



LIFE IN THE FAST LANE
BOOK ONE

Frunk

THROTTLE

ANNA ALBO

Full Throttle

Life in the Fast Lane

Book 1

Anna Albo

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Full Throttle

Book 1 – Life in the Fast Lane

Chapter One

Luna

My eyes shot open. Whoever was knocking on the door was doing it loud enough to wake the dead. I glanced over at the clock on the nightstand, which mocked me as usual. It was nearly nine, and clearly Rafe had sent one of his cronies to retrieve me. I dragged myself out of bed and answered the door. I didn't care that I was wearing pajama shorts and an old, faded T-shirt.

This time it was Andre, Rafe's minion for the day, dressed in his Perez uniform, a sympathetic smile on his face.

"Slept in?" he asked.

"Something like that," I said, trying to hide a yawn.

"Your brother is looking for you."

I let out a tired breath. "Tell him I'll be at the track in twenty minutes. If that's all right with him."

With Andre gone, I headed to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I missed the vacation I'd taken in Greece with Jess, my best friend since birth. Our mothers were friends from their college days, and it made sense that Jess and I carried on that tradition. We hadn't seen each other in way too long and had finally been able to catch up while spending countless hours on the beach in Greece: Jess worked on her tan while I played beach volleyball with other tourists or took relaxing swims in the warm sea. That was the thing about me: I couldn't be idle for long.

I swept up my unruly locks into a messy bun. I had my father's wavy, almost curly chestnut-brown hair and I despised it. I tried to tame the tendrils that had escaped the bun but quickly gave up. I had no one to impress. Normally, I didn't care about appearances and would simply tie my hair back

to keep it out of my face. Jess, on the other hand, spent hours on her clothes, hair, and makeup. I often wondered if we were switched at birth. Jess was more my mother's daughter than I could ever wish to be.

I moved on to my teeth. A good dose of minty toothpaste would wake me up. I got dressed in my usual pit uniform—not the one Rafe would have wanted. I knew it would infuriate my brother that I wasn't in the right gear, but I didn't care. I longed for the days when my Uncle Roberto was around, when the rules weren't so stringent. But after his car accident, he didn't come to races anymore. He stayed at the Perez base in California's wine country, overseeing the team from there and monitoring his sea of grapes. That left Rafe in charge with his loyal second-in-command, Carlos, at his side. Another crony. So many damn cronies.

And that was where I came in. I remembered vividly the day my brother called and asked for what amounted to the bulk of the first portion of my trust fund. I'd received that chunk on my eighteenth birthday, followed by another portion on my twenty-first birthday. The final portion would be given to me on my twenty-fifth birthday—a date less than two years away. Those portions were Marco Perez's way of protecting his children from pissing away our inheritance, and it made sense. I'd seen so many friends from school and acquaintances blow their trust funds without a second thought. At least I had the last third to rely on if this investment didn't pan out, because if my father were still alive, he'd conclude I'd pissed away the first two installments. And he wouldn't be wrong.

Rafe had asked for the money to help fund the Perez Racing Team, and when he'd asked, I hadn't hesitated to invest—though I made it clear to him that it *was* an investment. Our mother had been furious when she'd found out. She'd hated the idea of the team when Roberto and Carlos had proposed it six years ago. By then, Rafe had already invested the first two installments of his own trust fund, and Roberto, always a savvy businessman, had amassed a small fortune following his brother's death and had sunk a huge portion of it into the team. With my money, we'd formed a partnership and kept the team solely owned by the Perez family. The whole venture was a huge risk that I hoped I wouldn't regret.

Initially, I'd found it all so exciting, even though I was far removed from the spectacle and living across the Atlantic. My intentions had always been clear: I wouldn't join the team in any capacity other than appearing at the odd function, car unveiling, and charity event. I was content letting Rafe and my

uncle manage the team while I pursued my university degree far, far away from it all.

But then Uncle Roberto had had his accident, the one that had nearly killed him, and my life changed forever. I can still remember the panicked call from Rafe, the way his voice cracked. At first I'd thought something had happened to our mother or little sister, maybe Rafe's wife or small sons, but no, it was Roberto. Rafe, who rarely showed emotion, couldn't stop his voice from faltering as he detailed the horrible events of the crash. Roberto had nearly died. And after months of physiotherapy, which left him still limping badly and in constant pain, he'd made the decision to step away from the team. He resigned as team director and president, handing over the reins to Carlos Boreno.

That decision sealed my fate. I was now deemed essential as one-third owner of the team. The Perez presence needed to be strong, and Rafe couldn't do it all on his own. So I'd been here as a full-time presence since the racing season started a month ago, whether I wanted to or not.

"I miss my old life," I said to the empty hotel room as I adjusted my shirt collar. I snatched my pit badge and left the room. I passed a few drivers hanging around the lobby, but I didn't say a word. I made it a point not to interact with them because, what for? They wanted nothing to do with me, and vice versa. Drivers were all pompous assholes anyway—my brother included. My role was to show solidarity and be part of the team. I didn't need to make friends.

A car was waiting for me, and I was shuttled over to the Dallas track only a few blocks from the hotel. After going through security, I headed for the team garage. I'd been to Dallas before, but now the city was hosting its first-ever grand prix event, and that came down to hometown hero Blake Carlton. He'd pushed for the event, and, well, Blake Carlton always got what he wanted. Another pompous asshole. But who was counting?

I found Rafe in the Perez garage arguing with the team's chief mechanic. That wasn't unusual, since Rafe seemed to argue with poor Alex daily. Rafe glared at me as I passed him, but I ignored him and went to speak to Tanya, one of the team's coveted technicians, and also one of the few women working with any racing team.

"How are the cars running?" I asked.

I knew the basics when it came to racing cars. I'd driven plenty of them—and was actually good at it, having driven every summer as a kid. When I

was older, my uncle had entered me in competitions, to my mother's chagrin. I'd even won a few races, which pissed off all the boys, but I outgrew it, preferring sports and pursuing my education to driving.

Now, my role was behind the scenes, working public relations with Juan, the team's public relations head. I loved the job, and it made my transition to working with the team easier. It also got me out there, meeting new people, and it definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone.

Tanya nodded toward one of the cars. "Pretty good. I think we've solved that engine problem. The damn thing is a piece of garbage."

She hadn't meant to be funny, but I laughed anyway. And then, from the corner of my eye, I saw Rafe walking straight for us. I cringed at the thought of him berating me for being late. I had nowhere to run as he marched up to me. Time to brace myself for the onslaught.

"I told you to be here by eight," he said through clenched teeth.

Tanya half smiled and made her escape, slipping away before I could stop her. I was alone to deal with my brother.

"I slept in. The alarm didn't go off. I'm sorry."

"Jane Edwards wants an interview. She's been waiting for you for over an hour. It was on the schedule. Hence, why I asked you to be here at eight."

I fought hard not to roll my eyes. My uptight and stressed-out brother needed to relax a little. I'd never been late before. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. I think she said she'd be in the pressroom. And when you get back, we need to talk further."

With that, he stalked off. I was relieved to escape the garage and his disappointed glare. I made my way down the corridor between pit lane and the other team garages. I waved to all the people I'd met over the past month. As a newcomer, I knew I had a lot to learn. Rafe, always the big brother, had warned me that people may seem nice, but to always be prepared for a knife in the back. So far, I hadn't seen much evidence of that, but I also kept my nose clean.

I found Jane in the pressroom, where drivers made themselves available for interviews. She was interviewing Devin Flynn with Team Russo, one of the best teams on the circuit. I didn't know much about him except for what Rafe had told me. He had made it clear that I was to stay as far away from Devin Flynn as possible. He was trouble with a capital T. He was an outspoken Englishman who was better known for his party lifestyle than his driving prowess. He also had a chip on his shoulder from having to play

second fiddle on the team to Erich Riedl. Like second drivers on many other teams, Flynn's job was to make Riedl a winner. It was really that simple.

Jane concluded the interview with Flynn. As he passed me to leave, he smiled and said hello. I smiled back, and it was easy to see why women were so taken by him. The chiseled jaw, the sparkling sea-green eyes, the tousled hair, the smile that could melt a woman into a puddle. Of course, none of that worked on me. Even though I'd never met the guy before, I had him all figured out.

"Sorry, I'm late," I said, once I'd stopped staring after Flynn. "Please forgive me."

I noted a smirk on Jane's face, but I didn't know why she was smirking. Because of Flynn? Well, I did have a pulse, and the guy *was* hot. Objectively. I didn't want a chance with him, even if I thought I had one.

"No problem. Flynn was here to entertain me."

"I hear he's always the entertainer."

"Yes, that's true. Have you met him?"

I glanced at his retreating figure. He had a nice ass, even in racing coveralls. "I haven't had the pleasure."

Jane's face lit up. "I'll have to introduce you tonight at the banquet."

"Sure," I said, confused by why Jane was so interested at the prospect. Jane had been working press at the circuit since I was a child and my father still raced. She'd always been kind to me, which made me wonder if there was a good reason for me to meet Devin Flynn.

We flew through the short interview in record time. It was about nothing, really, just a sound bite for Jane when it came to broadcast time.

"Off the record, I wanted to know something," Jane said, pulling me close.

"Of course. If I can answer it."

"Since joining the Perez team, people around here can't stop talking about you. There are rumors circulating that you are testing one of the Perez cars? Is that true?"

I recoiled just a bit. That was the most out-there thing I'd heard in months, and just off-the-wall enough for me to suspect that Rafe was spreading it to get some buzz. "Really? No, I haven't been in a car in years. Who started this rumor?"

"It's been going around for a while, that it was the reason you were with the team. I have no idea where it originated. But now that I've got you alone

and away from prying eyes, I thought I'd ask."

A long time ago, in my teens, I'd wanted to be like Rafe and my dad. I'd taken up cart racing and was pretty good at it. I even had people talking about me, and that I may be a future star, but I'd never loved it like Dad and Rafe. And as I'd finished high school, I'd all but abandoned the idea. I wanted to go to university, get a degree, live a normal life. I didn't want to be in the spotlight all the time, to have my life dissected.

"It's not true. And you can put that on the record." I paused for a second, then added, "But I have to ask, what more have you heard?"

Jane leaned in a little closer with that seemed to be juicy gossip. "That you may be more interested in getting involved in the team, perhaps be the official test-driver. It would be quite the achievement to have you testing the cars. Lords knows, we need more women breaking barriers. Look at me. For years, I was the only woman working around here. And now there are women working in garages with almost every team."

My thoughts were swirling. When I went to find Rafe for that conversation he wanted so badly, I'd give him my thoughts on this new rumor.

"You're absolutely right. It's tough with so few of us around, but the Perez team is working on changing that. We were one of the first teams to hire a female mechanic, and she's now one of our best. But as for me testing the car, I've told you the truth."

"If anything does change, you'll give me the scoop?"

"Yes, of course."

I walked back to the pits with a purpose. I found Rafe looking over the car. I didn't care that I was interrupting him. In fact, I wanted to push him right into it.

"Jane just told me the oddest thing. There's some rumor going around that I'm going to start testing cars. I mean, that *would* be wild, since I haven't driven one in years, and it would also be very irresponsible and dangerous, because, well, I *haven't driven a car in years*," I said, dropping my voice. "And only someone desperate for attention for his fledgling team would orchestrate something so preposterous."

Rafe looked at me with his ebony eyes. He was giving nothing away. "Next time, wear your uniform in the pits."

"And next time, don't start any rumors. We're going to need to talk further. And I can assure you, you're not going to like anything I have to

say.”

Chapter Two

Luna

I milled around the banquet that evening, trying to look like I belonged there. I'd been to a few before, and they were always a dull affair, mostly because I had no one to talk to. As for clothes, I had a few outfits I recycled that had been carefully picked out by my best friend, Jess. It wasn't like anyone noticed that I wore the same dress more than once, and I hardly cared about fashion. If it fit and looked half-decent, then that was good enough for me.

I spent most of my time with the Perez team, twiddling my thumbs and waiting for the night to end. Tanya was usually at these shindigs, and we'd gossip until we'd stayed long enough that people had seen us, but Tanya was working late, so I had no one to entertain myself with.

"I promised you something," Jane said, coming up from behind me. She'd nearly scared me into spilling my mineral water, and her devious smile made me wary.

I barely remembered the conversation from that afternoon, but as she stared intently, it came back to me. "Oh, is he here?" I asked.

"He's having a drink with Erich Riedl."

I didn't have the heart to tell Jane that I wasn't interested in meeting Devin Flynn. Two weeks before, at the race in Montreal, Tanya and I had dissected what we knew about the Englishman. He was our gossip victim that day. Tanya had learned about an incident with Flynn and an Italian model in a bar washroom. It didn't end well, and somehow Flynn had left with a black eye when the model's boyfriend found them.

Still, I reluctantly followed Jane over to the two men. I was glad Erich was with Flynn. Erich had a long and friendly history with my family, and I'd

known him all my life. He'd always been good to me, like a second brother—a nicer brother—and Rafe said that he was the only man who could be trusted on the racing circuit. He was also Flynn's teammate and the star of the Russo team. Erich was the less flashy of the two, preferring to take his racing career seriously, while Flynn focused on partying.

"Ah, Luna, I didn't see you this morning," Erich said, kissing both of my cheeks.

"I was late. My brother won't let me forget it."

"He does have his schedules, doesn't he?" Erich said, flashing a smile. "Have you met my teammate, Devin Flynn?"

"No, I haven't," I said, wondering what I needed Jane for.

Erich made the introductions, and I shook Devin's calloused hand. He smiled at me with a playful grin that must have helped him bed scores of women. I smiled back before turning my attention to Erich. I wasn't being dismissive of Flynn; looking away from him had more to do with the tingle that traveled up and down my body. Why had that even happened? Was it because I found the man impossibly gorgeous when I didn't want to? Or was it that momentary intense gaze from his sea-green eyes? I was suddenly feeling dowdy in the simple black dress that Jess had picked for me when I'd complained about all the figure-hugging dresses most of the women wore to these things. Or was it the fact my Uncle Dario could have whipped up a variety of gorgeous dresses that would have made me look less plain? Whatever the case, focusing back on Erich seemed like the right thing to do.

"How is your mom?" Erich asked.

"Good. She asks about you all the time."

Jane took that moment to interrupt. "Erich, can we talk a moment? There is something I need to ask."

She pulled Erich away, leaving me flabbergasted. I didn't want to be left alone with Flynn. I'd only just formally met him, and now I had to talk to him? About what? Types of beer? Breast-cup sizes? Condom brands? Why was Jane leaving me alone with him? I turned to him to see if he knew what the hell had just happened.

"What was that?" I asked, probably more annoyed than I should have been.

"No idea. The woman is a flake," he answered, his accent making my breath hitch. It *did* sound sexy. I didn't know what to say next. My tongue was suddenly tied.

“So, what do you do?” he asked. His tone was polite, but it was obvious to both of us that he’d rather be anywhere else. “I’ve seen you around but haven’t had a chance to chat with you.”

Because I wasn’t a model or actress. No, I had to stop beating up on myself. I was happy the way I was. Sort of. “Besides owning one-third of the team, I’m my brother’s personal assistant and punching bag. Oh, and I share public relations duties with Juan Diaz, our public relations director.”

“Sounds fun,” Flynn said with a smirk.

“Loads.”

I could see him contemplating his next question.

“I hear you’ve tested the car.”

That statement sucked the life from me. Why was this rumor persisting, and how could I stop it? Other than killing my brother? “No. I haven’t tested the car. I haven’t gotten into the car. Right now, I don’t even know where the car is.”

He chuckled. “Cute. So, it’s just a rumor?”

“It is.”

“Riedl said you were good back in the day. Probably could have raced cars in this league if you’d kept it up.”

I furrowed my brows. Erich and Flynn had talked about me? This made me feel uncomfortable. I enjoyed being anonymous, that picture hanging on the wall that no one really noticed.

“There’s two problems with that. I wasn’t that good, and I didn’t want to keep it up. It was something I did for a bit of fun at the time, but I never took it as seriously as my brother.”

“And now you are his assistant and do PR part-time.”

I wanted to kick this jerk in the balls.

“And own one-third of the team,” I added.

“Right. How could I forget? And your brother’s punching bag.”

Yup. I was done. “This has been so much fun, but I must be going. Good luck in the race, Mr. Flynn.”

I walked away and didn’t look back.

* * *

For weeks, Rafe was content to keep perpetuating the lie that I was testing the

Perez cars. I didn't understand why. I'd tried to talk to him about it more than a few times, but he rebuffed me each time. With no answers, I flew to England where the next race would take place. London was like a second home to me; it had been my father's base when he drove cars for the Merrick team. He'd bought a flat there, one the Perez family kept to this day.

Jess was staying in the flat while she put her journalism degree to good use—or was she?—writing freelance for mainly English tabloids, although she worked for anyone who wanted her work. She wrote trashy celebrity stories using all the contacts she'd made over the years. She also spent a huge amount of time stateside, where the tabloid she worked with most ran an American version of their trash heap of a newspaper. But who was I to judge? Jess was in her element.

I caught up with my best friend, and we had lunch on an outdoor patio. I hadn't seen her in months. We'd both gone to university in Montreal, where we made so many friends. And we made sure to see each other every summer. That was now in jeopardy with my new job.

"I'm still not used to this," Jess said, glaring at me.

"Used to what?" I asked, sipping my mineral water.

"You not being around. Remember all the fun we had? Me chasing boys and you avoiding them? Staying up until ungodly hours cramming for exams? Me dragging you to parties and you pretending to enjoy it?"

I shook my head. "Yes, such wonderful times."

"I have one huge regret about those years," Jess said with a pout. "I had wanted you to hook up with a guy, lose your V-card, have fabulous sex, and enjoy life more."

"I'm not sure that having sex is required to do that."

"I haven't given up. I'll find the right guy for you, otherwise you'll die a virgin."

I rolled my eyes. "For now, it's time to join the real world now. I think we've had enough of the partying—well, I have, at least. We've got to embrace our new jobs. Although, I think yours is much more interesting than mine."

Jess shrugged and sighed. "I thought it would be more exciting, but all these deadlines and chasing stories. And sometimes it doesn't feel right going after a story that may hurt someone's feelings. Fortunately, I never have to cover the royals. That's dreadfully boring."

Jess brushed a blonde wave from her face, and the action caught the

attention of most of the men on the patio. Jess was a natural beauty, with the endearing smattering of freckles that she refused to cover. She was tall with the right number of curves. And she was always dressed impeccably and on trend. When I needed fashion advice, Jess was my go-to. But even though we were so inherently different, we'd immediately clicked when first met as toddlers. And while Jess and I had never lived in the same city for long, other than our two years in Montreal before she'd moved on to finish her journalism degree in nearby Ottawa, it was our shared summers and holidays where our friendship was solidified.

"But enough about me. What's going on with you?" Jess asked.

"Nothing much. Rafe has me attending some charity golf tournament in his place this weekend. Talk about boring."

Jess smiled at that bit of information. "Can I get an invite? Sounds like a breeding ground for gossip."

"I don't see why not."

Jess sipped her water. "And how is your dear brother?"

"Being an ass and starting rumors about me testing cars."

"What's that? Testing cars?" she asked, digging in to her Caprese salad.

"It's testing new modifications to the car. New engines. That kind of crap. The whole idea that I would do it is ridiculous, but he's trying to drum up some press."

Jess tilted her head. "But why?"

"I don't know."

That wasn't sitting well with Jess. "He's started a rumor that he knows will never be true and can be easily disproven? And he's probably going to keep this lie going, right?"

"I assume."

"He's up to something."

"You think?"

Jess pushed her plate aside and motioned for me to lean in closer. "Your brother doesn't strike me as an attention whore. He's all about the Perez team and making it a success. Could this rumor be linked to that? A way to get press for the team?"

"Possibly. But why?"

"What are the main reasons for that? Why does someone seek attention when it's not just about the attention?"

I thought for a moment, and then it dawned on me, making my stomach

churn.

“You think it’s financial?” And if he needed ridiculous rumors to drum up money, I was screwed.

“I don’t know. Obviously, that’s just a guess, but what other reason could there be?”

I prayed it was another reason because if Rafe’s cry for attention was for financial reasons, and the team was in trouble, I was about to lose a small fortune, and at the same time face my mother’s wrath.

Chapter Three

Devin

What was that tapping sound? Each tap sounded different from the last, and whatever it was, the noise was driving me crazy. Was someone trying to contact me with bloody Morse code? I opened one eye, then the other. I looked over and, fuck, Cora was still here. Or was it Carla? What the hell was her name? We'd met at party the night before, thrown by one of the Russo sponsors, and she'd said she was an actress, or was she a singer? We drank, we chatted, then she came to mine, and we'd fucked. I distinctly remembered calling her a cab, but then we'd gotten into the tequila, and here she was. In my bed instead of her own. And that incessant tapping? Her fingernails were clacking away on her damn phone.

"Oh, you're up," she said in a far too cheerful voice.

She looked different without all the makeup on. Like a different person completely, not bad, necessarily, but not herself, whatever that was. But her fabulous tits looked the same, and suddenly my cock was twitching.

"Didn't I call you an Uber last night?" I said, rubbing at my tired eyes. As much as my cock wanted some action, I had to shower and get to a team meeting in an hour. I couldn't be late again.

"Yeah, but we were having so much fun," she said, setting her phone down on the nightstand and moving closer to me, rubbing those fabulous tits against my arm. She grasped my throbbing cock and licked her lips. "We could have some fun again."

The previous night *had* been fun, but she had to go. I didn't do sleepovers, and I certainly had no intention of seeing her again, despite what my cock wanted. It was time for the brain in my head to take over. "No time for this," I said, pushing her hand away. "I have a team meeting, and you

need to get back to wherever you live.” I slipped out of bed and cast her a quick look. She was frowning like a five-year-old. I hated that shit. My cock suddenly went limp.

“Do you have to go? I could stay, and we could hang out after your meeting. I can definitely make it worth your while.”

Nope. No one stayed at my house, especially if I wasn't there. “Sorry, Cora ... Carly? Whatever your name is. You've got to get going.”

She was scowling now. “It's Chiara.”

“Right. Well, time to get dressed. I'll call you an Uber.”

Because she seemed a bit pissed that I'd gotten her name wrong, I waited to take that shower until she was safely out of my house and in her Uber. I made no mention of calling her again because I wasn't *that* kind of asshole. I didn't want to get her hopes up because I'd already screwed this up. I had a strict rule, and I'd gone and broken it by letting Chiara spend the night. Absolutely no one spent the night. I couldn't let a woman think we'd have something long-term, because it was never going to happen. There was absolutely no chance of that. And I had to make sure I didn't run into this bird again.

I made the meeting with time to spare. Riedl was there, droning on about tire compounds to Davide, our chief racing engineer, and I tried not to yawn as I grabbed an espresso. I had to admit that Russo was a step up from my last team. We hadn't even had a bloody drip machine at Knight, let alone a full-fledged espresso machine with all the gadgets. Not that I'd ever admit it to anyone on the team and give them the satisfaction, but getting the Russo ride was the best thing that had ever happened to me. It opened doors, it made me money, and it got me any woman I wanted.

The best thing that ever happened to me, but a little voice in my head piped up that it was all boring shit.

Anyone who thought that all those things would make them happy had no idea. None of it really mattered, although sometimes it was loads of fun. And though I knew something was missing, I couldn't put my finger on it, so that meant I'd just keep doing what I wanted, trying to fill that damn void.

I took a seat and pretended to listen to Davide and Riedl moan about things I didn't care about. The mechanics jumped in to argue about the tire compounds, and I sipped my coffee and nodded when necessary. Thankfully, none of them wanted my opinion. They never did.

What I wanted was sleep. I'd been out way too late last night, and then

with Cora—damn, Chiara—the night had gotten away from me. I may have nodded off toward the end of the meeting, because Matteo, my racing mechanic, tapped me on the shoulder, and I jolted. Crap. Hopefully, Davide hadn't noticed.

“You look like shit,” Matteo said.

“Long night,” I said.

“Every night is a long night for you. Maybe take a break from the models?”

“Never,” I said, and we both laughed.

“Don't forget about testing later this week. We're going to try out the new engine.”

“Right. Can't wait.”

I tried to slip away and made it past both Davide and Riedl, but a hand grabbed on to my arm. Great. Who now? I turned and there was Sara Massi, the head of communications for the team and rumored to be Luciano Martini's sidepiece. It helped to get ahead when you were shagging the team's owner. She was a real hard-ass and ruled with an iron fist. She'd never been nice to me, and as hard as I'd tried to be nice to her—which was fucking hard—I couldn't break through.

It didn't help that she was hot for her age. In her mid-forties, the woman looked thirty. Her tits were still perky, her ass was curvy, and she was just about as tall as I was. She never smiled and looked like she'd be a firecracker in the sack. Whip and all.

“Hello, Sara,” I said as pleasantly as possible. I was a bit scared of her.

“Riedl cannot make it to the charity golf tournament. You will be going in his place.”

I noted that it wasn't a request. I also noted that she'd make a fucking hot dominatrix, not that I was into that. I liked to maintain control. “I'm not much of a golfer.”

“I'm sure you'll have no trouble faking it.”

Then she was gone, and I couldn't tear my gaze from her perfect ass. Suddenly it hit me, and I realized that comment of hers had a double meaning. Damn it, the woman was such a hard-ass and nasty too. I kind of liked it, not that I'd ever make a play. I wanted to keep my ride.

But because she'd kept me around that extra minute, Riedl had seen me and sauntered over. Fuck me. I just wanted to go home and get a few hours of sleep, not deal with this smug asshole.

“What was going on with Luna in Dallas?”

The German had me completely confused. “Perez?”

“Yes, how many Lunas do you know? Never mind, I’m sure it’s more than a few.”

“Look, mate, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” And I truly didn’t.

“At the banquet. When Jane pulled me aside to talk about what I thought of the track in Dallas. She started asking very odd questions, like if I’d purchased cowboy boots or a cowboy hat. And had I visited any oil fields. The whole conversation was ridiculous and contrived. I only assumed you were behind it somehow so that you could be alone with Luna.”

What the hell was he talking about? “Sorry? No. I have no idea what Jane was up to, but I can assure you I had nothing to do with it.” What the fuck *was* going on? But now that Riedl had mentioned it, the whole thing did seem rather odd. Was Perez into me? I mean, it wouldn’t be surprising, but she certainly didn’t give off that vibe.

Riedl stepped closer to me and wagged his finger in my face. “Luna is one hundred percent off limits. I mean it.”

“You hoping to tap her yourself?”

Riedl’s face blotted red, and I was sure he was going to deck me. “No. Absolutely not. I’ve known her since she was in diapers.”

“Some guys have a thing for that.”

Riedl’s hazel eyes narrowed, and I was now sure that he was going to deck me, but since he was a self-professed pacifist, he grunted instead. “Let me make this clear to you. If you try anything with Luna, I’ll have you castrated. Do you understand?”

I thought about rolling my eyes but contained myself. “I have no interest in her. Can you imagine shagging the female equivalent of Rafe Perez? No thank you.”

“You’re insufferable,” Riedl said and pushed past me.

The man was a fucking wanker.

Chapter Four

Luna

Jess was more excited about the golf tournament than I was. Something about gossip and business being the two best things about the sport.

Before we'd even left the flat, Jess had chosen an outfit for me to wear. I reminded her that I was required to wear my Perez polo shirt, but Jess had chosen a matching short skirt that put my tanned and toned legs on display.

"You have to show off your best assets, Luna, and that's your legs. If Rafe wants you to get some attention, this is how we're going to get it."

"If I wanted attention, I'd get a boob job."

"Or that," Jess said and laughed.

I drove up to the front entrance of the Fairbanks Golf and Country Club. In the distance, I could see the parking lot filled with sports cars and ultra-expensive luxury sedans. My own sedan was clearly out of place, among the Ferraris, Jaguars, Aston Martins, and other high-end cars, but I didn't care as I handed the keys to a valet. I wasn't here to show off. A young man introduced himself as my caddie. He took my clubs, and Jess and I went into the clubhouse to register.

We found it packed with various English celebrities, everyone from actors to news anchors and journalists. There were also several drivers from all the teams. I said hello to a few as they stared at Jess, who seemed to enjoy the attention.

"Check out who's here," she said under her breath. "I'm going to have news stories to last a lifetime."

"Just be discreet, please."

The last thing I needed was for her to get me in trouble. It would be added to Rafe's long list of things I couldn't get right.

“My work is all about being discreet. Don’t you worry about me.” And with that, she wandered off to get her gossip.

I meandered through the crowd and found the registration desk.

“Luna Perez,” I said to the young man behind the desk. I attempted to scan his list in the hope that I was set up with someone interesting.

“Ah, yes, Ms. Perez. Your tee time is at eight twenty-nine, and you are paired with Devin Flynn.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” So much for interesting. Sure, he was hot, but he was also a jerk. And jerk always outweighed any kind of hotness.

“That’s the name I have here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, showing me his printout.

“Well, thank you anyway.”

I made my way back to Jess, who was chatting with an English actor who’d found himself in some recent marital trouble. Jess pulled out her phone and texted him her number before turning her attention back to me. It sure hadn’t taken Jess long to network.

“What hunk are you partnered with?” she asked.

“He’s more an ignoramus than a hunk.”

“Oh no! Who is it?”

“The dimwit walking toward us.”

Devin Flynn had seen me and was headed our way.

“Luna, what a pleasant surprise it was for me to find out that I’d be partnered with you,” he said, flashing his infectious smile. There were lines around his mouth when he smiled, making him appear older than he actually was. On another man, that may have made him look less handsome, but it worked on Flynn. “I was hoping to show your brother how to play golf, just like I show him how to drive.”

I puffed out an exasperated breath. This guy was unbelievable.

“I’m Jess Cartwright,” Jess said, extending her hand to him. I could tell by the way she was batting her eyelashes and licking her lips that she thought he was attractive.

“It’s a pleasure,” Devin said, shaking her hand and taking her in very carefully.

“Look at the time,” I said, barely glancing at my watch. “We should be getting out to the first tee.”

I pushed Jess toward the door. “You’re too tall for him,” I said. At five

foot ten, she was his height, and in the heels she always wore, she'd tower over him.

"I can wear flats. And who cares about height anymore?"

I didn't stick around to finish the discussion. Instead, I followed Flynn to the first tee while Jess joined the spectators. Normally, I would have never left a friend stranded, but Jess was the exception. She would have no difficulty making friends, especially of the male variety.

The tournament was a laid-back affair. Flynn was in his element. He acted like a complete fool at the first hole, hamming it up for photographers by pretending to use his golf club as a baseball bat. I stood off to the side and watched as he prepared to take his first swing. I knew by his form that he'd lied about his handicap, and as his ball sailed into the trees, I concluded that it was going to be a long afternoon.

The first hole was a short par three. With my first hit, my ball came within feet of the flag. Devin whistled and gave me a thumbs-up sign. I muttered a few swears back as he went in search of his ball in the trees. I walked over to where Jess was standing, knowing it would be a while.

"Okay, before you completely dismiss this idea, hear me out," Jess said. "This guy could help you. Sure, he's a bit goofy, but if you play along, you could cash in on that attention your brother seems to be craving lately."

"What on earth do you mean?"

She gestured. "Look at Flynn. He's working the crowd to his advantage, so why aren't you doing the same?"

"What am I supposed to do? Aim for the trees too? I want to get home before dark."

"Be the straight man to his comical one. When he makes a bad shot, humiliate him. He's not going to care. He's here to have fun."

"You know I'm not that way."

"Start being that way," she said, pushing me back to the course.

After three shots on a par-three hole, Devin got his ball on the green. I was finally able to make my shot. And taking Jess's advice, I checked my watch a few times, and even pointed to it when Devin pitched his ball onto the green. That got a few laughs. Devin's putting abilities were only slightly better than his driving ability. Again, I made a face and got a few more laughs. I was finally able to putt and eventually parred the hole. Devin was four over.

"You lied about your handicap, didn't you?" I asked as he took a club

from his appointed caddie. I couldn't imagine how bad he'd be if he wasn't given the correct club.

"Is it obvious?" he asked with a sly smile as he prepared for his first shot on the second hole.

"Painfully."

"Who doesn't lie about their handicap?"

"Me."

"You must be very boring," Devin said, positioning himself at the tee box. He liked to wiggle his ass a lot as he prepared, and I couldn't help but notice in his form-fitting blue golf pants.

I took exception to his insult, but I swallowed it. When his second shot sailed straight into the bunker, I couldn't help but comment. "You couldn't hit the green if it were a thousand feet wide and right in front of you," I said, taking my driver and setting the ball on my tee.

"And you are still boring," he said with a wink.

By the sixth hole, I was six over par and Devin was nineteen. He got into an argument with his caddie, blaming the young man for his own terrible play. Devin had taken it upon himself to choose his clubs, and I could predict his golfing future: he was going to suck badly.

On the seventh hole, his ball sailed into the water with a plunk. I chuckled as I stepped up to the tee. It was Devin's turn to take exception.

"What?" he demanded.

"Only an idiot would use a five iron on this hole."

"Big deal. You're better at golf than me. It hardly makes you in better shape."

Those were fighting words. Game on! "You name any sport, and I'll bet that I'm better at it."

Devin nodded and smiled. "I'll take you up on that challenge, Ms. Perez. I bet you I can throw my golf ball farther than you."

Not exactly a sport, but I was up for it. "Maybe you should be doing that anyway. It might help your score."

"Ha ha," he said, grabbing a ball from his caddie and throwing it through the air. It landed a good distance away from us.

"I was right. You should be throwing your balls instead of swinging at them."

"There's something naughty there," he said, narrowing an eye.

"You're gross. But I *am* impressed with your distance." I picked up the

ball I'd just placed on my tee, and with one swift motion, sent it through the air. It landed a few feet past Devin's ball.

Devin's face soured. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I played baseball in high school and university. Do you care to challenge me to anything else? How about a race to the green? I'll give you a head start."

"I would like to challenge you to a best of three because that throw was a fluke."

"Do you really want to keep embarrassing yourself?" I asked, picking up another ball. By then, a few reporters had caught wind of the challenge going on at the seventh hole. They watched as Devin lost a best of three, then a best of five, and finally a best of seven.

"Care for a best of nine, Mr. Flynn, or are you satisfied that I've kicked your ass?"

"How the hell do you keep doing that?"

"It's called strength and technique, and you don't have either. Now, can I take my shot?"

"Go ahead," he said in defeat.

By then, our caddies had furiously gone to retrieve all the balls littering the fairway.

On the ninth hole, Devin finally shot for par. He jumped up and down and threw his fist in the air. I waited for his little drama to end before taking my shot for one over on the hole.

"Do you know what you are?" Devin said, taking a seven iron from his caddie. He'd finally gone back to allowing the young man to choose his clubs.

"No, what am I?" I asked dryly. I couldn't wait to hear it.

"You are a female version of your brother."

"I suspect that isn't a compliment."

"It isn't," Devin said, positioning himself for the tenth hole. I was careful to be quiet as he took his swing. When he was finished, he continued, "You are both boring."

"You mentioned that earlier."

"No excitement from either of you. It's like pulling teeth to get you to smile. Do you know how to smile?" he asked, handing his club back to his caddie. "You lift the corners of your mouth and voila, a smile."

"You don't give me anything to smile about."

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever heard your brother laugh either,” Devin said as I was about to swing. I caught myself before the shot and glared at him. He fell silent.

“My brother happens to be a very serious person. He’s always been that way.”

“He takes life far too seriously.”

“It seems you don’t take life seriously enough.”

By the last hole, I no longer knew Devin’s score. He had fallen so far behind that I couldn’t keep count. I ended the afternoon shooting a hundred and two. I was pleased. That was an impressive score for the course.

“So, tell me, where did you learn to golf?” Devin asked.

“My stepfather taught me. He also encouraged me to play soccer. I almost made it to the national team, but I wasn’t quite good enough.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I don’t lie.”

“Clearly you are too busy playing sports, so you have no time for a social life, which leads you to being boring.”

“Enough with that already,” I said, giving him a playful push.

We entered the clubhouse and reported back to the tournament organizer. I was about to say goodbye to Devin when he stopped me.

“Why don’t you and your friend come to Zelda’s tonight.”

“Who is Zelda?”

Devin tilted his head and gave me a confused look. “It’s a club.”

“Oh,” I said, mildly embarrassed. And then I caught on. “If you’re interested in Jess, I wouldn’t bother. You don’t meet her height requirements.”

“Low blow, Ms. Perez,” Devin said, feigning hurt.

I was about to leave but remembered what Jess had said. If Rafe wanted publicity, maybe I should give it to him.

“But fine. If you want us to come, we will. It could be fun.”

“Ah, finally a smile. Come around ten. I’ll be there with some friends. I promise you a good time.”

Chapter Five

Luna

Jess flawlessly applied some red lipstick, smacking her perfect lips together before sweeping her long blonde hair over one shoulder. I was lying on Jess's bed, reading one of her many fashion magazines. When did she have the time to read them all? Between parties, writing articles, more parties, dating hot guys, and finding the perfect outfit, I didn't see even five minutes of her day unaccounted for.

"How tall is he?" Jess asked.

"I don't know. Maybe five foot ten. Possibly a little taller," I said, scanning over a quiz about how to keep your man from straying.

"He's good-looking, but there's something about him that doesn't grab me."

"His goofiness?"

"That's not it," she said, checking herself over in the mirror again. Jess had on the tightest little black dress I'd ever seen. Her ample cleavage was bursting to be set free from its confines.

"Not rich enough?"

Jess gave me the finger. "I don't care about that. But there's this *je ne sais quoi* about him. I get the feeling he's not refined, like he's just a little too rough around the edges."

"You can say that again. What gave it away for you? The constant cursing and yelling on the golf course?"

Jess spritzed some perfume and turned to me. "What's his story?"

"I don't know. He must come from money. All these race car drivers do."

"I don't think so," Jess said. "He lacks ... something."

I climbed off the bed and followed Jess through the flat as she grabbed

her keys and purse. “Class? Tact? Sophistication? Refinement? Elegance? Grace?”

She sighed in annoyance. “I was going to say confidence, actually.”

Now, that stopped me short. “Confidence? Are you nuts? That’s the only thing he has too much of.”

We walked to the lift and down to the parking garage. We got into Jess’s BMW and were off.

“It’s just an observation.”

“A wrong one.”

As we drove, a thought did occur to me. “Did you know what Zelda’s was?”

“Who doesn’t? It’s the most popular place in London right now.”

“Oh,” I said, biting my lip.

“Don’t tell me. When he asked you to come to Zelda’s, you thought Zelda was a person?”

“It was an honest mistake,” I said pathetically.

Jess laughed to the point that she almost had to pull over. I wasn’t amused.

When we reached Zelda’s, the place was packed. A never-ending line of partygoers snaked around the block down the other side of the redbrick building. We breezed past them and inside to the dark, pulsating club. I pushed my way through the throngs of people, trying to keep up with Jess. I was surprised we found Devin in the crowd with a few of his friends, drinking beers, and checking out the women. His friends all stopped to stare at Jess and didn’t even notice me standing behind her. I wasn’t surprised. There was no way I could stack up to Jess and her ... well ... stack.

She loved the attention, and it took her a moment to remember that I was there too. Introductions were made, and Devin offered to buy us drinks.

“Nothing for me,” I said. I needed to keep my wits about me since I knew how this would play out. The guys would buy her drinks all night, hoping to wear her down. I’d be the sober one who took her home and made sure she didn’t get into any trouble. Essentially, I’d be her mom.

Devin arched his brows in confusion. “Nothing?”

“She’ll have a vodka tonic,” Jess said. “And I’ll have a beer.”

“Well, now we’re talking,” Devin said, making his way over to the bar.

Jess turned to me and scowled. “You need to loosen up.”

“But I’m not interested in drinking.”

“If I knew you’d be fun without alcohol, I wouldn’t have to shove it down your throat.”

I grunted and shook my head as Jess struck up a conversation with Colin, one of Devin’s friends. I stood by myself, wishing I’d never agreed to come. I tried to smile, but I wanted desperately to go home, get in my pajamas, and watch a good action flick.

“Your drink, Ms. Perez.”

“Thanks,” I said, accepting it from Devin.

I took a seat at the booth he’d commandeered and was shocked when he sat down next to me. Didn’t he have a woman to impress, somewhere? To charm into his bed?

“So, you don’t drink?”

“Not to excess. I do like a good glass of red wine,” I said, taking a sip of my vodka tonic. “And you don’t need to say it. I get it. I’m boring. I suppose I’m beginning to prove that.”

“Just a little,” he said with a wink.

I hated how adorable that was. “This isn’t my scene. What can I say? I’m perfectly happy spending the evening going for a long walk followed by reading a good book and heading to bed.”

“Admirable. I prefer getting drunk and getting laid, and not necessarily in that order. I’m flexible that way.”

“I suspected as much.”

Jess wandered over and put an arm around my shoulder. “Devin, I think we need to get my friend liquored up a little. Only then will she have some fun.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No. I’m not interested.”

“Sure you are,” Jess said, calling over a server and ordering some tequila shots. A few minutes later, the server returned with six shots. “Two each! On the count of three, we drink up.”

“I hate you,” I said to Jess.

“Just do it,” she said, shoving one shot into my hand.

On the count of three, I gulped back my shot. It burned down my throat and warmed my stomach. Another few drinks and I knew I’d be drunk. I had to be careful about this. We repeated the same little game, and Jess made sure to keep the drinks coming.

“Give her ten minutes, Devin, and she’ll be the life of the party.”

“I look forward to that,” Devin said with a devious smile.

Jess wasn't wrong. As the alcohol took hold, I felt as though my feet were barely touching the ground. First, I giggled uncontrollably. Then Devin took the opportunity to get me out onto the dance floor. I laughed and danced, feeling my long curls bouncing through the air and all around me. We were both terrible dancers, but I didn't care. And more importantly, I was having fun.

I had no idea how many songs we'd danced to, but I needed a break. I collapsed into a booth with Devin right behind me. His friend Colin was there, and I listened to them talk about sports. I barely noticed when Colin wandered off, leaving me alone with Devin. I was too busy drinking another vodka tonic.

"Having a good time, now, Ms. Perez?"

I stopped drinking and gazed over at him. He looked good. Really good. Too damn good. I'd gotten him all sweaty on the dance floor, and now I wanted more. Part of me wanted to jump into his lap and kiss him, but the only shred of sanity left in me thwarted that. "It's all right."

He laughed and rolled his eyes. "I think this has been the least boring I've ever seen you."

"I'm capable of being interesting."

He scratched his chin as he looked at me. As if he wanted to devour me. Had a man ever looked at me like that before? Or maybe I was imagining it all, thanks to the alcohol.

