Not a chance,” Jenny says. She hasn’t changed since leaving the track and is wearing a black leather skirt with a frilly purple top. Her hair is up in a severe bun. She reaches us and leans into Soren to give him a hug and kiss on the cheek before sweeping her arm in a motion toward the bar. “Shall we sit?”

“Maybe a table would be better,” Soren suggests, and Jenny nods, her red lipstick flawlessly painted over her grim smile.

I follow them both, unsure what the hell this setup is about. Jenny knows I’m not doing an exclusive interview. I only allow interviews on the track, right after a race. That’s it.

I don’t do events where the press can grill me. I won’t go to a studio. She knows this. And still, all three of us sit down at one of the tables and just stare at each other.

“So, I’m assuming you know Soren Adams,” Jenny says, her eyes narrowed on me.

“I do.” I look over at Soren, who, to his credit, has his back straight and his head held high. “He’s the whiny little ‘sports’ reporter who loves to bitch about track ethics,” I say, using my middle and index fingers to emphasize the word *sports*.

“At least I’m not slamming people into the wall on purpose to show off,” Soren bites back, his annoyance with me clear. “And why the hell are you putting quotations around *sports*? I happen to work for one of the top sports news broadcasts in the nation.”

I ignore his question. “Why are we here?” I look over at Jenny because this guy clearly hates me, and it makes no

sense.

“Because Soren can help you. And you better change your shitty attitude really damn quickly because he doesn’t have to.”

I snort at that and take a drink from the glass the waitress just placed in front of me. Jenny must have ordered when I wasn’t looking, and I couldn’t care less because to deal with these two, I know it’s going to take a copious amount of liquor. “I’m sure he’s being paid well.”

“Of course he is. And it’s coming from your account,” Jenny informs me before taking a sip from her own cocktail glass.

Goddammit.

“And how much am I paying exactly?” I ask her as I look over at him.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says and pulls my attention back to her steely eyes. “He’s worth the money.”

Soren huffs softly, clearly not wanting to be here, and I don’t get why he is. “I’ve agreed to do some interviews with you to show your softer side.” I turn my head to look at him, my eyebrow raised, and he just shakes his head slowly from side to side. “I told her that wouldn’t be possible, but she thinks it is.”

“Well, what the hell does she care? It’s my money.”

“Royal,” Jenny snaps, and I look over at her again. “You need this. You’re lucky he’s here.”

“He hates me. Calls me all kinds of shit. *Neanderthal* and *outdated*. *Over-hyped*. *Way overpaid*.”

“I stand by all that,” Soren says coolly as he lifts his glass to his lips. Lips that are far too pink and puffy for my liking. They look really soft. But they turn stern and are set in a frown when he notices me watching him.

I try to shake that weird-as-fuck moment off. “Then why help me?”

He shrugs his left shoulder. “It’s a lot of money.”

My lips part in surprise, and I let out a harsh puff of air. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Jenny.” I look at my agent, who is definitely not kidding. “He hates me. Why would he be able to make me look . . .”—I cringe, just thinking about it, but force myself to finish—“softer?”

“Because he hates you, and the world knows it.”

I toss my hand up in frustration and lean back in my chair. “Well, that explains it then.”

She rolls her eyes at me and takes another quick sip before placing her glass down on the table and looking me right in the eyes. “If he manages to find anything remotely human inside you and reports on it, the world will believe him. Because he does openly despise you. And he’s very honest.”

I’m the one to roll my eyes now. “He wants everything PC and nice. The world isn’t nice.”

“The world is changing,” she says adamantly, and I have to wonder if she really believes that.

I shake my head. No. The world is cruel. Cold. And they feed off the drama, even when they say they hate it. They want the fights. They need the villain to feel alive. To judge. To make themselves feel better.

“No.”

“You aren’t saying no,” she says calmly. “It’s a chance of a lifetime, and you’re going to take it.”

“Or?” I say like the petulant child I can’t seem to stop being.

“No *ors*. No *buts*. No *nos*. You’re doing this.”

I turn to look at Soren when Jenny doesn’t waiver. “Fine. Your fucking funeral because I am *not* soft.”

“Can’t wait,” Soren says, and goddammit, he’s not afraid at all.

And I’m shaking like a leaf.

CHAPTER 4

SOREN

Okay, maybe I do hate him. The guy is cocky, arrogant beyond belief, rude, and just an overall shithead. I don't have to be here. The money will be great, but I don't *need* it.

I don't know if I can do this. I want to run, but Jenny seems awfully confident. I'm not nearly as confident as my words.

"I don't know if I can do this," I admit out loud and hate the smirk that forms on Royal's ridiculously handsome face.

"See?" He looks at Jenny. "Already backing out."

"Can you blame him. You're being a dick." Jenny glares at her client, but of course, he's not scared. He's too much of an asshole to be afraid.

"I thought you couldn't wait." Royal eyes me, his gaze unnerving as his hazels hold onto my own green ones.

"I don't have to do this," I say calmly, probably reminding myself more than him.

Jenny speaks before he can. "No, you don't."

"What?" Royal snaps in her direction. "He doesn't, but I do? I have no choice?"

Her red painted fingernail is all I see as she points at her pain-in-the-ass client. “His career is thriving. Yours is deteriorating. He has choices. Yours are limited. Now get it through your damn head and be civil.”

For once, Royal doesn't seem to have an arrogant reply. No, he almost seems to shrink in on himself and goes quiet. And while I don't think it's nearly as dire as Jenny is making it, she's not totally wrong. People openly hate him online. There's always an article about him being toxic to the sports world.

And maybe that's the only way to get it across to him.

“What do I have to do?” he asks, and for some reason I don't like the dead tone he's using now. That normally confident spark in his eyes—gone.

Jenny seems to soften a little, sitting back in her chair. “Just let him interview you. At home. On the road. At a race. Let him see other sides of you.”

Oh yeah, that should be fun.

What the hell was I thinking agreeing to this?

Going to races is bad enough, now I have to follow an actual racer around when he goes about his routine?

I should have stuck to football.

I actually wince at that thought because no—football didn't work out so well for me.

“Fine. I have a race in a few days. Be there,” he says as he stands up, not giving either of us another glance as he saunters his way to the elevators, I'm assuming to go up to his room.

I look over at Jenny, who's holding the bridge of her nose between her thumb and finger. “This has to work.”

“You really think it will?”

She drops her hand to her glass and lifts it to her lips. “It has to. I know he thinks I’m overreacting, but his career is dwindling. It won’t be long before a rookie comes in who’ll play the new game.”

“*The PC boring game,*” I say with sarcasm. What’s so wrong with not wanting to hurt other humans? I don’t get it.

Politically correct has such a horrible connotation, but it really just means don’t be a dick.

Why does that have to be so difficult for some people to understand?

Well, it seems damn near impossible for some people, including Royal. I’ve watched him over the years, and I swear the man only becomes more offensive. Even his best friend, Axel, has softened over the years. He was known for fighting and smashing people into the walls. And okay, maybe he hasn’t changed too much, but he’s tried.

That much is clear. And I mean, the guy is married to another racer. Talk about a total one-eighty. Axel and Sebastian are the first out racers in their division. They’re a beacon of hope and change.

And then comes Royal not-gonna-change-no-matter-what Dutton.

“Yeah. That one. He’ll be fine.”

“Again, I’m not a miracle worker. I’m not sure this is going to work out, Jenny. That guy doesn’t want to change.”

“He will,” she says with fierce determination, and all I can do is nod, even though I think she should just cut her losses and maybe sign one of those new rookies she’s talking about.

But something tells me Jenny loves a damn challenge.

And that's exactly what Royal Dutton is.

Challenging.

CHAPTER 5

ROYAL

Fucking Jenny.

I should fire her.

I really should.

Have Soren follow me around, trying to dig up something that makes me worthy?

That's just fucking great, Jenny.

Thanks.

I'm trying to reel in my anger after getting up to my suite, but it won't subside. My career is disintegrating?

Really?

I don't think it's that damn bad.

I win races. That's my job. I do my job, and I do it well, but it's still not good enough. When the hell will I ever be good enough?

I try like hell to push that thought away as I strip down and climb into the hotel's fancy shower. It's made of marble and has insane water pressure. Just like my house does.

Like every shower in my house that's so big, not all of the bathrooms have ever been used. That's how huge my house is.

Seven bedrooms, eight bathrooms. Four-car garage. A pool. Do you know how rare pools are in Kansas City?

Pretty rare.

At least ones like mine with a full waterfall and hot tub, all built into the ground.

But no. I'm still not fucking good enough.

I own enough cars to fit in all four of my garages. I'm thinking about getting another one and building a shed in the back to store it.

I let the water pour over my face as I stand there in the hot shower, willing away all the damn cold I feel. Because you don't know cold until you haven't had a roof over your head at night.

Because you don't know cold with an empty belly when you cry yourself to sleep, just wondering why the hell you aren't enough for the people who were supposed to love you.

But I have to push it all away. I have to be confident and sure. Arrogant, some may say. Because no matter what they say, no one wants that sad, broken boy.

I finally force myself out of the shower, even though the hot water would have held out for a lot longer, and dry off before putting on a pair of black joggers and lying down on the king-sized bed.

The sheets are soft and inviting. They smell fresh and clean.

I can order dinner and have it delivered to my room within twenty minutes. And I will, but for right now, I just lie on my back, looking up at the ceiling and feeling numb.

When I get myself to calm down enough, I reach for my phone and search online for Soren. He's not difficult to find. The guy has a lot of followers on every platform.

His first post on Instagram is him wearing what he was tonight, a boring-ass blue suit and tie. His hair perfectly done.

The caption . . .

Meeting with a hotshot and his agent. Send wine.

It's not even clever. Send wine? Really? As if he was the one being told what to do and that he's total shit. *I* needed the wine. Send *me* wine.

Fucker.

And the comments.

Who? OMG. TELL USSSSSS!

Ohhh, that HOTSHOT? Please say it's that HOTSHOT!

Tear him a new one! That guy needs to be knocked down a peg.

Sending you all the wine if it's THE HOTSHOT.

Goddamn nickname.

Did he really have to put that in there?

Of course, they all jumped on it being me. I mean, the guy is obsessed. I scroll through his blog next. Looking at all the pieces about racing and toxic masculinity. How it's the one sport, above all, that's stuck in the 1980s.

Fuck this guy. He has no idea what he's talking about.

Except I keep reading, and he kind of does. I mean sports-wise, the guy does seem to understand the logistics. But he's wrong about the fights and wrecks.

People watch the races for those two things.

I'm not wrong about that.

And if they go away, it's just fast cars going around in circles—which, don't get me wrong, that's pretty badass—but still. I learned a long time ago you have to put on a show to be noticed.

And maybe they do hate me, but if they hate me, at least they're still talking about me.

The silence is what I fear.

When I'm no longer relevant enough to talk about. When I'm not making headlines at all. When I truly am washed-up.

Maybe that's what Jenny is implying will happen soon. That's why I gave in and agreed to her bullshit plan. Though I have absolutely no faith in Soren finding a softer part of me. I've done everything I could my entire life not to go soft and to, in fact, only go harder and stronger.

Every single day.

You're a fighter, my boy.

I toss my phone down next to me and grit my teeth, thinking about the voice inside my head, whispering those words to me.

I'll go along with this. I'll talk to Soren about races and show him my fancy-ass house and cars. I'll even take him to dinner at the fanciest restaurants around. I'll wine and dine him and turn on the charm until he's forced to tell them I'm not so bad.

Because I can't take the silence. I just can't.

CHAPTER 6

SOREN

Does it have to be this loud? I swear I'll never get used to the noise of the track. I mean, I admit I kind of enjoy the adrenaline rush you get when you see those cars flying by and not putting on the brakes at all, but does it have to be so damn loud?

I can't even think.

And it's hot as hell out here today.

This sheen of sweat on my brow is just not cute.

I'm sitting next to Leslie, who I have to admit is my idol. The woman is incredible. Yes, she comes from a family of racing legends—her father and her brothers—but she's made a name for herself over the years.

She married Cash Phillips when she was already at the height of her career, and they've created a life people dream of. Hence, another reason I'm here today—she's been taking a step back lately, wanting to spend more time with her kids and Cash.

And I admire the hell out of it.

Most people don't know this about me, but I'm sort of a romantic. I love that she's found love so great she only wants to pour more into it.

So here I am on a Sunday afternoon, watching cars speed around a track, lap after damn lap, before one of them inevitably crashes into the wall.

“I can’t believe I’m here,” I say out loud, which gains Leslie’s attention.

“Why’s that?”

I shrug, my eyes on the track. “There’s just so much toxic masculinity.”

She snorts a quiet laugh and shakes her head as she looks right at me. “Your focus was on football for a long time there. You really don’t think that’s some toxic macho-men bullshit?”

I laugh and can’t fight my smile, just before the grimace comes over me. I was very much obsessed with football for a while. But I don’t want to think about that time in my life.

I don’t want to think about the way I failed. And failed damn hard.

“Maybe I should switch to women’s sports.”

She shrugs as her attention returns to the track. “Women can be dicks too. Anywhere you have competition, you’re going to find some serious assholes.”

“True.”

She doesn’t get to say anything else, though, because out of nowhere, a black car smashes into the wall, one my eyes were firmly on. Then another and another pile up, while the other racers try like hell to avoid the wreckage and continue on.

I see Royal jump out of his car, followed by the driver of the red car who slammed him into the wall, both of them screaming and yelling at each other.

Yeah. This is a great fucking look, Royal.

They appear to be yelling, their hands flailing around as they both remove their helmets and then . . . a punch is thrown.

And of course, it's Royal's fist that flew first.

Soon, the other drivers who also wrecked are approaching, along with the pit crews, and I see Jenny moving that way too.

He's definitely fucked now. Jenny is not happy as the fight grows bigger and bigger. Grown-ass men rolling around on the pavement, trying to kill each other, while some try to pull the guys who are fighting apart.

It's absolute and total chaos.

"Fucking morons," Leslie says, shaking her head, and I'm pretty sure her eyes are on her husband as Cash removes one of his racers from the fight. I don't see Axel or Sebastian, so they must still be in the race. God help any of them if they accidentally hit Cash because I'm pretty sure the woman next to me will go feral.

And then I watch Jenny pull Royal by the collar as he throws another punch at the guy on the ground—the one who hit his car and sent him into the wall. But he doesn't fight Jenny when she pulls him away.

Thankfully, he looks like he's trying to cool down as she pulls his sorry ass toward the sidelines.

I sigh heavily. This was supposed to show me the good side of Royal Dutton. But I've seen him race before. I've seen him in this exact damn scenario. I've gone live and talked about it many times. I've written many articles about it over the years.

About how toxic this sort of behavior is. How little boys and girls at home are watching this display and think that it's totally fine to hit someone when they make you mad.

How they have a responsibility to their fans not to do this. But does Royal care? Hell no.

How am I supposed to find something good in this man who clearly doesn't give a damn about anything other than winning a race?

It's going to be impossible.

CHAPTER 7

ROYAL

Fuck, she's pissed. And I mean, really damn pissed-off. Her nostrils are flaring, and she might actually kill me this time.

But that asshole sent me into the wall and totaled my damn car. Took me out of today's race. Why the hell isn't she mad at *him*? He cost us the race today.

But I keep my mouth shut as she releases my collar and stands directly in front of me, her patience razor thin. Even I can pick up on that.

She doesn't say anything for far too long, and my head swirls with the events from the race. I was doing well, damn well. I was on my way to winning this thing. And then that unskilled rookie hit my damn car, thinking he could pass me. And he ruined it for six of us who went into the damn wall.

I hate losing.

I steel myself as I wait for what Jenny is going to say to me. "Just say it," I snap when I can't take it any longer.

"What about this do you not understand, Royal? Seriously. Do we need to get you checked out?" I let that roll off my shoulders, but she's not done yet. "What, did your mom drop you on your damn head when you were a baby? Is that it?"

That cold runs through my body, and before I can stop it, the words fall out of my mouth. “Nope, not even my mother wanted to deal with me. Left my ass behind before I could form a sentence. Better give up now.”

I expect a cold retort, something snarky. But it’s so much worse than that because I see genuine pity in her eyes. “Royal —”

“Don’t,” I say quickly, wanting to get away. The race is over for me. My car is fucked, and I can’t stand the way she’s looking at me. I want her to insult me. I want her to berate me. Scold me. Anything but have that goddamn look of pity on her face.

She sighs deeply, and I know she wants to say more, but it’s not a lecture that’s haunting her mind. She wants to ask me if I’m okay. She wants to tell me it’s my mom’s loss and bullshit I’ve heard before.

But I can’t stand it. I push it as far away as I can. “I’m leaving.”

“You’re going to be fined for that fistfight.”

“Won’t be the first time,” I say coldly, my body and my mind going numb. I need to get the hell out of here.

I see the media with their pit passes, trying to make their way toward the wreckage. In that small crowd is Soren and Leslie. I see the confusion on Soren’s face, and I feel like my firesuit is starting to suffocate me.

I need to get away.

And that’s exactly what I do.

I run.

I’ll worry about the fines later. I can’t right now.

I don't even remember driving to my house or changing after my shower, but I'm sitting in my living room with a drink in my hand when I hear the doorbell ring.

Well, that can't be good.

Only a handful of people have my address.

I put the glass down on the coffee table and make my way to the front door. Through a window in the door, I instantly see who's standing there.

I open the door angrily. "Jenny is fucking fired."

Soren just pushes past me and walks into my home without blinking. "No. She's not. You need her too badly."

I close the door behind me and turn to face the intruder. "She gave you my gate code."

It's not really a question because I know she must have. "Yes."

"Why are you here?" I ask next because there's no point in discussing Jenny's lack of boundaries.

His eyes scan my face, and I swear he almost reaches out his hand but stops himself. "Where's your kitchen?"

That's an odd question and not at all what I thought he was going to say, so I'm caught off guard and point. He nods and makes his way to the kitchen.

If he's impressed by the fancy house I call a home when I'm not traveling, he doesn't show it at all. Just goes to the freezer, pulling the door open and searching. "Seriously?"

He looks at me, the freezer door still open as he lifts his brow. "What?"

"No frozen veggies at all?"

“You came here to eat?” I ask dumbly.

He sighs heavily and looks around, finding a dish towel on the counter, then grabbing some ice and placing it inside. He wraps the towel up before handing it to me. “You should ice that.”

I take the icepack he threw together and carefully place it to my lip. The contact stings where that fucker’s fist caught me earlier, but I hope I don’t show it.

I don’t show weakness.

“Why are you here?” I ask again, leaving the ice-packed towel against my lip, making it awkward to talk.

“I was hired for a job.”

I snort, finding my way to the counter bar and taking a seat on one of the barstools. “Ah. So you’re here for the first interview.”

He walks around the counter and sits down next to me. I can’t help noticing he smells really good. Probably some sort of cologne, but it’s impressive that he can smell good after spending the day at the track in the heat like that.

What a weird thought.

Today must have been more exhausting than I thought because I’ve never thought a guy smelled good before. But Soren does. That’s not that weird. It’s fine.

“I’m here to find out why you are the way you are,” he says slowly, like it’s some sort of epic statement, and in that moment, I almost pity him because there’s no digging deeper with me.

I know it’s kind of his job, but it isn’t going to happen.

“Good luck with that.”

“Why did you go so damn feral? That kid didn’t mean to hit your car, and you know it. But you looked like you wanted to kill him out there.”

I place the ice-filled towel down on the counter. Then I press my palms into my eye sockets because I’m not in the mood to talk, and damn it, I’m tired.

So damn tired.

“Do yourself a favor and tell Jenny this whole thing is off.”

Not surprisingly, Soren isn’t having that, his back straightening as he eyes me with determination. “Not happening. When I’m hired for a job, I finish it.”

“There is no digging deeper here. He pissed me off. He made me lose the race, and I was mad, so I hit him. The crowd loved it, in case you missed them cheering.”

“I heard plenty of booing too,” he says knowingly.

I hop off the barstool, hellbent on getting away. “Look, I’m tired. Go with a Neanderthal joke or something. Your followers will love it.”

He climbs off his barstool too and stands directly in front of me. “That’s the last thing you need right now. Let me give them something real. Tell me why.”

I swallow hard, hating the concern and pity I see in his eyes. “I’ll be just fine, no matter what you decide to go with.”

“So damn stubborn.”

“Just figuring that out?” I walk to the front door and open it, gesturing for him to get the hell out of my house.

My body sags in relief when he doesn't fight me. He shakes his head solemnly as he walks out the door, and I shut it behind him.

I can barely fucking breathe as I sink down to the floor and try like hell to get my mind right again.

This sad, broken guy isn't me.

I'm loud. Arrogant. Certain.

I'm the goddamn hotshot of the racing world.

CHAPTER 8

ROYAL

I don't want to open my eyes when my dog starts yipping away. I keep them closed as I lie flat on my back on my big comfortable bed. I barely managed to order food last night. I let my dog inside from the backyard and then shared the food with him before I fell asleep, letting the day fade away.

Trying to push away all the bullshit that clouded my mind. But when Oscar won't shut up, I finally force my eyes open and nearly fall off the damn bed when I see Axel picking my dog up and laughing when the dachshund traitor starts licking his face.

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?” He looks amused, putting my dog down on the floor so he can scamper off. Axel is dressed the way I'm used to seeing him when we aren't on the track—jeans, white t-shirt, and a black jacket.

“Now, that's really fucking funny, coming from you.” The asshole just sits on the edge of my bed, not caring at all. And okay, so I may have barged in his house a few times without knocking, but come on.

Soren's little visit last night was enough.

“Not in the mood,” I say grumpily and cover my eyes with my arm as I lie back down.

“Oh, how the tables have turned,” he says, the amusement clear in his voice.

“Go. Away.”

He chuckles, and if he wasn't my best friend, I'd kick his damn ass. Still might. “Jenny called.”

I drop my arm from my eyes and look over at him. “And being a good friend to me, you told her to fuck off,” I deadpan.

He rolls his eyes at me, shaking his head. “Nope. I had dinner with her.”

I sit up, pressing my palms into my eyes again and trying to rub the sleep out of them. “I have no friends.”

He just grins smugly at me. “You actually have a lot of friends. A lot of good damn friends who'll tell you when you're being an idiot, and you're being an idiot.”

“Why? Because I don't want to play nice with the media? You've really changed, and I'm happy you're happy,” I say as I climb off the bed. “But I'm not changing.” I start toward the door of my bedroom.

“You saved me, you know?”

That makes me stop and turn around to face my oldest friend, who's still sitting on the edge of my bed, his eyes deadly serious. “What?”

“We both know what I'm talking about,” Axel says quietly. “I was angry. So damn angry, and you taught me how to be okay.”

We don't talk about this stuff. We just don't. We keep it light, and I like it that way. That's what I taught him all those years ago when we first met. To bury it. To laugh instead of getting angry.

That it'll piss 'em all off more. The people who let us down.

“So what? You honestly think this is going to help my career or whatever? Doing interviews with some reporter who hates me?”

He stands up and walks closer to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Soren. Yes. I think he’s the right person to help you out.”

“Was he at dinner too?” I ask incredulously.

He nods. “So was my husband. We all care about you and your damn career.”

“You seriously think it’s that dire? I win races.”

“And we both know it’s not just about that anymore. The fans can turn on you, and they’re starting to. I know you’re the Hotshot . . .”

I roll my eyes. Both of us hate the nicknames, no matter if we’ve embraced them or not.

“But you don’t have to be that all the time. You can change that image, and hell”—he shrugs—“maybe you’ll be happier.”

“I’m plenty happy.”

He laughs at that, and damn him, I hate that he knows the truth.

That I haven’t been happy in a really long damn time.

“Just give them a chance. Trust Jenny. She knows her shit, and you know she does or you wouldn’t have hired her.” He shoves my shoulder. “And quit being such a grumpy bastard. That’s *my* job.”

I can't help laughing as I shove him back. "Nope. You're disgustingly happy now. All sunshine and rainbows."

"Fuck off," he says, and we leave my room and move into the living room, where Oscar wastes no time jumping on Axel's lap and making himself comfortable.

"Can't believe Cooper got to you too."

I scratch my dog's floppy little ears and shrug. "Well, Oscar needed a home, and I have a house. It made sense when Cooper explained it to me."

Axel laughs, not at all surprised. Cooper became a fast friend of ours a couple of years ago when the racers volunteered at the local animal shelter where he works. The guy is too charismatic and has managed to talk most of us into adopting a pet or two or three.

Except Maverick.

Talk about a grumpy bastard.

Don't think Cooper will ever wear him down.

"He thinks Oscar needs a playmate," I say absently, still petting the dog's ears.

Axel chuckles. "Yup. Sounds like Oscar'll have a new friend by the end of the month."

You'd think it would bother Cooper for us to adopt pets when we aren't at home very often. We travel a lot for our jobs, but Cooper has no problem checking in on the animals. And when he can't, our neighbors' kids do it for him.

I swear, he has a little animal-caretakers phone tree going and knows all our schedules. Cooper is something else, I gotta say.

“So you going to give them a chance?”

I sigh and drop my hand. “Axel . . .”

“Look, I know you’re playing your role, and it’s worked for you. But you need the change. Trust me on this.”

I think back to how angry he was when we first met. How I felt his rage and understood it. Foster kids. Abandoned. No one wanted us.

I remember being angry.

And I remember deciding I’d show them all.

But if my career ends early because I have no fans anymore, that’s really not showing them, is it?

I grab my phone from the table and send a text to Jenny to set up a time with Soren.

She replies almost instantly that she already did, and I’m too damn tired to be annoyed.

“I’ll do it, but he isn’t going to find anything softer about me, Axel. You know me better than anyone.”

“And I like you,” he says.

I swallow hard, hating that. Hating that I know he does, but even he doesn’t know it all. He doesn’t know much, except that I was a foster kid like him.

Because I didn’t want him to know.

And now, I’m just supposed to tell the world?

Not. Happening.

But I’ll play their little game for now.

CHAPTER 9

SOREN

I was surprised at Jenny setting up a time with Royal for our first interview. I was even more surprised by her follow-up text to let me know he agreed to it.

You'd think with her setting up the time, he'd have already agreed to meet. But I'm learning that's not how things are done when it comes to Royal.

Royal Dutton is the most stubborn human I've ever met. I was two seconds away from doing a live on my Instagram, confirming that after he shut me out of his house. Until Jenny's name came up on my phone.

I let her talk me into a dinner invite. And then I let her talk me into trying again after a nice, peaceful dinner with her, as well as Axel, and Sebastian—who, for the record, are really nice for a couple of racers.

I always thought Axel was a tool, just like his bestie, but either he isn't or Sebastian has leveled him out over the years.

Either way, it was a nice dinner, and I allowed myself to give Royal one more chance. But if he doesn't behave this time, I'm done.

At least that's what I tell myself as I go through his gate and park my car outside his ridiculously fancy house in

Kansas City.

I barely ring the doorbell before Royal answers the door, wearing torn jeans that likely cost more than they should and a racing t-shirt—which, of course, advertises his racing team.

I'm not surprised.

What *does* surprise me, though, are the two dachshunds who race out the front door, yipping at my feet and sniffing my charcoal-colored suit pants. "You have dogs?"

"Yup. Meet Oscar and Annie."

I look down at the dogs, who are still yipping and sniffing away, and then back up at Royal. "You named them Oscar and Annie?"

