INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CROSS THE LINE*

CRASH INTO YOU



SIMONE SOLTANI

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PAN BOOKS

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For anyone sitting in the shadow of grief. We'll find the light again.

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Excerpt from *CROSS THE LINE*

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FORMULA 1 RACE SCHEDULE

Pre-season testing: Bahrain • February 21–23
Bahrain • February 29–March 2
Saudi Arabia • March 7–9
Australia • March 22–24
Japan • April 5–7
China • April 19–21
United States (Miami) • May 3–5
Italy (Imola) • May 17–19
Monaco • May 24–26
Canada • June 7–9
Spain • June 21–23
Austria • June 28–30
United Kingdom • July 5–7
Hungary • July 19–21
Belgium • July 26–28
Summer Break
Netherlands • August 23–25
Italy (Monza) • August 30–September 1
Azerbaijan • September 13–15
Singapore • September 20–22
United States (Austin) • October 18–20
Mexico • October 25–27
Brazil • November 1–3
United States (Las Vegas) • November 21–23
Qatar • November 29–December 1
Abu Dhabi • December 6–8

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PROLOGUE
Zaid

September – Singapore

I've lost count of how many times I've almost died.

It's part of the life I chose. Part of what makes me who I am. But it doesn't make facing it any easier.

Somewhere on the track, my Formula 1 car is nothing more than charred remains. The monocoque – the structure meant to keep me safe in the event of a crash – is all that's survived, covered in soot and dust and fire-suppressing foam, but I'm living proof that it's done its job.

'You still with me, Zaid?'

The question comes from the paramedic sitting beside me in the ambulance. He checks my vitals on a small screen before returning his attention to me, searching for anything else that might tell him how I'm doing. But it's the way his eyes drop and linger on my hands, limp and useless in my lap, that churns my stomach.

Dull pain thuds at the base of my skull. His words sound like they've come from underwater and my reply is thick on my tongue. 'Still here,' I say, but *here* is relative when I'm still piecing together how I landed in this position.

We're in Singapore, I know that much. It's a street circuit – my favorite – with tight corners and slim margins for error. The start of the race was fine. The lights went out and my P1 grid box was behind me in a split second, business as usual. I was ahead in turn one, barely edging out Axel Bergmüller, nearly wheel to wheel. It was good hard racing between rivals. Maybe not the cleanest, but we've done this with each other for so long that it's a familiar, if infuriating, dance. It was all *fine*. And then . . .

And then Lorenzo Castellucci came down the inside of the track, pushing

for a gap that wasn't there – that would never *be* there – and forced his way in.

It was followed by a blur of screeching tires and shattered carbon fiber. Of flickering flames, acrid smoke, and pain radiating from my fingertips to my elbows. Adrenaline and training and muscle memory got me out of the car before I could burn with it, but I'm barely five minutes removed and I don't know what really happened, except that I've escaped with my life.

I'm still here. But is anyone else?

'That's good,' the paramedic says. 'I'm going to walk you through what happens next, okay?'

I attempt to nod but the throbbing behind my eyes makes me stop. To his credit, he explains slowly and clearly. It's something about a hospital and surgeons on call, but it's all in one ear and out the other. My mind whirs with only one thought.

'Are they alive?' I ask. I swallow hard and try to specify. 'Axel . . . Lorenzo . . . Was there anyone else?'

The look on his face tells me I should stop asking questions. 'Everyone made it out,' he says.

Made it out. Doesn't actually mean shit. Doesn't mean they're not bleeding on the side of the track with a white sheet held around them to keep out prying eyes. I've seen it before. Don't want to see it again. But isn't that what I signed up for?

'Alive?' I press. He can't miss the panic in my voice. I can hear it too.

'Alive,' he reassures me. 'They're being taken care of.'

It's an answer, vague as it is, but I'll take what I can get, even if it only shifts a little of the worry off my shoulders.

Now, maybe, I can think about myself. I can think about the pain simmering and flaring in tandem, mirrored on left and right, bones at awkward angles that tell me everything is wrong. I can think about how tired I am. Physically tired. Mentally tired. Tired of this life I've built over the past two decades that revolves around one thing and one thing only – racing.

I can finally think about how I'm ready for it all to end.

I've lost count of how many times I've almost died – but this is the last

I’ll ever add to the tally.

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CHAPTER 1
Ava

Five months later, February – London

There are three things I know for certain about Formula 1 drivers. Number one: They're all hideously competitive. They wouldn't have reached this elite level of open-wheel racing if they weren't. Number two: At their core, they're huge nerds. Data is a god to them, and they'll use whatever they can to their advantage. And number three: They all have *extremely* questionable taste in fashion.

'Did your invite get lost in the mail?' I ask Axel Bergmüller, the two-time world champion who's currently wearing ripped jeans, scuffed sneakers, and a Specter Energy Racing polo shirt. It's not the worst thing I've ever seen a driver wear, but it's certainly not appropriate for a formal event. 'You know the dress code said black tie, right?'

He steps off the red carpet and into the wings where I've been waiting for him. 'They should be glad I'm even here,' he says, unfazed by my scolding. Maybe it's an Austrian thing. Maybe it's a champion thing. Or maybe it's just an Axel goddamn Bergmüller thing, but this man could not care less. 'I didn't want to come.'

'You never do.' I loop my arm around his to drag him into the venue, tired of standing around in my beautiful but insensible stilettos. At least one of us followed the dress code. 'My dad is going to be furious when he sees you.'

'Omid will weep gracious tears that his best driver decided to show up, and you know it.'

There won't be tears, but my father will undoubtedly heave a small sigh of relief that his bratty, infuriatingly talented number-one driver has shown up for a mandatory event.

As team principal of Specter Energy, one of Dad's main responsibilities

is wrangling this twenty-six-year-old man-child who carries the hopes and dreams of the team. And it's a task we share, even though I haven't worked for the team in over a year.

But Axel is – unfortunately – like family at this point, all thanks to Dad practically adopting him when he was just a teenager racing in Formula 3. As his honorary older sister, my duties include getting him to show up where he's supposed to and not make a mockery of the team in the process.

We're not doing a great job of either at the moment.

'These are the worst parties,' he grumbles as I tug him into the throng of well-heeled guests. 'Full of people who don't know shit about motorsport and act like they're entitled to our time, all because they're paying to have their company logos on our cars.'

This annual event, hosted by the official timekeeper of the sport, a long-established Swiss watch brand, does indeed draw the exact crowd he mentioned. It's more of a pre-season kickoff party than anything, a chance for teams and sponsors alike to mingle and network before everyone is at each other's throats in the spirit of competition.

I see why he dislikes it. He's about to be paraded around like a prized pony, gawked at and fussed over, made to give a speech and be on his very best behavior for the next several hours. He's temperamental on a good day, and if he's being forced to do something he hates? No one is safe. May the universe have mercy on the first person who asks him how he thinks the upcoming season is going to go. They're about to verbally get their ass handed to them.

'Axel, please.' I sigh, pulling him to a stop so he can face my pleading stare. 'I just want to enjoy tonight. I know you hate it all, but I've missed this.'

His dipped brow eases, his glare a little less severe. 'Right, you've been away from this bullshit.' He's quiet as he shifts uncomfortably, probably remembering the *why* behind my absence. 'Are you sure you want to be here?'

I understand his hesitance. Rumors pushed me out of my job and the world of Formula 1, and showing up again is sure to refuel them. But when

my best friend – the COO of one of the companies sponsoring an F1 team – asked if I wanted to be her plus-one tonight, I couldn't resist the offer.

'I'm sure,' I say.

But Axel's still skeptical. 'Really?'

'Really.'

It's hard to believe after everything that happened, but it's the truth. The world of motorsport is all I've ever known. My parents worked in IndyCar when I was a kid, and I grew up in the pit lanes of the American circuits, comforted by the scent of fuel and rubber, lulled to sleep by revving engines. I learned to drive a kart before I could read. I even briefly considered becoming a strategist like Mom or an engineer like Dad before I realized neither was my strong suit. It was marketing and design that scratched an itch in my brain, and once I had degrees in graphic design and sports marketing under my belt, I dove straight back into the world of motorsport.

But I only came to work for Specter Energy Racing after grad school, when I received an olive branch from Dad following a decade of him mostly ignoring my existence – aside from dropping money I barely touched into my bank account every month. At the time, I was working in the marketing department of an IndyCar team, but when the offer from Dad came in, I was compelled to accept it. Just like him, I couldn't resist the allure of Formula 1.

By then, he'd worked his way up to being team principal following years as an engineer, having made the shift from IndyCar to F1 after Mom's death. While I was left behind at a Virginia boarding school at fourteen, he jetted off to England to follow his dreams of conquering the pinnacle of motorsport. And with six Constructors' Championships under his belt, I'd say he's accomplished that.

I, on the other hand, haven't accomplished much – unless you count being at the center of a scandal that ended with me being asked to leave the team.

I level Axel with a hard stare when he doesn't look convinced by my answer. 'Do you think I'd be wearing a gown and heels that pinch my toes if I didn't want to be here?'

‘I know you love playing dress-up.’ He snorts, green eyes rolling. ‘Have you talked to Omid yet?’

‘He’s the one who sent me to wait for you.’ It was more about getting me away from the team’s sponsors he was speaking with, since he was unwilling to address my surprise reappearance. ‘And now that you’ve graced us with your presence, I can go have fun with people I actually like.’

‘I’m the highlight of your night,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘But fine, go socialize with the enemy.’

I bristle at the way he refers to my best friend as *the enemy*, but considering she’s the sister of one of the McMorris F1 Team drivers, he’s not completely wrong.

‘And *you* can go find my father,’ I instruct as he puts a hand to my shoulder to start nudging me forward. ‘You’re all supposed to be onstage for a speech in twenty minutes. Specter Energy’s up after Omega Siluro.’

Axel dramatically mimes that he can’t hear me over the noise and music before dropping his hand and melting into the crowd, likely in search of the nearest exit. Whatever. At least I got him in here. I made no promises about making him stay. Besides, it’s not like Dad can fire me all over again.

A flash of blonde hair in my periphery has me turning to catch *the enemy* approaching, her trademark scowl lightening when she spots me.

‘About time you came back in,’ Edith Maxwell-Brown grumbles. ‘Do you have any idea how many creepy old men I had to fend off while you were gone?’

I give her a quick scan, taking in her black taffeta gown and its sweetheart neckline, accented by the teardrop diamond necklace resting just below her collarbones. She looks amazing on a normal day, but she’s a full-blown stunner tonight. ‘At least two dozen,’ I answer. ‘Those guys are plentiful around here.’ And so is their money.

‘Place is practically overrun with them.’ Edith grabs two flutes of champagne from a passing waiter’s tray but hesitates on offering one to me. ‘Are you drinking tonight?’ she asks quietly. ‘Wasn’t sure if you’d changed your mind since the wedding.’

It’s a thoughtful question, since I’ve spent the better part of a year abstaining completely – all for the goal of preparing my body to carry a

future baby. Still, I have to fight to keep a smile on my face as I take the glass from her, because there's a big part of me that wants to cry.

'I'm taking a break from IUI for a while. The last round's failure took a lot out of me.' I lift the glass in a mocking toast to me not being pregnant. 'So I'll be drinking expensive champagne and eating all the soft cheese my heart desires until I'm ready to try again.'

She taps the rim of her flute against mine. 'That's the spirit. You'll miss them when they're gone.'

Her mention of *when*, not *if*, buoys me a little, as if it's just a matter of time before I spot two little lines on a pregnancy test. I've dreamed of one day being a mom ever since I lost my own, wanting to build a family to pass along the love she gave me and to support my kids in the way I wish I could have been by my remaining parent. I want to be everything for a child that my mother was for me.

But the harsh reality is that it's been eight months of trying and I'm no closer to making my dream come true.

Logically, I *know* that less than a year isn't a long time to be trying for a baby. It's not even long enough to be hit with a diagnosis of infertility. But having to keep waiting because my body has decided *Hmm, no, I don't think we want to do that* is the letdown of the century.

'My doctor thinks it's time to move to IVF, so maybe I'll have better luck with that,' I say, trying to remain positive despite the slow creep of disappointment month after month. 'But she did warn me that I'm heading into *advanced maternal age* territory.' I scoff. 'She might as well have just called me old. I mean, come on, I'm thirty-four, not eighty-four. I'm not even old enough to run for president.'

I can joke all I want, but I know basic biology. Growing older means this process will only get more complicated. It's why I finally said to hell with waiting to find the perfect partner to do this with – I just had to go for it before I lost my best window of opportunity. I'm grateful that there are procedures and techniques that allow me to do this as a single woman, but even still, it's starting to feel like a task that only ends in heartbreak.

I'll be okay, though, no matter the ultimate outcome. Like my mother

always liked to remind me, it's okay to stumble down the path of what you want, as long as you keep going.

'My mum had my youngest sister when she was in her forties. You'll be fine,' Edith reassures me. 'Besides, if it doesn't work, you can just take one of my kids. I don't really need any past the heir and the spare.'

I purse my lips to fight a smile. She loves her four beautiful, hell-raising children dearly, though she's very glad to be away from them tonight. If my future kid turns out like any of hers . . . Well, I'm going to have a riot on my hands from day one, but I welcome it. 'Still considering that,' I admit. 'They're pretty cute.'

'Take the littlest. She's already talking about wanting to be an F1 driver like her Uncle Thomas. You and your dad can make her into a champion.'

I'm not sure how useful I'd be, considering I've never worked in any sort of driver development department and my brief karting career wasn't particularly successful, mostly because I was more interested in playing racing video games than actually being on-track. My dad, however, might have better luck, considering he turned Axel from a kid with an attitude problem into a world champion (with an attitude problem).

'Let's see if Dad will talk to me long enough to even bring it up,' I say dryly before taking a sip of my champagne, savoring the fizz. I might as well enjoy myself tonight before going back to my structured life of no booze and preemptive prenatal vitamins soon enough.

'Things haven't got better between you?'

I shake my head. 'It's the whole reputation thing, you know? I embarrassed him, the team, the Farahani name . . . I think he's still trying to get over it. It was easier to push me away than stand up for me.'

Edith huffs her disappointment, but our conversation is interrupted by applause carrying from the other side of the massive event space, where the next pair of drivers and team principal have taken the stage. They're being interviewed by the host for this evening, some British comedian who's clearly been instructed to be on his best behavior, if his lackluster routine is anything to go by.

'God, this is painful,' Edith mutters as we listen to yet another set of media-trained drivers say nearly the exact same thing as the last batch. 'Had

I known it was going to be this terrible I wouldn't have asked you to be my date tonight.'

Bad as it is, I'm glad she insisted I stay in London for the week after the wedding so that I could be her plus-one to this horror show. It's not often we get to spend this much time together, and it's even rarer for me to take an extended – but much-needed – vacation from my freelance graphic design job. Being your own boss has some perks, but it can be tough running a business as a one-woman show.

'I'll never understand why they make them do this.' I take another sip of champagne to keep from wincing in secondhand embarrassment, even if part of me is gleefully enjoying it. 'If they want to talk, let them, but this feels like torture for everyone.'

'I would never tell any of them to their faces to shut up and drive,' she says, 'but fucking hell, *please* shut up and drive. They're much better at that.'

She can claim that she wouldn't say it to their faces, but I know better than to believe it. In the five years Edith Maxwell-Brown and I have been friends, she's never once been anything but blunt. We met in the paddock at the Spanish Grand Prix when she marched up to me and pointed at the embarrassing coffee stain on the white shirt of my team uniform, quickly declaring it unacceptable for me to be seen with. She then whipped a stain-removing pen out of her handbag to fix it for me. She only introduced herself in her posh English accent after I stuttered my thanks, and even then, it was with curt directness and a handshake so firm I swore my bones squeaked.

It's what makes her an excellent businesswoman. And minus the handshake, it's what makes her a great friend too, because I've never once had to wonder what she really means. She just says it.

She's right about how boring this is, but it's not stopping me from basking in it. Of course I've missed the racing and on-track action, but I've longed for the little things too, like the awkwardness of the drivers and the interviews that show that their talents are best displayed behind the wheel.

The world at large puts them on such a pedestal, and in some ways they deserve it. It's a sport with only a handful of spots available – you have to

be the best of the best just to make it here. But underneath it all, they're still remarkably human. Every driver I've worked with, including the ones I secretly couldn't stand, has had the same typical wants and needs and fears as the rest of us mere mortals. Even my little shit of an adoptive brother, a champion with more inevitable accolades in his future, is just flesh and blood like the rest of us. They're undoubtedly special people, yes, and I've missed being able to see that up close and personal, but I'll always cherish the moments when I saw them as only human. It's one of the things I miss the most.

We clap politely when the Omega Siluro drivers wave to the crowd as they conclude their interview, but the applause picks up when they leave the stage and the Specter Energy boys take their place.

'Oh my god,' I groan when I spot that Axel has somehow found and added a bow tie to his outfit, as if that were the missing part to make his ensemble black-tie appropriate. 'I didn't think this could get worse.'

Edith snickers, eyes flicking over him. 'He's lucky he's cute.' Then her eyes cut to me. 'How have you never been interested in him?'

'I've told you before,' I say patiently, keeping my voice low. 'While Axel is a very handsome man, he's' – I lift a finger to start counting – 'one: not my type, and two: my dad's favorite child. He even speaks Farsi better than I do, the bastard.' I clear my throat to dislodge the bitterness and add a third finger. 'Three: He's eight years younger than me, and I've known him since he was a teenager, which is bad enough on its own. And four' – I raise a final finger – 'having a child with an F1 driver does *not* sound like fun, which is arguably the most important factor at this stage in my life.'

Besides, just the rumor of being romantically tied to a driver can be nearly life-ruining. I've already learned my lesson.

Edith contemplates my list. 'I get it. Not sure I'd want to raise a kid with a man who's gone nine months of the year either.'

Exactly. I wouldn't wish that part of how I was raised on any kid, let alone my own.

We listen, occasionally rolling our eyes, grimacing, and even chuckling as Axel and his teammate Raphael Marchand go through the motions of the interview. When it comes to charisma, the Frenchman wins ten times over,

but Axel's wit and dry humor are charming in their own way, especially when he discusses how it feels to be racing again after last season's crash at the Singapore Grand Prix, one that could have ended his career, just like it did for Lorenzo Castellucci.

'Shit,' Edith swears under her breath, and I glance over to find her frowning at her phone. 'Something's come up at work. I'm so sorry, but I have to go.'

I'm used to her bailing early or canceling our plans completely because of her job, but my stomach still sinks. There's always some kind of drama going down in the hotel business, and it's been even more dramatic since her father overlooked her for a much-deserved promotion to CEO of their family's company after years of practically running the place herself. He picked her completely useless older brother, Andrew, instead, but after recovering from the initial shock of it all, Edith decided not to take that as a final answer.

'More Andrew chaos?' I ask.

She nods. 'Staging a coup really is so much work,' she says airily, but there's a steel to it too. 'You can come with me if you'd like, but I don't think you really want to watch me ream him and a bunch of solicitors into the wee hours of the morning.'

'While I'm sure that will be entertaining, I think I'll stick around.' I touch her wrist in gratitude. 'Thanks again for letting me crash at your flat this week. I wasn't sure if staying with my dad for that long was a good idea.'

'Someone might as well inhabit that place while we move into the new house.' She shoots me a wink, then sobers. '*Please* don't trip over any more boxes. I really don't want you ending up in hospital. But feel free to pack a few. That shit's never-ending.'

'Oh, I'm aware. At least you only moved across the city and not the Atlantic.'

I hauled ass back to the US after getting fired, partially because my UK residency was tied to a work visa, but also because I wanted – honestly, *needed* – a fresh start. Unfortunately, I'm still unpacking everything I accumulated over ten years in England and I fear it may never end.

'And whose fault is that, babe?' She leans in for an air-kiss. 'We're still

on for breakfast tomorrow, I promise. I'm going to make the most of my last day with you before you fuck off back across the pond.'

I smile, air-kissing her other cheek. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

'And if you don't, it's because I'm in jail for fratricide.'

She knocks back the rest of her champagne, hands the glass off to a waiter, and then she's gone.

It leaves me to turn my attention back to the stage, where my father is animatedly discussing Specter Energy's confident outlook for the season. As he speaks, I'm reminded of all the speeches he gave at the end of team meetings, how they'd meander and seemingly veer wildly off-topic yet always circle back around and end with a poignant question to consider.

I used to walk away either dazed, confused, or truly inspired and usually found myself huddled up with the rest of Specter's marketing and social media teams, who were also trying to figure out what the hell he was on about. It's an odd thing to miss, but listening to him tonight makes the ache of what I lost hurt a little more.

My father gives a reserved wave to the crowd as they wrap up the segment, and I sip my champagne while they depart the stage, half listening as the host cracks more terrible jokes. Without Edith by my side, this is decidedly less fun. Especially with all the eyes that are suddenly upon me.

I'm nowhere near conceited enough to think everyone here knows who I am, but plenty of them do – and plenty of them are staring. Part of me expected this, to be looked at and whispered about, but another part was more optimistic. Surely there's better gossip to dwell on. The talk should be about Lorenzo Castellucci's tell-all interview that dropped a few days ago and shook the world of F1 with some of its revelations – like the teammate sabotage at McMorris or him taking full responsibility for the crash that nearly killed him and two other drivers in Singapore.

More attention travels my way when the host announces that Mascort is the next team to take the stage, and it quickly becomes obvious that *nope*, there isn't better gossip tonight.

God, I should have gone home to my cats after the wedding. At least their judgmental stares are cute.

With Edith's invitation tonight, I hoped I could dip my toe back into this

world, maybe find a way to keep wading until I was immersed again. So far, all I've proven to myself is that I was right to move on. I was right to focus on building a version of my life that I could be equally excited about.

Except I'm still stuck digging the foundation of that new life. It's been a year and a half since I left Specter. Eight months of fruitless IUI after saving up and fighting to get it covered by my crappy self-employed insurance. Too long spent wanting and waiting and wishing for things to happen that just don't seem to want to come to fruition.

And yet every day I make myself open the metaphorical curtains and feel the sun on my face, because I've seen how dark life can be, how grief can steal away the light, and I'm determined not to let it drag me back to the shadows.

Taking a cue from Edith, I down my drink and slip through the crowd until I reach the back of the room, wanting to hide for a bit, at least until this part is over. But when the applause starts and reaches a near-deafening level, I can't help but glance over my shoulder, looking back toward the stage.

And there he is. Zaid Yousef, the face of Formula 1 – and the reason I can never come back.

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CHAPTER 2
Zaid

I’m standing in front of a crowd and I’m about to have a panic attack.

Cameras flash, catching this moment for posterity, all while I calculate whether I’d break any bones if I jumped off the stage. Maybe shattering an ankle would make Mascort want to end my contract early. Not like two broken wrists was enough.

‘We’re so excited for pre-season testing in Bahrain next week,’ Dev Anderson announces beside me, wielding the mic like a natural showman. ‘Zaid and I can’t wait to see everything this car is capable of. We got a taste a couple days ago during the shakedown, and I’ll just say . . . it’s going to be a season you won’t want to miss a second of.’

The crowd murmurs appreciatively, with a few enthusiastic smatterings of applause thrown in, but I barely hear it over my pounding heart.

‘Anything you’d like to add, Zaid?’ the host asks, watching me with the starry-eyed enthusiasm that once would have warmed me. Now it only makes cold sweat drip down my spine.

I force myself to lift the microphone, the plastic so slick from my damp palm that it nearly slides out of my grasp. ‘My teammate’s said it all – and more,’ I say, drawing a laugh from the blur of bodies below. ‘Looking forward to the season starting. Thank you to everyone back at the factory for giving us such a promising car.’

I only get the words out because of how many times I’ve said them in the past. It’s rote recitation at this point.

‘And how are you feeling about your return after that *terrible* crash in Singapore?’ he pushes on. ‘Are you back in winning shape? Ready to fight for another title?’

Ready to fight? Christ, the only thing I’m ready for is to run away.

It’s been five months of hell battling my way back into shape, back into a version of myself that I didn’t want to return to. I was done with racing the

second Lorenzo Castellucci forced Axel and me into the barriers, nearly killing all three of us in the process. Seventeen years – more, if you count my time in karting and the junior formulae – of putting my life on the line has been plenty. I'm already in the history books as a seven-time world champion, tied with a record-breaking driver from an era long past. I don't need to prove myself any more. I could walk away right now and no one could say I haven't given it my all.

Except I have a multiyear contract that my team is desperate to see to completion and the chance at a record-shattering eighth title. How am I supposed to run from that? How could I live with myself if I let down the people who have been loyal to me for all these years and expect me back on the grid? People who want me to not just return, but win for them. To show the world that a working-class Iraqi kid from North London could be the greatest of all time in a sport that's always been for the most privileged. How could I stand to disappoint them? How could I walk away from that kind of responsibility? How could I abandon a chance at that level of glory?

This is the dream I fought to live. What my parents sacrificed so much for. What my father wanted for me more than anything. With him gone, this sport is the strongest connection to him that I still have. What would he say if I left it all behind? Even though he's dead, I couldn't bear disappointing him like that.

'I'm ready to fight for another title,' I lie. 'Going to give it my all.'

It's the answer the crowd wants to hear, even if the words scrape my throat like jagged shards of glass. The host wants more, though. It shows in the way he leans in, an awed sparkle in his eyes. I've seen it enough times that it's hard to miss.

Apparently Dev can recognize it too, because he shifts in front of me and waves to the packed room, all bright light and big personality, everything I haven't been in a long time. 'Can't wait to see you all taking advantage of our hospitality suite this season,' he teases, striding toward the stage exit. 'Enjoy the party!'

I'm left nodding my thanks to the crowd and following behind him, a united front, and I've never been so thankful for a teammate in my life.

'You good?' he murmurs when we're down the steps and off in the small

backstage area.

‘Having the time of my life,’ I answer, but at least my chest has stopped constricting.

His smile turns knowing. We belong to a small club of people who inherently understand one another in ways the grand majority never will. Dev is young, more than a decade younger than me, but he’s faced his fair share of unwanted attention over the years. He knows, on some level, how miserable it can make you, yet we have to smile and wave and be nothing but gracious through the worst of it. Not to mention we both have the added pressure of being brown – Indian American in his case – in a predominately white sport.

When it comes to teammates, Mascort could have saddled me with someone much worse. He’s the one who kept my seat warm post-Singapore last year and helped the team fight for important points in the Constructors’ Championship while I was recovering.

They brought him over from Argonaut Racing, a lower-midfield team known for its fully American crew and drivers – and for a history of rarely winning. But Dev somehow hauled Argonaut’s tractor of a car to P1 at the Hungarian Grand Prix after some excellent strategic calls made by the kid himself. Not to mention he consistently outqualified and outpaced his teammate by an alarming margin.

He’s always been a talent to watch, even won Rookie of the Year when he came into F1 six seasons ago. And while I’ll never admit it publicly, in private I’d go so far as to say he might even be a better driver than me one day.

Our respective managers are waiting for us after we hand our mics to a waiting tech. Reggie nods to me, while Dev’s manager is quick to grip his elbow, looking less than pleased with his client’s behavior.

‘I need you out there circulating,’ the gray-haired man tells him, more a command than a request. ‘Just because you’re up here with the big boys now doesn’t mean you can sit back and wait for everyone to come to you.’

Dev deflates, his smile waning, but he nods nonetheless. I’m reminded of my early days in the sport, when Reggie and I had to hustle hard for sponsorship deals, snatching up whatever we could until I started making a

name for myself. It took winning two championships for the major names to finally get behind me.

‘You should do the same,’ Reggie suggests, keeping his voice low as he moves up beside me. ‘Put in some face time. Show people you’re doing well and excited for the year ahead.’

The last time the public saw me, back in December for my charity’s annual gala, I gave my speech, said hello to a handful of people, and then left early under the guise of a family emergency. It was more of a sighting than a proper outing, so this is my chance to be seen again in a relatively controlled environment. It’s in my best interest to socialize and act like I’m not hating every bloody second of it.

I’m about to ask Reggie to stick with me when his phone rings, and his apologetic glance says I won’t have an ally tonight.

‘I’ll catch you out there,’ he says before turning away to answer.

And then I’m on my own.

Fine. It’s fine. I’ve done this a thousand times before, in worse places, with arguably worse people. I can paint on a smile and lie through my teeth about how well I’m doing. If I can convince the sports psychologist involved in clearing me to drive again, I can convince a bunch of wealthy windbags that my team is deserving of their money and support.

I take a deep breath and shake out the pins and needles in my fingers before ducking out of the backstage area. For a brief, blissful moment, I’m swept up by the crowd, just another body in the wave of partygoers. But like Moses and the Red Sea, the waters part and I’m the center of it all.

I’ve barely moved a couple of feet before the first group descends, hands patting my arms and shoulders and back like we’re old mates. Or worse, like I’m their toy to touch and play with. But I don’t recognize a single face. They talk *at* me more than *with* me, recounting stories about my career that I can hardly recall and asking questions they have no business inquiring about.

As soon as one group’s done, another takes their place, and I’m stuck repeating the process for the journey across the room. There’s a circle of Mascort team members who will shield me if I ask, but I have to reach them first. It all makes me wish I hadn’t told my assistant to take the night off

and my bodyguard to wait in the car, thinking I'd be safe enough with my manager and half the team in attendance. Live and fucking learn.