"Your friend was right," he said. "You do loosen up after a few drinks. Speaking of your friend, is she single?"

I frowned, and by the time my brain caught up with the action, I was sure he'd seen it. But why did I even care? Why did that statement prick my heart?

"You're not her type," I said, my voice suddenly sounding very serious.

"How do you know?"

"Because you're not."

He pffted. "What does that even mean? And how would you know?"

I'd gone from lusting after him to wanting to kick him in the balls. Hard. And all that in less than a minute. "I'm her friend. I would know. You're not her type."

"She's on her way over here, so perhaps I'll ask her."

I huffed as Jess squeezed in next to me.

"Jess, can I get you another drink?" Devin asked. "Or should we maybe

head out and go someplace else?” It was like I’d suddenly become invisible. What was going on here? And why did this feeling now grip my heart?

“Where were you thinking?” Jess asked, with a glint in her eye.

“Somewhere quieter. Say, my place?”

Okay, drunk or not, I’d had enough, and there was no way she was going home with Devin Flynn. “She’s coming home with me!”

Devin smiled like the shit he was. “I get it now. I misunderstood before. Well, I’m game for a threesome. They’re fun.”

I gritted my teeth, or what I could feel of them. “I didn’t mean *that* kind of together. And you wouldn’t be invited even if that’s what I meant!”

“It could still be fun.”

“No. Not even a little.”

Jess stood up and decided to abandon me and head to the bar instead. I guess she’d grown bored. That meant that he set his sights on me with a mischievous grin.

“Why don’t you come sit next to me so we can talk?” he said.

“We can talk from where I’m sitting.” Which wasn’t very far away from him anyway.

“Fine, I’ll come sit next to you,” he said, stumbling over to me. He sat so close, I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“I don’t appreciate you propositioning my friend right in front of me.”

This confused him. “Were you jealous?”

“Extremely,” I said sarcastically.

“What will it take to get you to relax and unwind? Weed? You’d probably prefer edibles. Am I right?”

“No!”

“Sex?”

I looked at him with wide eyes. “You will try that on anyone, won’t you?”

“I’m sure you find me irresistible.”

“More like irredeemable.”

He stared at me for a long moment and said, “I can guarantee you the best night of your life.”

“I hardly think so,” I said, a little unnerved by his intense gaze.

He waited a moment and said, “Do you want to have sex now?”

“Not with you!”

“Why not?”

“I’m a nice girl.”

“I’ve fucked nice girls. No one has to know.”

“I’m sure you have. I also don’t trust you.” The fact I was a virgin nearly left my lips, but I managed to rein that in.

He contemplated that for a moment. “I wouldn’t trust me either.”

I shifted in my seat and leaned back and away from Flynn. I couldn’t even imagine having sex for the first time with him. Or maybe I could. He was probably good at it. “Why would you even want to sleep with me?”

“Why not?”

“That’s not very enthusiastic.”

“I suppose if I thought I had a chance tonight, I could become very enthusiastic.”

Now it was perfectly clear, in case I’d had any doubts. He’d sleep with any woman he could get his hands on. “So, this is all a game just to needle me?”

His jaw tensed, and he moved in closer to me, so close I thought he might kiss me, and that scared the shit out of me. “Just to be clear, I’d fuck you right here if you let me. I think you’re feisty. And hot. And probably flexible. A mind-blowing combination.”

I caught my breath. Maybe before he’d been teasing me, but right now, I was sure this was no joke. I parted my lips to speak, but stopped myself before I said something stupid. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Too bad, but I’ll leave my offer on the table. You can take it any time.”

Was it the booze talking? I didn’t know. As the night wore down, after Jess and I had danced until our feet hurt, we took an Uber home. Maybe it was the leftover buzz of tequila, but I brought up Devin.

“What do you think of him?” I asked.

“He’s cool to hang out with, but he’d make a terrible boyfriend.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked innocently.

“Total playboy. He breaks hearts and doesn’t give a shit about it.”

“You think so?”

“Totally. Why are you— No. Please don’t tell me you have a thing for him.”

“God, no! He’s a jerk.”

“Okay, good. You had me worried there for a minute. Don’t fall for his shit, Luna. The only thing he’s ever going to give you is a broken heart and an STD.”

I knew she was right, but what were these feelings I was having, and how did I make them go away?

Chapter Six

Devin

I loved racing at Caldwell. As a kid, I'd dreamed of hoisting the first-place trophy here and having my family in the crowd cheering me on. So far, Dad had shown up, but my mum and sisters had never bothered to. They'd never been interested much in racing or what I did, and besides, having Mum around would be a liability. She'd be divulging all my secrets in no time. And my best had been a fourth-place finish, no trophy had been in sight, so nothing lost.

I daydreamed as Davide droned on about strategy and race conditions. I tried hard not to fall asleep, but it was bloody impossible. Davide's voice was like the dull hum of an airplane engine, lulling me into a slumber. It wasn't until he clapped his hands to signify that the meeting was over that I finally perked up. I was certain he'd done that to wake us all up.

I was nearly running for the door when Riedl called after me. Fuck. What did that shithead want now? A day didn't go by that he wasn't on my case about something. You'd think he was the owner of the team and not Luciano Martini. I had no idea what today's complaint would be. Another lecture to keep my racing lane clear, or to make sure I moved out of the way for him as quickly as possible? Yes, I loved racing for Russo. It was an honor. But being Riedl's teammate was torture.

"A moment?"

I plastered on a fake smile. "Sure. Of course."

He pointed to an empty corner of the garage, and I dutifully followed. He then stared at me, waiting for me to speak, even though he'd been the one who'd asked for this little tête-à-tête.

"And?" I said.

“It’s about Luna Perez. I thought I told you she was off limits.”

This again? For fuck’s sake. “You did. I do remember that. Is there a problem?” I asked as pleasantly as possible.

He shifted his feet and tried to loom over me, despite the fact he wasn’t any taller than I was. I maintained a neutral expression even though I wanted to laugh.

“Yes, there are a few problems,” he said with a fake smile. “First, you were her partner at the golf tournament. That’s not staying away from her.”

I nodded. “This is true, but I didn’t select her. I’m sure that was quite random. Was I supposed to refuse to be paired with her? Wouldn’t that have hurt her feelings? You seem to be concerned about those, so you surely wouldn’t want me to trample all over them by refusing to partner with her.”

Riedl’s jaw tensed, but his sarcastic smile remained. “I suppose not. But I understand you were later seen with her at a nightclub. Drinking and dancing together. That’s definitely not staying away from her.”

Did this bastard have spies following me? “Yes, I invited Perez and her friend. It was totally harmless. I made no moves on Ms. Perez.” No need to tell Riedl the truth.

“I’m only going to say this to you one more time. Stay away from her. Do not attempt to corrupt her. She’s a good person with a big heart. You ... are not.”

“Ouch. Got it. Now, in case you hadn’t noticed, I brought my new girlfriend this weekend. I have no designs on Ms. Perez.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Sure. Thanks for the chat.”

I imagine he didn’t hear me mutter “asshole” under my breath as I left the garage.

* * *

I made a point of having Henrika around, as painful as it was. She was drop-dead gorgeous, but as dumb as a post. My only solace was that at the end of the day, she went to her flat, and I went to mine. After this weekend, I’d be kicking her to the curb. But until then, I had to show her off and make sure that Riedl saw her.

And the next morning everyone saw her. Despite the cloud cover and cool

weather, Henrika was decked out in a plunging and fitted white blouse and what had to be the shortest gold miniskirt I'd ever seen. It barely covered her flat ass. She had on the highest of heels and sashayed through the paddock as if it were a runway. Was I putting on a show with her? Of course I was. The one thing my agent, Enzo, had stressed to me was to stay relevant and in the public eye. Henrika was going to help me do that this weekend.

We were on our way to the Russo entertainment tent, and everyone had stopped what they were doing to take notice of us ... well, of her. Normally, I loved this kind of attention, but today it seemed just a tad over the top despite what Enzo had preached to me.

And then I spotted her. Luna Perez, standing outside her team's garage, chatting with one of the Perez crew. She stopped talking when she saw us, and something in her expression changed. She'd been in an animated discussion, but now she seemed to sag right before my eyes. I gave her a quick nod and turned away. I hadn't liked what I'd seen. Was I the cause of that? Was Riedl trying to tell me something without explicitly saying it?

I dropped Henrika off at the entertainment tent and made my way to the Russo garage. I had to meet with my mechanic, Matteo, to discuss some qualifying strategy. I needed to get my times down and challenge for the first few spots on the grid, come race day. Especially if my dad was present. How great would it be to win the race and have him there to witness it?

The rest of my team was looking over the car and checking performance reviews. Matteo and I sat at a little table to discuss setup. The Italian had a frown on his face as he scrolled through his iPad. When he was done, he slammed it down and gave me a hard stare.

"You're too fat."

My head jerked back like he'd sucker-punched me. "Excuse me?"

"You have gained five kilos since the beginning of the racing season. In turn, you're killing your racing times. We've done all we can to lighten the car, but it's time for you to lighten yourself."

"I may have gained a few—"

"Stop drinking."

The air between us chilled, but Matteo had no remorse. His deep-set brown eyes didn't show an ounce of sympathy. Had anyone else talked to me that way, I would have decked them, but I respected Matteo. I also trusted him.

"I don't drink that much."

Matteo tilted his head. “What? You cannot be serious. You drink all the time. Alcohol is bloating you, keeping on that extra weight. Not to mention that you eat too much. You need to drop those five kilos. Maybe a few more. I talked to Davide, and we can bring in a nutritionist if that would help—”

I held up my hand to stop him. “You talked to Davide?” That had been a step too far. He’d gone behind my bloody back!

“Don’t get mad, but I did. I wasn’t specific, but I suggested that you and Riedl could both use a nutritionist.”

I huffed. “Right. Like anyone thinks Riedl needs a fucking nutritionist.”

Matteo leaned in closer to me. “I tried to be as discreet as possible with him. But the fact is that I discussed this with you two months ago, when you’d only gained two kilos. And what’s happened in those two months? You’ve gained three more kilos. And that doesn’t include the weight you gained over the winter.”

I frowned. “Are you sure those scales are accurate?”

“Yes. So this is what is going to happen. You’re going to cut back on the alcohol, see the nutritionist, and do proper workouts. If you gain even another kilo, Davide will have your head because you’ll never get those times down. You do realize this, right?”

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. Yeah, I knew it. Unlike other drivers, I refused to go to extremes to drop the weight, but if I could comply by cutting back on a beer here and there, I’d do it. And if I had to up my workouts, I’d do that too. I’d even eat less of Franco’s pasta.

“All right. Fine.”

“Good. Let’s weigh you in next month and see where you’re at.”

I felt like a fucking child as I slunk out of the garage and walked toward the dining tent. The best way to deal with this shit was a solid lunch. I’d eat whatever I wanted and start a bullshit diet tomorrow.

Chapter Seven

Luna

I dreaded the racing weekend at the Caldwell track outside of London. Rafe was still chasing after me at every opportunity to remind me to make myself more visible. He'd even suggested I try racing again in the lower circuits to gain some attention. I'd flatly refused, and it started a minor argument in the Perez pits. What he didn't understand was that when I did race, it was for fun. But it wasn't something I really loved. I didn't see it as a job or a calling. And that was what made it different for me.

He wouldn't hear it, though, and I'd finally had enough of his pestering and sought solace elsewhere. I thought of Erich Riedl. He was a creature of habit, and since it was twelve thirty, I knew he'd be having his lunch in the Russo dining tent. I found him eating steamed vegetables, brown rice, and grilled chicken, the same lunch he ate every day. I sat down next to him and let out a heavy sigh.

"You look troubled. Should we talk?"

"I'm just looking to escape my brother, but I'm always happy to chat."

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Franco can whip you up something, or you can eat what he's already prepared."

"Yes, I'd love to eat." Although part of me worried it would resemble Erich's lunch.

He asked the Russo chef to prepare me a plate. Thankfully, it was pasta with a generous helping of chicken parmesan. As we ate, I remembered an old story Uncle Roberto told me. Back when I was barely four to Erich's ten, our fathers had arranged a marriage for us. It would be a union of epic proportions, they'd both claimed. It was obvious for all to see what a liking Erich had taken to me. My uncle claimed that instead of playing with Rafe

when they were kids, Erich would play with me, with my dolls or later board games. What most people didn't know was that I was usually the odd kid out, surrounded by boys. Erich most likely felt sorry for me, playing all alone.

The romance our fathers had planned was destined to fail, especially after my father's death. The Riedls no longer spent part of their winters in Southern California. I didn't see my "future husband" much anymore, even though Erich's father, Michael, maintained close contact with my family and did whatever he could to mentor the fatherless children. Plus, a few years later, he married his high school sweetheart.

"Is your brother still nattering about you driving the Perez cars?"

"Every day," I said, grabbing a slice of freshly baked bread, dipping into my spaghetti, and lathering the piece with sauce. The Italian team had pasta on the menu at all times, even if Erich didn't touch it or the amazing bread. He liked to choose his carbohydrates carefully. "What am I supposed to do? I have no interest in driving the cars even in the capacity of test-driving them. Who am I to drive these cars?"

"I ask myself that all the time about some of these drivers on the circuit. They pay their way on to a team when they have no business being on the track. But, Luna, you are a different case. You own the car, and you aren't driving against other drivers."

"It's been seven or eight years since I've driven competitively. It doesn't interest me anymore."

"Not that I'm condoning what your brother is doing, but you were pretty good back in the day. People were talking about you as the next great Perez. I've never asked why you gave it up."

I shrugged. "I didn't love it. For a while it was fun, but then it became a job I didn't enjoy. And there was pressure to live up to my family name, and I didn't want to do it anymore. And if I'm honest, it was easy to walk away. And I wouldn't find it fun now."

"Tell Rafe that."

"I have, and he doesn't listen."

"Should I talk to him?"

"No. He'd be angry if he knew that I'd talked to you about this."

"He's desperate. Maybe you can think of something else to drum up some sponsorships. He told me about the financial problems."

I paused and tried to keep my face neutral. "Oh?"

"Yes, and he knows he can't keep sinking money into the team. It will

bankrupt all of you.”

I was surprised that my brother had confided all that to Erich. While he was a friend, he was also a competitor. “Yes, that’s a good idea. Maybe I can come up with something.”

We ate in silence for a moment before Erich spoke again.

“Flynn mentioned that you had a night out with him.”

I bristled. I wondered how much he’d told Erich, but by the expression on Erich’s face, it couldn’t have been much. If Erich knew how much I’d had to drink, he would have immediately reprimanded me.

“Have you ever heard of Zelda’s?”

“I’ve been there a couple of times. Is that where you went with Flynn?”

He’d been there? A few times? I really needed to get out more. “Yes,” I said, and was about to tell him more about the evening when Flynn himself came into the dining tent, dressed in his racing uniform.

“Where is my lunch?” he asked the chef and stopped when he saw me sitting with Erich. “Franco, you can bring it to me. I’ll be sitting with Erich and Ms. Perez.”

I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

“Ms. Perez,” he said, taking a seat next to Erich. “How are you this fine afternoon?”

“I’m okay. Thank you for asking.”

“Erich, have you seen how this woman can drink? She was sucking back tequila shots like they were going out of style.”

Erich’s face contorted as if he’d taken a bite of the sourest lemon. “I can’t say that I have,” he said.

“She’s a bloody riot. We couldn’t get her off the dance floor, at least until the alcohol wore off.”

The more time I spent with Flynn, the more I wanted to kill him. “Very funny,” I said.

Erich huffed. “Luna, don’t get used to hanging around with this guy. He’s going to ruin your liver.”

Flynn snickered. “Too bad you’re married, Erich. You and Luna would make a perfect match.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “We’re both boring?”

He pointed at me as if I’d won a huge jackpot. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“And speaking of romantic entanglements, the blonde who keeps hanging

around, does she belong to you?” Erich asked.

“So you’ve seen her?” Flynn said, raising a brow. “Why do you think I’m late for lunch?”

“Charming,” I said. I tried to banish the thought of him with the woman I’d seen walking with him through the paddock. For some reason, the sight of it had scratched at my heart.

“Her name is Henrika,” he said to me specifically. “She’s Swedish. She barely speaks English, but does that matter? We don’t talk that much.” He then turned his attention to the chef again. “Franco, I’m hungry!”

“Bastardo,” Franco said, slamming a plate of pasta in front of Flynn.

“Don’t you want to ever settle down?” Erich asked as we both watched Flynn wolf down his lunch.

“Settle down? That might make *you* happy, but I want to enjoy women—as many as I possibly can.”

“And what about Henrika?” I asked.

“Every good thing must come to an end. I give it another few weeks before she starts to grate on my nerves.”

I said nothing to that. I couldn’t believe how cavalier Flynn was when it came to relationships.

“And this is how you’re going to live the rest of your life?” Erich said.

“Who knows?” Flynn said, pouring himself a glass of water. “Six months from now, I could meet the woman of my dreams. She could sweep me off my feet, and we’d live happily ever after. But the chances of that are fucking slim.”

“To each their own, I suppose,” Erich said diplomatically.

“Some people choose to live their life the way Devin does,” I said, suddenly on the defensive. “But I’ll tell you something: If I were the woman who swept you off your feet, I probably wouldn’t notice because I wouldn’t give you the time of day or even a second look. You’ve had your hand in a few too many cookie jars, if you know what I mean. No woman who respects herself would want anything to do with someone like you.”

Erich blinked in stunned silence, while Flynn took the insult with a chuckle. “Well, darling, no chance you’d be the one sweeping me off my feet.”

I brushed aside the insult as best I could, and before I could speak, Erich jumped in.

“Look at the time,” he said, rising in an attempt to cool the growing

hostilities. “Luna, you should probably get back to your team.”

“You’re so accustomed to trash,” I said, ignoring Erich. It was as if he hadn’t said a word. I was on a roll now, and Flynn was going to know what I really thought. No more wallflower for me.

“Devin, Leo mentioned wanting to see you about some racing strategy,” Erich attempted.

“You know what you need,” Flynn said, his gaze bearing down on me. His jaw was tense, and his face was grower more crimson by the second.

“Let me guess. Because you’re so original, would it be a good lay?”

“I had a more colorful way of putting it.”

“It wouldn’t be with you. I don’t need you to pass along all the diseases you’ve picked up over the years.”

“Luna!” Erich said in dismay.

“Get her out of here,” Flynn snapped at Erich.

“My pleasure, asshole,” I said, rising.

“You know what? You aren’t boring,” Flynn called to me as Erich escorted me away. “You’re just a bitch.”

I flipped him the bird as I exited the tent.

Once we were safely outside, and I had a chance to catch my breath, Erich began an interrogation.

“What was that?”

“He is such a pompous son of a bitch.”

“What did he do to you?” Erich asked incredulously.

“He insulted me.”

“You insulted him first.”

Why was Erich taking his side? I knew then it was best to leave and diffuse the tense situation. “I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

I had no idea what had gotten into me. I’d crossed a line and vowed to myself that I’d apologize to Flynn later.

Maybe.

Chapter Eight

Luna

I let a week pass before I went to see Flynn to apologize. In that time he'd dumped Henrika and was solo for the race weekend in France, not that I really noticed or was keeping track. I made my way over to the Russo dining tent and found Flynn having lunch with Erich. I'd already mentioned my apology plan to Erich, so when he saw me, he took his cue to exit, leaving me alone with Flynn. Flynn groaned when I sat across from him.

"I just want to say I'm sorry," I said.

"That's refreshing. Someone who actually apologizes when they make an arse of themselves."

I fought with every ounce of me not to roll my eyes. "Right. Well, I don't know what possessed me to judge you like that. I'm sure you don't have any sexually transmitted diseases, and if you do, you probably practice safe sex so as not to pass them around."

Did I just say all that?

He scrunched his nose. "*That's* your apology?"

"Yes," I said tentatively. "Is it insufficient?"

"It's an odd one, but I'll accept it."

"It would be big of you to apologize back."

He smirked. "I'm sorry that you provoked me to say things I wouldn't have normally said."

I shook my head. He really was insufferable. "Okay, see, *that* is not an apology."

"It's the best one you're going to get, Ms. Perez. Now, are you staying for lunch, or do you have to run?" he asked, his sea-green eyes glinting in the soft light. "I do hate eating alone."

I thought about that for a moment. There was no harm in it. “I think I can spare some time.”

“Franco, another plate,” Flynn called to the chef.

“*Madonna*, do you ever stop eating?”

“Not for me this time, but for my guest,” he said, shooting a glare toward the kitchen.

Franco returned with a plate heavy with pasta that I knew I couldn’t finish—but I was going to try anyway. It looked delicious, with the fresh parmesan on top.

“You and Erich are close?” he asked after my first bite.

“He’s a special friend.”

He arched a brow. “A special friend? Sounds scandalous.”

“Not that kind of special friend. Is your mind always on sex?”

“Yes, except when I’m in the car. I figure if I’m driving a car at two hundred miles per hour, I should probably pay attention.”

“Good idea.”

“And Erich? This special relationship? You don’t get off that easily.”

“It’s family friendship. His father and my father were good friends. We used to spend a lot of time together. Besides, Erich is married, so it’s not that kind of *special*.”

Devin chuckled. “When has that ever stopped anyone? And if you’ve noticed, his wife is never around. It would be easy to sneak around behind her back.”

“I know Monica!” I snapped. “She’s an amazing woman. I would never do anything like that to her.”

“Ah, but you’ve thought about it?”

Flynn was really digging deep now. “Not even for a second. Erich’s like a brother to me. Are you trying to stir up some gossip?”

“No, but I see the way he looks at you, and I know a lot about men’s motivations. They’re never interested in a woman unless they can fool around with her. I call it screw potential.”

I couldn’t help but groan. Mostly because it grossed me out to think that Erich looked at me in any way other than as a sister. “You’re awful, and Erich isn’t like that.”

“Come to think about it, you’re right. He really isn’t,” Devin said, grabbing a piece of fresh bread that Franco had also left in a basket. He tore off a piece but didn’t pop it into his mouth. “And he doesn’t actually look at

you that way. I was simply trying to figure out your relationship with him.”

He was really pissing me off, which seemed to be a pattern for him. “I told you it’s friendship. And why do you care anyway?”

“I don’t. I’m making conversation.”

I wanted to kick him in the nuts and take my apology back. Thankfully, Erich returned just at that moment as if sensing an intervention might be needed.

“I would have thought you two would have torn each other’s heads off by now,” Erich said.

“Ms. Perez apologized, so I offered her lunch.”

“Yes, a free lunch,” Erich noted, and he didn’t look happy about it. “Luna, maybe next time you should see if you can get him to take you to a restaurant and have him actually *pay* for the lunch.” Erich seemed to think better of it and said, “Never mind that. It’s probably best to stay away from him altogether.”

There would be no next time. I pushed away my half-eaten pasta and rose. “I really should be getting back to my brother,” I said, checking my watch. “It’s been a pleasure, gentlemen.”

* * *

Rafe’s car spun out and crashed in France, and for the second time in a row, he didn’t finish a race. He was so irritated by the whole thing that when he offered me a week off before the next race in Miami, I jumped at the opportunity and flew to London to spend time with Jess.

“We are going to a new club,” Jess declared on my first night there. “And don’t even try to say no.”

This wasn’t what I’d had in mind for my week off. “Don’t you get bored of the club-hopping?”

“Never. It’s where I find my best gossip. I do have to write about these people. I’m not going to find out info at a park or watching TV all afternoon.”

The nightclub was called Thirst. It wasn’t scoring any points for name originality, but I’d agreed to go, so I let Jess pick my outfit, and, of course, she picked the tightest dress she could find that boosted my breasts so high that it looked like I had cleavage. Soon we were on our way. The place was

ultra-exclusive with a members-only policy. Neither of us were members, but the Cartwright name had cachet and so did Jess's press credentials, so we were ushered inside.

I hated bars. Each outing always ended up the same for me. Jess would push men away all night while I propped myself up on a barstool, nursing the same drink for hours and wishing I was at home.

"He said he was going to be here," Jess screamed over the music. She was scanning the crowd.

"Who are we looking for?"

"Josh Reynolds. He's a hot new actor who's up for one of those superhero movies we never watch. He's going to be here tonight, and I'm hoping to get a bit of info on him. Maybe take some pics."

Jess weaved her way through the crowd. I was trying to stay out of the way. The club was way beyond capacity. Was every person in London a member? Packed in like sardines, I narrowly missed slamming into one of the barmaids with a tray of drinks.

We stood in a corner while Jess inspected every face. I'd gotten myself a club soda and watched as men passed by Jess, staring longingly at her half-exposed cleavage. This sucked and as usual, I'd go home feeling a sense of self-loathing because none of the men looked at me that way—even though I didn't want to be here in the first place! It was an infuriating vicious cycle. I wondered if it was my wild, untamed mound of curls. Or was I too slim with cleavage that was almost nonexistent when not wearing this particular dress? I wasn't blessed with my mother's figure, and instead took after my father's slim but athletic side of the family. Jess claimed I had an excellent complexion and rarely plastered me with too much makeup. My makeup regimen consisted of some lip gloss and maybe some light foundation and blush on race weekends. That's if I remembered to put it on.

"If you smiled, you might actually get some attention," Jess said. "And you need to exude confidence. You aren't confident about how you look or feel. And it shows."

"But I thought brooding was what made women so hot," I said sarcastically.

Jess pursed her lips. "Twenty-three years old and you still haven't had a serious relationship. Stop holding out for that perfect guy and get yourself laid. Your virginity is your own fault."

"Thank you for that. You're such an amazing and encouraging friend.

You should be a motivational speaker. And while you're at it, do you mind keeping it down. Not everyone here needs to know I've never had sex."

"It may get you laid," Jess said dismissively.

A barstool became available and I quickly took it. With tensions rising between me and Jess, I thought it was a good idea to let my friend roam freely for a while. I'd be sure to keep an eye on her, though. Almost immediately, a man offered to buy Jess a drink, and she happily accepted. They made their way to the other end of the bar, but I could still see her.

I scanned the crowd. The dance floor was packed with rich people my age, dressed up and hoping to hook up with someone equally rich and beautiful. The whole scene was depressing, but at the same time, I wanted any one of those guys to look at me the way they looked at Jess, even if I had no intentions of hooking up with them.

Something caught my eye. The bar had a second level, and leaning against the railing was a familiar face. Devin Flynn was holding a drink and chatting with a curvy blonde.

I shook my head at the sight, turning my attention back to the soda in my hand. I wasn't the least bit surprised to see him there. How many women had he met in this place? That he then dated for a short while? The same ones who would strut through the paddock with him as if they were goddesses. Little did they know that the following week, a new blonde would take their place.

I thought of an evening in Belgium, when I'd been waiting for Rafe in our hotel lobby. I'd spotted Flynn with his latest blonde bombshell. They were checking into the hotel. As Flynn had made arrangements with the front desk attendant, the blonde caressed his arm with the tips of her fingers. He'd leaned in close to her ear to say something, and she smiled. The moment they were in the elevator, they were all over each other before the doors even closed.

I looked back up and saw that he was staring in my direction, and the blonde had disappeared. I didn't think he wasn't looking at me, though. How would he see me among all the lowly first-level patrons? Jess had explained earlier that only the elite made it to the second level.

"Do you want a drink?" Jess asked, startling me. She seemed to have materialized from out of nowhere.

I held up my glass of water to her. "I have a vodka tonic in here," I lied.

Jess seemed to buy it and stood next to me for a few minutes before

heading over to the bar for another drink.

I looked back up to the railing, but Flynn was gone. I was disappointed that my entertainment for the evening had left. I wondered if he actually enjoyed his life. How much fun could juggling women and parties really be? Could he ever truly find happiness jumping from one bed to the next?

A few minutes later, he returned to the railing with a new blonde and another drink. I recognized this woman. She was an English model who'd graced the covers of a few magazines. Jess had done a piece on her, something about late-night partying with an American actor. Flynn looked uninterested in the model. No doubt her breasts weren't large enough. I was certain that was one of Flynn's prerequisites. He *did* have his standards. How could I forget his concept of screw potential? The woman seemed to try to engage him in conversation for a few minutes until she finally gave up and excused herself.

My attention was diverted when Jess returned with two guys, both of whom seemed interested in her. She introduced me. The man with the dark hair had been the one Jess had been looking for since we'd arrived. The other guy was his friend and had been given the task of entertaining me while Jess got to know her new potential target.

"I'm Vic," he said with a smile.

"Luna," I said, wishing the earth would swallow me whole.

"Ever been here before?"

"No, my first time. How about you?"

"I've been before," he said, looking around. It was my first clue that he wasn't the least bit interested. "So how did you even get in here?"

I gasped a little at the audacity of the question. "Jess used her charms," was my reply.

"Guess you're lucky to be her friend."

I wanted to kill this guy. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, normally they don't let just anyone in here."

Heat was rising in my cheeks. I was about to retort but got interrupted instead.

"Ms. Perez, what on earth are you doing down here?" someone asked, whispering in my ear. The voice sent a chill through me. And it was the good kind of chill.

Chapter Nine

Luna

“O h, hi, Devin.”

Vic’s bored face lit up. “You know Devin Flynn?” he said to me.

“Know me? I’m lucky to know her,” Devin said with a devilish smile. “Ms. Perez, your presence is required upstairs.”

For a split second, I considered not playing along, but then thought better of it. “You’ll have to excuse me,” I said to an open-mouthed Vic. “I have somewhere better to be.”

Devin took my hand as excitement bubbled in my veins. As we climbed up the winding stairs, I felt like a princess, and maybe clubbing wasn’t so bad when this was your usual experience of it. And as we walked past the bouncers guarding the entrance, I couldn’t help but beam. I was the center of attention for once, not just Jess’s sidekick.

“I have a table in the corner,” Devin said, still holding my hand. His hand was warm and rough but comforting.

“Thank you for saving me.”

A little grin formed on his lips. “There I was, minding my own business, and I see the daughter of Marco Perez looking as though she needed rescuing. So I rode in on my white horse and whisked you away. Who was that tool you were talking to anyway?”

“Nobody,” I said, and not a truer statement had ever been said.

“I’ll take your word for it. He didn’t look interesting.”

His sea-green eyes sparkled, and I tried to bite back a smile. I didn’t want to give him any wrong ideas, even though every inch of my body was tingling.

“Well, thank you for the save.”

“Now, can I get you anything to drink?”

Hmm, this moment deserved a real drink. “I’ll have a whiskey sour.”

He called a server over and had her bring my drink. “So,” he said, taking a gulp of his beer, “I haven’t seen you at Thirst before.”

“Jess dragged me here. Not my usual scene, but seems like you’re always around when I give in and go to a bar with her.”

He was smiling, and I realized it was a fantastic smile. His green eyes stood out against his tanned skin, and I couldn’t help but stare at them, no doubt his best feature. Not that the rest of him wasn’t appealing. I mean, if that was something a woman would be interested in, and I certainly wasn’t.

“You’re just along for the ride, then?”

“Unfortunately. She ends up fighting off wannabes all night while I sit in a corner thinking about what I have planned for the next day. I’ve already concluded that I need to do some laundry, and the flat could use some cleaning. In a sense, I get a lot of planning done when I go out.”

He kept smiling and staring, and it dawned on me that my life sounded a little pathetic. Just like Vic a few minutes ago, I knew I was boring Devin Flynn.

“You and your brother look a lot alike,” he said out of nowhere.

“We take after our father. Everyone says that Rafe is his spitting image.”

Devin tilted his head to one side. “You’re definitely prettier than your brother, though.”

I laughed, feeling my nerves ease a bit. “I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

A group of women walked by the table, and Flynn didn’t miss checking out each one. He smiled and said hello to a few, others he wrinkled his nose at in subtle dissatisfaction. I bristled at this, wondering whether I should make an escape or conversation. Either option seemed dicey.

“Do you live around here?” I asked, going with the latter option.

His gaze focused on me again. “I have a home in Sandrine.”

A gorgeous enclave that only a select few could afford. “Ah, you live with all the wealthy people.”

“I like it there. A lot less press. Where do you live?”

“Nowhere, really. I stay in our family flat in London when I’m in London, and we have a family home in Southern California. That’s on the Perez side of things. My mom lives in Italy, in a small, idyllic town called

Cortese.”

I was babbling, but I didn't know how to turn that off.

“Is that right,” Devin murmured. He seemed more engrossed in his surroundings than the conversation.

Yup. It was time to go. “I should find Jess,” I said, giving up. “She has no idea where I am.”

“You're leaving?” he asked with surprise.

How could he be surprised? This conversation was painful. “Yes. Believe me, you'll have a better time without me. Besides, the women will pay more attention to you if I'm not around.”

He furrowed his brows. “I'd like you to stay,” he said, grasping my hand as I rose.

My skin tingled at the touch, and I tried to ignore it. “Do you really want me to? You don't seem interested in my company.”

His eyes opened wide. “I don't? Then I should rectify that. Please, Ms. Perez, sit down so I can properly get to know you.”

I considered it for a moment because I was genuinely curious why he was acting so nice and sat down again, sending Jess a quick text to let her know where I was. I secretly hoped that Jess didn't try to find me. At least not yet.

“So tell me, do you enjoy working with Perez?” This time he kept his gaze focused on me.

“It's okay. My brother can drive me crazy, though.”

He leaned in a little closer. “And your accent. I can't place it.”

I was surprised by his sudden switch from boredom to intense focus on me. I managed to find an answer, though. “Because it's hard to place. As kids, we spent winters in Italy, summers all over the world, and then when my father died, my mother split her time between California, near my father's family, and her home in Italy. Many days I feel like I'm from nowhere at all.”

“I'm still learning Italian, so maybe you can help me with that,” he said with a sly smile. “It helps when the mechanics and other personnel are talking. At least I know if they're talking about me.”

He ordered another round of drinks as we talked about track gossip. We were careful not to bring up any confidential info about our respective teams, but Flynn was a wealth of knowledge about other drivers and what journalists to avoid, so I could appreciate that.

As I sipped my second glass of wine, I felt the fog of light-headedness coming on. I had to pace myself.

“You’re definitely not a typical rich kid, are you?” he asked.

“In what sense?”

“Out of control like your friend.”

Jess and I couldn’t be any different, but somehow we made it work. When we were out together, she tried to make sure I had a good time, and I made sure she got home safe. Or tried to, anyway. She’d been known to leave me stranded, then text me hours later to tell me where she was. That set her apart from my dear friend Elizabeth in Montreal. Like me, Elizabeth could be relied upon. Jess? Not so much. And that’s why the two of them didn’t see eye to eye. Still, I loved Jess. No matter how much time had passed, when we did see each other, it was as if no time had passed at all.

I felt the need to defend her from Flynn, even if his accusation mirrored my own thoughts. “Jess isn’t out of control.”

“Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating, but you’re not as out there, looking for attention. You don’t use your name to get through the door, and you certainly aren’t a brat.”

“I like fading into the background.”

He nodded. “I’m relatively new to the whole wealth thing. Up until a few years ago, I couldn’t get on a team, and now I’m driving with one of the best. It’s amazing how quickly your luck can change.”

“How long have you been racing on the circuit?”

“Four years. Two with the Knight team and two with Russo.”

“And how do you like driving with Russo?” I asked, even though what I really wanted to know was how he’d landed a spot with one of the most flashy and sought-after teams.

“I love it. They’re a better team than Knight, and they pay me a lot more.”

We finished our second drinks, and while I didn’t want to go, I figured it was time to find Jess.

“I should go find my friend.”

“I suppose,” he said. “If you don’t find her, you know where I’ll be.”

Had I detected a frown? It was microscopic, but I was sure it was there. Was he actually sad to see me leave? I wanted to reconsider, but I’d already made my decision.

“Thanks for the drinks,” I said with a smile.

“Thanks for the company.”

I wandered back downstairs, checking my phone to see if Jess had responded. Nothing. I searched every corner of the bar, eventually running

into Vic. Lucky me.

“Do you know where Jess is?” I asked.

“She’s gone. I thought she told you.”

Irritation was percolating inside me. “Gone? Gone where?”

“She left with Josh about twenty minutes ago. She tried to look for you, but then she saw your text and figured you were fine.”

I was stranded and furious. Would it have killed Jess to send a text? I didn’t even have my keys to the flat! Why hadn’t I taken them with me? Easy answer. Because I trusted her. She was going to get an earful.

I ordered an Uber and went outside to wait. I pulled out my phone to send Jess a nasty text. I then texted my friend Elizabeth to tell her about Jess’s latest antic. How much I missed Elizabeth.

You will never guess what Jess did. She left me stranded at a bar with no keys to the flat.

Within seconds, I could see the three dots on my phone.

Geez! What is wrong with her? You okay? Can I do anything?

I called an Uber. I’ll be fine. Guess I’m staying in a hotel.

Text me when you’re settled so I know you’re all right.

I could always count on Elizabeth to care. Another reason she and Jess were so different and why they could barely stand each other.

I’d go to the nearest hotel for the night. It was beginning to drizzle, and I hadn’t prepared for rain. I was furious that Jess had left me to fend for myself, and now I was going to get wet too. As I fumed, I felt someone come up beside me.

“What are you doing out here?” Devin asked.

I felt stupid, standing alone in the rain. “Jess left me here, and I didn’t bring my keys, and I have no way of getting into the flat.”

“I live ten minutes from here. You can spend the night at my place.”

My breath hitched. If Rafe found out, he’d kill me.

“Really? You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind. Lord knows I have the room.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I should call my mum first and ask her if it’s

okay,” he said with a smirk.

“I just don’t want to impose,” I said with a giggle. He could be funny when he wanted to be.

“It’s no imposition at all.”

I canceled by Uber and followed him to his silver Porsche. I got inside just as the rain began to pick up. We drove in silence as he pulled up into the circular driveway of a two-story brick house nestled in the countryside not far from the city. The lawn and flower beds were perfectly manicured, not something I could see Flynn doing himself.

Once inside, I saw that the interior looked like it belonged to a completely different house. It was starkly modern, in shades of white, black, and gray. The furniture was sleek and subtle with only the barest of necessity. The house lacked any knickknacks or signs of life. The one thing that did stand out was the grand piano sitting near a huge bay window.

“Do you play?” I asked.

“It’s for show. Broads love it.”

I wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic or not. It seemed like an odd thing to have if you didn’t play.

He showed me to one of the three guest rooms. I wondered why he needed so much space when he lived alone. The room he’d chosen for me had a huge bed, a night table, a lamp, and a few abstract and colorless paintings on the walls.

“You’re a minimalist?”

“You’re so demanding. There’s a bed, isn’t there?” he said with his wry smile.

“You have a point, I suppose.”

He really looked at me, the way my soaked dress clung to me. I was shivering. “I must have something for you to change into. I’ll be right back.”

I set down my purse and checked one last time to see if Jess had messaged me, but there was nothing. I was about to text her again when Devin returned with a Russo shirt, a zipped hoodie, and what looked to be sweatpants with the tags still on.

“I don’t have much that will fit you. Just these promotional clothes. All new. Everything else will be far too large. As it is, these are all probably too big.”

“It’s fine. Thank you, Devin. And thank you for your hospitality.”

“Anytime. Do you need anything else? I’m sure I have an extra

toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap hanging around. I can set those up in your bathroom down the hall.”

“That would be great.”

“Well, good night. Holler if you need anything else.”

He left, closing the door gently behind him. I changed into the shirt, the one thing that didn't have the original tag on. Even though it had been cleaned, I could smell the faint scent of a man's cologne. I liked the smell and held the shirt's collar up to my nose. I then crawled into the cold bed and shivered until it warmed up around me. I sent a quick text to Elizabeth to let her know I was all right. I then turned out the light and wondered what Rafe would do if he ever found out I'd spent the night at Devin Flynn's.

Chapter Ten

Luna

I couldn't sleep. I slipped out of bed and out of my room. I listened in the hallway for any noise, but there was nothing, so I made my way down the stairs and into the sprawling, mostly barren great room. I flipped on a light and saw a display case I hadn't seen earlier, dotted with a few trophies and some family photos. One caught my attention. It had to have been from a recent Christmas. He was seated at a table with whom I assumed were his family. He definitely resembled his parents. Two couples—siblings and their partners?—rounded out the group, and an older lady, likely his grandmother, was sitting next to Devin. He had his arm around her shoulders. Everyone looked happy and normal. Notably absent was Devin's flavor of the week.

Next, I saw what was unmistakably a scrapbook on one of the shelves. I pulled it out, sat down on the gray leather sofa, and switched on the only lamp. The sofa was rock-hard, like no one had ever sat on it before.

This scrapbook chronicled Devin's entire racing life. My eyes widened at photos of Devin at six or seven years old. Every article that had ever been published about him had been carefully snipped out of whatever paper it had come from and placed neatly in the scrapbook. There were photos of him as a teenager with long hair and a sneer. I chuckled to myself. I needed to snap a photo of this to blackmail him with later. The scrapbook ended with his first race with the Knight Team. Whoever had done this for him had stopped at that point.

When I was done snooping, I placed the scrapbook back where I'd found it. I looked through the rest of the trophies and photos, knowing that everything on display must have been particularly special to him, since he didn't seem to be the sentimental type.

“I thought I heard something,” Devin said, making me jump. He was standing in the entranceway, rubbing his eyes. He was wearing a pair of boxer shorts or regular shorts—I couldn’t be sure—and a faded Russo shirt.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said.

“I’m a light sleeper. I hear everything.”

He came to stand next to me.

“I was admiring your trophies,” I said.

He looked them over as if he’d never seen them before. “I try not to toot my own horn,” he said.

I laughed and shook my head. “You have such an odd sense of humor.”

“It’s called being funny.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are definitely funny.”

“Can I get you anything?” he asked, walking toward the adjoining kitchen.

“Water would be nice.”

He returned with a glass of water for me and juice for himself. He sat on the piano bench while I sat back on the sofa. We stared at each other as if we were both trying to figure out what the other was thinking.

“How did you get started in racing?” I finally asked.

He seemed to relax, like I’d broken the ice neither of us had expected to be there. “My dad loved cars. He was a mechanic, so I was around them all the time. One day he let me drive one. Shit, I was probably five years old. I was steering the car and he was using the pedals. After that day, I was never the same. I couldn’t get enough of them. My dad was happy about that, being his only son. He figured that one day I would take over the family business. Then he started entering me in races, and I got hooked on the speed. I’ve never looked back.”

“How were you discovered, or are you one of those who pays his own way?”

He narrowed his eyes and chuckled. “Pay my own way? You must be kidding. Five years ago, I could barely make ends meet. There were days I couldn’t eat if I wanted to race. My parents didn’t have a lot of money, and I used to do all kinds of odd jobs just so I could pay the entry fees. It was a long way to the top for me. I’m not gifted financially like your brother or Riedl.”