He shakes his head and whistles for them. "Nope. They came with the names." He motions for me to follow as he and his dogs head into the house. "Come on. They aren't going to hurt you."

I look at the small dogs with short little legs, floppy ears, and long bodies, then back up at Royal, hoping my annoyance shows. "I'm not afraid of them. I just didn't know you had them. They weren't here the other day."

I follow him inside before he closes the door behind me. "Oscar was outside. Annie, I just adopted a couple of days ago. But she's already decided she's the boss, and Oscar seems to be cool with it."

I'm surprised by his calm, cool demeanor and his willingness to talk to me about his dogs. I mean, it may not seem like a big deal, but this is Royal Dutton. Then I realize he's wearing his mask.

The one I've seen him put on countless times for interviews on the track. The ones where he's obligated to smile for the cameras, but off the track, he shoots down every single interview opportunity.

I'm sure that mask gets tiring. Maybe that's why he can only stand the interviews at the track.

I reach down and scratch Oscar's ears and then pat Annie on the head gently before doing the same to her. Then I focus back on my thoughts.

Nah, I'm sure it isn't that deep. Maybe he's just in a good mood today. Who knows? And really, I don't care. My followers might love the animal angle, but it's not going to totally save his personality.

I straighten back up and face Royal, who was watching me pet his dog. "We doing this here?"

He nods and then slides into a spot on his couch, kicking his feet up on the table and getting cozy. "Yup. Take a seat."

I bristle at his domineering attitude but sit in one of the oversized chairs near the couch. Annie hops right up on my lap and makes herself at home. Okay, I can do this. I can make him human.

I mean, we're sitting here in his living room—and yes, the furniture is obviously very expensive and doesn't look used at all—but he looks right at home. The house is spotless, like it's not lived in, maybe a little cold, but the dogs seem happy here.

For every hint of inauthentic, there's a touch of something real.

I can do this.

"Okay," I start. "How about your childhood?"

“No.”

I cock my head to the side. “No?”

“No. I’m not talking about my childhood,” he says grimly, his face stone-cold serious. I sigh heavily. Great. So I can’t start at the beginning, when he was likely innocent and maybe had the lightness of a child.

This is totally fine.

“Fine,” I say, sitting up a little straighter. “What about high school?”

I mean, I’m sure he was a douchebag then too, but no way he was as bad as he is now. “No.”

I huff, annoyed. “Seriously? What the hell are we going to talk about then? You agreed to an interview.”

“How about we talk about what an awesome racer I am?”

He says it with so much confidence, I kind of want to smack him. Okay, not kind of. I really, really do. “No,” I say simply.

A slow smirk plays on his full lips, highlighting his perfectly styled blond hair as he leans back into the plush sofa. “Why not? It is my career.”

“And that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to show more than just an arrogant, too-full-of-himself racer who doesn’t give a shit about anyone else. Now stop wasting my time.”

He sits up now, his back straight. “I’m not talking about my childhood. I’m not talking about high-school bullshit. I don’t know why you’re here either because what I am is a racer. It’s my life. It’s what matters.”

I believe him, and it makes me sad for him. “Isn’t there something you enjoy besides racing? Anything at all?”

He seems to think about it before he speaks, which let’s be honest, that’s a pretty big deal for Royal. “Worlds of Fun.”

I cock my head to the side, completely dumbfounded. “The amusement park?”

He nods with a small smile on his lips. A real smile. Not a mask. Not a smirk. A real damn smile. “Yeah. When I first moved here, Axel and I saw a commercial for it and decided to go. It was a blast. The most fun I had not in a car and with my clothes on in my entire life.”

I try not to think about him without his clothes on and have to berate myself for that fact. I do not want to see him naked. Nope. It doesn’t matter that he’s so damn beautiful on the outside, it melts my brain. He’s not my type.

And he’s a notorious playboy. The number of women he’s been seen with over the years is enough to tell me if he isn’t straight, he’s hiding it. But it looked awfully damn real.

But none of that matters to me. Straight or not, I’m absolutely not going there. Not ever.

“We should go.”

“What?” It takes me a moment to register what he said as he stands up.

“We should go to Worlds of Fun.”

“Now?” I ask, surprised.

He nods and picks Annie up off my lap, cuddling her and then setting her down on the wood floor. “Yeah. Why not? You want to see a different side of me, and I haven’t been for a couple of years.”

I stand up slowly, looking down at my dress pants and smoothing my tie. I'm dressed for a professional interview, and he wants to take me to an amusement park. This is my life.

"I'm not really dressed for it."

He shrugs like it's nothing. "I have something you can borrow, I'm sure."

I can't help but drag my eyes over his tall, broad frame. I'm not a small man, maybe a little on the thin side and average height. But Royal towers over me and has to have fifty pounds on me.

He laughs at my perusal. "I have some older stuff from before I hit my growth spurt. They might come close to fitting your scrawny ass."

He starts toward the stairs. "My ass is not scrawny," I gripe as I follow him.

He just laughs, and we go into a room I don't think is the main bedroom. There's not much in here but a nicely made bed and a dresser, which he goes to and digs around in before pulling out a worn t-shirt, a pair of joggers, and then finds some ratty old sneakers.

"These should work. I wore them my freshman year."

He holds the clothes—if that's really what we're going to call them—out to me, and I take them. The shirt is a little worn, but there are no holes, and it has a very simple *Texas* on the front of the dark gray cotton. The joggers are dark black and seem clean and soft. The sneakers are definitely ratty, but they look like they'll fit.

"Really?"

“It’s Worlds of Fun. It’s totally fine to not wear a tie.” His words drip with sarcasm, and I huff.

“It’s okay to wear something other than jeans and t-shirt too when you’re over twelve.”

“Just change. Let’s go. I’m getting excited about this now.”

Anyone else, I’d think they were joking. But Royal—I see a flicker of excitement in those eyes, and I can’t help but wonder if maybe he’s going to show me a different side of himself.

“Fine,” I concede and head into the small bathroom in the corner of the room, closing the door and taking care to not mess up my hair as I dress in the clothes that make me feel like I’m going to sleep rather than going out in public.

But it’s fine. I can do this for the story.

I can dress down a little. No big deal. Although, I do feel a little twitchy as I walk out of the bathroom and am met by Royal, whose eyes run over my attire. He grins wide, like the asshole he is.

“I know I look ridiculous.”

He chuckles. “You look like you’re going to a pajama party.”

“That’s it.” I start back into the bathroom. “I can wear a suit to Worlds of Fun.”

“No, wait.” He grabs my arm, and I swear for the briefest moment, I feel an electric shock crackling beneath the surface where his fingers touch my flesh. My eyes snap to his, and I notice his pupils are blown wide, and his lips are parted in what looks like shock.

Does he feel it too?

He drops my arm and takes a step back, his face contorted with confusion before he clears his throat and pushes his fingers through his hair. “You look good. You, um . . .” He clears his throat again. “You should be comfortable. We should go.”

I want to argue with him. I want to go change back into the clothes I’m used to, but I’m struck dumb for a moment and just decide to follow him downstairs instead, leaving my clothes in the bathroom.

I’ll grab them later.

“I’m driving,” he announces.

“No way,” I instantly retort.

“What?” He looks so offended, it actually makes me laugh. “I’m the professional.”

“You’re a professional who likes to go two hundred miles per hour in circles. I’d like to make it there in one piece.”

We head for the front door, and I grab my keys out of the pocket of the borrowed sweats, where I also had to put my wallet and phone. These pants are ridiculous.

I unlock my car, and his grumpy ass grumbles the whole time as he climbs in the passenger seat and buckles up.

I drive us toward Worlds of Fun, which isn’t far from his house. But the whole time, he’s busy bitching about how slow I’m driving—which is right at the speed limit—and ordering me to pass the *slow-ass* people, who are again going . . . the speed limit.

Though, when we finally get there and park, his mood brightens considerably, and I have to double my walking speed to keep up with him. He pays for our tickets, even though I

tried to object, and when we're through the gates, his eyes go wide as he looks around.

“Okay, so what do you want to do first?”

“I, uh . . .” I look around at the brightly colored park. I haven't been here since I was a kid, but I swear it still looks the same. “I don't care. Whatever you want.”

He's off before I finish the sentence, and I follow him to a long-ass line where he's already waiting. I stand next to him and see the line is for bumper cars.

“Seriously?”

“Come on. Don't be intimidated because I'm a pro.”

I roll my eyes at him but can't hide my amusement. “You know your actual job isn't to bump into other cars. You're supposed to avoid doing that.”

He doesn't get pissy like I expect him to. He just grins wide as we move up the line. “This is more fun.”

I study him quietly as he engages with a couple of people who recognize him, along with several little kids, whose eyes light up when they realize they're going to be playing bumper cars with Royal Dutton.

And he's charming. He doesn't curse. He doesn't tell them to try to hurt other people in their cars. In fact, he even helps a couple of the kids buckle in properly when it's our turn to find a car.

“All right, Soren.” He settles into a hot-pink car with all the bravado and confidence I'm used to from him, but his smile is bright. “This is called fun. You're going to hate it at first.” I climb into the dark-green car next to his and shoot him

an annoyed look. “But stop resisting it so much. You’ll learn to love it.”

Before I can tell him to fuck off, the ride starts, and cars are spinning around, bumping into each other like crazy. I can hear Royal laughing as he playfully chases some of the entranced kids around and then lets them slam into his car.

I’m hit pretty hard by a kid on my side, and then I decide to do what he said—I stop resisting it, and I have fun.

And he wasn’t wrong. It’s a damn blast. We ride a few more rides around us but end up at the bumper cars a few more times before it starts to get dark and the park is close to shutting down for the night.

I look over at a large roller coaster that’s lit up and actually looks kind of pretty with the sky in the background. “Should we do that one?”

Royal looks behind him, his eyes going wide as he turns back to me, shaking his head. “Hell no.”

I can’t hide my laugh. “Are you kidding me? Royal Dutton is afraid of rollercoasters? How the hell can that be, Mr. Badass Racer?”

He’s not amused, and he almost looks a little sheepish and embarrassed or I’d swear he’s messing with me. “It’s not the speed, it’s the height. I don’t like heights, okay?”

I study him again and still can’t hold back my laughter. It just seems so ridiculous.

“Fuck off.”

I laugh again because there’s no heat in his words at all. “I have to tell them this,” I say, lifting my phone, and he grabs it instantly.

“No way!”

“Come on.” I struggle to get my phone back, still in a fit of laughter. “They’ll love this. Totally makes you look like less of a shithead.”

“Oh, thanks.” He holds my phone way up in the air, keeping it from me, but he’s light and playful. His laugh joins mine.

“Why don’t you take a picture of us with it in the background and tell them we were both badassess.”

“I can’t lie to my followers.” I place my hand over my heart. “They know they can trust me.”

He rolls his eyes exaggeratedly at me, but he laughs and hands me my phone. “Tell them whatever you want.” The moment sobers us.

He didn’t exactly say he trusts me, but it’s sort of implied.

Instead, I pull the camera up and turn so the bumper car ride is in the background, pulling him to my side. I quickly snap a picture before I overthink too much about his body this close to mine. I look at the picture and show him, noticing not only how happy he looks but how happy I look too.

It’s strange, and I don’t want to dwell on it.

He nods his head in approval, and I post the picture on my Instagram, promising a story to come.

I’ve hinted at a new project I’m working on, but as soon as I post it, I start to overthink a little bit.

“Maybe I should delete that.”

“What? Why?” Royal asks as the park starts to shut down, and we make our way to the exit.”

“Well, it kind of looks like . . .” I sigh and look at the picture again, seeing it’s already gaining a lot of attention. My cheeks heat with embarrassment as he examines the photo.

“What?” He chuckles. “Like we’re dating?”

I frown at him, my brows drawn close together. “Well, you see that little rainbow flag on my profile.” I point to it in my bio for him to see. “That means I date men. And I don’t hide it.”

He rolls his eyes at me, ever the diva. “I know that. I’m not dense. My best friend is married to a dude. He has that rainbow flag on his social media too.”

I walk faster to keep up with him. “So then, you know they could assume.”

He shrugs his big-ass shoulders. “If they do, they do. But if they do, they also haven’t been paying attention.”

We go through the exit, and I’m keeping pace with him now. “Oh, you mean the women on your arm.”

“They’re not only on my arm.” He waggles his eyebrows at me in an over-the-top way, and I hate that I laugh.

“There are bisexuals, you know? And hell, Axel had quite a few women on his arm for years.” Axel went through painstaking measures to hide his truth away from the world.

“I know that. But I’m pretty sure your followers know you’re only with me for the story, that I’m straight, and that you’d never want anything to do with me if I weren’t.” The last part is said with so much certainty, I have to stop walking for a moment.

This is not the guy I’m used to seeing.

I expected him to tease me about wanting him bad or something equally douche-y in an over-the-top, jock sort of way, but no . . .

He's so damn sure I wouldn't want him.

"Royal . . ." I start, but he shakes his head, motioning toward the lot with his arm.

"Let's go. At least traffic won't be bad tonight, but I'm beat."

I don't believe him of course, but I decided not to fight him either.

Instead, I drive him to his house and then drive home in a daze, going over the day.

I even forgot to grab my clothes and end up wearing his all the way to my house. Jenny gave me his number, so I send him a quick text to let him know I'm sorry I forgot them, and I'll be sure to return his clothes the next time I see him.

He sends me a damn thumbs-up emoji.

Asshole.

I roll my eyes at that and put my phone down.

Okay, Royal Dutton is even more confusing than I thought.

CHAPTER 10

ROYAL

I can't stop thinking about the other day. Worlds of Fun. I can't believe I told Soren about fucking Worlds of Fun.

The guy is getting to me already. And I don't like it.

Except I do.

Maybe a little too much. Maybe in ways that are confusing as shit to me. I need to finish my shower, so I'll be ready for the car to pick me up to take me to the airport, but for some damn reason, my cock has other ideas.

It's rock-hard and begging for some relief, despite a late-night jerk-off session in bed when I woke up, drenched in sweat, my balls aching, and my shaft so damn hard, it only took a couple of strokes before I went over.

I don't know what I was dreaming of.

Okay—that's a damn lie. I do. But it doesn't make any sense.

It must have something to do with mixing Soren and one of my favorite places. Feeling that damn joy of the amusement park with him by my side. I haven't been to Worlds of Fun in a couple of years, but I used to go there regularly, even alone when Axel didn't feel like it. I went so many times, just going around to my favorite rides and allowing myself to be that kid

again—the one who wasn't sick. Who didn't have any responsibilities because I hadn't solidified my spot on a racing team yet.

When Axel and I first got here, we worked odd jobs and had a good time. We lived in a shitty little apartment until we made it, and sometimes—God help me—sometimes I miss those times.

Before I had to worry about my image. Before it mattered whether people liked me or not. Don't get me wrong, I love to race. I love my career. But I hate all the other bullshit.

Maybe that's why I suggested Worlds of Fun when we couldn't agree on a topic for his interview. That's the last time I remember just getting to be me.

But it doesn't explain why I had a dream about Soren, laid out completely naked for me. His fingers sliding over his body—one I haven't even seen. One I've only ever seen in a buttoned-up suit until that day when he was forced to wear my casual clothes.

He looked way too damn good in my clothes.

And what the hell is happening to me?

I've never once questioned my sexuality. Not that I have a problem with any of it. Be who you are, wave that rainbow flag if that's how you identify. I just never have before.

This has to be a one-off thing. A strange dream mixed up in all the emotions of having to do these interviews and Worlds of Fun. Seeing Soren let go a little bit and just have a good time.

Would he be like that in bed? Or would he be closed up and full of rules?

Shit. No. Stop thinking about Soren.

I scold myself even as I wrap my hand around my aching shaft. I try to pull up the memory of the last time I got laid.

It's been a while, like three months. That also has to be why I'm suddenly extra horny. Makes sense.

But yeah, she was a flight attendant in . . . Pheonix. Yeah, I think so. Long blonde hair, blue eyes. Really straight teeth and big breasts. Really flirty and smiley. I liked the attention.

I start to stroke my cock, the soapy suds and water scaling over my body as I close my eyes and brace myself against the shower wall. She liked kissing. Kissed like crazy.

I don't mind kissing so much, but I can usually take it or leave it.

I wonder if Soren is a fan of kissing. Would his lips feel like hers? They're plump, that's for damn sure, and they look pillowy soft.

Shit. I'm thinking about him again.

And no matter how hard I try, I can't bring up the nameless blonde from Pheonix. Nope, when I shut my eyes tight and slide my hand over my rigid dick . . . when I cry out with a shout as cum shoots against the shower wall . . . it's his face I see.

His dark, wavy hair and startling eyes, and a slight smirk on his cynical face. His sharp cheekbones with a hint of color at the top. His lips parting slowly as he pants, and I slam into his tight body over and over . . .

And holy shit, what the hell is happening to me?

I did not just come, thinking about fucking Soren when I was totally conscious of what I was doing.

It's not even really the fact that he's a guy. I mean, I've admitted when men are attractive before, even though I didn't have the urge to fuck them—and *that*, I could get past easily. To each their own. Fuck who you want when you want to. Fuck society and their labels, quite frankly.

But the fact that it's Soren. Uptight. Cynical. Criticizing Soren. The guy who hates everything I stand for. Who wants the world to be rosy and sweet all the damn time. Who calls me reckless and says I'm a horrible role model.

Suddenly, I want to kiss him? To . . .

I try to shake that thought away and quickly rinse off before climbing out of the shower. I take my time drying off, shaving, and then getting dressed. The whole time trying to get Soren off my mind.

I manage to get ready just in time to grab my bag and tell the dogs goodbye before the car pulls up, and we head to the airport.

When I get to the line, I'm shocked completely stupid when I see Soren standing there, bag thrown over his shoulder, and of course, in a suit and tie and expensive dress shoes. "Soren?"

He turns to look at me, shaking his head with a snort. "Barely made it."

"I have plenty of time." Though I suspect he's probably been here for a while. "What are you doing here? I thought I was flying with Jenny."

She sent me a reminder about the car service and told me not to be late this morning, but there was no mention of Soren or her absence.

“Yeah, uh . . .” He grips the back of his neck, and he actually looks a little nervous. “She had an emergency and thought it would be a good time for us to do a second interview.”

“Emergency?”

He just grins, knowing it’s bullshit as much as I do. “She’s fired.”

“No, she’s not,” he says with certainty as he boards the plane, and I follow him. His seat is next to mine in first class, so there’s no avoiding him whatsoever, and after what I did in the shower only hours ago, it’s my cheeks that heat.

Jesus Christ. I jerked off to the man sitting next to me.

I wonder what he’d think if he knew that. Would he be horrified or maybe . . .

I shake away the thought of him being anything but horrified because Soren doesn’t want me.

That’s for damn sure.

I’m not sure what his type is, but I know, without a doubt, what it isn’t. I’m everything he hates.

And yeah, I’m 100 percent positive he’d be horrified.

This is going to be a really long damn trip.

CHAPTER 11

SOREN

The past couple of days were strange. I thought for sure that picture would have had rumors flying. I mean, see a gay guy with another guy, and the world assumes. Right or wrong. They just do.

And sure, there were some who did. But mostly, it was just people angry because I looked happy with him. Wondering if I was finally getting him in line. Wanting more and more details about how I could stand being around him.

The hate was real.

And I didn't like it.

I really didn't like that I'd likely contributed to that hate with my past posts. I've posted that I'm working on a series of interviews with Royal and that maybe there's more to him, but so far, it's just been met with hate.

So much so that the last few days have been exhausting and beyond draining. Even if they were still for the most part being kind to me, there's been a large call to stop the interviews with Royal.

A lot of them requested I move my focus to Axel and Sebastian.

But one thing I don't do is bend to other people's wills. I write and report on what I want to when I want to. I'm a freelance reporter for that reason. I don't have a contract with any station or newspaper for that reason.

I agreed to take on this job, and I'm going to do everything I can to finish it. Even if Royal is in a particularly salty mood today, which seems to have started when he saw me at the airport this morning instead of Jenny.

I've been to races before, obviously, but Jenny thought it would be a good idea to shadow Royal the entire weekend throughout this series to try to find some likable parts of Royal the racer.

How? I still have no idea. But then I think about Worlds of Fun and how happy he looked there. How good he was with the children and his fans.

By the end of the weekend, he's even quieter than he was at the beginning. He didn't do so well during the races, but he didn't do terrible either. Though I can tell it's eating away at him.

There were no fights. No wrecks. And by the end, he does a polite interview with the press and retires to his hotel room. I should be proud of him because he behaved, but something just feels off.

And I don't like it.

So I head to his room instead of my own, and after I knock and Royal answers, there's no witty banter. There's no sarcasm or playfulness, he just looks . . . tired.

And it's not satisfying at all, like I thought it would be to see Royal Dutton knocked down a peg.

"Royal."

“What are you doing here?” His eyes scan over me, sending unexplainable heat through my body before his eyes settle on my face.

“Thought you might want to get dinner.”

“I just want to get some sleep, Soren.” He looks so damn downtrodden, and I can’t take it.

“It was a good weekend, Royal. We should celebrate.”

He shakes his head. “Good? It was terrible. I’m sure your fans are thrilled about how damn bad I raced this weekend.”

I frown because he’s probably not wrong, and I have absolutely no delight. “You finished fourth today. Do you know how incredible that is?”

“Fourth is not first.”

I huff and roll my eyes at that, wrapping my hand around his wrist and pulling. “That’s it. I cannot take sad sack Royal. This is pathetic. We’re going to dinner.” He doesn’t fight me as I yank him into the hallway—even though I know there’s no way I’d have been able to if he didn’t let me—and the door closes.

“Where are we going?” he asks, annoyance in his tone.

“Somewhere we can walk. You need to walk off this weird sad shit you’ve got going on. It’s not you.”

“You don’t know me,” he says as we head toward the elevator.

“I know you’re terrified of heights,” I shoot back, and I swear I see a hint of a smile move across his lips.

There we go.

He rolls his eyes, but the amusement is there, and I'll take it. We walk to a nearby restaurant and are seated by the hostess before we scan over the menus. Royal is still quiet, which is unsettling.

But it's my job to make people talk. I can do this. Even if I don't quite understand why I'm working so damn hard at it.

Before I can ask anything, though, our waiter approaches with a friendly smile on his face. He's young and good-looking. But when his eyes light up, I know instantly he recognizes one or both of us. "Oh my God, you're Soren Adams!"

Okay, it's me. It's really not all that rare, but it is kind of odd when I'm sitting with a professional racer. "Hi," I say dumbly, and I feel Royal's eyes on me. "I am."

"I knew it." The waiter looks like his eyes might pop right out of his head, and I can't believe he hasn't even taken a second look at Royal. "Oh my God. I'm a huge fan. I follow you like, everywhere. I live for your Insta lives! I can't believe you're here. What brings you to Bristol?"

I nod in the direction of Royal, who's still watching me. "Race this weekend."

"Oh, that's right." He waves that off, not looking at Royal. "I don't really follow racing. I mean, it's just going round and round in circles for hours. I don't get it."

"Yeah sure, that's all it is," Royal says, his tone pissy.

Finally, our waiter seems to notice Royal, his eyes turning to him, and his cheeks pink a little. He must recognize Royal now, but probably more for his bad-boy persona and the constant gossip about him. "Sorry about that. I'm sure it takes a lot of skill, Mr. . . . ?"

Yeah, he just knows him as the hot guy who gets into trouble a lot.

“Royal,” I say, and the waiter’s eyes move to me. “Royal Dutton. He’s a damn good racer and has a lot of talent.”

My cheeks heat as I once again feel Royal’s gaze on my face, but I stay focused on the waiter. “I can’t believe you’re here with him. I saw you were interviewing that hot racer from the underwear ads . . .” He looks sheepish for a moment and glances at Royal. “Sorry, that’s how I know you and didn’t really catch your name.”

Royal grimaces but doesn’t say anything, and I just want to order food and work on getting him out of his shell again. I want to hear him make a joke about filling out the underwear nicely—which he does, by the way—or anything, but instead, he just sits there quietly.

“Anyway . . .” The waiter must sense his mood and turns his attention back to me. “You’re really here. I thought for sure you’d go back to focusing on football. I mean, it’s in full swing now.”

I cringe at that and shake my head, my throat suddenly going dry as I think about football and the reasons I stopped covering the sport as much. “I needed a change.”

It’s all I can say, and I can feel Royal’s eyes on me again, digging silently in.

“Anyway. Would it be okay to order?”

“Oh, right!” the waiter says and then quickly takes our order before going back to the kitchen with the promise of being right back.

“Seems like you’ve got a fan,” Royal says, but I can’t exactly tell why he’s irritated. Everything feels off.

“I have lots of them. And so do you.”

He snorts and takes a sip of his water. “Isn’t that why you’re here? Because I don’t?” He places his glass back down on the table. “And now, I’m not even winning races.”

“You don’t have to win every single one, Royal. No one does that. It’s impossible.”

He doesn’t say anything, his mood even more stoic, and I don’t like it. I don’t like this side of him at all. Mostly because I don’t understand it. Cocky shithead? I get that. Not a fan, but I get it.

Mopey sad guy with no self-confidence?

This I don’t get at all.

After we eat, the waiter brings us the check which Royal grabs before I can. The waiter runs it, bringing the receipt for Royal to sign. And while I’m looking at Royal, still annoyed he insisted on paying, the waiter decides to shoot his shot. “So, I know you’re not in town forever, but maybe we can get together before you leave.”

He’s giving me this pouty, innocent look that screams anything but innocence, and maybe on any other day, I’d have taken him up on that offer just to blow off some steam.

But not tonight. I just can’t bring myself to even flirt with the good-looking waiter. “I’m sorry. I’m out of here tomorrow.”

He presses his hands against the table and leans in closer to me, flashing me a flirty smile. “There’s always tonight.”

Royal clears his throat loudly, gaining both of our attention. “Here.” He holds the receipt out, and the waiter

stands up, pushing off the table and taking the receipt from him.

“Thank you, Mr. Dutton.”

“No problem,” Royal grumbles and stands up, but doesn’t move away, keeping his eyes on me.

So are the waiter’s, and his are pleading with me to take him up on his offer. I should. I really should. Especially since things with Royal are getting a little . . . confusing.

But I don’t. I give him a polite smile. “Maybe next time. Thank you so much for the excellent service,” I say as I pass by him and feel Royal on my heels.

We don’t say one word to each other as we walk back to the hotel, and he continues the silence when I follow him to his room.

I can feel his intense irritation.

But I have no idea what caused it because for once, the Hotshot isn’t running his mouth.

CHAPTER 12

ROYAL

I've been quiet. All damn weekend. I wasn't even sure why, at first. I had the urge to tear into him and Jenny. Ask why they thought him shadowing me in Bristol, Tennessee, was such a great idea, but I wanted to focus on the race.

I wanted to show them all I could win.

But I fucked up and checked Soren's social media. I saw the picture he posted of us at Worlds of Fun, and at first, I thought it was a pretty good picture. And then I made a rookie mistake.

I checked the comments.

God, that was stupid. I don't know what led me to do it. But all I saw was how much his damn followers hate me. How they want me to lose. How I'm a cocky hothead—which I am, but damn.

I didn't realize there was so much hate for me. Maybe it shouldn't get to me. I don't know why it did, but it did. It sucked, and it put me in a foul mood.