Sweat prickles on the back of my neck as more people press in, and I clasp my hands behind my back to keep from shoving them away. It's no mob scene – these are rich people with *some* tact – but it's too much attention. Not even our car launch event two days ago was this chaotic, and that included a few hundred screaming fans in the audience. Businessmen are pushy in a different way, though, a unique entitlement coating their moves and words.

'We should set up a meeting,' one of them says, and I think I recognize him from a *Forbes* article I read while in hospital. 'It could be a very lucrative partnership for us both – especially once you win that eighth title.'

He says it teasingly, but that's been the common thread in all these conversations. *Number eight*. They speak like it's already a done deal, like I don't have to drive to a level that I don't know if I'm capable of any more, or like my competition is simply going to roll over and let me have it. I should appreciate the unwavering belief, but it's just another kilo of pressure added to my shoulders, and I'm already near to buckling under its weight.

'I'll have my people get in touch,' I say, throat painfully dry, and if I don't get out now, I'm going to crack. 'If you'll excuse me . . .'

I take my chance when there's a break in the bodies, slipping through and out of the bubble they've put me in, and then I'm finally on the outskirts of the crowd at large. Finally in clean air.

Breathing deep, I let my eyes slide shut for a moment, focusing on my lungs expanding and contracting in the way my therapist taught me – a way to ground myself and keep my heart from knocking its way out of my chest. It works for the most part, and my pulse slows as my body reminds me that I'm not actually being hunted by wolves.

I feel a little better when I open my eyes – or at least I do for the split second before I crash into someone.

An apology is on the tip of my tongue as I grab the woman's elbow, steadying her before she can stumble into the bar and ignoring the slight flare of pain that surges through my wrist as I do so. But the words die

when she lifts her head and I'm left staring down at the daughter of Specter Energy's team principal.

'Oh god,' Ava breathes out, big doe eyes staring up at me in horror. 'Not you.'

In the fantasies I've had of us meeting again, those words weren't part of any of them. But I can't blame her. I'm quite possibly the worst person she could have run into for a myriad of reasons – the biggest being that I wrecked her life.

A beat passes before she recovers enough to step out of my grasp, and judging by her flushed cheeks that nearly match the pink of her dress, she'd rather be running away. Sadly for her, the crowd has pushed in again and there are far too many curious eyes on us. Unless she wants to shove her way through and cause a scene, there's nowhere to go.

'It's nice to see you, Ava,' I say, sliding my hands into the pockets of my trousers to keep myself from touching her again, no matter how desperate I am to do so. 'Been a while.' A year and a half, to be more precise.

She manages a smile, but her eyes are wary when she says, 'Nice to see you as well.'

Even if it's not a lie, it's hard not to grimace when she takes another step back. I didn't personally do anything to make her want to steer clear. It was my notoriety that led to the mess we found ourselves in.

The long and short of it is that we were caught together in what looked like a compromising position, when in reality it couldn't have been more innocent. I still haven't figured out how the paparazzi got those shots of us at my father's memorial service, but the images led to hideous rumors and allegations. The least ugly was that she was dating me to further her career in Formula 1. The worst was that she was a honeypot for Specter Energy, sleeping with me to steal Mascort's secrets. In all of them, I was made out to be the victim of her machinations, like I hadn't been the one to take advantage of her kindness in a moment of fragility.

It culminated in Ava leaving her job at Specter Energy, as well as my publicist releasing a statement condemning the stories and declaring I had no connection to her. Even if there *had* been something going on between us, she didn't deserve that kind of treatment. No one would have. But

especially not Ava, the real-life version of a slightly off-kilter Disney princess.

She's living up to the description in her gown with off-the-shoulder straps and a bodice that hugs her like a corset. Black hair tumbles over her light brown shoulders in soft waves, held out of her face with a pearl-studded headband that's practically a diadem. It's surprising not to see a parade of adorable forest animals skittering around her feet to top off the vibe. It suits her, though. Because even through the worst of the storm, she still flung rainbows and sunshine wherever she went.

As much as I want to smile at her, to reassure her that I still appreciate what she did for me and how glad I am to see her, my face doesn't move. Our gazes hold and suddenly I'm back at Dad's memorial, Ava's hands warm around mine, her lips at my ear as I cry against her neck, whispering to me that it won't always feel like there's a gaping hole in my chest – that, no, it will never fully heal, but it will close little by little every day.

Then she blinks those big brown eyes and I'm returned to the party, taking in the curious worry in her gaze that I don't care for.

I look away.

Of course, it's just my luck that I make eye contact with someone else, an older man who's been edging closer while we've been standing here. Now that I've accidentally given him my attention, he claps a hand on my shoulder, his jowls quivering as he breaks into a wide grin.

'Well, look who it is,' he says, chuckling like we're in on a joke, but it only makes me stiffen. 'Been waiting to talk to ya this whole time, but the wife told me it'd be impolite to corner you before you went onstage.'

A frail woman with elaborately coiffed white hair leans around him to give me a wave. 'My husband is *such* a fan of yours. He's been following your career since you were just a wee thing.'

The man proudly puffs out his barrel chest, and I soften a bit. I always have time for people who have spent years supporting me.

'Knew you were a talent ever since your F2 days,' he boasts. 'No one thought one of you Arabs could make it as far as you have, but I've always believed.'

My guard is immediately back up, and I swear I hear Ava suck in a sharp

breath. She could have easily slipped away by now, but no, she's stayed to witness this mortifying moment.

I keep my face carefully schooled, honed over decades of hearing comments like this. 'Thank you for your support,' I say, because there's nothing else I *can* say, not unless I want to make waves and headlines, and I'm tired of both.

'You're going to win us that eighth title, now, aren't you, boy?' he cajoles, giving my shoulder a squeeze. 'It's what we deserve.'

Yes, it's what *they* deserve, the people who care only that I drive fast and drive well. That I win for *them*. Not for myself, not for my team, not for my loved ones and genuine supporters, but for this league of people who claim to be my fans but barely see me as human.

'Besides,' he goes on, 'we all know you don't have many years left. You're thirty-nine.' He whistles, like I'm some impressively ancient relic. 'You better make this season count.'

There's a ringing in my ears growing louder by the second. My practiced smile is slipping, my gaze growing unfocused as I search for something to cling to that will keep me from snapping. My fingers ball into fists at my sides, itching to connect with something, preferably the liver-spotted nose in front of me. I'm teetering closer and closer to the edge. Is this the moment I fall?

A high-pitched laugh drags me off the cliff's edge and I blink, fingers unfurling, finally turning to look at Ava. She's beaming, a grin lighting up her face and forcing her eyes to narrow a little. But, no, it's not the smile doing that – it's anger. There's fury behind the facade.

'Oh, I doubt he's going anywhere,' she teases, all warmth and joy. Except that warmth is a fire that will burn anyone who gets too close. 'You'll probably be dead before he retires!'

Ava laughs again and then slips her hand into the crook of my elbow. 'Come on,' she says as she nods toward a break in the crowd, our perfect exit strategy. 'Your team principal is looking for you.'

I freeze for a split second because there's no way she'd know if Basil wanted to see me, but then it dawns on me what's happening.

I glance back at the confused older couple and offer one last tight smile.

‘Can’t leave the boss waiting. If you’ll excuse me . . .’

Ava tugs insistently at the sleeve of my tuxedo jacket, and then I’m following behind her without a second thought. She keeps ahold, dragging me along as she *sorry, excuse me*s and *gonna squeeze past you*s her way through the room. And somehow I just . . . let her. A handful of people don’t move out of her way until they spot me, scurrying back when my narrowed eyes land on them, but Ava’s polite directness works well enough to get us out of there.

It’s not until we’re standing in the dimly lit back hallway leading to the toilets that she finally stops and lets go, her brow scrunched as she assesses me.

‘Are you okay?’ she asks. Whatever she’s seen on my face makes the question come out hesitantly, like she’s waiting for me to implode on the spot.

I take a breath to steady myself and then nod to assuage her worry. ‘Thank you for rescuing me before I did something shitty.’

Her expression eases, that familiar soft smile making its grand reappearance. The sight has something twisting in my chest, but I do my best to ignore it, just like I have for years.

Because, look – Ava’s an attractive woman. I know it. Fuck, anyone who’s ever seen her knows it. She has wide dark brown eyes that flick up at the corners, made even more dramatic tonight with a smudge of kohl. Full pink lips, stained darker by whatever she’s wearing on them. Skin that’s just this side of golden after these bleak winter months but will glow in the height of summer. I know that because I’ve watched it happen every year for over a decade.

And all I’ve ever done is watch, because Ava Farahani is as off-limits as a person can be.

‘No problem,’ she says. ‘Figured I owed you for shutting down all those rumors about me. Least I could do.’

‘You don’t owe me anything,’ I tell her, taken aback that she could even think she did. If anything, *I’m* the one who owes her for helping me in the first place.

‘Still.’ She waves it off. Literally waves her little sparkly bag in the air,

nearly hitting me. Clearly she doesn't want to dwell on the topic, and neither do I. We don't need a reminder of what we've faced. 'Unless you need me to rescue you again, I'm gonna head out. My date left already and I've been getting some . . . unfortunate glances.'

Again, I grimace, because it's my fault she's getting those stares, but Ava's still bright as ever as she announces it. There's a radiating light inside her, and it only makes me more aware of the cloud perpetually hanging over my head. I might hate her for it if I weren't so sickeningly envious.

And I have to admit, it's not the only form of envy I feel, the rest of it directed toward whoever her date tonight was. I've seen Ava with dates here and there over the years, usually at events just like this one, gazing at them with the kind of adoration I could only ever dream of being on the receiving end of from her. Each time, I've had to tamp down unearned jealousy, reminding myself why acting on my attraction is a terrible idea. Still, it never stops my chest from burning or my ill-advised crush from waning. I swear, every time I see her, it only grows.

But I know better than to mix business and pleasure, and I certainly know not to pursue the daughter of any team principal, especially not the one of Mascort's biggest rival. And definitely not one whose life I've already upended by mistake.

'So yeah,' Ava finishes on a disappointed exhale. 'Probably my cue to go.'

'Wish I could do the same,' I say wryly. 'Someone's bound to send a search party for me soon.' I clear my throat to dislodge the bitterness, pointedly avoiding her gaze. I need to leave her be so she doesn't face yet another round of vicious gossip. 'Sorry for nearly mowing you down. Have a good night, Ava.'

I should say more, should apologize not just for nearly knocking her over, but for everything else. We never spoke in the aftermath of those photos and articles, and I never got to thank her for keeping the secret of what really happened – not that I think the gossip hounds would have believed the truth.

But my jaw stays clamped shut. There's no point in it all, not after this

long. She's moved on and is clearly doing well. There's no need for me to bring it back up.

I'm turning to leave when her hand lands on my arm. I could easily slip away. It would be for the best. Just keep it all in the past where it belongs. Instead, I stop and look back at her.

Ava's already staring up at me, and I see the wheels turning in her head as she contemplates something. Then she asks, 'How do you feel about french fries and cheap bourbon?'

'I . . . What?' I squint, thrown by the question. I wait for her to either repeat or explain, but she only watches me expectantly. 'I don't mind them,' I finally answer.

'And how do you feel about the American flag being used for multiple types of decor?'

'As long as it's not in my house, I don't care how it's used,' I say slowly. 'Why?'

She brightens, her entire face lighting up in a way that makes me wonder if I've ever felt that kind of happiness. 'Because I know a place that has all three and I doubt anyone there will recognize you. Do you want to come with me?'

Hard to believe no one would recognize me, especially in my own hometown, but I think I'd take anywhere over being here. I'm going to end up cornered for the rest of the night because people want to pick and prod and poke, and this is their big chance. I thought I was ready for it, but it's become very clear that I'm not.

If I stay, someone will make me admit my truth – that I don't want to do this any more. That climbing into a Formula 1 car scares the hell out of me. That I'm so fucking *done* with putting my life on the line for entertainment week after week and yet I'm going to keep doing it anyway because I can't stop now.

My best option is to just go home. If not to my own house, then to my mum's or my brother's. I should go cuddle my nephew and imagine the life and family I could have had by now if I hadn't given everything to racing.

What I shouldn't do is go anywhere with Ava. Being spotted together was what got us into a mess in the first place. We don't need to reignite anything

and cause round two of drama, no matter how desperate I am to stay in the warmth of her presence for just a little longer.

Besides, it's nearly the start of the season, and past some champagne at parties and on the podium, I don't drink during those months. I certainly don't eat anything outside my dietician's strict plan, and last I checked, chips weren't on it.

I have my structure and I stick to it. I have my rules. It's all there to keep me out of trouble, no matter how alluring the trouble is.

And yet, despite all that, I tell her, 'Lead the way.'

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CHAPTER 3
Ava

I'm making a huge mistake.

I know good and well that I shouldn't be buddying up with Zaid Yousef, but my god, I could practically *feel* the anxiety rolling off him. How was I supposed to throw him back to the wolves?

All right, yeah, he's a grown man who can handle himself, whatever. But he's been through the wringer already and I owe him, no matter what he tries to say. Is inviting him out for bourbon and fries going to solve whatever's going on with him? Probably not. But maybe it'll lift some of the melancholy draped around his shoulders. Potatoes usually have that effect.

Besides, he's not the only one who needs to get out of here.

I feared that leaving the party with Zaid would be a challenge, but we've made it out a back exit and into the alley behind the building without much fuss. The problem now is how I get this incredibly recognizable man to a second location without blowing our cover. I shared a car with Edith coming here and planned to grab a taxi home, but that's out of the question unless we want to face all the photographers out front. And even though the pub I have in mind isn't too far to walk to, I can't manage it in heels, and having a devastatingly handsome man in a tuxedo walking with me would immediately draw attention.

But before I can ask Zaid for ideas, a hulking man steps out of an SUV idling at the curb and opens the back door for us.

'I planned to sneak out at some point, just not this early,' Zaid explains without a hint of shame when he sees my surprise. 'And this is private property, so the photographers can't come back here.'

I'm both impressed by his planning and upset that he has to so carefully consider how to avoid being chased by paparazzi. But I guess that's just the life of a celebrity.

Ever the gentleman, Zaid lets me climb in first. He waits until I've bundled myself and my gown inside, then slides onto the seat beside me, our knees bumping momentarily before he pulls away, and I pointedly ignore the electricity that zings up and down my leg at the contact. The driver closes the door behind him and then climbs behind the wheel, glancing in the rear-view mirror with eyebrows slightly raised.

I take that as my cue to tell him where we're headed, appreciating that he doesn't question me or Zaid on it – or the fact that we're here together.

I watch through the tinted windows as we maneuver through the narrow alley and ease out to the street. The sounds of the city are faint through thick glass and steel, and the quiet in the car is heavy once we're in the flow of traffic, as if we've both just realized what we're doing.

Yep, *definitely* a huge mistake.

I'm struggling to find a topic to restart the conversation when Zaid asks, 'Who was your date that ditched you?'

My shoulders relax at his question, even more so at the slightly disgruntled note in his voice. 'Oh, it wasn't like an actual date or anything,' I clarify. 'I was here as my best friend's plus-one. She's Thomas Maxwell-Brown's older sister, actually.'

I can't make out every detail of his expression in the low light, especially since he's staring straight ahead instead of at me, but I swear the tension in his strong jaw eases. 'I see,' he murmurs, pausing again to consider his words before adding on, 'I didn't expect you to be here tonight.'

Him and everyone else, it seems. I didn't think my presence was going to cause any sort of ripple. Hell, I didn't think anyone was even going to *notice* me. There have been so many scandals since mine and Zaid's – like Dev's fake STD or Thomas's video ranting about Lorenzo Castellucci, among ten thousand other things.

I was convinced everyone had moved on, but apparently the crash and Zaid's triumphant return to the sport have the spotlight beaming even brighter on him. It also shines on anyone who's ever gotten close to him, whether they want it to or not.

'I thought it would be nice to see everyone,' I explain, thinking of Axel in his borrowed bow tie, my father's ramblingly poetic speech, and all the no-

nonsense women I banded together with over the years when I worked in the paddock. ‘I wanted to be back in this world for a while, you know?’

‘Not really,’ Zaid confesses, and I want to interrogate that answer, but he pushes on before I can. ‘No one gave you any trouble, did they?’

He’s returned to being put out on my behalf, and I press my lips together to keep from smiling. ‘No, nothing like that,’ I reassure him. ‘Just a few weird looks.’

Zaid grunts and that seems to be the end of our conversation. I’m itching to keep things going, but we can’t exactly have a private chat with someone else in the car, and I don’t know how comfortable he is with being overheard, so I keep my mouth shut and take a moment to drink him in.

In this lighting, his eyes are such a deep brown that they’re nearly black, a little less warm and a little more guarded than what I’ve noticed in years past. There’s an exhaustion in the set of his broad shoulders too, and I don’t miss his nearly imperceptible wince when he sweeps his fingers through his thick, dark hair, pushing the wayward strands off his forehead. He’s certainly just as attractive as the last time I saw him, and I can’t imagine there will come a time in the next few decades when he doesn’t make *People*’s list of sexiest men, but there’s been a shift in him, and I have to force my gaze back to the window before I catalog everything that’s changed.

It’s a long twenty minutes of crawling through Central London traffic before the driver calls out, ‘We’re here.’

I throw open my door and clamber back out, but Zaid hesitates as he stares at the dingy-windowed pub in front of us.

‘No one comes here except lost tourists and American expats,’ I promise, heading off any protest. ‘There’s a downstairs bar with a bunch of private booths, and the only sport people care about is American football. You’ll be fine.’

Zaid’s narrowed eyes say he doesn’t quite believe me, but he steps out of the SUV nonetheless, surreptitiously glancing up and down the street before striding to the door and hauling it open. He motions for me to go first, and I duck inside before he changes his mind, hoping what he’s about to see won’t make him run right back out.

‘What the fuck *is* this place?’

‘Hell on earth,’ I announce over the country song blasting from the jukebox, simultaneously sweeping a low-hanging American flag out of my face. ‘Follow me. It’s better downstairs.’

I’m not sure if *better* is the right word, considering there are more flags in every shape, size, and form everywhere – including a life-size Paddington Bear statue painted in the stars and stripes – but it’s quieter than the upstairs section. I hike myself up on one of the barstools, then wait for Zaid to take the seat next to mine.

‘See?’ I say brightly, spreading an arm to highlight the mural of a screaming bald eagle on the wall. There are US president-themed booths behind us that we can retreat to if we need more privacy, but other than the bartender, we’re the only ones down here. ‘Told you I knew the perfect place.’

The mild horror on his face nearly makes me laugh. ‘How did you even find it?’

‘Buck Decker used to have his annual Fourth of July party here before the event got too big,’ I tell him, invoking the name of Argonaut Racing’s Texas billionaire owner. ‘I crashed it one year and then kept coming back here because they had all the food I missed from home.’ The number of Philly cheesesteaks I ate that summer . . . truly obscene.

The bartender comes over, not even batting an eye at Zaid in a tuxedo or me in a gown, and I take the liberty of ordering for us both – two bourbon rocks, two baskets of fries, and one Chicago-style hot dog to see if I can get another horrified reaction out of Zaid. Once she sets our drinks down and leaves to put our order in with the kitchen, the tense silence returns as Stevie Nicks sings about white-winged doves.

I sip my drink and then drag my bottom lip between my teeth to keep from uttering something uncouth to fill the quiet, like *What made you agree to drink cheap whiskey with me?* or *Why do you seem like you’re on the verge of having a breakdown?*

‘So,’ I say. ‘How’ve you been?’

It’s a simple yet accidentally loaded question, especially since the last time we were together he was crying quietly in my arms, struck down by

grief. Since then, there have been the crash and the broken wrists and the loud doubts about his return to the sport.

Zaid grunts and throws back half of his drink. ‘Fine,’ he answers after swallowing, the word gruff and . . . all right, yeah, *incredibly* sexy.

I’ve had a no-dating-drivers rule since I was old enough to have a crush. It started with my parents warning me away from the IndyCar boys, and the rule carried on when I started working in Formula 1. I know to steer clear of drivers, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t done my fair share of admiring from a distance. And almost all of it has been of Zaid Yousef.

Honestly, who could blame me? The man is like a fine wine, only getting better with age, which should be impossible considering he’s been handsome for as long as I’ve known him. I was eighteen when he made his splashy F1 debut as a driver for Deschamp. Dad was new in his role as team principal of Specter Energy in those days, which meant I was in the paddock during university breaks since I had nowhere else to go.

It also meant I had the opportunity to stare a little too hard – and a little too often – at the hotshot twenty-three-year-old driver with a crooked smile. Zaid being the bane of my father’s existence just made him even more alluring.

Back then, Deschamp was an upper-midfield team but hadn’t won a championship – Drivers’ or Constructors’ – in over a decade. Zaid was already a champion in his own right after working his way up the junior formulae, and the hope was that he’d be the team’s savior. Of course, the media doubted his abilities, claiming he was an overpriced acquisition and would burn out under the lights in no time. And, unsurprisingly, there was plenty of racist rhetoric to go along with it. God forbid a brown man find success.

Deschamp won the Constructors’ Championship that year. And Zaid was only a single point shy of winning the Drivers’ Championship, claiming second place behind his veteran teammate.

He’s more than made up for that ‘loss’ – and silenced the loudest naysayers – in the years since, having won seven Drivers’ Championships across two different teams. It likely would have been eight by now if Lorenzo Castellucci hadn’t nearly killed him last season.

And that's why his answer of *fine* to my inquiry into how he's been makes me wince.

'Sorry, that was the worst question I could have asked,' I say as I pluck up my glass, determined to hide my flushed cheeks behind it.

Zaid huffs what I think is a laugh. 'Don't worry about it. I just don't know what else to tell people at this point.'

He blinks once, lips dipping into a frown, like he can't believe he's confessed it, but I have to respect that he doesn't backpedal or overexplain in response. He just allows the words to settle between us and lets me decide how to take them.

'So, are you *not* fine?' I ask casually. 'If you aren't, feel free to unload on me, because then I'll be able to eat all our food in peace while you carry the conversation.'

My hope is that he'll rise to my jokes, but he shakes his head instead. 'Believe me,' he murmurs, 'it's nothing you want to hear about.'

I heave a dramatic sigh as the bartender returns with three greasy baskets. 'All right. But if you're not gonna do that, will you at least tell me all of Mascort's engineering secrets so I can get *something* juicy out of this conversation?'

This time, he genuinely snorts before finishing off his drink. 'Eat your chips, Ava.'

Heat rushes through me at hearing my name on his lips, pleased by the way he always makes the soft vowels of the Farsi pronunciation sound like a melody. I pop a fry in my mouth to disguise my delight, then nod when the bartender asks if we want another round of drinks. She's kind enough to make them doubles.

I feel Zaid's gaze land on me when she walks off to clean glasses at the other end of the bar, and I nearly start babbling to get him to stop looking at me so intensely. But he's the one who doesn't want to talk, and I'm not about to talk *at* him, so I eat more fries and . . . wait.

I've knocked out half a basket and a tumbler of bourbon, and I'm in the middle of thinking about grabbing the hot dog when he finally says, 'Let me ask you something.'

I nearly sigh in relief, reaching for my fresh drink. Good thing Edith's

flat is only a couple of blocks from here, because I'm already buzzed.

'Why did you come outside that day?'

I freeze mid-sip, confused. But then it hits me: his father's memorial service.

Even though it would be hard to forget everything about that day – and everything it led to – I never thought we'd talk about it. For me, our moment together was a secret I planned to take to the grave, something Zaid and I would simply pretend never happened. But then the photos hit the internet and so did the false narrative about our supposed secret relationship, so we were forced to address it, though it never involved us talking directly.

But considering how hard he's staring at me right now, I guess we're about to.

I slowly lower the glass and wet my lips. 'I wasn't stalking you or anything,' I begin, needing to get that out of the way. I don't want him to think I was lying in wait to catch him at his most vulnerable moment. 'I was there with my dad to pay our respects, and I was standing near the doors to the churchyard when you disappeared outside. When you walked by, you . . . you had this look on your face that didn't seem right. You were so calm, but there was something happening under the surface. I think it was the moment when everything really hit you.'

It had been a few weeks since his father's sudden heart attack, and while I'm sure his grief in the direct aftermath was awful, I knew how the reality of loss didn't always sink in until later.

Some of his intensity softens as he nods, a small acknowledgment that I'm right.

'Well, I didn't want you to face it alone,' I go on, fingers drifting up and down in the condensation on the glass. 'My mom died when I was fourteen, so I know what it's like to lose a parent. I thought you might need someone who understood in that moment.'

I leave out how I didn't have anyone to help me through it, to hold me while I cried, to tell me it wouldn't always feel so raw. Dad shut down in the days and weeks and months after, throwing himself into work and the

world of Formula 1. I was left to grieve alone, something I don't think I'll ever fully forgive him for but have pointedly chosen to move on from.

'You were right,' Zaid admits, glancing away before his eyes settle on me again. 'I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come out there. And I never thanked you for it.'

I lift my glass and tilt it jokingly toward the fries. 'I think you covering our tab tonight will be a proper show of gratitude.' When Zaid doesn't crack a smile at my attempt to lighten the mood, I lower my drink again and hold his gaze, trying not to admire the little flecks of ebony and gold in his eyes. 'But you've never needed to thank me. I went out there to check on you because I wanted to, not because I expected anything in return.'

Zaid stares back, and I swear he can see past all the fronts I've ever put on. It's unnerving and electrifying at the same time.

'I don't think you expected the tabloids to call you a—' He cuts short, tongue pressing against his top lip as he tries to remember. 'What was the headline again?'

I snicker. '"Specter's Spy,"' I quote, which was the favored nickname for me. '"The predatory Persian princess looking for a payday." Horrible thing to say, obviously, but I have to respect the alliteration.'

Zaid isn't as amused. Can't blame him – it took me a while to get to a point where the words no longer stung and I could laugh at the outrageousness of the situation instead of crying over how it alienated me further from my father, ruined my career, and excommunicated me from the sport I loved.

But then the corner of his mouth tugs up, a bare hint of a dimple appearing in his stubbled cheek. God, he's too pretty for his own good, the only man I've ever considered tossing away my no-dating-drivers rule for, even though he'd be the absolute worst choice.

Then again, no one said I had to *date* him. I'm not looking for a boyfriend or a husband, and I certainly don't want him for a baby daddy. God, of every man I know, he would be the worst choice I could make.

But maybe one night would be enough to break me out of whatever spell he's had me under for ages . . .

I know I shouldn't. It's a *very* bad idea to hook up with the man who's

caused me so much trouble. Yet the bourbon has me thinking about the possibility, and about just how good it could be.

‘At least they called you a princess,’ he says, voice so deep and smooth that my toes curl inside my shoes. ‘That bit suits you.’

‘Why, thank you.’ I curtsy the best I can while sitting, then try not to groan at the absurdity of it. ‘My dad was livid when that article came out,’ I go on to cover my embarrassment, ‘but I think he secretly liked that they called him “Specter’s shah,” messed up as it was.’

‘Remember when they claimed we had a “tumultuous breakup”’ – he sarcastically adds the air quotes – ‘and called it “the new Iran–Iraq War”?’

‘The one and only time they issued a retraction because it rightfully pissed off so many people.’

‘Yeah, it was ugly.’ He blows out a breath. ‘I’m sorry you went through that.’

I wave off his apology because, again, it’s something I’ve made myself move on from. ‘It’s in the past. The press doesn’t care about me these days, thankfully.’

Zaid, on the other hand . . . I know they’ve been hounding him more than they did before the crash, which almost seems impossible. I wouldn’t believe it if he weren’t a top headline every time I opened a newspaper or scrolled through social media. If he were *just* a Formula 1 driver, I might not understand the obsession. But Zaid Yousef is more than that.

He’s a humanitarian, the face of several high-profile sponsorships, an art gallery owner, and even a movie producer. He’s taken the millions he’s made and not just put them into mansions and jets and yachts like other athletes, but reinvested them in people and projects, even creating his own junior karting team and young driver management agency. His namesake foundation, dedicated to getting more girls and marginalized kids around the world into STEM and motorsport, is unrivaled. Hell, the most recent documentary his production company financed about asylum seekers *won an Oscar*. He’s bigger than the sport, and the limelight follows him wherever he goes.

And from what I’m sensing, he’s sick of it.

‘It would be nice if the press didn’t care about me too,’ he says, and

there's that flash again, like he can't believe he's admitted it. He covers the slip with another swig of whiskey before asking me, 'What have you been doing since you left Specter?'

'A little of this, a little of that,' I say vaguely, because nothing I've done could ever be as impressive as his accomplishments. 'Moved back to the US, bought a house, started doing freelance graphic design. Nothing all that special.'

'Is it what you want to be doing?'

I swallow back the *not really* threatening to bubble up and try to keep my smile light and easy. 'It is what it is,' I answer.

The reality is that I miss F1. I miss my old job and my life in England. I even miss all the back-to-back travel that left me wishing for a month of hibernation at the end of each season. But I know the slower pace of life now is what I need to move forward with my dream of motherhood. Besides, it's not like I can take a baby from race to race and work at the same time.

The happy medium would have been working at Specter Energy's headquarters, like I did when I first came to the team, before the marketing department grew and my talents were needed trackside instead of just in the office. But Dad made it clear I wasn't welcome anywhere near the team any more, and no other constructor would have welcomed a competitor's daughter with open arms.

My time in F1 is done, no matter how much that reality hurts sometimes.

Zaid looks like he wants to challenge me on my answer, but he stops short, holding up a hand in apology before reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone. Whatever he sees on the screen has his expression shuttering and posture stiffening. I don't have to spy over his arm – though I do anyway – to know that it's from someone wondering where the hell he's disappeared to.