“My brother’s earned his place,” I said firmly.

“Oh?”

“He’s a better driver than you.” Something about Flynn brought out the fight in me.

He tilted his head and grinned. “That’s a joke, right? You can be funny too.”

I pointed to the display case. “He has more trophies than you do.”

“I have more fun, so what’s your point?”

He certainly did have a lot more fun than Rafe. I was pretty sure my brother was completely miserable, but he’d never admit it. “Don’t you think this life is a lot of bullshit?”

Devin sipped his juice. “Of course it is. I’m always kissing the arse of some sponsor or another. Just once I’d like to tell them what I really think of them, but I can’t. The money is too good to screw around with. Never in a million years would I have thought I’d ever have this much cash. So I can’t complain. I have two beautiful homes, a bunch of fast cars, and the best of everything. And lots of extra money to take care of my parents if and when they need it.”

“What about your privacy?”

“It’s give and take, and I’m happy to give some of that up.”

“I don’t envy any of you. I only ever want to stay in the background. What I don’t understand is how you remain so upbeat. Doesn’t the pressure get to you?”

“No. Riedl is the big fish at Russo. I’m just a bit player. He’s the one dealing with all the pressure.”

I thought not to ask my next question, but I couldn’t help it. “Do you ever worry about dying on the track?” It happened, more than anyone liked to talk about.

Devin pursed his lips, and I was sure he knew where I was going with that line of questioning. “Racing is not for the weak of heart.”

That wasn’t a good enough answer for me. “But do you worry?”

He shrugged a shoulder as he pondered that. “No. I was asked once if I was scared of dying, but if you’re hung up on dying, then you’re in the wrong profession. Besides, if it happened, at least it’d be quick and painless.”

My breath hitched. Did Devin realize what he was joking about it? “It’s strange,” I said into the stillness. “I don’t think about Rafe dying. It’s like he’s too strong and stubborn to die. I know it’s foolish to think that way because at any moment he could lose control of the car, or it could malfunction and that’s it. He’d leave Eva a widow.”

Just like my father had left my mother a widow.

Had it been quick and painless for my father? It wasn't something Mom ever spoke about. I could have checked online, looked at the crash photos, watched the video, but I'd never been able to bring myself to do it. I didn't want to know. I'd once come across a picture from that day, an image of my mother, her expression stoic, blood on her white shirt and jeans. Her dark brown hair was swept over her shoulders, and she looked like a supermodel despite the casual outfit. Despite the blood. She'd just been with her husband after he'd died and was leaving the hospital. Even then, she had no privacy.

"It's not foolish," Devin said quietly. "You have to think about it in terms of whether you worry about it and make yourself insane, or you forget about it and tell yourself it won't happen, that it can't happen." He paused for a moment. "Have you talked to anyone about your dad's death?"

"A bit, but ... I don't know. Maybe I don't want to know what his last few minutes were like. Or what kind of injuries he had."

"It's good to talk to people. You should think about doing it more."

He said it in the nicest way possible, no doubt worried that he might offend me. What a surprise.

"Maybe I will. But don't you ever think it's stupid to risk your life for such an insignificant thing?"

"Why are you getting so philosophical? It's too early in the morning to make me think this hard."

"But it must have occurred to you."

Did he sense the desperation in my voice?

"Luna, the way you look at racing is very different from the way I look at it. I love it more than anything else, just like your brother loves it. Speed is our drug; it doesn't matter how much of it you have, you want more. Sometimes you get too much of it and you die. That's part of life."

"Maybe I'm trying to justify why I'm fatherless." I hadn't meant to say that aloud, and when I glanced over at Devin, I saw sympathy and pity on his face. Exactly what I didn't want. "Anyway, I should try to get some sleep," I said with a yawn.

"I'm sorry I couldn't say the words you wanted to hear."

"You said a lot. I understand this life more than I ever have before."

* * *

Hours later, I awoke to the smell of coffee wafting into my room. I pulled myself out of bed and looked in the mirror. My curls were tamer than I'd expected. I wondered what I'd looked like in the middle of the night; I hadn't even checked before I'd ventured downstairs. Oh well, too late to worry about that now.

I found Devin at a small table in the oversized kitchen, reading the newspaper and drinking a steaming mug of coffee.

"Good morning," I said.

He looked up and set his paper down. "Good morning to you too. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby after our talk."

"Can I get you some coffee?" he asked, rising from the table.

"Sure."

He pattered around the kitchen, seeming to know his way around it even though it looked pristine and unused. As he busied himself, I took the opportunity to check him out. His short, coppery hair was tousled in that sexy just-out-of-bed way, and by his jeans and T-shirt, I could see that he worked out and kept himself in shape for the most part, although he was definitely one of the stockier drivers in the circuit.

"What do you take in your coffee?" he asked, turning to face me. He smirked a little. He'd caught me staring.

"Cream and lots of sugar."

The smirk became an outright grin as he handed me the coffee and sat back down.

"How do I look?" he asked smugly.

"What do you mean?" I asked innocently, although I could feel my cheeks burning crimson.

"Do I look good?"

I decided to play along. "Not bad. You have some meat on your bones, unlike most of the other drivers. I bet you could be in better shape, though."

"Carlton is in good shape, and so is Riedl. I'm not fat, am I?" he asked, lifting his shirt and exposing his muscular abdomen.

I looked away, trying not to laugh. "No, you're not fat."

He let go of his shirt and rested his elbows on the table. "I may not be in the best shape of my life. I can admit that."

"You used to be in better shape." I covered my mouth with a hand. What made me say that?

“You can tell? Like, you’ve noticed?” he asked, leaning in closer.

“Sure. I’ve seen pictures,” I said, not mentioning that I’d snooped through his scrapbook extensively. “A little work, and you can look that way again. What have you stopped doing?”

“Everything. Skiing, snowboarding, swimming, biking. I did it all. But then I didn’t have as much time for it, and some of those things I’m forbidden from doing now because I may injure myself. I can’t void the insurance,” he snarked. “So many bloody rules. Maybe I should work out with you. You’re in fantastic shape.”

He’d noticed? “Maybe one day we can work out together. We’ll see.”

An uncomfortable silence followed, or at least it was uncomfortable for me. I hated silence and wished he’d say something, but he seemed content to drink his coffee and stare out at his property. Finally, I spoke.

“I didn’t ruin your plans last night, did I?”

“What plans?”

“You know, female plans.”

He nodded in understanding. “I wouldn’t say they were ruined. I did come home with a woman. My perfect record still stands.”

“You’re always charming.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? Women love me.”

“I’m trying to figure out what they love so much.”

“It’s my eyes,” he said, batting them at me a few times. “They suck women in every time.”

“You’re a chick magnet, Flynn. And what do you do in the mornings? Kick them out?”

“Mornings?” he asked as though I’d said something foreign. “There are no mornings.”

I groaned and downed the last of my coffee. “Yes, a true charmer.”

He glanced at his watch. “Look, why don’t I get you back home. We can stop for breakfast along the way. How does that sound?”

“Marvelous, actually.”

By his cheeky smile, I knew he’d taken my words the wrong way. I was hungry, not desperate to spend more time with him.

Or was I?

Chapter Eleven

Luna

In Miami, two weeks later, Devin Flynn showed up with a new girlfriend, a French actress named Celine. Apparently, she required no last name. She sauntered around the paddock, and every straight guy with a pulse stopped to look. I wasn't going to lie: It was a stab in the heart when I saw them walking hand in hand. He was free to do what he wanted, so why did it bug me? I had to admit that Celine was hard to miss. She was at least an inch taller than Flynn, easily pushing six feet, with long, raven-colored hair and striking blue eyes. How could anyone not stop when she went by? And she had legs that went on forever. A real-life goddess, and Flynn was proud to parade her around.

"I would give my left tit to look like her," Tanya said as Celine passed by the Perez garage.

"Her boobs are fake, and she's probably had every part of her nipped and tucked," I sniped. "So don't be giving up any tit."

"But to look like that? How does Flynn attract them? All he has to do is open his mouth, and I would run away as fast as possible."

I bristled despite myself. I certainly didn't need to defend Devin. "I suppose some women are attracted to him."

"But the mouth! He's an embarrassment to the male species."

Tanya was going overboard with her assessment. Devin was clearly a handsome man with a good sense of humor. That made him more appealing than most men in pit lane.

"There must be something about him," I said with a sigh.

Rafe made eye contact with me and beckoned me over. He and Carlos looked discouraged, and I didn't want to know what it was about.

“Yes, dear brother.”

He handed me a phone. “I want you to have this with you at all times.”

“I already have a phone.” I stared down at the brand-new phone. It was nicer than the one I currently had. Unlike everyone else around with the latest technology, my phone was generations behind, and with a cracked screen to boot.

“Yours is not secure This is a Perez phone. During the racing season, you will have it charged and with you, no matter where you go. Is that understood? And leave your dinosaur at the hotel or home or at the bottom of the ocean. I don’t care where, just not around here.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. “Fine.”

“The other reason I wanted to talk to you is because Carlos and I have come up with an idea for some added exposure.”

I was already dreading what was going to come next. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“A California athletic-wear company wants to sign on as a sponsor and have us both in ads.”

That didn’t sound so bad. “Okay. Is there a catch? I’m sensing a catch.”

Rafe pursed his lips. “Maybe. They want you in bathing suits.”

My jaw dropped. Rafe had to be kidding. “Absolutely not.”

“They aren’t asking you to wear any less than you do when you play beach volleyball.”

“That’s different. I’m not on full display for thousands and thousands of people to see.”

“We’re meeting them Monday. I expect you to be there to at least hear them out.”

I didn’t protest. Yet. I would wait until after tomorrow’s race. The last thing I wanted to do was pose nearly naked for anyone to see. It was one thing to do so while looking like Celine, but I was well aware that I didn’t look anything like her. What I needed to do was find alternate ways of drumming up sponsorship, and clearly, I would have to think of them myself.

I needed to be away from the Perez pits, and fast. I grabbed a bottle of water and stalked away. I found myself gravitating to the Russo pits, where Erich was skimming through video on an iPad. His face lit up when he saw me, and the iPad was abandoned.

“Luna! Let’s go where it’s more quiet,” he said between roars of engines.

I followed him into the quiet motorhome, where he grabbed an electrolyte

drink. We took two of the many empty seats, and I sighed.

“I’ve got a new phone. Apparently, my old one was insufficient. I’ve texted you the number. It seems my brother needs to keep even closer tabs on me.” I shuddered at the thought if he ever found out I’d spent the night at Devin Flynn’s. He’d probably lock me up forever.

“I’m sure it’s more to know where you are and that you’re safe.”

I arched a brow, which solicited a chuckle.

“All right, maybe not,” Erich conceded.

“I don’t understand why this is important. I’m not essential to the team or its performance. I’m really here so that he won’t have a guilty conscience.”

“About what?”

“I’ve invested a lot of my inheritance in this team and have gotten nothing in return other than grief. But I’m not going to complain. I willingly gave him the money, so I should have more of a say in what I want to do, at the very least.”

“That’s only fair. And you have been good to him.”

“I wonder sometimes ...” We were silent a moment, and then I ventured to the subject of Flynn. “Did you see Devin’s latest girlfriend? What’s her name? Celine?” As if that name wasn’t burned into my memory.

“She’s quite extraordinary,” Erich said with a chuckle.

“I’ve even caught myself staring at her. How does he do it?”

Erich shrugged. “He’s lucky with women. It’s easy for him to talk them into bed. And the appeal of being a race car driver doesn’t hurt. He always has a beautiful woman on his arm and never the same one twice.”

My new phone rang. I looked down to see my brother’s name on the screen. “It’s Rafe. Talk later?”

I answered as I stood up and made my way out of the motorhome. “We need you here now,” Rafe said quickly. “Luigi Verti is here for an interview. Don’t keep him waiting.”

I groaned when Rafe hung up. Verti wrote for one of the biggest racing magazines, and interviews with him were few and far between for a smaller team like Perez.

I reported back to the media room, pasted on a smile, and said all the things Rafe would expect me to say. Verti seemed mostly uninterested, glancing at his phone several times. I deflated. The interview was likely never going to see the light of day, and if I didn’t impress him even a little, I’d never hear from him again.

Just as I was finishing up the interview, my phone rang again. What did Rafe want now? He knew I was with Verti and shouldn't be interrupted, but when I looked at the caller ID, it came up as unknown. That was odd. "Team phone, sorry, I should answer," I mumbled, then into the phone I said as pleasantly as possible, "Luna Perez."

"What are you doing?" asked a voice with a distinctive English accent.

"Who is this?" I asked, smiling uncomfortably as Verti waited patiently for me to get off my phone.

"You don't recognize my voice?"

"I think you have the wrong number," I said and hung up. I turned my attention back to Verti, hoping the faux pas of answering my phone wouldn't make it into his article. "I'm sorry about that, Luigi. What was your last question?"

"What are the plans for Perez next year, since the team won't be in contention for the racing championship?" he asked, only slightly annoyed.

"We need more reliable cars. We've been forced to retire from far too many races this year with engine failures, and that's just not acceptable."

My phone rang again. Luigi pursed his lips into a thin line. Crap. I was in trouble now.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know who keeps calling me. I think they have the wrong number. This is a new phone and ..."

"It's fine. We are finished here," he said absently.

"What?" I spat into the phone as I walked back into the Perez garage. Whoever this was, he was going to get an earful from me.

"You hung up on me," the voice the with English accent said.

"Who the hell is this?"

"Stop and turn around."

I turned and saw Devin Flynn standing about ten feet away. He waved, and I could feel my blood begin to boil. "How did you get this number?" I said into my phone before realizing how silly it was to talk to him this way when he was within shouting distance. And I was definitively ready to shout at him. I hung up and stalked toward him.

"Riedl gave it to me after I asked him for it," he said, quite proud of himself. "And when I say gave it to me, I happened to see it on his phone when he'd texted you something. He shouldn't have left it unattended and unlocked."

Erich liked to send me funny memes. Most of them weren't very funny.

“That was an important interview. Do you know how hard it is for us to land a piece with Luigi Verti?”

“It will be a puff piece. It’s when he doesn’t ask for an interview that he gets down to the nitty-gritty.”

“Why are you bothering me anyway? Where is Celine? Or whatever her name is.”

He smirked. “Does everyone know her name?”

“It’s hard not to notice her when you’re both on the cover of the local newspaper.”

“I must have missed that one,” he said with his sly smile. “She’s gorgeous, isn’t she?”

“In a phony kind of way.”

“But she got your attention.”

I wanted to poke him in the stomach with a hot stick. But then I got an idea.

“Maybe that’s what I need to do,” I said. “Land some hot hunk and get myself some attention.” And I wasn’t just saying it. The problem was finding a hot hunk who’d be interested in dating for the purpose of me getting some attention. Where would I find someone like that?

Flynn was glaring, oblivious to my sudden scheming. “I’m not dating her for attention.”

“Right. You really enjoy her conversation.”

“Jealously does not become you, Ms. Perez.”

“The only thing I’m jealous of is her cleavage.”

Chapter Twelve

Luna

After talking it through with Jess, and after I'd forgiven her for the Thirst incident, I nixed the athletic-wear deal. I didn't want any exposure—literally or figuratively. I enjoyed life as a private person with only a handful of people knowing who I was. I mean, why would they want me anyway? I was a small cog in the Perez machine, and in the grand scheme of things, Perez was a small cog in racing circles.

Jess had a theory, though, and she texted it to me.

I know you haven't figured this out yet, but you've got a hot bod, you're freaking gorgeous, and you're associated with a racing team.

Come on!

I'm serious. They are trying to capitalize on you before anyone else.

She couldn't be right, could she? Nevertheless, as expected, Rafe was furious, even a month later when we found ourselves at the race in Hungary.

After a tension-filled day, where Rafe and every other driver complained about the safety of the track, I returned to my hotel room, wanting to crawl into bed and sleep for twelve hours. No sooner had I reached my room than there was a knock on my door. A man was there, holding a medium-sized package.

"Ms. Perez?" he asked. When I nodded, he handed me the package. I didn't even have time to tip him before he was gone. I shut the door and set the package on my bed. There was no note on the outside. I opened the box

and found a water gun, a neon-orange one with a huge barrel, inside. I stared at it curiously. I looked for a note but found nothing.

By the next afternoon, I'd forgotten all about it. Juan and I were in a deep discussion about the track and what interviews I would handle for the weekend. Rafe had been bemoaning the track again all morning. He'd been rallying the other drivers to demand added safety measures be installed, and he'd gotten most of them to agree, even big shot Blake Carlton. But Gregory Brown, the World Racing Federation head honcho, shot them down, assuring the drivers it was safe as is.

"It's been an ongoing issue here," Juan said. "This comes up every year, and marginal changes are made. One year someone is going to die. Only then will they make changes."

"It's not hard. Why don't they want to do it?"

"I have no idea. No one wants to pay for it, I suppose. Isn't that what it always come down to? Money?"

Juan and I moved on to discussing the press release naming Rafe and Pedro as the Perez drivers for the next season. Just as we were wrapping up, my phone rang. Again, an unknown number.

"Luna Perez," I said.

"Ms. Perez."

I groaned. "I thought you would have forgotten my number by now."

"I'm amazing with numbers."

"What do you want, Flynn?"

"Did you get my gift?"

Gift? Then it dawned on me. The stupid water gun. "That was from you?"

"Who else? Did you bring it?"

I stepped away from Juan and out of the Perez garage. "No. I thought someone had given it to me by mistake, seeing as it's a children's toy."

"That's too bad."

"Why?"

"Because you're wide open, and I have you in my sights."

I looked around but didn't see Flynn. I realized what he had planned. "Don't even think about it," I said.

"Too late."

He hit my shoulder with a steady stream of water. That was when I saw him, behind a column just outside the Perez garage. He ran off before I could think to respond.

“I’m going to kill him,” I said, wiping the residual splash of water from my cheek.

“Who the hell did that?” Juan asked, coming to stand next to me.

“Name the only idiot who is allowed to drive these cars.”

“Ah, Devin Flynn.”

* * *

After the team meeting that afternoon, which was once again dominated by track safety complaints, I found a toy store a few blocks from my hotel. I purchased the largest water gun they had in stock. At nearly two feet long, it held a liter of water. I carefully filled it the next morning, humming a little tune to myself as I hid it in a duffel bag. I would wait for the perfect moment if it took all day.

Later that morning, I took a casual walk down the paddock. I found Devin Flynn in an interview with Jane Edwards, and he looked vulnerable. Just the way I wanted him. I ran back to the Perez garage and took out the water gun. It was loaded, pumped, and ready to fire. I crept back to the pressroom where he was still chatting with Jane outside. The vulnerable air was gone, leaving him looking confident, almost smug. I was about to take care of that. I hid around a corner, knowing he would have to pass me at some point.

“Thank you, Devin, and good luck tomorrow,” I heard Jane say.

My heart picked up a few beats. I held my breath as he passed by. Slowly, I stood. It was time to take care of business.

“Hey, Flynn,” I called out.

He turned, and at that moment I fired. The water blasted out of my gun and hit Flynn in the middle of his chest. He was stunned and soaked. It took him a moment to realize what had hit him. In that time, shocked bystanders had now begun to laugh and clap. It was the first sign of any levity that weekend.

“That’s it, Perez. You’re in trouble now!” He grabbed a water bottle from a man who’d been watching and broke out in a run toward me. I turned on my heel and started running down pit lane, with Devin in hot pursuit. I sped past a dismayed Celine who was watching her boyfriend literally chase another woman. I was too quick and ran into the safety of the Perez garage and one of the offices, locking the door behind me. I was out of breath and

laughing when I turned around and saw Rafe's unamused face.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Believe me, you wouldn't find it funny," I said, out of breath and trying to contain my giggles.

A moment later, my phone rang.

"Luna Perez, Water Gun World Champion, how may I help you?"

"I'll get you," Devin said, trying not to laugh.

"I nailed you, Flynn. It couldn't have been any more beautiful."

"There is something to be said for chasing another woman while my girlfriend is watching."

"I think you've learned a lesson today. You'd better be on your toes, going forward."

"I do like a challenge, Ms. Perez. May the best person win."

* * *

Erich invited me to dinner that night. I didn't normally make dinner plans with him as he liked to keep to himself before a race, something about getting into the right frame of mind. But maybe I kept him in the right frame of mind sometimes. I couldn't help remembering how Flynn had emphasized that I was boring.

Erich suggested we meet at his hotel room. The Russo team always stayed in the top hotels, and we almost never stayed in the same one, an expense Rafe couldn't justify. So stepping into the swanky hotel gave me that extra little jump to my step.

As I stepped out of the elevator on the fifteenth floor, I couldn't help but notice the noise. No wonder he'd asked me to dinner. Clearly he needed an excuse to get out of his hotel room. The floor was vibrating from heavy bass music, and voices ranging through the hallway. The hotel was okay with this? Erich was okay with this? I wondered as I knocked on his door and waited. But when the door opened, it wasn't Erich.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Flynn's sea-green eyes regarded me with mild interest. "Riedl and I switched rooms a few hours ago. He couldn't handle the noise. Why are you visiting his room?"

How did he turn this back on me? "We were going for dinner and—"

Suddenly, I noticed Celine. She was walking toward Devin, wrapped in a bedsheet. That was when I finally realized Flynn was dressed in boxer shorts and a wrinkled T-shirt. “Well, anyway, what room is he in?” I asked, flummoxed.

“Fourteen ten.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay, bye,” I said with an awkward wave. I stepped back from the door, and he slowly closed it. I stopped halfway down the hall and grabbed my roiling stomach. I suddenly had the urge to cry, and I had no idea where that had come from. I took a moment to compose myself and gather my thoughts. It was Flynn. Just freaking Flynn. What was the big deal?

In a daze, I returned to my hotel and sent Erich a text to tell him I wasn’t feeling well. Once in my room, I collapsed on my bed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to understand why I was so upset. And then it hit me. Devin Flynn had a life. A wonderful life filled with beautiful things and beautiful people, and what did I have? A one-third stake in a failing racing team and a bit of fun with him that afternoon, something he’d clearly already forgotten about.

I decided it was time for a friend and called Jess. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t hide the sadness in my voice.

“What happened?” Jess asked, her voice concerned.

“I don’t even know,” I said. “My life is going nowhere.”

“And what made you come to this sudden realization?”

I sighed and grabbed hold of one of the pillows, hugging it tightly to my chest. “I didn’t do what I wanted with my life. I did what my brother wanted. To top it all off, I don’t have big boobs or look like a French model.”

“Okay, that’s really specific.”

“And true.”

“What is going on with you?”

“I want someone to love me.”

“Oh geez,” Jess said, her voice full of sympathy. “You’d better tell me what happened, tonight. Start from the beginning.”

I blew my nose into the phone. Sure, not the most pleasant thing, but Jess would understand. “Erich invited me for dinner, and we arranged to meet at his hotel room. When I got there, Devin was in bed.”

“With Erich?” Jess asked in nearly a screech. “Now that’s some serious

gossip I could write about.”

“No! With his girlfriend. Erich and Devin had switched rooms.”

“Damn. That would have made a great story.”

“Jess! Be serious.”

“I’m sorry. Go on.”

“There was a party or something going on, and Erich’s room was too noisy for him.” I tossed the pillow to the side and sat up in bed. I blew my nose one more time. “Obviously, Devin was in bed with his girlfriend. She walked past him in only a bedsheet.”

“People have sex all the time. You just happened to be there at the wrong time.”

“It made me realize how pathetic my life is.”

“Because a known womanizer was having sex? Big deal. He probably gets laid every night. Trust me, you don’t want his life. Or his STDs.”

“It just upset me, that’s all.”

“Why would it upset— Wait, do you like him? Be straight with me,” Jess said, her voice pitching up.

“No! Of course not.”

“Crap. You like this guy. I should have known! All the signs were there. Look, I get the attraction. He’s hot, and he’s that bad-boy type, but he’s not right for you. Not even a little. Guys like him are in it for the short term.”

I jumped off my bed and paced the room. “I don’t like him.”

“I can tell when you like a guy. You don’t coo; you get angry. You don’t pine away; you plot his murder. So let’s avoid all that. Now, if you really like the guy, ask him out for something innocuous. He probably won’t even know it’s a date.”

I hadn’t told Jess about spending the night at Flynn’s, and I certainly wasn’t going to do it now. Not with Jess suspecting so much.

“I’m not interested in him, and I’m not asking him out.”

“You see him all the time. Suggest drinks.”

“No.”

“Why are you fighting the attraction?”

“A minute ago you told me he wasn’t right for me.”

“I changed my mind. You want someone to love you, that’s great! But you’ve barely dated. I want you to go out and have some fun first. Maybe it’s with Devin Flynn.”

I stopped pacing. “He has a gorgeous girlfriend. I can’t compete.”

“He’ll dump her within the week, and you’re a knockout with a killer bod. Stop selling yourself short.”

“But I’m not like my mother.”

Jess sighed. “You’ve got to stop comparing yourself to her. You’re two different kinds of breathtakingly beautiful. But let me tell you one thing about your mother that you don’t have. Her confidence. If you had it, you’d see how gorgeous you are. Men do love you, but you’re too busy being down on yourself to notice. So I’m here to tell you to stop that.”

“You’re a good friend, Jess.”

“A friend who wants you to take some chances. So think about it, okay?”

Yes, I’d think about taking chance in general, but there was no chance in hell I’d ever let myself get close to Devin Flynn. He was way too dangerous.

Chapter Thirteen

Devin

Fuck, fuck, fuck. How did this happen? I shut the door to my room and wanted to kick it. Why had I even answered the damn door in the first place? If I'd bothered to look, I would have seen it was Luna, and I wouldn't have answered. I'd never forget that look on her face as Celine came up beside me. How the smile slipped from Luna's lips. I was responsible for that.

While Celine took a shower, I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to figure this all out. I wasn't stupid. I knew what I was doing with Perez, and I could see she was enjoying it ... enjoying me. I was enjoying her too. Probably too much for my own good. So why had I gone and fucked it all up by opening the door? Why had I even brought Celine along? She and I were past our sell-by date, but I'd still made the decision to invite her.

I grabbed my phone to text Luna. But what would I say? Sorry you caught me post-shag? I threw my phone down on the bed and rubbed my temples. I had no idea how to make this right or if I should even try. She had to be off limits, and not because Riedl said so. She was career suicide.

"Who was that?" Celine asked, coming out of the washroom, naked. She had zero inhibitions, and I liked that about her, but right now, nothing was going to lift my sour mood.

"Luna Perez."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?" she asked dismissively. "Does she work for the team? Your assistant?"

For some reason, that pissed me off. Anyone with an ounce of interest in racing knew the Perez family. Maybe not Luna necessarily, but her father? Rafe? Their team? Fucking something?

“Do you know who Marco Perez is?”

She shrugged as she slipped on a pair of lacy white panties, then moved on to a matching bra. “No. Is he a friend of yours?”

“He’s dead. He was also one of the best race car drivers to ever live. Luna is his daughter.”

“Interesting. What did she want?” she said, though I could see she didn’t care at all, and that ratcheted up my anger a few notches.

“My teammate. You know, Mickey Duck. She didn’t know we’d switched rooms.”

“What an odd name. Poor boy. Did his parents not love him?”

I suddenly despised how little she knew about the sport I loved, and she hadn’t even tried. Pit lane was her runway, a way to show off and get her picture taken, and as of now, I was no longer going to be a part of that.

“I’ve been thinking. It’s going to be a busy weekend, and this track is a real bugger and needs my full attention. Maybe you should go back to Paris tonight. Enzo can find you a flight. I need to make sure I get my rest. I’m sure you understand.”

She turned to me then, narrowing her blue eyes. “Why does it sound like you’re trying to get rid of me?”

“I need to focus on my job.”

“Are you trying to break up with me?”

Break up? We were barely dating. Fuck it. Why play around with her anymore? “Yeah, maybe we should just go our separate ways. You’re a great girl, but we don’t have that right connection.”

She smiled viciously. “Fuck off.”

She didn’t seem all that hurt as she gathered up her things. Just as she was about to leave, she stopped. “That Perez woman? I saw the way she looked at you. Don’t ruin her life. Okay? Don’t be an asshole.”

As I pulled myself out of bed the next morning, my head throbbed with what felt like a hangover, even though I hadn’t had a drop to drink. I had to keep my wits about me. One late turn on this track and I’d be in the wall, or worse, spinning out in front of other cars. Then I’d be in the hospital or six feet under.

I got to the track and met with Matteo. We had strategy to discuss going into qualifying. I wanted to be as close to pole position as possible on a track like this. The less traffic, the better. Once we’d gone through the course a few times, it was time for a healthy breakfast. I’d taken what Matteo had said to

me seriously and was already down four pounds. Six more to go.

Riedl was in the dining tent, eating his porridge slop. I got oatmeal and fruit along with an espresso and sat next to him. He was reading the paper and looked up at me when I sat.

“How was your evening?” I asked. I couldn’t get Luna’s expression out of my mind, or Celine’s parting words to me. I hoped she’d had a good night out with Riedl.

But Erich frowned. “I was supposed to have dinner with Luna, but she couldn’t make it.” Then he narrowed his eyes at me, like he had a sixth sense about the situation. “Why, do you know what happened to her?”

That was a punch to my stomach. She hadn’t even shown up to her dinner with Riedl. Was that because of me? Damn, it had to be.

“She came to my room last night, looking for you. I guess she didn’t realize that we’d switched rooms.”

“Right. I did forget to tell her that,” he said with a shrug.

Something wasn’t sitting right with me. He seemed almost happy with this development. “Anyway, she may have seen me with Celine. She left pretty quickly after that.”

“What a shame,” he said with what was now a sly smile.

And then it slammed into me. Riedl had done it all on purpose. He wanted Luna to see me in a more ... intimate moment ... with Celine. He was the biggest prick I’d ever met.

“Why’d you do that to her?”

He looked up from his paper and carefully set it down. “Do what to her?”

The innocent bullshit really bothered me. “Let’s not play around. You intentionally gave her the wrong room number so she’d see me with Celine.”

Riedl tilted his head. “Again, what did I do to her?”

“You’re really going to pretend you have no idea what I’m talking about?”

Riedl’s expression hardened. “You can blame me for what happened last night if you wish. But I made it very clear to you that Luna was off limits. For whatever reason, you keep ignoring that. Now, if I happened to have given her the wrong room number and you were stupid enough to answer the door with your latest whore in the room, whose fault is that? I guess the question I have for you is, why did *you* do it to her?”

I wanted to smash his face into his porridge bowl. “I’m not pursuing her, if that’s what you think.”

“Really? Then explain the water-gun fight yesterday. You should leave her alone, unless you like toying around with her emotions.”

My back was up now. “I’m not doing that.”

He grunted. “Come off it. That’s exactly what you’re doing, and it’s cruel. Stop being a piece of shit.”

Riedl picked up his paper and resumed reading as if I’d suddenly become invisible. But he’d hit me where it hurt. Maybe I was toying with her feelings—and maybe I was a piece of shit.

Chapter Fourteen

Luna

The race weekend in Detroit seemed to crawl by. It was always a spectacle, and even years and years after my father's death, he was always remembered here. Before the weekend even began, fans would leave flowers on the corner where Marco Perez's car crashed into a concrete barrier.

The track had changed since then, more safety measures had been put in place, but it was of little comfort. This track, this place, reminded me of losing my father. I'd been his little girl, the daughter he adored and doted on. And then he was gone. I'd been nine years old. I still had memories of his funeral. Of kissing his coffin because Mom wouldn't let me see his face one last time. All those years ago I didn't understand why. Now I understood the closed casket. She wanted us all to remember him the way he'd been.

My phone buzzed. A reminder to catch up with Erich. He knew how difficult this race weekend was for me, and he'd made sure to meet with me for a quick lunch in the Russo tent. I wandered over there, trying to ignore all the tributes to my father. Marco Perez was a legend.

Erich was waiting for me, watching some racing footage on his iPad. He set it aside when I sat down.

"Luna, so nice to see you! I'm sorry we missed each other last week. How are you doing? I know this weekend is going to be a tough one for you."

"Holding up," I said.

"What happened to you in Miami? I tried calling and texting you, and then time got away from me."

"It's all right," I said, taking a bottle of water from him. "Did Flynn mention that I ran into him instead? Thinking it was your room."

Erich nodded slowly. “My apologies for that. I should have let you know I’d changed rooms. It totally slipped my mind. The noise was terrible, and hotel management refused to do anything about it because the hotel was fully booked for the race weekend, so I asked Devin to switch with me.”

I picked at the label on the water bottle. “Did he mention that I interrupted him?”

“He did happen to mention that. He seemed a bit embarrassed, or as embarrassed as Flynn is capable of being. But did something else happen? Did he offend you in some way? Because you didn’t come for dinner after that.”

I shook my head. “I saw him with his girlfriend and started feeling a little sorry for myself. I’m twenty-three years old and have never had a boyfriend, and look at him. A different woman every week.”

Erich reached across the table to pat my hand. “You don’t want to have a different man every week. You want to find the right person. I found the right person, and I can assure you I’m much happier than he is.”

“I suppose. I’m simply feeling lonely and a little sorry for myself.”

“Well, that’s altogether different.”

Franco came around and deposited two lunches for us. Mine was a plate of cheesy pasta, while Erich was relegated to steamed vegetables and a piece of salmon. I waited for Franco to leave, and once he was gone, my floodgates of emotion opened.

“Sometimes I think it’s hopeless, that I’ll never meet that special person. When I went to school in Montreal or lived in London, I found ways to keep myself busy. Even back in Cortese with my mother, but here ... I don’t feel important. I see all these happy people. You with Monica, my brother with Eva, Flynn with his flavor of the week, and I’m alone.”

Erich frowned just a little. “I don’t think anything I can say will make you feel better, and I’m certain the reminders of your father’s death don’t help. But you’re as lovely on the inside as you are on the outside. And you have so much to be thankful for.”

“Name one thing, and it can’t be money.”

He leaned in a little closer and grasped both my hands now. “You’re smart and funny. And you’re a beautiful young woman with her whole life ahead of her.”

I slipped my hands from his grasp and brought them to my face. “Please, never repeat that ever again.”

“Maybe that wasn’t so helpful. But what kind of man are you looking for?”

“I don’t even know,” I said, pushing penne around my plate. “It’s like I choose the most unattainable men and get depressed when I realize they aren’t interested in me back. And they are always the wrong kind of men too. The ones my mother would absolutely hate. I don’t want to meet someone boring like my brother. He’s not fun. I want fun!”

“Fun can be dangerous. It sounds like you’re almost interested in someone like—oh, no. Please tell me it’s not Flynn.” He sounded so disappointed.

“No, of course not,” I said, my face flushing.

“No, no, no. Not him!”

“It’s not him.”

Erich’s face contorted as if he’d eaten something foul. “You tell me what you like about him, and I’ll tell you all the things you should hate.”

I traced my fork around my plate, then gave up the pretense and admitted, “He’s fun and exciting. He makes me laugh. And I’m not blind. I see how handsome he is. But I know I don’t have a chance with him. Besides, Rafe would kill me.”

“He’s also a playboy, and they make terrible partners.”

“I *know*,” I said, finally pushing my plate away. “Do you see the women he’s with? I don’t stand a chance anyway.”

“First of all, he’s not good enough for *you*. And don’t forget that! Listen to me,” he said, grabbing both my hands again and holding them tightly. “Devin wants to screw around. You want something meaningful. My worry is that he will break your heart. Don’t be tempted by him.”

“I get it.” More than anything, I wanted to leave. I rose from my seat and thanked him for lunch. “Thank you for everything. You’re a good friend.”

* * *

After most people had returned to their hotels for the evening, I took a few minutes to myself and walked along the track to the corner where my father had lost his life all those years ago. It hadn’t changed much—other than safety improvements. Along the chain-link fence, people had left flowers and notes. I picked up a bouquet of white roses and read the simple note: “Marco

Perez, rest in peace.” Holding them close, I walked toward a grassy area near pit lane and enjoyed the quiet and the last of the fading sunlight.

I had no idea how much time had passed when I heard the footsteps on the gravel and then saw the long shadow of a person. I looked up to see Devin Flynn in his street clothes: a pair of blue jeans and a white Russo shirt.

“I wanted to clear my head before tomorrow’s race, and who do I find?”

I smiled bitterly. “I’m trying to put some demons to rest.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Care to join me?”

“Why not?” He sat down next to me, took in a deep breath, and stared out at the track. That was when he noticed the flowers in my lap. He gestured toward them questioningly, and I handed the note to him.

“Do you get a lot of these flowers?”

“It feels like less each year, but it looks the same.”

“Were you here when he died?”

“No,” I said, putting on my sunglasses. If I got emotional, I didn’t want him to see it. “Rafe was.”

“How old was he?”

“Thirteen. I was nine.”

“How come you weren’t here?”

“I’d been sick for a few days. Maybe the flu? Who remembers now. So my parents got my grandparents to come sit with me in California. I remember being pissed off about it. I used to love race weekends. I only got to go to them in the summer when I wasn’t in school. And it’s funny, I don’t remember much about other race weekends, but I remember that one as if it happened yesterday.” I paused and picked at a blade of grass. “I vividly remember my mom and Rafe waiting in the car and my dad looking for something in the house. I was standing on our front steps, taking it all in. Mom rolled down her window and called for Dad to hurry up.

“Finally, he came out of the house, picked me up, and kissed me on both cheeks. He did that every time he left. He said he’d see me in a few days and got into the waiting car. He blew me a kiss, and I watched him drive away. I never saw him again.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Devin took my hand and gently caressed it. The action caught me by surprise, but I didn’t take my hand away. If I were being honest with myself, I kind of liked it. It was soothing.

“I was playing with my Barbies when my mother called Rosa. Rosa was my nanny. She’s my little sister’s nanny now. Anyway, we’d just had dinner and I wasn’t the wiser. Sure, I’d seen the accident earlier in the day, but I hadn’t really put it all together and didn’t remember much about it. Accidents happened all the time. I saw the marshals pull my dad from the car, but I don’t think I realized it was *him*, you know? Maybe I thought it was another driver, or like it wasn’t really real. And Rosa was always so calm under pressure, so she didn’t show any signs of distress. But when I think back on it, my grandmother was as white as a ghost and my grandfather began to pace the room.

“So when my mother called all those hours later and Rosa sat my grandparents down, I’ll never forget my grandmother sobbing. Asking God in Spanish why this had happened. And then I just knew. It all came together in a flash. In many ways I think my dad’s accident killed my grandfather too. A few years later, he had a massive heart attack. My grandmother insisted it was because of his broken heart.”

“It’s a terrible thing to have to go through. For you and your family. Especially when you were so young,” Devin said quietly.

“His death affected everyone. My mom was never the same. It took her a long time to accept what had happened. To move on. And Rafe ... well, he tries to brush it all aside, but I know it’s hard for him to be here.”

“I wish I could say something to make you feel better.”

“Just having someone to talk to is nice. Rafe and I never talk about it. My mother almost never brings up my father. It’s sad that he’s a forbidden topic.”

Devin sighed wistfully. “I know I play up all the fun and games, but I know it can be serious too. Look, if you don’t laugh occasionally, all this other stuff is going to eat you up.”

“I know. But sometimes it feels very solitary. At least for you, you have all those adoring women to keep you company.”

“Just because I have women around, it doesn’t mean I’m not lonely.”

I huffed at that. “Come on! It’s different for you.”

“Oh really?” he asked with his signature playful grin.

“You’re used to this life. You have things going on all the time. It’s new for me, and people aren’t exactly clambering to spend time with me.”

“Give it a chance. Maybe this life will win you over.”

I thought about those words. Did I really want this life? To potentially have to go through what my mother endured? To eventually become her?

“This scene ... this environment destroyed my mother. When my father died, she retreated from society and from her family. All the joy was sucked from her. And I resented it. Not only had I lost my father, I lost my mother too. She became this woman who lived with me and Rafe and Rosa. She’d never been warm and fuzzy—that was Dad—but she was still someone I adored. And then she wasn’t.”

“Sounds like she loved your dad a lot, though. That she had trouble getting over it. Don’t you think it’s kind of sweet to have loved someone so much that it’s gutting when they are gone?”

“But at the expense of everyone else?”

Devin nodded at that. “Good point.”

“For a few years, she was lost to me and Rafe. Had she not met Tony—my stepfather—I’m not sure we would have ever gotten her back. And ...” I couldn’t believe I was sharing all this, but it felt so good. “She was never the same. Now all she wants to do is meddle and critique. I wonder sometimes if the detached, mourning version of my mother was better than the current, judgy one. I often wonder what kind of relationship I would have with her if my father hadn’t died. I think she would have been so much more loving.”

“You know,” he said, dropping his voice a little, “you only get one mum. She may not be perfect, but I bet she loves you to bits.”

“That’s true,” I said solemnly.

He put his arm around my shoulder and gently pulled me in. “She went through a lot. Sounds like she had an amazing love affair with your dad.”

“Something I can only dream of. Isn’t that something we all dream of?”

He was silent for a long time, and when I gazed up at him, he had a faraway look in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking that you’re probably onto something.”

I glanced at my watch. “We should get back. The marshals hate when we hang around the track too late.”

We walked back to the pits, past the corner that had taken my father’s life. I stopped to grab more flowers. I handed them to Flynn.

“Here, to give to someone special.”

“I’m going to keep them for myself, and I’m going to tell people someone special gave them to me.”

My heart blipped at that. Why had he said something like that? And why were my insides doing cartwheels?

Chapter Fifteen

Luna

We need to talk. Call me when you get to Indianapolis.

That was the text I received from Erich a few days later. It would be a few more days before I got to the next race, but he had piqued my interest.

Is this an emergency? Should I call you now?

No, no! Just something we need to chat about.

I thought about this until I reached the track that Tuesday afternoon. I texted him to let him know I was there, and a few minutes later he replied to tell me to meet him at the media center. It was an odd place to meet, but I slipped away and met him there. He was waiting, a look of consternation on his face, but he lit up when he saw me.

“Luna,” he said, giving me a hug. “You’re doing well?”

“I am. And you?”

“Good, good,” he said absently as he scanned the area for what I presumed was a quiet spot.

“What is it that you wanted to talk to me about? I’ve been thinking about this for days.”

“Come, not here,” he said, gently grasping my arm and leading me away. We found a place near a fenced area, away from all the prying eyes.

“You have me intrigued.”

He pursed his lips at that and sighed. “I just found this out a few days ago. I had no idea it happened.”

I frowned. “You’d better tell me, then.”