When I came in fourth, I wanted to punch something. Or someone. But there was no one to blame but myself for that fourth place. Just me and my mind.

My mind wasn't on the race. And it wasn't the entire damn weekend.

All I wanted tonight was to sulk in my hotel room, but of course, Soren had other plans. He just had to drag me to that fancy restaurant with the hot waiter who clearly wanted Soren.

The dude was desperate for it.

And I mean . . . since I can't seem to quit jerking off to thoughts of Soren, I guess I get it. Except I fucking don't.

I don't know what's going on with me, but it's wreaking havoc on my whole damn life.

"Do you want to talk?" Soren asks me after following me up to my room.

No. I don't want to talk at all.

I wanted to punch the waiter for ogling Soren and being not at all subtle about the things he'd like to do to him—or what he wanted Soren to do to him. I don't really even know how it all works.

I've only been with women, but that doesn't stop me from fantasizing about Soren. All the damn time.

It's becoming a real problem.

One I don't understand at all.

He's a pain in my ass. One I want to go away, but then again, the thought of him actually going away is terrifying to me.

"Yeah, I want to talk." Soren looks startled, his eyes going wide as he looks up at me, his lips parted in surprise. Damn it, I'm staring at those full lips for way too damn long before I

finally finish my thought. “Why didn’t you take that waiter up on his offer?”

Another round of shock seems to go through Soren before it transforms into annoyance as he flops down on the sofa in the suite, just making himself at home. “That’s not what I meant.”

I sit down next to him, probably too close since my knee touches his, but I can’t bring myself to care. I know that’s not what he wanted to talk about, but it’s all I could think about on the walk back.

“Because I had plans tonight.”

He’s not telling the truth—at least, not the whole truth. Soren is a terrible liar. “Right. Work.”

He takes a deep breath and then shrugs. “Getting to know Royal Dutton.”

I roll my eyes at that and lean back into the sofa. “That’s work.”

He snorts. “You have no idea. Especially because you won’t fucking talk to me. About anything real.”

My jaw works in frustration, and I won’t look at him. Just keep my eyes straight ahead on the large television that isn’t even on. “You know what? I’m tired. You should go. We can do an interview another time.”

I hate how cold my voice sounds. I want to put on the show—the loud boisterous persona—but how can I?

I was awful this weekend. There’s nothing to be arrogant about.

I just want to sink into my own despair right now. And I really don’t need a witness to this.

I get up and walk toward the door, ready to open it and kick his ass out, but he's off the couch and gets to the door first, blocking it. "Are you mad at me or something?"

I want to laugh.

Mad?

I'm always mad at him. He's an asshole who hates me and blogs about it. This is our thing. Why the hell does he all of a sudden care? And why do I?

None of it makes any sense at all.

"No, of course not." I try to flash him my most obnoxious smile, but I'm pretty sure I fail and just manage to look sick.

"I think you are," he says, his voice solemn and his face determined. Damn him. He's so fucking stubborn.

"I'm not mad. I'm annoyed because I wanted a night alone. If you would have accepted what that guy was offering, you could be there and not harassing me."

Lies. Total damn lies.

The truth is, thinking about him with that waiter made me feel something I'm not sure I've ever felt in my entire life.

Jealousy.

Why the hell was I so damn jealous? It makes no sense. I feel lost and out of sorts. Nothing like myself.

I look up, and he's watching me intently. He studies my face, and I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin. I'm used to people analyzing my surface—they do it all the damn time.

But that's not what he's doing.

He's looking at me way too closely. Studying me. Trying to figure me out, and I don't like it. I'm about to back away from him, get away, fucking run, but then he speaks. His voice totally calm.

“I think you're full of it. I think you're mad, but that's not why.”

I stop and look him dead in the eye. “Why, then? You tell me.”

But I don't want him to tell me. I don't want him to see it because I don't know how to deal with it.

I'm about to step back again, but his voice stops me. “Will you please just talk to me?”

I can't stop staring at his mouth. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me, but at the moment, I just don't care. I'm too raw. Too angry. Too out of sorts. And I can't stop staring.

So instead of walking away—instead of running like I really want to do—I find myself putting one hand on his hip and the other on the back of his neck and pulling him into me. He opens his mouth to say something, I'm not sure what—but my mouth crashes down on his before I can think.

Before I can stop myself.

But he doesn't push me away the way he should. Instead, I hear a soft whimper as one of his hands goes to my hair, and his body melts against mine as our lips move together in a rhythm that's so familiar, so simple, I nearly cry out at how damn good it feels.

He's not a passive participant. He's not aggressive either. It's just a soft, inviting kiss with his fingers sliding through my hair and his other hand resting on my shoulder. He tastes good. Way too damn good. Somehow sweet after our meal. His lips

feel firm but pillowy soft, and he allows my tongue to sweep inside to swipe over his. I moan as his body sways slightly, his fingers clenching in my hair. It doesn't last long.

The kiss was just a brief taste before my wits come back to me, and I'm pulling back slowly and gently. My other hand falls to his waist, so I'm still holding him close. He looks up at me, dazed.

His eyes are large, his pupils blown, and his lips are puffy and swollen from our brief interaction. "Royal," he barely breathes.

I release him and take a step back, but not as far as I should. I kissed a guy. And I want to do it again.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," I say idiotically.

I see a flash of anger and then confusion sweeping over his face as he stands up a little straighter and eyes me carefully. "Why did you?"

I shake my head, wanting to laugh and cry. I've really been fucking up lately. And not just out on the track. "I don't know. I shouldn't have." Horror washes over me as my eyes widen, and I take him in.

Oh, God. I didn't even ask him if I could kiss him.

What if that's not what he wanted?

Of course he didn't want that. He can't stand me. I'm just a goddamn job for him, and here I am, manhandling him and forcing my lips on his.

"Shit. I'm so damn sorry, Soren. I didn't think. I should have asked you . . ."

He holds up one hand slowly, telling me to shut up with the gesture. "If I didn't want the kiss, I would have told you to

stop. Not kissed you back. I'd have pushed you away."

I try to let his words sink in, but it doesn't make me feel any better. "I'm sorry," I say again.

He pushes a hand through his thick dark hair and sighs as he drops it to his side. "Why did you kiss me?"

I don't want to talk about this. Everything inside me is telling me to run. That it'll blow over. That soon, he'll realize he isn't going to get a good story, and he'll be gone.

I take another step away from him, trying to ground myself. "I don't know." He looks annoyed, and I can't blame him. "It's been a really long time since I've gotten laid. I'm probably just horny," I say stupidly because I know that's not it.

Not it at all.

"Oh, that's nice." Now he's more pissed-off than annoyed. But I also see a hint of hurt in his eyes.

That I don't like.

When he starts to go to open the door, I can't let him leave like this and blurt out, "Wait." His hand stops on the door handle. "That wasn't why."

He drops his hand and turns to look at me. "Why then?"

I shake my head because I don't have an answer for him. "The truth is I don't know. I've been thinking about it lately, and I just did it."

"Are you bi?" he asks me carefully.

I shake my head slowly. "I don't think so. I don't know."

For whatever reason, he seems to accept that as an answer, even though I'm not sure I'd let that go if the situation were

reversed. “I’m not interested in being an experiment for anyone.”

“Right,” I say, understanding that. He deserves better than a guy who doesn’t understand his sudden attraction and who may just be going through some shit. He doesn’t know if I’m just playing games with him, even though I swear I’m not.

I wouldn’t do that.

“How about another interview,” I offer.

“No way.” There’s a slight smile on his lips now—those lips I’ve tasted. God, he tastes good. He felt good pressed against me too.

I didn’t see that coming.

But I liked feeling his slightly smaller body, which was hard and masculine, pressed against me. I liked the deep rumble in his throat and the feel of stubble against my face as I explored him for the briefest moment.

“Why not?” I ask.

He grins now, and goddammit, he’s beautiful. “You won’t actually talk.”

“I’ll tell you one real thing. A real answer to whatever you want to know. Whatever you ask. I promise.”

My heart is thumping so damn hard in my chest I actually have to place my hand over it. I don’t want to answer real questions. I don’t want to dive deeper into my past. But for some reason . . . for Soren, I want to.

At least I do right now in this vulnerable moment.

But he doesn’t take advantage of that. Not like he probably should.

“Why wiener dogs?”

I can't stop the laugh that bubbles from my throat at that off-the-wall question. But I recover pretty quickly. “They're feisty, and you can't say they have it easy with short little legs and long bodies, but they make it look damn easy. Hell, they manage to make it look fun.”

He smiles and then laughs, but I can tell he knows I'd have answered anything and that my answer would have been 100 percent the truth.

“Well, I should get going. Early flight tomorrow.”

I don't want him to go at all. I want to beg him to stay but instead, just nod and walk closer to the door to let him leave. “See you tomorrow, Soren.”

“Tomorrow,” he says softly and leaves, the ache in my heart only growing larger.

Damn, I really did want him to stay.

Which means it's a really good idea to let him go.

CHAPTER 13

SOREN

I'm back in my house in Kansas City after flying back with Royal this morning. It wasn't exactly weird on the plane with him, but it was quiet.

I can't believe he kissed me.

I really can't believe I kissed him back.

I was stunned stupid when he pulled my body into his and crashed his lips down on mine, but not for long. No. I wanted it.

I wanted so much more.

I wanted to explore every inch of his toned body, but then he was pulling away, and I saw the shock in his eyes at what he'd done. And then, all I wanted to know was why.

Why did he kiss me? I didn't see one hint of attraction before that moment, but maybe I missed something.

Or maybe it's like he crudely said—that he was just horny.

But I don't think that's it. I felt something. Something that had my gut turning and my mind spinning during that kiss. It was real.

But I also meant what I said. I won't be an experiment for anyone. Questioning your sexuality and exploring it, that's

great. But if he's just another fuckboy who's going to jerk me around . . . Yeah. Not so great.

But that kiss . . .

Damn it. My fingers absently move to my bottom lip as I slowly drag my finger across it, replaying the kiss in my mind.

I let out a shuddery breath and then try like hell to shake it off. *Okay. Focus.*

I log onto my Instagram using my phone and find a picture I took during the first race this past weekend. It's a good picture of the whole track with the main focus being Royal's car.

But as I go to type up the caption, I pause.

I didn't like all the aggression and hatred my followers had when I posted the picture of us at the amusement park—dating or not—which we're, for sure, *not*. It doesn't matter. And okay, maybe he's been a total asshat in the past—at least from my perspective.

But I'm starting to see a different side to the Hotshot.

Or maybe he just scrambled my brain with that kiss.

Ugh!

Quickly, I type out a caption.

Spent my weekend at the track! You all, maybe I had it all wrong . . . or maybe I didn't. But I'm starting to see a different side to Royal Dutton, and perhaps by the end of this, you will too.

I try not to think too much before I post it, then decide to go take a quick shower before I need to leave. Because Jenny

informed me that the racers she and Cash Phillips represent will be at the local animal shelter today for their annual event.

I shower quickly and drive to the animal shelter, noting all the fancy, extremely expensive cars parked outside. I can't shake the smile off my face at that. They're ridiculous.

But my smile is goofy.

I climb out of my very practical—probably boring to them—car and walk inside, my phone in hand because Jenny asked me to take pics. I walk into the shelter, and of course, the first person I see is Royal.

He's dressed in ripped jeans, wearing a t-shirt with the animal shelter's name across his broad chest, and his dark-golden hair is perfectly styled. He looks beautiful as always, and I hate it.

Damn beautiful bastard.

His eyes lock with mine briefly, and my heart does this stutter thing in my chest, causing me to stop walking for a moment. Probably not noticeable to anyone else, but I mentally scold myself.

I've been around every single type of celebrity during my career. I've seen the most beautiful of humans, and I don't get nervous.

But that's what I'm feeling right now as I recover and approach Royal, who's standing with Jenny, Axel, Sebastian, Maverick Adair, and a cute guy I don't recognize.

They all have matching shirts advertising the shelter in various colors—even Jenny, which makes me smile. She smiles back at me, grabbing my shoulders and kissing my cheek. "Thank you for being here, Soren." She motions to the

men next to her. “I believe you know everyone, except maybe Cooper.”

I’m assuming that’s the good-looking guy with a kind smile, who’s standing between Royal and Maverick. He’s on the small side, but not too thin. I notice when he smiles at me that he has dimples and eyes that sparkle with kindness. “Hi, I’m Cooper. I’m a volunteer here.”

He holds out his hand for me, and I shake it. “Nice to meet you.”

“By *he volunteers here*, he means he forces us all to adopt animals until our houses are stuffed full of them,” Axel says, but there’s no animosity in his voice. He seems quite fond of the guy, who blushes to the tips of his ears.

“I’m not that bad,” he says.

“Yes, you are,” Royal says, wrapping his arm around Cooper. A flash of something goes through me at the contact, and I don’t know what it is. Not really. It’s clearly just a friendly gesture, but it sends heat through me and not the good kind.

The green-eyed nasty kind.

Cooper shoves Royal playfully away, and they laugh, as do Axel and Sebastian, but I notice Maverick isn’t laughing with the rest of them. No, he looks like he wants to rip Royal’s arm clean off.

I’m not sure why, but they aren’t known for being friends, that’s for damn sure. Even though Maverick doesn’t race cars—he’s on the motorcycle circuit—so they aren’t in competition with each other, but he and Royal have always had words during public events—and it wasn’t sweet nothings they were spewing at each other.

Cooper shows me around after that, letting me meet all the adorable animals looking for a home. I ask him if it's okay to post pics on my social media, and his eyes light up. "Oh, yes. Please do. They all deserve a chance at a real home."

I smile and nod in agreement, reaching down to pet an adorable little black kitten. "They are very cute."

"Do you have any pets?" Cooper asks me, his eyes still lit up and his dimples popping.

"This is how it starts," Royal says, nearly making me jump at his close contact when I didn't realize he was near. Although I should have. My body is now hyper-aware of him and his spicy cologne that I take a moment to breathe in before I catch myself.

I turn to look at the stupidly handsome man, his smile wide and bright and his eyes sparkling with mischief. "What?"

Royal nods toward the kitten. "He's pulling you in, Soren. Run away."

"I am not," Cooper says, but he's grinning wide. "I asked a simple question."

"Uh-huh," Royal says, shaking his head with a smile. It's weird to see him like this—joking around with his friends and not snarling with competition thrumming through him with nervous energy.

No. He's relaxed. Kind of like he was at Worlds of Fun.

Cooper pouts, but it's playful. "Do you have any pets?"

I shake my head and give the kitten's ears one last scratch before pulling my hand away. "No. I travel a lot."

"Oh well, if you're a pet lover and want one, I'm happy to help out."

I focus on Cooper's words but can barely concentrate because Royal is laughing. And goddammit, it's such a beautiful sound, I'm entranced.

"Help out?"

Cooper nods his head casually, picking up the kitten I was petting. "Yeah. I do it for all these guys when they're out of town. I make sure they get lots of love and food and water."

"And toys and treats," Royal adds.

Cooper blushes. "Sometimes."

Royal laughs again, and damn it, it does something to my insides. I can't keep my eyes off him as he takes the kitten from Cooper and cuddles him to his broad chest. "This little baby is pretty cute."

The kitten is adorable, but my eyes are glued to the man before me.

The one who kissed me.

My mind is a complete mess, and I almost completely miss what I agree to as the two—okay, I guess technically, the three of us—talk.

And goddammit, somehow, I end up taking the little black kitten home, along with a starter pack of a litter box, a litter-box scooper, litter, food, treats, and a collar.

Damn, this Cooper guy is good.

When I get home and get the new kitten settled—who, apparently, is named Mickey, and I'm not going to change it—I go into my office and sit down at my computer, going over the events of the day.

Seeing Royal like that has made me see him in a whole new light. He was happy. Truly happy.

Surrounded by his friends, joking and laughing.

I captured a picture of all of us—me included, with Mickey cuddled against my chest—and post it on all my socials without another thought.

I make sure to tag the shelter with all the shelter information available, hoping like hell to get the community involved to adopt the animals. I smile when the kitten jumps up on my lap, and I can't resist a selfie for my Instagram story.

She's so damn cute, all cuddled up against my cheek, and I put the link for the shelter in the story too.

I also notice the shelter, as well as a personal account in Cooper's name, following me, and I quickly follow back.

I smile to myself as I cuddle Mickey.

Looks like I made a couple of new friends today.

CHAPTER 14

ROYAL

It's the last race of the season, and Soren isn't here.

Why the hell does that bug me so much? It shouldn't. I want to shake it off. But it's on my mind throughout the entire race.

Along with that goddamn kiss.

What the hell was I thinking, kissing him?

And why the hell do I want to do it again so badly?

I can answer that question. Because it felt really damn good. I haven't been able to stop thinking about how good his body felt pressed against mine or how soft his lips were.

I'm an obsessed person. That's for sure.

Seeing him at the animal shelter the other day was the last time I saw him. He looked good, thoroughly rested, and confident as he walked into that shelter, but I didn't miss the quick misstep he took when he saw my eyes on his.

I don't know if he feels this thing between us like I do.

Surely, he doesn't. He's an out and proud gay man. Handsome, with a successful career. He can have his choice of any guy out there. There's no way in hell he's been obsessing about that kiss like I have.

Despite being distracted as fuck, I managed to win second place in the race. But I didn't really feel like sticking around to celebrate Brayden's win, even though I don't really mind that guy so much.

He's a legend, and to lose to him doesn't sting as bad.

I end up back at my house that same night, not wanting to stay out of town, but I'm surprised when I pull into my drive and see a familiar car there.

And I feel like a real bastard because it's not the car I want to see. Axel is sitting out on my porch, waiting for me. I can hear my dogs barking inside the house, trying to get out, so I assume Cooper must have gotten my text about what time my flight landed and brought the dogs home.

His place must have been totally full this racing weekend.

I smile to myself as I walk past Axel and unlock the front door. He stands up and follows me inside as we're greeted by two very excited dogs.

"Why are you here instead of celebrating the end of the season with your husband?" I ask, flopping down on the couch as Oscar hops up on my lap after making two attempts to make it up because of his short little legs.

"Oh, I plan to do lots of celebrating later," he says wagging his eyebrows in an exaggerated fashion.

I pretend to gag, but he just laughs and sits down in one of the plush, oversized chairs in my living room. Annie hops up on his lap, making it in one try and triumphantly looking over at Oscar.

I can't help but laugh at her antics and scratch Oscar's floppy ears. "Why are you here, Axel?"

“Jesus. Can’t a guy hang out with his friend?”

I eye him suspiciously and shake my head because we both know he’s here to talk and not to just hang out. “Why?” I try again, tired from the day.

“I know you wanted that win,” he says easily, but I can hear the hint of caution in his voice.

I did. But I wasn’t that upset about losing either.

So I decide to flip it on him and ask the question that’s really on my mind, “How did you know you were into dudes?”

His eyes bug out of his head, clearly not expecting that question at all. His brow furrows as he studies me carefully. “Mostly when they made my dick hard.”

I roll my eyes, and I’m not sure why I expected a real answer from my dumbass friend. “Thanks, asshole.”

He looks even more confused now. “Wait, are you seriously asking me? Like . . .” He cocks his head to the side and studies me even more closely. I hate it. I want to run the hell away and steal my words back. This was not a good idea.

Not that Axel would ever be cruel, but I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it.

“Never mind,” I say, standing up and walking to my kitchen, grabbing a glass for some water to distract myself.

Of course, Axel follows me. “Not never mind. What’s going on? Why do you want to know?”

I fill the glass, then start drinking it down, hoping he’ll let it go, but also knowing he won’t. “Oh . . .” he says, watching me. “Really?”

I put the glass down on the counter and eye him. “Really what?”

He looks far too smug, and I’m annoyed, but I also see a hint of understanding there. “You think you might be interested in a guy?”

“Can we please just forget this?” I ask desperately.

He shakes his head like I knew he would. “No. I’m here. We can talk. I . . .” He trails off for a moment, but then I see determination on his face. “I knew I was gay when I was pretty young, but I didn’t admit it to myself for a really long time. Family and racing . . . nothing felt . . .”—he sighs —“safe.”

I nod, trying to understand, but it wasn’t like that for me. I was always interested in women. That’s all I’ve ever known. I didn’t have to hide that. I never had to hide that part of me.

“I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell me,” I say honestly. I still feel like shit, thinking about him needing to hide that part of himself. I knew long before he came out—it was hard to miss the longing way he’d watch a good-looking guy here and there. And it was definitely hard to miss the way he stared at Sebastian from day one.

He was a goner for the Pretty Boy.

He smiles at me. “I’m sorry I didn’t know I could. But we’re past that now, right? You know you can talk to me.”

I feel guilty because as much as we joke around and as hard of a time as we give each other, I do know I can trust him. He’s my oldest and best friend.

I swallow hard, my throat dry despite the amount of water I just drank. “I kissed a man . . .” I finally manage to say.

Axel can't hide his surprise, but he recovers pretty quickly. "Is that the first guy you've kissed?"

I nod. "Yeah. I, uh . . ." I take a deep breath. "I thought I was totally straight, up until then. Fuck, I still think I am, but I . . ." I shake my head because I sound like an idiot, and I'm not even sure what I was trying to say.

"Hey." Axel walks closer to me. "It's okay. There are no rules, Royal. No black and white."

"Why now?" I ask, completely clueless. "Why am I all of a sudden attracted to a guy when I've never once felt that before? It makes no sense, Axel."

He grins at that, shrugs, then sits down on one of the stools in my kitchen. "Why did you kiss him?"

I shake my head at that because I don't know. "I don't know. I wanted to. I just . . ." I start pacing because it makes no sense, and it's so goddamn ridiculous. "I wanted to."

I stop walking and wait for him to respond. "Okay . . ." I hate that he's being so careful with me, like I might break. I'm not fucking breakable.

"I just wanted to. I . . . couldn't stop thinking about it. About him. We've been spending so much time together, and I was obsessed."

His eyes seem to register something, and he can't hide his surprise. "The reporter?"

I huff and sit down next to him on a stool. "Yeah."

"Wow," he says, processing it slowly before he shrugs. "He is really cute."

"He's not cute. He's perfect, beautiful even."

Axel stares at me, wide-eyed now, with his lips turned into a totally smug smirk I want to punch off his dumb face. “Wow. You really have it bad, man.”

He’s far too amused, and again, I want to punch him. “No, I don’t. It’s just a weird little blip or something.”

He’s full-on laughing now. “A blip? Really?”

I huff again, really fucking annoyed. “Shut up.”

“Did you talk about it with him? After you kissed? Did he kiss you back?”

My body heats, thinking about how he kissed me back, but I try like hell to shake it off. “He did. But I kind of stopped it and then told him it was only because I was horny.”

He stares at me for a long time, looking at me like I’m an idiot—which, yeah—that was pretty damn idiotic. “That tracks.”

“Fuck you,” I say with no venom whatsoever because it does. I’m really good at saying the right things, but I’m also pretty damn good at saying the wrong things too. Especially when they really count.

“Look, are you freaking out because it’s a guy you’re into —”

“No,” I snap instantly, but then soften and shake my head. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. You know I don’t care about anyone’s sexuality. Not at all. Love who you love, and fuck who you’re attracted to.”

“They should make that a Hallmark card,” Axel says with a laugh.

“You know what I mean.” I stand up and start my pacing again. “It’s just confusing that I’ve never been attracted to a

guy, and now I am. And even worse, he's the goddamn media."

He chuckles. Neither of us are huge fans of the press. "Yeah, that's pretty messed-up."

"You're telling *me*." I sigh.

He climbs off the stool and walks closer to me. "So what has you so upset? I mean, for real."

I look at my friend with total seriousness. "I want to do it again."

"So?" he asks carefully.

"So. He's not into me. Not at all."

"You said he kissed you back," he points out.

I shake my head. "I think he was just lost in the moment. I mean,"—I sweep a hand in front of me—"I *am* hot."

He rolls his eyes and shoves my shoulder. "And totally modest."

I laugh, my usual smirk coming back.

"Maybe he'll come around and you can kiss him again."

"I don't think so." I feel a wave of sadness at that, which I don't fully understand. "He can't stand me. Hates everything I stand for."

"So show him the real you."

I laugh caustically. "You know the real me and barely like me."

"True," he says but then nudges me with his hand on my shoulder. "Just try, Royal. You don't always have to play the part. I've seen Soren's posts. He's starting to see you

differently, and so is the rest of the world. Jenny's evil plan is working."

"To make me look like a pansy," I say grimly.

"To show to world you aren't the douchebag you want them to think you are. You can win races and be a badass without being an asshole."

"I'm not so sure that's true."

He smiles and wraps one arm around me. "I am. Just try, Royal. For the first time in your life, allow yourself to be happy."

I hate him at this moment.

To the outside world, I'm happy and confident, even if I do seem like an arrogant asshole. They think I'm happy that way.

Only a handful of people know the absolute truth . . .

That I'm not happy. That it takes work every single day to appear that way, and when the mask comes off and I'm alone, that's when I'm the real me.

That's when I allow myself to be weak.

To be sad.

To be scared.

And if Soren sees that, how could he possibly be attracted to me?

CHAPTER 15

SOREN

The absolute last person I expect to see when I open my front door is Royal, but here he is, looking almost nervous. He puffs out a heavy breath, the cold air making it visible.

It's cooled considerably in Kansas City over the weekend. And while it's not freezing yet, it's pretty damn cold, so he's dressed in a black hoodie and jeans. "Royal?"

"Hey." He's careful, his eyes not really meeting mine. It's early, but I didn't think he would be back yet after the race yesterday. "Um, nice house."

I nearly laugh because, while my house is nice, it's nothing like his. It's a small three-bedroom, two-bath, very typical of the suburbs kind of home, and truthfully, I love it. Even though I'm not here as often as I'd like to be. "Thank you. Do you want to come in?"

He must have gotten my address from Jenny, which doesn't bug me as much as it probably should. Lord knows the woman has questionable boundaries. But if he's here, he must need to talk.

And God help me, I want to be here for him.

I felt bad I couldn't be at his last race of the season, even though he didn't invite me, and Jenny didn't ask. I think she

thinks we have enough of the racing side of him and has encouraged me to find the human side during the off-season.

Still . . . I wanted to be there.

He follows me inside, and I close the door behind him as Mickey circles his feet, checking him out. Royal seems happy to see the kitten—or maybe he’s looking for a distraction—and scoops her up quickly. Watching him cuddling Mickey to his chest, I direct him into the living room, and we both take a seat on opposite sides of my sofa.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” I have to ask him, my eyes sweeping over his handsome face. He looks tired, but otherwise okay and still completely, devastatingly handsome.

“I’m fine.” He looks around the room, his eyes taking in every detail. “I really do like your house. It’s comfy.”

I smile at that and agree. “That it is. Thank you.”

“It feels safe.”

I cock my head to the side and want to ask him more about that statement—because surely, his house is safe. He has a gate and a security system—probably the best one money can buy.

But I bite my tongue, not wanting to go into the reporter role and scare him off.

“Royal . . . why are you here?”

He’s petting my kitten, who’s curled up on his lap, but he looks agitated. “I want to give you a real interview.” I open my mouth to ask him if he’s sure, but then he adds, “Off-camera.”

I nod slowly because that’s fine. “O-kay. Did Jenny want you to do this today or something? Because she didn’t say

anything, and I'm sure you're tired after your flight and your weekend."