He's pulling away without physically doing so, retreating in on himself and shutting me out after a brief peek behind the curtain. I shouldn't push to see more, should just let him go brood in a dark corner somewhere, but watching him shut down makes my chest ache.

'Hey, are you any good at darts?' I blurt before my brain can catch up to

my mouth.

Zaid's eyes drag back up to mine, brow once again dipping in the middle. I hop off my barstool and back toward the dartboard on the screaming-eagle wall.

'Because I'm fantastic,' I push on. 'And I've yet to meet anyone who can beat me.'

That is, in fact, an egregious lie. I'm terrible at darts, more likely to take out someone's eye than hit a bullseye, but I've never met a racing driver who turned down a little competition. And right now, I'd do just about anything to get Zaid out from underneath the storm cloud that's soaking him through.

'Think you could be the first?' I coax, glancing at him over my shoulder as I grab the darts from the board.

He's still as he stares at me, but he's considering my offer. What I can't tell is which way he's deciding – the man is so wildly unreadable that I don't think his book is even open. When he finally stands, tall enough that I have to tilt my head back to look at him, I'm almost convinced he's about to turn and walk back upstairs without saying goodbye. But to my surprise, he shrugs out of his tuxedo jacket and tugs at the knot of his bow tie, letting it hang around his neck as he pops the top button of his shirt. I swallow hard and watch, biting my tongue to keep from requesting that he undo a few more buttons.

He then gestures toward the darts, turning his palm up for me to place them there. Our fingers brush as I hand him his set, and I swear electricity arcs up my arm, sending sparks through my chest. Shaking off what was certainly a hallucination, I grin cheekily up at him and get a smirk in return.

'All right, princess,' he says. 'Let's see how good you really are.'

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CHAPTER 4
Zaid

If someone had told me this morning that I'd end up in an aggressively American-themed pub with a woman whose life I accidentally turned upside down, I wouldn't have believed them. But the truth is stranger than fiction, and Ava Farahani is quite possibly the worst darts player I've ever met. Her only saving grace is that she makes failing miserably look like it's the most fun she's ever had. I can't say I know what that's like.

'Okay, so I lied about my talents,' she confesses as she bends to collect her fallen darts. 'But you are *infuriatingly* good at this. What's your secret?'

'It's all those hand-eye coordination drills my trainer makes me do,' I reveal as she straightens up again, my gaze trailing over her bare shoulders as she sweeps her hair back, having long since ditched her headband, complaining that it was cute but destined to give her a headache.

I'm having trouble keeping my eyes off her. I'm having even more trouble keeping my hands to myself, tempted to adjust her stance every time she takes a turn. It would just be a quick nudge of her hips, a hand cupping her elbow, fingers encircling her wrist to get her into a better position. But no matter how innocent each touch would be, I already know it would lead me to places I don't need to go, even if I've wanted to for a long time.

'I should have known.' Ava blows out a fake defeated breath. 'Is there anything you're *not* good at?'

'Plenty of things.' Once she returns to my side, I throw my first dart of the round. It lands just outside the bullseye. 'There's a reason no one has ever seen me play golf.'

I'm not joking, but the comment succeeds in making Ava laugh, throaty and loud, and I'm suddenly desperate to know what that sound tastes like on her lips.

That's Omid Farahani's daughter, the little voice in the back of my head hisses. *You know better.*

I absolutely do and yet the warning holds no weight. It's been too long since my chest felt this light, too long since someone put me this at ease, and the idea of backing off and playing it safe feels like cheating myself. I'll cling to this sliver of joy while it deigns to stick around, even if it comes with foolish thoughts. As long as they stay in my head, what danger am I in?

'I bet you're good at that too, you just don't want to embarrass the rest of us mere mortals,' Ava says as my next dart hits just above the last. 'I'm convinced you're good at everything. Greatest F1 driver of all time, world's sexiest humanitarian, fantastic painter . . .'

There are so many parts of that sentence I could unpack, but it's the last bit that stands out. 'How did you know I'm a painter?'

Her gaze goes sly, and I feel the look deep in my gut. 'Are you trying to get me to admit that I've researched you, Mr. Yousef?'

I blink at the confession, hand dropping back to my side. 'You have?'

'Mm-hmm.' Ava clasps her hands in front of her, ever the picture of innocence. 'Know thy enemy, right? Had to learn all about the man who was destined to make my father's life hell.'

It's a completely valid reason, sure. But with the way she sways a little closer and her eyes hold mine, I get the sense that it's not the *only* reason.

Doesn't matter, the little voice snaps. I once again don't bother listening.

'What else do you know about me?' I ask, voice low, barely audible over the outro of 'Hotel California.'

Ava stares up at me through her lashes, lips pursed as she thinks. 'I know you started karting at five years old,' she says. 'That your father was the one who built your first kart, worked three jobs to afford it, and took you to all your races. I know you race under number forty-five because four and five were the numbers of your favorite footballers when you were a kid. And most importantly . . .' She trails off and smiles slowly, stealing all the air from my lungs as she does. 'I know you're a painter because you haven't been very good at hiding it. You bought a gallery so you could showcase some of your own pieces under a pseudonym. It's an open secret in the paddock.'

I chuckle and dip my head in confirmation. I haven't been particularly

secretive about it, but it's nice that she's paid enough attention to put two and two together. 'It's not fair you know these things about me and I hardly know anything about you,' I point out.

I'd like to, though. Have for years. I want to know how she stays so unwaveringly sunny. How she's been through heavy things and still keeps walking in the light. I need her to teach me. Because what I'm feeling right now? It won't last, and I'm dreading the moment it fades.

'It's probably better that way,' she says, brushing me off. 'Wouldn't you rather I stay whoever you've built me up to be?'

No. The answer is immediate and forceful, because I want to know the woman behind the smile, but she's right. I should let her remain a fantasy, let her stay the angel who swept in to help in moments I wouldn't have made it through alone.

But when her gaze drops to my mouth before lifting again, I know that's not going to happen.

'I wouldn't mind knowing more,' I tell her, turning away and throwing my last dart. 'As much as you'll give me.'

Ava's still staring at me when I look down again. 'You can have as much of me as you want.'

I'm about to suggest something I absolutely shouldn't when she laughs and strides back over to the bar to grab her drink. She tips her head back to drain the rest of the whiskey, and I watch her throat work as she swallows, fighting the urge to drag my tongue along the column of her neck. It's the alcohol's influence, I know that, but Ava's intoxicating enough on her own.

'I'll be right back,' she calls, already heading toward the stairs. 'Just need the bathroom.'

She disappears before I can follow her, and it's another few seconds of standing and staring until I finally move back to the bar. The bartender places a glass of water in front of me, and I nod my thanks before she heads off again. I'm alone now, a rarity these days, and I take the opportunity to just . . . breathe.

For once, I actually can. I can suck in a breath that doesn't get caught in the middle of my chest. It slips past the boulder that lives there and fills the corners of my lungs that haven't tasted oxygen in months – maybe even

years. But tonight has loosened something in me that's been twisted tight, and I can thank Ava for it, all because she was brave enough to step in and save me from myself.

I understand too well what she meant about remaining who you've been built up to be in someone's head. For so many people, I exist as a real yet fictional entity they worship. I could have so easily destroyed that illusion tonight and made them hate me instead. I'm usually cautious about every move I make and word I speak, but lately, it's been harder to keep up the facade. It's nice not having to bother with it around Ava – she's already seen what's underneath.

I sip at my water as I wait for her to return, the Rolling Stones fading into Bon Jovi. When Aerosmith starts screaming, I glance at my watch and stand from my barstool, frowning. Ava should have been back by now.

Probably realized this was a bad idea and ditched you, the little voice says as I take the stairs two at a time.

I pause when I reach the top landing. To my left is the rest of the pub, with more horrendous decor and a smattering of patrons, while to my right is a short hallway leading to the toilets. But it's the glass door at the end of the hall that catches my attention, especially when a flash of pink fabric flutters into view.

The February cold is a harsh slap when I push outside and serves to knock some sense into me, but it fades again when I spot Ava in the center of the courtyard. She stands under a canopy of fairy lights with her head thrown back and her hands pressed over her heart, like she's wishing upon a star in the smoggy sky. I'm intruding on a private moment, and yet I keep moving closer, my dress shoes loud against the cracked concrete.

Still, she doesn't look over, just keeps staring up as I take her in. It's a view that I already know I'll mentally paint again and again. It might even be enough to get me to pick up a sketchpad for the first time since the crash.

Fated mates one night, enemies to lovers the next—reading moods change.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google whenever yours does.

‘I needed some air,’ she explains before I can ask. ‘I’m sorry about what happened in there.’

I stand beside her, relaxing with the knowledge that she didn’t abandon me. ‘Sorry for what?’

It’s a beat before her chin drops. ‘For coming on to you so strong.’ She laughs uncomfortably as her hands fall back to her sides. ‘It’s the whiskey. I’m not usually so forward.’

If that was her coming on strong, then I fear I’d be oblivious if she were subtle, but the revelation is enlightening.

‘I didn’t mind,’ I confess, and then watch for her reaction from the corner of my eye.

Ava shakes her head, dismissing me like she doesn’t believe it. ‘I shouldn’t have done it and I’m sorry. You already get enough unwanted attention. You don’t need it from me too.’

I frown at her repeated apology. If only she knew I’ve been on my best behavior to keep from making *her* uncomfortable – that I’ve been so cautious for damn near fifteen years. But now I don’t need to pretend that this thread of attraction isn’t mutual, even if it’s a dangerous notion to acknowledge.

I step in front of her, then anchor my fingers underneath her chin, tilting her head back until she’s forced to meet my eyes. ‘Stop apologizing.’

‘Sor—’

My thumb brushing her lower lip cuts her off. I trace its shape, carefully watching her as I do and giving her the opportunity to stop me, but all I see in her gaze is cautious curiosity.

‘Why did you invite me out tonight, Ava?’ I ask.

She blinks at the blunt question, but her eyes hold mine. ‘Because I wanted whiskey and fries and I didn’t want to go alone.’

‘You could have picked anyone else,’ I counter. ‘Why me?’

She searches my face as if it will tell her what to say. ‘Because we both needed an escape,’ she finally admits.

Now that she’s being honest with me, I want to return the favor. I slip my fingers from under her chin to cup her jaw instead, my thumb stroking over her cheekbone. Ava inhales sharply, surprised, but she doesn’t pull away.

‘This is why you don’t need to apologize,’ I murmur, eyes dropping to her parted lips. ‘But maybe I’m the one coming on too strong now.’

‘You’re not.’ Her answer to my musing is quick and breathless. ‘Definitely not.’

My other hand settles into the curve of her waist, the scent of jasmine mixed with something sweet flooding my senses as I step closer. Our mouths are a breath away, and it would be so easy to close the distance. But with our history and how she’s been treated because of it, I won’t do anything else without permission.

‘Can I kiss you?’ I ask.

She nods, practically knocking our foreheads together. ‘Absolutely. Yes. Please.’

She grips my shirt like she’s holding on for dear life, the rise and fall of her chest stilling as she waits for me to lean in. It makes me want to smile again, makes me brush my nose against hers just to watch her eyes flutter shut, as if the anticipation is too much to handle. It’s only a soft graze when our lips finally meet, but it sends a current down my spine. And when I go in for a proper taste of her, I’m struck by how easy it would be to get lost in this woman.

It takes a beat to coax her mouth open and another before her tongue timidly meets mine. I almost pull away at her hesitance, but then she’s drawing me in, pressing higher on her toes so there’s no mistaking that she wants this. Her enthusiastic words were one thing. This, though? This heats my blood until I swear it could melt the frost lingering on the ground.

I sink my fingers into her hair, slipping through the soft strands until I’m cradling the back of her head. It’s a deep, languorous kiss, more than I expected from her, but Ava’s unafraid to lead and guide, to take what she wants from me.

I taste salt from the fries on her lips, a trace of whiskey on her tongue. I’ll never be able to have either again without thinking about her or this night. She’s ruined both in the best way possible.

We break apart when a small group of people stumbles out of the pub, drunkenly laughing and screeching and, thankfully, paying us no mind as they huddle in the opposite corner to smoke. It’s a reminder that we could

so easily be caught, and all the rumors about us could kick up again. They'd undoubtedly be worse this time.

But it doesn't make me step back or let her go completely. Don't think I could unless she shoved me away, and she still has me in her grasp. Her cheeks are flushed and her skin is hot under my touch, like she feels the burn of this as much as I do.

'That was . . .' She trails off to suck in a lungful of air, her eyes lifting to mine and holding before she boldly declares, 'I'm staying not far from here if you want to do that again without getting interrupted.'

There's nothing I'd like more than to do that again. I've thrown years of caution to the wind already, and now that I've had a taste of her, I'm desperate for more. *This* is what I've been missing while being on my best behavior, and I'm furious I've been deprived of it, all because the ridiculous taboo of her being part of a rival team kept us apart. I'm so fucking *tired* of always doing what's expected of me, of making all the 'right' choices.

But I shouldn't do it. I *really* shouldn't.

'Absolutely. Yes. Please,' I say instead.

Ava laughs, finding humor in my gentle mocking, and it rings through the night. Then she tugs on my shirt, forcing me down to her eye level. 'But let me make something clear,' she says. 'Whatever happens tonight, that's it, okay? A one-time thing. And no one can know. I have no interest in being publicly tied to you again.' She pauses before tacking on, 'No offense.'

It's my turn to laugh, and even though the scratch of it is still unfamiliar, it feels more natural than it has in too long. 'Don't worry. I understand.'

As her grip on me loosens, her smile widens. 'Let's go ruin your idea of me.'

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CHAPTER 5
Ava

If eighteen-year-old Ava could see me now, she would scream. Even at my current age, I'm not far off from freaking out because *Zaid Yousef*, racing legend and my lingering teenage crush, is following me to my bedroom.

Well, not *my* bedroom exactly, but it's the guest room Edith keeps for me in her Soho flat, a place currently littered with cardboard boxes and other hazards from moving. I do my best to warn Zaid as we make our way down the dimly lit hall, but I'm the one who trips, catching my heel on a box labeled *Junk???*

His arm darts around my waist to keep me from tumbling to the floor, and I clutch at his shoulders for extra measure. I hold tighter when he backs me against the wall, and I catch his smirk before he leans in, picking up where we left off at the pub. We were forced to keep our distance for the short walk here, not wanting to get caught by curious eyes, but I'm done staying away.

It's been years since the last time I kissed a man, even longer since I brought one home with me, so when Zaid stroked his thumb over my cheek and asked if he could kiss me, any thoughts that this might be a bad idea disappeared into thin air. And when our lips met, I felt the heat of it all the way down in my bones.

It's the same sensation now as he kisses me again, slow and sweet and utterly unhurried, like we have all the time in the world. But that's not our reality – this is a one-night-only production. The fact that he couldn't wait any longer tells me he wants to make the most of the opportunity we have together, and he's not alone in that.

I twine my arms around his neck, delighting in the slide of his tongue against mine and the way he nips at my lips whenever we break to breathe. I'd be a puddle on the carpet if he weren't propping me up, and when he

spreads my knees with his own, his thigh pressing against the aching parts of me, I know it's past time we made it to the bedroom.

I push him back just enough so he can't distract me with another kiss. 'Second door on the right. Go.'

He grabs my hand and tugs me along. I press the door shut once we're inside, locking it even though we're the only ones here, but it's better to be safe than have Edith or her husband accidentally walking in.

My pulse quickens as Zaid turns to me, his fingers squeezing mine as he closes the distance. He keeps moving even when our bodies are flush, backing me against the chest of drawers next to the door, the top of it just tall enough for my hips to rest against. He holds off on kissing me again, taking time to stand in the moment and drink it in. There's a faint flush across his cheekbones as his heavy-lidded eyes roam over my face. They're a little dazed, like he can't believe this is happening, but the glint in them tells me he's pleased it all worked out this way.

I certainly didn't expect to end up here with him tonight, let alone ever, but it feels . . . right. It's a full-circle moment to finally make good on some of the rumors, a subtle *fuck you* to a world that thought they knew us but will never know of this.

'You look amazing in this dress,' Zaid says as his touch drifts to the zipper that spans the length of my spine. 'But I'm desperate to see you out of it.'

I place my hands on his chest as his fingers snag the zipper, pulling it down so slowly that I squirm with impatience, like that will help him do it faster. The motion has me grinding against him, his hardness pressing into my stomach through the fabric of his tuxedo pants and only making me more eager to be undressed.

Finally, he finishes unzipping and slips the off-the-shoulder straps down my arms with careful ease. It takes a little persuasion to get the fitted bodice over my hips, leaving Zaid to dip low as he pulls it down my thighs. He's even kind enough to help me step out of it, my hands on his shoulders as I lift one heeled foot and then the other. I expect him to rise again after he flicks the gown away, but he kneels instead, gazing up at me in a way that feels like worship.

I’ve never been so glad for matching lingerie and the sugaring appointment I nearly canceled earlier this week. They allow me to stand confidently under his stare, even going so far as to press my shoulders back so he can have a better view. I don’t think a man has ever taken me in this reverently, and I’m not about to squander a moment of it.

‘Can I touch you here?’ he murmurs, hands lightly caressing the backs of my calves.

‘Yeah,’ I exhale, but I really want to shout that he can touch me anywhere he likes, however he likes.

His fingers move up to my thighs, and I nod in encouragement when he cups my ass, dragging my hips away from the wood so his face is within inches of my lace panties.

‘What about here?’ His lips hover over the crease of my thigh, breath tickling my skin.

‘God, yes, please.’

He licks away a smile before pressing a kiss there, then to the other side, alternating back and forth, inching a little closer to my center each time. When his lips graze the top edge of the lace, his eyes snap up to mine. His pupils are so blown out that I can’t discern them from the brown of his irises in the low light.

‘And can I kiss you here?’

I suck in a shuddering breath. ‘I might scream if you don’t.’

‘I’d rather you scream when I do.’

I almost laugh, but it catches in my throat when he kisses me over the fabric, trailing down to the aching spot between my thighs. And when he hooks a finger around the lace to pull my panties to the side, exposing me to him and the cool air of the bedroom, all I can do is gasp as the heat in my stomach ignites from embers to a bonfire.

It’s torturous how slowly he moves, pressing more featherlight kisses to my skin until I’m ready to stomp my foot and tell him to put his whole damn mouth on me. The man must have the power of telepathy, though, because the second the thought crosses my mind, he glides his fingers down my slick seam and his tongue follows suit.

A nearly incoherent ‘Oh my god, holy shit’ tumbles from my lips as my

hands slap down on the dresser, bracing myself against the onslaught of sensation. I'm glad for the support when his free hand grips under my thigh, hiking it over his shoulder and fully opening me, and my mind goes blank when he swipes the flat of his tongue against my clit. It takes everything in me not to dig my stiletto into his back when he does it again.

I'll admit, I *may* have fantasized about this a few times over the years. Maybe more than a few. Okay, maybe more like *a lot*. But nothing could have prepared me for the reality of Zaid on his knees in front of me, tuxedo jacket unbuttoned and brushing against my bare legs as he eats like a man starved.

My inner thighs quickly turn to jelly, quivering and shaking as he slips a finger into me, adding just a hint of pressure that makes what he's doing to my clit all the more intense. The rough scratch of his stubble is sure to leave my skin red for days, but I'll bear it with pride as a souvenir of this night.

I can't take my eyes off him, wanting to commit every inch of him and this moment to memory, something to revisit fondly and often when the nights are dark and lonely. He works me over with such ease, licking and biting and sucking in all the ways that threaten to have me coming in record time. Watching him is like witnessing the painting of a masterpiece, the composition of a symphony, all done by a man who's too beautiful for his own good.

I'm stretched taut under his touch, throwing my head back as I try to escape the overwhelming build, all of it happening too fast. But he doesn't let me escape. He pins my bucking hips against the drawers, the brass pulls indenting my skin. And when he adds a second finger, it escalates the ache to nearly unbearable heights.

'Zaid,' I pant, and his low groan in response vibrates through my core.

My hands go from being splayed flat on top of the wood to digging scratches into the enamel with my nails. It's probably an irreplaceable antique, but I can't stop. I can't stop the filthy moan that leaves me either when he crooks his fingers up into the perfect spot.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the orgasm rips through me, inner walls gripping and pulsing around his fingers as he continues to lap at me, dragging it out until I'm so sensitive that I have to put a hand to his

forehead to push him back. My panties slide back into place when he lets go, and I feel him chuckle against my thigh as he places kisses there instead, waiting for me to come back down to earth.

‘If I’d known flirting with you would lead to this,’ I say before gasping in a breath, ‘I would have done it sooner.’

‘You should have.’ Zaid kisses my inner thigh one more time before gently placing my foot back on the floor. ‘I’ve wondered what you tasted like for years.’

I barely have a moment to acknowledge his confession before he rises and clasps a hand around the back of my neck, dragging my mouth to his for a rough kiss. He lets me taste myself on his tongue, and then he’s pulling away, leaving me panting for more.

He grabs my hands and backs toward the armchair in the corner, sitting down hard and pulling me onto his lap, my knees on either side of his hips. His cock strains against the confines of his tuxedo pants and I impulsively rock into him, wanting to feel every inch.

‘You’re going to kill me,’ he groans into my neck as I grind down. ‘Gonna make me come in my trousers like a fucking teenager.’

‘So take them off,’ I say as I push his jacket from his shoulders. ‘Problem solved.’

‘You trying to get me naked, Ava?’

‘I’ve always been curious about what’s under your fireproofs.’

He shrugs out of the jacket and watches me as I start unbuttoning his shirt. ‘Guess I’m not the only one who’s thought about this before.’

I freeze when I realize what I’ve accidentally admitted, then lean in to kiss his neck to hide the color creeping across my cheeks. He smells like oud and sandalwood and something else warm and spicy that I can’t place but has me nuzzling closer to get another hit. ‘Yeah, yeah. I’ve always thought you were cute. Don’t let it go to your head.’

‘Too late,’ he murmurs, hands sliding to my ass and rocking me against him. ‘My ego is growing.’

‘I don’t think that’s your ego I feel.’ I pull his shirt free from his pants with adrenaline-trembling fingers. ‘But I’ll check just to be sure.’

‘So you *are* trying to get me naked.’ He mockingly tsks, but he doesn’t

stop me from pushing his shirt open.

His skin underneath is a warm tan, verging on bronze, with a dusting of hair that I immediately run my fingers over. He's muscled and lean and so flawless that I want to drag my teeth across his skin just to leave a mark.

But as he unbuttons his cuffs and takes off his shirt, I see he already has scars – two of them, one on each wrist, long and thin and dotted with little spots where every stitch was placed. The healed skin is still pink, still raised, still fresh enough, and when he catches me looking his face shutters.

'I expected you to have tattoos,' I blurt, hoping that will distract him from thinking too hard about what those scars mean. But I really *did* expect him to have at least one tattoo hiding under there. 'You're a shockingly blank canvas.'

A bit of his guardedness lifts at my observation. 'My mother would kill me if I got a single tattoo. Even if she never saw it, she'd know.'

I wrinkle my nose, palms splayed on his solid chest. 'Ooh, maybe we *don't* talk about your mom right now, yeah?'

That's all it takes for his smile to return. It's small but open, his eyes alight once again. 'Probably best,' he agrees, dragging me forward on his lap, making me swallow back a moan. 'We don't need to talk at all.'

His lips find mine, our tongues tangling in another kiss that feels as if it could go on forever. Somehow, even when we break for breath, our lips never leave each other. They linger on jaws and corners of mouths. They whisper against skin, brush noses and cheeks and chins. I don't know if I've ever been so content to simply sit and kiss, giggling when his stubble tickles my neck and twisting his soft hair between my fingers. His hands alternate between my hips and thighs and waist and ass, squeezing and gripping but never in a way that's too much.

But there comes a point when I'm breathing too hard – too hot and too overdressed in just a bra and underwear. Even shirtless, he's also wearing too much. I want to feel skin on skin.

His teeth snag my bottom lip when my hands trail to his belt buckle, his eyes opening lazily as if the move has broken the trance we've been in. He presses his lips to the crook of my neck once I have the buckle undone, and

when his open-mouthed kisses drop to my collarbone, I lose whatever coordination I have left to get his pants open.

‘We should stop.’ He mumbles the words against the hollow of my throat, still kissing and biting, making no move to do what he says.

‘Do we have to?’ I ask breathlessly, but my weak hands cease their progress.

‘I don’t *want* to,’ he clarifies. ‘But I’m happy to keep doing exactly this for as long as you want.’

My stomach sinks and twists, even though it really shouldn’t. Tonight has been more than I could have ever hoped for, more than I ever expected, and I’m being greedy. This should be enough.

Still, I ask, ‘Why?’ I’m glad it doesn’t come out as a petulant whine.

Zaid chuckles, and I don’t even care that he’s essentially laughing at me. ‘Because I don’t have a condom,’ he says, punctuating the explanation with a kiss right below my ear. ‘And if you get my trousers off, I’m going to fuck you across that big, plush bed over there.’

It’s a perfectly reasonable explanation, and I know he’s right. I’m not on birth control and I know nothing about his health history. It’s a risk neither of us should take.

Still, our inability to do more makes me want to grumble – until I remember something that has me sitting up straighter, and has Zaid groaning as I press down harder on his lap.

‘There are condoms in the bedside table.’

At least, there should be if Edith hasn’t cleared them out for the move, left over from when I was here for her birthday party last year and delusional enough to think I might actually hit it off with one of the guys she was determined to set me up with. Needless to say, they all went unused.

‘Good to know,’ he says, back to kissing my neck, but he makes no move to get up and throw me across the bed like I want.

‘Zaid?’ I prompt.

‘Mm?’

‘I’m telling you we should use them.’

He freezes for a moment before his arms circle my waist and hold tight.

‘Oh, thank fuck,’ he says gruffly. ‘I don’t think I could have taken another minute of this.’

‘Big switch-up from what you were saying before.’

‘I was trying to be responsible.’ He pushes to standing and I throw my legs around him. ‘Now we both get what we want.’

We fall together in a heap on the mattress, knocking nearly all the air from my lungs, and whatever’s left is immediately stolen by his lips. His kisses are urgent and heated, with a new hunger to them that I feverishly match as my nails drag down his chest. This time I don’t stop when I reach his pants, unbuttoning and unzipping like a woman possessed until I can slip my hand past the waistband of his underwear. He groans and breaks our kiss when my fingers wrap around his length, giving him an experimental stroke that has a full-body shudder racking through him.

Zaid grasps my wrist and pulls it up between us. ‘Do that again and I’m not even going to get the chance to be inside you.’

I’m laughing before I can stop myself, head thrown back into the pillow as he nips at my throat in revenge. ‘We better solve that.’

I shimmy out from underneath him just enough that I can reach the bedside table, jerking open the drawer and rummaging inside until my fingers wrap around a foil packet. When he sees what’s in my hand, Zaid stands and makes quick work of the rest of his clothes. The sight I’m presented with when the last article hits the floor leaves me slack-jawed.

‘Wow.’ It’s the only word that comes to mind as I take him in, all hard muscles and sharp lines, the evidence of years working tirelessly in the gym. And the rest of him? The universe clearly has favorites, because Zaid is *definitely* one of them. ‘You’re – *wow*.’

He smirks as he grabs my ankle, gently prying off one of my pumps. ‘High praise.’

My laugh this time is weak, more of a nervous exhale, because he’s almost intimidatingly perfect. But he takes my reaction in stride, tossing my other shoe to the floor before kneeling on the bed, giving me a better view of him. I’m already reaching to undo the clasp of my bra when he curls his fingers around the sides of my panties, dragging them down with fervor.

‘Fuck, Ava,’ he murmurs when the lace set is on the floor, his eyes

trailing down my body. ‘Do you have any idea how badly I want you?’

I practically throw the condom at him, needing more than just his admiration, sublime as it is. He rips the wrapper open and rolls it on with ease before lowering himself between my legs, cock sliding against my slickness. We both groan.

I’m wet from plenty of foreplay, but I still reach into the drawer again to grab a small bottle of lube, placing it beside us and trying not to let the heat that creeps into my cheeks stop me from asking for what I need.

‘Sorry, sometimes I just need a little help,’ I explain, because as great as sex can be, it can also be uncomfortable at the start.

Zaid doesn’t blink, unfazed by my request. ‘What did I say about apologizing?’

He keeps me from answering by leaning down for a bruising kiss, and by the time he’s done I’ve forgotten what I was apologizing for. When he pulls back this time, it’s to grab the other pillow, which he slides under my hips after tapping me to lift them.

And then he’s back between my thighs, one forearm braced next to my head while his other hand brushes between my breasts, down my stomach, and circles my clit until I’m panting and bucking and swearing at him to just fuck me. All he does is smile.

Finally, he grabs the lube, squeezing out just enough, and then he’s braced over me, cock nudging at my entrance. I gasp at the stretch as he pushes in, grateful for both the lube and the pillow because I can’t lie – it’s been a while and he’s *a lot* to handle. He doesn’t rush, just takes his time, moving inch by inch until I cant my hips, wordlessly asking for more until he’s completely seated inside me.

‘How’s that?’ he asks, and I wish I could appreciate the breathy note in his voice better, but I’m too focused on how overwhelmingly full I am.

‘It’s – *fuck*.’ I blurt the curse as he pulls out slightly and pushes back in, somehow filling me deeper this time.

His laugh is a rumble against my temple. ‘That’s what I thought.’