“Do you remember that conversation we had a few weeks ago? How you were sad, and you mentioned Flynn? And your interest?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart thumping a few extra beats. “How can I forget? It was a moment of madness. I don’t look back on that weekend with much fondness.”

“You remember that we spoke in our dining area.”

My jaw tensed. “Where is this going?” I had a feeling where it was going.

“There’s another way into the tent. It’s in the rear, close to where we were sitting.”

“Okay. And?” The blood was thumping hard in my chest and my ears. Had a reporter heard it all? Jane Edwards? I’d never live it down.

“Flynn came through it and heard everything we said. For some reason, he decided to tell me this a few days ago. I’m not sure why.”

I had an idea why. Our moment in Detroit. My stomach plummeted. “No,” I said, shaking my head.

“I want you to know that I had no idea he was there.”

“He heard me tell you that I was attracted to him?”

Erich nodded. “He heard it all.”

“But ... he hasn’t let on once. I’m so embarrassed.” No, I was mortified.

“Do not be embarrassed. He was the one behaving badly. And I don’t like it one bit. I want you to be careful around him. Now that he knows this, he may try to use it to some advantage. I wouldn’t put anything past him, and the last thing I want for you is to get messed up with him.”

I leaned against the chain-link fence and wanted to sink down and under the earth. “How do I face him now?”

“Don’t do anything differently. He doesn’t know that you know.”

“Easier said than done.”

* * *

I lay on my hotel bed, staring up at the ceiling. I’d managed to avoid Flynn all day, and now I was alone, right where I wanted to be. Rafe had offered to take me for dinner, but I’d opted to eat dinner alone and reflect on my sad life. Then I’d flipped through the news and social media on my phone. I’d even tried calling Jess but got her voicemail.

The knock on the door nearly made me drop my phone. I dragged myself off the bed to answer it. Erich was standing there with a sheepish smile on his face.

“Come with me to the lounge for drinks.”

“You don’t drink before a race.”

“I’ll have mineral water and you can drink.”

I grimaced. “That doesn’t sound very interesting. Besides, I’m perfectly happy watching funny cat videos on my phone.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer. Let’s go,” he said, grabbing on to my hand.

“All right, all right.” I scooped up my phone and key card and let myself be led into the hallway.

The lounge was hopping with women and drivers. It was like a massive audition. Women were looking to land drivers, and drivers were looking for a guest for the night. Erich was quickly ushered to his own table, and we ordered a round of drinks, a whiskey sour for me and a tall glass of mineral water for him.

“Was this a good idea?” I asked. “Am I supposed to be feeling better?”

“Perhaps this wasn’t the greatest idea.”

“I may need a few more drinks to get me through this night.”

“Why don’t we go to a restaurant? Somewhere quiet.”

I shook my head. “No, don’t worry about it. I like the idea of my hotel room being a few floors away.”

“I’m not letting you get away that easily,” Erich said. “We are going to try to have a nice evening.”

I people-watched. Every woman was dressed in designer clothes with flawless hair and makeup. But to what end? These guys would be in town another few days, and then what? They’d never see them again.

I was sipping my drink when Flynn sauntered in. As always, his head was held high, and he had enough confidence for everyone in the room. I couldn’t help the way my insides fluttered. Part of me hoped he wouldn’t see me, but the other part of me ...

He was greeted by a few other drivers and shook their hands. He then went up to the bartender and ordered a beer. I watched as he took a long look at every woman in the room. An attractive brunette caught his attention. I wanted to look away, but my gaze was glued to him. As if he could feel my eyes on him, Flynn slowly turned and saw me staring. He looked at me for

only a moment before returning his focus to the brunette as if he'd never seen me at all. The story of my life. Invisible.

"Luna," Erich said, reaching across the table and touching my hand.

I looked at him. I hadn't heard him call my name. "Sorry, I was thinking about something else," I said.

"About Flynn?"

I nodded slowly. Why hadn't Flynn acknowledged me? I knew he'd seen me. "When my mother was my age, she turned every man's head. I just turn them away."

"Luna, stop," Erich said with dismay.

"It's the truth."

"No, it isn't."

I rose and gulped my drink. "I'm going back to my room. I appreciate the invitation, but I'd rather just crawl into bed and forget all about this day."

"I don't want you to be alone and miserable."

"It sounds like more fun than being here."

Erich glanced over at Flynn and cursed under his breath. "He's only one man. And a stupid one at that. Do you know how many men would love to have you on their arm?"

"Name one."

"Lots," Erich said, unable to come up with a name.

"I'm leaving."

"He's going to know you're leaving because of him," Erich said in a last-ditch effort to keep me from going.

"No, he's not. He doesn't even know I'm here, or he doesn't care. I'm not sure which."

I glanced back at the bar. Flynn was now chatting up the brunette and her overly abundant cleavage. Deliberately, I turned my back on him and said, "I can't believe I allowed myself to even consider the thought of maybe enjoying his company. He hops from bed to bed, thinking that it makes him more of a man. How can a person go through life sleeping with a different woman every chance he gets? It's disgusting. It's not normal. He's a freak of nature along with all those other clowns who think they're proving something. This isn't a contest. You don't win a prize if you screw the most women. How does he sleep at night? Correction: he doesn't sleep at night. He's too busy screwing his latest flavor of the night ... What?"

"Hi, Devin," Erich said uncomfortably.

I slowly turned to see Devin directly behind me, his gaze cold. “Hi,” I said meekly.

“Let me guess. You’re talking about little ol’ me?”

His voice was beyond frigid.

“I was speaking in general terms,” I said, my face growing crimson with embarrassment.

“Sure you were,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “For your information, I sleep quite well, that is, when I’m not fucking my latest flavor of the night.”

I was mortified. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“What other way could you possibly mean? Anyway, have a good night,” he snapped.

I turned back to Erich. “You could have told me he was standing there.”

Erich shrugged. “You were on a roll. How could I stop you?”

Chapter Sixteen

Devin

Luna Perez was driving me crazy, and she was occupying my thoughts far too much. I'd wake up, and sometimes she was the first thing on my mind. Why was this happening? Well, maybe part of me knew why, and it had all started in Miami when she'd come to my room instead of Riedl's. Not to mention what I'd heard while she was having lunch with Riedl and then when I'd overheard her in the hotel bar. That had fired me up more than it should have.

All because the woman drove me crazy.

"Have you listened to a word I've said?"

I looked at my agent, blinking away my haze. I hadn't seen Enzo in weeks, and he'd come to the race in Mexico City to discuss my contract with Russo. Or the lack of a decent contract renewal offer. I had a feeling they wanted to push me out, but they were waiting for some other driver to become available. My gut was telling me it was Carlton. He had one more year with Roche, and there had been rumblings that he wanted to move on. Something about a change in engine supplier that would make the car shit next year. If he wanted a ride with Russo, they'd set out the red carpet for him. Why wouldn't Russo want a world champion, even if he was in his mid-thirties? The man had proven time and time again that he was a workhorse. If Russo did dump me after next year, it would be interesting with Carlton as Riedl's teammate. Carlton would never play second fiddle to Riedl, so I supposed watching the fallout would be a consolation prize for me.

"I was listening. Sort of."

"Before you sign on with Russo again, maybe we poke around with other teams. I can't guarantee a better contract, but maybe more stability.

Something more long term.”

I drummed my fingers on the table. We were at a small restaurant, and I wanted to get shit-faced so I didn’t have to deal with this. “Where do you think Carlton is going next year?”

“No idea. Either Merrick or Russo. That’s why I’m suggesting the stability option.”

“With a shitty team. No. I’ll find a way to increase my value, make Russo want to keep me.”

Enzo narrowed his dark brown eyes. “And how do you plan to do that?”

“I’m working on that part.”

Enzo glanced at his watch and stood. “I would love to stick around, but I have a flight in a few hours. We can discuss this in a few weeks.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

With him gone, my thoughts returned to Luna Perez, and damn it, that was exactly what I didn’t want. I also didn’t want to be sitting at this restaurant alone, so I settled the bill and walked back to my hotel. The air was still hot and humid, and I didn’t mind it. I preferred it over the dreadful air-conditioning in the hotel. I walked past an outdoor bar and decided to go in. I ordered a beer and watched American football, surrounded by mostly American tourists. No one seemed to recognize me, which suited me just fine.

My phone buzzed, and I was surprised to see it was my dad. It was past midnight back home, and then I remembered I owed him a call. He’d left a message earlier that day, but so much had been going on. Usually Mum and Dad didn’t call me on race weekends if it could be avoided, but he was calling pretty late, and that had me on alert.

“Dad, is something wrong?”

“No, no. I did try to catch you earlier, but when you didn’t call back, I assumed you were busy. Then I was worried that you didn’t get my message.”

Shit. That was on me.

“What’s going on? Why are you calling at this odd hour?” Dad usually called in the middle of the night, or first thing in the morning because he had no idea what time zone I was in, but I was still on edge.

“It’s nothing.”

Now he was being cagey and he was pissing me off. “Dad, spit it out.”

He cleared his throat, and I took that as my cue to sit down. This wasn’t

going to be good. “It’s about your gram, son. She had a stroke.”

I had no idea what a gunshot felt like, but this had to be pretty close. My gram? No. She was a pillar of strength. There was no fucking way she was going to get struck down by a bloody stroke. “Is she okay?” Shit, I was beyond frightened of the answer.

“She’s not dead,” my mother said.

“Maureen, I told you I’d tell him. What are you doing on the line?” my father rasped.

“Because I’ve been listening to you find a thousand ways not to tell him. And I just did. She’s not dead.”

And thank God for that. I didn’t care that they were bickering or that my mother was her usual caustic self. As long as Gram was okay ... but did I even know that? Dad had started the call by telling me nothing was bloody wrong!

“Woman, you are going to kill me. I was getting there, and you had to jump in and say it like you did.”

“Stop!” I said. “The two of you can argue about this later. I have questions, and I’d prefer to get my answers from Dad.”

Mum harrumphed and I didn’t care. At least with Dad, everything was straightforward without a guilt trip.

“How is she? How bad was it?”

Dad sighed. “It’s not great. She’s paralyzed on the left side, but she’s conscious and she’s doing okay, but she’ll be in hospital for a while, and we’ll need to work out some therapy when she comes home. She did ask about you even though her speech isn’t the greatest right now.”

“And she’s not going to come live with us,” Mum said. “She doesn’t want to. Can you believe that?”

Actually, I could. Mum had a way of annoying people, and while Gram always treated Mum like a daughter, Mum didn’t afford Gram with the same respect. And Gram never let on. She didn’t hold on to any resentment. And whenever Mum needed Gram to look after us, Gram never said no. The best times were spent there.

“So she’s going to stay in her home? How can she?”

Dad cleared his throat again, this time adding a few coughs for good measure. “We don’t think she’s able to do that.”

Then it dawned on me. They were going to put her in a bloody rest home!
“No, no! You are not putting her in some shitty old folks’ home. Whatever Gram needs, I’ll pay for it.”

“She’ll likely need round-the-clock care,” Dad said.

How bad was this? I figured some physical therapy, and she’d be good to go. “What are the two of you keeping from me?”

“We want to be realistic. We don’t think she can be on her own. She can’t even eat on her own.”

I rubbed my temples. This was worse than I’d thought. “I’ll pay for the care and come home right after this race.”

“I’m sure that’s not necessary,” Mum said.

Of course she’d say that. Gram was loved by everyone, and Mum didn’t experience that same adoration. I was sure it was one of the many reasons why she resented her. But Dad loved his mother, and no matter what my mum tried to pull, he wasn’t going to put up with it.

“I’ll have Enzo arrange the flights. And I want as much info as you can give me when I get there.”

“I’ll let your granny know,” Dad said. “I’m sure that will lift her spirits. She could use that right now.”

I got off the phone with them and then called room service. I was going to need a few drinks to get me through this night. And just as I was sitting back with a beer and trying to forget my troubles, my phone chimed.

Hey, how are you?

Luna Perez. Nope. I was not going to deal with her either.

Chapter Seventeen

Luna

The final race of the season was in Mexico, and all I could think about was my disastrous conversation with Devin Flynn. I'd tried texting him a few times, but he'd ignored me. So I made my way over to the Russo dining tent to apologize in person. I found Erich instead, and he seemed to have a jump to his step.

"Monica is pregnant," he said before I could get out a hello.

"Congratulations," I said, throwing my arms around him. At least someone had good news to share.

"We waited until she made it past her first trimester, so I've been holding this news in for a while. We've been trying for a few years, so this is amazing news."

"You'll be a fantastic father."

"Thank you for that. And how are you doing?" he asked, handing me a bottle of water. For late September, the weather was scorching, and the humidity was wreaking havoc with my curls. They were beyond out of control, and while I'd pulled my hair back into a bun, I could feel the tendrils that had fallen around my face. Tanya had commented that I looked sexy, which was untrue but sweet of her.

"I'm okay. I think we're all happy to see this as the last race of the season. Perez hasn't had the greatest year."

"Hopefully, next year will be a better one," he said as sincerely as he could, because why would he care? He'd had a great season and a baby on the way.

The door to the Russo office opened and out came Flynn. A frown was etched on his face, and he barely muttered a hello. He checked out the

assorted food being offered and returned with a sandwich and tomato salad. To my surprise, he sat down next to Erich without saying a word to either of us.

“How are you today?” I asked tentatively.

“I’m fine,” he said abruptly.

“What’s wrong with you?” Erich asked. “The team order a physical?” He laughed like it was some kind of joke, but it was clear Flynn didn’t find it amusing.

“You’re funny, Riedl. A real bloody comedian. You know what, I think I’ll eat my lunch elsewhere.”

We watched him exit the dining tent, and when he was gone, I turned to Erich. “What was that?”

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe his latest girlfriend broke up with him?”

“He didn’t bring one this weekend,” Erich said.

I arched a brow. “How would you know that?”

“It’s always a major production when he brings one, and no spectacle this week.”

Nick, the team manager, came in to grab his lunch. Erich caught his arm as he was leaving to ask if knew what was wrong with Flynn. The little man frowned and lowered his voice to say, “It’s none of my business.”

I fidgeted at that. This was beginning to sound serious. “Is everything all right?” I asked.

Nick sighed. “His grandmother has had a stroke. Apparently, they are very close. I’m not sure he wants anyone to know.”

I covered my mouth with my hand. “Oh no! Is she okay?”

“It’s not looking good, but he won’t talk about it. He isn’t telling anyone because he doesn’t want it to affect the race.”

“I’ll go talk to him,” Erich said, rising.

I stopped him. “I’ll go. I think this calls for a woman’s touch. Nick, do you happen to know where he went?”

“I saw him wandering off to the hill at the end of the track. It’s a quiet area, or the quietest around here, anyway.”

“I’ll see you later,” I said to Erich before venturing out of the dining tent. I walked to the end of the paddock, scanning the gently rolling hills that encircled the track. Sure enough, I saw Devin sitting in the grass in a shady spot, not far from the track. He had on a pair of sunglasses. I wasn’t sure if he

was aware of much going on, but when he spotted me climbing up the hill, he took out his earbuds and gestured me over. I sat next to him and picked a blade of grass.

“First of all, I want to apologize for what happened last week. I shouldn’t have said all those things. I had no good excuse for it other than the fact I’m a jerk.”

“It’s fine,” he said quietly. “I’m sure there was some truth to it.”

I shook my head. “It was inappropriate, and I know better.”

“Don’t worry about it, Perez.”

“There is something I wanted you to know about me. Something I haven’t told you before. I’m a good talker, but I’m an even better listener. So, I’m wondering if something is on your mind that you want to talk about.”

“Not really.”

I gently bumped my shoulder into his. “Really?”

He let out a breath. “Okay, who told you?”

“A little birdie.”

“I should kill that little bird.” He looked off at the other end of the track, and I could see his eyes become glossy with tears, but he managed to hold them at bay. “My grandmother had a stroke.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How is she?”

“My dad says not good. She’s paralyzed on her left side, and her speech has been affected, but she did ask for me. They said she should make it, but she has lots of physical therapy ahead of her.”

“You can’t leave? The team won’t let you go?”

“I haven’t asked.”

I could see his pain in his face. He was in no condition to drive a race car. “I think you should. The team will survive without you for one race.”

“And do what? I can’t do anything to help. But what I can do is my job. Finish the race weekend and take care of what I can.”

“It’s okay not to want to go, but maybe your grandmother would find comfort in having you there. That’s probably why she asked for you.”

“I don’t want to see her that way. In pain. Helpless. That’s not how I want to remember her. When I was a kid, my parents worked a lot, so she basically raised us. I love her to pieces, and to see her weak ... and possibly dying ...”

“You have to make the decision of whether you want to go, but if you’re feeling guilty about not going, that feeling won’t go away. Take it from someone who didn’t get a second chance to say goodbye.”

“Why must you be so logical?”

“Because I’m smarter than you,” I said, drawing a smile out of him.

“I’ll think about all this. And I do appreciate the chat.”

“I’m available for a chat anytime. And I promise not to insult you.”

He tilted his head at me and smiled. “I kind of like it when you insult me.”

The old Flynn seemed to be coming back because he had a mischievous smile on his face. He was such a cad. “I suppose if you’d like, I can insult you anytime.”

“I may take you up on that offer. In the meantime, I should get back before the team sends out an APB.”

Before we got up, I stopped him. “If your head isn’t in the race, tell me you’ll pull out. Don’t risk your life for the sake of the team. Your grandmother would be gutted if something happened to you.”

He thought about that for a moment. “Okay, I’ll make a decision tomorrow. I appreciate that you care.”

We walked back toward the pits. As we neared the Russo motorhome, my phone chimed with a text. Rafe needed to see me right away.

“I’ve got to run,” I said. “Hang in there, and let me know how it goes and how your grandmother is.”

“I will.”

I hesitated for a moment. “Hey, do you need a hug?”

He smiled. “Only if you can spare one.”

“I’ve always got hugs to spare.” I embraced him tightly and patted him gently on the back. I couldn’t help noticing how nice he smelled. Even at the track, his cologne wafted over me subtly. “She’ll be fine,” I whispered into his ear.

He nodded and solemnly walked away.

Chapter Eighteen

Luna

The end of the racing season had come, one that had found Rafe finishing fifteenth of thirty in the drivers' standings. It was a disappointing result for a Perez team that had expected to finish top ten. And like the previous year, Blake Carlton took the racing championship.

At least I got to take a break from the scene. I said goodbye to Devin, knowing he'd be the person I'd miss the most. I wouldn't see him until the spring, and maybe that was a good thing. I could finally rid him from my mind and move on with my life and my heart. At least that was the plan.

The end of the racing season also meant a visit with my mother. I'd been avoiding it. But it was harder and harder to do when Mom spent just a part of the winter during my sister's school break in Southern California at the Perez estate. The rest of the time she was in Cortese, which was just a short flight away. My only solace was that Jess would be at her own family estate in the Italian resort town of Tropea and would be company for the long days that I would have to spend with Mom.

Jess picked me up from the airport, and we stopped at an outdoor café for coffee and a quick lunch. I gave my friend a breakdown of the last few months as we sipped our cappuccinos.

"I knew you liked Flynn."

"It doesn't matter," I said, scooping up some milk foam. "Besides, if he suspects that I have feelings for him, and he's done nothing to act on them, then he's not interested back."

Jess shrugged. "You never know. Come on, the guy let you stay at his house. A sleepover without sex. That's huge."

"That's right. After you ditched me," I said, arching a brow. I had

eventually told her about that night and what had happened after she'd disappeared. She was pissed that I'd kept it from her, but she'd gotten over it. Just like I'd gotten over her abandoning me.

Jess laughed it off, but I hadn't forgotten. I'd forgiven my best friend, but there were definitely going to be trust issues when and if we ever went club-hopping again.

"Anyway," Jess said, "maybe he's testing the waters. Feeling you out."

"But I won't see him for months. How is that going to work?"

"Maybe I haven't thought that far in advance yet."

I sipped my coffee and sighed. "I think what makes him so attractive is how different he is from the men I spend all my waking hours with. Rafe and Erich are always so serious, and Devin seems like so much fun. And if I'm honest, I hate working for the Perez team. I hate everything about it. The only bright spot is seeing Devin."

"If you're unhappy with your job, you should tell your brother. Why stick it out with something that you hate?"

"I can't. It would let him down."

Jess crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair, staring at me intently. "Why is it okay for you to not let him down and for him to make you work a job you hate? Don't you think it's unfair to always put him first? That maybe Rafe should let you be happy?"

I mulled that over, staring into my cup. "You have a point."

I thought about this as Jess dropped me off at the front door of my family's house. I'd asked Jess to come in, as a buffer to my mother, but Jess had to visit with her own family and still had an hour's drive. I took a deep breath as I trudged up the stone steps to the front door. It had been a long time since I'd been here last. During that visit, I stuck around just long enough to annoy my mother, and vice versa. But there were three people I enjoyed seeing on my visits to Cortese: my little sister, Catia, my stepfather, and most of all, my former nanny, Rosa.

I opened the front door and set my small luggage down. I listened for sounds but heard nothing, so I made my way to the kitchen, then through the great room, and finally out the back door to the sprawling back porch. There I found Mom lounging in one of her comfy chairs reading a book.

"Hi, Mom," I said with a small wave.

Mom looked up from her book and smiled. She took off her reading glasses and set them and the book down before rising.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said, walking over to me and pulling me into a hug. “We expected you over an hour ago. Tony waited, but then had to go into town and run some errands. He’ll be delighted to see you. So will your sister.”

Even just sitting around the house reading a book, Mom was radiant. She had that timeless beauty that defied age. I’d seen pictures of her at twenty-three, just a year before my father had stolen her heart from another race car driver. The scandal that had ensued had led to a bitter rivalry between Marco Perez and Sergio Moreno that would last until my father’s death.

And now, with Mom in her early fifties, she was just as beautiful as she’d been at twenty-three. Men of all ages took notice of her. And how many times had people mistaken me for Mom’s younger sister? Too many.

“My flight was delayed.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said with a wave of her hand. “You’re here now. Should I have Rosa make some lunch for you? Are you hungry? You look like you’ve lost some weight. Luna, you’re already so tiny. You can’t afford to lose any more weight.”

“I haven’t lost weight. I’m fine.”

“All right. If you say so. How about that lunch? We could have it on the veranda and catch up?”

I didn’t want to catch up, but I owed it to Mom. “Sure, Mom. That sounds great. Let me just put my stuff away, and then I’ll go say hello to Rosa.”

Rosa was always the brightest spot in my visits home. After Dad had died, and Mom pulled away, it was Rosa who had stepped into the role of mother. She’d always been in my life as my nanny, but she jumped in when grief grabbed hold of Mom. When she could barely pull herself out of bed in the days after Dad’s death, Rosa had kept the family going, got us kids off to school, maintained a household routine. Showed love and support to me and Rafe when Mom couldn’t. Who knows what would have happened to us otherwise.

And in many ways, Rosa’s family life had revolved around our family life. When Mom and Dad lived in California, so did Rosa and her family, uprooting themselves from Italy. It was in California that Rosa’s children prospered, became American citizens, and now ran a small boutique vineyard near those of the Perez vineyards. In many ways, my parents helped make that happen because Rosa’s family was our family too.

And when Mom moved back to Italy, Rosa and her husband went with

them. Mostly because that was their home. Both their kids, who had roots now in California, stayed behind.

“Luna!”

Rosa’s light-brown eyes lit up when she saw me. She had a few more gray hairs, but all in all, Rosa looked the same. I ran into her arms and gave her the tightest squeeze. I was met with the familiar scent of Rosa’s lilac lotion. The smell always brought me comfort. I’d even bought a bottle for myself, to use when I needed to ground myself.

“How are you, Rosa?”

“I’m good. We’ve missed you.”

“How is Mike? And Gino? And Angie?”

“All good. Mike is working in San Diego now. With an upstart pet food company. All ethical-based products. He still works with Angie on the vineyard, but he wanted something different. He’s very excited about it. And he just bought a townhouse with George. They are thinking of adopting.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m so happy for them.”

“And Gino is Gino. He’s out taking care of the roses.”

“I heard the vineyard had a wonderful year. Angie posted about it on Facebook. I can’t wait to try the wine.”

“We’ll have some with dinner.”

Rosa pattered around the kitchen, and I helped with what I could. I’d learned to cook from Rosa, which came in handy during my university years in Montreal. Mom wouldn’t know how to turn the stove on or boil water, as Rosa pointed out many times.

I brought lunch out onto the patio, where Mom was leaning against the railing and staring out at the vineyards in the distance.

“Lunch is served,” I said with a forced smile. How would I get through this lunch? The inquisition that was likely to come?

“How lovely,” Mom said, staring down at the salad overflowing with all my favorites. Strawberries, candied pecans, and feta cheese on a bed of fresh greens. Rosa had her own secret salad-dressing recipe that she’d only ever shared with me. I’d made that same dressing many times in Montreal, and it was a favorite with my friends, especially my dear friend Elizabeth.

I didn’t wait to dig in. I’d forgotten how hungry I was and how much I loved this salad. As I forked up a second mouthful, Mom cleared her throat. I waited for the deluge.

“How did it go this year? You and Rafe got along?”

“We did. It was fine.” It was best to keep my answers short so Mom had nothing to latch on to.

Mom brushed a long, voluminous lock of her chestnut-colored hair over her shoulder. “And you’re happy? Doing all of this?” The disdain was obvious in her voice as much as she still tried to hide it.

“I am, Mom.”

“I worry, that’s all. I worry about you, and I worry about Rafe. Of course, for very different reasons.”

I knew the reasons. For Rafe, physical safety, and for me, financial.

“We are both fine.”

“I don’t hear from him as often as I’d like. He’s not keeping anything from me, is he?”

That surprised me a little. While Rafe wasn’t the best at keeping up contact with Mom, he was still much closer to her than I was.

“Not that I know of.”

“Maybe it’s nothing.”

Maybe it was Mom making things up and fishing for information.

We ate in silence for a few moments, and I thought to wolf down my food to make an escape. I also hoped that maybe Catia would come home early from school and disrupt this painful and awkward lunch.

“I was talking to your Uncle Roberto yesterday. He says he’ll come over tomorrow for a visit.”

“How is he doing?” I asked.

“Walking with a cane, but he’s walking, so that’s progress. I asked him if he thought he may return to the team.”

I already knew where this was going.

“And?”

“He seems to think you all have it under control.” Mom said it as though she didn’t believe it.

“I think he’s right.”

Mom pushed her half-empty plate aside. “Luna, sweetheart, I know you don’t want to hear this—”

“I don’t.”

“But I have to say this. When your father and I created your trust funds, we wanted to make sure you both were secure financially for life. And in less than two years, you are going to get the last of that trust fund money. If you’ve already invested most of the first two installments in your brother’s

racing team—”

“Our racing team.”

Mom acknowledged her error with a nod. “*Your* racing team, then what will be left won’t be much if you lose the team. I know just as well as anyone else in the racing world that teams are expensive. Your father and I saw many disappear overnight. I don’t want to see you ruined.”

I listened to Mom’s lecture and took one deep breath. “I didn’t invest everything in the team. And I’m not worried.”

I didn’t add that I’d also invested in the Greco winery. Something Mom had *not* done. Something I knew bothered Rosa, but that Rosa would never admit.

“I simply don’t want your brother to lead you astray.”

My blood was boiling now, but I kept calm. “He’s not leading me astray. I’m not a child, Mom. I’m an adult. I know you don’t want to see me that way, but I am capable of making my own decisions. Can I ask that we don’t speak of this again? I feel like every time I come home, we must discuss it, and I’m not sure why. You’ve made your position clear, and I’ve made mine.”

Mom folded her hands together. “Okay, I won’t bring it up again. I care, that’s all. I love you, darling. I want you to be safe and secure.”

“And I’m both,” I said, softening just a little.

I brought the dishes back into the kitchen and helped Rosa clean up. We caught up again, and just as I was about to leave the kitchen, Rosa grasped my hand.

“There is something different about you,” Rosa said, surveying me carefully. “Have you met a man?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve met many men. One stupider than the next.”

Rosa wagged her finger. “No, it’s not that. Have you met a young man you’re not telling us about?”

“No one of note.”

Rosa stepped a little closer. “I know your mother is probably the last person you’d want to find out, but you know you can trust me.”

“It’s nothing, Rosa. Just a silly crush. On a man who is as wrong for me as humanly possible.”

Rosa nodded. “I assumed there was a man. I had a crush on Gino when I first met him. Thought he wanted nothing to do with a girl who was three years younger than him. Then one day he asked me to the movies. Thirty-five

years later, we are still together.”

“Maybe one day I’ll find my Gino, but until then, I’ll admire this man from afar. Just where he should remain.”

Chapter Nineteen

Luna

After spending much of the evening chatting and playing board games with my little sister, I finally got to bed. It had been a long time since I'd slept in my old bed, and I probably had the best sleep in months. Moving from one foreign bed to the next—and not the way Flynn did—meant I'd rarely had a restful night.

When I got up early the next morning, I did some refreshing stretches before putting on my workout clothes and going for a run. I had so much energy pent up, looking for a release, and I waved to my mother before she could stop me to chat.

As winter was setting in, the mornings were cooler than I'd expected, but the minute I got running, the cool breeze was a blessing—nothing like the winter months in Montreal when I'd had to force myself to get out of my warm bed and face the cold, bone-chilling mornings. The old redbrick building I lived in with Elizabeth and her aunt had so many drafts, and even the warm days were terrible because of the humidity. But nothing beat a summer in Montreal. I missed those.

The run cleared my head, and when I returned home and showered, I checked my phone. A missed call from a number I didn't recognize. I ignored it and made my way to the kitchen where Rosa was making bacon and eggs. I poured myself a cup of steaming coffee.

“You're up early,” she said.

“I slept like the dead. Now it's time to eat, and I do miss your breakfasts, Rosa.”

“And I miss having you as a breakfast guest. Remember when I used to make hot milk with the egg inside? And you'd dip your toast in it?”

Did I ever! Sure, it sounded gross, but Rosa had a way of not cooking the egg in the milk and instead, making it a sweet drink once she'd added the sugar. And the more buttery the toast, the better. Perfect for dipping. Maybe I'd have that tomorrow, even though I wasn't five years old anymore.

I was halfway through my breakfast when my phone buzzed. I glanced at it, noticing the same unknown number. I planned not to answer, but it niggled at me, so I picked up before my voicemail kicked in.

"Hello."

"Hello, Ms. Perez. Why so elusive?"

My heart skipped a beat at hearing Devin's voice. He was the last person I'd expected to hear from. "Oh, hi."

"Don't sound so excited," he teased.

"I just didn't expect a call from you. I'm a little surprised." And I was. My first thought was to wonder if he needed something from me.

"I suppose I'm trying to keep you on your toes."

I cleared my throat and gingerly got up from the table. The last thing I wanted was an audience.

"What can I do for you?"

"How have you been?" he asked as if I hadn't asked a question.

"I'm fine. Visiting with family."

"I was going to call you sooner, but things have been a bit crazy for me. Russo has been testing new cars, and since I'm the grunt of the team, I've been doing all the testing. Lucky for Riedl, I suppose. I've also been fulfilling a lot of sponsorship duties as well. Again, something Riedl prefers not to do. He gets away with murder, you know. But I suppose I'm more photogenic, so I can see why the sponsors prefer me."

I checked the back porch and was glad to see it deserted. I picked a quiet corner and sat down on one of Mom's plush ratan chairs.

"Right. Sounds like a lot of work. Why were you calling again?" Would I get an answer this time? And not him boasting about his handsome face.

"I left my place in Milan. It's been raining for days. It was simply too much."

"Permanently?"

"Hell, no! I love that place. Well, when it doesn't rain, that is."

This was getting strange. He hadn't called just to chat, did he? "Okay. So how can I help you?"

"I'm glad you asked that."

I had actually asked many times, but since he was finally getting around to it, I wasn't about to call him out on it.

"There is something you can help me with. You know I'm not a conformist, and sometimes I like to shake things up. And with Christmas coming, and our huge Russo Christmas party—you know, people would kill to get an invite to that party—I thought, why not shock the establishment a little and ask a member of another team to be my date for the night."

My mouth gaped open and I quickly closed it. "That's more than 'shaking things up'!"

"I know, so what do you say? Want to be my date this Friday night?"

I hiccuped a gasp. "Sorry, your date? Me?"

"Yes, this Friday. I know it's short notice, but I can have you flown in early so that you can find the appropriate dress. It will be a great time."

Was this a cruel joke? Or was it that he couldn't find anyone else to go? That seemed unlikely. "You couldn't find someone else? I thought you were dating some Norwegian model. Or was she from New Zealand? I can't keep up with you, Flynn."

"She was too silly. And she was from Nebraska."

"Oh." Right. I wasn't even close.

"And I thought it would be nice to have a date I could have an intelligent conversation with. So, what do you say, Ms. Perez?"

I twisted a long coil of my curly brown hair. This would drive Rafe nuts. But wouldn't it also be exactly what he wanted? The coveted publicity he couldn't get enough of? And would I want to put myself out there to be critiqued? "Maybe I have other plans," I said in an effort to stall.

"What plans could you have that would be better than this? Besides, what woman would turn down an evening with me?"

He was so full of himself that it was admirable. And yet I had my doubts about the whole thing. No, this was a terrible idea, and I couldn't go along with it. "I'm busy Friday."

"Ah, humor. Very cute. So we have a date?"

I drummed my fingers on my thigh. What would Rafe do? He would lose his mind; that was what he would do. He'd kill me with his bare hands. "Where is this party?"

"Milan, of course. The team doesn't like to stray too far from headquarters. They've rented some fancy estate to hold the thing. Black tie and all that."

I let out a deep breath. My heart was racing wildly at the prospect. Of course I wanted to spend time with him, but at what cost? And he'd already told me he was using me for the shock value, but did I care? Maybe I wanted to shock Rafe just as much. Maybe more.

"I'll have to make arrangements to get there."

"Don't be silly. I'll have an airline ticket sent to you. First class, of course. It's not like you're that far away! Besides, I don't want you to think I'm a cheap date. Say Wednesday? That should give you enough time to pick the perfect dress. That's on my dime as well. It's the least I can do on such short notice."

Was this impractical? Wild? Totally. Did I want to do it? Hell, yes! "All right, let's do this."

Chapter Twenty

Luna

I flew to Milan Wednesday morning. I had a plan in mind. After calling my Uncle Dario—Mom’s only sibling—he happily arranged to meet with me in his small studio. He’d been in the fashion industry all his life, but even with the backing of my parents, when Dad was still alive, he’d never been able to get his dream label off the ground. He’d worked with various design studios and labels in his career, and now worked on one-of-a-kind pieces by commission only.

He lived and worked in a tiny studio just outside Milan’s main fashion district. I had stayed there a few times when I’d thought about going to university there, before deciding to go to the same university in Montreal that Mom had gone to, and where she met Jess’s mom all those years ago.

I’d enjoyed spending time with Uncle Dario because there were no rules, but it was also for that reason I’d decided Milan wasn’t right for me. I enjoyed some rules, and to have guidance, and my uncle was more a free spirit who didn’t care who I hung out with or when I came home. For someone like Jess, that would have been ideal. Not so much for me.

When I reached the studio, my uncle was there with open arms.

“Luna, how wonderful to see you,” he said, scooping me into a hug. Like Mom, he was tall and had on the sharpest clothes on his slim frame even when he was hanging around his small studio. “I was telling your mother the other day how long it had been since I’d last seen you. So tell me, what is this party all about? I have chosen a few of my vintage dresses, all elegant, and I can easily alter any of them to fit you.”

“It’s for a Christmas party. I was invited to the Russo team’s party by one of their drivers.”

My uncle arched a brow. “That sounds interesting. Does your mother know about this? No, never mind. Forget her. More importantly, does your brother know about this?”

Even my uncle, who didn’t care at all about race cars or its drivers, knew the significance of this and how Rafe would react.

“I haven’t told him yet,” I said, following him to a rack of dresses.

“Do you plan to tell him?”

I hedged on that. “Eventually. Probably after the party.”

“Yes, a good plan. You do want to enjoy yourself.”

He leafed through the dresses and produced a forest-green gown with a bit of a train. I shook my head. The next dress was navy and covered in sequins. I nixed that one too. I wasn’t much into bling. The third dress was black, a fitted dress with a muted sheen to it. It had straps that seemed to flutter.

“I want to try this one on,” I said.

“I like it too.”

Dario took it off the hanger and handed it to me. I went to the bathroom and changed. My uncle didn’t have a big enough mirror for me to see it in there, so when I stepped out, his first reaction made me beam. His face lit up and he clapped his hands and motioned for me to check myself out in the full-length mirror.

“It fits you almost perfectly,” he said. “I have to make minimal alterations. And you look absolutely beautiful in it.”

“I’d better. I’ll have a lot of competition.”

He pffted me, but when I didn’t smile, he put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me in. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know. I’m just tired of feeling sorry for myself. One day I’d like to be the one who turns heads.”

He wagged his finger at me. “Oh, you turn heads. Even this old geezer notices that. I’m not sure where you’re looking when they’re gazing at you, but you seem to be missing it. But you know what, I know more than a few makeup artists and hairstylists. Not that you need it, but I can have them here before the party. You will be the most beautiful woman there.”

When I smiled at that, he gave my shoulder another squeeze. “Luna, is this man special? More than a way to needle your brother?”

“No,” I lied. “Devin Flynn lives to shock people, and that’s why he’s asked me to this event. And maybe that’s what also bothers me. The fact he’s

using me as a prop.”

Dario had me step up onto a small platform as he prepared the dress for alterations. He pinned one section of my dress along the back zipper and then moved to the hem. “If you think he’s using you, then perhaps you shouldn’t go. Unless you think it’s mutually beneficial. Is that the case here?”

“Maybe.”

“Why don’t you view this party as a night out? Have a good time. Does this man make you laugh?”

I bit my lip and thought of all the silly things he’d done. “He’s very entertaining.”

“Perfect. Then go in with the attitude that you’re going to have fun.”

These thoughts whirled through my head as I met with my Uncle Dario’s makeup artist and hairstylist, two days later. I watched as the stylist swept my hair into a sleek updo, and the makeup artist matched my makeup to my dress in muted tones that brought out the glow of my naturally bronzed skin. And then it was time to get into the dress. My uncle had made the alterations to match my un-model height of five foot five, and when I looked at myself in the full-length mirror, I didn’t recognize the woman staring back at me.

“Gorgeous,” Dario said, a wide smile spreading across his face.

“I look so different.”

Dario frowned. “You look exactly like yourself, and just like your mother. The only difference between the two of you is that you lack her confidence.”

Funny, Jess had said the same thing. I didn’t reply.

My uncle continued, “My dear, once you have confidence, you will be a force to be reckoned with. And that’s something I want you to work on. When you go to the party tonight, look at all the men, make eye contact with them. *See* what they are seeing.”

Those words stuck with me as my phone chimed. Devin was here, and I buzzed him into my uncle’s building. When Dario let him in, I was sure I heard Devin gasp. I gave him a sheepish wave but kept my gaze trained on his sea-green eyes. For the first time in my life, I recognized desire in a man’s eyes as he took me in. Maybe not to ravish me right then and there, but he was looking at me the same way he looked at all the other women he salivated for. And it scared me for a quick moment. Was I prepared for this?

“Hi, Devin,” I said, breaking the moment between us. “This is my Uncle Dario. Dario, this is Devin Flynn.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Flynn said in the politest voice.

My uncle pulled out his phone and asked us to scoot together for photos. I tried to hide my embarrassment. My uncle was treating us like high school prom dates leaving for the most magical night of our lives. We obliged, and I pulled Devin out of the loft before my uncle could request any ridiculous poses.

“And you’ll be taking good care of my niece tonight, yes?” Dario called after us.

Devin glanced at me and then back to my uncle. “I won’t be taking my eyes off her.”

“Good answer. Well, the two of you have a wonderful time.”

“You look great,” Devin said, leading me down the hall to the elevator.

“You don’t look too bad yourself.”

“I just combed my hair and put on a tuxedo. And your uncle seems nice,” Devin said, putting his arm through mine as we walked to our waiting limo.

“He’s amazing. He’s also talented. He made this dress.”

Devin’s eyes opened wide. “Are you serious?”

“Why would I lie?”

“That explains why he lives in Milan. Does he work for a label?”

I gave him side-eye. “You seem to know a thing or two about fashion.”

“I get invited to fashion shows occasionally. Doesn’t hurt when you’re dating the models.”

That comment stung a bit, but I moved on from it. “He used to have his own label. Now he does custom work for select clients.”

“And that’s enough to live in Milan?”

“I suppose. I guess I don’t really pry. My grandparents left him some money, so I suppose that supports him. He’s always been my favorite, so I don’t ask invasive questions. He is the opposite of my mother, so we get along great.”

Devin arched a mischievous brow. “I sense a story there. You’ll have to tell me about it.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe after a few drinks?”

I laughed at that. “You want me to have a good time, right? That doesn’t include talking about my family.”

We climbed into the limo, and Devin poured glasses of champagne without asking. He handed me one and we toasted to the evening. I stole a

few glances at him and tried not to get my hopes up about the night. I wanted to have fun and not to think about my brother or anyone else. And if I had a good time with Devin, well, that was a bonus.

“Should I expect any difficulties this evening?” I asked, sipping my champagne.

“I hope not. Maybe just some surprised faces and the gossip sites going crazy.”

“I haven’t told my brother about this. Or my mother. I’m sure it will kill one if not both of them.”

“By tomorrow, they’ll know. And the rumors are going to be flying.”

I tilted my head and took in his smug face. “You love being a troublemaker, don’t you?”

“I thrive on it.”

“And this isn’t some scheme to embarrass me or my brother?”

He laughed, and when he did, his face lit up. I found it charming despite myself. “I wouldn’t dare. You would probably kick my ass.”

“You’re right. I probably would.”

The drive to the estate was a little over an hour. He told jokes and stories from his childhood. Some of the jokes were funny, others silly and crude, but nothing I wouldn’t expect from him. I told him all about Elizabeth and my university days, and how much fun I’d had. I wished Rafe would learn a thing or two from Devin about being less uptight.

“I haven’t asked, but how is your grandmother?”

He looked at me and smiled warmly. “That’s thoughtful of you to ask. She’s doing okay. Better than expected. She’s doing a ton of physio and getting her mobility back.”

“That is great to hear.”

As we neared the estate, his expression grew more serious. “So, there is something I didn’t tell you,” he said. “I booked us some rooms tonight at a nearby hotel. I assumed the party would go late and that neither of us would want to drag our asses back to the city in the middle of the night. Now, before you panic, we have separate rooms. I’m sure that will come as a great disappointment. There will also be a change of clothes for you. I arranged for everything.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or annoyed. How could he just expect me to be available? But wasn’t it a nice gesture to arrange for everything? I was conflicted.