"I'm fine, and no, it wasn't Jenny." He still looks nervous, and I want to take it away. "What do you want to ask?" His eyes meet mine, his expression pulled tight and his body rigid.

He looks like he's about to be executed, not interviewed.

And while, okay, that might have given me some pleasure weeks ago, now I'm not really enjoying it at all.

"What's off-limits?" I ask, trying to offer some sort of comfort, but he doesn't relax.

"Nothing."

Mickey must sense the tension because she jumps down and heads out of the room. I use the opportunity to move closer to him on the couch, not enough so our legs are touching, but almost. "Royal, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to."

"No." He shakes his head, his agitation only growing. "That's not how you do this, Soren. You're a reporter, through and through. What do you want to know?"

I don't answer him because I don't think it's a real question.

He confirms it when he continues, his voice strained. "Ask me what you really want to. I mean what will make me more human, huh?" I don't speak. I wait for *him* to. "How about the fact that no one ever gave me a damn thing? That I had to work my ass off for everything I've ever had. I had to scrape my way to the top."

My heart is pounding in my chest, and I shift a little, my knee touching his thigh, but neither of us react.

“How about that I learned really damn early that nothing would ever be handed to me? That nothing would ever be easy. That I couldn’t be weak. I couldn’t ever show I was feeling weak. I had to be strong.”

“Royal,” I say, barely recognizing my own voice because it’s hoarse, my throat swelling with the pain I can feel coming off him.

He just shakes his head, closing his eyes tightly. “No one wanted me. Not ever. I had to make my own way.”

I move closer to him and brush a hand over the stubble on his cheek. His eyes don’t open, but he doesn’t pull away from me either. “Is that true?”

I know in my heart it is, but I need to hear it from him. His eyes open, and they meet mine, his hand wrapping around my wrist, but not pulling me away from his face. “Yes.”

“Royal,” I say again softly, hating the agony of his words. Not knowing why he felt that way or why he’s struggled so much, but it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t do it. I know it. But I still can’t help myself.

It’s meant to be a soft and gentle, brief kiss, and it starts out that way when I press my lips against his. But then he kisses me back. No hesitance.

None at all.

He kisses me hard and grips my wrist, pulling my body into his even more, and the kiss quickly heats up. His free hand moves to the back of my neck, gripping tight—not to the point of pain—but his strong grip holds me there as his tongue plunders my mouth.

His tongue sweeps over mine, making me groan, and I’m completely and totally lost in this desperate kiss.

I don't have time to think about how, technically, he's always thought he was straight or the fact that I always thought he was just an arrogant asshole.

That we haven't talked about the first kiss since it happened. There's no time for any of it because I allow myself something I don't usually do. I just feel. I feel his pain. His desperation. His need.

And when he goes to lift my shirt off over my head, I raise my arms and let him.

He pulls back, and for a moment, I'm afraid he's going to stop it—but I'd rather he do that than have any regret—so I sit perfectly still.

He shocks the hell out of me when he releases my hand but only to drop his to my chest, his fingers skating over my pecs and down my stomach. I'm not nearly as built as him, but I do run every morning and would consider myself fairly fit. Still, I fight the urge to shift nervously away from him and remain unmoving.

His finger skims over the light trail of hair that goes from my navel and disappears into my slacks. I'm positive he'll stop. There's no way he can convince himself I'm a woman now—not that I'd ever want him to do that in the first place, but maybe I need to give him more credit because his lips part, and he softly breathes, “So beautiful,” just before his mouth slams against mine again.

I'm stunned for a second before my hands move to the hem of his sweatshirt, and he helps me slip it off him, along with his t-shirt. We toss them behind him, and I don't get to admire his beautiful body before we're kissing frantically again.

We should stop.

We should talk.

But I can't seem to get that thought across to my body.

My hands splay over his muscled back as his slide through my hair, and his tongue slides over mine, making me groan. My cock is hard and aching, but I'm too afraid to do anything about it.

I don't want to break this beautiful spell.

Somehow though, it doesn't seem like Royal wants to either. His hand moves to the button on my pants. He flicks it open and is pulling my zipper down when I finally come back to my senses and wrap my hand around his wrist. "Royal, wait."

He's breathing heavily, but he stops, pulling back a little to look into my eyes. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

"No." I shake my head, trying to catch my breath. "It's just." Shit. I can't think. My balls are achy and full, craving release. I don't remember the last time I was this turned-on, if ever. But I need to force myself to talk. "I'm a guy . . ." I manage dumbly.

I want to crawl into a hole in that moment, my cheeks flushing, but he only smiles then—that confident grin I'm used to but which somehow seems different too. "Oh." His hand slides over my hard dick through the material of my pants. "I *know*."

I swallow hard, fighting the urge to thrust up into his touch. "But . . ."

"But what, Soren?" he asks, his hand not moving but not pulling away either. "Do you want me to stop?"

I shake my head quickly, panting with need. “No. I don’t, but . . .”

“Then be quiet and let me enjoy my first time with a guy.” He presses a firm kiss on my lips. “A very hot guy.” He kisses down my neck, and I tip my head back, letting him kiss and lick over my throat. “A very, very fucking hot guy.”

I moan as he starts to move his hand over me again, palming my cock over my pants. I’m leaking profusely, and my balls are pulled up tight to my body, begging for a release, but I won’t rush him.

This isn’t an experiment for him. I can feel it deep in my bones. But it is his first time with a man, as he said. And I don’t want to rush him.

“Can I see?” he asks, moving back to my lips.

I nod slowly, my nose brushing his, and he smiles.

“Stand up.”

I nod again dutifully as I do as he asks, standing up and staying still. His big hands grip my ass, pulling me into him with my groin right at his face. I’m about to pull back to push my pants down, but he shocks me yet again when he pushes my slacks down but leaves my briefs on. I take that as him telling me that’s as far as he wants to go and step out of my pants, kicking them away, but making no other move to rid my briefs.

I start to sit down again, but he holds onto my hips in a firm grip, his mouth moving over the tip of my cock that’s trying to poke out of the top of my briefs. “Royal.”

I thread my fingers through his hair, but he doesn’t push me away. I swear he only holds onto me tighter, his hands going to my ass and sliding into my briefs, his big hands

gripping my cheeks as he mouths my tip, then slides his tongue down my still-covered shaft.

I think my brain may have actually melted because I can't think. I can't move. I can't do anything as he grips my bare ass in his hands and teases my clothed cock. When he moves back to the tip and wraps his lips around it, pushing my underwear out of the way so he can engulf the head, I cry out, "Oh, fuck."

His tongue slides through my tip, teasing me, tasting me, and then he lets out the most delicious moan that nearly has me losing it. I can't take it anymore. Falling onto his lap, I straddle his strong thighs as I bring our mouths together.

I kiss him hard and feel his thick erection, still confined by his jeans against my dick. He lifts me slightly and pushes my briefs all the way off while he kisses me. Then his hands slide over my back and down to my ass.

"Royal," I breathe, still totally shocked and not completely sure this is happening. "Are you sure you want this?"

His beautiful eyes meet mine, and that smug, confident smirk is back before he steals my lips again. He nods, our noses brushing against each other's before he rests his forehead against mine.

"I've wanted this since the first time we kissed. I just wasn't sure if you wanted it too."

What?

Is he fucking serious?

Oh my God, I think he is.

CHAPTER 16

ROYAL

I think my heart might actually explode. Not the way I thought I would die, but hey, can't really think of a better way to go. Soren is beautiful, there's no denying that. And if I thought the taste of cock wouldn't be my thing before, that thought is now long gone.

Or maybe it's just Soren.

Because the heady, somehow slightly-bitter-and-sweet-all-at-the-same-time taste of him is still on my mind as his forehead rests against mine and his naked body is seated on my lap.

"Why would you think I didn't want you?" he asks so quietly I almost miss it.

"You hate me," I say simply and not for pity or for reassurance either. It's just the simple truth.

But it's one he doesn't want to accept because he shakes his head, then pulls back enough to reach my cheeks, grasping my face in his hands. "No. I don't."

"Soren—" I start but am cut off instantly.

"I didn't understand you. Not at all. I was harsh."

I shake my head, his hands holding on to me and following the movement. "You were honest. You're always honest."

“So then trust me when I say I want to be here. Kissing you. I have no idea how or even why we’re here, but there’s nowhere else I want to be. I want to kiss you.”

Hope blooms in my chest, but something tells me, even if he gets to know the real me instead of the arrogant fucker I’ve taken to playing, it could make it worse. Maybe *he’s* the one who’s horny.

But something in his eyes tells me that’s just not true. And I can’t seem to force myself to talk more when he’s telling me he wants this, and my body is thrumming with pent-up need.

His hands reach between us, and he undoes my jeans slowly before I lift us both up semi-awkwardly, helping him free my cock and push my briefs and jeans down to my thighs.

“Damn it, I knew it.”

He looks down at my heavy cock, sticking straight up and pleading with him for relief. “Knew what?”

His eyes meet mine. “That the big dick energy wasn’t an act.”

I can’t help but laugh, but it turns into a deep groan when he wraps his hand around me and strokes firmly. “Oh, fuck.”

He nods in agreement, moving up so his cock brushes against mine. I’ve never felt anything like it before. My eyes squeeze shut, and sparks shoot behind my eyelids with every thrust. I try desperately to calm my raging body.

The threat of an orgasm races up my spine, but I don’t want this to end. I never want this to end. Everything I told him about my life is true. I spent my younger years alone and scared and was told I needed to toughen up.

I don't talk about that time in my life, and you'd think that would quell the white-hot need I have now, but if anything, I just want to feel good.

I need this moment. I need all the moments Soren will give me.

His hand wraps around our cocks at the same time. I curse, my entire body going rigid as he strokes us while his lips meet mine in sloppy, hurried kisses.

His naked body on my lap is short-circuiting my brain. My hands are everywhere, wanting—no needing—to explore his soft skin. He doesn't have a lot of hair, that damn trail from his belly that goes down to a soft patch of wiry hair driving me fucking crazy, but still, he's masculine and firm.

Everything I never thought would turn me on before is all I can think about now as my hands smooth over his back and down to his firm ass. I grip him tight, thrusting him against me, and before I even take a moment to think about it happening, I'm spilling all over his cock and his hand, crying out against his mouth in an earth-shattering orgasm.

He follows me over moments later, his lips pressed against mine as he kisses me sweetly while we both come down from the high.

He rests against my chest, and I wrap my arms around him, just holding him there. Neither of us move or speak for what feels like a really long time.

He's the one to break the silence. "Do you want to get cleaned up?"

I feel the cum cooling between us, our bodies sticky with it, but to be honest, I don't want to let him go. Still, I'm sure

he's uncomfortable. "Shower?" I ask, my throat hoarse from a powerful orgasm I was not quiet about.

I feel him smiling against my chest. "Together or separate? I may not have eight bathrooms, but I have two showers."

I squeeze his left ass cheek at his teasing and grin. "Together. Gotta save the earth and all that." He chuckles and pulls back enough to give me a *Really?* look, and I wink at him. "You can tell your followers I'm very concerned about the planet."

He laughs but then sobers, his expression becoming serious. "Royal." He brushes his hand over my cheek, his thumb sliding over my bottom lip. "I won't ever tell anyone anything you don't want me to."

I see the sincerity in his eyes, and I know he means it. "I want you to be able to do your job."

"Let's talk about it in the shower, okay?" He climbs off my lap and holds his hand out for me. I take it, but I don't move before my eyes sweep over his beautiful naked body. He's not muscled or cut, not really, but he's trim and fit. His arm muscles are slightly defined, and his stomach is smooth. His cock is spent, covered in our juices, and holy fuck, all I can think about is swiping my tongue over him to clean him, but he doesn't give me the chance.

His cheeks flush as he pulls me up from the couch. I push my pants and briefs off all the way and leave them behind as he leads me to a bedroom I assume is his and to a nice black-and-white-styled bathroom.

I wasn't kidding about liking his house either. Sure, it's much smaller than mine, but it feels like an actual home. Cozy

and warm with pictures throughout. The furniture is comfortable and nice.

He gets the water heated up, and I take the time to ogle his delicious backside. Huh. Have I always been into dudes? Because that is a nice ass.

Or is it just Soren?

“Are you okay?” I notice he’s turned and is now watching me with concern.

I stride to him confidently, cupping the back of his head in my hand and kissing his mouth with fervor. I may be a little confused as to why now, but I’m not confused at all about being attracted to Soren.

About wanting to kiss the hell out of him every chance I get.

He sighs against my lips and wraps his arms around me as he kisses me back, both of our cocks starting to rally already as we hold onto one another. The bathroom starts to steam up around us, and I slowly pull back away from his mouth. “Shower?”

He nods, his eyes glazed over before he seems to recover. I smile at him and take his hand, leading him into the shower. It’s not as big as the one I have at home, but it’s big enough for us, and it’s even better because it means his body is against mine, which is exactly where I want it to be.

This probably doesn’t change much for him. It was a good time, took away an itch if he hasn’t gotten laid for a while—which I don’t ask because just the thought of someone else touching him makes me want to punch something—but for me, it’s changed everything.

His lips against mine for the second time confirmed just how attracted I am to this man. And not just physically, which yes, I am. But in every other way. His honesty. His sureness. Him wanting to right all the wrongs in the world, no matter how impossible.

I spent most of last night going through all his posts like a total creeper, but it only cemented my admiration for this man.

He's not only interested in sports. He talks about all sorts of causes—equal rights, human rights, and even animal rights. I smile at that last one, thinking about his post about the animal shelter and the kitten who now calls Soren's home her home too.

After our hair is wet down by the cascading water, Soren grabs some shampoo that smells just like him—fucking heavenly—and reaches up, pushing his fingers through my hair, getting it nice and sudsy as it slides through my locks.

I do the same for him, reveling in the short silky hair between my fingers before we rinse and then he grabs some body wash, using his hands to clean me, paying particular attention to my stomach and washing away our dried cum.

But Soren, he doesn't stop there. He lets the water wash away the suds, then drops to his knees, his mouth level with my cock which has fully taken notice. "Holy shit," I barely choke out, and it's his turn to smirk.

His hand wraps around my stiff cock, circling it in a strong hold. I want to feel his mouth on me, but I don't want him to do anything he doesn't want to. I lick my lips as I look between us and see his cock is standing heavy and hard between his legs, his other hand stroking himself.

My knees nearly buckle at that sight, but I haven't seen anything yet because he chooses that moment to suck my cock into his mouth, not stopping until the head is pushing against the back of his throat.

“Holy shit,” I say again, my fingers going into his wet hair and gripping tight. “Do you not have a gag reflex.”

I may have not seen many other cocks—especially hard ones—in my life, but I know I'm not small in the dick department, nor short. He took me like it was nothing, and I swear I feel him smiling around me even as his mouth is stuffed full of my dick.

He pulls back, his tongue teasing my leaking slit before he grins up at me. “I can teach you how, if you want. Someday.” He winks at me—actually fucking winks at me—with so much confidence, I nearly come right then. But then he's taking me back into his mouth and to the back of his throat, and I cry out, clutching his hair in my fingers again.

I hope I'm not hurting him, but somehow, I know deep down if I were and he wanted me to stop, he'd tell me.

Because Soren isn't arrogant, but he's something I envy so damn much more—he's self-assured. He knows what he wants, what he likes, and what he doesn't like. And he doesn't hide it. Not ever.

He sucks me off expertly, his other hand jerking himself off, making his muscles flex and my knees weaker and weaker because all I can do is stand there uselessly, letting my cock slide in and out of his lush mouth. I try to warn him that I'm about to come, but he stops, his hands going to my ass and grasping tight, forcing me into the recesses of his throat, and I'm a goddamned goner. My cum spills down his throat, and he swallows around me before one hand disappears from my

ass and he's yelling my name, his cum hitting my leg and then my foot before the water washes it away.

I regret not tasting him, but when he stands, I don't waste time, pulling him into me for a hot kiss, tasting the remnants of my release on his tongue as I do.

"You're incredible."

I swear he blushes at that and then shakes his head. "It was just a blow job. Don't tell me you haven't had one before."

I have, but for the life of me, I can't pull up one memory, other than the one from moments ago, and I don't want to. "You're incredible," I repeat against his lips and kiss him hard before he pulls back, looking a little stunned.

He recovers, and we rinse off before we climb out of the shower and dry off with his soft, fluffy white towels.

We don't get dressed though. We just wrap the towels around our waists, and he pulls me back to the living room, where he cozies up to my side, and I realize I don't want to move.

I don't want to go anywhere or run, like I normally do after a hookup. Because that's simply not what this was.

Not at all.

CHAPTER 17

SOREN

Did all of this really just happen? It feels like a dream. One I most certainly don't want to wake up from.

“So I guess we didn't talk much in the shower,” I say and can't help but blush lightly because that was all my fault. Once I started touching him, I didn't want to stop until I got a taste.

And damn, did he taste good.

His big cock choking me is one memory I'll never stop reliving, I'm positive of it. But it was the look of awe on his face that really sticks with me. The stark need and pleasure consuming his features.

He was more beautiful in that moment than anyone I've ever seen. But we do need to talk.

He leans back into my couch, a white towel wrapped around his waist, his firm muscular chest on full display, along with the few tattoos he has on his arms and left pec.

His arm wraps around me, and he pulls me closer to his body, confirming he isn't running away. He's staying put. My heart pounds rapidly in my chest as I lean into him and let my fingers slide absently over his rock-hard stomach. “What do you want to talk about?”

He sounds almost sleepy, clearly as sated as I feel, and it makes me smile. “I need you to know you can trust me. I’m not going to tell anyone anything you don’t want me to. Your permission will be required.”

I feel him tense a little, but he doesn’t argue with me or accuse me of lying to him. “You’re a reporter doing a series of stories on me. Isn’t that permission enough?”

“Not to me,” I answer him honestly. I believe in reporting the truth, I do, but this is uncharted territory for me. I’ve never had a sexual experience with someone I was reporting on before.

Not. Once.

And while I know this was a line I crossed, I won’t hurt Royal, nor will I betray his trust.

I look up at him and see his chin tilted down as he looks at me, studying me closely. “You’re allowed to have limits, Royal.”

“Those limits make me an asshole to your followers,” he says simply, his voice quiet.

I flinch. I don’t mean to, but I do. I hate that I contributed to that, but I see someone different now. And my followers are starting to also. “So show them what you want to, but if you want me to keep something between us, then tell me.”

I see the smile on his face, but it’s a sad one, and I don’t like it. I grasp his chin with my fingers and sit up enough to look him in the eyes.

“Royal, I mean it.”

Now his smile is back—his real smile. “You’re kind of bossy.”

“Not kind of,” I say, leaning in to give his lips a quick kiss. I don’t know what’s happening between us or when it changed. All I know is I don’t want it to stop. I want it to last for as long as possible. “How about this?” I start, and his smile only grows. “When we’re naked, everything we say is between us.”

Yup, his smile is huge now. “A naked rule?”

I grin at that and nod, liking the hell out of my own rule. “Yes. A naked rule.”

His hand skims over my naked chest and lands on the knot of the towel. “Do towels count as clothes?”

I nod. “Must be totally naked for it to not be on the record.”

“I can live with that.” He starts to unknot the towel just as my cat decides to make herself known and jumps up between us, looking at us, like she knows what we were planning and is disgusted.

Though, Royal’s smile is so damn sweet when he scratches her ears that I can’t be bothered. We’ll probably have some un-naked time to figure stuff out anyway.

“I should probably go home and let my dogs out.”

Disappointment settles in my gut, but I try to hide it. This was a big morning for him. He probably needs time to think about what’s happened. To decide whether he really liked it. I mean, I know he did—but whether he wants to do it again.

What it all means to him.

“Soren?”

I realize he asked me something, but I was too busy stuck in my head and didn’t really hear him. “What?”

He's studying me carefully, looking amused, but also unsure at the same time. "I asked if maybe you'd like to come with me."

What?

I stare at him, and I notice he's nervously shifting on the couch and looking down. "I mean, you don't have to. It's silly."

He starts to get up, but I grab his hand, causing Mickey to once again become annoyed and jump off the couch. "No, it's not. But are you sure? You don't have to ask me to come along if you need some time to think."

"Thinking's never been my strong suit," he jokes, and I just shake my head and scold him with my eyes for putting himself down.

"Don't do that."

He smiles and then cups my cheek with his big hand, his eyes searching mine. "I have no idea what the hell is going on, but I know I don't want it to end yet. I would stay, but I left pretty early this morning, and I'm sure my dogs need to go outside."

I nod, but I feel slightly confused. "So you were already home today?"

He nods. "I got in last night, but I left early. I drove around for a long time, trying to talk myself into not coming here. But I had to. I had to come here, Soren."

His eyes are intense and fixed on mine. My heart flutters nervously in my chest. "I'm glad you did."

"Me too," he says, and I can tell he's being truthful. "Even though you didn't actually get much of an interview."

“Especially because of the naked rule and not being able to report about any part of that epic dick I now know you have,” I say, waggling my eyebrows and trying to lighten the mood and make him laugh.

It works.

He lets out the sexiest rumbling laugh, his head falling back with the act. “Well, you have my permission to tell them all about that.”

I laugh and shake my head, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Nope. Naked rule.”

He’s grinning and then sighing happily. “I don’t know what this is.”

“I don’t either,” I say honestly.

“I want to find out though,” he says quietly, and I struggle with any words after that, so I just kiss him again. Then we quickly get dressed before we head to his house to let his dogs out.

“So why racing?” I ask when we settle in his living room, much like we did in mine. But this time, we’re fully dressed.

He seems to think it over, eyeing my clothes and then smiling. “Hmm, so the non-naked rule answer then . . .”

I grin but then nod. “Yes. The on the record, able to share with my followers answer.”

“I’m good at it,” he answers, but I don’t think he’s trying to be coy or even arrogant. It’s said very concisely.

“You are,” I agree. “But how did you find that out?”

He looks like he’s warring with his mind over the answer, and I almost chicken out and tell him we can talk about

something else, but then he's opening his beautiful mouth. "I grew up in foster care."

"Oh," I say, dumbfounded. "Royal . . ." I'm about to tell him this sounds like naked-rule territory, but he stops me with a quick shake of his head.

"It's okay. Honestly, I'm surprised it hasn't come up before. You reporters are supposed to be good at research, right?"

"Ha," I say sarcastically, but it's true. This is the first time I'm hearing about the famous Royal Dutton growing up in foster care.

He shrugs, trying to be casual, but I see the vulnerability in his eyes. "Anyway, one of my foster mothers, she was into racing, and she taught me."

I know, without question, that's the condensed version, but I'm happy he's sharing anything with me, to be honest. "And you just ran with it." Statement. Not a question.

"I did. I thought it would just be a hobby, but like I said, I'm really good at it." He waggles his eyebrows at me, and it actually makes me laugh instead of rolling my eyes. Wow, have things changed in a matter of days. "But honestly, it was like racing was in my blood. I just took to it."

I find myself smiling at that. "I'm glad you did."

He studies me closely and then puts his hand on my face in a way I'm quickly becoming addicted to. I'm certain he's about to kiss me, but fate has other plans because just then, his phone rings loudly.

He sighs heavily and grabs it, looking at the screen. "Fucking Jenny. I really need to fire her."

I laugh. “No. You really need to answer that,” I say, and he reluctantly drops his hand from my face and does what I’ve suggested.

He brings the phone to his ear as he answers, but he doesn’t move away, so I can hear everything.

“Jenny.”

“Royal. You free for dinner tonight?”

His eyes meet mine, and I expect him to make a lame joke about a date with her or something that he normally does to get to her, but he doesn’t. He studies me carefully. “I don’t know. Who’s asking?”

I hear Jenny’s long sigh. “Your agent, who’s trying to save your damn career. I’m inviting Soren too. We need to check in about his plan.”

My eyes widen, and I pull my phone out of my pocket to see a single text from Jenny, inviting me to dinner. I show it to Royal, and he grins widely. “Okay. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll send the details to your phone. Don’t be late,” I hear Jenny say as Royal hangs up.

“Guess we’re going to dinner tonight. You wanna ride with me?”

I nod dumbly as I text Jenny to confirm before sliding my phone back in my pocket. “Since I doubt you’ll be nude in a restaurant with your agent, the naked rule won’t apply. Is that okay with you?”

He nods, cupping my face with one of his hands again. “I mean, I’d rather be naked. But yeah, I’m fine with you reporting on anything you want to.”

I smile at the naked part, even if it blows my mind a little that he admitted to wanting to be naked again with me. “Are you sure you’re okay with what happened?” I have to ask. It doesn’t feel real.

He leans in, brushing his lips over mine softly, his head nodding as his nose brushes against mine when he kisses me softly. “I’m very okay with it. I want it to happen again and again, but only if you want it to.”

“Of course I do,” I blurt out and feel him smile against my lips.

“Good.” He takes my hand in his and holds it sweetly—far sweeter than I could have ever imagined Royal being. “I have no idea what’s going on, but I haven’t felt like this before. I’ve never . . .” He trails off quietly, swallowing hard as he eyes meet mine. “I know I have a lot of money and fame. I know what I let people see, and trust me, part of that persona is me—I *am* a cocky shithead.” I find myself smiling yet again, but my smile fades when I see the seriousness in his eyes. “But I ___”

“Royal . . .” I breathe quietly, my hand sliding over his cheek. “You don’t have to explain it to me. This feels new to me too.”

But part of it feels very familiar too. All too familiar. A famous athlete, saying all the right things. And me falling for it.

I try to push that away. I don’t want to be just another jaded asshole. I want to believe in this . . . whatever it is.

He nods his head slowly and then leans back into the couch, pulling me to his side. “I want to try,” he says so quietly, I barely hear him. “For once, I want to try.”

I don't know exactly what he means, but I just lean into him instead of asking him.

Something tells me he'll let me know when he's ready.

And I can wait.

CHAPTER 18

ROYAL

The naked rule.

I like it.

But I'm definitely dressed right now. So I know whatever we talk about at dinner is very much on the record. Even though I'm starting to trust Soren, and I'm pretty sure if I asked him not to divulge anything, he wouldn't.

But the naked rule works for me. Maybe it's because I absolutely like being naked with Soren—or maybe it's just silly enough to be the perfect agreement—I don't know, but it works.

Sadly, I didn't get any more naked time with Soren today. After we agreed to dinner with Jenny, we played with the dogs for a while in my backyard, had a quick lunch, and then mostly just hung out at my place—fully clothed.

But he didn't try to question me.

It was very casual.

Very ordinary but not boring. Not at all. I always thought I needed flash and thrills, but with Soren, I don't want any of that. I'm perfectly content, watching mundane television and playing with my dogs until it's time to go to dinner with Jenny.

Who, by the way, totally knows something is up.

What, I'm not sure she's figured out, but she eyed us pretty damn hard when we walked into the upscale restaurant together. I wanted to grab his hand in mine, claim him right then and there.

But I decided that might be pushing it.

Kansas City isn't really full of paparazzi, but that doesn't mean people wouldn't have their phones out and snapping pictures if I walked inside, hand and hand with Soren. We're both fairly famous around here, and even just walking into the place not holding hands, we had a fair share of photos snapped.

"So how is the project going, Soren?" Jenny asks, taking a drink of her martini as we sit at the table, waiting for the food we ordered.

We both flinch at her calling me a project, and yeah, she notices. Jenny misses nothing. I recover a little faster than Soren, but he's the one to answer. "It's going well. People are really warming up to Royal."