When he starts to move in earnest, it’s with shallow strokes until I relax around him. I run my hands over his broad back and shoulders, reveling in the warmth of his skin, in the scent of him surrounding me, of how *real* he

is. He's still the idol, the icon, the god that so many worship at the altar of. No one can ever take that away from him. It glows around him, a halo of eminence. But here, with me, he's also a man with calloused hands and soft eyes who's worshiping at *my* altar.

He peppers kisses anywhere he can reach – my neck, my collarbones, down my shoulder and over until his tongue flicks at my nipple. My moans and little sounds of pleasure spur him on, driving deeper into me. And when I lift my knees, bringing them closer to my chest and spreading wider for him, his measured movements lose some of their control.

'Like that,' I breathe out as he hits a spot that makes my stomach twist into the most perfect knots. '*God*, just like that. Don't stop.'

He obliges until I'm begging him for more, harder, repeating 'yes' and 'please' until the words lose their meaning. He gives me enough to keep me on the brink, but not the push I need to get over the edge, and it's the sweetest form of torture.

'You're taking me so well, sweetheart. Tell me how it feels.'

I dig my nails into his back as I try to form a coherent thought. 'It feels —' I cut short when he hitches my left thigh higher, a moan escaping instead with his next stroke. It takes a few more seconds of breathing before I can speak again, and even then the words are barely more than a whine. 'I think you know how it feels.'

He smirks and runs his thumb over my lips before pushing it into my mouth. I swirl my tongue around it and suck, smiling at the way he shivers and stills for a moment before finding a rhythm again.

'You were right about ruining my idea of you. It's gone.'

I squeeze around him in reply, which earns me a string of expletives as his thumb slips from my mouth, composure disappearing. When his hand travels lower and his touch finds my clit, I'm the one with no composure left to speak of.

'But I'd rather have this version of you,' he murmurs, rubbing tight circles as he snaps his hips.

My thighs tremble. I'm close, so close that it's not going to take much to finally reach the top of this towering peak, pushed to heights that have me panting. And when it finally happens, it's incendiary, like crackling flames

licking at every inch of me, igniting every nerve ending until I burn completely through.

The rush of my climax triggers his, and with a few more stuttering thrusts, he follows me over the edge, his face buried in my neck as his body shudders. The hand between us slowly rises until he's cupping my cheek, lifting his head to give me one last deep kiss before he rolls off to my side.

My heart hammers and my chest heaves as I recover, and I can't help but slap a hand on his chest to see if he's in the same state.

'Fuck,' he exhales, his hand falling on top of mine. Under my palm, his heart thunders. 'There are more condoms in that drawer, right?'

I want to laugh, but all I can do is suck in another lungful of air. 'How can you possibly be thinking about doing that again already? I'm going to need five business days to recover.'

Zaid grasps my hand and drags it to his lips, speaking against my knuckles. 'Haven't got enough of you yet.'

'Charmer.'

'Let me show you how charming I can be.'

And then he makes me come four more times.

Hours later, I'm sprawled across his chest, satiated and completely spent. Somewhere in the heap of clothes on the floor, a phone buzzes, but neither of us moves to get it, content to bask in the afterglow.

'It's probably my driver,' Zaid says against my hair, fingers drifting up and down my spine. 'My original plan was to head home early. I have a morning flight out to Bahrain tomorrow.'

Pre-season testing, where all the teams' cars will be out on-track together for the first time, starts on Wednesday, so it's no surprise that he's heading to Bahrain for it a few days early. I know from experience how killer that first time-zone change of the season can be, so he's smart to give himself a chance to acclimate.

I lift my head enough to glance at the clock on the bedside table, which tells me it's nearly midnight. 'Do you need to go?'

'I'm not rushing.' He traces his fingers up my neck and sinks them into my hair, pulling my head back so that he can brush his mouth across mine. 'Don't want this night to end yet. Best one I've had in a long, long time.'

‘Best one? Really?’ I tease against his lips. ‘Even though you nearly punched an old man in the middle of a perfectly nice party?’

‘I’m choosing to ignore that part. My night started when you stole me away from the party and then snuck me up into your tower.’ He kisses me again, slow and tender, before murmuring, ‘Might start to think you really are a princess.’

‘Mm, don’t blow my cover.’

We keep kissing, drunk off each other now that the whiskey has worn off, only reluctantly stopping when his phone buzzes again.

Zaid pulls away and sighs, dragging his free hand over his eyes. ‘Guess it’s time to go.’

‘It is,’ I agree, pushing down the growing desperation to keep him here, because that was never what this night was supposed to be about. ‘Don’t want your carriage to turn into a pumpkin.’

He drops his hand, staring at me like he’s trying hard not to smile. It’s been a delight watching him relax and light up, and I’ll savor this rare peek behind the curtain of such a private man. I doubt I’ll see it again.

I roll to the other side of the bed, freeing him to get up, and I admire his spectacular backside as he heads to the bathroom. When he emerges again, he moves to our shared pile of clothes and gently tosses the pieces that belong to me onto the duvet before tugging on his own.

‘Are you gonna be in the paddock this season?’ he asks as he zips his trousers.

I shake my head and lean against the headboard, tucking the sheet around my torso as he sits to put on his shoes. ‘No. Not with Specter, at least. I’m not really welcome back there after . . .’ I motion vaguely, knowing he’ll understand what I’m referring to. ‘Everything.’

I swear guilt flashes across his face before his expression settles back into that pleasant neutral.

‘Besides,’ I go on, deciding not to dwell on it, ‘I don’t think I’d be up for that much travel.’

He shoots me a doubtful look as he shrugs into his shirt. ‘Really?’

He’s right to be suspicious, but if he’s waiting for me to explain myself, he’s wasting his time. I’ve only told Edith and a few other friends about my

plans to be a single parent, one who won't abandon her kid to go galivanting around the world for the sake of motorsport. I certainly haven't told my family, especially not my father or maman bozorg, who'd both be upset that I'm doing this alone and unmarried. Dad would probably attempt to talk me into waiting until I met someone to settle down with, while my grandmother would whip out a binder of potential suitors I could be married to within the month. Since I don't want either, I'm not telling them anything until I'm nearly to my due date. Hard to yell at a heavily pregnant woman, you know?

And I'm definitely not telling Zaid Yousef, because no one's one-night stand wants to hear about their plans for a baby. I'm sure he'd keep my secrets, though. I've kept his.

After a slight pause, Zaid pushes on. 'Thanks again for saving me tonight,' he says as he buttons his cuffs, hiding away his scars. 'Can't say I have any interest in ever going back to that pub, though.'

I laugh. 'Happy to have given you inspiration for your next nightmare.'

The silence that follows should be awkward, but all I feel is content, and Zaid's small smile is a comfort. This was a perfect night and I'm happy to leave it at that, even if that lingering burn to ask him to stay the night is there.

'Take care of yourself, yeah?' he says, and I swear he's hesitating, waiting for me to tell him to come back to bed.

But I know better, and it's time to listen to reason, no matter how much I'd rather ignore it.

'You do the same,' I tell him, a gentle dismissal. 'I'll be rooting for you.' I pause before flashing him a grin. 'But I'll be rooting for Axel more.'

He chuckles and dips his chin. 'You're a bloody pest, princess.'

'People have called me worse.' I give him a happy little wave. 'See you around.'

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CHAPTER 6
Zaid

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What's better than hot men in tuxedos? F1 drivers in tuxedos, baby. Over the weekend, teams, drivers, and sponsors reunited in London for a pre-season gala, and some photos from the night have just leaked – including a blurry snap of two people who we were *not* expecting to see together.

Multiple sources claim they witnessed Zaid Yousef speaking to Ava Farahani – daughter of Omid Farahani (team principal of Specter Energy) and Zaid's rumored ex-girlfriend. Sources also claim that neither looked happy about this run-in. It's not surprising, considering the rumors that their breakup wasn't amicable. Apparently, it was so bad that Ava left her job at Specter Energy (nepo baby queen) and disappeared from the F1 world completely. I mean, we get it, girl. We've done drastic things to avoid our exes too.

Anyway, for those of you who care more about the actual sport than the interpersonal drama (we're not sure why you're following us in that case), pre-season testing in Bahrain begins today, and there's just over one week to go before the first grand prix of the season. Until then, let's all enjoy the last moments of silly season and the look-at-me-shirtless-on-a-yacht photos these rich (and incredibly ripped) men love to post.

Leave your season predictions in the comments! We think Axel Bergmüller is going to come back raging and Zaid Yousef will match him blow for blow, but we're not counting out last year's champion, Reid Coleman, just yet. Reid could have a shot at a second title, especially if his homeboy Dev Anderson continues his streak of giving up his lead to Reid in the last few laps. More importantly, Reid's going to need his team at D'Ambrosi to not be an absolute clown show for once, but we're not sure they're capable of anything but pure fuckery.

COMMENTS

no1_axel_berg_fan Axel's taking the championship this year no doubt

no1_axel_berg_fan then again Zaid won the year he was supposedly fucking Farahani's daughter so maybe good pussy is the way to a championship idk

Bahrain

Dev Anderson is, in short, a fucking muppet.

Fortunately, he's the most competent muppet I've ever met, a talented driver with a good head on his shoulders. It was a smart move on Mascort's behalf not only to sign him to be my teammate this season, but to have him replace me in the grands prix I missed last year. His impressive string of podium finishes was the only reason Mascort won the Constructors' Championship instead of giving it up to Specter Energy, making him our team's savior.

Shame all that doesn't make him any less annoying.

'Still can't believe they're letting two brown people be on a team,' Dev says, practically bouncing in the passenger seat as I drive us from our hotel to the Sakhir circuit, the sights of Bahrain flashing by out the window. 'Wouldn't be surprised if the FIA finds a rule against it.'

I try to tune out Dev's blathering, wishing the team hadn't insisted on us carpooling for the sake of *teammate bonding*. Or, really, they want it to look like we're one big happy racing family to everyone on the outside, because friendship is marketable.

Dev makes a decent point, though. This isn't a very diverse sport, and while he and I represent some of the progress made, there's still so far to go.

'You excited to be back at it?' he asks. 'Bet you missed all this shit while you were gone.'

I keep my eyes on the road at his question, avoiding his curiosity. Dev doesn't need to see the unease that lingers in my gaze or the fear I keep having to swallow back. I'm sure it already shows in my tense shoulders and the terse answers I've been giving him and everyone else. How I haven't been called on it or been taken aside for a private conversation by a higher-up is a mystery, because how has no one noticed this seismic shift? Am I the only one who feels it?

'Yeah,' I answer once I crush the dread back into its too-small box.

Dev waits for me to elaborate, but there's nothing else I want to say about the start of pre-season testing today.

I used to like testing and the build-up to the season. After months of simulator work and the shakedown a week before the official testing days to see if the new car would even drive, I'd have a taste of what was to come. But there was always more to be discovered, more to push for, and it would become clear during those three exhilarating days on-track.

Now, though? I'm trying to keep down the muesli my trainer shoved at me this morning, because the idea of racing again makes me sick.

I still don't know how I survived the shakedown. I don't know how I climbed into the car for the first time without having a panic attack, all while being watched and filmed and photographed by everyone imaginable for marketing material. I don't know how I did lap after lap at Silverstone – albeit slow ones compared to typical race pace – without hyperventilating inside my helmet. Was it muscle memory? Do something enough times and you'll never forget, right? Like riding a bike.

Except this proverbial bike is an eight-hundred-kilo race car going two hundred miles an hour.

'The car felt pretty good in the shakedown,' Dev goes on when I don't fill the silence. 'I mean, I know it was only a few laps around the track, but hey, at least it didn't explode or anything, so that's a plus. I guess we won't know for sure what we're working with until we do a full run.'

'Right.'

'And we won't *really* know how we stack up until next week's race. You ready for it, buddy?'

'Sure.'

I don't want to be an asshole, but this is all I can manage. I need to get my shit together because Dev doesn't deserve to face the brunt of my anxiety spiral. I don't dislike the guy. He's ridiculous, sure, but he has an edge I respect, plus a sharpness that can't and shouldn't be ignored.

But I don't foresee us being more than teammates and acquaintances, and him calling me *buddy* in his charming California-boy accent only sets my teeth further on edge. My last teammate and I had a slightly better

relationship by simple virtue of being paired together for five years – and his knowing he was always going to be the number-two driver.

But I get the vibe that Dev's hungry to do more than just support me, and it's easier to be friends with someone when they're not your direct competition. But in Formula 1, your teammate is the one person you're always looking to beat.

'Are you nervous for today?' I ask him before he can ramble on, even though the answer is obvious.

Dev tucks a finger under the neck of his black Mascort T-shirt, tugging the fabric away from his throat, then glances at me from the corner of his eye. 'Will you judge me if I say yes?'

'Not at all.'

'Then yes,' he blurts. 'I'm so excited I could scream, but I'm also shitting myself. I *never* felt anxious at Argonaut, not since my rookie season. They barely developed the car from year to year unless there were major regulation changes. I knew it like it was part of me. But filling in for you last season . . .' He trails off before blowing out a heavy breath. 'I did well enough, but I was fighting for my fucking life the whole time. It's like I'd been driving in easy mode for five years and suddenly someone turned the difficulty up to extra hard.'

Some of the pressure in my chest eases with his confession because I understand that feeling all too well. I've had nearly two decades to hone my craft, and ten of those years have been spent at Mascort as their number-one driver. I can't definitively say the cars were designed around my tastes, but they were built with my input and preferences at front of mind. Anyone who can't fit the standards I've set has to either cope the best they can or pack it up.

But before that? When I was still young and green and paired with veterans who were in the same privileged position I am now? Shit was rough.

'I've always been in awe of you,' Dev goes on, 'but driving your car, it . . . changed things for me. I've never been scared behind the wheel before, but that experience took *years* off my life. You make it look easy, and no one realizes how hard you work for it to seem that way.'

I appreciate the recognition of my labor, but I'm hung up on his vulnerability. I've never admitted anything to a teammate like he's confessing to me now, even though I've felt it before, all because they would have used it against me. His ability to let it out so easily is enviable and shows some of the progress this sport has seen over the years. The only people I've ever been able to be so open with are my therapist, my father, and . . . Ava.

Both times with her were a mistake – a wrong-place, wrong-time situation that she happened to stumble upon. But when it happened last week, I *wanted* her to see beneath the mask, to let her prod at the parts of me that have yet to heal. Because, for some reason, I knew she'd understand.

I've lost count of how many times today alone I've found my mind drifting toward her, adding to an endless tally in the five days since the party. It shouldn't come as a surprise – I've always struggled to keep her out of my head, starting from the first time I saw her in the paddock fifteen years ago.

It must be a trend with her, because she made me laugh on that day too. It was back before she started working for Specter Energy, still in university and traveling with her father over her summer break. She was fresh-faced and beaming, like the behind-the-scenes chaos was the most amazing thing she'd ever experienced, and her teasing smile stole my attention.

She was walking beside Omid, ribbing him after a contentious qualifying session that had resulted in one of their drivers being slapped with a ten-place grid penalty. When we passed each other as I was on my way back to Deschamp's motorhome, I overheard her innocently offer to speak to the FIA – the governing body of our sport – to get the penalty reduced, suggesting increasingly outrageous solutions at a rapid-fire pace every time the man exhaustedly shot her down.

My snicker caught her attention, and when our eyes met, she didn't waste a second before shooting me a wink and loudly declaring, 'Well if you won't let me go in there and cry, I say we just go with good old-fashioned bribery.'

That moment was enough to make me ask around about her, curious to

know who the beautiful girl terrorizing Omid Farahani was. The discovery that she was his daughter didn't stop me from stealing more glances at her over the years – all right, sometimes more than a glance – but it always kept me from getting too close.

I'm certain her father warned her away from me back then. Who wouldn't have? I had a playboy reputation and a penchant for recklessness – any parent's nightmare. But Omid wasn't the only one with warnings. My own father once caught me looking her way, and while his lips never moved, his expression said it all. *Don't make trouble for yourself.*

Well, I've gone and made trouble anyway, unable to keep myself from following the trail of my youthful infatuation, still harboring a crush on a woman I should have stayed far away from, especially after turning her life upside down.

And I should still stay away. Yet here I am, thinking about how nice it would be to bump into her in the paddock and pick up where we left off. It pains me to admit it, but even after years and a night that will only live on in my memories, Ava Farahani still has a hold over me.

But this isn't the time to be fantasizing about dropping to my knees and tasting her again or how her laugh alone puts a smile on my face. I need to focus on what lies ahead, because it's coming up fast.

I spare a glance at Dev, pulling on a thread I've been marginally curious about over the past few months. 'So you're saying you didn't throw those races so Reid Coleman could win the Drivers' Championship?' I ask casually. 'It was just you getting used to the car?'

His head snaps in my direction, brown eyes wide. 'What?'

I might not have been on the grid for the last few races of the season, but it doesn't mean I was oblivious to the rumors. The loudest talk concerned Dev's performance and how, even after multiple pole positions and leading nearly every lap of several grands prix, Reid beat him to P1 week after week.

Dev and Reid are friends, or as friendly as lifelong competitors can be. They came into F1 in the same season, along with Axel and Thomas, but as Americans who grew up in the same karting circuits, they've always been more familiar with each other. Everyone knows Reid hasn't had the easiest

go of it at Scuderia D'Ambrosi, the Italian constructor that was also Lorenzo Castellucci's team, and after five years of inching closer to the top, he finally got his chance to win the Drivers' Championship after his teammate took Axel and me out of contention. Reid wouldn't have won without those factors – and without Dev continuously being the runner-up when he could have easily taken the top step of the podium.

Dev doesn't need me to repeat myself, so I wait for his answer as I follow the directions of a traffic marshal guiding me toward the VIP car park.

'Do you—' He cuts off, shaking his head once, dark hair falling into his eyes. 'Do you actually believe I'd do that?'

The question has rattled him, and I'm inclined to think that he might have done it. 'What I believe is that I don't care either way,' I tell him as I pull into our designated parking spot. 'Mascort still won the Constructors' thanks to your help.'

Dev isn't pacified. 'I—' he says, but this time he's interrupted by a knock on the window, the smiling face of Mascort's lead social media admin appearing. When I spot the phone in her hand, already recording us, I know this conversation is over.

Like a switch has been flipped, Dev is back to full muppet, all bright eyes and beaming smiles as he opens his car door. There's no trace of his worry left, nothing to hint that I might know his secrets, but there's a deep well to be explored.

'It's showtime,' Dev says, glancing back over his shoulder at me. 'Smile for the camera, buddy.'

———

I'm the first up to drive.

Testing days are split into two sessions – morning and afternoon – and each team sends one driver out on-track per session. Sometimes it's the same driver for both sessions that day. Sometimes it's split between the two. And today, I'm the miserable sod who's climbing into the cockpit bright and early for the inaugural go-round.

There's no observing Dev behind the wheel first, no hanging back with

the team, no getting my bearings or having time to force myself off the ledge. My chats with the engineers, the pit crew, and our team principal are finished. I'm fully zipped into my race suit, boots on my feet, balaclava near to suffocating me. I'm warmed up and physically ready for what's about to be thrown at me. All that's left is to just . . . drive.

'Want a hand in?' my trainer asks, drawing my attention away from the black-and-silver carbon-fiber beast in front of me.

It's an innocent question. I've requested help before, an elbow to hold onto or a higher step stool to aid in clearing the height of the halo. But that's not the help I need.

'I'm all right,' I make myself say.

The garage isn't particularly hot, but I'm sweating under my fireproofs, the material clinging to me in ways I've never been bothered by before. Today, I'm choked and constricted, tempted to unzip my suit and grab one of the cooling apparatuses they use on the car and direct it toward me instead. If there weren't five photographers, an entire video crew, and an FIA official documenting my every move, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Their presence is what gets me to move, not wanting to be watched up close like a zoo animal. Thankfully my helmet's already on and I've turned away enough that they can't see the reluctance in my eyes. As I grip the halo, the photographers take shot after shot of the scars that peek past my sleeves, and I can imagine the black-and-white edits they'll post with some bullshit inspirational quote underneath.

My sweaty palms nearly slip off the titanium bar, but I swing my right leg into the cockpit without stumbling and drag my left in behind it. I take a second to adjust my suit before lowering myself down into the custom contours of my seat. And then I'm in.

My heart gallops in a ragged rhythm as I plug into the radio and put on my gloves while someone does up my seat belt. It'll be a miracle if none of the three dozen people standing around see the way my hands shake, but I hide it by clutching the steering wheel tight.

My lead engineer leans down to give me last-minute guidance on how to take the corners and curbs, along with what data the team is looking to collect. It's simple stuff, nothing out of the ordinary, and yet I have to will

my mind to stop screaming so I can pay attention. I flip down my visor once he stands, needing more separation between me and the world.

After dragging in a few more deep breaths, I relax into the seat. Not that there's much room for it – I'm crammed in here like tinned fish – but I'm more cradled than constrained. It's the way it used to feel. The way I used to love. That's a good sign, right? Fucking hell, it better be.

When it's time, my lead mechanic gives me the signal to shift into gear, then he walks backward out of the garage to motion me into the pit lane. I take another breath, hold it, then hit the throttle.

The rumble of the engine vibrates through me as I swing out and trundle down the pit lane. I take care to build speed slowly as I cross the white line of the pit exit and move onto the track, letting the tires heat before increasing my pace. It's all still second nature – every shift of the gears, every press of a button or flip of a switch. It's like I never spent five months away.

And I'm . . . fine.

But that's all I am.

There's no rush of anxiety as I start my next lap, then another and another, but there's no joy or excitement or anything I've felt at the start of seasons past either, which might be even more devastating because . . . fuck, the car feels *good*. It's weighed down by testing sensors and it still needs adjusting, yes, but it's smooth and steady and responds to my every touch as if it knows exactly what I want before I tell it.

This should have me thrilled for the year ahead, ready to sit down with the engineers and explain at length all the changes and tweaks I think the setup needs. Yet all I can muster is some vague, fleeting anticipation and more than a little exasperation for the hours of meetings I'll have to tolerate in order to make the car the best it can be.

The crushing indifference is worse than the fear I anticipated. The cockpit of an F1 car has been my sanctuary for almost half my life. Even with the horrors I've faced, I'm still more comfortable here than I am anywhere else.

But it doesn't feel like home any more. It's merely a place I'm expected

to be, performing the job I'm expected to do. It's an obligation. It's no longer an all-consuming power.

The realization sparks something within me. It heats the indifference into unsettled anger over losing that obsession, threatening to bring it to a boil. It manifests in my foot pressing harder on the throttle, in disregarding the guidance on how gently to take the curbs, in letting the car loose to scream its way around the circuit.

'You're pushing too hard on these lap times,' my engineer warns over the radio. 'We need you maintaining to collect valid data.'

I don't slow. I brake late in the next corner. I go flat out on the straight. I take the hairpin of turn one too fast and nearly lose the back end, recovering with a violent wiggle that has my heart tripping over itself with a sick, furious glee.

And then I do it all over again. Faster this time. Harder.

'Zaid, you need to back off,' he cautions once more, a little more forceful, as if that will get me to listen.

I feel something now. It's twisting and slithering. It wraps around my stomach and squeezes. I don't like it, but it's better than nothing.

'Box, box.' This time it isn't the voice of my engineer, but of our team principal, practically spitting the words. '*Now*.'

I let his anger wash over me before downshifting and slowing, heeding his directive to return to the pit lane.

And finally, I smile.

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CHAPTER 7
Ava

Top of the Podium magazine

Monday 18 March
By Damian Larson, columnist

BACK DOWN UNDER

It’s round three of the Formula 1 World Championship, and we’re off to Melbourne this week for the Australian Grand Prix. Things are looking good for storied rivals Specter Energy and Mascort. Both teams have come out strong off the line, with Axel Bergmüller and Zaid Yousef once again proving their champion status with one win apiece so far.

Fans and journalists alike – myself included – had doubts regarding the level of driving we could expect to see from Bergmüller and Yousef after their devasting crash in Singapore last season. However, I can personally put my concerns to rest. It’s clear these two are driving on a level we’ve never seen before, with Yousef holding nothing back and Bergmüller doing his best to pull ahead. If there was ever a season of F1 to watch from start to finish, this is it.

London

I’ve never been so tired in my life.

It’s not like I typically sleep well on red-eye flights from Dulles to Heathrow, but I don’t usually feel like death warmed over upon arrival. And I certainly don’t fall asleep two minutes after finding a seat on the

Piccadilly line, only to jolt awake as the train's pulling into Knightsbridge because some tourist hit me with their backpack. It's pure luck I didn't wake up in Cockfosters.

Even dragging my carry-on up to Dad's flat is the chore of chores, and once I'm inside I slump against the door to catch my breath. I should've insisted on spending Nowruz at home instead of coming back across the pond barely a month after being here the last time, but all of Dad's family outside Iran are based in the UK and my maman bozorg would never forgive me if I didn't attend the New Year celebrations. Never mind that my dad won't even be there for the party tomorrow since he's already jetted off for the Australian Grand Prix. I would have too if I still had my job with the team – or if he'd invited me to come.

'You look like shit,' a deep voice announces.

I look up to find Axel staring at me, hands on his hips and wearing the fuzzy race car socks that I bought my father for his birthday last year. Axel being here in the flat isn't surprising, even if it's crossing a thousand professional lines, but the fact that he's here *now* is unexpected.

'Shouldn't you be on a plane to Australia?' I ask.

'We're leaving soon. Omid wanted to make sure you got here first.'

I grunt in reply, but hopefully he can hear the gratitude in it. Even if he doesn't, he still grabs the handle of my bag and wheels it to one of the guest rooms down the hall. I shuffle to the kitchen as he does, hauling myself onto a stool at the marble island and sitting motionless until the throbbing at the base of my skull eases. My stomach churns like I have the onset of a hangover, but I haven't had a sip of alcohol since the last time I was in London, so it can't be that.

Axel strolls in and heads straight for the fridge to grab a bottle of water, cracking the lid before handing it to me. It's a strangely considerate action, but thanking him will only earn me an eye roll since he loves to pretend he's not a nice guy. I chug without saying a word.

I can't deny that he's made some terrible choices in the past, things he's learned from after plenty of firm talkings-to and lectures as to why his actions were unacceptable. It's taken hard work to break him of the views his shitty father instilled in him, and even more work to build him back up.

He’s an acquired taste, that’s for damn sure, but he’s a good man underneath it all.

‘Tough break in Jeddah,’ I say after setting the bottle back down. ‘That pit stop was terrible. Glad you got fastest lap, though.’

Thanks to the extra point earned by setting the fastest lap time in the race, Axel is one point ahead of Zaid after two grands prix and one win apiece. Other than last year, they’ve been trading the Drivers’ Championship back and forth, and the two titles Axel won were hard fought, coming down to narrow points margins. I’ve seen before how a single point can change the tides of a championship.

He makes a sound of agreement and leans against the counter. ‘The Mascorts are quick this year. I knew Dev was going to be a menace, but Zaid’s driving like the cocky asshole he used to be. Man’s insane.’

I would choose less offensive language to describe Zaid’s actions on the track lately, but . . . Axel’s not quite wrong about the way his closest rival has been driving. Zaid’s been audacious and unrelenting, willing to take a penalty if it means he claims a corner or gains an advantage on another driver. Even back when he was a *cocky asshole*, as Axel put it, he didn’t drive like this – like he’s only doing it for the thrill and nothing else. Zaid’s always had a careful control to him, even in the moments when you’d think he’d let loose. But this? This is Zaid unleashed.

It’s been fascinating to witness, even through a screen, and I’ve liked watching it more than I care to admit. I’ve liked watching *him*. I hoped our night together would rid me of my crush, but it seems to have done the opposite, because he’s been lingering on the edges of my thoughts more than usual. Even now, just casually talking about him has my stomach doing little somersaults that I’m doing my best to ignore, especially in front of Axel.

‘I thought he’d be playing safer because of . . .’ Axel trails off before grumbling, ‘you know.’

I raise an eyebrow at his vague reference to the events of Singapore. ‘Did you forget you were in the same crash? It’s not like *you’re* playing it safe. You’ve practically been matching Zaid’s chaos.’

‘I only got burned,’ he reminds me, and I can’t help but glance at the

scarred skin peeking out around the collar of his shirt and inching up his neck. ‘He broke both wrists. Big difference. And at his age?’ Axel scoffs. ‘I would have just retired.’

‘He’s not *that* old,’ I say, bristling on Zaid’s behalf. ‘He’s only thirty-nine.’

Axel smirks. ‘Oh, that’s right – you’re old too.’

‘Okay, in that case, I hope you finish outside the points this weekend, you dick.’

As he throws his head back and laughs, Dad walks into the kitchen and eyes the two of us like the suspicious parent of misbehaving toddlers.

‘Why are we laughing?’ Dad questions, his Tehrani accent faint but still prominent enough, even after decades of living in both the UK and the US.

His attention shifts my way when Axel points at me, some of his suspicion lightening, though it’s replaced by a cautiousness he always has around me. We’ve had our issues throughout the years, and I know he carries a heavy load of guilt over how he responded to Mom’s death. Considering it resulted in him essentially abandoning me at fourteen, it’s warranted.

Our relationship has a long way to go, and my unfortunate Zaid Yousef situation was a major setback. I still don’t know if he believed me when I told him there was nothing going on between Zaid and me. Whether he did or not, whatever trust we’d built was immediately destroyed when he asked me to leave my job. Nothing’s been the same since.

‘Khubi?’ he asks, staring at the bottle in my hands instead of directly at me.

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ I answer in English, perpetually self-conscious about my Farsi after not having anyone to consistently speak it with for years. ‘Wish I could join you guys in Australia.’