“I should let my uncle know. I don’t want him to worry.” I took my phone out of the chic clutch my uncle had supplied me with and sent him a text.

The driver pulled up the long stone driveway to the estate just as I was sending my uncle a text. The entrance was bathed in lights, and an attendant came to open our door. Devin got out first and helped me out. We both stared up at the grand entrance, and I took a long, calming breath.

“You ready?” Devin asked.

“I think so.”

“Let’s go have some fun.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Luna

Devin put his arm through mine again as we walked toward the entrance. The bright lights and flashing bulbs of photographers disoriented me for a moment, but when my eyes adjusted, I saw people milling around as we walked through the main doors into the grand lobby. Two ushers immediately took our coats. I looked around, trying to fight the feelings of intimidation. People dressed to the nines were all around me, laughing and chatting, and I didn't know any of them.

"Don't be nervous," Devin whispered in my ear.

More camera flashes by official-looking photographers, and smiling foreign faces greeted me. So many eyes were watching us, and I thought of my mother. What would she do? I decided to channel her and try to win over the crowd. I stood up straight, pasted on a demure smile for pictures when a photographer insisted on taking one with me and Devin, and made eye contact with people. I shuddered to think what Rafe would do when he saw it, but I wasn't going to worry about that now.

As we mingled, Devin seemed to know almost everyone. He expertly introduced me to them all, and I could see why he was a public relations asset. He made everyone feel like the center of his attention, even though he was probably wondering who was winning the football game. He was a master of bullshitting; I could learn a lot from him.

I also remembered what Uncle Dario said. I made a point to look at people, men and women, and they did see me. Some men even took longer looks. My uncle was right. And my newfound confidence certainly didn't hurt.

We finally got around to the Russo team owner, Leonardo Martini. Devin

hugged him and introduced him to me. I'd seen Martini a few times, but we'd never been formally introduced.

"Ms. Perez, what a pleasure to meet you," he said. He was Devin's height, sporting a perfectly tailored tuxedo. His jet-black hair was slicked back, and although he was pushing sixty, he didn't look a day over forty. "I've seen you around the track, and I can't believe this is the first time we've chatted."

"Race weekends are always so busy. It happens. And it's a pleasure to meet you, too, Mr. Martini."

"I insist you call me Leo."

"Thank you, Leo."

His deep-set eyes were trained on me. "I remember your father," he said. "He was a good man. Taken much too soon. I had always hoped he'd drive for us one day, but he was committed to Merrick. Such a shame."

"Thank you for the kind words. Indeed, he was. I'm sure he would have loved to drive for Russo."

"I assume you aren't here on a spy mission?" he asked with an arched brow.

I laughed at that. "Just here with my friend Devin. My brother doesn't even know I'm here."

"Well then, welcome. I hope you have a wonderful time."

With the pleasantries out of the way, Leo focused his attention back to Devin.

"Next year will be our year," he said.

"I believe you," Devin said, patting Leo on the shoulder with what I knew to be his phoniest smile.

Devin chuckled once Leo had disappeared. "He probably can't believe I had the balls to bring you here."

"You're going to get yourself in trouble," I said with a slight shake of my head.

"Bah," he said, waving his hand. "You may be part of another team, but you are still Marco Perez's daughter. And that gives you a pass. Plus, these uptight bastards need a kick in the balls every once in a while."

I was relieved when I caught sight of Erich and Monica. They were the first familiar and friendly faces I'd recognized this evening. Erich was surprised to see me, and I saw a fleeting look of disappointment on his face. I chose to ignore it. He kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear that he

wanted to talk to me later. I dreaded the thought as I hugged a pregnant Monica.

“Flynn, you can’t surprise me anymore,” Erich said with a faux smile. “You brought the enemy to our Christmas party.”

“Oh, please,” Devin said. “The Perez team is far from being an enemy of ours. Rafe would be faster on a bicycle.”

“Always full of tact,” I observed.

Devin shrugged. “We weren’t great last year, but your team was awful,” he said as if it were fact. “Your brother is a good driver, so I don’t know why he insisted on forming his own team. He could have driven with any of the top teams and been champion, but that will never happen with Perez.”

“Flynn, those loose lips of yours will get you into trouble,” Erich warned.

“Believe it or not, but I’m already used to this from him,” I said.

“See, she knows me well,” Flynn said with a wink. He then turned to me and put on his most charming smile. “Ms. Perez, what can I get you to drink?”

“Your best red wine.”

With Devin gone, I was sure that Erich would corner me with whatever he had to say, but instead, I chatted with Monica as Erich observed. When Flynn returned with my drink and a beer for himself, I sipped the drink while Erich and Devin discussed the seating arrangements. I wasn’t surprised that Erich and Monica were at the front table. He was the star of the team, after all. Devin and I were relegated to one of the middle tables. I said nothing, seeing that Devin was annoyed at the placement.

We mingled until just before dinner. Devin worked the room like a politician, and when it was time to sit down, I found our table consisted of Devin’s racing engineer, some technicians and their spouses. I chatted with the women while the men told vulgar jokes. Dinner was drawn out, followed by several speeches I could barely stay awake for. This evening was more boring than I’d anticipated.

“That was the most mind-numbing two hours of my life,” Devin said once the endless monotony of speeches was over. Had he read my thoughts? He’d gotten us both after-dinner cocktails to enjoy. Everyone from our table had left to stretch their legs, and I liked having Devin to myself for a few minutes.

“Those speeches were pretty awful. Great relief for insomnia.”

“You can say that again.”

We watched people mill around, and when I turned to Devin, he was watching me. His gaze was more intense than I'd expected, but I didn't let on.

"I was thinking about something that happened with Leo earlier," Devin said, twisting his chair to better face me. "That stuff about your dad. Did that bother you?"

It had happened so many hours ago that I'd barely remembered it. And even more surprising, Devin remembered? "Oh, that? No, I'm used to it."

"I remember your dad too. He was my childhood idol. I wanted to be just like Marco Perez. And the race he died at? I wasn't sure I should tell you, when you and I were talking about it, but ... I saw it on television. It was surreal. I was twelve at the time, and I don't think I fully grasped it."

"Imagine being nine," I said quietly.

"I'm sure you keep your memories near and dear to your heart."

"I do, because I don't have that many memories. I remember that he would always sit me on his knee while he watched race videos. I remember that he taught me how to swim, and he was very patient because I was terrified of the water. He used to come to all my soccer games if he was around. And he liked eating olives, and I liked eating them too. No one else liked them. It's strange to remember that, but it was something we shared."

"He was a good dad, then?"

"The best."

For once, I didn't get teary-eyed, talking about my dad. Maybe it was because I felt comfortable talking to Devin about it.

"And how did he meet your mother? Isn't she Italian?"

I chuckled. "Oh, don't you know that story?"

A sly smile spread across his face. "A bit, but I'd like to know more."

I motioned for him to move in a little closer. I'd always assumed that everyone knew how my mom and dad had connected.

"Well, she was originally dating an Italian race car driver named Sergio Moreno. They were engaged."

"Holy shit! I remember Moreno. He didn't race long, did he?"

"Just a few years, then he moved back to Italy and after that tried racing in the United States. Allegedly, he was so heartbroken, he could never win again. As the story goes, my father took one look at my mother and knew he was going to marry her. He pursued her relentlessly for over a year, and just a few months before she was supposed to marry Moreno, she ran off with my

father. They were married three months later.”

“I had no idea!”

“She doesn’t talk about it, and Moreno didn’t have much of a career in North America, so it didn’t really matter.”

“That is wild. You know what I like about you, Ms. Perez?”

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

“You and I can have meaningful conversations with each other.”

I snorted. “That’s profound.”

He frowned at me. “Let me finish. When I take out a woman, she’s usually spending the evening stroking my ego.”

“Among other things.”

“Are you going to talk or listen?”

He was more frazzled than annoyed, and it dawned on me that he did have something sincere to say.

“Okay, go on.”

“As I was saying, my dates usually tell me how wonderful I am and it’s boring. The only reason they do it is because they think I want to hear it. With you, I have to be on my toes or you’re going to cut me down, and that’s all right. I find it refreshing. You make me laugh too. And to think I thought you were terribly boring.”

My brows knit together. I was pretty sure that was all a compliment, but with Flynn, I could never be entirely certain.

“If it helps, I’m being myself. Why bother being someone else?”

“Precisely. We are a lot alike.”

“I foresee us becoming good friends as long as you act like an adult. I’m not into childish pranks or practical jokes.”

“You have to admit that water-gun fight was brilliant.”

“Just keep in mind that whatever you do, I can do bigger and better.”

“I’ll remember that.”

We watched the people milling past us for a moment before Devin launched into another series of questions.

“Do you like working with your brother?”

He’d moved a little closer to me now, and our knees were almost touching, and it made my blood warm.

“Not really.”

“Why?”

“He likes to be in control.”

“And you don’t want to be controlled.”

“Exactly. He thinks he can run my life and make decisions for me.”

“So walk away.”

“I can’t,” I said.

His eyes were fixed on me, and I couldn’t look away. Suddenly, I wanted to tell him everything.

“Why not?”

“I’m too invested.”

He gave me a peculiar look, and I no longer heard the muffled sounds of people around us. My full attention was on Devin Flynn. Something had come over me; it was like a bubble that only Devin and I were in.

“Invested, how?”

“Financially. We have money problems.” I knew if Rafe ever found out that I’d told Devin that, he’d want to kill me.

“Oh, shit.”

“I’ve invested a lot of money. I’m in pretty deep.”

Devin leaned in closer and grasped on to my hands. “Don’t invest another dime. Luna, you’re blowing your money on your brother’s stupid dream. The team will never be a winner.”

“But he needs me.”

“He needs your *money*. What a selfish asshole. He doesn’t care if you end up penniless.”

“That’s not true,” I said defensively.

“How much have you lost?”

I took a long time to answer. “A lot. But it’s not technically lost until the team folds, and I’ll make sure that never happens.”

“Promise me that before you give him another dollar that you will look into the finances of the team. Look deeply. I’m certain you won’t like what you see.”

I swallowed hard. “Okay. I will.”

We saw Erich walking toward us, and Devin let go of my hands and shifted his chair back and away from me. I took a deep breath and smiled. I didn’t feel myself, but I knew I had to act normal so I wouldn’t arouse any suspicion from Erich.

“Flynn, do you mind if I steal your date away for a moment?”

“You’re married, so no, I don’t mind.”

I grumbled as I rose and followed Erich to a quiet corner. It seemed that

Erich liked to play the role of my big brother when Rafe wasn't around, and I certainly didn't need another big brother.

"Luna, *what* is going on with you and Flynn?" he said.

I grumbled. "We're just friends. I promise."

"I thought we talked about his. I warned you about him."

"I appreciate your concern, but this is strictly platonic."

He pursed his lips. "When your brother finds out about this, he's going to be furious."

"There is nothing for him to be furious about."

"You're sure about that?"

"Positive."

Erich sighed. "Let me tell you something about Flynn. If you don't go home with him, he'll drop you off, go to the nearest bar, pick up the prettiest blonde, get a little drunk, and take her back to his place. Please don't let him drag your name through the dirt. He's a fun guy, but his morals are lacking."

"I'll remember that," I said tightly.

"Please do. You might get sucked in by the good looks and charm, but he has nothing else to offer."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Devin

Luna was chatting with Riedl, and by the look on her face, I had a pretty good idea who they were talking about. I wanted to march over there and give him the what-for and tell him to mind his own bloody business, but that would cause a scene, and worse, make him dig in his heels. Instead, I listened to Giancarlo Bruni, a supermarket heir and longtime Russo sponsor, drone on about how I should drive the car. It was rich coming from a man pushing three hundred pounds.

“Sometimes, I think you take the corners too fast. You lose control.”

“Yes, that happens on occasion,” I said, trying to keep a pleasant smile on my face. I wanted to deck this arse.

“And you are too tentative when you pass. You need more confidence. You should watch videos of some the greatest drivers. They know how to do this. Your teammate could give you some pointers.”

I was staring at this fat man’s bald head, and I wanted to poke him in the forehead. “I’ll work on that,” I said. Just then, Luna was wrapping up her discussion with Riedl. If I made my escape now, I could talk to her, see if I could find out what she and Riedl had spoken about.

“Giancarlo, as always, it’s been a pleasure. Thank you for the advice.”

I thought I could leave, but he grabbed my arm. “Don’t let Riedl push you around. You have talent, and he’s a bully. You can be a winner. You’re not too old for that yet.”

I wanted to agree with that, but I had to be careful. “Again, thank you for the wonderful advice.”

I glanced to where Luna and Riedl had been talking, but she’d disappeared. I saw her retreating figure heading for the ladies’ room. Damn.

But Riedl was still there, sipping his stupid mineral water. I passed by the bar, grabbed another beer, and headed his way.

“Harassing my date?” I asked with only the barest of smiles.

“Simply chatting with my old friend.” Riedl didn’t know whether to take that as a joke or not, so my work was done there.

“I’m sure. She didn’t seem pleased.”

Riedl raised a brow. “Oh, you actually noticed that?”

“I did. What were the two of you discussing?”

Riedl smirked. I hated when he did that.

“Flynn, she’s a sweet girl. Why are you doing this? Will you even feel any guilt when you break her heart?”

“I’m having a nice time with her. And I believe she’s having a nice time with me. What’s to feel guilty about?”

“You know she fancies you. And if you ask me, what you’re doing is cruel.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

Riedl scrunched his face in frustration. “You should be very careful. You think you’re in the driver’s seat, pardon the pun. But you’re not. If you think you’re going to hurt her, that’s not going to happen. Because if you do, Rafe will ruin your life, and I’ll finish you off. I know you have secrets, and I’ll find out every last one of them.”

I stared at him, probably a moment too long. It was a tell, and he’d caught it. Now I had to be careful, or he was going to ruin everything I had.

* * *

Our driver took us to our hotel. It was early enough that we could have gone back to the city, and I could have dropped her off at her uncle’s place, but I was having a good time and wasn’t ready for it to end quite yet.

The old hotel had a small lounge, and I suggested drinks since it wasn’t too late. While my conversation with Riedl had pissed me off, I was thinking more about my conversation with Luna earlier. About her stupid brother, and how he’d put her future and their father’s legacy in jeopardy. And as we ordered, I thought of bringing it up again, but the evening had already been heavy enough. It was time for levity.

“How is your friend? The one who ditched you. Jess?”

Luna laughed. “She’s still writing salacious celebrity stories for that garbage tabloid she writes for.”

“Did she ever apologize?”

Luna’s big brown eyes seemed to sparkle as she shook her head. “Not really. At least not sincerely.”

“You seem so different from her. You’re an odd match.”

“We complement each other. It’s just hard to see, if you don’t know us well.”

I sipped my drink and watched her finger the rim of her wineglass. Then my gaze traveled up to her face. I’d only seen a few pictures of her mother, but they looked alike, and she had her father’s bronzed skin and the curls. She was the woman you wanted to spend the rest of your life with—you know, for those who wanted that kind of commitment.

“You should bring her around. There is so much gossip at races.”

“I’ve thought about it, but I’m not sure it’s her scene.” Luna’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have some other motive for me getting her to race weekends?”

At first I didn’t catch on, but then I did. “Right. No, I have no interest in her. However, she does seem like great fun.”

“Unlike me?”

Was she joking? I couldn’t tell with her sometimes. She seemed to often go to a darker place, where she got down on herself.

“Ms. Perez, if I didn’t think you were fun, I wouldn’t have asked you along tonight. Now, why are you always feeling sorry for yourself?”

She raised a brow. “You’re the one who called me boring! I’m not feeling sorry for myself.”

I wagged a finger at her. “Bullshit. Now, you don’t have to take my advice, but you need to stop comparing yourself to others.”

Her mouth fell open now. “I do no such thing.”

“You do. All the damn time. Sometimes it’s subtle, like how you assumed your friend is more fun than you are.”

“Because she is,” Luna mumbled.

I leaned in closer to her and motioned for her to do the same. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret.”

I could see she was interested but skeptical at the same time. This woman was skeptical of everything.

“Go on,” she said.

“I think you’re the most fascinating woman at the track every weekend. In fact, I look forward to our chats, no matter the subject. You keep me on my toes, make me laugh, and frustrate the hell out of me.” Among other things I wasn’t about to tell her.

She blinked a few times. “Is that so.”

“Most definitely.”

She leaned back and drummed her fingers on the table. “Interesting. I suppose you’re fascinating, too, in that make-me-crazy kind of way.”

I smiled. “See, we’re both fucking amazing.”

She finished her wine and set the glass down on the bar. “It’s been a lovely evening, but it’s also been a long one, and I’m exhausted. Do you mind if I head off to my room?”

“Not at all. But let me walk you there. I am a gentleman, after all.”

She playfully punched my arm and hopped off her chair. We headed for the elevator, and I couldn’t help but wonder what her brother—or better yet, Riedl—would think if they saw it. Maybe they’d both drop dead. That would be nice.

As we headed to our floor, I thought of making a move on her. Of course I did. She was gorgeous, and she had the most amazing body I’d ever seen. I’d kill to get my hands on her tight ass, but that was career suicide. If Riedl didn’t destroy me, Rafe would.

There would be no one-night stands with Ms. Perez.

We reached her door and she turned to face me. Her cheeks were a bit flushed, and I wondered if that was the wine, or if I had something to do with that. Did I want to kiss those full ruby lips? In a fucking heartbeat.

“Thank you again for a wonderful evening. I enjoyed it,” she said.

“As did I.”

She leaned over to kiss my cheek, and I tensed for a second. She smelled of lilacs, and I wanted to pull her close.

“Good night, Mr. Flynn.”

“Sleep well, Ms. Perez.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Luna

I flew home the next afternoon. This time no one picked me up from the airport, which suited me just fine. I expected a barrage of questions when Mom saw me, or worse, when Rafe finally reached me. I'd managed to avoid his calls all day.

Despite my better judgment, I searched out my mother. I decided it was best to get this over with. I found Mom in her office, going through paperwork. Since my father's death, Mom had set up a foundation that worked with troubled youth, finding ways to get them off the street and into school. Mom had been passionate about it, so had Dad before his death. While there had been the glitz and glamour of racing, Dad had seen the poverty in some of these cities, especially in Brazil and Mexico. Even in his own country, and he was determined to see kids get the all the chances they deserved, and Mom had always been on the same page with him.

Mom looked up from her paperwork and took off her black-rimmed reading glasses, setting them on her desk. I sat across from her and waited.

"I see you're back. You may want to give your brother a call. I think he's called here a hundred times. It seems photos of you and a Mr. Devin Flynn are circulating the internet. A lot of people are talking about it. A lot of my friends have asked me for details, and you can't possibly understand how embarrassing it is to say that I know nothing about it."

I missed Mom's guilt trips. "It is totally platonic."

"You may want to tell that to your brother, although by the looks of all the pictures, it didn't seem that platonic."

I wasn't sure what photoshopped pictures Mom was looking at. "It was strictly platonic, and besides, I'm not his type."

Mom narrowed her eyes. “And why is that? What is his type?”

“Models. Mostly blonde ones. And I’m neither, so Rafe has nothing to worry about, and you have nothing to tell your friends. I won’t be cavorting with Mr. Flynn.”

Mom appeared more confused. “Then why did you go to the party with him?”

“Why not? We’re friendly, and it was a night on the town.”

Mom pushed her papers aside, evaluating what I’d just said. “So a man you say isn’t interested in you flew you to Milan for a party? Does that really make sense to you?”

I stared into my mother’s dark brown eyes. “He’s a friend. That’s all.”

“So you say,” Mom said in a tone that didn’t believe me one bit. “Well, I suggest you call your brother before he goes mad.”

“I’ll do that right away.”

I left Mom’s office and made my way through the kitchen, looking for a friendly face, but Rosa was nowhere to be found. I grabbed a tall glass of water and headed outside to the back porch. It was a warm enough early December afternoon, especially after the cold of Milan. I took a seat on one of the plush chairs and dialed Rafe’s number. I took a few quick breaths before he answered, and when he did, I could hear the edge to his voice.

“You called?” I asked as casually as possible.

“Yes, I did. About a hundred times.”

“I was on a plane back to Cortese.”

If I could see Rafe right now, he would be seething. There’d be smoke coming from his ears and nose.

“Luna, do you enjoy making my life difficult?”

I sighed dramatically, more to annoy him than anything else. I wasn’t in the mood for a lecture. “My social life is my own business.”

“You showed up to a Russo party with Devin Flynn! Your picture is on every racing and gossip website.”

“I hope they got my good side.”

He was silent. Now I’d really poked the bear. “You are trying to make me look like a fool.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “It has nothing to do with you! I went to a party with Devin. Your name wasn’t even mentioned, so what is the big deal?”

“Since when are you so friendly with Flynn. And calling him Devin now?”

I don't think you understand the optics. Don't you see that? Nevertheless, I forbid a relationship with him."

My blood was boiling. "First of all, there is no relationship to forbid. Second, if there were a relationship, I wouldn't care if you decided to forbid it or not. I will date whomever I want. Does that sum it up for you?"

I'd never been so short with Rafe before, but I'd had enough. He wasn't my father, and I was a grown adult.

"Flynn is up to something."

"Sure, Rafe. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to unpack and catch up with Rosa. Anything else?"

"Yeah. He's not invited to *our* Christmas party."

* * *

Later that day, Mom joined me on the back porch. She took a seat next to me, and we both stared out at the setting sun. I had already filled in Jess about my evening with Devin and fight with Rafe. I wasn't sure I wanted to rehash it with Mom all over again.

"How did it go with Rafe?"

"As well as can be expected. He's trying to control me, and I told him to mind his own business."

"I'm glad you stood up to him. I don't like when he pushes you around."

"Neither do I."

Mom sighed. "It's amazing how much the both of you are like your father but in such different ways."

"How so?" I asked. I loved when Mom reminisced about Dad. She didn't do it nearly enough.

"Rafe is the perfectionist, and when things don't go his way, he tries to pull out all the stops. He can be difficult and has your father's ego. And you are the gentler side of Marco, cool under pressure, you do what you want, but you're also fiercely loyal. You're athletic like he was. He loved all sports even if he wasn't good at them. He was never afraid to try. He influenced both of your lives, even though his time in them was short."

"I miss him every day."

"So do I," Mom said.

We didn't speak for a few minutes, but then Mom broke the silence.

“I’m telling you all this—about your father—because I want you to fight for what you want.”

That surprised me for some reason. I thought for a moment, then admitted, “That’s just it, Mom. I don’t know what I want.”

Mom reached out and took my hand. “I think you may want something with this Devin Flynn. If he is a good man, I don’t want your brother to hold you back.”

Had I heard that right? Mom would have spent hours googling Devin. And he would be the last person Mom would want me to hook up with. “Mom, I’ve already told you, he doesn’t see me that way.”

“And I told you that you’re wrong.”

“You should see the women he dates. I don’t compare.”

Mom frowned. “You are such a beautiful young woman. I wish you’d see that.”

“I don’t look like them.”

Mom slowly shook her head. “Where did I fail you? I thought I raised you to love yourself and to be confident. You are beautiful. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Mom’s chocolate-brown eyes were fixed on me now, and what she was saying was from the heart. “I hear you, Mom. But I’m not the one for him.”

“Well, I talked to your brother about this Flynn character this morning. I wanted to know more about him.”

I groaned. Of course she did. “Why did you bother? I’m sure Rafe had nothing nice to say.”

“I wanted to know more about the man my daughter is interested in.”

“I’m not interested in him!”

“Are you actually trying to fool your mother? I don’t think you realize that your face lights up whenever anyone mentions his name.”

I had wondered if it was that obvious. Yet I’d seen Devin in action many times. I knew that if he was interested in a woman, he would let her know. And not once had he given me any indication he was interested. Not even when he’d walked me to my hotel room. Yes, there had been a spark, but I was sure it was coming from me only. And if he’d made a move, I’d have refused to be another of his conquests. I didn’t hold my virginity sacred, despite what Jess thought, but I wasn’t about to lose it to a guy who wouldn’t care about me the next day.

“For the last time, he’s not interested.”

“You keep saying that, but you don’t know it.”

“I do know it,” I said, my cheeks burning with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment.

“Regardless, I grilled your brother about him,” she said, not caring that I hated the direction of the conversation. “It seems this Mr. Flynn is quite the playboy. I’m not sure I like that. And he certainly likes the company of women. I don’t like that about him either.”

I wanted to disappear and blink myself out of the situation, like Jeannie did in the old television show I’d watch on Saturday mornings. It was on the oldies channel, and I would have killed to have looked like Barbara Eden.

“But he’s also very nice to you,” Mom continued. “You insist he’s not interested in you, but why would he whisk you off to his Christmas party? I needed more information, so I called Michael Riedl.”

Oh God, this was getting worse by the second. “You didn’t,” I said, aghast.

“I thought Michael may know more than Rafe, since his son is Mr. Flynn’s teammate. And he did. It seems Michael is very fond of the man. He thinks he’s quite the character and very outspoken. He even compared him to your father. So that’s a compliment.”

“I can’t believe you called Michael,” I said, shaking my head. But the idea that Devin reminded Michael, who was like an uncle to me, of my father, warmed me.

“I wanted to know more about the man who is pursuing my daughter. There are some things we should probably talk about.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Please tell me we aren’t having the sex talk. I’m twenty-three. I’m too old for it.”

“No, I realize that. I meant the talk about race car drivers. I was engaged to two of them and married one. You have to be prepared to accept the lives that they lead.”

I decided to humor Mom. I spent thousands of hours with race car drivers, so I was pretty sure I knew what kind of lives they led. “Okay, go on.”

“They feel they are the center of the universe, and sometimes they do things that would not normally be acceptable behavior.”

“For instance,” I said, egging her on.

“Your father was an exception, but other drivers loved the company of women. Many kept mistresses well-hidden from girlfriends and wives. Now, I may not be involved in that life anymore, but I do know nothing has

changed in the last fifteen years. By the sounds of Devin Flynn, he may be one of those men who likes to keep his options open when it comes women. Don't think that he's a saint."

"Yes, Mom."

"It's a fast-paced life, one I wanted to shield you from. Your brother has chosen to bring you into that life, and you need to keep your head on your shoulders. I've never wanted you to use your name to get an easy pass through life, and I don't want you to start now. You've always been sensible, so make this choice about Flynn wisely."

"Okay, Mom."

"Do you care for him?"

That caught me off guard. Did I? Maybe. I'd been so excited about the Christmas party and had loved every minute I'd spent with Devin.

"No," I said without much confidence.

"Because if you do," she said, ignoring my weak reply, "I think you owe it to yourself to at least find out if he might care for you. When it comes to men, you seem to run away, and I don't know why."

"I don't run away."

"Yes, you do. There have been so many young men interested in you, and you always dismiss them. Now you've finally shown interest in a man, and you aren't going to do a damn thing about it. Why don't you call him? Invite him over for a few days? As much as I would have preferred him to be anything but a race car driver, I can learn to accept him."

My face was burning. "I won't be calling him."

Our conversation was interrupted by Catia and Tony. My little sister shrieked when she saw me. I was never more relieved to have the conversation with my mother interrupted. I owed my little sister an ice cream in town.

"You're back," Catia said, her steely-blue eyes wide with excitement. "Mom said you'd be back. Are you staying for a while this time?"

"I'm here until at least Christmas."

"Woohoo! We can go see the Christmas light parade and go to the Christmas market this weekend. They have the best Santa candy apples."

"We can do all that."

"Go wash up for dinner," Mom said to her younger daughter. "We are going to eat soon."

Yes, this interruption was exactly what I needed because there was no

way I was going to call Devin Flynn and put myself out there for him to reject. The humiliation would be too much to bear.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Devin

Something was buzzing. A bug? I tried to swat it away, but the damn thing wouldn't shut up. I opened my eyes and realized it was my bloody phone, buzzing away on the nightstand like an angry bee. I took a look out the shaded window and realized it had to be at least midmorning.

I'd gotten home the night before after a few days with my family for the holidays. It was nice to catch up with my sisters and see my father and chat about cars and sports, but Mum had me wanting to run for the damn hills. She'd gone on and on about responsibilities and that I'd let too many people down. I'd never been so happy to leave and have a night out with my mates. Now I was paying for it with a splitting headache and nasty hangover.

I grabbed the phone and looked at the number. It had to be an Italian dialing code, but not one I recognized. If Davide or anyone else wanted me back at the track for testing, I'd tell them where to go. I had vacation for at least another two weeks, and they weren't going to renege on it.

"Yes?" I said, nastier than I'd intended.

"Is this Devin Flynn?"

I paused. A woman's voice. A melodic voice speaking to me in English but with a sexy Italian accent. She sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't quite place her voice.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Good. I do have the right number. Mr. Flynn, my name is Maria Morelli."

I sat up ramrod straight in bed. Luna's mother? "Hello, Mrs. Morelli. You're Luna's mother." At first I wondered if something had happened, but her tone was too calm for that.

“That’s right,” she said in the same firm tone.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m not sure you can do anything, but I would like to discuss some things with you. I should ask if this is a good time?”

“Sure, yes,” I said, crawling out of bed and sitting on the edge of it. I had a feeling I needed to give Maria my full attention.

“Good. I understand you took my daughter to your Christmas party. Explain to me why you would do something like that.”

I suddenly felt like a teenager, going out on a date and having to contend with an angry parent. Why did I feel like I was being interviewed by Maria? Or rather, interrogated. “There was nothing nefarious about it. I thought we’d both have a fun night.”

“But why would you choose my daughter? You must have known it would annoy her brother.”

“Well, sure, but that wasn’t the reason. I wanted Luna to have a good time.”

“Why, Mr. Flynn?”

My skin was tingling a bit, and my heart had picked up a few beats. The woman was making me nervous. How did Luna contend with her on a daily basis? And was Maria the cause of Luna’s lack of confidence? That wouldn’t surprise me. Having spoken to her for a mere few minutes, I was already scared of her. “I enjoy spending time with her.”

“You enjoy spending time with various women. Why my daughter?”

Part of me wanted to tell her it was none of her damn business, but like with my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Walker, I found myself unable to lie to Maria Morelli. “I like your daughter.”

“Like her how, Mr. Flynn?”

A thick lump was forming in my throat. “She makes me laugh, and we have great conversations.”

“I see. And yet, your bedroom seems to have a revolving door for all the women you date. Do you expect my daughter to be one of those women?”

“Uh, no. Of course not.”

“Then I must ask, what are your intentions toward Luna? Is the plan to parade her around as a prop while she makes you laugh and has great conversations with you while you then invite other women back to your hotel room?”

Shit. This woman had me on the rope, like she was some prizefighter.

“Mrs. Morelli, that’s not my intention.”

“If you plan to play with her emotions, I’m telling you that this is not acceptable. So please, tell me what you want from my daughter.”

My head was throbbing and this conversation wasn’t helping. She had me avoiding landmines, but what did I expect? “I don’t know,” I finally said. “I wish that I did. My feelings for Luna ... I can’t begin to describe them. I don’t want to hurt her, and that’s why I don’t know what to do. But let me be clear: I would never disrespect her.”

A long silence followed, so long that I thought she’d hung up. But then she cleared her throat.

“Mr. Flynn, you need to grow up,” she said without much emotion. “You need to stop behaving like a horny fifteen-year-old and be a man. You can’t keep screwing around and hoping to find happiness. My daughter doesn’t deserve to be led on by you, especially if you can’t figure out what you want with your life. She’s a beautiful and smart young woman who can be led astray by someone as unserious as you, and I won’t let that happen. But if you think you can be serious, and that you can pull your life together, I think you could be good for my daughter. She does seem to like you.”

Everything she said ... wasn’t wrong. “I don’t even know that she wants me in her life. Not like that.”

She sighed. “Don’t be obtuse. You must know she cares for you. More than I’d like her to. The last thing I want is for you to damage her already fragile ego. Now, if you think you can be good to her, then I’d be happy to invite you to my home. This invitation doesn’t come lightly, so please think this through. If you do show up to my home, I have expectations. High ones. I assume you are clear about that?”

Did I just hear her right? After all this, she’d just invited me to her home. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good. I’m not going to tell Luna about this conversation. I expect the same of you. If you do decide to accept my invitation, we’ll all be happy to have you visit.”

Why did I doubt that?

“Okay, thank you. I’ll think about it.”

“This has been an illuminating chat. Goodbye, Mr. Flynn.”

She hung up and I stared at my phone. What the hell had just happened, and what was I going to do about it?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Luna

“Let’s play Monopoly,” Catia said.

It had been three weeks since the Russo party. Out of protest, Rafe and his family had canceled their trip to Cortese for Christmas. If he thought he was punishing anyone, that made me chuckle. Instead, I had a peaceful holiday with my mother, stepfather, little sister, Uncle Dario, and Rosa’s family. Mom had invited a few friends as well, all people she knew with no family in the area who were alone for the holidays. All staff had been invited too. I couldn’t remember a nicer Christmas celebration.

A few days after ringing in the New Year, my sister cornered me to demand we play board games.

“Aren’t you a little young for such a cutthroat game?” I said, eyeing the battered Monopoly box she held out.

“Dad and I play all the time. It’s fun.”

I’d never thought it was a fun game. I’d seen fights break out with my Montreal friends. One time Jess and Elizabeth nearly came to blows when Jess landed on Elizabeth’s “hoteled” Park Place, and Jess refused to pay the full amount, claiming that Elizabeth had bought houses, not hotels, for each property. They argued about it for ten minutes before Jess got up and stormed out. She didn’t talk to Elizabeth for weeks, not that they were that friendly to begin with.

“Okay, but I’m not going to let you win.”

She smiled that devilish smile of hers. Catia wasn’t anything like her calm and gentle father. She was hell on wheels, someone who needed to be busy or she’d explode with excess energy. She had her father’s steel-blue eyes but Mom’s long chestnut-colored hair, the same color as mine. Even at

her young age, I knew she'd be a knockout when she got older.

Catia set up the game. She had a slew of special rules she let me know about, and then we dove in. As expected, Catia was a shark. She was buying up properties and laying down houses and hotels before I knew what hit me. I was assessing my dwindling Monopoly finances when Mom came into the dining room and cleared her throat loudly. I looked up and nearly fell off my chair.

“Devin?!”

He waved and smiled his sly little smile. “Hello, Luna.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked, unable to mute my shock. If I'd known he was coming, I would have dressed in something other than the ratty old Perez T-shirt and tattered, ancient jeans I was wearing.

“Is that how you welcome me?” Devin asked with a laugh.

“I didn't expect you,” I said, trying to regain my composure. I glanced over at my little sister who was regarding Devin with suspicion. Smart kid, I thought.

“I was in the area and thought I'd stop by.”

Catia raised a brow at that. I concurred.

“You happened to be in wine country?”

“I do love wine.”

“Harvest was a few months ago.”

“Then I'm early.”

“Or really late,” Catia added.

Mom cleared her throat again, and I realized I hadn't made any introductions. “Right. Uh, you probably have already met my mother, but this is Maria Morelli. And this is my little sister, Catia.”

“You can call me Cat,” she said, hopping off her chair and walking over to Devin. She held out her hand for him to shake. The kid was ten years old going on thirty-five.

Devin seemed impressed and shook her small hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Cat,” he said.

“Since Devin has come all this way, I've asked him to spend the night,” Mom said. “Rosa knows all about it and plans to make a wonderful dinner tonight. In the meantime, Luna, why don't you show Devin to his room.”

I didn't immediately register the last part of Mom's statement. I was still processing the part where he was spending the night. Rafe would have a heart attack when he found out, and this time, I wouldn't be the cause of it.

I finally snapped out of my daydream and noticed everyone staring at me.

“Luna, you’ll show Devin to his room?” Mom said again.

“Yes. Right. Follow me,” I said to Devin.

He followed me through the main house and upstairs to the bedrooms. When I was sure we were out of everyone’s earshot, I let loose.

“What are you doing here?”

“I told you, I was in the area.”

I wanted to punch him. “Now, try the truth.”

He smirked and followed me down the long hall. “I was in wine country and thought I’d come by for a visit.”

“We’re not exactly in a prime location. You don’t just stumble upon Cortese. And if I remember correctly, wine isn’t your beverage of choice.”

“True. But I still figured I’d visit. And I made sure your brother was out of town. Clever, isn’t it,” he said, tapping the side of his head.

I showed him to one of the unoccupied guest rooms and he went inside. I followed him in, snarking, “On the subject of my brother, he’s barely speaking to me because of the Russo Christmas party. He didn’t even come home for the holidays, he was so pissed off.”

“Lucky you.”

He was so infuriating, but I wasn’t about to fight with him now. There’d be time for that later.

“Now, you’ll see we have an abundance of furniture here,” I said. “So I’m sure you can appreciate it. Maybe get some ideas for your place.”

“That’s cute,” he said. He walked to the window to take in the view of the distant, mostly barren vineyards. “I’ve always wanted to visit wine country.”

I could hardly believe that. Beer country? Yes. Wine country? Not so much.

“I’ll let you get settled. You’ve got your own full bath just through that door. If you need anything, holler. We’ll eat in about an hour.”

With that, I turned on my heel and left.

* * *

Devin was the life of the party at dinner, because, of course, he was. The ultimate charmer, he had Tony, Catia, Rosa, and her husband, Gino, in stitches. He regaled them with tales of his life as a race car driver. Catia had

come around to liking him. I suspected she maybe had a little crush on him, but I couldn't know for sure. She was holding that close to her imaginary vest. Only Mom kept a watchful eye on her guest, smiling politely but never letting on how she truly felt.

After dinner, Rosa and Gino returned home while Tony and Mom took Catia into town for hot chocolate. I saw through the ruse as an attempt to leave me and Devin alone. Did Mom actually want me to hook up with Devin? I highly doubted it, but I had no other explanation. I decided to take advantage of having Devin around and put him to work helping tidy the kitchen before making some coffees. We took the strawberry torte Rosa had left behind and ate on the back porch.

"How did it go with your brother after he found out about the Christmas party?" Devin asked, pouring three heaping teaspoons of sugar into his coffee. I watched with fascination as he filled his cup with cream right to the top. It wasn't even coffee anymore. More like a latte, a very sweet latte.

"Not well. Like I told you, he boycotted Christmas."

"He's such a baby."

At least on that we agreed.

He went on, "I figured inviting you to the party would give you that added bit of exposure and maybe attract attention and sponsors. He should be thanking me, but he is so shortsighted."

Something dawned on me at that moment. Was his sole intention to give me exposure? So that I wouldn't be so invested in the team financially? And while that had been thoughtful of him, it also stabbed at my heart. He didn't really want to spend time with me; he simply wanted to help me out. A pity invitation. Normally, I would have remained silent and not asked him to elaborate, but I wasn't going to do that anymore.

"Just so I'm clear on this, you invited me to the party for exposure for me? And I assume to get some publicity and attention for you?"

He sipped his coffee and glanced over at me. "Well, yes. And I also wanted to spend the evening with you. You're a lot of fun."

He'd said that before, and I hadn't believed him.

"If I recall, you went out of your way to tell me how boring I was."

"You got more interesting."

I begged my cheeks not to blush, like that was possible.

"I've told my brother I'd do whatever it takes to secure more sponsorships—within reason and that doesn't include exploitation of any

kind—and try to help him with investors. I put that spin on my attendance at your Christmas party, but he wasn't going for it.”

“He's an idiot,” he said dismissively. “You know, you're athletic. Have you ever thought of using that to your advantage?” He took a bite of his torte, and from the look of pleasure on his face, I could see what a sweet tooth he had.

“How so?”

“Make yourself more visible. Do something outrageous.”

“I assumed that going to the Russo Christmas party was outrageous enough. But if I need help being more outrageous, I have the master right here. What do you suggest? And anything to do with me appearing nude is out of the question.”

He tapped his fork against the side of his dessert plate. “I don't have any ideas right this second, but I'll think of something. Maybe something to do with sporting goods companies? If I had to guess, you're the only real athlete on the team.”

“Who cares if I'm athletic. Rafe is the driver.”

He shook his finger at me. “No, no. You underestimate the enormity of your name. You are the daughter of one of the most famous race car drivers to ever live. And you've got a lot more going for you. So listen to me when I tell you that you alone have the power to draw in sponsors.”

“But I have to do something outrageous first.”

“I said I was working on it,” he said with a wink.

I loved how silly he was, and maybe that frightened me a bit. I didn't want to love anything about him.

I took a few bites of my torte and then set it aside, stuffed. Devin asked if he could finish it for me. Yes, definitely a sweet tooth.

“Tell me something no one else knows about you,” I said, finishing my coffee.

“If I do, I'd have to kill you.”

“Come on, you know I can keep a secret.”

He nodded and set down my now empty plate. “All right, my middle name is Norman.”

“Why is that bad?”

“Devin Norman Flynn. DNF.”

Did Not Finish. I giggled. “Oh, that is bad for a driver.”

“You got it. Now, it's only fair that you share a secret.”

I had to think about that for a second. Did I want to keep sharing things with him? So far, I'd been able to trust him. It wasn't like I had to share anything too intimate.

"Right. Okay. Before he became my stepfather, I had a crush on Tony."

Devin's brows furrowed. "Now that's just sick."

He then laughed, and I couldn't help but laugh too. We chatted about our childhoods and how different the worlds we'd come from were. He'd started racing cars because his father had loved racing, and he had passed that love on to his son who had taken it a step further. He told me how many times he didn't have a cent to his name, but that racing was more important than eating. Now that he'd made it, he'd bought his parents a new house and paid for his younger sister's college tuition. I learned he had two sisters. One younger and one older. I thought of the family picture I'd seen at his house, placing the faces there with the stories he told me.

We didn't notice how late it had gotten. I realized Mom, Tony, and Catia must have returned ages ago, but we'd been too engrossed in our conversation to hear them. But when we both began to yawn, I knew it was time for bed.

"Have a good night, Ms. Perez," he said.

I took a last look at him and grinned. "You, too, Mr. Flynn."

When I got to my room, I sent Jess a text to let her know what had happened. It was late into the night on the East Coast, so I didn't expect a reply. Instead, I reflected on my evening with Devin. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun ... and then it hit me. The Christmas party, when Devin was also my company.

I crawled into bed, thinking how I was only meters from where Devin slept. A warmth enveloped me like a comfy embrace, and I finally admitted to myself how much I liked him. I knew his history and it made me wary, but in the end, my only fear now was that if I didn't do anything about my feelings, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Devin

I couldn't sleep. Again. I had to stop drinking coffee so late at night. It was fucking with my sleep far too much. I told myself to get out of bed and make some warm milk like my mum used to do when me and my sisters couldn't sleep, but I had no flipping idea where Rosa kept anything, and I wasn't about to rummage through the kitchen at three in the morning.