I'm not sure that's true, but I keep my mouth shut. "I've seen the comments," Jenny says, and I swear I see a ghost of a smile. "Now that it's off-season, what do you have planned?"

The question is directed at Soren, so he answers, "Whatever Royal wants to show me."

His sweet smile has me grinning like a goofy idiot, and I can feel Jenny's eyes on me now. But does she look annoyed or amused? I can't really tell. "And what do you have planned to show him, Royal?"

Yeah. She, for sure, knows.

I don't answer with "my dick," so there's some progress. Really, she should be proud because it's difficult not to say

since she clearly knows I either have already or would like to again.

“I don’t have any plans yet.”

I know *she* does though, and I’m not surprised at all when she starts naming things I could do. “You can volunteer at the animal shelter again. That was quite a hit.”

I nod in agreement as I take a drink of water. I have no idea what Soren and I are going to do after dinner—if he wants time alone, or if I can convince him to come back to my place—but I know I want to be 100 percent sober if it’s the latter. “I’m not sure I can handle adopting any more animals though.”

“Me either,” Soren agrees with a laugh, and damn, is he beautiful when he’s laughing. His face completely alight.

“Yeah, Cooper almost got me last time too.”

I’m surprised by that. She’s the only one who’s been able to say no to Cooper so far. Hell, even Maverick now has a dog. “Really?”

“He didn’t,” she says haughtily, and it makes me chuckle. There’s no doubt Jenny is a badass, but when she shows this rare side—where she cares—I like that too. Although . . . huh, I guess she and I are more alike than I realized. “Anyway,” she says, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Cash is having a fundraising event next month. You both should attend.”

I swallow hard, all traces of smiles wiped from my face now as a cold shudder runs through me. Soren’s eyes are trained on me, but he doesn’t call me on what I’m sure is an odd response to an event which raises funds for sick kids. Most people hop right on that, but it makes me sick every single year.

I force myself to go . . . but goddammit, it never gets easier.

“Okay,” I say solemnly.

I’m sure Jenny just chalks it up to me being an entitled brat, but I feel Soren’s eyes on me. He’s studying me. I think about talking about foster care earlier and teasing him about doing research. God, I hope he doesn’t.

I don’t want this exposed, naked rule or not.

The rest of the evening is fairly quiet and honestly, pretty damn enjoyable. Jenny closes the evening, letting me know she’ll text all the information about Cash’s event and that I need to keep up the good behavior, but she ends it with a wink and a hug.

I think I might actually be growing on my agent—just a little bit.

Huh. Didn’t think that would ever happen.

We get back to my car—yes, he finally let me drive—and we climb in, but I don’t start driving yet. I turn to look at him, feeling more nerves than I’ve ever felt. And yes, I drive cars at a high speed around a track for a living.

This is way more scary.

“So, uh . . .” I start lamely. *God, why is this so hard?*

Thankfully, Soren takes pity on me. “Would you like to come back to my place for a bit?”

“I would.” His smile lights up my car. “But I need to check on Annie and Oscar.” His smile drops slightly, and I curse myself but add, “My place?” to let him know I’m definitely interested in hanging out more with him tonight. That I don’t want the night to end.

He bites his lower lip, and I swear to God, I might pass out from the nerves. It was just fun. He's over it now. He's regretting asking me. *Shit. Shit. Shit. This is so not me.*

“Or . . .” I'm staring at him, my heart thumping so damn hard in my chest, and my palms are legitimately sweating. “We could pick up the dogs, and you could come back to my place. I probably need to give Mickey a little attention.”

I recognize the nerves he's experiencing now. He was afraid to ask me. *Huh.* So I don't make him wait for even a second. “Yes.” His eyes widen in response.

“We don't have to. I mean, if you'd rather go back to your place, I can stay for a little bit—”

I cut him off, risking a lot but not caring as I lean over and steal his lips quickly. The kiss is brief, but impactful all the same. I pull back, and he looks at me, dazed. “I want you to stay for as long as you can. Or I want to stay at your place as long as I can, actually. I like your house. But whatever works best for you, so we don't have to end the night here,” I say as I kiss him quickly, then move back over into my own seat.

I should be concerned about someone witnessing the kiss, but I'm not. Not at all. My sexuality is nobody's business, and if I want to date a dude, I can.

My brows furrow slightly as the thought goes through my head. Is that what we're doing?

Are we dating?

I have no idea. I've never dated anyone before. It's been all random hookups, but I still don't believe that's what was between us this morning. Or what that very first kiss was about.

Are we dating? I don't know. But I think I want to be.

I drive us to my house, where we gather a very excited Annie and Oscar, some toys, treats, and food before driving to Soren's much more comfortable house. And the dogs waste no time making themselves right at home, including yipping at the cute little black cat who tried to sneak up on them cautiously.

She's now on the kitchen counter, where my dogs can't grab her and looking quite annoyed. "Sorry about them," I say to Soren as we watch them.

"She'll be fine," he says, and then he rests his hands on my shoulders, and I realize he's in front of me. Looking at me carefully like I might run, which to me is ridiculous.

This may just be a little fun for him, but it seems like I'm all-in, as fucking strange as hell as it is. It doesn't seem to matter to my brain, which is screaming . . .

Mine. Mine. Mine.

I was jealous of that waiter at the restaurant after the race when we were out of town. I've wanted to kiss him ever since that first damn kiss. I can't stop thinking about this man.

So I'm not going to fight it, and when he lifts up on his feet to reach my mouth, I swoop down at the same time and meet him halfway. Our lips collide, and my hands wrap around his lower back, pulling him into me.

We kiss and make our way toward the couch as he lifts my shirt from my body. I'm full of nerves again, but not the same as in the car. I don't know how far he wants to go or even what I'm doing—not really—but it doesn't matter.

Whatever he wants, I want.

He tosses my shirt, and then I remove his, going back to his lips, but he carefully pushes me back using both hands, his

breath coming quickly. “Do you want to stop?” I ask, trying to control my own breathing.

“No,” he says firmly, but then he’s shaking his head, like maybe he’s not sure. “I just . . .”

“What?” I cup his jaw in my hand. “You can tell me anything.”

“Why?” He drops one hand but leaves one to rest over my heart. “I mean . . . it’s not just because you’re horny.”

I flinch because I hate that I said that after our first kiss. I’m a total asshole. “No. I mean . . .” I peruse his body with my eyes, dragging them slowly over his bare chest and stomach before meeting his eyes again. “I am, but that’s not why this has happened. I’m pretty much always horny when I’m near you.”

He smiles sweetly at that, and I’m relieved he’s not annoyed because it’s 100 percent true, but there’s so much more to it also. “But why? I mean, you’ve never been into men before.”

I don’t want him to think I’m using him for an experiment, so I’m cautious in my answer. “I haven’t. I’m still not sure I am. But I know I’m attracted to you, Soren. In every way.”

Another sweet smile. “That’s good to hear. But why aren’t you freaking out? I’m freaking out a little for you, and I’ve known I was gay for a long time.”

I grin at that. Unable to resist, I lean in and press a soft kiss to his full lips. “I don’t know. I’m just not.”

He studies me carefully, but he must be semi-satisfied with my answer because he takes my hand in his and leads me to his bedroom, closing the door behind us before wrapping his arms around my neck and kissing me hard.

Kissing me until we're both damn near breathless, our hard cocks grinding against each other through our pants. He undoes my pants, pushing them down and sinking to his knees in front of me at the same time. He uses his hands to push my briefs down, freeing my cock and letting it slap against my stomach.

I can't slow my breathing as my fingers thread in his hair, and he takes me to the back of his throat. "Oh fuck. Soren."

He sucks on me, using his tongue to tease me, and it feels incredible. But I need my mouth on his again, so I tug him to his feet, our mouths molding together as we both quickly work to undress and make it to the bed.

"Just let me get lube and a condom," he says as I lower him to the mattress. My body freezes, our lower halves pressed together, but I use my arms to keep most of my weight off him.

"You want that?"

He cocks his head to the side. "What? Lube and condoms?"

"Sex," I say, my heart thrumming faster and faster. I know, technically, we've already had a form of sex, but this is new for me.

I mean—not sex. Sex isn't new. I'm not a virgin.

Shit. I'm way too in my head.

"Hey." Soren captures my attention with his hand resting over my heart, but he's not pushing me away, his tone gentle. "This is great too. More than great. We can keep doing this if you don't want to—"

“No,” I cut him off instantly because I do. I really do. I just . . . “I do want that. Sex and lube and condoms.” I say, and a grin falls across his face at my bumbling. “I just, I haven’t . . .”

“Had sex with a man,” he guesses.

“Right. Or . . . anal,” I manage, which makes him smile bigger. “Shut up.”

He laughs at that, but it’s not cruel, his hand still over my heart. “It’s okay. Really. We don’t have to.”

“I want to,” I say, way too quickly. “I mean, if you do, I do.”

“I definitely do,” he says, and I notice his chest is heaving with need as we talk. His cock is hard and leaking, standing up against his abdomen, and God, I want this. So damn bad.

I notice the bead of precum at his tip, and I can’t stop myself from using my finger to swipe it away, bringing it to my lips as my eyes meet his. His pupils are blown wide as he watches me, his lips parted with desire.

“I’m negative,” he blurts out, and I look at him in surprise. “I mean, we probably should have already had this talk this morning. I’m a big advocate for safe sex for everyone. I just . . . we didn’t, and we should. And . . .”

I nearly laugh, and I would cover his mouth with my hand, but it’s the only thing keeping some of my weight from crushing him. “I’m negative too. Was tested a few months ago and last week. I haven’t been with anyone in months. I take safe sex very seriously too.”

He slowly licks his lips, and I’m lost in the motion, totally transfixed. He nods slowly, his eyes on his cum on my finger. “Okay, then.”

I grin, loving his shy smile and the desire in his eyes. I watch him as I drag my tongue over my finger, tasting him. It's different, but in the best way. I find myself closing my eyes, a low moan falling from my throat as I lick my finger clean and swallow.

Instantly wanting more. "God, you taste so good."

"Oh, holy shit," I hear Soren say, and then he's pulling me to him, his lips meeting mine as we kiss frantically. I want to taste him straight from the source this time, but he's making his way to the bedside table and grabbing lube and a condom before I can say it.

I nearly laugh at him trying to get the lube open, his fingers shaking—but I don't think it's nerves. I think he wants this that bad, and holy shit, it's hot as hell.

I take the lube from him and pin his lithe body beneath me again before I settle on my knees between his parted thighs. "Tell me what to do."

His fingers graze my abs as he reaches up, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his pupils blown. "Lube up your fingers and add one, then two. I don't need a lot of prep, but it's been a while," he adds shyly, biting on his bottom lip.

And as much as I hate thinking about anyone laying their hands on him, I think he's cute as hell like this. "Okay," I say, nerves starting to catch up to me. I think I'm a fairly decent lover—haven't had any complaints yet—but with Soren, I don't want to be decent.

I want to be the best.

The feral need to be the best is a hundred times more than it's ever been out on the track, and that's saying something.

“Hey.” I realize I haven’t moved and look at Soren, who’s watching me closely. “It’s okay. I’ll love whatever you do to me. I’m so damn close already, Royal.” His hand is still on my stomach, but he’s stopped moving it. “I just want you inside me.”

My cock jerks furiously at his admission, and I nearly drop the damn bottle of lube as I finally open the cap and squirt some on my fingers. “Oh, shit. Condom.”

Again, he looks slightly nervous, and I wonder why. He doesn’t make me wait for too long before he says, “If we’re both negative . . .”

My eyes widen slightly as my brain catches up. “Oh . . .”

“I mean . . .” He seems a little shaken. “We can. We totally can. It’s just that, well, we don’t necessarily need to. Unless we’re sleeping with other people. Which I’m not at all. I mean, you might be, and that’s okay.”

I’m grinning like a damn fool, looking down at him, stumbling over words and looking way too cute.

“What?” he asks exasperatedly.

“Hey, Soren?” I lean down, moving my mouth close to his but not pressing my lips against his yet.

“Yeah?” I feel his breath on my lips.

“Fuck the condoms.” I feel him smile, just as I press my lips against his and kiss him hard. He falls easily into the kiss, his tongue sweeping inside and massaging mine, making my already needy cock weep with anticipation. I pull back enough to look into his eyes. “I’m not sleeping with anyone else, and I don’t plan to.”

I should probably add “for now” or “for a while” or something, but I can’t make myself say it. I don’t want to think about a time with anyone else. I just want this.

He nods, his nose brushing mine as he kisses me again and threads his fingers through my hair. I don’t want to move my mouth from his, so I don’t. I find my way between our bodies as he lifts and parts his legs, allowing my lubed fingers to find his hole. I kiss him as I circle it slowly, marveling at the feel of him.

When I add more pressure and slip inside his tight heat, I groan, and he gasps softly, “Yes.”

“Oh fuck, you feel so damn good.”

“It’ll get even better,” he says as he kisses me hard, and I slip inside some more. I groan again, and his hands move to my back, sliding over my skin and lighting me on fire. “More. Please more.”

I oblige, pulling my finger out before adding another, reveling in the tight heat surrounding my fingers. I might not make it inside him at this point, but I’ll have no regrets.

“Please,” he pleads with me. “I need you. Now.”

“Fuck,” I groan. “I think you need more.”

“Nope,” he says, as his hands grip my forearms, and I scissor my fingers inside him, stretching him a bit more. “I need you.”

I need that too.

I stop arguing with him and remove my fingers, but I curse when his lubed—I guess I missed that part—hand circles my aching cock and strokes me. “Oh fuck, Soren,” I gasp, and I swear he’s smiling.

But then he's guiding me to his prepared hole, and I'm pushing inside him, neither of us smiling anymore. We're both too fucking blissed-out as I push into him, stretching his body around mine.

"Oh, God. Yes." He pulls his thighs back more, and I take over holding them as his hands move to my bare ass, and he's pushing me inside as I thrust forward, surrounded by the most intensely squeezing heat until I bottom out.

I have to still my entire body for a moment, afraid I'll come if I move even a small fraction. But Soren has other ideas, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass as he somehow manages to pull back until only the tip of my cock is inside him. Then he thrusts forward, fucking himself on my dick.

"Oh shit. Yes. Yes. Yes," I chant as I hold onto his thighs, no doubt bruising his flesh and moving with him.

It's on after that, neither of us holding back. It's chaotic and frantic and so damn perfect.

I can see his cock is flushed a deep purple at the tip, leaking like crazy, and standing hard and tall against his stomach as I fuck into him over and over again.

He removes one hand from my ass and strokes himself, but after a couple of long, slow strokes, I can't take it. I knock his hand away and grab his hot shaft in my hand, jerking him off slowly, using his precum and the lube still on my hand.

He tosses his head back, the veins in his neck popping. "Yes. Oh God, yes. I'm so close." His entire body pulls up tight as I slam into him over and over, adjusting my angle and making him cry out. "There. Right fucking there," I hear him

say, and I do it repeatedly, one hand holding his leg and the other on his gorgeous cock.

When his cock starts spilling cum over my hand and onto his belly, I swear I nearly black out from the sheer pleasure of hearing him cry out in ecstasy at the same time. I feel my balls drawing up tight against my body, heat rushing down my spine, just as my release hits me.

My cum fills him to the brim as I keep pushing into him, riding the waves of pleasure before I nearly collapse on top of him.

I find his sweet mouth and kiss him. Wanting to tell him so many damn things but unable to form actual words.

That was beyond perfect.

Better than any race.

Better than any damn thing.

And I'm totally fucked because I still don't know what this is to him. But to me, it was everything.

CHAPTER 19

SOREN

Holy fucking shit. I think he ruined me for all other guys. And I should be more upset about that. I mean . . . I don't know what we're doing. We haven't talked about it, and if I'm being honest, I'm a little afraid to.

We had sex without a condom. I've never done that. And he admitted he's not seeing anyone else—although, I swear I heard an unspoken *at the moment* in there somewhere.

But I trust him.

I have no idea how that even happened, but I know it's true. I believe, deep down, he'd never put me in any danger.

After we finished, we lay there for I don't even know how long, his weight on top of mine. And I think I'd have stayed there for even longer—sticky mess between us and all—but he finally suggested we take a shower, and I agreed.

After a shower of washing each other, kissing, rutting together until we were both coming all over each other again, and then rinsing off, we finally made it back to my bed where we collapsed naked under the covers.

But now, so many questions swirl around in my head. So many I want to ask but so many I probably shouldn't. I don't

want to rush things or freak him out. I don't want him to run away from me.

So I'm stone still and completely silent as I lie next to him on my back, staring up at my ceiling. His arm wraps around my waist, and he cuddles into my side, nuzzling into my neck. It feels so damn good, I could cry.

I don't remember the last time I cuddled like this.

Okay, yeah, I do. But it brings back too many bad memories. For the moment, God, this feels so damn good. And so different from that. A hundred times more powerful. What does that say about my time with the man I thought I was going to spend my entire life with?

Because even during our best times, it didn't feel like this.

David had his sweet moments, and he actually has the good-guy persona down pat, but he didn't hold me this way. It's almost indescribable how good this feels, and I don't want it to end.

I'm flat-out terrified it might.

"Hey," I hear Royal's quiet rasp near my ear, but I can't make myself speak or even move. "Naked rule applies now. Ask me whatever it is you're thinking about."

Damn him. How can he read me that well? I'm usually very good at being unreadable. I squeeze my eyes tight and shake my head. I don't want to mess this up.

"Soren." I hear a hint of fear in his voice. "What's wrong?"

Oh, fuck it. I open my eyes and turn my head so I can see him. "Are we a thing? I really want us to be a thing. I mean . . ." My heart is pounding so damn hard, but I keep going, "I know you'll have to keep it a secret." I feel like

retching, but I manage to keep it at bay. “And I understand that. Especially since it’s so new.” Royal shifts so his head is propped up on his hand, his elbow bent and braced on the bed. But he doesn’t say anything. He lets me go on with my mindless babble.

God, I wish he’d stop me.

But he doesn’t.

I roll to my side to look directly at him. “And I know this is all new to you. And hell, it’s probably just a hookup. A little bit of fun. But damn it, Royal.” He raises an eyebrow but doesn’t speak. I huff, annoyed. “Say something. Say anything. Tell me I’m crazy and it was just fucking, and I need to get a goddamn grip.”

“You finished?”

I glare at him, annoyed and embarrassed. “Yes.”

He drops his hand, then pulls my body closer, forcing my head to rest on his shoulder. “I’ve never felt like this before in my entire life. I don’t know if it’s because my life has been shit until now and I haven’t let anyone get close to me or if it’s simply just you. But no, this isn’t a casual thing for me.”

I force myself to take a breath because it feels like my chest might explode at any moment. And despite the words spewing from my mouth a moment ago, I can’t seem to think of one thing to say.

“And I don’t want to hide you.”

My gut clenches tight at the thought. “But?” I force myself to ask.

“But nothing.”

I look up at his face, still resting on his arm. “Your career.”

“I don’t give a fuck about what any of my fans think about who I’m with.”

I frown at that because obviously that’s true, but I’m supposed to be helping him fix his career, and let’s face it—despite making some positive strides recently—racing is far from being accepting.

“There’ll be backlash. Or they’ll say you’re fucking me to get me to say good things about you.”

He chuckles and squeezes me tighter. “Ah, so you finally figured out my master plan.”

I roll my eyes, knowing he’s kidding, but I’m not. Not really. I’ve been here before. David had so many excuses about why we needed to hide. “I’m serious. They’ll all have theories.”

“I don’t care about their theories,” he says, burying his face in my hair and then kissing my temple.

The move is so sweet, a single tear escapes my eye and slides down my cheek. I curse myself for being so sensitive, but if he notices, he doesn’t say anything. “Soren, I’ll admit this is happening really damn fast, and I never saw this coming —”

“Exactly.” I sit up so fast, I nearly get dizzy but recover quickly. “It’s so fast. We went from hating each other to fucking to . . .”—I gesture wildly with my hand—“to what? I don’t know.”

He sits up much slower than I did, then places a hand on my shoulder, letting it slide down my arm to my hand before he takes it in his, our fingers locking. “I never saw it coming, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to fight it or deny that it’s

very damn real, no matter how fast it happened. I care about you. Deeply. And this isn't casual for me."

"But . . ." I stare at him and see how serious he is.

"But what?"

"But you're a fuckboy."

"Ouch." He covers his heart with his free hand and feigns hurt. I shove him playfully, and he laughs. "Don't slut-shame."

"I'm not," I say, horrified because I would never, but then he winks at me with a smirk, and I shove him again.

He's still laughing when he squeezes my hand tightly and looks in my eyes. "I want to date. I want us to be exclusive, and I don't want to hide you. I watched Axel and Sebastian play that game for far too damn long, and it was ugly."

I lick my lips nervously, my entire mouth dry. "I . . ."—am again speechless. "Royal, we're working on your career."

"Look, if they don't like me because I'm with a man, then they're just plain fucking stupid, and I don't give a fuck about them. I don't like them either." He huffs indignantly, and it makes me smile.

He always makes me smile.

"But you love racing."

He nods, not arguing. "I do. But it has to love me too. I'm exhausted, trying to be what they all want me to be. I just want to race."

"Maybe we can keep it a secret for a little while. Not because you're not ready to tell the world you're with a man, but because we're not ready to tell the world we're together. We don't really know what this is, Royal." He starts to argue,

but I place my hand over his mouth to stop him and lean into his strong body. “I know you’re all-in. I’m starting to learn when you like something, you just lean into it, but it’s okay to take some time.”

And while it makes me nervous, I know it’s the right move.

With David, it was always him who hid us. He had his reasons, and I didn’t want to push him out of the closet. But after years of hiding, part of my soul was lost forever to the experience.

Every time he’d go to an event alone—or worse, with a female date—I’d have to watch from afar or from my phone through pictures. Every time I had dinner alone because he didn’t want to be seen with me out in public, even if we could have presented it as friends and nothing more. Every single time I woke up alone in a hotel room after he snuck out in the middle of the night.

It all haunts me.

But this feels different.

“How much time?” he asks, which only proves my point. He doesn’t want to hide me away.

“I don’t know.” I lean in and kiss him softly, letting one hand rest over his beating heart. “Not long.” My voice is shaky. “I can’t handle it for very long.”

“I’ll shout it from the rooftops right fucking now, if you’ll let me,” he says, and when I pull back and look into his eyes, I see how completely serious he is about that.

“Just a little while.” I need to find a way to not fall so damn fast for him.

“Okay.” He pulls me into him and kisses my temple. “Just a little while because as far as I’m concerned, you’re mine for as long as you’ll have me, and I really want everyone to know that. Especially dumb waiters with their stupid dumb faces.”

That has me cackling, and I tackle him onto the bed and shower him with kisses because jealous Royal is just too damn cute.

And I know, without a doubt, falling for him any slower is completely and totally impossible.

Because I’ve already fallen.

CHAPTER 20

ROYAL

“But seriously, Mickey needs a friend.” I listen to Cooper do his best to talk Soren into adopting an adorable orange kitten, then smile a mile wide at my boyfriend while he tries to come up with excuses about why he can’t.

And for the record, that’s what Soren is. My boyfriend.

Even though it’s been two weeks since we decided we were dating and exclusive, and he won’t let me tell anyone.

And okay. I get it. I do.

At least, I want to get it, but God, it’s killing me. I’ve never been this damn happy in my life. Not ever.

And I can’t tell anyone about it.

I mean, I know if I told Soren how much I wanted to tell everyone, he’d probably let me. But he’s worried about my career. Says I need to get back on solid footing before we safely announce we’re a couple.

And to his credit, he’s been trying his best to do that.

He’s posted several times about me, including a very short post with my blessing about growing up in foster care and how important it is. How badly they need help. Honestly, he did a shit ton of research on it because most of the information in

the article wasn't about me and was about things I had no clue about.

And that post went over very well. Jenny said there even seemed to be sympathy for me. Like I give a damn, but still. I guess that's a positive thing.

Not to mention, today we're back at the animal shelter—not for a planned event but just to help out, and Soren thinks that'll go over very well. Especially since, and I quote my boyfriend, “Cooper is so damn cute.”

Pain in my ass. I swear. He knew exactly what he was doing, and don't worry, he paid for it when I bent him over the back of his couch and fucked his brains out before coming here. Leaving my cum inside him before walking out the door, then getting in my car.

That's the only thing that gives me a little peace as I watch him with the very good-looking volunteer. But Soren's eyes keep landing on me.

And I guess . . . yeah, that gives me even more comfort.

Damn him. He really has me twisted up.

Soren is giving me his *help me* eyes, but I mean, honestly, Cooper pretty much has me sold, so there'll be no help from me. I walk over to them and take the adorable little kitten, smiling when she purrs and cuddles up against me. “So what are you going to name her? Or does she already have a name?” I ask Soren, who gives me the death glare and then sighs. Defeated.

“No name yet,” Cooper says cheerfully. “But she'll love any name you give her. She's super sweet. Look at those eyes.” He scratches the kitten's ears, and I'm laughing so hard I disturb the little kitten in my arms.

Soren takes her from me, still giving me the death glare. “Molly,” he says firmly, cuddling his new kitten.

I laugh some more, but Cooper’s eyes light up. “Oh, I love that name! Perfect. Mickey and Molly! I love it. I’m totally getting them embroidered collars for Christmas.”

I laugh again because I’m sure he will. Cooper volunteers here and works nights at a local bar while going to college. How he has any time left to even shop for Christmas presents is beyond me, but I’m not doubting the guy.

Soren finishes the paperwork before taking a pic with Cooper, me, and Molly and posting it with the shelter’s information. He blamed me for talking him into adopting the new pet, and judging by the comments, they’re okay with this.

Cooper was eyeing us curiously most of the time we were at the shelter, but if he thought anything was going on between us, he didn’t say it. For that, I’m grateful because if he had asked if we were together, there’s no way in hell I’d have been able to keep my mouth shut.

I want everyone to know I’m with Soren. It’s like this living thing inside me—the need to claim him as mine for the world to see. But I’m trying my best to give him the time he asked for.

We get back to his place, and we’re immediately greeted by Annie and Oscar, who are yipping away at us. Yes, we all stayed here last night, and honestly, we have almost every night since that first one. The only exception was when Soren had to go out of town for two long days to cover a college football game.

He asked if I wanted to go with him, but I said someone had to watch the animals, and since I’m in the off-season, I

didn't want to put it on Cooper. But man, did I want to go with him.

I've never been this clingy in my life. Hell, I fought most of my life to never depend on anyone again, and here I am—needing another person more than I need my next breath.

Likely very dangerous for me, but I can't seem to bring myself to care enough.

Mickey doesn't take to her new sister very quickly, hissing and slapping at her for a good hour before the new kitten gets tired of it and curls up on Soren's lap as we sit on the couch together in the living room.

Annie and Oscar have also calmed down and finally stopped barking at the new kitten. They're curled up by Soren's fireplace in this comfy little setup here. It's cold as shit outside, so we have the fire going, and I can't help but think about how domestic this whole scene is.

About how much I dreamed about this when I was that sick kid stuck in the hospital for so long. Thinking about a nice warm home, surrounded by animals with someone who loved me. Sure, maybe back then, I thought it would be a woman—but now, it's all Soren.

This is what I desperately want.