A silly part of me waits for an invite or even a hint that he wants me back in the paddock. Even if it’s not for a job, it might be nice to return as a guest of Specter Energy for a few races.

Dad blows out a tired breath and pats his more-salt-than-pepper hair. ‘You don’t want to be on a plane with this one for the next twenty hours.’ He shoots a pointed look at the grinning man watching us.

I’m disappointed but I don’t push. His job is his primary focus – sole focus, really – so I can’t blame him for not reading between my lines. Besides, I don’t think my body could handle a flight that long, and he’s right that Axel would make it even more miserable.

‘Well, good luck this weekend.’ I dart my eyes to Axel. ‘I hope your teammate outqualifies you.’

I should tell him how much I enjoyed watching Zaid beat him in Jeddah – although Zaid didn’t look like he cared either way that he’d won – but I figure that’s going a little too far.

‘Please,’ Axel laughs. ‘As if Marchand even could.’

I roll my eyes and slide off my barstool. ‘I’m going to bed,’ I announce as my stomach tosses itself around. ‘I feel like I’m coming down with something. Text me when you land?’

The question is directed at either of them, but it’s only Axel who nods. Dad stares over my shoulder until I shift away and move toward the doorway of the kitchen.

‘Khodafez, azizam.’

I hesitate at the endearment tacked onto his goodbye. It’s been a long time since he called me that. Maybe it means he’s moving on from the mess I made. Maybe it means he misses me as much as I miss him.

But even if it does, I don’t turn around to find out.

———

The distinct beat of an Iranian pop song greets me when I step into Maman Bozorg’s house the next evening. It’s followed by shouted salaams and enthusiastic cheek kisses from cousins with dyed-blonde hair and the best nose jobs that dollars, pounds, and rials can buy. One cousin’s surgery is so recent that there’s still a bandage across her newly narrowed bridge.

I begged my mom for a nose job when I was twelve, so self-conscious that it was too big for my face, too wide, that the slight bump and the curved tip made me ugly. I desperately wanted a cute upturned button nose like my white classmates had. I just wanted to fit in instead of being bullied for how I looked.

It was one of the few times she ever yelled at me, switching between English and Farsi, mixing idioms and metaphors until I honestly had no idea what she was trying to say. But the gist was *Don't let the world tell you you're ugly just because you're different*. I never asked again after that, and I've grown to love my nose instead.

She did let me wax my unibrow, though, so there's that.

The pang of grief that hits me isn't unfamiliar and the intensity of the ache isn't any less powerful now than it was when her loss was fresh. Twenty years later, it's mostly fleeting, like a sharp slap that stings for a moment before fading. I once told Zaid that it wouldn't always feel so raw, which wasn't a lie, but isn't the full truth either.

Grief doesn't care about the passage of time. It strips you down to the bone whenever it wants. It will leave you bare and bleeding, daring you to rebuild layer by layer, all while continuing to rip at you. It keeps tearing, keeps sloughing off skin and fat and muscle. All the passage of time does is teach you how to rebuild faster.

Tonight, my grief is a paper cut. Other days, it's a knife slipping between my ribs. And sometimes it still leaves only bones behind.

I move farther into the house, brushing past uncles carrying heavy plates of ghormeh sabzi and zereshk polo as the aunties sip tea and titter about how the hair on their husbands' heads seems to have moved to their backs. There are plenty of chubby-thighed babies passed my way, little fists grabbing for me as their mothers ask if I'd be willing to babysit for a while, just like I always do during these events. I've been the designated baby wrangler for my cousins and their friends since my mid-twenties, one of the few who wasn't married or saddled with kids of their own yet. I gladly took on the role even though my heart ached with every baby snuggle and gummy smile, wanting so badly to have that for myself but never finding the right opportunity.

This time, I tickle their tiny feet and bask in their giggles before handing them back to their disappointed moms and carrying on, looking for a quiet corner to take up residence in. I feel worse than I did yesterday, even though all I did was sleep once my dad and Axel left. Clearly that wasn't enough to fix whatever's wrong, and now I have to make it through this party without

hurling on one of my grandmother's precious Persian rugs or an uncle's Gucci loafers.

I bump into the haft sin table when a gaggle of children tangle around my legs as they play a game of tag, nearly sending a copy of the Shahnameh – a holy book to my secular family – flying in the process. Gripping the edge of the table, I suck in a breath and steady myself, but the scents of spices, rosewater, and heavy cologne make my stomach churn worse than before.

When the kids rush off again, I mumble an apology to the book and the disgruntled goldfish whose bowl I disturbed. I'm about to keep moving when another kid excitedly hops in front of me, and I realize it's one of Edith's children.

The towheaded four-year-old wearing a McMorris T-shirt over her frilly dress clings to my knee and giggles as I bend to press kisses to her rosy cheeks. Edith, her husband, and their kids have a standing invitation to any and all of my family events, mostly because she likes the Farahanis more than the Maxwell-Browns. She usually shows up too, even without me.

I let Lila babble for a minute about how much fun she's having and how happy she is that I'm here and how her Uncle Thomas is going to teach her how to drive a kart this summer because she's finally old enough. I nod along, listening attentively as I smooth her soft hair back, trying to focus on her bright face instead of how lightheaded I suddenly am.

'Lila, sweetheart, where's your mom?' I ask when she finally pauses to breathe.

Lila throws out an arm, pointing across the room to where Edith and Peter are standing, then rushes off to rejoin the other kids. When I reach the couple, Peter kisses my cheek before pulling back and smiling. Edith's husband is the true definition of a gentleman, with a strong emphasis on *gentle*. He's her polar opposite, soft-spoken and unassuming, and I'm inclined to believe it's why they work so well.

I take Edith in after she gives me an air-kiss, noting the smirk she's trying to suppress. 'You're looking more smug than usual,' I comment.

The last time she was this chipper, she'd just discovered that her older brother had been embezzling from their family's company and was

preparing to use it as blackmail against him. There must have been a development.

‘Andrew has decided to take a leave of absence from the company to “focus on his growing family,”’ she says, light and bright. ‘And he won’t be taking the CEO position when Dad retires.’

‘Holy shit. Does this mean you’re going to get the job instead?’

She shrugs. ‘Possibly. But I’m happy enough where I am for the time being.’

That’s code for *He better give me the job if he knows what’s good for him*, but she won’t say it that baldly around my family.

I glance over at Peter to see what he thinks, noting the glass of white liquid he’s holding slightly away from his body, like he doesn’t know what to do with it.

When he sees me staring, he gives me an awkward smile. ‘Your grandmother handed me this but I’m not quite sure what it is . . .’

‘That’s doogh.’ Simply saying the word makes my stomach roil, though it’s something I usually love. ‘It’s a fizzy yogurt drink. Not sure if you’ll like it.’

‘Oh.’ He eyes the glass for a moment before offering it to me, lifted just below my nose. ‘You can have mine if you’d like.’

When the sour scent of fermented dairy hits me, I clamp a hand over my mouth and nearly retch. I have to speak through my fingers as I back away. ‘Sorry, I need to—’

I take off before I finish the sentence, pushing past bodies as I rush for the nearest bathroom. To my horror, the door is shut and locked. My stomach heaves again and I force myself to keep moving, heading for the stairs and hauling ass until I reach my grandmother’s bedroom, praying no one thought to use her en suite.

I burst into the blessedly empty bathroom, dropping to my knees so hard in front of the toilet that I’ll be shocked if I don’t have bruises on them tomorrow. And then I promptly lose everything I’ve eaten today into the porcelain bowl.

I don’t lift my head again until I feel cool fingers sweeping the hair off my sweaty neck, my watering eyes landing on Edith.

‘Thanks for not puking on Peter,’ she says. ‘Lila already did that this morning, so I’m not sure he would have taken kindly to a second round.’

I exhale a pained laugh as my eyes slide shut in a long blink. ‘We both know he would have lovingly patted my back and said, “There, there, darling, let it all out.”’

She sighs in resignation. ‘You’re right. Big softie, that one.’ She gently twists my hair between her fingers, tying it back with the elastic from her wrist. ‘You done?’

I nod, the nausea subsiding, and I let her help me up after I flush the toilet. She keeps a hand hovering near my elbow as I stop by the sink to rinse my mouth out, then she escorts me into the bedroom, motioning for me to sit on the edge of my grandmother’s flower-patterned duvet.

She sits beside me and frowns. ‘You look terrible.’

I sigh. ‘I must have the flu or something. I slept twelve hours last night and still woke up exhausted. Plus, my stomach hasn’t been right for days. It’s felt like a weeklong hangover without even drinking.’

Edith’s eyes narrow a little more. ‘So, you’re tired and nauseated.’ Then, to my shock, she pokes my boob.

‘Ow!’ I bat her hand away and cradle my aching right tit. ‘What the hell was that for?’

‘And your boobs are sore,’ she continues like a scientist who’s just conducted a successful experiment. ‘Is there a chance you’re pregnant?’

I roll my eyes. ‘Women are allowed to be tired and sick and not be pregnant, Edith.’

‘That’s not an answer.’

I almost snap at her that no, I’m definitely *not* pregnant, because I haven’t been brave enough to start IVF, though I bite my tongue when Zaid’s face flashes in my mind.

But no. No, that’s not possible. We used condoms, and if several rounds of sperm shot directly into my uterus couldn’t do it, there’s no chance *that* could have gotten me pregnant.

Except . . . is there?

‘I don’t *think* I’m pregnant,’ I say, a new kind of nausea starting to swirl in my stomach. ‘But maybe – maybe I should take a test just to be sure.’ I

swallow hard, trying to push my heart from where it's lodged in my throat. 'Can you go grab my handbag? It's downstairs in the foyer. I have some tests in there.'

'You keep tests in your bag?' she asks incredulously.

Pregnancy tests, ovulation tests, a thermometer to double-check that the ovulation tests are accurate . . . It's like Mary Poppins's endless bag if she were in the middle of trying to conceive. 'Look, this whole fertility thing has been an absurd process,' I huff.

Edith stands, not about to argue. 'At least I don't have to run to the shops for you.' She pauses for a moment before hesitantly asking, 'Is there really a chance you're pregnant?'

'I guess we'll find out.'

Ten minutes later, we're staring down at two tests, one with matching faint pink lines and another that screams the result in bold capital letters.

Edith looks over at me. 'I'm not an expert,' she says, 'but I think you're pregnant.'

I'm already shaking my head, eyes squeezing shut to block out the irrefutable proof sitting right on the edge of the sink, because this – this shouldn't be possible.

'When was your last IUI session?' she goes on. 'I swore you said you hadn't scheduled another one last month, but maybe I got the dates wrong.' Even if she thinks she's made a mistake, she still lets out a joyful laugh. 'It finally worked!'

I don't blame her for her celebration, because the grand result truly calls for it. I'm *pregnant*. Finally and truly, after months and months of trying and waiting and wishing and trudging on, it's happened. But I'm hanging in the balance of shouting along with her in joy and passing out from shock.

'This wasn't—' I cut short and draw in a shuddering breath. 'This wasn't from IUI.'

Edith's elation slowly wanes as she waits for me to elaborate. 'Excuse me?'

My armpits are starting to feel uncomfortably damp and there's a bead of sweat slowly rolling its way down my spine. 'It wasn't IUI,' I say again, a little louder this time. Maybe too loud, because there's a strange buzzing in

my ears that's making it hard to hear myself. 'About a month ago I . . . slept with someone.'

'You – *what?*' Now she's the one shaking her head, throwing her hands up to stop me from saying anything else. 'You *slept* with someone? To purposefully get pregnant?'

'No!' This time I'm undoubtedly shouting. 'It was just a hookup.'

And that was all it was supposed to be. A one-night thing. A little bit of fun and a break from the headaches of life. It wasn't supposed to result in . . . *this*.

Edith has switched to nodding, starting to wrap her mind around it, but her lips are still fiercely turned down at the corners. 'Okay. Right. Was it someone you know, or was it, like, a stranger you met in a bar, or . . .' She trails off, waiting for me to supply the answer.

'Not a stranger.' I hold my breath for a second as I brace myself to tell the truth, because there's no point in keeping it from her. 'It was Zaid Yousef.'

Edith stills, brows slowly knitting together as she stares at me, blinking once, then again, her lips parting as if she's about to speak but nothing comes out for a few long beats.

'You slept with Zaid Yousef.' She says each word slowly, like she wants to be absolutely certain she's heard me correctly. 'The man who nearly ruined your life.'

I wince. 'It's not his fault the press couldn't mind their own business and blew everything out of proportion,' I remind her.

'Yeah, well, he could have stood up for you sooner than he did,' she snaps, shock dropping away.

I get why she's reacting like this, I really do. I cried on her shoulder through the worst of it all, let her stroke my hair and murmur all the creative ways she planned to kill all the gossipmongers. I know Zaid and his publicist waited as long as they did to speak out in hopes that people would simply lose interest, but my continued presence in the paddock fueled the rumors. They only stopped once I left.

Nothing I say is going to change her opinion of him right now, so I nervously twist my fingers together and wait for her to cool down.

It takes half a minute of deep breathing, but then she asks, ‘When did this happen?’

I grimace as I timidly answer, ‘The night of the pre-season party, after you ditched me.’

‘You’re having a laugh.’ She’s back to shaking her head, wisps of hair escaping her once-perfect French twist. ‘I saw you the next morning and you didn’t say anything about it! You just let me prattle on and on about work and the kids!’

‘I’m sorry,’ I groan. ‘But he and I agreed to keep it a secret. I figured it was for the best.’

Edith looks like she wants to argue that, but she drops her eyes to the pink floor tiles and blows out a breath instead. ‘All right, I get it,’ she grumbles, grudgingly coming around. When her gaze lifts again, there’s a sly curiosity in her expression. ‘But since you wouldn’t tell me then, you’d better tell me now . . . How was it?’

It’s my turn to breathe deep. ‘He made me come six times.’

‘Jesus *Christ*.’ She sits down hard on the edge of the bathtub, elbows on her knees like a fighter recovering from a sucker punch. ‘I should have known. Man like that? He’s had enough practice to be a pro.’ She’s lost in thought for a few more seconds before her attention snaps back to me. ‘Wait, it’s been over a month since then. Didn’t you miss a period? How weren’t you suspicious you could be pregnant?’

Because I didn’t think it was possible, that’s how. I thought my period being late was just stress from work deadlines and traveling, or my body choosing to be a little shit. It doesn’t matter that I’ve read nearly every pregnancy and baby book under the sun and know all the signs I should have been looking for. But I wasn’t looking because I couldn’t fathom something like this happening.

I shake my hands out, willing my building anxiety to escape from my fingertips, but it keeps growing, fanning the flames instead. ‘We used condoms! I thought we were being careful.’

‘Condoms aren’t one hundred per cent effective against pregnancy, you know.’

I barely resist rolling my eyes. ‘*Thank you*, Dr. Maxwell-Brown.’

Edith ignores my sarcasm. ‘Did he bring them with him? Because they could have been degraded, especially if he kept them in his wallet.’

‘No, they were mine. Well, they were yours, technically. I stole some from your bedroom over the summer.’

‘Babe.’ She slowly rises until we’re eye to eye. There’s panic in her gaze. ‘Those were *so* old. They were from before Peter had a vasectomy.’

My stomach drops to my knees. That was *four years* ago, right after Lila was born. I didn’t even think to check the expiration date. ‘You could have told me that!’

‘I didn’t know you were going to steal them and fuck Zaid Yousef with them!’

‘Can you *please* stop saying that?’

‘I’m still trying to cope with it!’

‘How do you think *I’m* feeling?’ I shout back.

Silence hangs after my outburst as the realization settles in.

‘You have options,’ Edith says after a few seconds, her hand finding mine without looking down. She runs her thumb over my knuckles before squeezing gently. ‘Do you want to talk about them?’

I pause, my throat tight, then shake my head. Despite the strange, stressful, and genuinely unbelievable circumstances, I made my choice the second I saw the positive tests. I’ve wanted this for so, so long. I’ve wanted every part of it, from the good bits – first kicks, sleepy snuggles, and adorable useless little shoes – to the not-as-great – like morning sickness, sleep regression, and the terrible twos. It’s an adventure I’ve been excited to go on for ages. And I’ve finally gotten my wish in the wildest way possible.

A watery laugh bursts free, and I slap a hand over my mouth to contain my joy. ‘I’m going to have a baby,’ I exhale when I drop my hand again.

We lock eyes and stare for a moment – and then we’re screaming and hugging and I’m pretty sure Edith is crying even though I know she’ll deny it if I ask. I slump against her when we’re done celebrating, my arms around her waist and my head on her shoulder like we’re slow dancing. She rests her cheek against my hair and lets me lean, neither of us speaking as we sway.

Eventually, she murmurs, ‘You have to tell him. Even if you don’t want

anything from him—’

‘I don’t,’ I interrupt, because the plan has always been to do this on my own.

‘—he deserves to know and to make his own decisions about how involved he wants to be.’

I nod reluctantly against the soft cotton of her shirt. ‘I know, but . . . when would I tell him? *Where?*’ I pull back to look at her. ‘He’s in a new country every week and this is *not* a conversation I’m having over the phone.’

I may not want to share the news on a call, but the idea of seeing Zaid in person again has my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. Honestly, I thought I’d never see him again except maybe in passing, like at a sponsor event or if I ever got the chance to return to the paddock. It would have been casual and brief, nothing more than a head nod or a wave before moving on, and I’d be content with the memories of our one perfect night but not dare to get that close again.

I’d absolutely spend more time with him if I had a guarantee that no one would know or care. I’d drag him to more outrageously themed places and feed him guilty pleasure foods all day long just to watch him fight a smile and lose every time. I *want* to get to know him better. I want to open his book and read each page carefully. But it’s a risk I already know the consequences of, and I can’t put myself through it again.

When I tell him the news in person, I’m going to have to be so careful not to let myself get sucked into his orbit, despite now being tied together in this borderline miraculous way.

Edith moves me until we’re both sitting on the edge of the bathtub, then pulls her phone from the back pocket of her trousers to bring up the grand prix schedule. ‘After Australia, he’ll be in Japan, then China. I’m guessing you don’t want to fly to Asia . . .’

I sigh. ‘I’d prefer *not* flying sixteen hours when I feel like shit.’

‘Understandable.’ She scrolls farther. ‘He’ll be in Miami at the beginning of May. We could do it then if you don’t want to hunt him down in the weeks he might be back at the Mascort factory.’

May. I’ll be out of my first trimester by then – out of the woods when it

comes to a higher probability of miscarriage. I can only hope nothing horrible happens, but there's always a chance, and waiting to share the news is the safest bet. It'll give me some time to process too. Because right now? My head's a mess.

As if Edith can sense my impending breakdown, she says, 'Hey, let's figure out your due date.' She pulls up a pregnancy website I've already spent way too much time on and I give her the information she needs. 'Looks like we're having a November baby.'

I dare to smile at her subtle excitement. 'We?' I question.

'Oh, I'm all in,' she announces. 'I'm already mentally designing your nursery. What do we think about a Peter Rabbit theme?'

What I think is that we have plenty of time to plan it all. There's no rush. We can take it one day at a time.

But what's a little more pressing is telling the man who wrecked my life that I'm having his baby.

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CHAPTER 8
Zaid

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Sunday 5 May

We need to talk about how ridiculously hot Stella Margaux Maxwell-Brown looked walking into the Miami paddock this morning. This is the first race she's attended since Jeddah, likely because she's been busy opening new locations of her famous patisserie chain.

Hopefully she'll be a good-luck charm for her husband, because the man needs it after the terrible race he had in China two weeks ago, finishing outside the points after suffering a tire puncture not once but *twice* during the grand prix. It's not like Thomas was ever going to be a championship contender, but still, what a disaster.

Back to what really matters: How much do you want to bet that all the other WAGs hate Stella? Hot, successful in her own right, married to one of the sexiest drivers on the grid . . . Yeah, we'd hate her too.

Miami

Miami is a fucking nightmare.

Each of the American races is its own special, themed hell – cowboys and football in Austin, gambling and Elvis in Las Vegas – but Miami is a horror movie combination of celebrity worship, blinding eighties neon colors, and the worst humidity outside of Singapore.

'Fucking hell,' Adnan grumbles, holding up a hand to keep another zealous group of fans at a distance. 'They let just anyone in here these days.'

Anyone with money is the more accurate answer, but my bodyguard isn't wrong. Still, I smile and wave and put a hand over my heart to show my gratitude as we walk on through the paddock. It's not until Adnan safely delivers me to my private driver room that I let the smile drop away and massage the tension from my jaw.

I've been faking a good mood since Wednesday, tackling another week of

mandated interviews and sponsor events and filming ridiculous social media clips with Dev. It all required me to be on and present, and now I'm so drained that it'll be a miracle if I don't fall asleep on the grid in a few hours.

Dev is starting tenth after a qualifying session cut short by a red flag, and while I'm faring a little better in P3, Axel's starting P2. Shockingly, Reid Coleman outqualified us both and took pole. I'm hanging on to the top spot of the championship, ahead of Axel after five races by a measly four points, so I'll either expand that gap today or lose it.

Starting third isn't the worst outcome, even on a track like Miami's, where overtaking isn't easy. Besides, I won in Jeddah from P3. Doesn't that prove I still have what it takes?

I wish I could look back on that win with fonder feelings – wish I could use it as fuel to keep driving hard and rediscover my passion for racing. But the truth is, there was no joy in it, only relief. I thought it might be a fluke, something I could brush away and move on from with my next win, but taking the top step at the Chinese Grand Prix after a duet of second-place finishes in Australia and Japan proved it wasn't a one-off thing.

I thought winning again would feel better than that. It didn't feel much different from losing. And yet I'm still here, because the idea of walking away is more intimidating than staying.

Today, I put on my fireproof suit and go through my pre-race rituals with my trainer in near silence. I keep my chats with our team principal and engineers short. I linger in the corners of the garage, avoiding cameras and eye contact with the celebrities in the VIP box. I'm sure I'll wake up tomorrow to another call from my manager gently pressuring me to be more social next time.

But really, who fucking cares? I'm finally doing what so many people demanded of me in years past as a public figure who dared to speak his mind – shut up and drive.

On the starting grid, I flex my fingers one at a time as I grip the wheel, reassured when my wrists only give the tiniest of protesting twinges, and watch my mirrors as the rest of the cars file in. Surviving turn one and not getting taken out by anyone is the goal. Last season my own teammate

nearly drove me into the barriers when he locked up, coming mere inches from clipping my rear wheels as he sailed across the track. With Dev in the midfield, I won't have to worry about him repeating Otto's mistake, but it also means I'm on my own to defend my position.

When all the cars are in their boxes, I take a deep breath, holding it as the five red lights flick on one by one. And then it's lights out.

I'm off the line right behind Reid, and for a split second I'm certain I can stay there, but the right-hander of turn one gives Axel the chance to swoop back in and keep P2, especially when I have to lift off the throttle to avoid the McMorris from P4 that streaks in front of me, heading straight for the runoff area.

I push again when I'm clear, keeping tight on Axel's rear wing, following him into turn after turn. There's a little understeer that I have to fight, enough that I complain to my engineer about it on the radio with less-than-family-friendly language. I'm forced to fall back when Axel's dirty air in the corners starts to hinder me, though I do my best to make it up in the straights. Still, he pulls away, because that car is a rocket ship.

It only takes three laps before Axel makes a tricky move on Reid at the hairpin of turn seventeen, diving down the inside, cutting it so close that I swear their wheels touch. And then he's ahead, taking the lead and wasting no time running off with it, while I'm left to contend with the D'Ambrosi.

I have to hand it to Reid – kid's good. Last season, he stuck close in the points behind Axel and me, never letting us get too complacent or absorbed in our battle. And while luck played a major role in his championship win, his grit and determination were the main contributors. You don't win without the work.

But I'm not letting him win again.

By lap seven, after being forced to back out of several overtake attempts, I'm fed the fuck up with being stuck behind Reid as Axel pulls farther ahead. Reid's defending hard, but he's not faultless. Nor is he as ruthless as he should be. At his age, I was a goddamn nuisance on-track, and even Axel in his rookie season was bolder than this. Then again, I might be cautious too if I witnessed my teammate's hubris almost get him killed.

I'm not proud of the move I make on the D'Ambrosi in the next turn. It's

dickish and risky and if it was done to me I'd be whinging for a penalty. But nudging him slightly wide gets the job done, and I can finally get on with catching up to Axel.

'Zaid,' my engineer warns over the radio when I've safely exited the corner ahead of Reid. 'What have we talked about?'

What *haven't* I been scolded for lately is the real question. Top of the list is how I've made rash decisions and pushed the car too hard. How I'm racking up penalty points and could get slapped with a race ban if I continue. How I no longer seem to have any regard for the rules – or my life.

'You're being reckless,' Basil, our team principal, snapped at me in the aftermath of the Japanese Grand Prix, where I'd been given a time penalty for said recklessness. 'You're driving like you have nothing to live for.'

'I have a record-breaking championship to live for,' I boredly told him, even while resentment burned behind my ribs because those daredevil moments were the only thing keeping my heart beating. 'I think that's something.'

'You won't be alive to see that championship if you keep this up, Zaid.'

I've always loved taking risks. Always loved seeing just how far I could push the limits. But he's right that I've been toying with the edge of what I can get away with, safely or otherwise. I didn't admit it then, and even now, with my engineer waiting for an answer, all I'm tempted to do is act out again like a petulant toddler.

'What's the gap to Axel?' I demand instead.

I sense more than hear his sigh. 'Two point—' He cuts short, announcing what's just flashed across the screen of my steering wheel. 'Safety car. Incident in sector one.'

I'm making my way through sector three now, forced to slow thanks to the double yellow flags being waved, and it's not long before the reason for it comes into view. There's a ruined Argonaut in the wall, its front wing and front right tire ripped off – and an unmoving driver still inside.

My heart creeps into my throat at the sight. It's not the first crash I've seen since the start of the season and it won't be the last, but each one

churns my stomach, acid eating away at the steel walls I keep trying to rebuild.

‘Is he okay?’ I ask my engineer, surprised my voice doesn’t crack.

‘Trying to find out.’

I want to snap at him to be quick about it but keep my mouth shut. Instead, I pass by the car as slowly as I reasonably can, spotting the colors of Nathaniel Decker’s helmet, holding my breath until I see him detach the steering wheel. Only then do I exhale and keep on, catching up to Axel as the safety car guides the bunching convoy around the track.

‘Decker’s okay,’ my engineer says, confirming what I’ve seen. ‘Lots of debris, so be careful. It’ll be a few laps behind the safety car before they can get this cleaned up.’

I have my issues with Argonaut Racing, their Texas billionaire owner, and their nationalistic *All American, all the time* slogan and way of life, but I feel for Nathaniel, even though he only has his seat because his father owns the team. Nepo baby or not, crashing in your home race is a huge disappointment. I’ve done it once, at Silverstone, and I’d prefer to never do it again.

Thankfully the crash happened in a place where his car can be easily removed, so this won’t turn into a red-flagged race. It’s early to pit for new tires, but a few drivers dove into the pit lane as we passed it for a cheap stop, hoping the benefit of less time lost will aid in their plight. But Axel stayed out, and so did Reid, and so have I, which means this restart is going to be interesting.

Four laps later and it’s happening. When the safety car heads back in, it’s up to Axel to get things going again. He weaves on the track, both to get heat back in his tires for better grip and to keep me from picking up a tow that could help me pass him. It’s a shame for him that I still get the slipstream as he takes off down the straight, sticking close to him. I dart to the inside at the next corner, forcing Axel wide and leaving us wheel to wheel, but he cuts me off in the exit and keeps the lead.

‘Oh, get fucked,’ I grumble, sweeping across the track again, coming too close to touching his back left tire and nearly sending us both off into space.

But Axel evades my bullying and then we’re back to the ever-so-familiar

dance we do weekend after weekend.

‘Dev is now in P7,’ my engineer reports. ‘Gained some places on the restart.’

Dev’s higher position will help our plight in the Constructors’ Championship. But it won’t do much since Raphael Marchand, Specter Energy’s second driver, is now in third, somehow having passed Reid.

I’ve fallen an uncomfortable three seconds behind Axel, but he’s starting to struggle, our gap slowly getting smaller. Just as I expect, he pits on lap twenty-five, leaving me as the race leader. It’s not long before my engineer comes back on the radio to update me.

‘Bergmüller had a slow stop,’ he says, and there’s a note of glee in his usually level voice. ‘He’ll be coming out behind Marchand.’

I’ll have to pit soon as well, though thankfully my tires still have enough grip that it’s not a desperate need. It’s a few more laps before I get the order to box, and while my stop isn’t the quickest we’ve ever done, it’s not bad by any means. I come out a few seconds after Raphael and Axel pass the pit exit, and slot in narrowly in front of Reid.

‘Marchand is keeping Bergmüller behind him,’ my engineer says. ‘Appears there are no orders to let Bergmüller through. The teammates are free to race each other.’

That’s surprising news from Specter Energy, since Raphael isn’t a top contender in the Drivers’ Championship, and most teams would prioritize the driver who is – aka their number-one driver – even if they’d never openly admit it. Axel should be getting the red carpet rolled out for him instead of being told to battle his teammate for the lead of the race. But this all works to my advantage. Let the boys fight. They can leave me out of it.

‘Stay focused,’ my engineer instructs once I’ve reduced what started as a ten-second gap between Axel and me down to five after a handful of laps.

‘Leave me alone,’ I snap at him. ‘I know what I’m doing.’