I climbed out of bed and looked out the window. Obviously, pitch black, and not a light for as far as I could see. There was something peaceful about this place. I could see why Luna liked it so much, but I liked the action, lights, parties, and maybe that was another reason I couldn't sleep. Yet I knew there was more to it than that. Like, what the fuck was I doing here? I hadn't even thought through the decision to come. I'd been sitting around in Milan, after some Russo meetings, and I'd simply hopped into my car and found myself here.

Enjoying myself.

Gwen, my younger, New-Agey sister, would tell me to meditate. She was big into that shit. Deep breathing, centering myself, some other silly crap. She was the calm one in the family, the one destined to be the least screwed up. She'd done a few yoga retreats in India. She was a nurse and had joined Doctors Without Borders rather than pursuing a career closer to home. Mum had flipped out, Dad had been supportive, and I'd told her she was nuts to risk her life, but I loved the silly girl all the same, and wished her the best.

I pulled out my phone and looked for the meditation app she'd installed on it ages ago. I could hear her now telling me I needed to "chill" and do some deep breathing. If it helped me sleep, I'd do just that. I got back into bed, popped in my earbuds, and opened the app. It took some navigating to

find the guided sleep section, and as instructed, I closed my eyes and wondered if this bullshit would work. A guy with a soothing voice told me to breathe deeply, in and out, and when I opened my eyes again, it was bloody morning! How the hell had that happened? I sat up and looked at my phone, resting against my side. Seven a.m. Holy shit. And I felt refreshed.

I showered and headed downstairs, having no idea who else would be up. I was somehow not surprised that Rosa was already working on breakfast, a wide smile on her face.

“Good morning, Devin. Can I get you some coffee?”

“Why don’t you show me where it is, and I’ll get it myself. I don’t want to put you out,” I said.

She motioned to the shiny chrome machine with the fancy pot full of coffee. It was hard to miss. I grabbed a mug from the cupboard she pointed to and poured myself a steaming cup.

“Luna isn’t up yet, but feel free to eat if you’re starved.”

I headed for the dining room and regretted it immediately. Maria was there, reading the paper, and before I could slink out, she lifted her gaze to me.

“Morning, Devin,” she said without cracking a smile. I couldn’t get a read on the woman. Did she want me there or not? I couldn’t be sure. She had invited me, but the invitation had also somehow seemed like a threat.

I aimed for charm. “And a lovely morning to you, Maria. How was your trip into town for hot chocolate?”

“Lovely. Thank you for asking. And how was your evening with my daughter?”

“Lovely as well. We did a lot of catching up.”

Maria blinked at me a few times. Had I said the wrong thing? What did this woman want? I could see why Luna had a difficult relationship with her. I’d been in the woman’s presence for barely a day, and she had me walking on eggshells.

“That’s nice. I suppose now that you’re here, you’ve figured some things out? Like how you feel about my daughter?”

I took a seat perpendicular to her seeing as I couldn’t avoid the discussion now. I could attempt to tell her what she wanted to hear, but I wasn’t sure what that was. And I had a pretty good idea she’d see right through me if I tried to bullshit her.

“I don’t know. I’m being honest.”

She frowned, and I knew instantly that it was the wrong answer. “So you’ve driven here for hours to do what exactly? Hang out?”

I sighed. This woman should have been a police interrogator. She had me sweating already.

“I like Luna a lot. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Then coming here was a bad idea. Don’t you think it gives her the wrong idea?”

God, I was an asshole. But what else was new? “My feelings for her are complicated.”

“Explain them to me,” she said coolly.

“I like her a lot. More than I’ve liked any other woman, but I don’t trust myself not to hurt her. And that wouldn’t be fair. That’s why I haven’t pursued anything further than friendship.”

“So you have trouble controlling yourself.”

If anyone else had talked to me like this, I’d have told them where to go. But this was Luna’s mother, and I begrudgingly had respect for her. She was a tough woman who wasn’t going to put up with my shit. And that made her and Luna so similar.

“I worry about that, yes.”

“Then I suggest you either get it together, or, for the sake of my daughter, pack your things and go after breakfast. That would seem like the appropriate thing to do.”

Yup. She really wasn’t going to take any of my shit.

“I understand what you’re saying.”

“Good. Then you have about an hour to decide. And if you do leave, please don’t make it about my daughter. Come up with some kind of emergency so that Luna doesn’t feel bad. And then—this is important, Mr. Flynn—leave my daughter alone when the racing season starts. So let’s make sure you exit as gracefully and painlessly as possible.”

“Maria—” She put up her hand to stop me.

“You’ve disappointed me, Devin. You came here. I thought you were ready to be serious about your feelings for Luna. It appears you lack that maturity. So it’s time to stop playing games with my daughter. Is that clear?”

“But Maria, I’m not even sure what I want.” The thought of walking away from Luna entirely was making my stomach roil.

“Then you need to figure that out somewhere else. Luna has had some setbacks in her life, and you are not going to set her back again. My daughter

needs a man, not some silly boy who drinks too much and can't keep his dick in his pants.”

I felt like I'd gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson in his prime. She'd hit with uppercuts, shots to the stomach, and a few low blows to the groin. And all while she sipped her morning coffee. I didn't know what to say to her, so she passed me a platter of ham and bacon.

“Hungry?”

“Uh, yes.” Sort of. How could I eat after that pounding?

I took the platter from her and put some ham on my plate. I then reached for the eggs and stopped. I looked at Maria who had returned her attention to her newspaper.

“You don't give her enough credit, you know.”

Maria's gaze slowly returned to me. She put down her paper. I was fucking scared, but I wasn't going to back down now.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“She's a feisty woman who keeps me on my toes. Who makes me laugh. I want to spend every second with her. And I think if you'd stop coddling her all the time, she might find her sense of confidence. I know how hard losing her father was on her, and you didn't fill that void when she needed you most. And after leaving her on her own like that, you started micromanaging her. Let her bloody live. Stop trying to control her life.”

Maria crossed her hands in front of her, and I braced myself for the onslaught.

“I think I know my daughter better than you do. I know what she needs. If you stay, you must do so because you've decided to be serious about her. I won't allow you to trample on her emotions.”

“But this is what I mean. Give her her damn wings. Let her fly.”

Maria was about to respond, but that was when we saw Luna, coffee cup in hand, coming into the dining room. Maria and I both stopped talking, which was suspicious as hell, but what could either of us say?

Maria had given me something to think about, and I had breakfast to think about it. Was I staying, or was I going?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Luna

I wandered down to breakfast the next morning to find that Rosa had prepared a full breakfast with eggs, bacon, ham, pancakes, hash browns, toast, and a fruit platter with yogurt. I found another thing: Mom in a deep conversation with Devin. He looked at home sitting across from her, like two old friends. Or that was what I thought until I sensed the tension crackling between them.

“What were you two talking about?” I asked, taking a seat next to Mom, then leaning over to grab some hash browns and eggs.

“Your father,” she said with a smile. “It seems Devin is a fan of his. Devin had some insightful things to say.”

Mom didn’t seem as sad as usual when she talked about my father.

“Doesn’t he always,” I said, flashing Devin a smile.

“He was an amazing race car driver,” Devin said.

“A good man too,” Mom added.

And just like that, the conversation ended yet again.

“What do the two of you have planned today?” Mom asked after a painful silence.

“We could go into town,” I suggested, though not that much was happening. Once Christmas was over, the town all but hibernated until spring.

“Whatever you’d like,” Devin said.

“Just so you know, Tony, Catia, and I are driving to Florence for the weekend for a mini vacation. Rosa is going to visit with her in-laws. You’ll have the place to yourselves, providing Devin plans to stick around.”

I scrunched my nose. What was Mom talking about? I didn’t know how

long Devin was planning to stay. Why did my mother seem to know more about this than me? And the last time I checked, Mom had no trip north planned. So what was she up to?

When I'd finished breakfast, Mom took our breakfast plates away, something she'd never done before. Then, over her shoulder, she wished us a good day, which felt like a dismissal. I took the hint and suggested to Devin we get changed and head to town.

It was a fifteen-minute drive, and we took in some wine shops and a wine-tasting session that was going on. We walked to a nearby restaurant to let the alcohol wear off and enjoyed a quick lunch. Devin insisted we stop at a flower shop to get something for Mom and Rosa.

"But they will both be gone," I pointed out.

"I know. We can choose something now and I'll have the items delivered when they get home."

As he spoke with the florist in his broken Italian, I surveyed the situation. He was buttering up Mom and Rosa when he really didn't need to. I had to assume my mother liked him at least a little. If Maria Morelli didn't like him, he would know it by now and likely be on the road back to Milan. Or a plane back to Britain. Or wherever he was living now.

"What should I get your sister and stepfather?"

"My stepfather likes ouzo. As for my sister, she's at that stage in her life where she wouldn't be caught dead with toys. But she does like board games."

Devin picked up the liqueur and a couple of board games, and we drove back home. I'd been curious about the breakfast conversation and decided it was as good a time as any to ask.

"Are you planning on leaving? Is that why you've bought all this stuff? Because you don't need to give parting gifts."

"Guests should leave their hosts something."

I noted that he hadn't answered my question. "So ... you are leaving?"

He glanced at me. "Should I?"

"Is that a trick question? If you want to go, I can't stop you."

"Perhaps I'll stay, then. I'm having a nice time."

It was all strange, but I didn't question it further.

My family was gone, but Rosa was preparing dinner before she and Gino left to visit family. I checked in with her while Devin went up to his room for a shower and what I thought was a nap. He'd eaten a slew of desserts from a

bakery we'd come across, and I expected a carb coma was setting in.

"I like him," Rosa said with a mischievous smile.

"I like him, you like him; now all we need is for him to like me. Easy-peasy."

Rosa stopped chopping an onion and turned to look at me. Her dark brown eyes looked thoughtful. "I think he does like you," she said.

"Why do you say that?"

Rosa shrugged. "The fact that he's come a long way to see you out of the blue. The way he looks at you."

"He never looks at me."

Rosa wagged her finger at me. "The reason you never notice him looking at you is because you're not looking at him. So how could you possibly notice?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't believe you."

"You just don't want to believe it. I sensed it right away."

"I sensed nothing."

"You are wrong. And also oblivious."

I sampled the tomato sauce Rosa was working on. As usual, it tasted amazing. I cut a piece of Rosa's homemade bread and dipped it into the sauce. Just as I was putting it into my mouth, Devin walked into the kitchen, his hair wet. He smelled of pine and bergamot. I didn't know what smelled better: the sauce or Devin.

"Hello, ladies," he said pleasantly. "It smells wonderful in here, Rosa."

Rosa smiled like a shy fifteen-year-old, seeing her secret crush. "Well, I thought I'd make you both dinner before I head out with my husband. I've left food for breakfast and lunch as well."

"That's kind, thank you," I said.

I cut another piece of bread and topped it with sauce. I handed it to Devin to try. He moaned as he ate it.

"Amazing, Rosa. What would it take to convince you to come to England and work for me?"

She blushed just a little, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"I love Cortese and California far too much. And there's too much rain in England."

Rosa finished up and gave us some quick instructions before leaving with Gino. Devin found the wine and poured two glasses and we sat down to eat. I couldn't believe he was still here. What did he want? Knowing him like I did,

there had to be a reason he was still sniffing around, but I couldn't figure it out.

"Where should we go tonight?" he asked.

"There really isn't anywhere to go."

"No nightclub? Even a lounge? Somewhere nearby?"

"You saw the town. It's pretty small. There is a nice lounge that's kind of a bar. There's a small dance floor. It's nothing fancy, but it's a great hangout." I didn't add that I didn't spend much time there because I barely knew anyone in town. Like me, most of my old friends had gone off to other, bigger places.

"Then let's go."

"I should probably change."

"What for? You look fine."

I decided I did look fine. Who did I need to impress anyway? I drove us—too slow for Devin's liking—and we took a booth in the half-full lounge. A soccer game was on the various televisions, but no one was watching. Devin grabbed us beers from the bartender. He didn't notice the brunette at the bar trying to get his attention, and that gave me great satisfaction. Even when she brushed her ample breasts against his arm, he simply took a few steps to his right and out of her way.

He slapped the beers down on the table and gave me a sly smile. "This place is a dive," he said.

"I warned you."

His sea-green eyes lit up. "I have an idea to make it more interesting. Let's play a drinking game."

"Aren't we too old for that?"

"You're never too old for drinking games. This is how it goes. I pick someone out in the bar, and you have to guess who it is. If you don't, you have to drink. And for this game, I'll be ordering some shots."

"I'm not playing."

Devin didn't seem to hear me. He motioned to the bartender, and because Devin must have tipped him generously the first time, he came right over, abandoning the two women waiting to order drinks. Devin ordered, and the bartender said he'd be right back with them.

"Okay, I've picked someone," Devin said.

"You must be hard of hearing. Too many engines blaring in your ears. I am not playing."

He nodded knowingly. “You’ve probably never played a drinking game before. Be adventurous and take a friggin’ guess.”

“No.”

“I’ll give you a clue. It’s a guy.”

“A guy? That’s your clue?”

I expected it to be a woman, even though I was still refusing to play his silly little game.

“No more clues. You have three guesses,” Devin said, placing a shot before me. Why had the bartender been so fast?

“I’m not playing.”

“All right. You’ve broken me down. I’ll give you one more clue. He has dark hair.”

“Everyone in here has dark hair.”

“Ah, now you’re playing.”

“Fine,” I said, to shut him up. I scanned the crowd. Twenty feet away was an enormous man talking to a brunette with brown hair pulled into a tight updo. I pointed toward him.

“Wrong. Two more guesses.”

“There is a man sitting at the end of the bar with a bad toupée. Is that him?”

“Good guess, but no. One more guess.”

I looked over the crowd closely. A man looked about ready to pass out from far too many drinks. I made him my final guess.

“Wrong again. Drink up,” he said, handing me one of the shots.

“Who was it?”

“The bartender.”

“You weren’t even facing him.”

“I didn’t say I had to be facing him. That would be giving it away.”

I groaned as I stared down at the drink. I had no idea what it was, but I gulped it back. It burned down my throat, and I fought hard to keep from coughing and looking like an amateur. Devin leaned back in the booth, clearly very pleased with himself.

“That was awful. But the good thing is that it’s now my turn.”

“You have to give me a few hints.”

“No, I don’t. Besides, your hints were pathetic.”

“But I narrowed things down. Just because you couldn’t capitalize on my hints is not my fault.”

He was ridiculous. “Fine. It’s a woman, and she’s been checking you out for a while.”

Devin brought his hand to his chin to ponder this clue. “I’m going to have to be honest and say that’s just about every woman in this place.”

“Just guess, smartass.”

He surveyed the milling crowd. “The chick who was brushing her boobs up against me earlier.”

I hadn’t realized that he’d noticed her.

“Wrong,” I said, beginning to feel the effects of my first and hopefully last shot.

“The one in the corner, licking her lips and winking at me.”

I glanced across the room. The woman was licking her lips and winking at him. This man was a magnet. “Not her, and I think she has a tick and isn’t actually winking at you. One more guess, my friend.”

He took his time with his final guess. Most of the women in the lounge had checked him out. The moment he’d walked through the door, women were fawning over him. Maybe a few knew who he was, while others simply found him attractive. When he made his choice, a pretty girl who had been staring at him for a long time, she wasn’t the right person either.

“I’m sorry. You’ll need to drink up.”

“Who was it?”

“Drink up, then I’ll tell you.”

He drank it as if it were water. He set the empty glass down and once again asked who the mystery woman was.

“It was me,” I said, feeling my cheeks burn.

He stared at me, his gaze piercing. I’d had the same feeling at the Christmas party, as if we were the only two people in the room. He broke the moment by summoning the bartender and asking for another two shots. I wasn’t sure what was going on or what would happen next. The bartender set down the two shots and Devin handed him a twenty-dollar bill.

“Drink up,” he said to me.

I did it, even though I thought I’d be sick. We placed our empty glasses down on the table and Devin grabbed my arm.

“Let’s dance,” he said.

He took my hand and led me to the small dance floor. A few other people were dancing to the upbeat song. I didn’t recognize it, but it sounded a bit country. He pulled me close and danced with me slowly despite the music’s

tempo. I wondered if we looked odd, especially when he wrapped his arms around me and I did the same. He'd never held me this close before and my heart was racing. I could smell his intoxicating cologne. I wanted that scent all over me. As he rested his cheek against my temple, I wanted the moment to never end.

"You know, this isn't a ballad," I said.

"I know."

"You aren't drunk, are you?"

"From a few drinks? Not a chance."

"So why are you acting strange?"

"I'm not acting strange."

I played along and we danced for a few minutes. No one seemed to pay us any attention, which suited me just fine. I was too busy relishing this time in his arms. In a split second, the moment could be over, and I wanted it to last as long as possible.

After a couple of songs, he led me back to our booth and ordered two more drinks.

"You are really strange; do you know that?" I said.

"I like to live life on my own terms. I hate when people tell me what to do."

"I can see that," I said, gulping some beer. I wondered if I'd regret mixing drinks.

"There's something on your lip," he said, leaning in closer to me. I lifted my hand to my lips, but Devin caught it in his own, and before I knew what was happening, he was kissing me. First I was hit with the shock, but as his lips searched mine, I kissed him back. And then, as quickly as it happened, it was over. I hadn't even had the opportunity to fully enjoy it.

He took a swig of his beer and settled back in the booth. Was the kiss a figment of my imagination? I took my glass, trying to hide my shaking hands. How could he have this effect on me? I took a few deep breaths, attempting to regain my composure. Was he playing games with me? I didn't want to be the victim of one of his pranks.

"We should probably get out of here soon," Devin said. "The place looks like it's closing."

I glanced around. The crowd was starting to thin out, but it wasn't like Devin to want to leave early. Was I boring?

"Sure."

I didn't think that either of us were in any state to drive, so we took an Uber home. I'd have to pick up the car in the morning, but I had other thoughts rattling around in my head. Was I a terrible kisser? Had he immediately regretted it?

We entered the silent house, and I took both of our jackets and hung them, not that I thought he'd be staying much longer. My shitty kiss likely had him planning his exit strategy.

"Before I head off to bed, is there anything you want?" I asked.

"There is something I want," he said as we stood at the foot of the stairs.

"I aim to please."

"I want you."

His sea-green eyes were darker, more intense, and his face had flushed just a bit. I was sure I'd been hit by lightning and rocked by thunder. What was going on?

"Don't fuck around with me," I said quietly.

"Actually, I'd like to fuck around with you," he said, his face lighting up.

"Not a good time for that," I scolded.

"It's a reflex. But I'm not kidding. I've been thinking about this all night."

I closed my eyes. I wished I knew what to do next. "I'm not going to be someone you have sex with and leave, right? You know I'm not that kind of woman."

"I know."

"And I want you to know that I really like you and you don't have the best reputation. How do I know I'm not going to get hurt?"

"I can't promise you anything."

A long moment passed. I watched him and he watched me. A lump was rising in my throat. I took another deep breath and closed the distance between us, putting my arms around him and kissing him like it would be the last time. He held me tightly and returned the kiss. I led him back to my room and closed the door behind us.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Luna

He kissed me again and my body quivered as he pulled me close. His mouth left my lips and found my neck. I buried my face in his shoulder, pulling him even closer. I wanted to smell him, the mixed scent of his soap and cologne. Part of me was scared of what would happen next, while the rest of me couldn't wait.

"Are you cold?" he asked as I trembled in his arms.

I pulled away just a little and stared into his eyes. "No. I'm a little nervous, though."

"Why are you nervous?" he asked tenderly as he caressed my cheek.

"The thing is ... I haven't had sex before."

He tilted his head. "Oh," he said with a bit of surprise.

Was there a hint of panic on his face? Had I ruined this night already, and would I die a virgin just like Jess feared.

"And I don't want to disappoint you. I want this to be a good experience for both of us, and I don't see that happening for you."

He smiled and shook his head. "Stop. You won't disappoint me. There won't be a report card later."

I loved that he was trying to put me at ease, but I was a bundle of tension.

"But I'm not like all the other girls you've been with. I don't know what to do."

He put his fingers to my lips. "Don't worry about that. I'll take care of everything."

"Okay." I took a deep breath and puffed out the air. This was happening, and there was no way I was stopping it now. I pulled my sweater off. Devin watched me closely as I slipped out of my jeans and threw them to the floor.

In only my matching pink panties and bra, his breath quickened just as mine had. I was trembling again, but I didn't take my eyes off him. He took a few steps toward me and every part of me flushed. My hands shook as I reached out to unbutton his shirt. He watched my hands as I slipped them up his chest, then over his shoulders. I traced my fingers back down his chest, feeling his lean muscles. He tensed for a moment when my lips touched the skin on his neck, holding still as if waiting for me to make the next move. I brushed my lips over his and smiled, and that seemed to break the spell. He unfastened my bra and it fell to the ground, exposing my breasts.

"Small," I said.

"No, perfect," he said, cupping each in his hands. "And fucking amazing."

His touch was like lightning. He ran one forefinger around the edge of each nipple as they hardened into peaks. He kissed each one and I let out a little mewl, fearing that I would collapse right there. I didn't know how much more I could take of this and pulled him closer to the bed. I'd been waiting for this moment for so long, and now, here he was with me, wanting me! My body ached for him so much that I barely had time to get out of the rest of my clothes.

"Don't be so anxious," he whispered into my ear. "You're getting ahead of me."

I took a deep breath and moaned with pleasure as his hands explored my body. I didn't mind that they were coarse and rough because my skin tingled in anticipation all the same. And when our eyes met, I reached out and gently caressed his cheeks.

"I want you so much," I said.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time, Ms. Perez."

The growl of his voice made my heart skip. As he guided me onto the bed, I stared at his face. He'd never looked so intense, like he wanted to devour me. My breath hitched as he hooked a finger into my panties. I lifted my hips and he slowly slipped the scrap of fabric down my legs and tossed it to the floor.

"You're fucking gorgeous," he said as his fingers grazed back up my legs, leaving a red-hot trail in their wake. And then his fingers gently explored me, the wetness between my lips. He seemed pleased as he slowly found my clit. I gasped as he gently massaged it.

"Oh my God," I breathed.

“I intend to explore every inch of your body.”

Before I knew what was happening, his mouth was there, sucking and tugging at my clit. His tongue was teasing me. Then it came so fast, the rising orgasm, like high tide crashing over me. The guttural sound that escaped me was nothing I'd ever heard before. I fisted the bedsheets as the orgasm hit me again, and only the feel of one of his fingers slipping inside of me brought me back down to earth. It felt good, better than I thought it would. And he moved slowly, as if looking for something. When he found it, I felt that rising tide again.

I cried out again and when his fingers slipped out of me, I felt empty. And when I looked at him, he was slipping out of his jeans and then his boxer shorts. I couldn't help but stare at his naked form. I had no idea how to gauge the size of a penis, but his looked big enough for me to worry about it. He was going to get that inside of me? I watched in awe as he put on a condom.

I didn't have much time to think about that. He was next to me, kissing my stomach and working his way up to my breasts again. As he teased each nipple, his fingers found my core again. Slowly massaging and prodding.

“I think you're ready,” he said.

I was. I wanted it for so many reasons, mostly because I needed it. I wanted to feel that connection to him.

“I am.”

“It may hurt a little. There could be blood.”

I didn't care. “Okay.”

“I want you to relax,” he said as he shifted his body between my legs. “It will be a lot easier for both of us if you're not so tense.”

“Right,” I said, and he kissed me. Maybe the kisses were a distraction, and so was the way he used his cock to slide between my lips and brush up against my clit. Then slowly, ever so slowly, the head of his cock pushed inside me just a bit.

“Relax, Luna.”

Right. I needed that reminder. And just as I took in a breath, he pushed forward. I felt a pinch and a bit of pain. I bit my lip to distract me from the discomfort. He didn't move for a moment or two, instead kissing my neck and using his fingers to gently work my clit again. But then he thrust a little forward. Again, I felt that split second of pain, but it soon passed.

“You feel so good,” he said. “So nice and tight. I'm not sure how long I'll last.”

His words put me at ease, and I kind of liked hearing them. It was almost as though my body opened up to him then. He sighed as he moved in deeper, and I realized he was fully inside of me. And it felt good. He stayed there, letting my body adjust to this marvelous invasion. Then came the short thrusts that had me catching my breath. Then came the longer thrusts, and as he continued to massage my clit, I could feel yet another orgasm coming.

“I can’t hold out anymore,” he said between quickened breaths.

The thrusts came hard and fast and I was ready for them. He slammed into me a few times and grunted as his own orgasm hit him.

He collapsed next to me. I didn’t know what to say or do. My mind had drifted off to a place of Zen I’d never been to before.

“How do you feel?” he said, turning to me. His hand swept away a lock of hair that had fallen into my face.

For my first time, it was magical. I’d expected it to be awkward and painful, but after the initial shock to my vagina, it had felt good, having Devin inside me, and he seemed to know all the spots that made me come alive. My stomach still fluttered in awe at the connection, feeling him inside me, stretching me, the heat, the mind-blowing orgasm. Sure, I’d be sore for days, but I didn’t care. I felt like a superstar. And now I was no longer a virgin. One of the best perks to no longer carry that label.

“Pretty good. How about you?”

“Fucking fantastic. And you enjoyed yourself?”

“I did. A lot.”

“Good. Because if I have my way, we’ll be doing that a lot more often.”

“I know I’m going to look forward to that.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Luna

I awoke to the sun shining on my face. Devin's arm was wrapped around my waist as he spooned up behind me. I never could have imagined how wonderful it would feel to have someone's arms around me first thing in the morning. And when I slowly rolled over to face him, he jarred a little but remained asleep. His short, copper-brown hair had a mind of its own, standing up in places. He had the beginnings of a five-o'clock shadow on his face, and I wondered what it would feel like against my skin. He was so handsome. As if sensing my stare, his eyes opened heavily.

"Good morning," I said, kissing his full lips.

"Good morning," he said with a grin. "What happened last night? How did I get here?"

I turned and punched him in the arm and he laughed.

"I had to try, didn't I?"

"That humor of yours will get you in trouble."

He pulled me close and kissed me hungrily. "You were amazing last night," he said.

"It's cute when you lie," I said. "I mean, come on, it was my first time. I couldn't possibly have been *that* amazing."

He arched a brow. "You sell yourself short, Ms. Perez. Your flexibility? That was amazing. Not to mention that hot body of yours."

I blushed but made sure he didn't see it by hiding my face in his arm. The virgin-less me still lacked some confidence, but I was determined to work on that.

We took a shower, and it was another opportunity for Devin to explore my body. He ran his finger along the outline of my toned arms. I was lean,

not as curvy as the women he was accustomed to dating. I had smaller breasts, but they suited me. By the look on his face, everything about me fascinated him, and that made my heart soar.

After a long shower, we dressed and made our way down to the kitchen. As expected, Rosa had left food with instructions on how to prepare it, even though I was fully capable of cooking for myself. After a hearty breakfast of eggs, bacon, and Rosa's perfect potatoes, I leaned back in my chair and smiled.

"I'm feeling good," I said. "How about you?"

"I'm good too. I didn't know you could whip up a delicious breakfast. I should probably keep you around."

"I try to keep it interesting."

He was staring at me now, his coffee in hand. I had no idea what he was thinking about, but something was rattling around in his brain.

"Come back with me to Milan."

I nearly spat out my coffee. "Did you just say something wildly impractical?"

"What's so wild about it? We clearly fancy each other, and I love having you around. And you just demonstrated that you can cook. What more could I possibly ask for?"

"Are we even officially dating?"

"I hope so!"

My head was spinning. Where had this come from? And from Devin, no less? The man was terrified of any form of commitment. "Is this to piss off my brother?"

Devin pffted. "I don't give a shit about him. This is about me and you. Together. Having fun. Getting to know each other. If you'd rather stay here and play board games ..."

I leaned back in my chair and surveyed his face. He did seem sincere, but was I ready for this? Whatever "this" was, because I wasn't even sure. "Can you explain what this entails? You know, if I were to come with you to Milan."

"You'd stay at my home."

I shook my head. He wasn't going to weasel out of this. "I want something more specific. Are you asking me to move in? Live with you? Or am I simply visiting for a few days?"

"This is happening fast," he said with an awkward laugh.

He was right. It was.

“So I’m hanging out and sort of living with you without *living with you*?”

“Better.”

He was infuriating, but at the same time, I didn’t know myself what I wanted. “Okay, then we could leave it as something fluid.”

“Sure. Sounds perfect.”

He was so cavalier about it. I wanted so badly for things to not bother me the way they didn’t bother him. “All right, let’s try this out and see where it takes us.”

Then reality hit. “I should probably let my mother know I’m leaving. I’m not sure what she’ll say. And I eventually have to tell my brother, but that can wait.” I wasn’t sure whether my mother or brother would be harder to tell.

Devin wrinkled his nose. “Yes, that can definitely wait. As for your mother, she won’t stop you, will she?”

“Not on your life,” I said with a smile, feeling more confident now.

After cleaning up breakfast dishes, I packed a few of my things. All the items I thought would be essential in Milan. Devin watched my every move, and I loved having his full attention. I refused to let the nagging thought that we wouldn’t last invade my happiness. No. I wasn’t going to think about that now. I was happy, and my brain wasn’t going to sabotage this.

“There is something I want to say.”

“What’s that, Devin Norman Flynn?”

“The way I feel about you is unlike anything I’ve felt for a woman. You make me feral, Luna Perez.”

My stomach fluttered. “I feel the same way.”

“You’ve fucked up my head, Ms. Perez. Made me want things I never thought I’d ever want.”

He pulled me close and kissed me. Everything about him made my heart soar.

“Like what, Mr. Flynn?”

“I would have never thought in a million years I’d be letting a woman stay with me.”

“Yes, stay, because it’s not living.”

“It’s as much of a commitment as I can give.”

“It’s enough for me.”

He kissed me again, and I never wanted him to stop. But all things had to come to an end. “How are we going to explain all of this? It could get us in a

lot of trouble. Davide will be mad. Your brother will burst blood vessels. Okay, so maybe it's not all bad. I would enjoy that part."

I playfully slapped his arm. "Stop. Right now. You will not antagonize my brother."

"You ruin all my fun."

As we packed up what little we had in his car, he stopped me for another kiss. "Taking a plane to Milan could be dicey."

"We'll wear hats and sunglasses. No one will recognize us."

"The press isn't going to believe this. They won't believe that I've settled down."

Settled down? Those words made my heart soar.

* * *

I found myself going from one end of the country to the other. I lounged in his hot tub, letting the warm water sooth my muscles after our trip. We'd gone unnoticed throughout our journey here. A few people had recognized Devin, but they hadn't been interested in bothering us, so we hadn't been outed yet.

Now we were behind closed doors in his secluded place. It was the perfect escape, a great vacation spot before Devin was called away to start work on the upcoming season's car, and life got too busy for me again. If nothing else, the humidity made my curls more bountiful. And when I looked at them, I loved the way they framed my face. How had I never noticed before.

Still, the first few days with Devin took some adjustment. I'd never lived with a man before, at least not one I was having sex with. Devin was set in his ways. When he changed, he threw his clothes on the floor, and I found myself picking up after him. Some nights he was a night owl, others he was in bed as early as possible. The pattern disturbed my sleep, but I was willing to live with it. For now, anyway, as long as I got my sleep.

My first night at his place we made love in his huge bed. He'd had it custom built, he'd said. As big as possible. At first I couldn't fathom why he needed so much room, but soon it became clear. He liked to cover every inch of it.

The second night he wandered off somewhere as I climbed into bed. It

was a cold evening, and he liked to keep his house cold, which didn't help. I was in my warmest pajamas with the covers wrapped tightly around me. When he returned minutes later, he was holding something. He got into bed, beaming.

"You know how I idolized your dad?" he said, biting his lip.

"You've said it a few times."

"I didn't want to say anything at first because I thought I might upset you. But I wanted to show you something. They are my prized possessions."

He handed me what he was holding. The first was a racing photo of my father that had been signed. "I got this at the Caldwell track when I was nine," Devin said with pride. "I was waiting for your dad after the race and all of a sudden, he was standing right in front of me. I was so excited I nearly shit my pants. I wanted to ask him for his autograph, but the words were stuck in my throat. He knew I was freaking out, so he took the picture from me and signed it. I remember he rustled up my hair and told me not to be so nervous. He was so cool under pressure. You and he are alike. You don't get rattled when the pressure is on."

"I'm like that? Are you sure?" I said quietly. I stared at the photo and saw so much of Rafe. What I would have done to have Dad again.

"Of course. Smart too. All the good things."

I took a deep breath. Underneath the photo was a letter my father had written to Devin when he was ten. It was a short note encouraging him to do what he wanted in life, and if it was to become a race car driver like him, Marco Perez wished him nothing but the best. I was hit with a sudden memory. My dad would set aside time each week to reply to anyone who had sent him something. Mom would help, too, and so would their assistant. I didn't think anyone did things like that anymore. Erich certainly didn't. He wouldn't give fans the time of day if he wasn't instructed to. And Blake Carlton was another notorious fan jerk. Come to think of it, Devin was pretty good with the fans. Was that something he'd learned from my father?

I handed the letter and photo back to Devin and wiped the stray tear that had slipped down my face. What I would have given to see my dad with his fans, and kids like Devin.

"If only he had known that one day I would fall for that scared and nervous little boy. The good thing is that he's not so scared anymore."

He frowned. "I knew this would upset you."

"It doesn't upset me," I said, fighting back tears. "It's touching."

“I didn’t say anything earlier because I didn’t want you to think I was interested in you because your father was my idol.”

“I kind of wondered why you didn’t want to talk about him when I was around.”

“He was your dad. I didn’t know what kind of pain it would bring up.”

“I’m glad that you met him.”

He set his prized possessions on the night table and pulled me close, just where I wanted to be.

* * *

In the morning, I took my normal five-kilometer run and left Devin sleeping. I ran along the manicured road, past all the other expensive homes, loving the feeling of the cool winter wind on my face. The street was quiet that morning, the sun just beginning to rise. By the time I got back to Devin’s, he was just getting out of bed.

“I’m taking a quick shower,” I said.

“I’ll throw something together for breakfast. Or order in. Not sure which,” he said with a grin.

After my long, hot shower, I found him in the kitchen, making coffee. He had an egg carton out as well as what looked to be some kind of deli meat and two kinds of cheese.

“I can’t make much, but I make some awesome omelets.”

“Then omelets, it is.”

Ten minutes later, I was sitting on one of his bistro chairs at the kitchen island, facing the nearby park and eating an omelet. Not as good as Rosa’s, but it wasn’t bad for a guy who barely cooked.

“What are our plans for the day?” I asked, taking a sip of coffee. He made a pretty good coffee too.

“I thought we’d get you some sponsors,” he said with a wink.

I stopped mid-bite. “Oh, you did?” I couldn’t wait to hear what he had planned.

“That’s right. I called Enzo, my agent, this morning. I told him I was dating Luna Perez and that the media couldn’t find out.”

I scratched my head. “Okay ...”

“I know Enzo. The moment I got off the phone with him, he was calling

every media outlet in the country. The man is a gossip. He thinks all gossip is good publicity. By early afternoon, the news will be all over social media. And someone is going to want to get a snap of us for the tabloids.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, putting up my hands. “Is this the right approach? I haven’t even told Rafe yet. Something I’m dreading.”

“It will get you a ton of sponsors.”

“How is that going to get me sponsors?” And shouldn’t I have given Jess the scoop? She’d eventually forgive me if I didn’t, but still. I’d give her some exclusive photos instead. And more importantly, did I want Rafe to find out this way?

He wrapped his arms around my waist and stared into my eyes. “We are going into Milan today to put on a show. Maybe you need some new clothes, then we may need to get you some new sunglasses, and what about lunch and then dinner at the hottest places in town?”

I smiled and kissed him. “Isn’t this going to get me in trouble?”

“As long as you carry the bags and make all the store logos easy to see, I’m free and clear from any issues with my sponsors. For good measure, I’ll throw on a Russo shirt so I don’t piss off my team.”

“Let me at least give Jess the first opportunity to break this.”

Devin shook his head. “She’s a freelancer. It will take too much time. We need to get the word out now. You can give her other exclusives. We’ll figure something out.”

“You’re brilliant, you know that?”

“I’m glad you’ve finally figured that out.”

Chapter Thirty

Luna

Before our adventure to find some new sponsors for Team Perez, I had to tell Jess. I texted her, called her, then texted and called again. I sent a series of texts explaining it all, along with a few pictures of me and Devin together. Hopefully, she'd be the first to break the story. And if not, well, it served her right for not answering her texts.

What I should have also done was call Mom and Rafe, but that could wait a few hours. Devin wanted to put our plan into action as soon as possible, and the last thing I wanted was for my brother and mother to ruin my good time.

We hit the Quadrilatero della Moda, Milan's prestigious fashion district, and wandered around. Devin was well-known as Milan's adopted child. While fans immediately recognized him, they mostly left him alone. I didn't expect anyone to know me, but a few eyed me up and down. I supposed they were wondering who was on Devin's arm now.

He put on his sunglasses and didn't make eye contact with anyone. He said that helped keep people from bothering him.

"Once you make eye contact, it's all over. They think you are suddenly approachable," he said. "The worst part of being recognized is that your life is never the same. If I want to run around town without shaving or fixing my hair, why does my picture have to be on every gossip website or social media post? It's like suddenly you can no longer do anything right. That's why I rarely grant interviews other than the ones required by the team or the federation."

He was making a lot of sense.

Our first stop was an Alexander Wheaton shop. He was a popular American designer who had begun to take off in Europe. His clothes were

sport and at the high end of affordable. It was trendy to be in a Wheaton polo top or wear his signature cologne.

The associate greeted us with a smile. She was a younger woman, blonde with gray eyes, slim and tanned, keeping with the Wheaton image of youth and vitality. She was wearing the familiar Wheaton casual polo in pink with the stitched AW above her left breast and a pair of Wheaton fitted jeans. She didn't recognize Devin, but she looked like she was trying to place him.

Devin took a polo shirt from a rack and showed it to me. It was white with the Wheaton initials all over it.

"A little over the top, no?" I inquired.

He wandered the small boutique and came up with a variation of the outfit the associate was wearing. The polo was dark blue with the Wheaton letters in white. I didn't like the jeans, but I could see where Devin was going with it.

"This'll show off your great legs and firm ass," he said, handing the items to me.

"I don't have the cleavage for the top."

"Sure you do," he said, telling the associate we would take them. The woman smiled because who wouldn't? His English accent was sexy as hell, but it was clear she still wasn't able to put a name to his face.

Devin watched the girl wrap it up. She pulled out a small shopping bag to place the purchase in.

"Excuse me, could you put it in a larger bag, the largest you have?" he said, leaning over the counter to see what was there. He grabbed a huge shopping bag with the enormous Wheaton logo on it. "This will do," he said, handing it to the associate. Somehow he made the whole maneuver seem charming. "Grazie."

She gave him a peculiar look but put the shirt and jeans in the gigantic bag.

I had underestimated Devin. He had this all figured out. As we exited the boutique, I held the bag in full view of anyone who was watching.

"Do you think this is going to work?" I asked as we strolled down the street hand in hand. I found it amusing how he walked with his nose up in the air. The fame and glory had already gone to his head. I could never fault him for his confidence. I'd kill for some of it.

"I've done my research on Wheaton. He's dying to get more exposure in Europe. He's backed one of the racing teams in American leagues, but

nothing here. If we play all of our cards right, you might get yourself a sponsor.”

I thought to ask him how he knew all that information, but he spotted a sporting goods store on the corner. It extended almost a whole block, and Devin insisted we go inside. The company was Lucrezia, he told me, a once-famous sporting goods name that had experienced troubles during the most recent economic downturn. It had recovered, going from an ailing institution on the brink of bankruptcy to retaking a chunk of the market share it had lost.

“How do you know all of this?”

“I read all the financial papers and magazines. You should too! I have a thousand at the house. I’m not just a pretty face. I have brains as well.”

A man in sneakers and a black Lucrezia tracksuit asked us if we needed any help. The moment the words left his mouth, I saw that he’d recognized Devin. It was written all over his face. The young man tried to remain casual, even though one of his hands began to shake.

“I need a new pair of running shoes,” I said. The young man was flustered as he showed me an array of different shoes. I chose the flashiest ones that I’d get the most use out of. “I also need some running shorts, maybe even an outfit for running that will keep me warm. It’s been rather cold the last few weeks.”

He showed me several pieces, and I chose the one with the most prominent Lucrezia logo. Devin sat back and watched in amusement. As we paid, Devin signed a few autographs for his adoring fans while I asked for the largest shopping bag.

“You’re catching on,” he said when we were back on the street.

“How do you know we’re even being watched?”

“I don’t know; I’m just hoping,” he said, and gave me a peck on the cheek.

We ate lunch in a small restaurant that Devin frequented. He loved Italian food and claimed it was the best restaurant in all of Italy, but the food had nothing on Rosa’s. Afterward, we walked to his sports car, and I loaded my stuff into the small room there was. We drove back to the house, and I decided it was time to call Rafe and tell him the news.

Devin kept himself busy on his iPad while I made the call in another room. Rafe was in England testing the new Perez engine. I hoped to get his voicemail, but at the same time, I needed to get this over with. I couldn’t keep running from him.

“Hi, I’m glad I caught you,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Where are you?” he asked casually. The usual edge in his voice was gone. I knew that Mom must have already spoken to him, telling him of Devin’s visit.

“Milan.”

“What are you doing there?” His voice was terrifyingly calm.

I closed my eyes, taking in a deep breath. This wasn’t going to be easy. I told him of the past week, thankful that he hadn’t heard about it from other sources yet. I wanted the news of my relationship with Devin to come from me. Rafe listened in silence, and as I concluded my tale, he said nothing.

“Are you angry?” I asked nervously.

“You know what I think of him,” he said, and his calm tone was a departure from his usual self. “If he’s going to clean up his act, then I wish you good luck. I can’t dictate who you can and cannot see. I know you know his reputation, and for your own sake, I pray he doesn’t hurt or humiliate you. Knowing him, he would do both at the same time.”

I was flabbergasted. Not once did it occur to me that Rafe might give me his blessing, however reluctant. What was going on? It wasn’t adding up, but calling him on it now didn’t seem like the right time. “I really care for him.”

“He must care for you, because what he’s doing could put his whole career in jeopardy.”

I paused. Was that it? The potential to throw his career away for me? Then the cynical side of me kicked in. Did Rafe see the payoff in having his little sister dating Devin?