Speaking of the man, he leans his head on my shoulder as he scrolls through his Instagram comments and smiles. "See? You're growing on them."

He shows me a couple of comments about how cute Molly is and how they're glad he listened to me. I see one that says *WELL, AT LEAST HE'S AN ANIMAL LOVER!* which makes me laugh.

"Maybe a little bit."

“You are. They’re starting to see the real guy.” He puts his phone down and turns to look up at me while still resting his head on my shoulder. “The child who had to live in foster care, and the man who loves animals and amusement parks.”

I look down into his eyes. “So does that mean I can tell them we’re dating?”

His mood seems to sour, and his lips turn into a frown. I miss the smile instantly. “You know I’m not ashamed of you, right?”

“What?” I ask as I shift a little to get a better look at him.

He pulls away from me but turns his body into mine, so he’s looking right at me. “I’m not wanting to hide you away. I’d never do that to you.”

Something about his expression and the sadness I hear in his voice as he speaks tells me there’s so much more to it. “I know . . .” But I’m not sure I really do. At least, I don’t really understand it.

He swallows hard, his hand brushing over my cheek sweetly. “I’ve done the secret relationship thing before.”

My guess is it didn’t go well. I don’t want to push him into talking about something painful, but I want to know everything about him too. I crave the information because if there’s anyway I can take away his agony—even a little bit—I will. “Do we need to be naked to talk about this?” I try to lighten the mood, but honestly, I just feel sick.

I don’t want him to hurt. Not now. Not in the past. Not ever.

He gives a soft chuckle but then shakes his head. “No. It’s not my secret. I won’t use names.” I’m sure my gaze darkens a little because I damn sure want names. I’m kind of hoping it’s

a racer, so if I did have a name, the fucker would be easy to get to. But then again, I don't want Soren pissed at me.

Good lord. I'm already totally whipped, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to avoid fights and rubbin' out on the track from now on if I can because I don't want my man mad.

I want to roll my eyes at my damn self, but I end up smiling instead.

"What?" Soren asks, looking slightly amused but also worried. He probably should be. I'm a bit unhinged at the moment.

"Tell me," I nearly whisper.

"I was an idiot." I find that hard to believe, but his eyes tell me not to argue, so I'm quiet. "I fell for a professional football player. One who was in the process of getting a divorce from his wife."

I swallow hard, trying to rid the nasty taste in my mouth.

"They weren't together anymore. I promise, I wasn't a home wrecker."

"Soren," I say with an amused half laugh as I take his hand in mine and pull it to my mouth to kiss his knuckles. "I know that. You don't have to say it. You're not capable of hurting anyone on purpose."

"But he was straight. At least . . . that was his image."

I nod in understanding. "So he wasn't?"

He shakes his head sadly. "He tried." He sighs. "He didn't want to be gay, and it was so damn sad. He thought he had to hide who he was, so he got married to a woman. He tried to be what he thought they all wanted."

“That is sad,” I agree, but I still don’t like this fucker. Whether I feel sorry for his situation or not, he clearly hurt Soren.

Soren continues, “At first, I thought it was okay to hide our relationship. He was in the middle of a nasty divorce, and I’d never force anyone to come out publicly before they were ready.”

“How long did it go on?” I force myself to ask, even though I feel sick to my stomach.

“Three years.” My eyes bug out of my head at his admission, and he snuggles up to me, still holding my hand. “Yeah. The divorce was finalized six months into our relationship, but he didn’t want to come out, which was his right. It was. I didn’t want to force him into anything.”

I give his hand a little squeeze, hoping to offer comfort. “I know.”

I feel him smiling, even though he’s tucked into my side with my other arm wrapped around him. His head is down, not looking at me. “But after a while, it just got too lonely. I had to watch him bring fake date after fake date to events. And when it got really bad, I found out he’d gone so far as to kiss them to make it convincing.”

“He cheated on you?” My entire body is stiff with rage.

“He claims he needed to. That there were people around, and he needed to make it look real. But it hurt. It hurt so damn bad.”

“Of course it did, baby,” I say, holding him closer to me and kissing his temple. “I’m so sorry. I’d never do that to you.”

Again, I can feel him smiling. “I know you wouldn’t. You don’t seem to care what anyone thinks.”

“I really don’t,” I agree with a smile of my own and kiss his temple again.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. I told him I couldn’t and that we had to break up. He accused me of using him. Said I wanted to use him for the story of a professional football player coming out. He was so mad at me. He said horrible things.”

I pull him up so I’m holding onto his face with both hands and kiss him softly because my heart can’t seem to take it. I hear the pain in his words, and I try my best to ease it with my lips. He kisses me back without any hesitation, his fingers threading through my hair and holding me there.

But we keep the kiss fairly tame because he needs to finish his story. *I* need him to finish his story. I pull back but only slightly and rest my forehead against his. “He was wrong.”

He smiles sadly. “I didn’t want a story. I wanted him.”

“I know, baby,” I say, the endearment totally natural to me as I hold onto his face and press a quick kiss to his lips. “He didn’t want to lose you, but he didn’t want to fight to keep you either.”

He shakes his head sadly. “I couldn’t live like that anymore. I hated it. I didn’t want to be a secret. I was an out and proud gay man. I wanted to live my life that way.”

“You deserved to.”

“I thought he’d understand. I thought he’d care and be sad that we had to end it, but I thought we could be friends.” I feel his shoulders slump. “But he was hateful.”

“I’m sorry, Soren.”

He shakes his head, his forehead rubbing against mine, but he doesn’t pull away. “I thought he loved me.”

I shake my head, too, hating the heartbreak in his voice. “I do.”

He looks shocked, his eyes wide as he pulls back a little to look into my eyes. “Royal . . .”

“I do,” I say it again firmly. “I really do, Soren, and I don’t care if it’s fast. I do everything fast. I’m a racer, for Christ’s sake.” That gets a small smile, but his eyes also well up with tears. Happy ones, I hope. “I love you.”

A tear falls, and he wipes it away, still staring at me. “I love you too.”

“I don’t want to hide it. No part of me does.”

“I don’t either,” he says sadly, but he’s holding back. “But this isn’t the same as that. There were so many times I thought he was hiding because he was ashamed of me. Maybe I wasn’t good enough. Maybe he didn’t really love me, but with you,”—he wipes another tear—“I don’t feel that way.”

“You’re more than enough,” I say as I lean in and kiss him because I can’t resist. “He’s an idiot.”

That pulls a laugh from him, and I smile into another kiss, one that quickly becomes heated. He’s straddling my lap before I know it. His hands move to my hair as we kiss, not holding anything back.

My cock is hard and aching as he rocks against me on my lap. But then, one of the dogs decides to make their presence known with a couple of yips, and Annie takes off after Molly,

who's scared to death and jumps up on a shelf in the living room, hissing.

Mickey isn't pleased either and jumps onto a nearby table, hissing at everything.

I start to laugh, and so does Soren as he shakes his head. "Cooper," he says exasperatedly. "Too many animals."

I shake my head into a kiss before he climbs off my lap and holds his hand out for me. I stand up, and we head toward his room. "Never too many animals. We just have to go behind closed doors to have some fun."

"Or kick the dogs outside. I don't think the cats would bother us."

I laugh, shutting the door as his arms wrap around my neck, and he kisses me. We waste no time getting naked and finding our way over to the bed. But even with the naked rule, neither of us are talking.

It's all grunts and moans as he climbs onto all fours, and I spread his ass cheeks with my hands, staring at his pretty pink hole. It's just waiting for me. I press my finger inside him, loving the feel of lube and cum from our frantic fucking earlier today. "Fuck, you're still wet for me."

"Oh, God. Don't make me wait." He arches his back, thrusting his ass back at me.

"You want me?"

"I do," he says instantly, but then looks over his shoulder to where I'm kneeling behind him, a finger still dipped inside his tight hole. "But right now, it's mostly your dick I'm craving."

I smack his ass playfully with my other hand, and he laughs. “Just using me for my epic dick.”

“Yup. You caught me.” He starts to rock back on my finger. I grab the lube quickly, removing one finger and adding some to it as well as my cock before pushing two fingers into him to fuck himself on. “That’s it,” he moans softly, his body squeezing my fingers. “Just like that.”

God, he really does love this. I love how needy he is for it. I can’t take it anymore and remove my fingers. He starts to complain, but barely gets out a sound before I’m sliding into his tight heat in one, easy stroke. My balls are against his ass as I fully seat myself inside him.

How is it this damn good every single time?

“Yes. Oh fuck. Yes,” he cries out as I pull back and slam back into him over and over. One of his hands disappears, and I watch as he jerks himself off ruthlessly. Desperately.

His ass squeezes around my cock as I move inside him, and I can’t think after that. I hold onto his hips and slam into him as he strokes himself. And when he goes over, crying out my name, his entire body stiffens, sending me hurdling toward my release. It only takes two more strokes inside him before I’m filling him with more cum.

When we’re finished and totally wrung out, he collapses into what I’m assuming is a very wet spot on the bed, but neither of us can be bothered to care as I fall on top of him and cover his body with my own.

I love the feel of him under me.

I love . . .

Him.

CHAPTER 21

SOREN

Royal seems off. I don't know why. Everything has been completely fine—more than fine—it's been absolute bliss since the night he told me he loved me and I was able to say it back.

We haven't gone public with our relationship, but that's because I want it to be the right time. I want it to be as positive as it can possibly be. I'd thought about tonight because we're attending a children's hospital charity, along with several other racers and celebrities, but I don't know . . .

Royal seems completely tense. Almost angry—but not quite. I can't figure out what's going on with him. He didn't seem to want to talk about it on the way over here.

He looks good—but there was no doubt he would. He's dressed in a traditional black tux, his dark-blond hair perfectly styled, and he carries himself with the strong confidence everyone is used to seeing in him. I guess if you didn't know him well, you wouldn't see what I do.

Fear.

That's it.

He's not angry or nervous. It's fear on his face as we walk into the grand ballroom of the hotel.

Why on earth would he be afraid?

“Royal?” I call, and he turns to look at me just as Jenny approaches us. She, of course, also looks phenomenal in a sleek black dress and heels. Her hair is perfectly done, as if she’s had it styled for the event.

She’s smiling as she stops before us, which is good. “You both look handsome.”

Royal’s jaw remains tense as he forces a smile. “You look beautiful yourself, Jenny.”

Her eyes move to me. “I didn’t see a post yet.” There’s worry there, and I know this is a big opportunity. A charity for sick kids. I mean, come on. How could they hate him for participating in this?

But it didn’t feel right. I thought about taking the picture, then making a post, but something holds me back.

And that something is Royal. No matter how silent he’s being on the subject and us being fully clothed. Something about this night seems sacred.

“I will,” I assure her, but that might very well be a lie. “Just wanted to get the feel of it first.”

She nods in approval. “I’ll let you work your magic then.” She winks at me and seems to be in a really good mood. I can’t say it’s not totally surprising. Although my cousin, Waylon, assured me Jenny is one of the good ones, I still haven’t seen a thoroughly happy side of her yet.

We’re approached quickly by Sebastian and Axel, who are both well-dressed for the event, as well as Cash and Leslie. They’re all buzzing with excitement about the night.

Cash seems pleased by the turnout, and he should be because this place is packed full of rich people ready to write a check. There are posters with pictures of children who've received help from this hospital—all success stories.

But it's done tactfully, and it gives me hope for a future with no sick kids. Where they all get to leave the hospital and go home to a life with grateful parents.

Still, I know that's not always the case.

I can't keep my eyes off Royal as he mingles with fellow racers, some rock stars, and other professional athletes. But I also can't rid myself of the feeling that something is off.

I'm ready to get him to leave for the evening when he surprises me by taking my hand and pulling me out of the ballroom but not out of the hotel. He releases my hand quickly, but it could still be risky.

Anyone could have seen the move.

He doesn't seem to care as he starts toward the elevator. I'm sure he wants me to follow him, so I do. I keep up his quick pace, and it's not until the elevators close with only us inside that he wraps his arms around me and kisses my lips hard.

I want to keep kissing him. I do. But again, it feels . . . not wrong . . . but off. Something isn't right.

“Wait.” I push against his chest gently and pull back to look into his eyes. “What's going on?”

“Nothing,” he says too quickly, and when the elevator doors open, he grabs my hand again and pulls me toward a room. He has a key card I now see, and before I know it, we're inside a suite, and his lips are back on mine.

He doesn't want to talk. Everything inside me screams that we should, but damn it, I can't think with his lips on mine, his tongue seeking entrance into my mouth.

"Royal," I gasp as we come up for air, but he's going for the button on my pants, undoing them quickly. *Oh, God. His hands.* I love his strong, capable hands. He's pushing my pants down and starts to lower to his knees, but I finally gain my wits and grab his arms, stopping him. "Royal," I say firmly this time.

He looks at me, and for what feels like the first time all night, he's truly looking at me. Not through me. He's here with me in this moment.

"What's going on?"

He swallows hard, but gives a firm shake of his head. "Nothing."

"Please don't lie to me," I say, my voice coming out shaky and not nearly as strong as I want it to be. But fear courses through me. Worry like I've never felt before. I need him to talk to me.

His gaze softens, and he brings one hand to my cheek. "I can't . . ." He shakes his head with a huff. "I don't want to be here."

"At the hotel?" I ask dumbly.

He nods. "The event. This fucking event. Every goddamn year. I don't want to see it. I don't want to be part of it, and I know that makes me an asshole. I know it does. But I . . ."

"Hey," I say as I wrap my arms around him and hug him tight. "It's okay. It doesn't. I . . ."—don't really know how to finish that sentence either, but I try. "We should go. We can go," I say with a little more certainty.

He pulls back out of my embrace enough to look into my eyes. “I have an obligation to be here. I have to go back down there, and God, I don’t know how, Soren. I thought maybe . . .”—he looks down between us, then back up at my face—“maybe a little escape would help.”

He seems to be doubting his plan now, and while I don’t understand what has him so afraid of being downstairs, I don’t think this will help. “We should go. You don’t owe anyone anything.”

He laughs humorlessly at that and shakes his head. “I owe so many people what feels like my entire life. Everything. Racing used to be fun.”

“Used to be?” I ask carefully.

He looks like he isn’t going to go any further into that thought, but then he seems to change his mind. “I owe the fans.”

I think that over carefully, trying to piece it all together. He owes everyone everything, and now he owes his fans. *What?* “What do you owe them?”

“I have to behave. And be what they want me to be. I need to volunteer and go to charities and get them to like me.”

My gut aches as I think about the whole reason we met.

To make him likable.

“Royal . . .” I start to say, but he covers my mouth with his hand.

“I’m fine. I really am. This event fucks with my head every damn year, but I get over it. It’s fine.”

I shake my head. “But it’s not right. You don’t have to be fake in order to get people to love you.” I lean into him a little,

breathing in his heavenly smelling expensive cologne. “I love you.”

He kisses the top of my head and wraps his big arms around me, holding me close. “That’s really all I care about. I love you too. I’ll be okay.”

I shake my head because he’s his own man and can make his own decisions, but I’m not letting him do this. “No.”

He cocks his head to the side as he holds onto my shoulders and pulls my body slightly away from his. “What?”

“No,” I say again easily. “We aren’t going back to that event. I’ll make something up for Jenny, if need be. But you weren’t yourself all day because of this. And you don’t have to tell me why, Royal. Not now or ever, if you don’t want to.” God, I hope he wants to someday, but I don’t push it. “But we aren’t going back to that event. We’re going home—to mine or yours, I don’t really care—and we’re going to get naked because we want to. Not to escape. Not to hide away. But because we can’t keep our hands off each other and we want to.”

Royal smiles, his eyes only on me. “I like you bossy.”

I grin now, leaning into kiss him hard but quickly before I pull back. “Good. Now let’s go.”

He doesn’t argue with me this time. Just leads me out of the hotel to his car before driving us to my simple little home.

And now, when we’re away from the event and it’s just us . . .

That’s when everything feels right again.

CHAPTER 22

ROYAL

Who the hell freaks out at a children's hospital charity event?

Me, apparently.

But who also has an amazing, understanding boyfriend who got him the hell out of there?

Also me.

I really thought I could do it this year without any problems. I put on the tux and my bowtie. Styled my hair. But I was numb the entire time, bombarded with memory after memory.

I wanted to have fun. Though I don't really remember the conversations I had with Jenny and Axel and Sebastian. I barely remember talking to Maverick or Cash and Leslie when they came over. I was in a daze most of the night.

I couldn't take it anymore, and that's when I got the brilliant idea to seduce my way-too-hot boyfriend, hoping he could offer me a quick escape from my pathetic reality. But of course, Soren is far too smart for that. He saw right through me.

And I'm grateful.

He did what I didn't have the guts to do and got us out of there. I feel like an idiot for needing to leave, but I can't deny

the wave of relief I feel when we walk into his house.

We're greeted by Annie and Oscar right away. The kittens are probably hiding somewhere and not too happy about being left alone with the dogs, even for the short time we were away.

I strip out of my tuxedo jacket and hang it on a kitchen chair, then let the dogs out into the backyard. It's cold as hell, but thankfully, there's no snow on the ground yet, so they go out to do their business without complaint.

I watch Soren also strip out of his jacket and untie his bowtie. God, he looks damn good tonight. He always looks good, and he's usually in a suit, but Soren in a tux is a whole new level of hot.

I can't believe I didn't get to enjoy it more. "What are you thinking about?" he asks me quietly.

That question is easy. "How hot you look," I answer him and am met with an exasperated laugh. "I mean it." I open the back door when I see Oscar and Annie want back in. They run inside excitedly while I close and lock the door before going to Soren, placing my hands on his hips. "You're so fucking hot."

I swear I see him blush, but I don't let him argue. I press my lips against his as I kiss him softly and try to tell him that way also. Because he's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks softly, his fingers still in my hair after our kiss. I love that he does that. His nose rests against mine as we stay in each other's arms but don't move.

"Well . . ." I drag one hand down the front of his dress shirt. "I do, but . . ." He's watching me intently, his breathing increasing as he does. "I think I'll need the naked rule to apply."

His expression gives nothing away. No teasing or worry. He's just observing because that's what he's particularly good at. "You know I won't tell a soul, even if we're fully clothed, right?"

I nod and then slowly begin to unbutton his shirt, starting at the top. "I do know that. I trust you 100 percent with everything I have, but the thing is, Soren . . ."—I get to the last button and undo it—"I wasn't lying when I said you're hot."

He laughs, but it's quick, and there's a nervous lilt to it. "I think we need to talk." His hands go to mine when I finish with the last button and open his shirt, putting his gorgeous, nearly hairless chest on display for me, but I still at his touch. "And your hands on me makes it too difficult."

I grin because that I can't deny. "Soren, when I had you in that hotel, I was kind of out of it. I did want an escape, but I knew who I was with, and I knew I wanted you." I cup his jaw with one of my hands. "I want what you said. Not trying to escape. I just want to be with you here in your nice, comfortable home." I lean in and press a kiss against his lips and feel him smiling against my mouth. "And I want to talk. But after."

He freezes for a moment, and I know he's thinking it over. Not out of concern for himself but for me. And damn him because I just lost another part of my heart to him. No one has ever worried about me before.

"Listen . . . I promise you. I'm okay." He swallows hard, his breathing picking up more. "Well, I'm actually not."

"You're not?" he asks instantly.

I smile but shake my head. "No." I drag my hand over his warm, soft skin, feeling the taut muscle of his stomach. "I

really, really wanted to taste this beautiful dick you have, but you stopped me.”

He shoves me away, but it's playful, and he laughs. “Royal.”

I take his hand. “Come on. I promise we'll talk later. I can't focus on anything but getting you naked.” I stop walking for a minute, his hand still in mine. He stops too, watching me as I add, “And not to talk.”

His smile overtakes his face, lighting up his eyes, and he nods. “Okay. Fun first. Talking right after.”

I agree because that's one hell of a deal.

We head into his bedroom and close the door, knowing the animals are likely settled for a while. I quickly push his shirt off his shoulders, loving every inch of skin that's bared to me. I kiss his shoulders and down his pecs. Then over his nipples, taking a moment to tease each one.

He's panting and trying to unbutton my shirt as I make my way over his torso. But he's getting frustrated, so I stand up straight and help him take off my shirt. “Thank fuck,” he says, totally serious.

I can't help but laugh as he leans in and kisses me hungrily. But I'm not laughing now as his fingers thread through my hair and our skin meets as we press together. I feel his hard cock through his pants, my own answering erection grinding against it as we kiss and paw at each other.

Frantic for it.

He undoes my pants at the same time I do the same to his. He shoves his pants down at the same time he rids me of mine. We kick them off and head to the bed in just our underwear.

He falls to his back, pulling my body on top of his, our kisses slowing. There's still a need, but it's less frantic. I start to make my way down his body, kissing and licking as I go, relishing in every second his hard body is beneath mine.

Everything about Soren is so damn perfect. When I reach the hem of his briefs, I don't waste any more time, dragging them down his thighs and legs until he kicks them away.

His dick stands at attention, ready for me, and again, I just go right for it because I wasn't kidding. I'd been dreaming about tasting him again, and while I might not know exactly what I'm doing, I know how to bring him pleasure. I can read him by now. When his fingers thread through my hair and he seems to involuntarily thrust upward, I move to the head of his dick, swiping over it with my tongue.

The sound he makes is downright feral—unleashed and beautiful. I do it again and again, swirling my tongue around the head of his cock and collecting the dripping precum on my tongue. “Royal,” he pants. “I need you. I want you inside me.”

I'll never tire of this side of Soren. This desperately needy side where his entire body is drawn up tight and he's pleading with me. I do, however, ignore his pleas because I'm all-in with him, and this is something I need.

I take the head of his cock in my mouth and suck, making him curse loudly and grip my hair even tighter.

He doesn't force more of himself inside my mouth though. And I'm pretty sure it's taking every ounce of control for him to stay completely still as I test out the feel of having his dick in my mouth. I take more and more of him inside until it hits the back of my throat, instantly making me gag, and he tries to pull away.

But that's not what I want. I pull back a little, trying to get used to it as I grip his bare ass in my hands, keeping him in place.

“Oh God, Royal. It's so good. Too good. I'm so close. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . .” He lets out a long, low moan when I suck him harder, taking nearly all of him to the back of my throat again. I smile around him because I'm doing this to him.

He's lost in his intense pleasure, but he's still worried about me. I want him to come in my mouth, but he's tugging on my hair and begging again.

“Please. I need you.”

Fuck. I'm torn because I want to make him come like this, but I want to be inside him as much as he seems to want that.

I reluctantly pull off his cock, but I don't move away. I don't grab the lube yet or move from between his parted thighs. Instead, I use my hands to move them apart more and stare at his pink hole, his full balls, and hard cock. Every bit of it is a masterpiece.

“You're so damn beautiful.”

I swear his entire body blushes, but he just gives me a shy smile and shakes his head. “Please,” he begs, his voice tight with tension.

With desire.

But I can't yet.

Not. Just. Yet.

I need one more thing.

CHAPTER 23

SOREN

When I feel the flat of his tongue drag over my eager hole, I nearly come right then. My entire body tenses with the most desperate need I've ever felt. "Oh God, Royal. Royal. Royal," I chant his name as he teases me with his very talented tongue.

Does he have to be good at everything?

I mean, Jesus. He just jumps right in, and my God, is he good at this. I feel one of his fingers teasing my hole at the same time his tongue swirls around, making it nice and wet for his finger to glide inside.

He adds another and crooks it just right to find that spot deep inside me that has precum trickling from the head of my cock. My balls are pulled up to my body, aching for release, and I know if he doesn't fuck me soon, it'll all be over.

"Royal, please," I plead for what seems like the hundredth time.

I swear I feel him smiling against my body, and then finally—fucking finally—he removes his fingers, grabs the lube as he sits up, and opens the bottle, pouring a generous amount into his hand.

I watch in fascination as his hand glides over his cock, slicking it. Getting himself ready to be inside me. "This is

what you want?”

I nod slowly, barely able to do even that, let alone speak.

He smiles and tosses the lube, then leans over me, stealing my mouth and feeding me my own musky taste. I moan into his mouth, loving every minute of it. I’m so far gone for this guy.

I feel the head of his cock pressing against me, but he doesn’t move forward. He just kisses me over and over again until I’m a needy, mewling mess beneath him. Just when I don’t think I can take it any longer—when I’m about to beg him again—he slides home in one beautifully strong stroke, making my back arch up into him. A strong groan rumbles from his throat.

My hand slides over his muscled back as he holds onto my parted knees, allowing him every bit of access to my body as we move together, his cock repeatedly pounding my prostate.

I’m so wound up with need, I can’t take it anymore. Cum sprays from my cock without any warning. It covers us both as he slams into me, his cock jerking inside as he lets loose.

When we’re both thoroughly sated, he collapses on top of me, still kissing my neck and jaw, every part of me he can reach. My hands go into his soft hair, and I hold him to me.

We decide to quickly take a shower, but don’t bother with clothes when we make it back into my bed. I cuddle against him, letting my head rest on his shoulder and breathe him in.

I know we need to talk, but this part of tonight was so damn perfect, I don’t want to ruin it. So I stay quiet.

But Royal . . . he doesn’t. “I was one of those kids.”

“What?” I ask, startled by his voice in the quiet room. I look up at him, but he’s not watching me. His eyes are closed.

“One of those sick kids. I can’t stand to see those posters of the kids in the beds. I know it makes me selfish as hell. It makes me a total asshole because I should be so grateful for children’s hospitals like that, but when I see those posters . . .”

I roll more fully to my side so I can watch him. His eyes are still closed. “Royal . . . we don’t have to—”

“Naked rule,” he states, and I nod, even though he can’t see me. He must feel it or sense it because he continues, “I was born to really young parents. My mom was sixteen, and my dad was seventeen. But apparently, they wanted me. They got married and had a plan. But that plan didn’t include a sick kid.”

My own eyes fall closed as I take in his words, but I don’t say anything.

“I was a year and a half when they noticed something wasn’t quite right. They took me in, and that’s when I got the diagnosis.” I swallow hard, waiting. “Leukemia. A really rare, childhood form of leukemia.”

“Oh, God,” I whisper.

“They tried. At least that’s what I was told. I don’t remember, not at all. I remember being in the hospital a lot. Being poked and prodded. But most of what I remember about them is what I was told. Apparently, it was the second time the leukemia came back. The first time, they stuck around. They tried to pay the bills and kept working while I was in the hospital for weeks and weeks, getting treatment. But the second time when I was almost five, they apparently couldn’t do it anymore.”

I feel tears welling up in my eyes, and my throat is raw from the sadness and anger warring there. *They couldn't do it anymore?* What about their child? "What happened?" I force myself to ask.

"They just left the hospital and never came back."

My jaw drops. I force my eyes open and look at Royal, who's now looking at me, despair written all over his features. "The bills were too much. The time was too much. It was all too much, I guess. They never came back, and I became the state's problem."

"Oh, Royal."

"Please don't," he says softly, wrapping an arm around me and stroking my arm. "I'm okay. I really am. I was pissed for a long time. I hated them for leaving me there, sick and alone. I was angry, but I'm okay."

He definitely isn't. No one could be. That's horrific.

"But this fundraiser . . ."

I look up at him in horror. "Oh, God. No wonder. Why don't you just tell Jenny no?"