I need to get past Axel, who’s fallen back some from Raphael, likely to preserve his tires. There are only fifteen laps left, and if I don’t overtake him soon, I’ll have no chance of catching his teammate.

But there’s a reason our title fights have always been so close – Axel is a master of defense, keeping me stuck behind him lap after lap after lap. I

simmer and curse, not caring that my scornful comments might be broadcast on live television.

Ten laps to go, and no matter how hard I try, I still can't get around him.

The only positive is that Raphael is losing pace, having pushed his tires too hard too early, and now he's paying the price. There's a one-and-a-half-second gap between him and Axel – four seconds between Raphael and me. If Axel passes his teammate – or if their team finally tells Raphael to let Axel around him – I'm going to have to fight like hell to pass Raphael too. If I don't, a third-place finish will set me back in the points, something I'll have to scramble to make up in future races while simultaneously praying that Axel has a DNF or two.

I should know better than to even think that, because the universe has a way of listening and answering in turn, not always in the way I want.

I watch it play out when Axel makes a move on his teammate, nearly the same one he made on Reid earlier in the race, diving down the inside of the hairpin turn. This time, though, it doesn't go as smoothly.

Tire degradation means he doesn't have the grip he needs to keep from swinging the car too wide, and Raphael must be asleep, because he reacts a split second too late, tagging Axel's back wheel as he turns in and sending them both spinning.

And I have nowhere to go but straight into their tangled web.

Unlike in Singapore, I have enough time and foresight to take my hands off the wheel before impact. I couldn't begin to say which Specter Energy car I hit, but whichever it is has me skidding across the track for what feels like an eternity. In truth, it can't be more than a second or two before my journey ends in the barriers, colliding with enough force that it shudders through every bone in my body, rattles my teeth, and leaves my ears ringing.

I've been involved in enough incidents over my career that this one doesn't come close to ranking in the top ten of the worst. The car is mostly intact, nothing's on fire, and I have a clear path out and away from the scene. It's minor enough in the grand scheme of things.

And yet I can't draw in a breath or lift my hands or form the words to tell my panicked engineer that I'm fine, because I'm back in Singapore, trapped

in a burning car, wrists shattered, head spinning. I can't tell up from down, can't smell anything but smoke, can't see anything but floodlights on dark pavement and the flicker of flames.

When I blink, Axel is hanging over my halo, his visor open, leaning closer and closer until he can get a hand on my shoulder. There's a fear in his gaze that I'm sure he'd find reflected back in my eyes if he could see them.

'You're okay,' he says to me. It's a statement, not a question. He's telling me that I am – telling us *both* that we are – and pulling me off the edge of the cliff before I slip further. 'You're okay, Zaid.'

He's right. I'm okay. Once again, I've survived. I've made it through.

But I don't know if I can do this any more.

———

'Are you *really* okay?'

My assistant flits about as he follows me to my driver room, dipping and ducking and trying to make eye contact with me. I pointedly ignore him.

'I'm fine, Sami,' I repeat for the hundredth time. I'd be more honest with him if he weren't also my cousin, duty-bound to report my well-being back to my mother. 'They cleared me at the medical center. It was nothing.'

The crash truly wasn't bad. Yes, it ended a promising race prematurely. Yes, my mechanics have intense work ahead to make the requisite repairs before the next race. And yes, I'll be feeling that impact for days – my neck is already stiff, my back aches, and while they couldn't conclusively rule out a concussion, no one's particularly worried. I know firsthand how much worse it could have been, so why make a big deal of this when it was nothing?

Except I *should* be making a bigger deal of it. I should be ranting and raving, up in arms because Axel was an impatient little shit and ruined both our chances of scoring points. I should be fucking furious and letting the whole world know it from the media pen, yet all I did while down there was run a hand down my face, shrug, and tell the reporters, 'That's racing,' all while my press officer watched me with increasing worry.

But I’m not angry. I’m just hot and tired, the kind of bone-deep exhaustion that comes after the worst adrenaline rush, and it’s creeping into the spaces that once held my obsession for this sport.

I’m no longer driving because I want to. I’m doing it because I *have* to. Because there are contracts that tell me this is where I’m supposed to be – where I’m supposed to stay. Because there are people I refuse to let down. Because I want to leave a stronger legacy for myself as the first man of color to achieve such greatness and do it in my father’s honor. But more than anything, it’s because without it, I don’t have anything else. This is it. This is what keeps me alive.

This is my whole *life*. Everything else is a distraction from the main goal of winning. The philanthropy, the documentaries, the art gallery – they’re things I hoped I could enjoy and build on when I retired, when I could finally give my full focus to something else, but I’ll never feel the same passion for them that I once had for racing. If I leave, I fear there will be nothing to fill the void.

I shrug out of my race suit’s sleeves, letting them flutter to my hips as I take a breath, easing myself away from the dramatics and hard choices that don’t have to be made yet. Right now, my path is still laid out for me.

‘What did Axel say to you?’ Sami asks as he grabs me a water from the mini-fridge.

I gratefully accept the bottle, dehydrated from a long, sweaty race. I chug for a moment before answering. ‘He came over to make sure I was all right.’

Sami frowns. ‘Really? Then why’d he grab your shoulder all angry-like?’

‘He wasn’t—’ I cut short, not wanting to expose myself or Axel and the memories that haunt us. ‘I’m sure he was angry about the crash, but it wasn’t directed at me. He was worried about how long it was taking me to get out of the car. Wanted to see if I needed any help. That’s all.’

‘Huh.’ Sami flops onto the love seat, considering this. ‘Press is saying he was yelling at you, blaming you for the crash. Even if he wasn’t, he still shouldn’t have touched you.’

I don’t know if I’d have snapped out of the flashback to Singapore if he

hadn’t, grounding me in that moment and dragging me to the present. ‘It’s fine. I’m not worried about it.’

Sami’s lips twist like he wants to protest, but there’s a knock on the door before he can speak. We both turn as Adnan pops his head inside, one large hand pressed to the doorframe.

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ he says, eyes darting between us, and there’s something in my bodyguard’s gaze that makes unease creep up my neck. ‘But I have a message I’m supposed to pass on to you, Zaid.’

‘A message?’ I raise a brow. It’s probably one of the bosses summoning me for a chat, but usually they have their assistants call Sami to organize it. ‘From who?’

‘Thomas Maxwell-Brown’s wife.’

That’s unexpected. I’ve had exactly one conversation with Stella before, and that was back in Bahrain when I apologized for not being able to attend her and Thomas’s wedding – well, their second wedding, which they invited everyone to after they eloped in Las Vegas last year. I’ve seen her in the paddock a few more times since then and offered polite greetings, but that’s all. What message could she possibly have for me?

‘What does she want?’ I ask, completely baffled.

Adnan pulls a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. ‘I’m supposed to give you this.’

This is getting stranger by the second. Still, I take the note and unfold it, heart beating in overdrive when I spot the signature at the bottom – along with the name of the hotel I’m staying at and a room number three floors below mine.

I need to see you.
– Ava

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CHAPTER 9
Ava

Well, I've certainly picked a terrible day to drop life-changing news.

Who could have known that Axel would decide to be a dick and ruin not only his own race, but his teammate's *and* Zaid's. I mean, I guess *I* should have known, considering the type of driver he is, but still. It's a shit show all around for the Specter Energy family, which I'm undoubtedly still a part of if the mortification I'm feeling counts for anything. You can fire a girl from the team, but you can't take away the fact that she feels responsible for one of their dumbass drivers.

Despite the paddock being only a few miles away, I watched the race from a nondescript luxury hotel room. Edith and her sister-in-law, Stella, squirreled me away here late last night after an absurd amount of planning and reconnaissance. It all started with deciding the Miami Grand Prix weekend was the right time to tell Zaid about my pregnancy. From there, it was planning how to set up a private conversation and how we'd keep anyone else – like my father or the press – from finding out about our chat. The hotel where Zaid was staying was our best bet; no one would question why he was there, and we wouldn't have to go out of our way to coax him to a separate location.

When Edith told me she had it handled and not to worry myself with the details, I trusted her. But when she shared that she'd asked Thomas's wife to help out, I nearly called the whole thing off. Was she out of her *mind*? What if Stella spilled the beans about the baby to Thomas? What if Thomas told Zaid before I even could?

Now I'm glad Stella's in on it, because I can't imagine anyone else could have wheedled their way into getting the information we needed. I'm blissfully ignoring that some of the methods *may* have verged on light stalking, but without her, we wouldn't have been able to covertly approach Zaid's bodyguard or convince him to pass on a message to his boss. Stella,

though? That woman gets whatever she wants with just a bat of her lashes and a few choice words.

And that's why I'm awkwardly pacing this hotel room, staring down at a text from Edith – who's been playing lookout down in the lobby – telling me that Zaid's in the building. If Stella succeeded in getting my note delivered, then Zaid should be on his way up here. If she didn't, then he's probably headed to his own room, and I'll be stuck planning another ambush.

A knock on the door halts my pacing and spiraling, my eyes cutting across the small entryway, and it's a long moment before I force my feet to move. I hold my breath as I press up on tiptoes to look through the peephole, stumbling down again when I glimpse Zaid through the glass.

Okay, so he actually showed up. Great. Absolutely perfect. This is . . . this is what I wanted. Everything is going according to plan. And yet it takes me a few more panicked seconds before I can haul the door open with trembling hands.

Even getting a preview of him through the peephole couldn't prepare me for the force of being face to face with him again. The scent of his cologne hits me first with its deep, heady oud, freshly applied and so exquisitely *him*. His hair is damp from a post-debrief shower and the scruff on his jaw is a little darker than usual, like he meant to shave this morning but figured it wasn't worth the trouble. The rugged look works entirely too well for him.

Most noticeable, though, is how the Miami heat has his black Mascort T-shirt clinging to him in all the right places. The sight has me flustered, flashing back to what it was like seeing him stripped down to nothing and feeling his skin against mine, and wondering if he'd be up for that again.

Fuck, these pregnancy hormones are no joke, although they're nearly overwhelmed by the relief of seeing him again. But, oh god, he's *here*, and now I have to break the news that he's the father of my child.

'Ava.'

I don't realize I've been staring slack-jawed until he murmurs my name, and even then I can't move or speak, stuck buffering between *I've made a huge mistake* and *How is this man so beautiful?* and *Tell him now, just do it!*

‘You said you needed to see me.’ His eyes drift over my face and then drag down, drinking in every inch in the same appreciative way he admired me lying naked beneath him. ‘Is everything all right?’

It’s another excruciating beat before my brain sparks back to life. I clear my throat, wanting to give him an answer to his question, but I’m not sure everything *is* all right – at least, not for him.

‘Come in,’ I force out, stepping back to let him past me. ‘We can talk inside.’

Zaid watches me, expression unreadable, but then he stiltedly nods and enters. I nearly trip over my feet as I turn and move quickly toward the suite’s living room. With lingering first trimester exhaustion still kicking my ass, I take a much-needed seat on the sofa and motion for him to sit next to me, noting that he looks as tired as I feel. There are dark smudges under his guarded eyes and the set of his jaw is tense, his brow dipped and heavy. I wouldn’t expect any less after a hot, grueling race that ended with slamming into the barriers.

But Zaid stays where he is in front of me, not moving other than folding his arms over his chest – *god*, his biceps are impressive – and tilting his chin down to look at me.

‘What am I doing here, princess?’ he asks when I still say nothing. His tone is gentle and the endearment disarming, but there’s still an edge of impatience to it.

Right. Okay. Moment of truth.

I take a deep breath before announcing, ‘There’s something I need to share with you.’

Zaid cocks an eyebrow, the rest of his expression unchanged. ‘Do you have Specter’s car design for next season?’

I snort, not because his deadpan joke meant to ease the tension is particularly funny, but because I don’t know how else to react. ‘As if they’d let me anywhere near that,’ I lament.

‘Then what is it, Ava?’

‘I’m pregnant.’

I don’t mean to just blurt it out, practically combining the two words, but they’re now hanging between us, lit up like a neon sign in Las Vegas.

And Zaid just . . . stares at me. There's no flicker across his face of my words registering, nothing that might hint at how he's internally reacting. I don't know what else to say, all language escaping me in a moment when it would be useful to grab my habit of overexplaining by the horns and ride it all the way toward getting *something* out of him. Instead, I'm left staring back at him, stomach churning in a way that I can't credit to morning sickness – which has really been like *all day* sickness – while I wait for him to say something.

'When did you find out?'

It's a perfectly even-keeled question, like he's already accepted what I've said as fact and is now cycling his way through all the pertinent questions. I know everyone handles shock in their own special way – personally, I lean more toward the dramatic – but his unaffected demeanor almost feels like an insult.

Despite that, I swallow back the nausea and answer. 'About six weeks ago.'

Maybe the fact that I've been keeping such a major secret will inspire something in him. But . . . nope. Nothing past one slightly robotic blink.

'And you're how far along?'

I'm blinking enough for the both of us, fighting back an annoying hormonal rush of tears because *why isn't he reacting?* 'Nearly thirteen weeks,' I say, hating the waver in my voice.

It seems to crack some part of his iced-over exterior, though. A muscle in his forehead twitches as his eyebrows briefly pull together, and he unfolds his arms to slowly swipe his palms across his thighs. 'I'm guessing you're telling me because you're planning to keep the baby?'

I nod, not trusting my voice, but the motion is resolute. I know what I want, and I won't let him think he can change my mind. I'm privileged that I have choices, and the one I've made is one I've never been surer about.

'Okay,' he says, like it's really that easy to accept.

Then he turns and pukes in the wastebasket by the door.

———

‘Again, I am *incredibly* sorry about that,’ Zaid says for what has to be the dozenth time, his ice-man facade gone as his true mortification seeps through. ‘It’s . . . been a day.’

No kidding. After getting his shit rocked physically – and I’m not ruling out that he *might* have a slight concussion – I’ve come and done the emotional equivalent. ‘I get it,’ I say lightly. ‘I’ve been spending a lot of my time puking too.’

Zaid almost laughs but settles his lips into a firm line instead, my joke a reminder of the situation at hand.

We’re both on the small sofa now, thighs pressed together in unavoidable contact, him slumped forward with his elbows on his knees while I lean back to keep my uncomfortably tight jeans from pressing into my new bump. It’s barely there, nothing more than what I usually look like on my most bloated days, but it’s an undeniable thing.

‘I apologize for ambushing you,’ I push on. ‘But it felt like something I should tell you face to face.’

Not particularly feeling that way any more, considering he’s a little pale under his five-o’clock shadow and has taken to staring at a spot on the floor instead of looking anywhere in my direction. Shit, maybe a phone call would have been better.

‘I appreciate you telling me in person,’ he says before drawing in a deep breath. ‘This is just . . . unexpected.’

The vampire she should avoid is usually the one she cannot forget.

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‘You’re telling me,’ I admit, and the whole story is nearly on the tip of my tongue, waiting to be confessed. ‘I definitely wasn’t trying to get pregnant. Well, I mean, I *was*’ – Zaid’s head snaps in my direction, prompting me to quickly go on – ‘but not with you! Not like this. Come on, we used condoms, and I didn’t think—’ I cut short, swallowing hard. ‘I didn’t think it would happen like this.’

He stares at me, eyes pinched in confusion. ‘You’ve been trying to have a

baby?’

I nod, but this is a conversation that could quickly go to hell in a handbasket if I don’t make it very clear that it was never my intention for *him* to knock me up.

‘I started fertility treatments last year,’ I explain. ‘I’ve always wanted kids, so I decided I should stop waiting until I found a partner and do it by myself. But the plan was to get pregnant using an anonymous donor, not—’

‘The man who ruined your life,’ he finishes for me.

I smile weakly. ‘I always intended to do this by myself, so please don’t feel obligated to have anything to do with me or the baby, but you have the right to know. And I’m sure you’ll want a paternity test for confirmation,’ I hurriedly tack on.

Again, I’m surprised when he straightens up, lips turning down at the corners. ‘Only if that’s something you want. I’m not asking you for one.’

I try to ignore the way his arm brushes mine, focusing on the relief flooding my chest instead of how much I like the feel of him near me. ‘So you just . . . believe me when I say the baby’s yours?’

Zaid huffs a humorless laugh, his dark eyes sympathetic as he stares down at me. ‘Ava, I can’t imagine a world where you would *want* me to be the father of your child. What reason would you have to lie to me?’

‘Don’t sell yourself short. Anyone would be lucky to have your genes for their kid,’ I joke, but I quickly sober because, ultimately, he’s right. He wouldn’t have been my first, tenth, or even hundredth choice to be my child’s biological father. ‘But you’re right. This definitely wasn’t the plan.’

We both sit with that for a moment, gazing out at the room and letting it sink in. No, it wasn’t the plan, and no, I don’t have a single clue how things are going to work, but this is the reality we’re facing.

‘Does your family know you’re pregnant?’ he asks after a few beats, glancing over at me again.

I shake my head. ‘I wanted to tell you first.’

He’s immediately back to frowning. ‘So you’ve been going through this by yourself?’

‘I’ve told a few friends.’ Well, I’ve told Edith, who told Stella. I don’t

have many other friends these days after distancing myself from motorsport. ‘I’m not completely on my own.’

His displeasure lightens some as he nods, like he’s comforted by that idea but still not happy about it. As he broods – and looks entirely too good doing it, the beautiful bastard – I keep going.

‘You don’t have to decide right now if you want to be involved,’ I say. ‘There’s nothing I really need from you and there’s still a while to go before the baby’s born, and—’

‘No.’ He interrupts so firmly that I press myself farther into the sofa cushions, like the word was a shove. His eyes widen when he realizes how it sounded, hand reflexively darting over to squeeze my knee. ‘*No*, as in I don’t need time to think about it. I’m in. Right now.’

I stare down at his hand on me, seeing but not feeling it through the fog of shock. When I imagined all the ways this conversation could go, I barely considered the option of him immediately wanting to play a role in our kid’s life. At best, I thought he might tell me he wanted to be involved after the baby was born, but *right now*?

‘Zaid, I’m giving you an out here,’ I gently urge, a nagging part of me believing he’s just saying what he thinks I want to hear.

‘Who said I wanted one?’ he counters.

‘Okay, sure, but at least take some time to process this. It’s . . . big. Life-changing.’ *Not something I want you to take back*.

His eyes find mine, and there’s a spark in them that slowly starts to melt the iceberg of doubt within me. ‘I know that.’ He pauses, searching my face, head tilting a fraction in question as he slowly pulls his hand from my knee and back into his own lap. ‘Do you – do you not *want* me involved?’

‘No!’ It’s my turn to nearly shout the word, though to Zaid’s credit he doesn’t wince. ‘I mean, if you want to be, I’m fine with that. It’s just . . . it’s going to be a little more complicated.’

That’s the understatement of the century, but how else can I phrase it? Because *Oh, yeah, it’s definitely gonna be a shit show* doesn’t seem like the best thing to say.

‘Then we’ll figure it out,’ he says, and his confidence brings my anxiety down a notch. ‘Together.’

Together. This is now a joint venture, an exploration in co-parenting. It isn't anywhere near a new concept, and I've known plenty of people who've done it successfully. But co-parenting with Zaid Yousef, famous racing driver who's away from home nearly nine months of the year and has the world's attention beaming down on him? That's a little different.

There's no guarantee that Zaid will be around much, especially if he stays in the sport for a few more years – which, judging from what has been announced about his contract, he's locked in for at least two more. What's that going to look like for me and the baby?

Then again, what does it matter? I've been prepared to be a single parent since day one, and if I'm the only one around the majority of the time, I can't be too mad about it.

I try to balance out the fear of the unknown by imagining what the good bits of this arrangement could look like – the two of us dressing our future kid in cheesy little checkered onesies, Zaid teaching them how to drive a kart, me with a built-in grand prix–watching buddy – but the churning nausea this pregnancy has brought about picks the perfect moment to hit me. I try to swallow it back, but it sticks in the back of my throat, leaving my stomach threateningly unsettled.

'Are you okay?'

I hold up a hand at Zaid's concerned question, needing a second to push past it before I can speak. 'It's just morning sickness,' I answer when the nausea ebbs again, but his renewed concern has me rushing to add, 'but it's getting better. It's not as bad as it was toward the beginning.'

I still can't believe I didn't realize I was pregnant sooner, but it was as if the second I did, every first trimester symptom hit me like a truck. If it weren't for my doctor reassuring me that it was all normal and that – according to my twelve-week ultrasound – the fetus was growing exactly as it should, I might have thought this baby was trying to suck the life out of me. Some days I still can't quite convince myself that they're not.

Even with all the less-than-stellar physical aspects, I'm *excited*. Still in shock too since I'd nearly convinced myself this might never happen, but my doctor made it clear that sometimes all it comes down to is the right timing. I'd thought, with my tracking and planning, I would know when

that time was, but apparently my body had other ideas. Too bad it couldn't have given me a little more of a heads-up that it was ready *before* I slept with a Formula 1 driver using expired condoms.

Zaid's gaze is heavy on me. 'I wish I could have been there to help you through the worst of it,' he says softly.

I'm struck by his sincerity, like he really *does* regret not being there for me, and it drops a small boulder of guilt on my chest, even if he didn't mean it to. 'I'm sorry I couldn't figure out how to tell you sooner.'

And now I'm also sorry he couldn't be there for that first ultrasound, to see that little jumping bean and hear their speeding heartbeat. I went by myself, just like I'd always expected to, but when I wasn't crying in wonder at the tiny blob on the screen, I was fantasizing about what it might be like to have a partner with me to share in the moment – even what it might be like to share it with Zaid. The idea felt too dangerous to dwell on at the time, so I pushed it to the far reaches of my mind. Now it's my reality.

'Hey,' he urges, and his hand is back on my knee, squeezing gently, grounding me. 'What did I say about apologizing?'

A flush of heat runs through me at the reminder of our night together, and this time I feel his touch all too well.

'I don't blame you for not telling me earlier,' he goes on before I can even struggle to start forming words. 'All I ask is that you don't hide anything else from me.' He pauses for a moment, letting his request sink in. 'I want to know how you're feeling, what you're thinking, what you want from me, what you need. You can tell me in your own time, but just . . . tell me. Okay?'

When I don't immediately answer, he dips his head so we're eye level, his stare imploring, thumb brushing back and forth over my jeans. 'Ava?'

'Okay,' I choke out, the heat replaced with a different warmth now, the kind that comes from being completely and utterly overwhelmed. 'But you have to do the same for me.'

His mouth lifts in the corners, a dry smile. 'I'm not the one who's pregnant.'

'No,' I concede, and it's my turn to search the planes of his face. 'But you're fighting battles too.'

I wonder if I’ve said the wrong thing when his lips settle into a firm line. He doesn’t call me out on it though, which is answer enough.

‘I don’t want this to be a distraction for your season,’ I go on. ‘So if—’

‘It isn’t,’ he interrupts. ‘Honestly, I think I needed a wake-up call.’

‘Are you sure? Because if this is too much, we can figure something out until the season’s over. I’ll be okay on my own if you need to focus on racing.’

Again, Zaid shakes his head. He swallows hard, and then his eyes lock on mine. ‘This isn’t a distraction, Ava,’ he says. ‘You just gave me something to live for.’

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CHAPTER 10
Zaid

I should be panicking.

I should be pacing and worrying and on the verge of hyperventilating. I should be spiraling over how my life will never be the same again now that I'm going to be a father. And I certainly should be telling Ava, *Actually, I'll take you up on that extra time to think about what I want to do. Cheers, love.*

But I'm not. And I won't. Because somehow, this punch she's delivered has shattered me and pieced me back together in a way that finally makes sense. I might be a little bit concussed, sure, but this is a gut-deep feeling of rightness that's placed my world back on its proper axis. It's burned away the fog that's lingered since Singapore, the one that made me wonder if I could ever feel more than numb complacency and the bone-aching discomfort of unceasing anxiety.

Turns out, I can. And it's exhilarating and terrifying and has me unsure if I should laugh or scream or gently take Ava's face in my hands and tell her that I'm scared absolutely shitless. But that fear? That twist of terror that everything is going to change? It means I'm alive. And that accompanying dip and swoop and lift of my heart inside my chest, eager to feel whatever's next? It means I *want* to see it all transform, no matter how it all comes to pass. I can't remember the last time I felt anything like it.

Might be a little too far to tell Ava all that, though. She's thrown enough by what I've already said, a gentle crease between her brows, doe eyes damp as she blinks away tears. I can't tell what kind of tears they are – happy? overwhelmed? hormonal? – but she has every right to be emotional right now.

'Don't worry about how this is going to affect my driving,' I say, needing to move on from my confession. She's already seen my struggles, and this isn't the time to rehash them.

Besides, she's just gifted me with the greatest reason to leave racing behind.

You just gave me something to live for.

She nods, tongue darting out to wet her lips. The motion drags my attention down to her mouth, and I'm reminded of the night that got us here. Of the whiskey and her smile. Of the red, white, and blue and a flash of pink in the middle of it all, making me laugh in ways I haven't in so long. Of the way she moaned my name and writhed beneath me, inhibitions unleashed.

God, she's beautiful. There's no way I could have resisted her, not after years of keeping myself away, but it was supposed to be one night. I wasn't even sure if I'd see her again, no matter how much I wanted to. Now we're tied together for life. Now she's the mother of my child.

My child. Fuck. I'm really going to be a dad. I have to tell my own father, have to see his reaction to having a second grandchild so soon, have to get all the advice I can possibly—

It's like a hot poker through the heart when I remember that's not something I can do. I've been without him for two years and yet I still have these moments when my first thought is of calling him. But he can't help me. He can't guide me through this. I'm on my own.

'We have a lot to figure out,' Ava says, lightly placing her hand over mine where I still have it resting on her knee. Her touch pulls me back to the present before I can follow the spiral of grief down to the pit I've barely clawed my way out of.

Now that she's mentioned it, the list that's compiling in my head is already miles long. My immediate thought is of the fans and the photographers lingering outside this hotel, the ones waiting for a glimpse of me or any sort of news. They'll be on Ava in a split second if they catch the faintest hint that we've even passed by each other, and if they learn about the baby? It'll be hell on earth.

I don't want them making her life as miserable as they've made mine through the years. Don't want her privacy stolen. Don't want her to face the evil things these faceless people say. Not again.

'The biggest thing we need to worry about right now is keeping you

safe,' I say. 'I don't want fans and the press hounding you again.'

She nods and draws her fingers away, and I'm taken aback by how bereft I feel without her touch. It only gets worse when she shifts to better face me, causing my hand to fall into the empty space between us. 'Then we should keep our distance from each other,' she says. 'I can't see any other way to prevent that from happening.'

I understand why she's suggesting it, but that's not an option for me. I refuse to show up on the day this baby's born without having been there to help Ava and watch her grow our child. I've already missed enough – I won't miss any more.

'No,' I say, a little firmer than I intend. I want her to know how serious I am, but I'm not trying to scare the poor woman off. 'We just need to be cautious and go public on our own terms. People are going to find out eventually, so we might as well control the narrative around it.' I take care to soften my next words. 'Let's tell our families first, give them a chance to settle into this, and then we can release a joint statement saying we're expecting a child together. It'll give people time to get over the shock of it before the baby's even born. Then, maybe, they won't be so horrible.' It's a long shot, but it's the only solution I can think of that satisfies my desire to keep her close *and* protected.

'I guess that could work,' she eventually concedes, and while I can hear a note of cautious optimism in her words, it seems like she's fighting hard for it. 'We both know how bad the rumors can get when you don't address things fast enough.' She pauses to take a breath as color begins to creep into her cheeks. 'But if we do go public, people are probably going to speculate whether we're, um, *together*, just like they did last time. I don't know if you want that, or how you want to handle it, or if it would affect your reputation, and I just—'

I gently cut in to keep her from rambling herself into more obvious embarrassment. 'Are you asking if we should let people assume we're a couple or hint that this was meant to be a one-night thing?'

'Yeah.' She exhales a timid laugh, glancing down at the carpet and twisting her fingers together. 'I guess that's what I'm asking.'

I gently grasp her hand, stilling her nervous motions and hoping she

won’t pull away again. ‘We can do whatever you’re most comfortable with. I’ll happily play along either way.’

She worries her bottom lip between her teeth as she quietly considers it. ‘I guess we can keep it vague and let them think whatever they want, because they will anyway. In real life, though . . .’ Her cheeks flush a deeper pink as she glances at me from the corner of her eye. ‘Obviously we have . . . *something* between us. But it’s probably for the best if we focus on one thing at a time, starting with making it through this pregnancy.’

It’s not a complete rejection but it still stings like one, even though I know she’s right. Acting on our attraction to each other at this point could be a recipe for disaster later down the line, and it’s important that we don’t add extra complications to an already complex situation. More than anything, we have to focus on how we can be friends and co-parents before we can even consider mixing in stronger emotions.

‘You’re right,’ I say, as much as I don’t want to. ‘And when it comes to our statement, we don’t have to say anything beyond the basics – that we’re having a baby and to respect our privacy at this time.’

Not that they will – we both know that already – but putting this out there now will help us avoid some future trouble. Let people think what they want. This is *our* business, not theirs.

Ava stares down at our hands, and I stroke my thumb over her knuckles, mostly to soothe myself, but I feel her fingers relax underneath mine.

‘Okay,’ she says, sounding a little more confident this time. ‘Yeah. We’ll put out a statement, and then you can get on with the rest of the season while I slink back home to grow this baby away from the spotlight.’