“Why do you say that?” I asked, settling into my chair. It was a modern leather black chair that was horribly uncomfortable. If I was going to make this my new hangout, I’d have to give the place some life and character.

“He must be very careful now. He is fraternizing with a member of another team in a very intimate way. Others have tried this before, hoping to keep it secret, but when it was finally discovered, they were kicked off the team. For you, there are no consequences. For him, it’s a whole other matter.”

All the anxiety I had felt before the call had vanished. I was now more interested in what my brother had to say. “I don’t want to be the reason he risks his career.”

“It’s his choice to do that. He’s a driver; he’s privy to a lot of information that he could easily pass on to you. Russo expects his loyalty, and if

something were to come out, that the two of you were exchanging information and that you had passed it on to us, well, he'd be finished. Not just with Russo, with any team. You can't keep this relationship a secret; that is impossible. Just be smart about it, for your sake and for his."

Little did he know that there was nothing secret about our relationship, and I'd just showed it off to anyone who was interested. I ended the call shortly after, but my eyes had been opened to a danger I hadn't known existed.

My next call was to Jess. She squealed when she answered the phone, so I could only assume she'd gotten all my texts and had been waiting for me to call again.

"I want to know everything, and I want an exclusive. Do you know how big this could be for me?"

I bit my lip. She was going to have to move fast. "Strange how you made my big news about you."

"I'm not even sorry. Spill it all!"

I gave her all the details, and when I was finished, she let out a satisfied sigh.

"I knew you were head over heels about him. And he's not all that bad, I suppose. And I want you to be happy. How was the sex?"

"Amazing!"

She laughed at that. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Keep enjoying yourself. And about that exclusive ..."

"Yes, of course. You got what I've already sent?"

"Yes, and it's about to be posted on our online version. I figured I had to move fast after getting all your messages."

"And for your true exclusive, send someone to get pictures, and I'll give you some soundbites."

"I'll give you a heads-up so you can get your hair and makeup done first. Oh, this is gonna be so juicy."

I wasn't sure if I should grin or grimace. "Just keep the article PG, okay? Do not embarrass us or make us look or sound bad."

"Of course. You're my bestie."

"Thanks for being supportive. I have a feeling you will be in the minority."

"He's a charmer. He'll win over your family. Okay, maybe not Rafe."

"Or my mother, although he seems to have charmed Rosa. Maybe Mom

will come around eventually.”

“If he has Rosa, then he’ll get your mom too.”

She needed to arrange a photographer, so we said our goodbyes. I hoped I wouldn’t regret giving her this exclusive. I’d seen her work before, and if she didn’t give me the best-friend treatment, I’d never trust her with anything again.

* * *

As Devin expected, photos of us together in Milan were in the tabloid online editions right after Jess posted her exclusive, and in their physical papers the next morning. As I sipped my coffee, I read a headline in Milan’s version of the *Daily Mail*.

“A Perez-Flynn Union of Another Sort.”

I shouldn’t have read the accompanying article, but I couldn’t help myself. The paper was both stunned and baffled that we could be a couple. In fact, they didn’t believe it. As the reporter went on to write, there was no possible way that Devin Flynn would saddle himself with me. First of all, they claimed I wasn’t his type, i.e., the blonde variety, dumbed-down, and top heavy. They wondered what he and I had to talk about. Sports? *Certainly nothing of the intellectual kind, and surely nothing about racing as we were both racing illiterate.*

I threw the paper down onto Devin’s kitchen island in disgust. “And I was worried they would blast you for having a girlfriend on an opposing team. They don’t even believe our relationship is real!”

“The press works in funny ways,” he said, picking up the paper. “And I take offence to the notion that I’m racing illiterate.”

I noted that he’d missed the point.

“I take offence to the notion that I’m unattractive and that you must have had a blow to the head to be dating me. Secondly, I don’t just talk about sports. That is ludicrous.”

“They didn’t say you’re unattractive, just not my usual type. Don’t worry about it; they need to sell papers,” he soothed. “They probably found someone who knew you when you were six, and they asked that person a few questions. You know how people get when it comes to their fifteen minutes of fame. Maybe this is a blessing,” Devin said, throwing the paper in the

trash. “If they don’t want to believe it, who cares.”

I stayed angry for most of the day. Rafe called from London, sounding cheerful for once. He was the last person I wanted to hear from.

“I had an interesting phone call today,” he said. I knew by his tone that he was smiling on the other end of the line. Why was he always happy when I was pissed off? “It seems you’ve caught the attention of Lucrezia. They want to throw some money our way.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “You’re kidding,” I said, suddenly excited. The dark clouds hanging over me lifted.

“They called Carlos this morning. They want to see their name linked to Perez. They are going to supply us with some footwear for the pit crew, and they want their logo in a prime spot on the car. They also want you to wear their shoes as often as possible. It seems they like the idea of seeing their sneakers on you.”

“I can’t believe it. His stupid idea actually worked.”

Rafe chuckled ruefully. “I should have known Flynn was behind it. I’ve heard he’s smart when it comes to money.”

“You should be thanking him, then.”

“Let’s not get carried away.”

I ended my call with Rafe and screamed in delight. Devin came to see what had gotten me so excited. I threw my arms around him, showering his face with kisses. “Lucrezia called. They’re on board.”

“That’s great,” he said. “At least the people of Lucrezia believe we are dating.”

“They probably had their salesperson verify it.”

“I think this is cause for celebration,” he said with a devious smirk. “And you, my love, must be properly rewarded.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Devin

Maybe I should have been worried about the team meeting at the Manta track just outside Milan. I knew Riedl would be there, and I also knew he'd lose it on me. Did I care? Not even a bit. But before throwing myself into that fire, I had to meet with Enzo. He'd sent me a flurry of texts that all essentially said the same thing: he needed to see me right away.

We met at a coffee shop on the outskirts of town and on the way to Manta. Enzo was already inside, a biscotti in one hand and a newspaper in the other. An espresso was in front of him. I got myself a coffee and headed over. He put his paper down when I sat down, and a sly smile formed on his lips.

"Is it real?"

"Is what real?" I asked, playing along.

Enzo pushed the paper and his coffee aside, leaning in closer to me. "The Perez woman. Are you crazy?" he said, waving his arms all around. "Are you trying to kill me and your career?"

"It's real and I care about her."

Enzo looked down his nose at me. "I don't believe it."

"You don't need to believe it."

Enzo stared at me some more. "Okay, if you insist on pretending you've found the love of your life, you better be prepared for the consequences. I've already spoken to Davide and just about everyone else at Russo. They are furious with you. Do you understand what this could do to your career? To my career?"

I loved Enzo and had been with him since the beginning of my career, but

he was slimy. Most days, that was what I liked about him most. Sure, he cared about his clients, but he made sure to put his best interests first. If my relationship with Luna crashed and burned, and Russo decided to turf me, it would hurt Enzo too. It wouldn't surprise me if he later turned on me.

"It will be fine."

"You are crazy! Look, it's not too late to end this. Say it was a little fling, wish her well, and move on."

I shook my head. "I'm not doing that."

"What is it about her? Why would you do this to yourself? To me?"

"I told you that I care about her. She's different. If it pisses off Russo, so be it. I've decided that my happiness comes first."

Enzo massaged his temples. He wasn't that much older than I was, and when I'd hit the jackpot with Russo, he'd hit the jackpot too. He'd landed a slew of clients after that, and with that came the new sports car he drove around and all the designer clothes he rarely wore more than a few times. Enzo was successful because he was ruthless and a great negotiator. I had to thank him for landing me the seat on Russo. No other agent could have pulled it off.

"Just so you know, they are drafting an agreement, and you better sign it. It's essentially a gag order. If you breathe a word to her about anything, you will be living out of a cardboard box for the rest of your life."

"I can be professional."

Enzo looked like he'd sucked on a lemon. "I don't think I've met a man as reckless as you. I do hope she's worth it."

Enzo was usually jovial, even in the more trying of times, but there was a definite edge to his voice, as if he was furious with me. I didn't understand it, nor did I care. The man had made a fortune off me, and it was in his best interest that he shut up.

I finished my coffee and made my escape. I drove the half hour to the track, wondering the whole time why Enzo was so irritated. He should have been happy. If Luna and I made it work—and I would do whatever it took to make sure of that—then he would profit from our union. It would be inevitable that sponsors would come calling for me too. Our relationship would also elevate my profile, and if that pissed off Riedl, well, then that was an added bonus.

I got to the track, and everyone regarded me with either suspicion or surprise. Why? Did they think I wouldn't show my face? I had a team to race

for. As I headed to the boardroom, I saw Sara Massi. She stopped when I reached her. Her usual stern expression was on full display.

“Have you spoken to Enzo?”

“I have. And good morning to you too.”

She ignored that. “We’ll have something for you to sign by the end of your meetings today. We’ll make sure Enzo reviews it first, but it must be signed before you leave. And you’ll need to leave your cell phone and any other electronic devices with me. You can retrieve them on your way out.”

Holy shit. They were taking this rather seriously. I fished my phone from my pocket and handed it to her.

“Have a nice day, Devin.”

With that, she was gone, her stilettos tip-tapping on the tile floor as she left.

I finally made it to the boardroom, and my heart sank when I saw that only Riedl was inside. How did I get so lucky? I took a seat across from him and smiled politely. Riedl wasn’t smiling. In fact, he was scowling to the point I could see the veins throbbing in his neck.

“How are you doing?” I asked as nicely as I could muster.

“Did I not make it clear to you that you were to leave Luna alone? What part of that did you not understand?”

I hated him. “She doesn’t answer to you and neither do I. We have a connection, so why can’t you be happy for us?”

“Because you’re being insincere. I don’t know what you are up to, but I’m not having it.”

“Last time I checked, you weren’t her father.”

Riedl wagged his finger at me. “You’re not going to ruin her life. And that means you’re breaking up with her.”

I laughed at his self-importance. Who the fuck did this prick think he was? “I’m sorry, do you think you’re *my* father?”

“I’m not playing around with you. I’m dead serious.”

I blinked a few times. This tosser was for real. “I don’t care what you are. The thing is, her own brother doesn’t care.”

This elicited some laughter from Riedl. “Do you actually believe that? You think that Rafe is going to let this go on? You’re living in a fantasy.”

I didn’t care what Riedl had to say or what he thought, and I certainly didn’t want to discuss this further with him, but he wouldn’t let it go.

“I know you are close to her and you’re concerned. Well, don’t be. I’m

not going to fuck this up.”

Erich sputtered a laugh. “You fuck up everything you’re involved in.”

“Are we still talking about France from last year, because I said I was sorry. I didn’t mean to take you out of the race.”

“No, I’m talking about people. You fuck around with them whenever you can. It’s like the only person you care about is yourself. You’ll walk over anyone if you think it’s going to get you somewhere. I’ve known Luna her entire life. She’s naïve. She doesn’t know what you’re all about. The partying and drinking. Are you suggesting to me that you’ve given up all other women?”

“Yes. Is it so hard to believe?”

“The last time you had any semblance of a relationship, you cheated on the girl two weeks later. So, yes, I do find it very hard to believe.”

“She’s changed me,” I said.

Apparently, Riedl wasn’t buying it, because he shook his head. “You are going to find a way to break up with her.”

“Go pound sand.”

Riedl slammed his fist on the table and I jumped a bit. I’d never seen him so pissed off. “You will find a way to nicely end things. Then you will never bother her again.”

“I’m doing no such thing.”

Riedl’s hazel eyes darkened in a way I’d never seen before. “I won’t let this continue. If that means ruining your life, I will. Do I have to make it any clearer for you?”

I believed him, but I also had to have my say. “I don’t know what you think my relationship with her is about, but I do care for her. She makes me laugh, she stimulates my brain, and she’s an amazing woman. I’m not going to hurt her. This isn’t a stunt.”

“We both know you’ll hurt her. You won’t be able to help yourself.”

“Why can’t you just give us a chance?”

Before he could answer, Davide and the rest of the team filed into the boardroom. But I thought maybe I’d gotten through to him. His face softened just a little, and I had to hope that he’d leave me and Luna alone. And if I hadn’t convinced him yet, I had to find a way because I was pretty sure he could ruin my career if he wanted to.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Luna

I needed a serious wardrobe upgrade. Now that Devin Flynn would accompany me to all the usual events of the racing season, all eyes would be on us, and that meant that I needed new outfits for every occasion. And with the upcoming racing season less than a few months away, I called my uncle and made him a proposition. I would contract him to provide me with gowns, as many as he could make, and I would pay more than a fair price for them and plug him as often as possible.

“Since we’re still here in Milan for a few more days, why not spend some time with him?” Devin said to me one afternoon. “Invite him over for dinner? Or better yet, take him out for dinner? He could consider it a working vacation. While I’m at it, let’s get Jess here as well. She can document it for that rag she writes for. We all scratch each other’s backs.”

For the longest moment I stared at him. He was always coming up with ideas. If he hadn’t been driving with Russo, I’d insist that Rafe and Uncle Roberto hire him not only as a driver, but the head of marketing.

With that in mind, I had a request a few days later. “I need a car.”

Devin was reading the *Financial News*, which didn’t surprise me at all. The more I got to know him, the more I realized how business-minded he was. He was a savvy investor and always kept an eye on his stocks online too.

He made a humming noise to indicate he’d heard me but didn’t ask anything else.

I cleared my throat. “Remember that suggestion about spending time with my uncle? I’m taking you up on that, and I’d like to pick him up.”

He flipped the page. “Doesn’t he drive?”

“He doesn’t own a car.”

This seemed to catch Devin off guard, and he actually looked up from the paper. “He doesn’t own a car? How odd.”

“He doesn’t think he needs one. He said everywhere he needs to go is nearby, and if it isn’t, he takes an Uber. But I thought I could spend some quality time with him by picking him up.”

“I could send a car.”

“No. I’d like to get him.”

“Okay,” he said absently, returning to his reading.

I waited but he didn’t move. “So I need a car,” I said. I could hear the irritation in my voice. Sometimes I forgot what a total bachelor he was. It was like he was unused to carrying on a conversation on someone else’s timeline.

He looked up from the paper. “One of *my* cars?” he asked in disbelief.

“No. I thought I would go next door to your neighbor’s house and ask him. Of course, I want one of your cars!”

The lines around his mouth presented themselves. He had at least three cars in his garage. Did he really have to think about whether he was going to let me drive one? “No one drives my cars but me,” he said without an ounce of apology.

“Would you give me the keys to a bloody car,” I said, growing angry. “You know I can drive!”

“But ...” He looked genuinely surprised. “They’re my babies. Really, Luna, I don’t let anyone touch them. Why don’t we just hire a service for your uncle?”

I gritted my teeth. “I need to get into town. I don’t want to rely on a service.”

“How long will it take?”

I sat at the table and brought my hands to my face. I wanted to throttle him. “I have no idea. Maybe an hour. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m sure one of your precious children has navigation.”

He seemed to finally sense my anger. “I guess I can loan you one,” he said, rising from his chair. He had the keys to the cars on keyrings hanging near the door to the garage. He studied the keys closely as if there was some riddle to them. I watched in astonishment as he picked up each set before placing them back on the hook.

“Are you going to drive me, then? That may be quicker than waiting for you to give me a set of keys.”

He mumbled something to himself before picking up a set of keys, then hanging them back up. He took another moment before choosing a different set. He turned to hand them to me, and I saw the Ferrari logo on the fob. Super, the car I knew he liked least.

But then he changed his mind again.

I was fed up with the spectacle. I grabbed my phone to call an Uber.

“You can have the SUV,” he said, leaping across the room to grab my phone. He had to know I was furious.

“Listen, if it’s such a hard decision for you, I’ll take an Uber. It will make us both happier,” I said, trying to pry his hand off of my phone.

“The white SUV. I’m sure now.”

“You’re really pissing me off,” I said, grabbing the keys. I took my jacket and he followed me out to the car. The expression on his face was as if he were about to send both me and his car off to war.

“Gentle with the brakes,” he said anxiously. “She’s going to know I’m not driving her.”

I humored him as I started the engine. He cringed when I backed out of the garage. I sped away knowing he would worry about his car the entire time I was gone.

* * *

Dario was happy to see me. He gave me a huge hug and invited me in because he hadn’t quite finished packing for the trip. I’d probably gone faster than Devin wanted for his precious SUV—God forbid the off-roading vehicle would come close to going off road! Still, the drive had burned off some of my anger, or at least brought it down to a simmer.

Once he’d finished packing, we carried his two large cases filled with dresses out to the SUV. It was a good thing I didn’t have the red Ferrari. My uncle planned to get an idea of what I wanted and what he could work with from dresses he’d already made. The rest would all be custom.

Dario was happy with his new job. It was like the good old days when he’d made dresses for Mom to show off at the same events I would now be attending. We talked about those days as we drove back to Devin’s, and it was nice to hear about my mom and dad. My uncle never had a problem talking about my dad, and how he’d helped him with his design label all

those years ago.

“He was a good man,” Dario said. “Always helping anyone who needed it. And he was good for your mom, and that’s why she was so devastated when he died. We all were.”

My uncle stopped then, and I knew it was time to change the subject.

When we got to Devin’s, the place was empty. I was glad to see him gone. I wanted uninterrupted time with my uncle. We started with a quick lunch, then spent the afternoon looking at different styles of dresses. Dario pointed out ones he thought would flatter me.

“You will be onstage now,” he said. “And really, anything would look wonderful on you, but I think we should stick to classic designs with a punch of color. I’m thinking old Hollywood.”

“I love that idea! And I can’t wait to show off your dresses.”

“I had a feeling when I saw you before Christmas that something special was going on. I see I was right.”

“I like him, Zio.” *Most of the time*, I couldn’t help thinking. But really, despite his bachelor mentality that made him forget how to share sometimes, I knew it was true.

“I don’t mind him either. He seems right for you. What does your mom think?”

“She seems okay with it. But with her, you never can be sure.”

To be fair, when I’d told Mom, she hadn’t been surprised. She hadn’t said much at all. Something about wanting me to be happy and that she would grow to like Devin. I guessed that was about as much of a ringing endorsement as I was ever going to get.

Dario arranged some deadlines. My first real engagement wasn’t until late February at the annual Perez Charity Classic held just outside Los Angeles. The following week, the team’s largest sponsor was holding a party to launch the season. It was almost a month away, giving my uncle lots of time to perfect the two dresses. I left my uncle to work on the designs, something I knew he needed peace and quiet for. I hadn’t even noticed that Devin had returned. My anger had dissipated, and I wanted to cuddle up with him.

He was watching television, a solemn expression on his face. I sat down next to him, sensing that he was upset.

“Is something wrong?”

“Not really,” he said, looking at me with a half smile.

I wasn’t convinced. “Why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you.”

“I’ve got to go to Manta again at the end of the week. We have testing to do. I’m going to stay there. It’s easier than driving back every night when I’m exhausted. I won’t be back for a week or so.”

I felt like I’d been slapped. That sounded plausible, yet it also felt like an excuse. “Where will you stay?”

“Russo has accommodations set up there. Like a mini hotel. That way they can keep us working from dusk until dawn.”

Now I was more shocked than worried he was trying to avoid me. A setup like that sounded incredibly expensive. Decent accommodations for the entire team was something Perez could never afford.

“And while you were with your uncle, your brother called your phone. I saw his name pop up on the screen.”

I checked my messages and groaned. He wanted me back in England the week Devin got back. I relayed the message to him.

“Looks like we won’t be spending much time together this month.”

He was sad and it touched me. I wrapped my arms around him. He melted into my touch and buried his face in my hair. It felt like an apology—for our stupid fight, and for the difficulties to come.

“I’m sure we’ll have time together later,” I murmured.

“That’s the problem with this life. You can’t have a decent bloody relationship.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Luna

“Are you worried?” Jess asked.

“Why would I be worried?” I asked, cleaning up the London flat. I hadn’t been there in several weeks and Rafe had left it a mess, not that Jess had ever left it any better. The London flat had a busy schedule between the three of us, and Jess always made herself scarce when Rafe needed the place.

“If he’s such a playboy, don’t you think he may stray?”

“In Manta with Erich? Not a chance.”

Jess pursed her lips. “You’re just trying to hide that you’re worried.”

I hadn’t let myself think about it much. I wanted to see the best in Devin and hoped he wouldn’t screw around on me. But now that Jess had brought it up ... “Maybe I’m a little worried,” I said, doing the dirty dishes Rafe had left in the sink. I couldn’t help comparing Rafe and Devin. They both had terrible habits like this. I felt like I was constantly cleaning up after the men in my life. “But I know him better than that; at least I think I do. He won’t cheat on me.”

Jess had the beginnings of a mischievous smile on her face. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“Yes. All I do is think about him. I know he’s the man for me. And now I won’t see him for three weeks. It’s going to be torture.”

Jess grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and twisted off the cap. I noted she wasn’t helping me with the dishes. In her defense, she paid for someone to come in weekly to clean when she was in residence. As for Rafe? Apparently he thought I was his cleaning service.

“You’re with the kind of man I have always seen myself ending up with.

Isn't that strange?" Jess said, swinging her blonde hair over her shoulder. "He is quite handsome." Jess picked up a photo of Devin and me that had been taken at the Russo Christmas party. I'd bought a frame for it just the other day. It was my favorite picture of us. We were both standing near the main entrance, smiling and looking like a happy couple that we weren't quite yet.

"He's a lot of things," I said, putting away the dishes. A smile crept up on my face at the thought of him. Man, he'd won me over in a heartbeat.

Jess rolled her eyes and laughed. "Luna, you are definitely in love. This guy better treat you right or he'll have me to answer to."

* * *

In London, I felt useless. There was little for me to do. Rafe had insisted the team base be in Europe, and for some reason, he'd chosen England. It could have been the English engines Perez used the first few years. Or it was some connection he felt because Dad had raced for Merrick, and their base was here. Whatever the reason, it was a decision that was made long before I came on the scene.

I did a few interviews, but most of the time they were asking about Devin Flynn and not Rafe Perez. Rafe was growing annoyed with the lack of attention the team was getting. As for me, my face was beginning to become recognized, one of the pitfalls of my new relationship. But if I looked at it positively, it was also an upside if I wanted new sponsors. There were still newspaper articles, blogs, and gossip shows questioning our union. Some claimed it was a moneymaking scheme hatched by me and Devin to pad our already huge bank accounts. Whatever huge bank account they thought I had was a mystery to me.

"It will blow over," Tanya had said. She was the first of the Perez crew to congratulate me, but I could see the skepticism on her face. And I didn't like it. We'd been as close to friends as I could call anyone on the team, but with my new relationship with Devin, she seemed to change overnight. She no longer joked with me, instead keeping things professional. I hated it.

Each day of testing, I watched from the pit wall as the cars zoomed down the track. I noticed the Lucrezia logo now on Rafe's overalls was also positioned nicely on the car. There had been no other offers from sponsors besides the usual oil company, mobile phone company and Thibault, the

team's engine supplier. A US telecommunications company had shown an interest, but their contribution was only half of what was still required. Rafe and I had forfeited our trust money for the year toward the team. It was something we both kept from our mother. We needed to land a big fish if we wanted to stop pouring our money into the team.

"Hello, Luna," Carlos Boreno said, standing next to me. "You have a visitor."

It was strange having the team president relay a message to me. "Who is it?"

"Some American in an expensive suit."

I was intrigued. Who could this be? I tamed my wild hair and swiped at the dust on my clothes as I walked to the makeshift office area that had been set up. A man in his early fifties was staring at some drawings of the car that were on the wall. He was dressed impeccably, his short brown hair brushed to one side. An expensive gold watch almost blinded me.

"Hello, I'm Luna Perez," I said, extending my hand.

"Hello, Ms. Perez, I'm Alexander Wheaton," he said, shaking it.

I was taken aback. Alexander Wheaton? Why hadn't Carlos prepared me? Had Carlos even asked his name? "Why, hello, Mr. Wheaton, what brings you to Caldwell?"

"I wanted to see how the operations were doing here in London, and while I was here, I thought I'd come by for a visit. I heard both you and your brother would be in town, and I wanted to meet the Perez children."

"Please, sit down," I said, pointing to the little table. I thought of the spread Russo would have had and hoped Mr. Wheaton wouldn't think what we had was pathetic. "Can I get you something? Bottled water, perhaps?"

"No, I'm fine," he said, taking his seat. He undid the buttons on his suit and carefully pressed out the imaginary wrinkles.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Wheaton."

"Please, call me Alexander."

"And call me Luna. It's nice that you've come for a visit."

"I had to. Apparently, you were our poster girl in Milan for a few days. Your picture was all over social media with one of our shopping bags. Then two days later, you were photographed on the street wearing your new purchase. It was hard to ignore."

Blood began to pulse through my veins. I knew what I was on the verge of accomplishing and I couldn't screw it up. "I just love your clothes."

“I was hoping you might say that. I’ve been interested in racing for some time. Your father was one of my favorites, and I’ve been looking for just the right team to back. You see, in America, I’ve done rather well with the Bryant team, but that’s US motorsport. I haven’t been able to break into Europe and Asia the way I’d like to. So I was thinking to myself, what better way than to jump on the Luna Perez bandwagon?”

I had to keep all my nerves in check and not sound like a blubbering goofball. “I can’t take all the credit for my recent popularity.”

“Yes, your new boyfriend adds to the charm.”

“And the success.”

He smiled now and drummed his fingers on the table. “What would you say to a little business arrangement between my company and your team? I envision seeing my logo prominently on your cars. And, of course, I would want to continue to see you in my clothes. And your brother too. They look fantastic on you, and I’m sure they’d look great on him.”

“I don’t think it would be a problem,” I said with a smile.

“You are a perfect example of a Wheaton woman. Successful, athletic, young, and involved with a very handsome man. What woman would not want to be in your shoes?”

“It’s all in the image.”

“Suffice it to say, you are a Wheaton woman. And I think I see a very bright future for the Perez team and my company.”

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll have my people call yours and set up an agreement.”

“I look forward to it.”

“And I’ll send you a few things to add to your Wheaton collection.”

“I’d love that as well. It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Wheaton.”

“Yes, and see you soon.”

* * *

The sponsorship from Wheaton put the Perez team in a comfortable position, something we weren’t accustomed to. We no longer had money concerns with the added influx of cash from Alexander Wheaton. Rafe returned some of my trust fund money, but we knew that we would have to keep all our sponsors happy, no matter the costs. It was now my job to kiss ass and keep

up appearances. Especially in Wheaton clothes and Lucrezia sneakers.

A few weeks later, I had dinner with Rafe's family. They'd come to visit for the weekend, and I enjoyed seeing his three sons, Marco, Stefano, and Antonio. Marco was almost eight and had already shown a keen interest in his father's racing career. No one dared to say out loud that there was a possibility of another Marco Perez. Rafe had already taken him to drive the cart cars, and little Marco had shown promise.

It was an unseasonably warm English evening, one that didn't require a heavy coat. Rafe and I sat outside enjoying the weather in only light jackets. We'd had little time to just talk like brother and sister. I wished we were closer, especially because of our partnership and the legacy we were carrying on. We'd never been overly close, but I wanted to change that, and I felt as though we were making slow progress.

"So, I guess Flynn is still kicking around," Rafe said, stretching his legs out in front of him.

"I really care for him," I said quietly.

"I know. You call or text him every two hours."

"I miss him."

"I don't see how."

I tilted my head and gave him an incredulous look. "You don't know him the way I do."

"Are you trying to tell me that he's different?"

"Completely. To be honest, I think all the macho stuff is a façade to hide insecurities."

"You mean the fact that he is the number-two driver, and he always will be at Russo?"

"Yes, although he won't admit it."

"He loves the attention; you can't deny it."

"But he is a good man."

"Until he screws you over."

I huffed. My brother was incorrigible. "He won't."

"Don't be so sure."

"Rafe, I'll concede that he doesn't have the best reputation, but he's really a good man; I know that deep down. I know you'll never give him credit, but it was Devin who helped us get those contracts."

"All that guy cares about is his own pocket," Rafe said skeptically.

I couldn't hide my frustration any longer. "It was his idea for me to

prance around Milan and show myself off with the right kind of merchandise. Whether you want to believe it, he was the mastermind.”

“Be careful who you tell that story to,” Rafe said, giving me a hard look.

“I suppose he and I shouldn’t talk about all that shit,” I said, staring out at the ocean in the distance.

“You’d better not. I would never admit this to anyone else, but I respect him as a driver. I’d hate to see him end a career because he’s using a part of his anatomy other than his brains.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Luna

The racing world took a few days off to take part in the annual Perez Charity Classic held just outside Los Angeles, and a short flight from the Perez estate near Santa Barbara. Drivers from all teams were encouraged to participate and few refused. And unlike the open-wheel cars they were used to, the cars in the Perez Charity Classic were sports cars that any non-racing human would be able to drive.

Celebrities were also invited to give the race a higher profile. The charity race that had at one time been organized by Mom and Dad was now completely handled by the charity's foundation. For Rafe and me, the only requirement was to attend.

I left the Perez house and flew in one of the Perez planes to Los Angeles to meet Devin. I arrived just before his plane landed and waited for him. He was swarmed by reporters as he exited the airport. It seemed that everyone wanted to see us together, to see if the rumors were true. He had to be escorted through the crowd by security and into the waiting limousine outside. The crowd was disappointed that we hadn't posed for pictures. What they didn't know and likely didn't care about was that I had only two days together with Devin. I was needed in New York to meet with Alexander Wheaton, and Devin was required in Italy for testing.

We drove to the hotel that the foundation had arranged. I had wanted to do so much with him during his stay. At the top of my list was bringing him to meet my grandmother. But time was at a premium, and packed with activities.

"I missed you," he said, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me tenderly.

“It’s been so long,” I said, grasping on to him tightly.

“The airport was a zoo. So many people wanted to see us. Or, I think they wanted to see you more.”

“This is wild! I can’t wait until it’s over.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “We probably shouldn’t venture out too far. We wouldn’t want to be mobbed.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I said with a smile. “Whatever will we do cooped up in here all day?”

“I’m sure I can come up with something.”

* * *

That evening we ventured into the city for dinner. We met Rafe and Eva in a private booth, away from all the staring eyes, in a small restaurant. Devin and Rafe discussed cars and tracks as politely as they could while Eva and I talked about the children. Eva changed the subject to Devin when he and Rafe got into a heated debate about recent modifications to differing tracks. They were too interested in their own conversation to care about the one I was having with Eva.

“He’s nice looking,” Eva said in Spanish just in case they were listening. “He has beautiful eyes.”

“And he knows it,” I replied, also in Spanish.

Eva glanced over to Devin, then back to me. “You know your brother doesn’t like him,” she said, dropping her voice.

“He makes it quite obvious. Has he said anything to you?”

“How do I say this nicely?” Eva said, thinking for a moment. “Your brother thinks he has no class. He says that Devin used to race against him in the lower circuits, or whatever you call them, and that Devin didn’t really belong.”

This piqued my interest since Rafe had never mentioned Devin from back then. “Because he wasn’t any good?”

“No,” Eva said. I could see that the words pained her somehow. “He wasn’t like the other drivers.”

I wasn’t following. “I don’t understand. He was a womanizer?”

“No, he didn’t have money. He could barely make ends meet and it showed.”

I nodded. “I see.”

“You know how your brother is. If you don’t have money, he isn’t interested.”

My brother really was a jerk. “What else did Rafe say?”

“Not much. He just thinks Devin isn’t good enough for you.”

“My brother the elitist. Sometimes I wonder who he thinks he is.”

Eva had no defense for that.

As dinner ended, I couldn’t wait to leave. By then, Devin and Rafe had antagonized each other over proposed car modifications, the validity of sand traps to slow cars, and the issue of team orders—Rafe for and Devin opposed.

“Let’s go before you two kill each other,” I said, grabbing Devin’s arm.

We headed back to the penthouse. I drove while Devin complained about Rafe.

“Does he always think he’s right?”

“Always.”

“He’s bloody insufferable.”

I parked the car in the hotel’s underground garage. When we got to our room, Devin threw himself onto the bed and switched on the television. As I got ready for bed, he found a sports channel and watched all the results from the day. I changed into my pajamas and climbed into bed next to Devin. While he watched TV, I texted Jess to update her on the situation. While we spoke, Devin motioned that he was taking a shower.

I had hoped Jess would come to LA, but she was happier staying in London and spending time with her new investment-banker boyfriend. Not even the promise of gossip, including the breakup of Blake Carlton’s engagement to his actress girlfriend, could sway Jess, even when I pointed out he’d be at the charity race, and she could get some gossip.

When Devin came back into the bedroom, he was wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. He rifled through his suitcase as beads of water slid down his chest.

“Seeing you like that is a real turn-on,” I said.

He looked up from the suitcase and smiled bashfully. “Aww, come on.”

“I think you’d better come to bed right this minute.”

“I’m not a machine, Luna. I’m only a man.”

“Do you think so?”

He jumped on the bed and began to nibble on my neck while one of his hands slipped down my pajamas and inside my panties. Damn, I was

instantly wet for him. He was so good at sex. He knew every trick and all the spots that would make me writhe beneath him, on top of him, you name it. My heart would blip just at the thought of us making love. How had I missed out on this for so long?

“Even though you’re wearing the least sexy pajamas I’ve ever seen, I’m ready to get you undressed.”

“It’s all about comfort,” I said as he pulled off my top and threw it on the floor. He pinched one nipple before tackling the other. My breath hitched as my hands snaked down to pull at his towel.

With my pajamas on the floor, along with his towel, he slid two fingers into me, and I arched into him. He found the spot, the spot that made my toes curl, and within seconds, a powerful orgasm was building. Shit, it had happened so fast. He hadn’t even given me a chance to get my bearings.

“How should I torture you tonight?” he murmured in my ear.

“Any way you want.”

The devilish look in his eyes made my heart blip. In an instant, he had me pulled to the end of the bed. With one sudden movement, he was inside me to the hilt. My body took a moment to accept the sudden invasion. A strangled moan left my lips as he let me adjust to him. Then the teasing began. He gently rubbed my clit, just the way I liked it. When he saw my breath quicken with another rising orgasm, he suddenly stopped. The torture had begun.

“I’m going to fuck you nice and slow,” he said, resting his elbows on either side of my head. He kissed me softly as he slowly thrust into me. I tried to lean into him, but each time I did, he’d withdraw from me.

“Harder,” I said breathlessly.

He laughed at this. “I think I’ll decide how we do this.”

Damnit. I did the only thing I knew I could do, and something Jess had told me: I clamped down on him. I would start and stop until I knew it was driving him to distraction. That left him few options. He could try to ignore the sensation, he could pull his cock out of me, or he could give me the pounding I desired. To my luck, option three was the one he chose.

As he picked up the pace, I joined in with the thrusts, as best I could with the way he had me pinned beneath him. When he resumed playing with my clit, I couldn’t hold back. I came undone and he slammed into me those final few times.

“You don’t play fair, Ms. Perez,” he said, kissing me gently on the forehead.

“I’ve learned a few tricks of my own.”

“I look forward to discovering everything you know.”

* * *

The next morning we made it out of the hotel without anyone bothering us. As we drove up to the track, photographers crowded around the car to snap pictures of us. Devin stuck his tongue out at a few photographers, and I caught his hand before he could give them the finger. Slowly, we were allowed to pass, and security quickly escorted us inside.

“Devin, please,” I said in a placating tone.

“I’m only having fun.”

“Not at the event to honor my father, you aren’t.”

As we made our way to one of the many hospitality tents, we passed Blake Carlton. I hadn’t really met him and had only seen him in passing a few times. He nodded at Devin passively, but he took a longer look at me. Did he finally realize who I was? Carlton was a superstar and a racing god, and while he was on friendly terms with Rafe, not once had he made an effort to say anything to me. To be fair, neither had I.

He blue eyes fixed on me, and I could see why women loved him. Those eyes were set off by his dark hair, chiseled jaw, and megawatt smile. Even though he was in his mid-thirties, he was still a racing powerhouse, although the previous year had been very close, and he’d barely scraped by to win the racing championship.

“This is killing him,” Devin said as Carlton passed.

He jarred me from my thoughts. “Sorry, what?”

“He gets dumped by his fiancée, and here we are getting all the attention. The guy is an asshole, anyway.”

I didn’t have time to mull that over, because Lou Alvarado, head of the Perez Foundation, quickly took us aside. He had been a trusted friend to my father for years. They’d gone to school together as kids.

“We need you and Devin to pose for some publicity shots. I know you said you didn’t want to be the center of attention, but quite frankly, you *are* the center of attention this year. As a matter of fact, in the last few days, we’ve sold out this venue, which is almost unheard of.”

Devin and I looked at each other, and he nodded. “I suppose we can pose

for some shots,” I said.

While many of the other drivers and participants had yet to arrive, Devin and I were whisked around the track to pose for photographers.

“Can you take off your sunglasses Mr. Flynn?” one photographer asked.

“No,” was the simple answer.

“How do you like Los Angeles?” another asked.

“I don’t,” he replied. “I just like the beautiful California women.”

He was being droll. I would have preferred him to be quiet and just smile. I could already see the headlines and hoped my grandmother would miss them.

“Enough pictures. Luna and Devin have to prepare for the race,” one of the event coordinators said.

It hadn’t been so bad. But that was just the start of it. Next, we attended an autograph session where whatever drivers who had already arrived were signing anything and everything fans had brought along. The lineup for Devin’s autograph was by far the longest, infuriating the likes of Blake Carlton and Hans Lauder. I couldn’t help but notice how many times Carlton glanced over. The two best drivers in the world had the limelight taken away from them by what they probably perceived as an average driver. Devin, on the other hand, basked in the attention. I watched in amusement as young women asked politely if he would have their picture taken with them. Devin refused no one.

Erich finished up his autograph session and took the opportunity to speak to me alone while Devin was occupied with various women wanting a photo with him. Erich put his arm through mine as we strolled down pit lane. Something about him seemed off, but I couldn’t place it.

“Flynn is the life of the party,” Erich said humorlessly.

“Are you surprised? He relishes the attention.”

Erich nodded but seemed to have other things on his mind. “I went to see your grandmother last night.”

“You did?” I asked with surprise. A fleeting thought passed through my head. My grandmother would be furious that Erich had taken the time to visit, while I hadn’t bothered to bring Devin to the house. I knew there would be consequences, and I’d have to rectify that quickly.

“She asked me all about Flynn.”

“And you lied and told her he was a saint?”

Erich chuckled. “I stretched the truth, but your grandmother knows an

awful lot about him already.”

“Well, Rafe is her informant. And her favorite.”

“She was wondering why you hadn’t brought Devin over.”

Damn. There would definitely be consequences now.

“Unlike you, he wasn’t able to get a few extra days off. He’s been doing a lot of testing along with your test-driver.”

Erich shrugged. “When he can drive like me, he can have the extra days off.”

And that had me thinking. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something. You used to drive in the lower circuits with Devin, right?”

Erich laughed as if it brought back some pleasant memories. “I most certainly did,” he said with a huge smile. “Only a year, though. Your brother would have more memories.”

“What’s with the big smile?” I asked with a narrowed gaze.

“Nothing,” he said, the smile imprinted on his face.

“Now you have me curious. What did he do?”

“Lots of things, but I’m sure you wouldn’t find them humorous.”

I ignored the innuendo there. “Come on, what do you remember about those days?”

“I remember that I was pretty good and Flynn was pretty bad.”

I didn’t like the way Erich was gloating. “He must have been good to make it to this level of racing.”

“Fine, he was good. It was his car that was bad. Very bad.”

Devin joined us then. He had escaped the frenzied autograph seekers. “What are you two gossiping about?” he asked as we walked into one of the garages. Devin’s voice was tight, and now I was on alert. What was going on?

“You in your glamour days,” Erich said.

“My glamour days?” Devin was thoroughly confused.

“Back when we raced in the English circuits together.”

Devin’s face turned a light shade of red. If looks could kill, Erich would have been dead and buried.

“Am I missing something here?” I asked in frustration.

Erich maintained his smile. “You missed a lot. I should be getting to my new teammate,” he said and gave Devin a pat on the shoulder. “Have fun.”

“He is such a son of a bitch,” Devin spat as we walked back toward our garage. There had been a last-minute change for the teams. I’d gotten myself

paired with Devin instead of Erich Riedl. It turned out that it didn't hurt to know the race organizers. Erich was now teamed up with a beautiful Brazilian model.

"What did he do?" I asked, almost running to keep up with Devin's quick pace.

"Like you don't know," Devin said angrily.

"I don't know."

Devin stopped. "This isn't funny, Luna. Of all people, I didn't expect this from you."

I was more confused than ever. "Devin, please, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"I'm sure Riedl told you the minute he had the chance."

"Now you're worrying me. Told me what?"

Devin tilted his head to one side. "You really don't know?"

"No, but I really want to."

"I'll tell you later. For now, we have a race to win."

* * *

The model was heartbroken to learn that Erich was both married and not the least bit interested in her. For me, it was further proof to those who didn't believe it that Devin and I were serious. The press was quick to embrace us, even though secretly many didn't feel Devin Flynn was worthy of my love. In one online rant, the author had even gone to the trouble of publishing photos of Devin's previous girlfriends. When I had told him about it, he'd taken my phone to look at the pictures.

"Hated her," he said, pointing to a young blonde. He then proceeded to give a brief history of the rest. "She was dumb, she was weird, she liked guns, go figure. She was a junkie, she was too tall, she was too short, she was throwing up after meals. I don't even remember her name. She was a pain in the ass, she was too French, she always complained, she was too religious, and she made me sick."

"Quite a history."

"They missed a few."

Devin and I walked toward our race car. We leaned up against the garage door and talked strategy. I'd drive the first twenty laps and give Riedl and the

others a run for their money. The idea was to stay as close to him as I could since all the other professional drivers had chosen to drive the second leg of the race. Once the Brazilian model took over, there would be no hope for Team Riedl, and if I could build a lead on all the other drivers, once Devin took over, it would be smooth sailing.

“You really want to win, don’t you?” I said.

“You’d better believe it! This may be my only chance to beat Riedl.”

The race was on the track named after my father. As expected, Riedl pulled out in front. I managed to keep him in my sights for a few laps before he pulled away, but I wasn’t worried. All the other amateur drivers had lagged so far behind that they mounted no challenge. Devin tried to help but he seriously got on my nerves in the passenger seat. His unwanted comments and pointers were beginning to grate. I eventually asked him politely to shut up or I’d kick him out of the car while it was still moving.

“I need to concentrate,” I said, “not listen to you.”

We pitted on the twentieth lap at which time we changed places. Riedl’s lead was over a minute, but it didn’t take Devin long to catch the Brazilian model. Meanwhile, the rest of the pack had fallen so far behind that there was no chance for Harris, Carlton, Lauder, Collins, or my brother to catch up. Devin and I won the race by over a two minutes, the first time a Perez had won the race since my parents had won just a few months before my father’s death.