"Because hospitals like this one are incredible. They pay the bills for the parents, so they can focus on the kids. I didn't have that. But it's just hard to see the kids. My mind goes right back there to those cold hospital rooms. To wondering where my parents went."

My heart aches for him. "Did they ever find your parents? Please tell me they're in prison for abandonment."

"Nah," he says quietly. "But every time I race, I like to think they're watching. That they know I'm the one they left behind. That I'm not that weak, sick child, and instead, I'm a

badass racer with more money and fame than they could have ever imagined. And I know that's wrong . . .”

I shake my head. “It's not. You have every right to want that. And you may have been sick, but you were never weak.”

I feel his immediate need to argue with me, but thankfully, he doesn't. He seems too tired to do that, which I hate. I don't want him tired. It starts to make so much sense why he wants to win so badly. Why he can't let other racers get away with bumping his car on the track.

He can't appear weak—in case they're watching him.

Oh, God. He's even more amazing than I thought he was. I lean up and steal his lips with a heated kiss because I need to try to take away even an ounce of his pain. I don't think it can actually work, but I hope so.

I want to ask him about the years he was in foster care. I want to know how he made it from fighting his childhood illness to the man before me today. But I don't get anything out because my phone is going off somewhere in the room.

And then I hear another phone.

And several dings.

Royal and I share a look before he climbs out of bed and grabs both our phones. I look at the missed calls and see Jenny's name on my phone.

“Jenny,” Royal says just as his phone starts to ring again. I nod at him to answer it, and he does. “What's going on?”

I hear Jenny through his phone. “You need to get to the hospital right now.”

“What?” Royal sounds distraught. “Why?”

“It’s Axel and Sebastian. They were in an accident. You need to get to the hospital.” My eyes bug out of my head as I watch Royal, his face deathly pale. “Royal? Royal?” I hear Jenny, but Royal is frozen.

I take the phone from him gently and bring it up to my ear. “Jenny, it’s Soren. Which hospital?”

If she’s surprised I’m with Royal, she doesn’t say it. She just gives me the details and hangs up.

I put the phone on the bed and then cup Royal’s face in my hand, looking into his distraught eyes. “Baby, we need to go to the hospital. It’s going to be okay. But we need to get there.”

He doesn’t say a word. He’s frozen, his entire body stiff. His eyes have an empty gaze now.

“Royal, we need to go.” I drop my hands after giving him a quick kiss, then make quick work of getting us both dressed. I drive this time, and we make it to the hospital fairly quickly.

Jenny is already there, along with Maverick, Cash, Leslie, and a bunch of other people in their circle. Most of them are still dressed from the fundraiser. Jenny walks over to us, her heels clicking on the hospital floor as she does.

“What happened?” I ask with Royal standing stiffly at my side.

“They were going home from the fundraiser, and apparently, they were recognized by some dumbass teenagers.” I swallow hard, not wanting to hear the details but knowing we need them. “They tried to race them. Axel was driving. He, of course, didn’t engage, but it didn’t matter. They had the lane blocked off for construction, and Axel couldn’t get over in time. These kids . . .” Jenny’s eyes are red, and I

realize she'd been crying at some point. "They sent Axel and Sebastian into a cement wall on the interstate."

"Jesus," I breathe. I notice Royal has taken my hand, and he's squeezing it hard. I look at Jenny. "Are they . . ." Shit, the words are so damn hard to say. "Are they okay?"

There's no real relief when she says, "They're alive." Because that's not *okay*. "Sebastian is in surgery. He was hurt pretty badly. Axel is getting some stitches . . . but . . ."

She shakes her head solemnly, and then I notice Royal's body become even more tense as his eyes move across the room.

I turn my head to look at what he sees. It's his best friend.

Axel.

CHAPTER 24

ROYAL

Axel is here. Axel is alive.

Holy shit.

My knees nearly buckle when I see him walking toward me. He has a bandage on his forehead and a cast on his arm, but other than that, he looks physically okay. But he's also so not okay.

He looks distraught and heartbroken. Missing his other half. When he reaches me, he wraps his arms around me and just lets go. A harsh sob falls from his throat, "He can't die. He can't fucking leave me."

I finally get control of my own body again and use one hand to hug him back. My other hand holds onto Soren in a death grip because I wouldn't make it through seeing my best friend—the closest thing I've had to a brother—so damn broken without him.

"He won't," I barely manage to croak.

Axel releases me after that, pulling back to look at me. His eyes drift to my hand in Soren's. But he doesn't say anything. He looks exhausted, and his worry is palpable. "It doesn't feel real. They won't let me see him."

I put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze it. We give each other a hard time. We compete like crazy out on the track. But there's never been any doubt we'll always be there for each other when we need it.

We've been there—side by side—for one another since we were angry, poor, and lonely teenagers learning how to race. Neither of us ever thought we'd be here. Rich and famous.

Never.

It was a hobby. Something to help us forget about all the bullshit. Something to make us smile.

But now we're professional racecar drivers—that hobby turned into a career—and it seems everything has caught up to us.

“What happened?” I ask grimly. I'm aware of all the eyes on us, but in this moment, it's just Axel and me. Two friends, who may as well be brothers, in the middle of the hospital waiting room.

Axel hangs his head, and I don't release his shoulder. He finally raises his eyes to mine. “We were on the way home from Cash's event. Driving on the road we've been on so many damn times. And some kids—fucking teenagers barely old enough to drive—recognized us. I have no idea how, but they did. The driver wanted to race me, but I shook my head at him. There was no way I'd do that.”

I squeeze his shoulder again. “I know that.”

His face is solemn, and his voice is raspy as he continues, “They wouldn't stop. There were a lot of cars on the interstate, and we wound up being boxed-in. Their car was on my left, and they wouldn't let us over. I should have pulled over, let

them go on and hopefully forget about it. But I thought they'd get the hint."

"Axel . . ." I say quietly because I can hear his guilt, but I don't have anything to add.

"I don't know if they even saw it coming. I know *we* didn't. But there was road construction, and we couldn't get over in time. They were blocking the goddamned way, and we slammed into a cement barrier."

"Fuck."

He sniffs, and I know he's holding back tears. "Sebastian . . . fuck. He didn't move. When I realized what happened, I looked over at him and saw he was bleeding but not moving. I . . ." He chokes on a sob. "Finally, I checked his pulse and could feel it, but he wouldn't open his eyes."

"He's going to be okay," I say firmly, though I have no idea if that's true.

I feel Soren's hand in mine, giving it a squeeze, and it adds a little comfort. "He has to be," Axel barely manages to whisper.

"He will," I say firmly again, and Jenny joins us, shocking the hell out of Axel and me and probably everyone else when she wraps her small arms around his neck.

"He. Will," she says, and it's far more convincing than when I said it.

Everyone falls in after that, trying to give Axel encouragement. Giving him hugs and pats on the back, but the truth is none of us know what to do. We're all so damn helpless right now as we sit in the waiting room.

Just hoping for an update on our friend.

Maverick is a complete wreck, and I'm not surprised when Cooper shows up, trying to offer some sunshine to all our cloudy-ass moods. He seems to be the only one with hope around here. But he doesn't seem to mind. Sitting next to Maverick, he even manages to make the surly bastard smile once.

Sebastian will be grateful for that, I'm sure. Maverick and he—well, their relationship is pretty much exactly what Axel's and mine is.

There's one brief update, but all they tell us is they have him stabilized, but he's still in surgery.

I can't take it anymore and decide to duck outside, hopefully unnoticed, to get my bearings. I hate hospitals. Even the adult side. I used to hate all the foo-foo crap they put in my room and the hallways of the children's hospitals—balloons, teddy bears, and colorful holiday decor, depending on what month it was—trying to distract the kids from their reality.

But this place is worse. It's sterile. It's empty. It's terrifying.

I make it through some sliding automatic doors and find a bench facing an empty field behind the hospital. It's cold, and I don't have a coat on, but I welcome the cold.

I welcome the feeling that reminds me I'm alive. Which makes me feel like an absolute bastard since Sebastian's inside fighting for his life.

I hear the automatic doors open, but I don't register anything until I feel Soren sitting down next to me on the bench and wrapping his arms around me, tucking himself into my side.

“He's going to be okay.”

“Was there an update?” I ask, letting him hold onto me.

“No. But I know he will be. Axel, Sebastian, Maverick, you . . . you’re all strong as hell. Untouchable.”

But we aren’t. And he knows that as well as I do. “Axel was a foster kid too,” I say quietly, my breath visible in the cold night air. “I met him at this camp for sad kids.” I chuckle to myself. “That’s what we called it, not what it was actually called.”

I feel Soren’s cold nose on my neck as he nuzzles into me.

“He was so angry. So fucking mad.”

“Can’t say I blame him. I don’t know his story, but I’d be angry if I were any of you. Parents are supposed to take care of their children.”

I wrap my arm around him as he holds onto my waist. “I recognized that anger. I understood it. And for whatever reason, I wanted to try to make it be better for him. I wanted to show him we didn’t have to always be angry. That I’d found something . . .”—I smile sadly as I remember those days —“fun.”

“Racing,” Soren guesses.

I nod. “Yeah. We learned together. When we aged out of foster care and graduated from high school, we moved in together, and it was just us against the world. We never thought we’d get here.”

“True success stories.”

“But still, when I’m out on that track, it’s like it’s chasing me. The past. The failures. The weakness.”

Soren sits up now, holding my face in his hands as he gives me that very familiar stare-down. “You’re not weak.”

“I felt like it in there,” I say honestly. “Since we got the call. I went numb. I can’t fix this for him. I can’t tell him to go out on the track and blow off some steam. I can’t make it any better or him any less angry.”

“Sebastian will be okay,” he says, his voice knowing, in a way it shouldn’t be because no one knows if it actually will be. But I still believe him.

I press a kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says, and then I kiss him again.

Only this time, I hear an all too familiar sound and see the flash. Soren freezes, then his head swivels toward what I assume is someone grabbing the story of Royal Dutton and Soren Adams in an intimate embrace outside the hospital where Axel and Sebastian were taken.

Shit.

“Oh, God,” Soren breathes. “Get out of here!” he shouts at the reporters.

And there are a lot. I notice a full crew. Several stations. “Soren Adams? Is that you? Is this your new boyfriend?”

“Royal? Are you the next *out* racecar driver?”

“Are you an official couple?”

“Royal, how are Sebastian and Axel?”

The vultures all shout, one after another, not giving one damn thought to the reason we’re at the hospital. That we could be mourning a loss. That we’re worried and frightened. That they shouldn’t fucking out someone who isn’t out.

None of it seems to matter to them as Soren grabs my hand and leads me back inside the hospital. One of the staff

members buzzes us in, and I'm confident they'll also keep the media out.

"Oh, God. Royal." Soren covers his mouth in anguish. "I am so sorry."

I see the fear in his eyes, but I'm too fucking numb and raw to say anything. I know I need to.

I need to say a lot of things to him.

But being back in the hospital. Axel and Sebastian being in trouble. The reporters.

It's all too fucking much at once.

CHAPTER 25

SOREN

Oh God, he's freaking out. Of course he is. Goddammit. How could I have been so careless? I knew there would be media at the hospital. This is the biggest story right now.

But I didn't think about it as I followed Royal outside.

I just saw him sitting there, alone and scared in the cold, worried about his best friends. And all I wanted to do was comfort him. Tell him I was there and that I loved him.

But I knew better.

When I heard that camera, my first instinct was to run, but I knew it was too damn late. They already had their story. They know there's something going on between us. I can see the headlines now.

"Please say something," I beg, hating the pleading in my tone, but there's nothing but fear coursing through me right now.

I can't lose him. I can't do it. I'm far too attached.

"There you two are." Jenny's voice comes down the hall as she approaches us, and we both turn to look at her. Royal remains completely silent. "Sebastian is out of surgery. It was . . ."—she stops herself and then takes a deep breath

—“dicey, but they got him stable, and they think he’s going to be okay.”

“Is Axel with him?” Royal asks, his voice far too quiet.

Jenny nods. “Yeah. They’re going to let him stay with Sebastian, but they aren’t going to let anyone else in tonight. They said it would be a good idea to go home and get some sleep.” She snorts dismissively. “As if any of us are going to get any sleep tonight.”

Doubtful.

Her eyes drift over us, surveying us far too closely. She glances down the hall and likely toward the exit doors, where the camera crews are perched and waiting. Her eyes move to me. “Friends?”

I shake my head. I recognized a couple of them but not one of them would I call a friend. And all of them very hungry for the story.

“Something happen?” She doesn’t seem mad, but she’s too observant to miss it.

I look at Royal, then at Jenny, ready to shake my head and deny it. But Royal speaks up, “They may have seen us outside together.”

Jenny’s eyes narrow at Royal. “Doing?” Royal doesn’t answer, and she sighs. “Please tell me you were clothed.”

“Jesus Christ. Of course we were,” I say.

Royal smiles and wraps his hand around my waist, pulling me into his side. I guess to settle me down, but it only puts my body and brain on alert. His arm is around me. That can’t be a bad sign, right? He’s openly touching me in front of his agent

and probably some of the reporters outside. “It was a kiss. Clothed. But it counted.”

I look at him, nearly in shock, then back at Jenny, who’s smiling at us. *Smiling?* Doesn’t she know this is bad? This is very bad. They know. The entire world will likely know within a matter of hours.

Royal was just thrust out of the closet. There was no official announcement. It looks like he was caught doing something wrong. And it was so not wrong, damn it.

Why aren’t they freaking out?

“You want to make an official statement?” Jenny asks Royal, and I feel like I could faint.

“Yeah.” He hugs me tighter and tips his head toward me. “But I’ll let *him* do it.”

Jenny nods, smiling at me. She’s smiling again. What the hell is happening? “Okay. Well, I’m going to head home for a bit, but I’ll be back in a few hours. You two should try to get some rest.”

“Yeah, right,” Royal says, and she gives us both quick kisses on the cheek before she heads outside to the waiting wolves.

I have no doubt she’ll be just fine though.

“Royal,” I start, but it’s cut off quickly with a fierce kiss that steals my entire breath, making my knees weak for another reason.

He pulls back, holding onto me and looking into my eyes. “Do you really think I care about them knowing about us?”

“It’s not just them. It’s going to be everyone.”

“I’ve wanted to shout that you’re mine for a long time now, Soren.” He kisses me again briefly. “I’m happy they know. I mean, I don’t want you upset . . .”

I shake my head. “I’m not upset. I just . . . you don’t . . . they shouldn’t have done that without your permission.”

He hugs me closer to him. “I appreciate you looking out for me, but I’m not worried about them at all. I want everyone to know I’m with you. Your fans might not like it—”

“You’re growing on them,” I cut in. “And I really couldn’t care less if they like you or not because I love you. I wasn’t ashamed of you. I swear it. I never want to hurt you, Royal. I just want . . .”

He kisses me again, softly and sweetly, but I feel it all the way down to my toes. “What do you want?”

“You,” I say easily because he’s all I want.

He smiles. “I want you too.”

“I don’t want to hurt your career,” I say honestly. I had him all wrong. I know that now. He was just a kid, trying like hell to show his parents how badly they fucked up by letting him go. He felt that pressure every single day of his life. Trying to prove himself worthy. But he’s always been worthy of it all. He deserves every single good thing.

I don’t want to hold him back in any way.

I want him to thrive.

“I love racing,” He admits, and I nod.

“We can fix this. You can say I kissed you, trying to comfort you.” He’s watching me closely, and I keep rambling, “You can tell them that I’m no one to you. That I . . .” His big hand covers my mouth.

“You’re *not* no one to me,” he growls. “You’re my everything.” He doesn’t remove his hand, keeping me silent, and honestly, I’m grateful. “I was saying, I love racing, but they’re going to have to get on board with the fact that I’m loud. That I like to put on a show because I’m good at it.” He drops his hand and looks into my eyes. “That I have a boyfriend I’m in love with, and I’m not giving him up for anything. I’m not going out there and pretending this isn’t very, very real.”

My lips part slightly as I listen to him. He doesn’t want to hide me. He doesn’t want to hide us. He’s choosing me.

“I love you.” It’s all I can seem to manage to say at first. “I don’t want you to be quieter or less confident. I want you to be the real you, loud and cocky as you are. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to hide any part of yourself.”

He smiles. “I don’t think I’ll be purposely crashing anyone into a wall anytime soon,” he says very seriously.

I nod, thinking about Sebastian and Axel. “Good.”

“Let’s go back to your place. Try to get some rest, okay?”

“Okay,” I say slowly, my eyes on the exit with all the reporters. “How do we get out of here?”

He takes my hand in his and starts toward the door. “With our heads held high and your hand in mine.”

And that’s exactly how we walk out to the car, hand in hand, with our chins raised and not answering one single question.

They can wait.

CHAPTER 26

ROYAL

“So the naked rule?” Soren asks, lying in my arms in his bed. Both of us are totally naked and sated after mutual blow jobs—him finishing in my mouth and me finishing off inside his glorious ass.

I’m exhausted from the night, but as soon as we got back to his house, all I could think about was celebrating Sebastian and Axel being alive and the fact that I no longer have to hide my love for Soren.

I’d have preferred to tell Axel in person, but he has enough going on right now. We’ll talk about it later.

“Ask me anything you want,” I say to Soren. Naked or not, I trust him 100 percent not to report anything I don’t want out there. Although, at the moment, I can’t think of anything.

No, I don’t think the world needs every detail about my life. But now, I don’t know. I don’t feel the shame I used to about the way I grew up. I know it wasn’t my fault. “You wanted to make Axel happy when you met . . . Does that mean you were already kind of happy?”

I smile and tuck his body against mine, reveling in the warmth coming off his bare skin. “Yeah. I had Dorris.”

“Dorris?” he asks, and I smile, just hearing her name.

“By the time I was fourteen, I’d already bounced around so many foster homes. I was mouthy and loud. I know you can’t believe that.” He smiles, and I kiss his temple before I continue, “Anyway, I had a clean bill of health. I’d been cancer-free for years at that point. But I was pissed. So damn mad that I caused trouble everywhere I went. I gave them all hell. The good and the bad ones. I didn’t want to give them the chance to not want me.”

I hate those damn memories. But for some reason, I want to tell Soren all of it. I want him to know my full story. “Royal,” he says sadly, cuddling up to me even more and hugging me close to him.

“I remember lying in hospital beds and dreaming of a time when I’d have my own family. How I’d protect them. How I’d never leave.” A small, sad smile crosses my lips. “How I’d have a bathtub.”

“What?” he cries, his tone amused as he looks up at me, surprised by the ridiculous dream.

I nod. “All the kids on television had their parents giving them a bath with lots of bubbles. I have no idea why that stuck with me, but I wanted that. I wanted it so goddamn bad. A parent who cared enough to get me bubbles and toys for something as mundane as taking a bath.”

He doesn’t look so amused now, his eyes wide and full of unshed tears. “You deserved to have that. I’m so sorry you didn’t.”

A tear falls from his eye, and I wipe it away with my thumb and cup his cheek. “I have you now. I have so much more than anything I could have dreamed.”

“Well, when we have kids, we’re giving them a damn bubble bath.”

I stiffen for a moment, and then he completely freezes. “Oh, that was stupid. I know we aren’t—”

I cut him off, swooping down to kiss that mouth that loves to ramble when he’s nervous. He sighs into the kiss, kissing me back with fervor, but we don’t let it get too out of control. We still have talking to do.

Who the hell would have thought I’d choose talking over orgasms?

Okay, not all the time. There’s no way I’ll always make that choice, but in this moment, talking wins.

“Our kids will have bubble baths,” I say easily because I can picture it all with him. I want it all with him. I’d given up on that childhood fantasy so long ago, but now, it’s all coming back into my mind.

I can and will have it all.

“Who’s Dorris?” he asks, bringing me back to the conversation.

A wave of happiness followed by sadness washes over me, and I pull him back to my body. “When I was fourteen, they sent me to this house out in the country. I think it was a last-ditch effort. They had no one else who would take my wild ass. But Dorris, she was different in every way.” I smile again. “She was a widow.”

“Please tell me this isn’t going to be a Garth Brooks’s “That Summer” situation,” he interrupts, and I laugh, pinching his side playfully.

“No. She was an eighty-year-old widow, and it wasn’t a ranch. It was a junkyard.”

“What?” he asks, looking up at me with his beautiful smile which nearly distracts me.

“Yeah. She had this salvage yard, where mostly everyone brought their old broken-down cars. She showed me the way around and put my ass to work. I tried to give her hell, but Dorris—she was patient. She was smart. She knew how to handle my stubborn ass.”

Memories of the older woman who took no shit from anyone bombard me. Her knowledge. Her laugh. Her long talks with me out on the porch as we watched the sun set over the salvage yard—which shouldn’t have been a beautiful sight, but it somehow was.

She taught me how to be a good person. She told me about how her husband and she had raised six kids in that house, all of them grown by then. How hard they loved each other and those kids and how sorry she was that my own parents let me down. I tell all of that to Soren as he listens to me, not speaking once. Just taking it all in.

“She loved races and demolition derbies. She took me to them on the weekends. We traveled a lot. She showed me how to build my own derby cars and gave me the cash to enter the races when I was old enough. She was the one who taught me how to race.”

“An eighty-year-old woman?” Soren asks, not unbelieving but obviously surprised.

“A badass eighty-year-old woman. Yes.”

“That’s incredible. I bet she’s insanely proud of you.”

“She was,” I say sadly, my heart aching.

“Was?” Soren picks up on it and lifts up to look me in the eyes.

I nod. “She died when I was nineteen. I only got five years with her, but in those five years, she showed me more care than I’d ever had in my entire life. And then she left me.” I feel my own eyes fill up with tears when I see Soren is on the verge of crying himself.

“Oh, Royal.”

“I know she didn’t want to leave me, but goddammit, she did. And it hurt. I was so mad.”

“I know.” He hugs me to him and kisses the top of my hair. “I know you were. I’m sorry you lost her, but I’m so damn glad you had her.”

He pulls back enough to kiss me on the lips, and I kiss him back softly, moving to tuck his body back under mine. “Don’t leave me.”

He shakes his head and brushes his fingers through my hair, looking up at me with those beautiful eyes. “Never. I’ll never leave you.”

I nod. “You’re mine,” I say as I bend down and kiss him, feeling his cock harden against my own eager shaft, but I need to hear this first. I need to feel it deep in my bones.

I’ve been left so many times in my life, but I always came back from it. I’d like to believe I was even stronger than before, though still slightly broken. But I wouldn’t come back from losing Soren.

This I know with total certainty.

I can’t lose him.

He wraps his arms around my neck, pulling me down to him and kissing the corner of my mouth, then the other. He kisses my nose next and then my forehead, his hands moving my head around to where he wants me before his lips press against mine. “I’m yours. Forever. I’m honored to be yours. You’re a fighter.”

“You’re a fighter, my boy,” Dorris’s voice echoes in my ear, and a tear streams down my cheek. She gave me the strength I needed to stop being so damn angry all the time. She helped me learn to be stronger. I went out and seized my racing career, using that anger and strength. Wanting to show the world I wasn’t weak.

“With you though . . .” I say, looking down into his eyes. “I don’t have to be.”

He shakes his head slowly at that, his eyes locking on mine. “No. You don’t. You don’t have to pretend or be loud or fake being strong when you don’t feel it. You can be yourself with me, and I’ll love you, no matter what.”

Another tear.

That’s all I’ve ever wanted to hear. All I’ve ever needed.

Someone to just love me for me. Someone to let me have weak moments.

I found it in Soren.

And I’m never letting him go.

CHAPTER 27

SOREN

“You know you’re a real asshole, right?” I listen to Axel give Royal shit as we sit in the hospital room, where Axel is perched next to Sebastian in his bed. “Kind of stole our thunder with that lip-lock.”

“You’ve seen him. Don’t act like you could keep your lips off him,” Royal shoots back, and Sebastian tosses a pen from the side table at Royal. It hits him on the arm, and he laughs.

“Watch it. He’s only interested in *my* lips,” Sebastian says, his voice a little croaky from being out for so long. He’s healing well from the accident. But even three days later, Axel hasn’t left his side for very long.

The guy looks wrecked but also totally complete next to his husband, who’s very much alive and expected to make a full recovery.

“Damn straight,” Axel says, smacking a quick, gentle kiss over Sebastian’s mouth. Then he looks at Royal. “And I take it you’re not so straight?”

I chuckle, and Royal rolls his eyes. “Nope. Not so straight.”

Axel smiles, looking at me, then at his best friend. “I can’t believe you fell for a reporter.”

“Hey. I’m right here,” I protest.

Axel only laughs. “Oh, I know.” He winks at me. “I’m happy for you both. This the real deal?”

He seems to be asking both of us, but it’s Royal who answers easily, “I love him. And he tolerates me.”

I move a little closer to my idiot boyfriend and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him to me so I can kiss his cheek. “I love you too.”

“Ugh, I’m going to be sick,” Sebastian complains, but he’s clearly joking.

“Yeah, yeah. I had to watch you two be all gaga for each other for how fucking long?” Royal asks. “You can deal.”

He turns to look at me and plants a big ole kiss on my lips, just as Jenny walks into the hospital room. She’s got coffee in one hand and her phone in the other. “So have you two decided how to make it official?”

I shrug and release Royal but lean on his shoulder as I face Jenny. “I was thinking at the top of a rollercoaster. Have one of those cams on his head to record me telling the world that I’m Royal Dutton’s boyfriend, just before we fall over the first hill.”

Royal gives me a death glare and shakes his head. “No. No rollercoasters.”

Axel laughs, but Jenny and Sebastian look confused as hell. “How about something a little slower? I’m not sure you could get the words out, plunging toward the earth,” Jenny says as she sits down in one of the free chairs. There are a lot of chairs the staff brought in to accommodate all the people coming by to check on Sebastian.

“I’ll think on it,” I tell her, and she seems to be okay with my answer for now. I know the story has already broken and the world knows, but no one has gotten it straight from the source yet.

Not Jenny. Not any of our friends. Everyone has kept quiet.

They’re all leaving it up to me. And believe me, I know how important this is. My fans have been commenting all over my social media, and my DMs are full of people asking if it’s true.

Some are nice. Some are not.

But none of that matters.

Royal shouldn’t have to make anyone like him, I now realize. He’s a good man. Arrogant and reckless on the track—although I think Axel and Sebastian’s accident may have changed that for everyone a little.

He’s a damn good racer and an even better boyfriend. And when I make it official, I want it to be exactly right. I want it known that I’m his and he’s mine and no one should fuck with my boyfriend because nothing is going to change how we feel about each other.

If I lose fans or if he does, it doesn’t matter.

It seems I had a lot to learn from Royal too. I cared so much about pleasing my followers and giving them what they wanted, I lost a part of myself. Yes, I was always totally honest, but I didn’t want to anger them.

I wanted to change the world for them but didn’t stop to think about the things that didn’t need to change.

That sometimes when you switch your perspective, you see that it was your view that needed to be altered.

We stay and chat for a little longer before making our exit, leaving the hospital, hand in hand, but ignoring the media camped outside yet again.

We drive to my house and are greeted by all four animals right away. “Do you miss your house?” I ask as I sit down on the couch and pat my lap for Annie to jump up. I scratch her little ears as she curls up and makes herself comfortable.

Royal sits next to me, one elbow on the back of the couch, his leg pulled up. He’s facing me as he watches me and Annie. “No. Not at all.”

I cock my head to the side, finding that hard to believe. “Really?”