I frown. Did she not understand what I meant when I said I wanted to be involved? Be there for her? That can’t happen if she’s off in America, all while I’m in a new country practically every week. I understand that she won’t be able to fly past a certain point in her pregnancy, and where she ends up then is a conversation we can have at a later date, but for now? If she’s comfortable with it and able to, I want her to stick close.

‘I didn’t mean—’ I cut short, trying to figure out how to phrase what I want to say without coming off like some overbearing prick. ‘I was actually hoping you could travel with me.’

I force myself not to be hurt by the way she jerks her hand away, her eyes going wide and a disbelieving laugh escaping her lips. ‘*Travel* with you?’

My face heats at her tone, but her reaction isn’t exactly shocking. I get the feeling she invited me here to tell me the news and unburden her conscience, then expected me to want to be hands-off. But that’s not the kind of father I had, and when I ever dared to think of the kind of father I wanted to be, it always revolved around me following in Dad’s footsteps.

‘Ava, I want to be there for you,’ I explain, voice low, heavy with emphasis. ‘But I don’t exactly have a job where I can be wherever you are. I understand it’s unfair to ask this of you, and obviously you can say no if you’re not up for it or just want to get back to your life, but I want to see that you’re okay. I want you with me.’

She blinks a few times, still thrown by my request. ‘I didn’t think—’ She cuts herself off, lips parting again as she tries to find what she wants to say to me. ‘I didn’t think that was an option.’

‘Why not?’ I push. ‘I want you there. We can make it work. And . . . you miss being in the paddock, don’t you?’

It’s a manipulative question, and my chest pinches at stooping that low. But from our conversation at the bar, I know she misses this world. I know she wants to come back, yet she won’t do it without an express invitation. All I’m doing is giving her one.

‘I miss it a hell of a lot,’ she answers, so quickly that I wonder if she’s even realized she said it.

But when she doesn’t shrink away or take it back, I say, ‘So travel with me. Come back to the paddock. Let me be there for you.’ *Let me take care of you*.

I don’t say the last bit because I don’t know how she’d take it. This independent woman, so determined to be on her own and raise a child that way too, doesn’t need anyone to take care of her. I have no doubt she’s capable of it, and maybe this kid would be better off with just one very dedicated parent. But I’m too selfish to let that be the case – I want in on this too.

Ava pauses, and I expect a firm *absolutely not* when she’s done thinking,

but instead she levels me with a wary stare. ‘Your team isn’t going to like that. I don’t want to upset anyone.’

So she’s worried about being a problem. I’ve always gotten the sense that she’s a people pleaser, someone who thinks everyone has to like her in order to be accepted. A peace keeper. I used to be that way, and maybe in some aspects I still am. But this? No one’s opinion is going to change what I want.

‘I don’t give a single fuck if they like it or not.’

‘Okay, well, my dad isn’t going to like it either,’ she counters. ‘He doesn’t—’ She cuts herself off again, lips pressing together to keep from confessing something. ‘Look, he’s just not going to like me being back.’

‘Do *you* care about that?’

Instead of answering, she puts her hands on the cushions beside her thighs and pushes herself to her feet. Her fingers dance nervously over her loose T-shirt, briefly pressing the material close to her body. My attention dips to her abdomen when her hands pause there for a moment, and it’s long enough for me to see the slight bump of her belly.

I might not have noticed without the emphasis of her touch, and one night together hasn’t made me an expert on her body no matter how much I wanted to memorize every curve, but I know I’m not imagining this. It’s there, the smallest reminder that all of this is real.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says, brushing it off, turning away to stare through the gauzy drapes covering the balcony doors. ‘I can’t travel like that. Sure, I can work from anywhere, but what would I do about doctors’ appointments? There’s about ten thousand I have to go to. I can’t fly back and forth to the US that often.’

‘Then we’ll find you the best doctors wherever we are,’ I offer. And I’d fly out any other provider she or the baby might need, make sure there were backups on call at every local hospital. I would do anything, spend any amount of money, to make sure she and the baby would be safe, comfortable, with their every need taken care of. ‘You’re not due until autumn, right?’

‘November,’ she clarifies, still with her back to me, but she doesn’t protest further.

‘We can make this work,’ I press. I’m reaching the end of what I can say without dropping to my knees and begging or making this seem like some fucked-up guilt trip. ‘But I understand if you’d rather stay home. I know I’m asking a lot. And it’s not like this was anywhere in your plans.’

She turns a little now, enough that I can see her nose scrunch, a silent *Yeah, no shit it wasn’t in my plans*. Of course, she’s polite enough to keep the words to herself.

‘Can I have some time to think?’ she finally says, voice small in a way that cracks my heart, because once again I’ve thrown this woman’s life into complete chaos. It’s like that’s all I’m capable of doing to her.

‘Of course.’ Sensing her dismissal, I slowly rise from the sofa. The muscles in my neck and back protest as I move, a reminder that this encounter hasn’t been my first car crash of the day. ‘I have some work to do at the factory, so I’m flying back to the UK tonight. After that, I’ll be in London with my family until it’s time to head to Imola. I think I’ll tell them the news while I’m home.’ I pause, sliding my hands into the pockets of my jeans to keep from reaching out to touch her. ‘Would you like to be there when I do?’

I’m not expecting a yes – it’s probably outrageous of me to even invite her along. But if I’m going to be involved, so is my family. With Sami following me around the world as my assistant, and with my mum, four aunts, and brother all active participants in my life, this kid’s going to be surrounded by Yousefs from day dot. And as the mother of my child, Ava will be surrounded by them too.

I know there will be some . . . *complications* with my family regarding the details of this situation. I can already see them looping through Ava’s mind as she faces me again, a shimmer of deep apprehension in her eyes.

‘I don’t know,’ she hedges. ‘But you probably shouldn’t be there when I tell my dad. He’s not going to take this news well.’

It absolutely makes me a coward, but I don’t want to be there either. ‘Just let me know if you change your mind, and I’ll be with you.’

Ava offers me a weak smile, and while it’s better than nothing, it still hurts me to see her worry. I want to smooth my hands over her rounded shoulders and draw her in for a hug that she probably needs, but despite the

little touches we've both stolen, it feels like a step too far after she pulled away from me. She may be having my baby – fucking hell, what a thing – but that doesn't change the fact that we're nothing more than acquaintances, no matter how long I've been far too aware of her.

I settle for dipping my head to meet her gaze. 'Take a few days to think it over,' I instruct as gently as I can. 'I'll give you my private number and you can call me when you're ready. We'll talk more then.'

She nods, throat working as she swallows hard, like the words she wants to say are stuck there. I won't press her for them.

Unable to resist, I slip a hand from my pocket, the pad of my thumb brushing her cheekbone as I push away some of the dark hair that's fallen into her eyes, tucking it behind her ear. My touch lingers for a few seconds too long to be just friendly, but this time, she doesn't pull away as her eyes swing up to meet mine.

'It's going to be okay, princess. I promise.'

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CHAPTER 11
Ava

Edith and Stella don't waste a second after Zaid leaves to crash into my room.

'So?' Edith prompts, shooing Stella along to the sofa. 'What happened? How did it go?'

Once they're crammed together on the cushions, I spill it all. To their credit, they don't interrupt me until I'm done speaking – or, well, rambling, really, trying to process what's just happened because . . . holy shit. Zaid Yousef wants to raise this baby with me. And he wants me with him the whole time.

When I'm finally finished, Stella and Edith share a pointed glance that has me wary.

'You're going to travel with him, right?' Edith asks, point-blank.

'I don't – I don't know,' I splutter, taken aback by her expectant attitude. 'I told him I needed some time to think. It's going to be a lot on my body, and not to mention it's probably going to end up being a PR nightmare for us.'

She stares at me for a long moment, narrow-eyed and unblinking. Then she declares, 'You've already decided to go with him.'

I scoff, folding my arms over my chest and trying not to wince at how much my boobs hurt. It's bad enough that I've already gone up a cup size and had to spend an outrageous amount of money on all new bras. 'Last I checked, you weren't a mind reader,' I volley back.

'Don't need to be,' she says breezily. 'I just know you. You want to go. And if I were you, I'd do it.'

I gape at her, shocked that she of all people actually *wants* me to go – that she thinks it's in my best interest. And . . . maybe she's right that I've already made up my mind. I was 99 per cent there the second Zaid asked if I missed being in the paddock.

He’s given me an opportunity to return to the one place I thought I could never go back to. Sure, it’s so he can keep an eye on me through the pregnancy, but he offered exactly what it would take to get me to agree. Turns out, he knows me better than I thought, and I like it more than I should.

Stella’s eyes bounce back and forth between us, taking in our standoff. ‘I’m not going to wade into whether it’s a good idea,’ she says cautiously. ‘But if you decide to travel with him, I’ll be at the next race. You’d at least have an ally.’

It’s nice to know that I wouldn’t be completely alone, but with how things went at the pre-season party, I can’t imagine I’d be treated any better in the paddock. Not to mention the sneaking around Zaid and I will have to do to keep our little secret under wraps until we’re ready to share it. It’s all too much.

‘Look, you want to be back in the paddock, don’t you?’ Edith asks when I’m quiet for a long moment.

I nod, holding myself a little tighter. ‘I do.’

‘And Zaid’s offering to handle everything imaginable for you?’

‘He is. And that’s the problem.’

I’ve been on my own for a long time, been in control of every detail of my life, and the idea of giving that up is terrifying. But saying yes to Zaid would require it. There’s no conceivable way I could do this otherwise. I may be financially secure, and if I ever needed help, I know my father or Axel would pitch in to assist me, but my net worth is pennies compared to Zaid’s millions, and it takes more money than I’ll ever have in my bank account to keep up with the whirlwind of Formula 1 – not to mention keep up with a man like him.

We’re not equals. We never will be. To me, this isn’t an even trade, and it puts me on the back foot if the arrangement doesn’t work out. Yet Zaid seems to think *he’s* being unfair to ask me to do this. That in itself should be a good sign, right? That he understands the imbalance here and is willing to lean into making things equitable instead?

‘Ava, it’s *okay* to let people help you,’ Edith stresses. ‘Let him do this for you. Let him step up in the way he wants to.’

Still, I'm waffling. 'I don't—'

'Just say yes,' she interrupts. 'Get something for yourself out of this. Hell, get more out of Zaid if you want.'

'Edith!'

She shrugs. 'He's already knocked you up. Might as well keep reaping the benefits.'

My cheeks burn as I roll my eyes and glance away, but she's planted a reckless thought in my head. There's no denying that the attraction between us is still there. I felt the pull immediately when I opened the door and found him on the other side of the threshold, and I saw the way he looked at me in return. I can lie to myself as much as I want and say that our one night together got him out of my system, but considering how many times I've thought about it since, I think all it's done is make me want him more.

But I can't. *We* can't. I made it clear to him that I don't want to complicate our co-parenting relationship – at least not until we're on steady ground with each other and the baby. I'm not ruling it out forever, but for now? It's not a smart idea.

'Edith's not wrong,' Stella agrees, crossing one long dark brown leg over the other. 'Clearly there's chemistry between you two. And I know from personal experience that there's no sense in ignoring it.'

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I try to process everything. Yes, I've always kind of had a thing for Zaid. And yeah, I'm certain that staying strictly platonic is going to be a herculean task. And of course everyone and their mother is going to speculate about us anyway, especially if I follow him around the world. Which, the more I think about it . . . the more I'm interested in giving it a try.

Oh god. Edith's right. I *have* made up my mind.

Being back in the paddock isn't going to be easy, I know that. There will be whispers and gossip and horrible media treatment, plus traveling while in the best of health is tough enough, so it'll be even harder while pregnant. But I'm still hung up on the fact that Zaid even asked me to join him.

Honestly, this is the first time a man has made it abundantly clear that he *wants* me with him. Back when I was in grad school and working in IndyCar, I had a boyfriend who flat out said he didn't want me coming with

him after he announced he was moving to a new city for a job. We'd been together for nearly two and a half years at that point, so this is truly the opposite end of the spectrum and it's coming from a man I only spent a single night with.

Zaid really wants me there. And I'm going to say yes – on my terms, at least.

I exhale and let my arms drop helplessly to my sides, looking back and forth between Edith and Stella. 'You two are the *worst* influences,' I declare.

Stella preens and Edith offers me a smug but tender smile.

'Go get what you want, Ava,' Edith says. 'All of it.'

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CHAPTER 12
Zaid

‘You’ve fucked up, mate.’ My cousin grimaces at me from across the jet, sprawled across the plush leather couch like this is his private plane instead of mine. ‘I mean, congrats and all of that, but your mother is *not* going to be happy.’

In the wide seat next to mine, Adnan nods along with Sami’s assessment, so solemn that you’d think I’d told him someone had died. Apparently, the news of Ava Farahani carrying my child is on par with that.

‘A child out of wedlock!’ Sami crows in put-on disappointment, sounding more like his mother than mine, but I get the point. ‘And not just that, but with a *Persian* girl.’ He throws up a hand for emphasis, letting it fall back to his chest with a dramatic *thump*. ‘Oh, Auntie Mariam is going to combust. I thought nothing would ever beat me coming out as bi in sixth form, but this absolutely takes the cake.’

I roll my eyes, bristling at his theatrics, but Sami unfortunately isn’t wrong in his assessment of the situation. I’ve not just committed one of the worst crimes fathomable in our family – not being married before having a kid – but I’ve gone and done it with someone from a culture where there’s a history of tension with my own. I take comfort in the fact that my mother is a level-headed woman, always putting logic before emotion, the person I inherited my not-particularly-reactionary personality from.

‘It’s going to be fine,’ I say, brushing him off, refusing to buy into his drama. ‘She accepted Emiko with no issues.’

‘She did, but your sister-in-law’s not from a country that was partially behind why our family left Iraq,’ he counters.

Most of our family emigrated in the late seventies, having seen the handwriting on the wall of war with Iran, but some stayed – and too many died in the eight years the war raged on. But there have always been simmering tensions between the neighboring countries, spanning back

millennia to empires come and gone. Arab versus Persian, with a deep divide between ethnicity and language, despite being lumped together into the so-called Middle East by the Western powers that be. We have horrible words for each other in Arabic and Farsi, learned early in life along with a healthy dose of skepticism toward one another, all because of tragic histories that neither side will ever forgive or forget.

My parents never taught me that prejudice, but I know how it lingers in communities and festers underneath the surface in families. And I don't want to see it boil over when it comes to Ava.

'Ava was born in the US. We're both second generation.' *More West than East*, as my grandmother would gripe. Always caught in the middle. Too much and not enough at the same time. Just another diaspora kid.

Sami shrugs and grabs a motorsport magazine off the side table, casually flipping through it. 'Your mum might not care, but you think that matters to the whispering aunties? Ava and her family are still Iranian and you're still Iraqi.'

'And our kid is going to be both,' I shoot back. 'So everyone's going to need to get the fuck over it. Khalas.'

I know he's taking the piss and my reaction is excessive, but if I don't shut down this kind of talk now, the situation will be unbearable by the time the baby's born. I refuse to bring a child into a family that won't welcome them with open arms, and I won't put Ava through that either. I'd rather leave and build my own family.

'Simmer down,' Sami chides, flipping another page. 'No use getting worked up about it before we even know what's going to happen. Thank you for telling us first, though.'

I blow out a breath, stepping back from the ledge this conversation has pushed me onto. I knew I'd have to tell Sami and Adnan immediately, considering they're with me nearly twenty-four seven when we're on the road. If Ava chooses to join me, we'll all be one big happy – slightly dysfunctional and strangely associated – family. Even if she doesn't, I'll still need Adnan to organize security for her, and Sami to coordinate our schedules. It'll be a group effort.

'Do you actually want to do this?'

I glance over at Adnan, processing his quiet question and trying not to be offended by the doubt in his voice. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Are you ready to be a father?’ he presses, doubling down instead of taking anything back. ‘This is going to change your life completely.’

I scoff. He can’t really think I don’t know that or that I haven’t considered how different things are going to look for not only me but Ava too.

‘Is anyone ever really ready?’ I pose. But Adnan doesn’t ease up at my rhetorical query, and I’m left to level him with a stare. ‘I want this. I don’t have a single doubt in my head about it.’

‘And what about Ava?’

It’s Sami who asks this time, and my eyes cut in his direction. ‘What about her?’

He blows out a breath, like I’m being purposefully obtuse. ‘I’ve seen the way you look at her,’ he explains, waiting for me to put the pieces together. ‘How you’ve looked at her for a *long* time.’

‘Jesus, am I not allowed to admire a beautiful woman without you being on my case about it?’ I fire back. But I know what he’s hinting at and what he wants me to admit, yet I have no plans to confess it unless he leads me straight into those dangerous waters.

‘So you want this baby, fine,’ he says, and here it comes. ‘But do you want Ava too?’

More than I should, I nearly tell him. But I’m not sure if she wants me in the same way.

‘This is a platonic thing,’ I say instead.

Secret babies, hidden heirs, and marriages of convenience—old favorites still work for a reason.

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Sami squints at me. ‘*Platonic?* Oh, come on.’

‘Look, right now, the focus is on raising a child together. We decided we don’t need extra complications, and I’m not going to push the issue.’

Sami and Adnan share a loaded glance that leaves me sinking down in

my seat, already knowing I'll be a useless mess until Ava gives me her answer.

———

I wake with a start when the jet's wheels touch down.

I don't remember falling asleep, and my phone's still in my hand with a half-drafted reply in a long chain of emails with my manager, my personal PR team, and my legal team. Instead of napping early to save myself the pain of jet lag upon arriving in London, I stayed up far too late trying to get ahead of whatever Ava and I might be met with upon announcing her pregnancy. The chain is full of warnings to heed and advice to take and several different game plans revolving around whether this is going to be a civil co-parenting relationship or one that will land us in a nasty international custody battle.

Is it early to be worrying about a lot of this? Most likely. But the idea of waiting and wondering and not being in control of the situation when the news breaks has planted a seed of fear in my gut that I don't want growing any bigger.

The flight crew has already opened the door and lowered the jet's steps by the time I get my shit together enough to unbuckle my seat belt and stand, my knees, hips, and back stiff from sitting. I canceled on my trainer yesterday for our post-race session in order to talk to Ava, and while I don't regret it, I wish I'd squeezed one in before flying home. It's times like this when I'm reminded that I'm not as young as I once was, and even when crashes don't result in catastrophic injuries, they all add up.

It's also a reminder that I can't keep doing this forever. I certainly don't want to, especially not now, with a baby on the way. I've pressed my luck for years and it almost ran out last September – I can't keep risking my life if I'm serious about being there for my kid.

But leaving Formula 1 isn't an option yet. I can't walk away before this season's over, thanks to contracts and promises and the guilt that I'm not living up to what my father would have expected of me, even though all he wanted was for me to be happy. But how can I be happy if I don't give my

all for at least one last season? How can I be happy quitting now if I'll spend the rest of my life wondering if this was the year I could have won an eighth title? I have to see it through.

It's a typical gloomy English morning when I duck out of the plane, and I only have to pause a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sunlight filtering through the clouds, a stark contrast to Miami's bright blue skies. Behind me, Sami sighs, mumbling to himself about the joys of our weather. I'm about to tell him that we can head home to Monaco as soon as I've handled all my business here, but my phone buzzes in my hand, cutting the thought and my movements short when I see the name on the screen.

Sami slaps a hand down on my shoulder to keep from running into me, but I barely notice as I press the phone to my ear and cover the other to block out the noise of the private hangar. 'Ava?'

There's a beat of crackling silence. 'Hi,' she finally says. The word is so hesitant that it's nearly a whisper.

I'm immediately alert, the dregs of sleep gone and my mind spinning with worry. 'Is everything okay?'

'Everything's fine,' she rushes to say. 'I just . . . I wanted to tell you I've made up my mind.'

I check my watch, counting the hours and converting time zones. It's been barely twelve hours since we last spoke, and considering it's morning for me, it's the middle of the night for her back in the US.

'I can't face your family yet,' she goes on remorsefully. 'I'm sorry.'

'No apologies,' I remind her as I start moving down the steps again, much to Sami's relief. 'I have it handled.'

She exhales softly, like she's gearing up to share something else. 'I'm going to tell my dad the news in person at the next grand prix.'

My brow lifts in surprise. 'Are you sure you want to do it then?'

'What, are you afraid I'm going to ruin his race weekend?' she asks dryly.

I can't help the huff of laughter that escapes me, and I ignore the strange glance Adnan shoots me over his shoulder. 'Wouldn't be opposed to it.'

'It seems like the best time,' she explains. 'It's hard to pin him down and

I didn’t want to take any extra flights trying to find him. Figured I’d already need to be at Imola for the race, so . . .’

I pause, trying to read between the lines of what she’s saying, but I’m too tired to figure it out. ‘Are you saying that *I’ll* see you in Italy?’

‘I am.’ She takes a breath, and she sounds a little more confident in her choices when she speaks again. ‘We can consider the races in Italy and Monaco a test run. Two weeks of traveling together. If things go okay, I’ll join you for as much of the season as I can.’

The weight that lifts from my shoulders is immense, enough to make me nearly stumble from the respite. ‘Thank you, Ava. This means a lot to me.’

She’s quiet for a few beats, long enough that I wonder if the call’s dropped, but then she speaks again. ‘We’ll see how it goes,’ she says, and it’s a reminder that this is only the start of everything.

We still have so many bumps in the road ahead of us.

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CHAPTER 13
Ava

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Thursday 16 May

Buongiorno, babes. It's Italian Grand Prix time!

Today is media day, and sweet treat queen Stella Margaux Maxwell-Brown is back . . . weirdly with Ava Farahani by her side. Strange link-up, but okay. Stella stunned walking into the paddock today (swipe through for full outfit photos) in a little white linen dress, ungodly high espadrilles, and a stack of jewelry on her wrist that probably cost more than most people make in a decade. But hey, if you're rich and married to a man who's even richer, why not flaunt it?

Ava went a more casual route in jeans and a loose white blouse – very quiet luxury in comparison to other paddock guests in some terribly gaudy outfits. But, girl, pull those shoulders back and don't look so scared to be here! Then again, maybe someone's afraid of running into her ex for a second time . . .

Imola

I scan my credentials at the swipe gate of the Imola paddock with Stella by my side and a lump in my throat.

As my photo pops up on the little screen, allowing me to pass through the turnstile, some of my anxiety morphs into excitement. It's been so long since I was last here – in any paddock, really – that I can't help but smile at the colorful team motorhomes lining the pathway and all the uniformed team members buzzing around like worker bees. It's like coming home.

Today's paddock pass is courtesy of McMorris, the team Stella's husband, Thomas, drives for. I briefly considered getting in touch with my old contacts at Specter Energy to see if they could grant me access, or even asking Zaid to figure something out with Mascort, but Stella told me she had it handled. Honestly, showing up with a McMorris WAG is probably the least attention-grabbing thing I could do.

It’s media day, the Thursday before the race weekend, which means the paddock is the calmest it will be until the grand prix is over. A few photographers snap our picture as we enter – let’s be real, they’re focused on Stella, owner of a thriving international bakery chain and the hottest F1 wife – but it’s nothing like the chaos of walking in with a driver on race day.

Stella takes it all in stride, waving at a few people she knows as we pass them, and I tell myself that the eyes that linger on us are because of her. She’s model beautiful and her white minidress strikes a stunning contrast against her dark brown skin. Her hair falls across her shoulders like a curtain of silk while my own waves have decided that the warm and breezy Italian weather is their absolute worst enemy, expanding to twice their normal size.

Self-consciously, I tuck my hair behind my ears and then move to smooth out any wrinkles in my top, but I stop myself at the last second. While my nearly fifteen-week bump is still small, it’s definitely getting bigger, and I’ve gone up a jeans size thanks to the combination of it and the couple of pounds I’ve gained. I don’t think most people would notice, but I’m not interested in any scrutiny.

We keep a leisurely pace as we walk, mostly for my benefit. I’m sure Stella could sprint in those wedges that lace up her toned calves, but whoever said you get more energy in your second trimester was a liar. I’m still exhausted and nauseated, and now I’m constantly craving ice cream, which has the added bonus of helping with my newest pregnancy symptom of heartburn. Thankfully, we’re in the land of gelato, and I plan to eat some for every meal.

We’re passing the Mascort motorhome when my phone buzzes in my hand, and when I see Zaid’s name on the screen my heart does a silly little tumble. It apparently hasn’t gotten the message that we’re trying to keep things friendly.

It’s been doing that every time he calls or texts, which certainly can’t be healthy, but I can’t seem to stop it. Our text history is short but growing longer by the day, and I’m up to date with how his mother and brother took our news – ‘Surprisingly well,’ he said on our last call, sounding just a tad

suspicious. ‘Mum was only a little bit dramatic and my brother barely taunted me about him finally becoming Mum’s favorite because of this.’

I wish I could have been there, but losing my mom so early in life has given me a complex when it comes to other people’s mothers. I’ve panicked and bolted the few times the moms of my friends have shown me affection or offered me motherly advice, and I didn’t want to risk that happening with her. I also couldn’t have faced the chance that she might shun or reject me and my child, either because of my family being Iranian or simply because she found something else about me to dislike. Not that I thought she would, but the idea that it *could* happen was enough to scare me off. I’m not going to be able to avoid the Yousefs forever, though, so it’s something I’ll have to work through – and quickly.

I motion for Stella to hold on as I slow to a stop outside of the D’Ambrosi motorhome, but she’s already been swept into conversation with a petite curly-haired woman dressed in head-to-toe Scuderia D’Ambrosi red.

‘How is it being back?’ Zaid asks when I answer the phone.

I skim over the commotion of the paddock, the sound of his voice loosening some of the lingering tension in my shoulders. It’s strange not being here in a working capacity. I’m so used to being in team kit with my laptop under my arm, listening to a harried social media admin explain to me what kind of asset they need for their race-day post *right this second*. Being a spectator makes me feel like a giddy kid again.

‘It’s amazing,’ I reply, because even with the curious glances I’m getting, nothing beats the energy of being here. ‘I missed it more than I thought.’

I can hear the smile in his voice when he says, ‘I’m glad you decided to come.’

I feel the same, and hearing Zaid say it has my heart tumbling again. I do my best to wrangle it back under control and shift the conversation to something safer. ‘Hey, aren’t you supposed to be in the drivers’ press conference right now?’

‘They can wait on me.’ It’s a confident statement but somehow not cocky. ‘I’d rather talk to you.’

‘Wow, the ego makes a triumphant return,’ I tease, pointedly choosing to

ignore the last part of what he said lest I melt on the spot.

‘I’ve earned the right after seven titles,’ he boasts, but there’s a hint of a laugh behind it.

‘*So* full of yourself.’ I’m grinning, unable to help it, and I’m sure I look like a blushing teenager with an overwhelming crush to anyone who’s watching. ‘Don’t get too cocky, though. Don’t want to jinx yourself and lose this weekend.’

‘You think I can’t live up to my own reputation?’ he challenges playfully.

Not in the slightest, I want to tell him, because I know he could win a race blindfolded, but I still say, ‘Mm, I’m not answering that.’

He laughs, and the sound wraps around me like a warm embrace. ‘Fine, then how about this? If I get pole on Saturday, you have to wear my number on Sunday for the race. I want everyone to see you cheering for me instead of Axel. We can consider it a soft launch before we put out an official press release.’

A burst of laughter escapes me, briefly drawing Stella’s attention, but she glances away quickly. ‘Oh, that’s just asking for trouble,’ I say.

‘Come on, princess,’ he coaxes. ‘If I can’t do it, then you have nothing to lose.’

Problem is, I know he *can* do it. But just like all the racing drivers I’ve lived my life around, I can’t back down from a challenge. ‘Okay, fine. I’m in.’

‘That’s my girl.’

The air in my lungs seems to disappear at the praise, leaving me unexpectedly breathless. Thankfully, there’s a little commotion in the background, and I take the opportunity to recover, but I’m back to being unable to breathe when he speaks again, his voice quieter. ‘Have you spoken to your father?’

I grimace at the reminder of what I’m here to do – and what I’m currently avoiding with this conversation. ‘Not yet.’

‘Ava,’ he says gently, and it feels like he’s taking my hand and pulling me in the direction I need to be heading. ‘Go tell him.’

I groan but he’s right. I need to go get this over with. ‘Can you do me a

favor?' I ask him before I can stop myself, no matter how silly I feel over what I'm about to request.

'Anything.'

'Can you – can you tell me everything's going to be okay?'

He doesn't hesitate. 'Everything is going to be okay, princess.'

Before I can thank him for obliging me, there's a voice calling for him to hurry up. It's Thomas Maxwell-Brown, if the posh accent and the *Bloody hell, get on with it* that follows are anything to go by.

'I'll come to your room later,' Zaid murmurs, and the low, warm words have butterflies taking flight in my chest. 'See you then.'

I mumble my goodbye before turning back to Stella, who has wrapped up her conversation and is nodding for me to keep moving. We're only a few yards away from the Specter Energy motorhome when we stop again.

'This is where I leave you,' Stella says, bending to press a kiss to my cheek before whispering, 'Good luck. And if your dad needs his ass kicked, I'm willing to help.'

After one last wink, she strides off toward the McMorris garage, and I'm left staring up at the sleek glass-walled front of Specter Energy's home in the paddock. It's a gamble as to whether the nondescript security guys stationed by the doors will let me enter, but as I make my way up the wide steps, they both nod in recognition and make no move to stop me.