Photographers mobbed us as we struggled to get to the stage for the trophy presentation. Uncle Roberto was waiting there, cane in hand, beaming. Rafe even made his way over to hug me and shake Devin’s hand. It had been a long time since a Perez had graced the podium.

“Good driving,” my uncle said, hugging me and presenting me with the small plaque.

I held it up high as the crowd cheered wildly. Even Devin applauded me. Thousands of fans had flocked to the track in hopes of rubbing shoulders with some of the greatest drivers in the world, but at that moment, all of their eyes were on me. Somehow, Devin had managed to secure a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork and proceeded to soak me. He then swept me up in his arms and swung me around to the delight of the crowd.

After the celebration, we stayed for hours to sign autographs. People wanted my autograph, and I couldn’t believe it. When had I become someone interesting? With the day over, I thought I’d be exhausted, but I was wide

awake as we climbed into the hotel elevator. Occasionally, I'd remember Devin's agitation from earlier in the day, and now it wouldn't leave my thoughts.

"About this afternoon, are you going to tell me why you got so upset?" I asked.

"It was nothing," Devin said.

I wasn't going to take that for an answer. "You know I'll find out one way or another."

"You do that," Devin said as we entered our room.

He wasn't mad at me, but his reaction was curiously blank. But I would find out. He could count on that.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Luna

After saying goodbye to Devin at the airport, I scheduled my own flight to Milan to pick up all the dresses from Uncle Dario. As I climbed into an Uber, my phone rang. I expected it to be Devin and didn't bother to check the caller ID. My first mistake. My second was answering the call.

"Hello, gorgeous."

"Hello, gorgeous? Is that how you answer the phone?"

"Oh, hi, Mom. I expected it to be Devin."

"Obviously."

I kicked myself for answering. "What can I do for you?"

"You could explain to me why you didn't bring Devin to meet your grandmother."

I cringed. I knew what a huge mistake it was not to bring him to meet my grandmother, but it didn't feel right. Devin and I were new to this relationship thing, and forcing him on my grandmother didn't seem fair, not that we had much extra time for visiting anyway. "There really wasn't any time. He was only in California for a few days, and we were so busy."

"Did you explain that to Sylvia?"

"Well, no."

"I had to listen to your grandmother complain for over an hour. She wanted to know why Erich found time to visit, but Devin couldn't find a few hours. And to think, Luna, the two of you stayed less than two hours away. You should have known better."

"I thought she would understand." Even though I knew that wasn't true and I was a jerk for not visiting.

"I think you owe her an apology."

“I’ll call her.”

I made sure not to make that same mistake twice. I was thankful Mom had nothing else to scold me about, and then it hit me as I hung up. Mom hadn’t congratulated me for winning the Perez Classic.

I had other things to worry about. I set out back to Milan to pick up my uncle’s latest creations before leaving for London the following day. All the shuttling around left me exhausted, but soon I’d be stationed in Europe for a while, with short trips rather than trans-Atlantic ones.

“You look gorgeous,” my uncle said as I tried on each dress. Only two needed some minor alterations.

“Thank you. These are beautiful.”

“I’ll send out the rest once they are finished. And if I have to, I can come see you if you need any further alterations.”

“You’ve been so good to me,” I said, giving my uncle the biggest hug.

“And you’ve always been special to me. I’m so glad to see you happy.”

After a spending the day with my uncle, I was off to London the next morning. Rafe had meetings for me to attend and a potential English beverage company to woo for any kind of sponsorship deal. And then, like my life wasn’t busy enough, Devin had a dinner he wanted me to attend. When he brought it up, I’d assumed it was to meet his family, but no. I wasn’t sure if I should be hurt, but then, I’d skipped bringing him to meet my grandmother. Neither of us wanted to force the other on our families.

Now that he was no longer a single man—or a playboy—he wanted to show off the woman in his life. He also liked to flaunt me in front of Russo and all the sponsors. To my surprise, I didn’t mind. I appreciated how invested in our relationship he was. The dinner party was in Milan, close to Russo’s headquarters, and was with one of Russo’s biggest sponsors.

So I had another evening flight that got me in just in time to crawl into bed. The next day, after a lazy breakfast and some yoga, I went to have my hair and makeup done. The party was earlier than I would have expected, with a lot of mingling expected before dinner. I got back to Devin’s, and when I slipped into my dress, I felt like a princess. The dress was charcoal in color, with shiny beaded sequins and a full skirt. My uncle had expertly picked out jewelry to match, and my curls were pinned up in a high bun.

“You look gorgeous,” Devin said.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling my cheeks warm at the compliment.

“Now, we better get out of here. We have a scene to make.”

Devin hired a limousine for the occasion. As we drove to the Gallo Petrol party, I collapsed onto the plush seat. The party was in one of the ritziest hotels in Milan. Gallo spared no expense, which pleased the people at Russo. Russo was expected to have a banner year with Gallo backing them. I only wished Perez had that much support from Vallenta, our petrol provider.

The party was boring, but as I had discovered about Devin, he talked to everyone at events like this. No matter how big or small, he had a way of making a people feel like they were the center of attention. I thought of how Erich and Rafe both acted, speaking only to those important to them. Even now, Erich fought a frown as he mingled across the room.

A particular incident drove the difference in their attitudes home to me. I was chatting with Monica when an elderly gentleman who had been invited by Gallo to the party, asked to meet Erich. He told us he'd worked for Gallo his entire life, and his only wish was to hobnob with the Russo racing team. Monica and I beamed at him, and she beckoned her husband over from the bar. She introduced the man to Erich, who barely spoke to him. He barely cracked a smile. It was so clear that he found this interaction to be an annoyance, and the first chance he got, he rudely excused himself. The older fellow looked heartbroken.

I hadn't realized that Devin was watching the same spectacle. He walked toward the man and introduced himself. The man smiled and shook Devin's hand. They spoke for over twenty minutes. Devin managed to look interested and engaged the entire time. One of the Gallo people took a picture of the two of them together, and Devin excused himself—politely.

"That was nice of you," I said, sipping a glass of red wine.

"What was nice?" he asked, completely oblivious.

"I saw what you did for that man. Does Erich normally treat people that badly?"

Devin sighed. His face tensed and the lines around his mouth appeared. "Yes."

"I didn't know he could be such an asshole."

"You said it, not me," Devin said, looking off into the crowd.

And that was when I sensed it. His reluctance to take credit for a kind gesture, and more importantly, his unwillingness even to talk about the good things he did. To talk about anything really important.

"Why don't you talk to me?" I said, touching his face so that he would look at me.

“I’m always talking to you. I’m talking to you right now.”

“Not when it comes to things like Erich and the team.”

“It’s better that way.”

“I tell you everything.”

He turned to me now with the most serious expression. “This isn’t the place to discuss this,” Devin said, looking away from me again.

I let the subject drop. The wine and the night were both taking a toll on me. My feet were throbbing, and all I wanted to do was sit down. It was only nine thirty, and the party was far from over. What did surprise me was the warm reception I’d received. If I’d expected a cold shoulder from everyone on the Russo team, it didn’t happen. They were all more than friendly to me. I was no threat to the team, and they knew it.

Rafe had been right: Russo was more interested in what Devin was telling me rather than what I could do to them. The Perez team was no match for Russo, Merrick, and all the other top teams.

By the end of the evening I was dead on my feet. I was constantly yawning and quickly covering my mouth to hide the fact. I fell asleep on the way home, and Devin carried me into the house. He helped me get out of my clothes before I fell into bed. Within minutes I was fast asleep.

* * *

It was raining when I woke up the next morning. Devin was lying next to me, wide awake and staring at the ceiling.

“Good morning,” I said, turning on my side and gazing at him intently.

“It’s a shitty morning. Rain is expected all day.”

“How long have you been up?”

“About an hour. I was watching you sleep.”

“Did I look sexy?”

The comment made him laugh. I loved to see him laugh. His face had a way of making something seem funnier than it was.

He put his arms around me and held me close. “You always look sexy.”

“Why are you upset this morning?” I asked, playing with his hair. It curled in certain places, but not in others.

“Testing didn’t go well.”

“You didn’t tell me that before.”

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

“What went wrong?”

“The team wasn’t impressed with my times.”

“That’s not so bad.”

“That wasn’t all. I got a warning from Leonardo about us.”

A sudden chill gripped me. A warning from the team’s owner was never a good sign. “What did he say?”

“I won’t repeat everything, but let’s just say that we have to be very careful both in public and in private.”

“How so?”

“He said he didn’t care who I was with, in general, but he did care that it was a member of another team. Basically, if he thinks that Perez is getting information they shouldn’t have, I’m finished completely. He promised that no other team would even want me around to clean cars.”

“Devin,” I said, caressing his cheek, “I’m going to tell you something about me. When I love a person, I’m loyal to that person. Whatever you tell me in confidence stays between the two of us. I would never betray you. I would expect the same from you.”

The word had slipped so casually from my lips. Love? I stared at Devin’s face, waiting for a reaction, but there wasn’t one. Maybe he hadn’t noticed, and I’d get out of this unscathed.

“They aren’t going to make it easy for us.”

“I guess we’ll find out in Australia in two weeks.”

“I have something for you,” he said, leaning over the side of the bed. He pulled something from under the bed and presented it to me. It was a box wrapped in gold paper with a huge bow.

“What’s this’?”

“Happy birthday, Ms. Perez. My love.”

Oh. He had caught it. And he hadn’t cared. I bubbled with excitement. I hadn’t realized he knew when my birthday was. I tore the wrapping from the box and found a silver watch inside. It was the women’s version of the watch Devin always wore. The watches were sought after, and there was a waiting list a mile long to own one. Devin was the only person I knew who had the famed Zone watch.

“How the hell did you get this? Rafe can’t get his hands on one of these.”

“I have connections. Do you like it?”

“I love it,” I said, putting it on. I knew the watch must have set him back

several thousands of dollars. “I’m going to be the envy of everyone.”
Devin smiled. “That’s the idea.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Luna

I arrived in Melbourne on Tuesday with Rafe and Carlos Boreno. I made sure I was in my Wheaton clothes, the ones Alexander had sent me specifically for the first race weekend. I also wore my new watch, which immediately caught Rafe's eye as we drove to our hotel.

"Is that a Zone watch?"

"It is," I said with an over-the-top smile.

"How did you get one of those?"

"Devin gave it to me for my birthday," I said as we entered the hotel.

"How did *Flynn* get one?" he said, unable to hide the irritation from his voice.

"I don't know."

"Do you know how much those things cost? He must really love you."

The hint of disbelief in his voice irritated me. "Rafe, you can be a real ass sometimes."

I hated the choice of our hotel. It wasn't close to the track, and it wasn't the hotel Devin was staying in. That wouldn't happen again. I'd barely put my small luggage down when Rafe texted to tell me that we had a meeting with Carlos, Pedro, and their racing engineers in his hotel room. So much for a moment of relaxation.

I listened as they droned on about racing conditions. Something about a chance of rain despite the sunshine and unbelievable heat. Rafe loved the rain; his best finishes had been in wet conditions. He'd been compared to our father when he raced in the rain. Both of their driving was considered sheer brilliance.

I kept looking at my new watch, which annoyed Rafe. "Where do you

have to go?" he asked, his eyes sending subtle daggers.

"Nowhere," I lied.

I couldn't fathom why I had to sit in on the meeting. I had nothing to do with race conditions. And I knew Devin would be arriving any minute. We'd planned to meet in my hotel lobby and spend the day together, likely our only chance all weekend.

"Next order of business, your interview with Jane Edwards," Rafe said, handing me a sheet of paper. "After discussions with Juan and Andre, these are instructions on what you are not to tell her. She likes to dig around, and if you want your little boyfriend to keep his job, you'll be careful what you say to Jane."

I scanned the brief, wondering why I hadn't been included in that little meeting. I wasn't supposed to mention the Russo team by name. I was also not to discuss what the Russo team would or wouldn't be doing. Any mention of Devin Flynn was to be only of a personal nature. Finally, I was to make it clear that Devin and I never discussed our respective teams with each other.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" I said, throwing the paper onto the table.

"No, I just want to make sure you don't make any mistakes. Take the paper," he said, shoving it into my hand.

I snatched it from him. "Well, gentlemen, if that's all, I think I'm going to go find my little boyfriend."

I left Rafe's hotel room and made my way down to the lobby. I was wearing a stylish pair of Lucrezia sneakers that went well with my Wheaton black skirt and polo shirt. I would call the Lucrezia representative in the morning to send me another pair of the sneakers. At Jess's suggestion, I'd already taken the look to social media and was pleasantly surprised by the results. People liked my look! And they'd started following me en masse. I supposed that adding the pictures of Devin hadn't hurt.

I settled into one of the plush seats in the lobby. I dreaded the idea of going outside and into the extreme heat. What I loved most about London and our family home in California was that it wasn't extremely hot or cold. In London, I simply had to contend with the rain, and if it became unbearable, I would go to Santa Barbara for a break.

I caught sight of Devin coming through the revolving door. It had been five days since I'd seen him last. I jumped out of my seat and went straight toward him. He lifted me into his arms and kissed me hard.

"I've missed you," he said in between kisses.

“It’s really hot out there, so why don’t we just spend the day in my air-conditioned room?”

“I can’t wait.”

* * *

During the practice session the next afternoon, I caught the action from the Perez pits. As usual, Rafe’s times were slower than any of the four top teams. I watched the other teams on the monitors, hoping no one would notice that I was watching Devin’s lap times very closely, when I should have been watching Rafe’s just as closely. Devin looked good on the track, and that was promising for Sunday.

Tanya broke my concentration. “Jane is here. She wants an interview.”

Right. My first foray into shark-infested waters this season. I took one last look at the monitors. Devin had one of the fastest times, but it meant little. Many of the other cars weren’t driving to their full potential: some on fuller tanks than others, some on new tires, others on old ones. Friday never seemed to count for anything.

I thanked Tanya and smiled, but she didn’t smile back. Something was definitely going on. She wasn’t the type to be jealous, but she did have opinions. A lot of them, and she’d always made it known that she had little respect for Devin. If this was going to be a problem—Devin and me together—then maybe she needed to move on. I couldn’t have someone potentially undermining me. But that was on the back burner for now.

“Hello, Jane,” I said as I entered the conference room. It was empty, and I knew that wasn’t a good thing. Now it would be easier for her to attempt to pry information from me. We shook hands and sat at one of the tables.

“Congratulations on landing Devin Flynn,” Jane said with a smile.

“Jane, we’re here to talk about my team, not my love life.”

“All right, first we talk business, then we’ll talk off the record.”

“Suit yourself,” I said with a playful roll of my eyes.

“The team looks to improve over last year. What happened over the winter?”

I appreciated the easy questions first. “An improved engine, a gearbox that shouldn’t malfunction. I think this is going to be a good year for us. I’m predicting a victory in at least a few races this year.”

“I see Pedro Martinez has signed on for the year. There were rumors he would be leaving.”

Hmm, I would have to look into this. It was news to me. “Pedro was never going anywhere.”

“If you had to pick a world champion, who would you want it to be?”

“Rafe Perez.”

Jane smirked. “That’s a safe answer.”

“Did you expect me to pick someone besides my brother?”

Jane shrugged. “I suppose not. But now that you’re dating Devin Flynn ... does he give you all the Russo secrets when you have him between the sheets?”

I was disgusted with the question. I expected better from Jane. “First of all, what makes you think I’ve seen the sheets?”

Jane’s eyes narrowed. “Off the record, then. Does he tell you about Russo?”

“On the record, never,” I said with conviction. “We are both professionals, and we’d never divulge anything like that to each other.”

“You know, I should take full credit for this union. I was the one who introduced the two of you.”

“If we ever have children, we’ll name our firstborn after you.”

The interview concluded, and I returned to the pits. Devin was no longer on the track, but Pedro was, and I felt compelled to watch. He looked nervous, or perhaps the heat was getting to him. Or maybe the rumors that he’d been planning to bail were making him nervous.

Tanya watched with me, and we commented on his style. Really, I wanted to see where her loyalties were. If she had a beef with me, I needed to know why or at least gather some intel first.

“Did you hear something about Pedro not wanting to sign with us for next year?” I asked the question casually, hoping Tanya would notice that as a one-third team owner, I didn’t know the answer to my question.

“As far as what I’ve heard, it’s the other way around. I’m assuming Rafe hasn’t said anything?”

Her tone was pleasant, at least more so than it had been in a long time. More importantly, she had my interest piqued. “Rafe didn’t want to re-sign him? This is the first I’ve heard about it.”

Tanya frowned. “You should probably talk to your brother.”

“But I’m asking you. And you seem to have information.”

She sighed heavily. “Rumor has it that Rafe has been chatting with Blake Carlton. It would be a huge step down for Carlton, so I don’t see it happening, but that’s what’s going around.”

I furrowed my brows. Blake Carlton? The racing god would not drive with our underdog team. I was dismissing it outright, but then I thought of the way he’d looked at me at the Perez Classic. Was he sizing me up for a change?

With the session over, I was thankful to escape the intense heat. I was certain I’d have to peel off my clothes later. I looked forward to a cold shower and assumed I would have the evening to myself, but Rafe insisted on dinner together. I wondered if he was trying to keep me from Devin. I wouldn’t put it past him. I took the opportunity to ask about Carlton.

“About that,” Rafe said.

My eyes opened wide. “Go on.”

“It’s really very preliminary talk. That’s why I haven’t mentioned anything. Blake and I have talked a few times, but he’s bound to Roche at least another year. I suppose people saw him and I together and started rumors. If it ever leads to more serious talk, I promise to have you involved in it.”

I was so confused. “Why would Blake want to sign with us? He’s a world champion with a top team.”

“He’s nearing the end of his career. He sees the potential of staying with our team in some other capacity when his driving career is over, and I think he’d be an asset.”

“So there is a possibility of him signing with us for next year? Some kind of last hurrah?”

Rafe refused to look at me directly. I knew my answer. Pedro was likely on his way out.

“Yes, maybe.”

“Yes, for sure.”

He shrugged a yes.

I had no idea what this meant for us. Probably huge things. I thought about this as I met up with Devin in his hotel room. I knew I couldn’t tell him anything about it, even though I wanted to. I found Devin lying on his bed when I walked in. He looked exhausted and barely lifted his head when he saw me. He waved pathetically.

“You look like hell,” I said.

“It was so fucking hot,” he said with a sigh. “Over a hundred degrees on the track. I just couldn’t stay hydrated.”

“You looked great, though. Good times.”

“Erich kicked my ass afterward. He had the fastest lap.”

“You held your own.”

“He also has the better car.”

I climbed into the bed next to him. “Do you think so?”

“I know so. They couldn’t give a shit about me. Erich’s their golden goose. I’m just the lackey.”

“And a very handsome one at that,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiled but had the energy to do nothing else.

“Do you want me to go?” I asked, touching his hand. “If you’re tired, you should sleep.”

“I’m not tired. I just feel like crap.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“No, I should feel better soon.”

He fell asleep moments later. I slipped out of his room and walked back to my hotel, relieved that the evening had cooled somewhat. Even though we would see each other at every race, I wondered what kind of time we were going to be able to spend with one another. On race weekends he had his commitments, and I had mine. In the end, I saw very little of him. But then I thought of Blake Carlton. What would I do about him?

* * *

I barely saw Devin on Saturday. That was qualifying day, and he had to stick close to Davide, Russo’s chief racing engineer. I spent the day watching another practice session in which Devin drove well, but not like he had on Friday. Rafe had a few strong laps and was happy with the progress of the car.

For qualifiers, it was the hottest day on record for Melbourne in March. A few members of different pit crews passed out from the extreme heat. I found the heat unbearable. I didn’t envy the racers in all their gear. Kevin Harris of the Sinclair team almost fainted from the heat after his qualifying session. He was brought over to see the track doctor who had confirmed the obvious: he had heatstroke.

By the time the host party rolled around that evening, I was tired, irritable, and missing Devin. He was still feeling ill after the qualifiers and was being looked at by one of the Russo medical personnel. I thought to give him the recipe for a hydration drink that I'd created. After my long runs, I'd found the perfect beverage concoction to combat dehydration and fatigue. Rafe would be furious if I passed on my secret recipe, but it was for a good cause.

I went to the reception alone, which surprised a few people. I didn't understand why they were so shocked. Devin and I weren't joined at the hip. Despite that, people were already whispering that something had gone wrong. I ignored the gossip. They just needed to talk about something, and Devin and I were still the hot topic of conversation.

"This race tomorrow is going to take its toll on the drivers," Tanya commented.

We sat at the Perez team table watching some of the weary-looking drivers wandering in and out of the banquet room.

"I thought there was rain in the forecast," I said.

"Apparently, now they're expecting a sunny and hot day."

I waited and checked her phone, but I didn't hear from Devin, and he didn't make it to the banquet. He texted me just as I was getting into bed to say that he was exhausted. I sent a quick reply.

I'm going to send something over. DO NOT SHARE IT.

What is it?

You ask too many questions! I'm giving you a recipe. Get someone at Russo to make it up for you.

I sent over a screenshot of my hydration drink.

What the hell is it?

Something that's going to keep you alive tomorrow.

* * *

I was in the pits early the next morning. I prepared Rafe's drinks, something

Rafe had insisted on when he'd learned years ago of my secret concoction that now wasn't so secret. Next, I met with Juan. I was merely his assistant and did what he couldn't or didn't want to do, but I took my job seriously. We discussed the race and any interviews that needed to be done. Race day itself was always quiet in comparison to the Friday and Saturday before a race. After my briefing with Juan, I sat next to Carlos Boreno in front of the race monitors. I liked to be a part of all the action, and Carlos liked to have me there.

Rafe had done well in Saturday's qualifying and was tenth on the grid. Pedro Martinez placed a respectable fourteenth. The real story was Devin's impressive fourth-place time. He'd never finished that high on the grid. I contained my excitement as his blue-and-red car pulled out onto the track for the race warm-up.

"Your boyfriend did well yesterday," Carlos said casually.

"I must be a good influence on him."

"Try not to be such a good influence," he said with a chuckle.

I smiled to myself. I knew my relationship with Devin reminded Carlos of my mother and father. If pressed, he'd tell me the stories that led to my mother and father getting married. His eyes still welled up with tears when he thought of the late Marco Perez.

The drivers positioned their cars on the grid. The roar of the engines was almost deafening. Finally, the lights went out and the race began. On the first corner Pedro collided with a Knight car and was sent into the gravel. His race was over before it began, and he slammed his fist on his steering wheel in frustration. The race went without a hitch for several laps. Rafe managed to move up to seventh place by the time he pitted on the thirty-third lap. Devin was also doing well. He'd moved into third place behind the previous year's world champion, American Blake Carlton. Only the two Merrick cars were ahead of him, that of Hans Lauder, the German favored to win the world championship, and Irishman Andy Collins.

The Roche team had lost its chief engine supplier, Dudone, and were now relying on less-powerful engines. It would be a struggle for Carlton to go after the world championship. But he couldn't be discounted either as one of the best drivers in the world.

By lap fifty-four, Devin was firmly in third place. Erich had suffered a terrible pit stop when one of the mechanics couldn't remove a tire in a timely fashion and now found himself in fifth place. If Carlton hadn't been

sandwiched between the two Russo cars, I knew that Devin would have had to let Erich pass him. It was in his contract.

Rafe, driving the race of his life, finished in sixth position and in the points. Any racing points we could get would be coveted, especially with the current ranking system. Only the top six teams and drivers in each race were awarded points based on the place they finished. And when the end of the season came, the higher we were, the more money the federation doled out.

The car had run better than it ever had, and everyone in the Perez pits cheered. Tanya and I went to see the trophy presentation. Devin was ecstatic at receiving his third-place trophy and waved it triumphantly to the crowd. It was a rare podium appearance for him. He caught sight of me and blew me a kiss. As a nearby camera focused on me, I clapped my hands and put both thumbs up.

I followed the drivers to the post-race press conference. Rafe came, too, and we stood next to each other as a journalist asked questions. Devin, Hans Lauder, and Andy Collins sat at the head table. Devin was the only one full of energy. Hans Lauder was asked about the race. He answered in his usual boring manner. Though a great driver, he was terrible in interviews.

The Irishman was somewhat more interesting and even joked about the weather being cooler than he would have preferred.

“Devin, tell us how the race went for you?” an English reporter asked.

Devin put down the water he’d been drinking. “Fabulous. The car wasn’t acting up at all. When I passed Carlton, I knew I had a great chance for a podium finish.”

“What about the heat? Was it a factor?”

“On Friday and Saturday, I thought I was going to melt in the bloody car. But today I focused on hydration,” he said, winking at me.

The press conference concluded and Devin went straight to me. He picked me up and swung me around.

“I love you,” he shouted for all to hear.

“You smell like a fuel tank,” I said.

Rafe chuckled. He rarely showed that he had a sense of humor. He shook Devin’s hand once he had placed me back on the ground. I prayed Devin didn’t mention the drink to Rafe.

“We’ll go to a pub tonight,” Devin said. “Drinks on me.”

“I’d love to, Flynn, but I have a flight out of here this evening. Take my sister.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Luna

Devin and I flew together to Long Beach two weeks later for the next race. I expected the California race to be an adventure. Many racing reporters still weren't convinced that we were together. They suspected it was a clever marketing tactic cooked up by Rafe with Devin as the witless accomplice. I was deeply hurt, although I tried not show it.

I wanted Devin to meet my grandmother, and Rafe's wife and children. I wouldn't make the same mistake I'd made during the Perez Classic. Devin was excited at the prospect of a few days at our California house where I'd spent most of my younger years, thrilled to see where Marco Perez had lived. I often wondered if my dad would have liked Devin. I had asked Rosa the question. She said a very emphatic "No."

"I know you're interested in seeing the vineyards and house in Santa Barbara, but I need to warn you about something. Since I didn't bring you to meet my grandmother the last time we were in California, she expects us to spend all our time at the house. I'd really like the time alone and away from all this crap, but I'm afraid we will have no other choice."

"It doesn't sound too bad."

He had no idea.

A few photographers milled around the Santa Barbara airport, hoping to catch a glimpse of Devin and me together. We obliged them and posed for a few photos before climbing into a waiting car.

"I used to enjoy my privacy," he said with dejection as we drove to the house in an Uber. "I don't mind a picture once in a while, because I am a handsome guy, but enough is enough."

I found it comical that Devin took himself so seriously. Someone else

may have thought he was joking, but he meant every word. He did think he was handsome; there was absolutely no doubt of that in his mind. His ego had been further boosted when an English women's magazine had named him the sexiest race car driver. He had cut the article from out of the magazine and pinned it up in the Russo garage.

It was a warm afternoon when we walked through the front door. The children weren't home, but Rafe's wife, Eva, was there.

"Where is everyone?" I asked my sister-in-law.

"Rafe took the kids out for a ride. Your grandmother is in the garden."

"Great," I said. I took Devin's hand and led him outside.

"Your grandmother lives here with Rafe and his family?" Devin asked with surprise.

"Yes," I said, not realizing that Devin thought it was odd. "My dad had this house built for all of us, including my grandmother. I used to live here with my parents, Rafe, and my grandmother. But Rafe and Eva don't live here full time. They also live in Spain, close to testing locations, and occasionally in London. I stay here whenever I want."

My grandmother was tending to her flower garden. She was almost eighty years old, but she still had the energy to take care of her flowers and kick a person's ass if necessary. The slight woman, no taller than five feet, hugged me and smiled at Devin.

"Grandma, this is Devin Flynn. Devin, this is my grandmother, Sylvia."

He shook her hand, and Sylvia looked him up and down. "My grandson talks of you often," Sylvia said.

Her English was impeccable. She'd come to the United States from Mexico when she was fourteen and met Juan Perez, a second-generation American, in Santa Clarita.

"Good things, I hope."

"Not always," Sylvia said, patting Devin on the arm.

"Devin is going to stay here a few days. Is that all right, Grandma?" I asked, knowing the answer would be a definite yes.

"Yes, of course. I would love to have the company."

I smiled. It was my grandmother who controlled the Perez home. It would upset Rafe to know that Devin was staying with us a few days, but I didn't care. However, I knew there would be consequences. My grandmother was a fervent Catholic, and any notion that Devin and I would sleep in the same room was out of the question. I explained that to Devin as I showed him to

his room.

“I expected that,” he said.

“Unfortunately, we aren’t on our own.”

“It doesn’t mean we can’t fool around; we just have to be careful.”

* * *

Not long after, Rafe and the kids came home. My brother didn’t bother to hide his feelings about sharing his home with Devin. What Rafe didn’t know was that Devin didn’t care. He was oblivious to Rafe’s scowls.

I played a few games with the kids while Devin buttered up my grandmother. He was a smooth talker and easily charmed Grandma. He had her laughing in no time, and I couldn’t believe it. Now he had to win over my mother.

He went to bed early, as did I. The jet lag had begun to hit me. I sat in bed and listened to the sound of the trees blowing outside with their leaves gently hitting my window. As beautiful as our home was just outside Santa Barbara, I couldn’t wait to leave. I didn’t spend much time here anymore, and I understood why Mom moved us away after Dad died. There were too many memories. I often wondered how Rafe had adjusted to it. He’d never mentioned it, but that was so like him not to.

I ate breakfast with my grandmother. Devin was still sleeping and everyone else was gone. I was glad to spend time with her. I didn’t see her as often as I wanted to. When I was living in Montreal, I would spend breaks from school here. Sometimes I’d invite Elizabeth and Jess along. We loved those getaways.

“He’s a nice young man,” Grandma said in Spanish.

My heart warmed. “I love him.”

“Yes, I can see that. Parts of him remind me of your father.”

“A few people have said that. I don’t see it.”

“I don’t know him well enough to make any conclusions,” Grandma said.

I finished breakfast and went up to Devin’s room. I knocked on the door and when I heard nothing, I slowly opened it. He was asleep: sheets strewn all over the bed and floor. It must have been hot; he had taken off the shirt he liked to wear to bed and was only in his boxer shorts. I carefully shut the door behind me and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked peaceful.

His eyes opened to a slit. “I knew someone was staring at me,” he murmured.

“How did you sleep?”

“Not too badly,” he said, sitting up.

“I was thinking that after you have breakfast, we could take a walk? I can show you the grounds. Or we could take a swim in the pool.”

“Sounds very nice.”

He ate breakfast, and Grandma and I kept him company. He had more wild tales to tell—all of the PG variety—and then Grandma rose to say she wanted to tend to her greenhouse. She’d already planted most of this year’s garden, but it wasn’t yet time for her eggplants and sweet potatoes.

We changed into our swimsuits and went out to the pool. I jumped in, Devin on my heels. I swam around taunting Devin to try to catch me. He was a great swimmer and caught me easily. I wrapped my legs around his waist and stared into his sea-green eyes.

“When are we going to crash and burn?” I asked, caressing his cheek.

“Never.”

“My mom says that you remind her of my dad. So does my grandmother.”

“That’s quite an honor, but your father was never a jackass.”

“You always make me laugh,” I said with a giggle.

“It’s my nature, I’m afraid. I’m a lot like *my* dad.”

“I can’t wait to meet your parents.”

He blinked a few times. Had I said something wrong? It was an innocent enough question.

“Yes. We should make that happen. And you’d like my dad. I tell him about you all the time.”

“Did he always support you?”

“Yes, he loves cars. He’s the one who got me interested. Whenever I needed him, my dad was there.”

“I’m glad,” I said, feeling a wave of anguish come over me.

“Your dad didn’t leave you because he wanted to,” he whispered, picking up the direction of my thoughts. “It was an accident.”

“After he died, my mother cried every night for two years. I remember walking past her room and hearing her sob in her pillow. Isn’t it strange that I remember that, but not my dad’s smile?”

“You were small.”

“Rafe has a lot of memories. He and my dad were close. It was hard on him when Dad died, and I remember he made our mom’s life hell. It was almost as if he was blaming her for our father’s death. She had a nervous breakdown and started drinking. I think deep down that’s why she took me away from here and left Rafe behind with our grandmother. She just couldn’t handle him anymore. And I loved those years in Italy. They were the best, especially when Tony came into our lives.”

“It must have been a difficult period for you.”

“If I tell you something, do you promise to never tell it to another soul?”

“You have my word,” he said, staring into my eyes. He had to know I was growing sadder by the moment.

“I’ve never told anyone this, but when I was twelve, Mom and Tony had broken up. I was devastated. I was angry with my mother because I thought she’d left Tony and robbed me of a father again. I was walking in a blind rage and came across a creek that was a few miles from the house. I watched the water trickle down the rocks. I took off all my clothes and went into the water. It wasn’t very deep, but I just wanted to die.”

Devin gasped as tears began to well up in my eyes.

“I just didn’t want to live. I thought that if I died, I would finally be with my dad up in heaven, and I would have him all to myself.”

Devin closed his eyes. “Shit, Luna. What changed your mind?” he asked in a whisper.

“People who kill themselves don’t go to heaven. That’s what my grandma’s always said.”

He opened his mouth to speak but seemed to think better of it. “I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“It was a difficult time for me. I’d lost my dad, and then I was losing Tony. And I resented my mother so much for everything I’d been through. My brother had moved back to California, and it was like people were leaving me. But something got me through. I don’t know what. Maybe faith? Maybe the sting of my grandmother’s words. I think Mom sensed something because she found me a therapist. And that helped a lot. Slowly, things changed and they got better. I got better.”

We finished our swim, had lunch, then took a long walk through the vineyards. It was too early to see anything interesting, but he was fascinated all the same. Dusk had begun to set in as we sat outside and enjoyed the sunset. As strange as the day had been, I was glad I’d spent it with Devin.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Devin

After a mostly relaxing few days with Luna and her family, it was time to get back to the business of racing. The weather in Long Beach was a relief from the scorching conditions in Australia, but I still had my crew make up a supply of Luna's hydration drinks. The woman was a lifesaver. I was sipping on the drink prior to our drivers' briefing. When I walked in, Riedl was huddled with Rafe in some private discussion. Since our unfriendly moment in Manta, Erich been giving me the cold shoulder and barely speaking to me. I couldn't say I was bothered by that development.

What did catch me by surprise was Carlton sitting in the seat next to me. He had on a Roche baseball cap and hadn't shaved that morning. The scruff on his face was coming in gray in some spots. Shit! When had he gotten so old?

"Hello, Flynn."

"Cheers," I said. The guy never talked to me, and here he was looking for a chat? Definitely odd from the likes of him.

"I see you're dating Rafe's sister."

"Yeah, I am. Sorry about your engagement," I said, even though I wasn't sorry at all. Back in the day, Carlton was a huge playboy, but he had high standards. Only supermodels and A-list actresses. We'd all been a bit surprised when he'd finally gotten engaged, but then that went to shit.

"You two a real thing?"

I turned now to face him more. What an odd bloody thing to ask me. As if we were mates having a good chat. What a wanker. "It's the real thing. Why do you care?"

"I don't. Just curious."

He did care, otherwise he wouldn't be asking. Carlton didn't care about other people's relationships unless he wanted something. "Now that you're on the market again, you're going to sniff around other people's birds?" I tried to make it sound as if I were joking, though I really wasn't.

Carlton's facial expression didn't change. The man was unreadable, not that I was worried about the old man going after Luna.

"Like I said, Flynn, just curious why a woman like her would saddle herself with someone like you. Anyway, have a nice day."

Fucking asshole. The eighteen-year-old me would have punched him in the face, probably what he wanted me to do. Make a huge scene so he came out looking like the good guy, but that was the old me. I wasn't giving him the satisfaction, but at the same time, the conversation was unsettling. What did Carlton really want? It had to be something significant.

Collins eventually took Carlton's vacated seat, and we sat through the drivers' briefing, spending most of it scrolling through our phones. Those briefings were all the same. Rules, what to expect from the race weekend, what was expected from us as drivers, and so on. Just as it was ending, my parents' names popped up on my screen. How many times had I told them not to call me during the day on race weekends?

Once I was back at the Russo motorhome, I called them back. I thought of Gram's stroke last year. If anything was wrong with her, I wanted to know ASAP.

"Hey, Mum."

"Good, we reached you. Your father and I want to talk to you."

"Is it about Gram?"

"What? No. She's fine," Mum said absently. "It's about your new girlfriend."

For crying out loud, that was what they were calling about? "What about her?"

"Your father and I want to know when we're going to meet her."

If I had a choice, it would be never. If Mum got ahold of Luna, she'd spill every family detail, and I wasn't ready for that. "Soon."

"You said that the last time we asked. It's just that we have Paige for two weeks, and we thought it would be a good time."

I bristled at that. Definitely not a good time. "We'll see."

"That means no," Mum said. "I won't continue to take no for an answer."

"It means I'm busy right now. I'm at the beginning of a racing season."

“You’re in Sandrine all the time. We aren’t that far away.”

I sighed, wanting to throw my phone into the nearest toilet. “You will meet her soon.”

“I know you don’t like us to meet your girlfriends because they don’t stick around long, but you seem different about this one. That’s why I think it would be nice to have a family reunion.”

“Keep it up and I won’t ever come back.”

Of course, Mum was undeterred. “Remember your responsibilities. Your father and I have sacrificed for you.”

And I bought them a new house, two cars, and more shit that I couldn’t even remember. No, I’d paid my penance. “We’ll see you when we can. We both have busy schedules, but I’ll make it happen.”

“Good. We expect to see you soon.”

I hung up and rolled my eyes. In many ways, Mum was just like Maria Morelli and that made me stop short. How the hell had I not noticed that earlier? We both had meddling mothers.

Like my day wasn’t bad enough, the trifecta came a few hours later as I was enjoying my lunch in the dining tent with my racing team. Riedl strutted in and walked over, and before I knew it, my team had scattered, leaving me alone with my bowl of pasta fagioli. Clearly they knew something was up, or else they were spineless shits. It could have gone either way.

Riedl sat across from me, a small grin on his face. He pushed away the half-empty dish in front of him left by one of my engineers, then steepled his hands.

“You don’t want Blake Carlton on your bad side.”

“Good to know.”

“He’s not driving with Roche next year. He’s not going to end his career with a losing team.”

I was starting to catch on. Merrick had no seat for him, and if he wanted off Roche, well, that left Russo. And my seat. “Maybe Roche will turn it around,” I said, playing dumb.

“I think you know what I’m getting at. But he’s also interested in racing with Perez. I hear it’s for more reasons than one.”

I looked at him now, a hard stare. “Why don’t you get to the point.”

Erich nodded. “Yes, why don’t I. It seems you’ve caught yourself in a catch-22. You are either going to lose your seat, or lose your girl.”

“He’ll never race for Perez.”

“That’s not what I’m hearing. He thinks he can help them in the long term, you know, behind the scenes when he’s finished his racing career. You know, working alongside your girlfriend, getting close to her. But at least you’ll still be with Russo. Maybe.”

“What do you want, Riedl?”

“I’m not sure I want anything anymore. My problem seems to have fixed itself. But as a courtesy, I thought you should know what’s going on. You know, as teammates. Enjoy the rest of your lunch.”

I wanted to throw my plate at his head, but instead I stewed, all with a smile on my face. I didn’t want anyone to know that Riedl had rattled me. But I had to figure this out and discover if Carlton was a threat or if Erich was only playing games. The one thing I’d learned about Carlton over the years was that when he wanted something, he always got it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Luna

Rafe finished the Brazilian Grand Prix in seventh place, just out of the points. James Wall was a surprise winner of the race, while Devin finished sixth. The next race was in Europe, a great relief to both me and Devin. As much as my past was linked to this side of the world, I couldn't wait to leave it.

We returned to London and to my family's flat. Devin had business in London, and he didn't want to have to drive in from Sandrine. I was taking a hot bath when he returned from his business meeting. He walked into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bathtub watching me. There were times he would stare at me without saying a word. I wondered what he was thinking in those moments.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"My investor droned on and on about where he thought I should put my money. I thought I paid him to make those decisions without involving me so much."

"He's just being cautious," I said, resting my head on the edge of the bathtub. The warm water was soothing.

"I have something I want to talk about," he said. "I know you stay with me in Milan, but what would you say about moving into my Sandrine home? Let's make this more official."

Oh. Milan was one thing, and he hadn't even officially asked me to move in. Now Sandrine too?

"We're not official enough?" I joked, stalling for time.

"We are, but I want you to know how committed I am to you. I've never asked a woman to live with me, so this is a big deal. We are a big deal."

I leaned over and kissed him. “Can I think about it?”

My answer seemed to surprise him, but he quickly covered up his pout. “Of course. Take as much time as you need. I realize it’s a big step.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I was wondering if you could help me with my fitness. The team is on my back a bit about that.”

“I don’t know if I like this idea. You would drive me crazy with your lack of discipline.”

“I’ll do what it takes to get me in shape.”

“I’d have to come up with some workouts and meal plans. You need to stick to them. No more heaping plates of pasta. I don’t want to waste my time.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Getting fit is hard work. Something you have to be prepared to do.”

He rose and kneeled down next to the tub. “I can do it. So do we have a deal?”

“I think we have a deal. But I’ll kick your ass if I have to.”

He leaned over the tub to kiss me, and I couldn’t help it, I pulled him into the tub, clothes and all.

“We can do this together, Ms. Perez. It will be you and me against the world. And whatever we come up against, nothing will tear us down.”

The Chase

Life in the Fast Lane - Book 2

In the high-stakes world of racing, the risks are even greater off the track.

A lot has changed for Luna Perez, reluctant part-owner of her brother's racing team. She's traded her private life for the spotlight, wooing sponsors, travelling the globe—oh, and falling for glamorous, infamous Devin Flynn, her brother's rival and racing's most eligible bachelor.

No one thought Devin could be tamed, but he's head over heels for quiet, fierce Luna. She's never been happier... but it's hard to ignore the swirling rumors about Devin's playboy past.

Enter Blake Carlton, champion driver and fan favorite. Blake claims he wants to drive for Team Perez, but is it the team he's set his sights on, or Luna herself? Blake will do anything to sabotage her relationship with Devin, and Devin is ready to fight back. As the rivalry between the two drivers heats up, Luna must navigate secrets, lies, and her own tumultuous past, all under the glare of the paparazzi's cameras. At the end of the chase, only one man will cross the finish line and claim Luna's heart.

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Anna was born and raised in Canada. She's a prairie girl who loves the city.

From new adult to chick lit and everything in between, Anna writes contemporary romance and women's fiction that makes people laugh and love.

When Anna isn't writing her latest book, she's enjoying a cup of tea while attempting to create a culinary masterpiece.

She lives with her partner and their furry babies.

This is Anna's seventh book.

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