“Really,” he says easily. “I didn’t even tour the house before I bought it. I took a virtual tour but barely paid attention. It was the kind of house I’d dreamed about as a kid. A great big fuck you to my parents to show that I’d made it. The big, fancy, empty house.”

“You said my house is safe,” I recall.

He nods. “It feels safe and comfortable. More like what I should have bought. I love this house. The simplicity of it. The hominess. It feels like an actual home.”

I lean forward a little and kiss him softly, annoying Annie. But she settles down when I sit back. “My house is all yours.”

He grins. “It is a little small for the amount of kids I plan to bring into it.”

“Is that so?” I say, liking the sound of it far too much. I didn’t have a big family, just one brother, but it was a happy

childhood.

I can see having many, many kids with Royal.

“Hey, Royal?”

“Yeah.” I move Annie off my lap and pat her head when she gives me a disappointed look, reaching my hand out for Royal.

“Come with me.” He instantly stands, taking my hand. I lead him back to one of the guest bathrooms. I don’t use it often, but my primary bathroom doesn’t have a tub.

He stands there with me, looking around and cocking a brow at me. “What are we doing in here?”

I smile and reach for the hem of his t-shirt. I start to pull it up, and he automatically lifts his arms to help me remove it from him. My fingers dance over his delicious abs, and I have to force myself to focus on my own shirt.

I pull mine off and then walk over to the tub, putting the stopper in to hold the water and turning the water to a warm, comfortable temperature. When I turn back around, Royal is watching me closely, still in his jeans.

“What are we doing?”

I unbutton my own jeans, loving the way his eyes are locked on my hands. Raw hunger is written all over his face. “Well, I may not have all the fancy bathrooms you do at your house, but I do have a tub,” I say with a smile and slide my jeans off.

I kick them away, having slipped my shoes and socks off earlier. His eyes are trained on my growing erection, covered only by my blue briefs. It takes a hell of a lot of effort to turn

away from him to grab the bottle of bubble bath I bought and pour some into the water.

I don't turn around, though, because I can feel the heat of his big body behind mine. Not quite touching, but he's near. I hear shuffling and smile when I see his jeans and underwear fly to the side of the bathroom near my clothes.

"You're going to give me a bath?" he asks in my ear, his bare chest pressing against the skin of my back. A shiver of desire runs through me.

"I'm going to take a bath with you."

I notice the tub has filled up quite a bit. It's one of the reasons I bought the house, to be honest. It's one of those old-fashioned clawfoot tubs. It's deep but probably not wide enough for both of us. It'll be fine though. I definitely don't need space from Royal.

I turn off the water but don't turn around when I feel his hands on my hips, going to the top of my briefs and taking his time lowering them down my ass, but not the front. His hands cup my cheeks, massaging them and making me desperate for him already.

I thought this would be a nice relaxing bath, but I'm not mad about this turn of events, especially when he drops to his knees behind me. "Oh, God," I barely breathe out as he spreads me open.

I brace my hands on the edge of the tub as the first swipe of his tongue over my hole has me clenching my hands and nearly buckling right there. He doesn't relent, licking and sucking on my entrance, stiffening his very talented tongue and fucking me with it until I'm leaking through my briefs and aching.

“Please,” I plead, unsure of what exactly I need or want at that moment, just knowing I need something.

And he gives it to me. His big hand pushes the front of my briefs down as his mouth pleasures my hole, hitting every nerve ending as he uses my precum to stroke my cock until I’m crying out with my release. Most of it is captured by his hand, but some falls to the floor. He doesn’t seem bothered at all as he stands up and kisses me hard.

His cock is still rock-hard and pressed up against my body, but he seems like he’s going to ignore it as he licks his hands clean, enticing my spent cock to rally at the sight. He starts to move past me to the bath, but there’s no way I’m not going to drop to my knees and return the favor.

The need to make him come even harder than he made me becomes a living, breathing thing inside me. He moans my name as I take him to the back of my throat, his fingers threading through my hair as I go to town on his thick dick.

I cup his cheeks in my hands and can’t resist running a finger through his crease. He doesn’t move away or ask me to stop. We haven’t really had this discussion, but I know this is likely new to him.

And if he shows any sign of wanting me to stop, I will, for sure, but he only spreads his legs slightly, widening his stance and giving me better access. I manage to look up at him, his cock in my mouth, stretching my lips.

His head is tossed back, the veins in his neck popped as he breathes rapidly and clutches my hair. I pull nearly all the way off his cock before sliding back down until my nose meets his groin, and I circle his hole with my finger.

I don't press inside right away, just tease him with it. I slide off his cock, licking and swirling my tongue around the tip and sucking hard before licking my way to his full balls. I take a second to wet my finger with my mouth, feeling his eyes on me.

I watch him as I get my finger nice and wet and then move it back to his crease. "Is this okay?" I ask him, and he quickly nods. His dick, slick from my saliva and his precum, jerks when I slide over his hole.

"Yes, Soren. Yes. So good."

I take his cock back into my mouth, just as I press my finger inside to the first knuckle, taking my time. He doesn't seem bothered by the stretch, his fingers tugging at my hair as he starts to fuck my mouth.

I control my gag reflex, my cock already back to full mast at how damn hot this is, but I ignore it. This is all about Royal. The sounds of pleasure coming from his throat as I suck him off and push my finger all the way in his ass are downright sinful and absolutely gorgeous.

I crook my finger inside him as I suck on him hard, and he goes off without any warning at all. He lets out a surprised shout, his cum hitting the back of my throat as I struggle to swallow it all and press against that spongy spot inside him.

When he stops spurting in my mouth, I swallow as much as I can and lick him clean before removing my finger, then I'm pulled up into his arms before his mouth slams over mine.

We kiss as we make our way into the tub. The water is still nice and warm and full of suds. He sits down and pulls me between his legs and wraps his arms around me.

"I think I like baths."

I laugh and turn around so I can lie against his wet chest, letting the water run over us both, bubbles everywhere. “Me too.”

I think I really, really love baths, and everything that comes with being with Royal Dutton.

CHAPTER 28

ROYAL

“I think I really, really love baths, and everything that comes with being with Royal Dutton.”

I stare at the caption of the very simple picture of his drained bathtub and our clothes still on the floor on Soren’s Instagram. “Baths are going to make them like me?”

He laughs and shakes his head, settling next to me on the couch. We got dressed after he took that picture and snuggled up with the fireplace on. “It’s just one of the many things *I* love about you, Royal. I don’t give a flying fuck what they love or don’t love about you.”

I stare at the picture. The one he hasn’t posted yet. He has an eye for taking a really great picture. The black-and-white marble floor stands out with our clothes on it. It’s obvious we took a bath together, but the scene is elegant as hell. It definitely tells the world we’re together, which is all I really care about.

I don’t care what it could do to my career. I do love it, don’t get me wrong, but I love Soren more. I love being free to be who I am, more than anything. And if my career crashes, I’ll find something else. But something tells me it won’t.

From what Jenny has told me, most people seem to be excited about our possible love affair. They have no details,

but apparently, they've been sharing posts from Soren over the last few months and analyzing every single one.

The bumper cars at Worlds of Fun. The track. The animal shelter. They watched us fall in love, even though we didn't know we were in love yet. And I kind of like that, for some reason.

"I like it," I say happily as I hand him his phone. "Post it."

"You're sure?" he asks, and I like that he asks. That he cares. I know he's not like the reporters and social-media people who have hounded me relentlessly in the past. I know he cares about getting a story, but he has more integrity and kindness than anyone I've ever met.

"Post it," I say with certainty. "Let the world know you're mine."

He shakes his head at that and then hits a button—I'm assuming to post it—before tossing his phone on the table and snuggling up to my side. I hear the notifications on his phone going crazy, but he doesn't look.

He picks up Annie instead, who's a very annoyed-looking puppy because she's wearing a black hoodie Cooper got her for Christmas, and she was not thrilled when we put it on her. He pulls the hood back a bit to look at her. "You're fine. It's too cold for you not to wear it."

I laugh as Oscar climbs onto my lap, his sweater on too, which doesn't seem to bug him in the slightest. "You ever think it could be like this?" I ask him as Annie fidgets, still trying to get the hoodie off.

"No," he says with a smile. "I never thought I'd fall for the Hotshot of racing and be sitting on my couch with his adorable little dogs after fucking in my bathroom."

I pinch his side and make him laugh. “Regrets?”

His eyes meet mine. “Absolutely none.”

I smile because I know he means it. I don’t think it’s going to be easy. Apparently, the internet has blown up with the news of *another gay racer*—their words and definitely not mine.

I don’t really need a label. I’ve had plenty of those throughout my life.

I’m more than happy to be the lucky guy with Soren Adams and leave it at that.

Because he’s all I need.

And our dogs. And this quiet, cozy home. And kittens. And my asshole friends and Jenny.

Jesus. When the hell did I get all this family around me without even realizing it?

Because that’s exactly what they all are. When I thought we were going to lose Sebastian, I felt like part of me was going to die. The Pretty Boy. Who the hell knew he’s now just as much my brother as Axel is?

Jenny—she cares. She did all this because she cares. Not for the paycheck. She makes plenty. If my career tanks, she can easily find another racer to swoop right in and take my place.

She set this all up to help me out.

Because she cares.

You’re a fighter, my boy.

I smile at Dorris’s words playing in my mind. I am. I fought for everything in my life. I fought to get here to my

little makeshift family. And I fought like hell to wind up in the arms of the man who makes me realize I can be me—strong and capable—but also care about others.

That I don't have to win all the damn time.

That if my parents ever did actually see who I was now, they'd know I'm okay—but not because I have money or fame. Because I have this man in my arms who loves me and who I love so fiercely, I know I'll never run away from him.

I'll never leave him, and he'll never leave me.

My past is a part of me, but it doesn't define me. I'm not that sick kid in bed, waiting for my parents to come back. I'm not that angry child, pushing everyone away. I'm not that cocky shithead racer, who would do anything to win because I can't stand the thought of looking weak.

I am strong.

And I did this all on my own. But damn, am I happy to have this with Soren now.

I fell in love with the reporter, and I have zero regrets.

CHAPTER 29

SOREN

“Okay, I could really get used to this,” I say as I face Royal in the big-ass Jacuzzi tub in our new house. There’s enough room for both of us to stretch out. And okay, I really love it.

And yes, new house.

We bought a house together in Kansas City nearly three months after making it Instagram official. Why? Because we could. Because we’re all-in.

And because we needed a bigger tub in a homier home. And this one is downright perfect.

It’s close to his old house, so we’re still near Axel and Sebastian and Ryan and Grady. Jenny and Waylon actually live close too. Both have fully embraced our relationship. Waylon went a little over-the-top when he met my new boyfriend, but that’s my cousin for you.

He had to go back out of town almost immediately after the first official meeting but promised a full dinner at his house very soon. Knowing Waylon, it’ll be a grand affair.

My followers seem to really enjoy all the updates I’ve given them into our lives too. His following went way up, as did mine, when we became a couple. Funny enough, I had an influx of racing fans following me, supporting the hell out of

the *newest gay racer*, though I've tried to repeatedly correct them on that.

Royal doesn't really like putting a label on himself. And I'm more than okay with that. He's my man, and I'm more than happy with that one last label.

Mine.

So fucking mine.

I reach forward, sweeping some bubbles into my hands and then smushing them around his jaw, making a bubble beard. "There you go."

He laughs and doesn't hesitate doing the same to me. We sit in our tub full of bubbles, suds in our hair and on our faces, and I realize this isn't what I thought I wanted.

I didn't sit around and dream about a life like this.

No, my brain never could have come up with something so damn perfect. But I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

And while I do love sharing our adventures together with our followers, some things will always be naked-rule sacred.

I don't think he ever worries about that, and I know I can trust him.

Some things are only for us.

"You ready for the race tomorrow?" He's been back at it for a couple of months now, and he's been doing really well.

He's won a couple of races. He's lost some.

But he's kept his temper in check. Still, I wonder if he knows it doesn't matter to me. If he does happen to lose his cool out there . . . he won't lose me. No, I don't want him to hurt anyone on purpose—but I don't think he will.

“I’m ready. That rookie is really getting on my nerves.”

“Yeah, a wannabe hotshot,” I say and then move between his legs and wrap my arms around his neck. “I’ll always take the original.”

He just shakes his head and wraps his arms around me tightly. “I love you.”

That’s all he really needs to say. Every time he does, I swear I melt. “I love you too. I can’t wait to watch you race tomorrow.”

That makes him laugh. “A racing fan. Who’d have thought?”

“Not me,” I say and lean forward to kiss him, sudsy beards and all. Of course, it quickly turns heated, and we can’t keep our hands off each other. We rut together in our brand-new tub until we come together, water sloshing over the sides.

I fell for the hotshot of racing, but what I got was so much more.

I got Royal Dutton.

EPILOGUE

ROYAL

Goddammit. The rookie is pissing me off and has been all damn day. But I'm not taking his bait. We're on the last lap, and I don't wreck his ass into the wall the way he's begging me to.

Instead, I maneuver my way out of it and then fly past the finish line, taking the win.

Fuck yes.

My adrenaline is pumping as I climb out of my car and am surrounded. I'm used to it by now, but I still can't get used to the man running toward me, his arms wrapping around my neck as he flings himself into my arms.

Soren is fully dressed in a suit and tie, despite it being so damn hot out here. He has to be sweating through all the expensive fabric. Some things just never change.

Axel is here, but Sebastian is in the stands, still healing but should be able to race fairly soon. I have no doubt he'll be giving us a run for our money any day now.

I also happen to know Maverick is in town, and he brought Cooper to the race. Fucking weird. But the guy does grow on you, that's for damn sure.

I lay a kiss on Soren's lips, and he laughs, pulling back a little to look into my eyes. "You didn't take the bait."

"Nope."

He leans in a little, his mouth at my ear, and keeps his voice so low, I can barely hear him over the roar of the crowd. "I kind of wanted you to send that smug fucker into the wall."

My body reacts instantly to his words, turned the fuck on and nowhere to go. Damn it. "Goddamn, my boyfriend is hot," I growl into his ear.

I swear I feel him shudder against me and smile to myself.

"Picture?" I ask, and I guess it takes him a moment to clear the lust from his brain. He nods and pulls his phone out of his pocket.

He moves us so the car is in the background and snaps a selfie.

I watch him post it with the caption, "MY MAN DID IT!"

His man.

Yeah, I'll never be the Hotshot again, not in my head anyway.

I'll be Soren's man until the day I die.

No other title can hold up to that one.

The End

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey, you all! I hope you enjoyed this book! It really feels like I'm going back to my roots a bit with this one. I wrote a lot of racing books in my MF career, so it's kind of fun to go back to that world.

I mean, while my dad is a NASCAR fan, I don't have a lot of knowledge of racing, nor do I want it. I'm more fascinated by the fame part and how someone famous can navigate a relationship with the world watching.

That was an absolute blast to play around with, and I hope you had fun reading it!

Maverick and Cooper's story will be book three, so please don't forget to preorder that one so you don't miss it!

The Pro vs. The Fan: <https://tinyurl.com/theprovsthefan>

Thank you all so dang much for being there for me. I know this series is a bit different for me, and I really appreciate you being here and supporting me. It means the world to me.

Don't forget to check out my other work and stalk me in all the places—I like it!

Thank you so much to Cora for always being there and also for blackmailing me into finishing this book with the

threat of poop in our next co-write. That had me writing nine thousand words in one day, you all! Love you, Cooooora!

Ari, I know it's been a tough month, but I appreciate you more than I can ever say. Thank you for being there, despite wading through your own hell. I love you. You matter. You're one of the best people I know, and you aren't allowed to ever leave me!

Elle Belle, Lark, Willow, Emma, Jeanna, and all of my other friends, I couldn't make it without you. I love you all!

And Dena, my editor and friend—thank you from the bottom of my heart! Thank you for making my books legible!

And to everyone else, don't let anyone make you feel weak. You are strong and your feelings are valid! This book touched on two things I care very deeply about: children's hospitals that take care of kids, no matter what, and animal shelters.

I want to live in a world where every kid and animal is healthy, safe, and loved.

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CHAPTER 1

RHETT

I stare at the blue frosting on the cupcake in front of me and try like hell to feel joy. Any kind of joy. Hell, at this point, I'll settle for feeling anything other than the ugly bitterness dragging me down daily.

I'm eighteen.

Eighteen years old and should feel like the luckiest guy in the world but the truth is . . . I'm broken. Undeniably broken.

“You aren't going to eat your cupcake? I think that's bad luck.”

I smile when I hear Bree's voice behind me and then see her red Converse sneakers before she plops down on the front steps next to me. I turn to look at her, setting the cupcake down. “What other luck is there?”

Her eyes narrow, and then she rolls them. “Please. We're the definition of good luck, Rhett.” She slightly turns to gesture to the big-ass house belonging to the steps we're sitting on. “Foster kids adopted by rich people who aren't assholes but instead, are amazing.”

I swallow hard and try to force a smile, but it just doesn't come. Because I know how lucky I am. Or how lucky I should feel. My parents were young when they had me. Really young.

And then, they lost me to the system several times before my mom took off and my dad permanently relinquished his parental rights to me, leaving me to drown in foster care. I bounced around from house to house, each one worse than the others.

I met Bree and Fletcher in foster care. They became my family. We rarely ended up in the same place but usually stayed in the same area and the same schools until Bree literally ran away from her foster father and into Rhys.

Rhys. A badass tattoo artist. Loyal and fierce. He didn't rest until she was safe. He and his wife, Blair, adopted Bree and then eventually, Fletch and me as well. They're amazing. They have money and a love most people only dream about.

They moved us into this big-ass house that's full of shit I could never have imagined, including a heated pool in the backyard I use frequently. We each have a car of our own, although I rarely drive mine because I feel guilty. I feel like I didn't earn it, so I shouldn't drive it.

They want us to focus on school. And they pay for a fancy prep school kids like me would never have a shot at. And I hate it. I fought going there for a while, but when Fletch gave in and went, I went too. To be with Bree and him. I hate the pretentious, preppy rich kids at that school. I hate the teachers who tell me I'm not applying myself. I hate the football games and the players who rule the school simply because they can catch a ball. I mean, a fucking dog can do that, but sure, let's give them props.

I live under the same roof—a safe roof, I might add—with Bree and Fletcher, my best friends in the world. But I feel like I'm suffocating every single day when I wake up and go into my very own bathroom with the heated marble floor.

I stare at myself in the mirror, and all I feel is that I'm a fraud. That this is not me. That I don't deserve any of it.

But I can't tell Bree that. And I can't tell Fletcher. Because they're nothing but grateful, as they should be. And I, for sure, can't tell Blair and Rhys because they're everything I could have ever dreamed of and amazing people I do love. But none of that changes the fact that there's something broken deep inside me.

Something clawing its way out, and I'm sinking every single day. And now, I'm eighteen.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm just in a mood."

Bree nudges my shoulder with her smaller one, and I turn to look at her, wishing like hell I could explain it. To describe to her everything swirling around in my mind, but I don't know how. Fletcher and she are the best things to ever happen to me and yet, I can't talk to them anymore. Not about me.

Her small hand slides through my hair that's grown out a little too long, and she rests her hand on the back of my head, searching my eyes with hers. I think she's trying to comfort me. I'm sure she's worried. I've been a moody asshole for a while now. But then, I notice her eyes on my lips and see her starting to lean in.

Oh. Shit.

No.

"Bree."

"It's okay, Rhett . . . Really."

She moves in closer, and my heart threatens to escape my chest with how fast it's pounding. And not with the good kind

of anticipation you should feel before a kiss. This is full of dread. “Bree, don’t,” I finally choke out.

She pulls back, looking shocked. Then, there’s the hurt look I was dreading. She doesn’t say anything and drops her hand.

“I’m sorry.”

She just stares at me, and I’m afraid she might cry. Which Bree does *not* do. “I . . .”

“It’s not you. It’s not.”

Now, she looks pissed, which, honestly, is a little easier to deal with. “Don’t give me that bullshit.”

“It’s not, Bree. We’re friends. Best friends.”

“Oh yay. What every girl wants with the guy she—”

“Don’t.” I shake my head and hold up a hand, hoping to stop her. Because I knew this was coming. I knew she was starting to see me that way, and I can never reciprocate what she feels. Not only because she’s my friend, but . . .

I shake it off because . . . No, I’m not going there. I don’t allow myself to go there.

“Don’t?” *Yeah, she’s back to looking hurt.*

Goddammit, why do I even exist? I should be in love with her. In the perfect world, I *would* be in love with her. Bree is beautiful—beyond beautiful. Every guy in our class salivates for her, but she wants no part of the preppy douchebags at our school.

No. She wants her moody, broken best friend.

I look away from her, that suffocating feeling coming back in full force. “Don’t say what you were about to say.” I lock

eyes with her again. “I’m not worth it, Bree.”

“You’re . . .” She folds her arms. The hoodie she’s wearing is too big for her because it’s mine. “Don’t give me that self-deprecating bullshit. You’re amazing, Rhett. I mean . . . you’re so kind. You volunteer at shelters on the weekend, and you paint murals for free to make the world more beautiful. You’re . . .”

I stand up, trying to pull air into my lungs. “Stop. Don’t make me into some sort of saint. I’m fucked up, and you know it.”

She stands too. “No more than the rest of us.”

“You think two fucked-up people make a whole? They can’t. They just break each other more. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

Her eyes darken, and she’s pissed. And hurt. I hurt my best friend. “So, because I’m a former foster kid, you can’t love me back?”

Goddammit. “Don’t say you love me.”

“But I do.” Her eyes are shining with tears, and I want to die.

I hold onto her small shoulders with a loose grip. “I love you too, Bree . . . Just . . .”

“No.” She wipes at a tear, and I die a little more. “Don’t tell me it’s not like that. Or that you love me like a friend or a sister.”

But I do.

“I’m sorry.” I wipe another tear away with my thumb. “I’m so sorry.”

“Happy birthday,” she barely whispers before she pulls away and goes back inside, away from me.

Yeah. Happy fucking birthday to me.

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THE PRETTY BOY VS THE BAD BOY

Read on for a peek at *The Pretty Boy vs The Bad Boy*, the first book in the On the Track series.

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PROLOGUE

SEBASTIAN

“Are you kidding me?” I climb out of my car, anger flooding through me as I try like hell to calm myself. He knows that was dangerous.

Axel Lennon may be a rookie, just like me, but he knows the track. He knows he can't cut off a fellow driver at the last minute like that. He spun me into a wall and messed up my car.

Though, it could have been so much worse.

And now he's being congratulated at Victory Lane as if he's some sort of hero. I begin to make my way over to him, but I'm stopped immediately by my agent. “Sebastian, remember what we talked about?”

I narrow my eyes at him. Yeah, I do. I signed with Kevin when I was brand new to NASCAR racing and thrilled just to be signed by anyone. But now, I'm regretting it. He created this whole image for me.

But it's not me.

“Yes. He could have killed me.” Shouldn't he be worried about that?

“Axel knows exactly what he's doing. If you go over there spitting fire, you'll destroy everything we've created.”

He. He created. I had nothing to do with it.

All I want is to race.

I look over in Axel's direction, his cocky grin and that dark hair matted with sweat, which he rakes his fingers through. He's conducting an interview, but the motherfucker has the nerve to shoot me a wink. My feet are moving before I can even think.

But Kevin, despite being portly, catches up quickly and intercepts me. "No."

I glare at him. "No?"

"You heard me. No."

I point at Axel, gesturing wildly. "That motherfucker is proud of himself for nearly killing me."

My entire body thrums with angry adrenaline, but Kevin stands firm, his body blocking mine. "Language," he scolds. "Anyone recording you right now could read your lips. You're the good one, remember? The angel to his devil."

I glare over at said devil, who's watching me with that cocky, arrogant air surrounding him. He's not worried I'll punch him right in his face—just like he has coming.

He knows it. I know it. But he's also confident my agent will wrangle me because that's what I've let him do for the past year.

"This is bullshit," I spit out.

"Be that as it may—and watch your damn mouth—here's what you're going to do." Kevin leans in close, his coffee breath wafting into my nostrils. "You're going to go over there, head held high, and shake his hand. Tell him that was a good race."

My jaw nearly drops as I look into my agent's eyes and listen to what he's suggesting. But then it clenches tight when I realize he's not joking. That's actually what he expects me to do.

God, I wish he was kidding.

"I'm not congratulating him on playing dirty."

Kevin glances over his shoulder at Axel, then back at me. "He's playing his role. He plays dirty, and they're eating it up. Now is the time for you to go over there and play yours."

"I just want to race." My jaw hurts from the way it's clenched so damn tight as I grit my teeth.

"And you can. But as I've explained to you repeatedly, there's still a role you have to play. You're in the entertainment business. Just like an actor. Just like a social media influencer. It doesn't matter. You have to entertain the masses, and trust me on this, the more you play into this good-guy role, the more money you'll make. And the more you can secure for your retirement."

That hits me directly in the chest, just like I'm sure he intended.

Racing doesn't expect you to retire as young as some other sports, but you can't keep it up forever. I need to plan for the future now. Set up my security.

And if that means playing a role now so I'm more memorable, then that's what I need to do.

"Fine." I finally get my mouth to say the word, but Kevin already knew it was coming. He straightens and moves to my side to escort me toward my fate.

I try my best to calm my heart rate as I make my way over to Victory Lane, where Axel Lennon stands like a king.

My hands clench into fists at my side as his dark eyes run over my firesuit all the way up to my face, studying me. Waiting to see if I'll finally hit him or if I'll let Kevin keep that hold on my balls like he's had for a year.

When I reach my hand out to shake his, a wicked smile slides over his features, and his devilish eyes meet mine. "Ah, Sebastian. So good of you to join us."

Some of the people around us snicker, but I just breathe deeply, steeling myself to do what I'm told. "Axel, good race."

My hand is still outstretched in his direction as he lifts his and firmly grabs hold. "So close, Sebastian. You're getting a little better at this."

More snickers.

Eating up his cool demeanor like they always do.

The camera loves him.

The bastard.

"Yes, well, that was a little risky at the end." I can't help myself.

He just smirks at me, squeezing my hand a little tighter. "Only if you don't know what you're doing." The bastard releases my hand with an arrogant wink, and again my fists want to swing, but I keep them at my sides.

"How about a picture of you two?" a reporter asks, and our attention shifts in their direction.

Axel—the cocky shithead—wraps an arm around my shoulder before I can shove him away and pulls me tightly to

his side, flashing a huge, white smile at the camera. “Of course.”

My entire body tenses at the sensation of his pressed against me, but fury rages through my blood. I force a smile, and there are a few flashes of the camera.

When they’re done, I start to pull away, but Axel only pulls me in closer, his breath hitting my ear as his voice comes out with expert smoothness, “Good boy.”

I turn my head quickly, glaring in his direction, but I don’t say anything. And I *still* don’t hit him.

He just winks again and then releases me so I can finally get away. My feet are fast on the asphalt, my rage threatening to explode, but thankfully Kevin doesn’t follow me.

I don’t think I could take talking to him right now.

Good boy.

That motherfucker knows my role in this.

Although he normally calls me *pretty boy*, which he knows I can’t stand either.

And he’s very good at playing his role.

You see, while I’m the good one. The pretty, all-American, clean-cut one . . .

Axel Lennon is now, and will forever be, the bad boy.

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