I *might* have been hoping they'd ask me to keep on trucking, and I would have happily complied. Now I'm inside and following a familiar path past high-top tables, refrigerated cases housing the team's namesake energy drink, and employees dressed in navy and neon yellow. My feet guide me to the back hallways where the offices are located, fully on autopilot. I don't stop until I'm outside a closed door, the plaque on it declaring OMID FARAHANI – SPECTER ENERGY RACING, TEAM PRINCIPAL.

I stare for a moment, heart rate kicking up until it's at full charge. God, I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if—

The door swings open and I stumble back a step. Then I'm face to face with Axel.

'*Ava?*' he says in disbelief, thankfully shutting the door behind him and

shielding me from view of the man sitting behind the desk. ‘What are you doing here?’

Shit, shit, *shit*. I hoped he’d be off doing interviews or filming something ridiculous for the social media team, but here he is, the last person I want to face right now.

I try to speak but nothing comes out, leaving me to awkwardly clear my throat and look anywhere but at him. He has a strange way of convincing me to spill my guts, and if I make direct eye contact, there’s no way I won’t confess everything on the spot.

‘I’m here to talk to Dad.’ The words come out as barely more than a squeak. ‘Is he free?’

Axel steps closer, brow furrowed and eyes pinched in suspicion. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ I brush off. ‘I just – I need to talk to him first.’

‘Ava.’ My name is a warning.

I grab his elbow and squeeze, hoping he can’t hear the way my heart is about to beat out of my chest. ‘I’ll tell you later, I swear. Let me chat with Omid before he gets wrapped up in another meeting.’

Axel isn’t remotely pacified, but his mouth settles into a resigned frown. ‘Are you all right at least?’ he asks quietly.

I soften some at his grudging concern. ‘I am. And I have good news to share. It’s just . . . complicated.’

His eyes narrow once again. ‘How complicated?’

Oh, how about I’m-pregnant-by-your-biggest-rival levels of complicated? ‘Like I said, we can talk later.’ I let go of his elbow and step around him. ‘Good luck this weekend.’

I don’t hesitate, pushing into my father’s office in an attempt to get away from Axel. Now that we’ve had a run-in, I’m far less intimidated by the idea of telling my dad, because telling Axel is going to be *so* much worse. There’s not much physical damage Dad can do to Zaid while sitting on the pit wall. But Axel? If he doesn’t like the idea of Zaid knocking me up, there’s a hell of a lot more chaos he can cause directly on the grid.

‘Hi, Dad,’ I greet when my father looks up in surprise. ‘Can we talk?’

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‘How did it go?’

Zaid sits in an armchair by the wide window in my hotel room, staring at me expectantly. If he can tell I’ve been crying for the past hour, either he isn’t letting on or I’ve gotten very good at covering up moments of crushing disappointment.

‘On a scale of one to ten, where *one* is my dad hugged me and said he was excited to be a grandfather,’ I begin, slowly pacing the room because if I stop moving I’ll be forced to reckon with my emotions, ‘and *ten* is him disowning me on the spot and threatening to have you taken out behind the barn and shot . . . I’d say a solid seven point five.’

Zaid looks rightfully concerned about the situation, or maybe he’s just worried about my choice of visuals. ‘I know that’s not the reaction you were hoping for.’

It’s not, but it was close to the reaction I was unfortunately expecting. It was just . . . worse.

It started with Dad asking why I didn’t tell him I was coming to Italy, which led to me confessing that I knew he’d convince me not to visit. When he didn’t deny it and guiltily glanced down at the papers on his desk, I figured there was no point beating around the bush.

‘I’m pregnant,’ I confessed.

To which he astutely replied, ‘But you’re not married.’

Of course that was what he was focused on, not the fact that I was a perfectly acceptable age to become a parent or that I was financially and emotionally prepared for it. It just mattered that there was no husband by my side. When I went on to tell him I’d been actually trying for a baby since last year, his face scrunched in dismayed disbelief.

‘You’re doing this by yourself?’ he asked, nearly scoffing at the idea.

‘It was my original plan,’ I told him, and that brought me to the moment of truth. ‘But that’s not how it ended up working out.’

I stop pacing and rub at my collarbone, staring over Zaid’s shoulder instead of directly at him. ‘When I told him you were the baby’s father and

wanted to be involved, he shook his head and said he didn't want this for me.'

It's the truth, but it's not the whole story. Before disappointment came anger, the *How could you be so stupid?* kind. The *You knew better* kind with a pinch of *I can't believe you'd do this*. A heavy dose of *Did you even think of our reputation?* Most of all, it was *Why did it have to be him?*

Truthfully, I understood his disappointment. Considering my own childhood being shuttled from circuit to circuit, raised by a mom and dad who were as present as they could be under the circumstances, I wouldn't want that for my kid either. And Dad knows good and well that it's hard to be a parent when you're spending most of the year away from home. It's likely going to be that way with Zaid for as long as he's still racing.

Zaid's black Mascort T-shirt stretches tight against his chest as he leans back in the chair, sighing heavily and lifting a hand to run his fingers through his hair. I notice the way his left eye narrows a little as his wrist moves and I'm curious if he's in any pain, but I'm too distracted by the line of his flexing bicep and the way his hair falls messily across his forehead to ask.

I guess it's a good thing we have an endless list of challenges in front of us, because they're a much-needed distraction from the raging tide of hormones trying to talk me into throwing our agreement to stay platonic to the wind and repeating the night that got us into this situation in the first place.

'Anyway, that's what happened.' I try to smile to show him that I'm okay, but it wobbles.

Zaid doesn't say anything to that, his gaze lingering thoughtfully on me. Then he's rising, crossing the room in three long strides, and opening his arms to me in invitation. I go without a second thought, leaning into him and burying my face in his chest because *fuck*, I needed this.

The contact, the comfort . . . it's not something I experience all that often. Other than Edith, I don't really have anyone else to hold me through the trying moments. I haven't had a partner in over four years, I lost nearly all of my Specter Energy friends, and the idea of seeking solace in a parent disappeared after Mom died. Just having someone to literally lean on feels

like both a luxury and a necessity, and the fact that Zaid knew what I needed without asking has me falling further down the rabbit hole.

‘You deserve better,’ he murmurs against my hair, and I have to tamp down the sob that tries to bubble up. ‘But I’m proud of you for being so brave.’

Brave. I certainly don’t feel it at the moment, so weak that I have to wrap my arms around his waist to stay upright. He’s solid and warm, and the steady beat of his heart under my ear does more to console me than it should. He believes what he’s saying, so why shouldn’t I?

Zaid rubs small, soothing circles on my back. ‘Don’t let him steal your sunshine.’

That’s what I need to focus on – the joy of not only carrying the baby I’ve wanted for so long but also being back in the world of F1. Yes, there are plenty of negatives I could dwell on, and some of them deserve to be given attention. But right now, I should be saying *get bent* to anyone trying to drag me down, and cherish this time to the best of my ability.

I nod, his shirt soft against my cheek, and take a moment to breathe. I inhale his scent and let it calm me, let the comfort of his presence pull me back into the light. It’s nice having help instead of having to do it all by myself. And it feels like the ultimate privilege to have this kind of access to him, all because he’s determined to be here for me. We’re only on the first day of trialing traveling together, but if it’s bound to be like this . . . maybe it won’t be as hard as I feared.

‘Thank you,’ I tell him, and I try hard to ignore how the planes of his abs feel under my fingertips as I slowly let him go. ‘Well, now that our families know, I guess the next step is to tell the world.’

Zaid seems hesitant to let me go completely, his hand catching mine before I can get far. ‘When do you want to announce the news?’ he asks, guiding me over to sit on the edge of the bed.

I almost forget to breathe when he pulls our clasped hands onto his thigh, letting them rest there as he watches me, waiting for my answer, like this is completely normal behavior between us. And maybe it could be, but right now, despite how much I’m fighting the urge to press myself against him

again, we have bigger things to figure out than this charged energy between us.

‘If we don’t want to keep sneaking around just to talk to each other, we should do it soon,’ I point out.

‘What about after the race on Sunday?’ he suggests. ‘People will already be talking about you wearing my number—’

‘Careful,’ I warn, but I’m fighting a smile.

Zaid smirks and ignores me, continuing on. ‘That way we can have it all out in the open in time for you to join me in Monaco and be with the team. You could stay with me at my flat.’

My heart trips over itself at his offer, and there’s a part of me convinced he’s only saying it out of obligation – that he’s the kind of man who’s hung up on duty and playing all the roles he’s expected to take on, and now that he’s had the label of *father-to-be* slapped on him, he’s just going through the motions of it all.

But that part of me is pushed to the side as I take him in, not getting the sense that he feels like he *has* to do this. I think he truly *wants* to.

‘I can stay at a hotel,’ I offer. ‘I’ll pay for it on my own.’

‘Ava, I want you there,’ he says, eyes holding mine, and there’s no doubt any more that he’s fully committed to this. ‘I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t sure.’

‘Okay.’ All the hotels in the city are probably booked by now anyway – at least, that’s how I’m justifying this, even though it’s ingrained in me to keep taarofing, to not be a burden. ‘I’ll stay with you.’

He nods, and I swear he relaxes a little more, like he was nervous to ask me to be his houseguest. ‘I have a motorhome that I bring to the circuits for the rest of the European races, if you’d like to stay with me there too,’ he goes on. ‘It’s more private than hotels. Better security.’

If his motorhome is anything like the two-million-dollar mansion on wheels that Axel had commissioned last year, then I’m sure it’ll be nicer than any hotel I could ever stay at. ‘Sure,’ I answer. ‘All depending on how Monaco goes, of course.’ Because while I’m leaning toward traveling with him, I don’t want to be hasty with my decisions.

But speaking of Axel . . .

‘Actually, there’s one more person I need to tell before we announce the news,’ I go on. ‘I need to personally talk to Axel. I don’t want him finding out with everyone else. He’d never forgive me.’

Zaid winces. While the two are on better terms these days than they have been in years past, in no world would I call them friends or even friendly. Hell, I don’t think I’d even call them anything more than *grudgingly cordial*. The crash in Singapore aided in toning down the animosity, but this, plus the four-point difference separating them in the championship, is sure to ratchet it back up.

‘I understand,’ Zaid says evenly, but he’s not keen on it. ‘You handle that, and I’ll get my PR team to draft a statement for us.’

It’s a relief to have professionals all over this, and that Zaid has it handled. He’s given me no reason not to trust him or think he can’t take on these tasks, so I’ll let him do what he’s decided is best.

‘That should work.’ I pause, thinking about his season so far and the chaos he’s been inspiring on-track. I know he told me not to worry about how all this would affect his performance, but this is a lot to add into the mix. ‘A little off-topic, but how are you feeling about the race weekend?’

He shrugs a shoulder. ‘Better than I thought I might,’ he replies, and it sounds a little like an unexpected confession. ‘I’ve had some . . . complicated feelings about my career lately. Led to me taking some unnecessary risks.’

‘Oh, is that what you’d call what you’ve been doing on-track lately?’ I ask dryly, bumping my elbow gently against his.

Zaid cracks a broad smile, the first I’ve seen since . . . Well, since our night together. Watching him light up and being the reason for it makes me feel like I’ve accomplished the impossible. More than anything, though, it makes me want to keep doing it.

‘I’ll admit, I’ve been a bit of a menace,’ he says with some semblance of humility. ‘But remind me, who’s leading the championship?’

‘I told you not to get cocky,’ I say, instinctively grinning back at him. I even think I’m leaning in. ‘It’s only by four points.’

‘I’ll do my best to make it more on Sunday when you’re wearing my number.’

I laugh at his confidence, but it's heartening to know he still has his head in the game. 'Can I confess something?' I say after a few beats.

Zaid nods, thumb still moving soothingly across my skin. 'Of course.'

'I know you hate hearing it,' I preface, apologetic, 'and if anyone from Specter ever asks, I'll deny it, but . . . I *really* want to see you win your eighth championship.'

He dips his head and exhales, smile turning wry. 'You and a lot of people.'

I wait for him to say more, but he makes no move to expand on whether he's part of the club. 'But what about you?' I ask, hoping I haven't pushed too far. 'What do you want?'

Zaid's silent for a long, heavy moment. 'I'd like to win it,' he says quietly. 'Because then I can finally be done.'

———

On Sunday, I walk into the paddock wearing Zaid's number.

Unlike the big show he probably expected, I've done it subtly by wearing it in the form of a necklace, a gleaming silver charm with the number 45 resting at the hollow of my throat, almost hidden by the neckline of my shirt. You'd have to be looking for it to know it was there. Or be one of the photographers following after me with a gigantic telephoto lens.

'Ready for today?' Stella asks as she loops her arm around mine, escorting me through the throngs of people who move out of the way when they see her coming, many of them gawking at the sight of her.

I can't blame them. She's wearing a custom silk slip dress in McMorris green, and her own charm necklace – boasting Thomas's number, of course – is on a chain long enough that the gold 70 nearly dips down into her impressive cleavage.

'I'm ready to eat everything in hospitality,' I say honestly, earning a laugh from her.

In addition to being my paddock pass dealer, Stella is also the reason why I'm wearing this necklace, because who else casually has an Italian jeweler

on speed dial who could make me the charm in a matter of hours? No one other than Stella Margaux Maxwell-Brown, that's who.

When I told her about the bet Zaid and I had made and that I wasn't sure how I wanted to hold up my end of the bargain, she'd lifted a finger, made one phone call, and then declared that she had solved my problem. Two hours later, I was opening a jewelry box with this stunning creation draped inside, along with another necklace with a citrine pendant.

'Edith told me you're due in November,' Stella said with a shy smile. 'I wanted to get ahead of the curve and gift you something with the baby's birthstone.'

I burst into tears on the spot.

Thankfully, there are no tears now as we make our way to the McMorris motorhome, but as Stella starts up the steps in her magnificent heels, someone snags my other elbow, tugging me away from her.

A protest lifts to my lips but falls away when Axel's face comes into view. I hold up a hand to Stella when she turns and narrows her eyes at Axel – a look I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of – to tell her I'm okay. Still, she hesitates before nodding to me, but the expression on her face is a clear *I will publicly murder this man if that's what you want*. Good thing for Axel that it's not on the agenda for today, because I wouldn't put it past her.

I'm not sure if I can blame my sudden nausea on morning sickness as he firmly guides me across the paddock toward the Specter Energy motorhome, not stopping until we're in his driver room with the door shut behind us. I appreciate that he wants privacy for the conversation we're clearly about to have, but I can only imagine what anyone who just saw that scene will say.

'What the hell is going on?' he demands, hands on his hips as he stares me down. 'Omid won't talk to me about it.'

I'd love to handle this with a little more delicacy than when I told my dad, but with how Axel's pushing, he's not making it easy.

'Before I tell you anything,' I preface, 'I just want you to know that I'm really happy, and I would love if you could be happy for me too. This is something I wanted.'

'No promises,' he shoots back without consideration. 'Now tell me.'

Well, then, to hell with it. Here we go. ‘I’m pregnant.’

Axel freezes, eyes darting as he searches my face for any sign that I’m lying or playing some kind of practical joke on him. When he doesn’t find any sign of my duplicity, he takes a small, staggering step back and blinks at me.

‘Oh, fuck,’ he exhales. His eyes go wide when he catches himself, backtracking on his horrified realization. ‘No, I mean . . . I just wasn’t . . . *shit*.’ He pauses to draw in a breath and fights to find the right words. ‘I wasn’t expecting you to say that. I mean, I knew you wanted to be a mom one day, but I didn’t think it would happen anytime soon. I didn’t even know you were with someone.’

I figured Axel would react better than my father to the general news of my pregnancy, but we’re veering closer to what I know is going to set him off.

‘I’m not with anyone,’ I tell him, which isn’t quite a lie, but I’m not ready to get to the truth yet.

‘Oh,’ he says again, taking a moment to process, color creeping into his pale cheeks. ‘Did you do, like . . . IVF or something?’

‘I was going through a fertility clinic at first.’ I swallow past the growing lump in my throat, internally kicking myself for not just coming out and saying it. Would have been nice to save us both the mortification of this conversation. ‘Look, you don’t have to be happy for me, but what I truly need you to promise me is that you won’t do anything rash when I tell you this next part.’

He levels me with a droll stare. ‘I would *never*.’

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. God, why did my father have to take in this little shit? ‘It’s about the baby’s father,’ I say, trying to keep my voice level. I take a deep breath before admitting, ‘It’s Zaid.’

Axel goes so still that I think he may have stopped breathing. A few long seconds pass before he snaps back to himself, expression twisting from disgust to disbelief to plain hurt.

‘You lied to me about never being involved with him, didn’t you?’

The accusation hits me hard in the chest. ‘What? No. Axel, *no*, I never lied to you.’ I take a step forward to close the widening gap between us, but

he takes one back, nearly at the door again. ‘Zaid and I barely knew each other back then. This is . . . this is a new thing.’

He scoffs and shakes his head, looking anywhere but at me, fingers curling and flexing at his sides like he doesn’t know what to do with himself. ‘Fucking *hell*, Ava. Of all the people—’

‘I know,’ I interrupt, because my heart can’t take another blow like this. ‘I know how this looks. I know it looks bad for the team and for you, and I’ve already gotten shit from my dad about it. I don’t need it from you too.’

He keeps shaking his head, like he’s trying to fight off accepting what I’m telling him. ‘I don’t think your dad is upset for the same reasons I am,’ he says, jaw tight. ‘Unlike him, I actually paid attention to what you went through last time with Zaid. I saw how you were treated by everyone. I watched you keep trying to pretend that everything would be okay. I even helped you pick up the pieces with your little McMorris friend when Zaid didn’t do shit past putting out some bland statement.’ He stops himself to draw in a shuddering breath, dipping his head so he can look me hard in the eyes. ‘Is he actually going to do more this time? Is he going to help and protect you? Be there for you?’

‘He wants to,’ I confess, the words coming out as little more than a whisper. ‘It’s just up to me to let him.’

‘Then let him, Ava. Because being tied to him nearly ruined you once, and I won’t sit by and let it happen again.’

A hot tear slides down my cheek before I can swipe it away. Axel watches its path, throat bobbing as he swallows hard, and even though he doesn’t move to comfort me, his gaze loses some of its defensiveness.

‘Look,’ he says, quiet and firm. ‘You’re practically my sister and I love you, but this is – this is too much. I want to be happy for you. I really do. But I need some time to wrap my head around it, all right?’

‘Okay.’ I somehow choke out the word, quiet until I can force myself to say more. ‘I understand. Just . . . please don’t kill Zaid on-track today.’

Axel tosses me a dark look and grasps the door handle, a declaration that this conversation is over. ‘I can’t promise that either.’

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CHAPTER 14
Zaid

I’m surrounded by infants.

Well, rookie drivers to be precise, but I’m nearly twice the age of the oldest one, so they might as well be children. The youngest of the three boys huddled around me, Theo, turned eighteen last week, so young that he had to receive special permission from the FIA to get his Super License early so he could race in F1. He deserved it, though; his last season in Formula 2 led to a championship and some of the best driving I’ve seen in years. It’s a shame his talent is being wasted at the stars-and-stripes hellscape of Argonaut, but at least he’s on the grid.

He’s Dev’s replacement at the team, and it hasn’t passed my notice that they once again chose a driver from a marginalized background – Black this time, ticking off another box on their diversity checklist. From what I’ve heard Dev mention about his time at Argonaut, they love their tokenism, and neither of us trusts them to foster Theo’s potential.

I’ve tuned out the rookies’ conversation, chiming in when they have a specific question for me but mostly keeping to myself and waving to the crowd as the flatbed lorry takes us around the track for the drivers’ parade. While this isn’t the worst part of race day and I’m grateful to the fans who are here, I can think of a thousand other things I’d rather be doing – the number-one option being back in Ava’s hotel room, with her wrapped in my arms. It’s the place where I’ve felt most alive and my mind most at ease.

I didn’t get a chance to see her this morning before leaving for the circuit, and the lack of contact has me itching to do something stupid just to see her face. I’ve even held back and only texted her once today, asking if she was donning my number as promised. I hoped to get a photo of her wearing it in reply, but all she sent back was a string of winking emojis and a handful of multicolored hearts.

I could go find her after the parade is over, just for a few minutes, but she

was adamant we keep our distance until we put out our official statement – and until she could tell Axel.

Judging from the way he hasn't stopped staring daggers at me since I climbed on board, I take it that he knows now, and he's not a fan. I understand she had to tell him sooner rather than later, but we'll see how that plays out for the race today. Considering I'm starting on pole, with him beside me in P2, we're going to have quite the time in a few hours. My only hope is that Dev starting P3 will force him to be on the defensive instead of attacking me.

My teammate's just wrapped up being interviewed by the TV production team up here with us, flashing the camera and crew a wink before slipping through the crowd of drivers to reach me and the infants. He greets Theo with a grin and a slap on the back before telling the kid it's his turn to head over to the interviewer.

'Wild how the rookies flock to you like a mother hen,' Dev says as Theo wanders off, taking up the newly vacated space against the railing.

'You were the same way,' I remind him as the other two dip their heads in embarrassment and turn to talk to the rest of our peers. 'Could barely go five steps without finding you grinning at me.'

Dev smiles fondly at the memory, and despite my grumbling about it now, I've never minded being the rookie wrangler. Tiresome as it can be, I wish I'd had someone on the grid to ease my transition into Formula 1. I was essentially thrown into the deep end, either ignored by the established drivers or outright loathed. My teammate my rookie year at Deschamp should have been someone I could view as a role model. Instead, he tried multiple times to ruin my life and get me kicked off the team. My revenge was finishing one point behind him in the championship, a clear threat that I was destined to be better than he could dream of. I made good on that the next season, and he's since faded into obscurity.

So if I can be the person the rookies confide in and come to for advice, then I'll gladly take up the mantle. They deserve to be welcomed, not shunned, and I can't wait to see them break my records one day.

'I definitely stalked you, but no one was as bad as Thomas,' Dev says,

louder this time so that Thomas can hear us over the wind. ‘I thought he was going to ask you to adopt him.’

His back is turned, but Thomas still gives us both a stiff middle finger – though it’s followed by him quickly flashing an apologetic, tight-lipped smile at me over his shoulder. I nod to show him there are no hard feelings, but Dev’s already homed in on the one person who *does* have hard feelings.

He elbows me lightly in the ribs before jerking his chin in Axel’s direction, letting me catch another glimpse of Axel’s discontent.

‘What’s that about?’

I shake my head, not about to get into it. ‘It’s nothing.’

But Dev’s not easily put off the scent. ‘Doesn’t look like nothing. This about Miami?’

‘No,’ I admit, figuring I can give him that much at least. ‘This is . . . personal.’

Dev immediately cants closer to me, eyes alight. ‘Oh, *do tell*,’ he says in a mockery of a posh English accent.

I should give him a heads-up about the attention that’s about to be on me and the team, but charming as he is, he’s a loudmouth. There’s a chance the whole paddock could know before Ava and I put the news out.

‘I’ll tell you after the race,’ I reluctantly promise.

And I will – as long as Axel doesn’t murder me first.

———

There won’t be homicide charges levied against Axel today.

I’ve won, which is nothing short of a miracle after the shit he put me through on-track, and the energy of the cooldown room before the podium ceremony is some of the worst I’ve experienced. Poor Dev is caught in the middle of it all, sitting in the seat typically reserved for P1 just to keep some distance between Axel and me, cracking jokes that get forced laughs for the sake of the cameras as we watch the race highlights on the screen in front of us.

When we’re out on the podium, the champagne Axel sprays directly in my face is the pettiest form of retaliation, but I let it happen, closing my

eyes against the burn as it drips down my cheeks and drenches my race suit. At the end of the assault, I wipe away the liquid and open my eyes to find him directly in front of me. He won't try anything too stupid with the whole world watching, but he still claps a hand around the back of my neck and drags me closer until I can't mistake his warning.

'Be good to her,' he murmurs. 'If you're not, I'll make your life hell on and off the track.' He then pats me hard on the cheek, and I can see his sharp grin from the corner of my eye. 'Congratulations. I can't wait to be an uncle.'

———

Later, after interviews, the race debrief, and a meeting with a very pleased Basil, I'm finally boarding my plane home to Monaco. My whole body's heavy as I drag myself up the steps, and my wrists ache worse than they have after any other race.

Ava and Sami are already here, sitting together on the sofa and getting on well, if the sight in front of me is any indication. Sami's head is thrown back as he cackles at something she's said, and Ava's smiling so brightly that I can only stand and stare in awe.

I wish I knew how she does it – how her smile wavers but never quite disappears, even when our entire futures are up in the air. It's a resilience that I thought I had, but this is different. Every day, she makes the choice to stay in the light, to turn her face up to the sun and bask in it. To *be* the sun when times are gray.

She's stunning and sparkling and just . . . perfect.

'Are you going to greet her or just leer like a creep?' Adnan murmurs from behind me.

I clear my throat and blink, stepping to the side to let him by. He saunters past me, though not before shooting me a knowing sidelong glance. Fucking hell, am I really that obvious? Am I not allowed to stare in wonder at the mother of my child?

Yeah, yeah, tone it down, creep.

'Hey,' I call out as I slowly approach the sofa. 'Did you two run into any

trouble making it here?'

I asked Sami to gather up Ava and bring her to the plane just after the race ended, hoping to avoid people finding out she was coming to Monaco with me. Our press release is approved and ready, waiting on my go-ahead to be published by my PR team. After that, nothing will be the same.

Ava turns her smile on me, and I swear it changes. It doesn't dim, only warms, becomes something just between us, like an inside joke I'm lucky to be a part of. My heart does a funny twist at the sight of it.

'No trouble,' she answers before glancing back to Sami. 'We even had time for a gelato pit stop on the way here. It's been my one craving.'

'She insisted we bring you some back, even though she knows your trainer will kill you if you gain another kilo.' Sami winks at her to show there are no hard feelings. 'Pretty sure she's trying to sabotage you so Specter Energy wins next weekend.'

Even if it is an act of sabotage, at least she thought about me. I can't ask for more than that.

'Hey, I'm fully on the Mascort train,' she protests, still bright and upbeat, but I can sense an undercurrent of sadness, probably because of her father's less-than-ecstatic reaction and Axel's murder attempts.

'Bet you're glad you don't have to wear Specter's hideous neon yellow any more,' Sami teases, tugging at the sleeve of her black blouse. 'You've already gotten the black-and-silver memo.'

I take a moment to look her over, noting the black top, dark jeans, and silver bracelets on her wrists. I like the way she can wear the dull shades without looking glum. She's just as vivid in grayscale as she is in full color, though Ava in pink will always be my favorite.

She even has on a few silver necklaces to tie it all together, one of which boasts a dainty silver charm that rests in the hollow of her throat. It's subtle, nothing I would have really taken notice of without prompting – but then I realize it's not just any little charm she's wearing. It's my racing number.

Realistically, I knew she promised to wear it today, even if I hadn't seen the proof yet. I was expecting something bright and flashy, something that might be brushed off as a joke if people commented on it. But this is subtle

and personal, like she's keeping me close to her without shouting it to the world. Like I'm secretly hers, and only hers – and that she's mine in return.

The sight twists something in my chest, squeezing and branding my heart with an Ava-shaped mark that was only etched there before. Now it's fully burned in.

Ava playfully bats away Sami's hand, then points back toward the cockpit. 'Go tell the pilots we're ready.'

Sami grins and stands, shooting me a look similar to Adnan's earlier one, just a little more impish. When he disappears down the aisle, I nod for Ava to come sit next to me in the plush seats on the other side of the plane. I angle myself toward her as I sit, hands settling on the armrest between us, but she goes so far as to fold her legs underneath her and face me fully. When her smile fades into a look of concern, my stomach drops at whatever I'm in for.

'I feel like I should apologize,' she says. 'Axel practically tried to take you out today.'

So that's what this is about – guilt for something that wasn't remotely her fault. 'You didn't make Axel drive like that.'

'Still.'

I nearly tense when her hands brush over mine, fingertips settling on the backs of my wrists, the warmth of her palms on my knuckles. Her hands are small in comparison to mine, her nails painted a soft pink, and I'm tempted to lace our fingers just to see how perfectly they slot together.

I need to slow down on those thoughts. She's dealing with an incredible amount of change, and I shouldn't add to it by constantly mooning over her. Besides, we declared we'd keep things friendly and nothing else.

But there's something within me that wants more of her – more of her time, her attention, her adoration – and I'm sick of fighting it after all these years. Whether I can do that without overwhelming her remains to be seen, because the last thing I want is to cause her any stress.

Or, you know, to get humiliatingly shot down.

'You had to drive like hell today,' she goes on. 'That was partially on me. I could have picked a better time to tell him than right before the race, but I was scared.'

‘I don’t blame you for anything, princess.’

She nods, accepting that, and then she’s quiet for a long moment before asking, ‘Do you want an ice pack?’

It takes me a minute to understand why she’s inquiring, but it makes sense as her fingers move up and down my wrists, taking care to avoid the raised skin of my scars. ‘Is it that obvious they’re killing me?’

‘It’s on your face,’ she says, lifting a hand and brushing her thumb from the corner of my left eye to my temple. ‘You squint a tiny bit, just on one side. I’ve noticed you do it a few times when you move your hands.’

I almost laugh at the idea that I have a tell, but as usual, the sound sticks in my throat. ‘You’ve been watching me that closely?’

She blushes, and *fuck*, it’s the prettiest sight I’ve seen since watching her come.

Despite the wash of color across her cheeks, she smiles wryly, secretly pleased to have been caught. ‘What can I say? You’re hard to take my eyes off of.’

The words are bold, and I can see her gearing up to take them back, full lips parting and eyes widening a fraction. But then she stops herself. Her lips press closed again and her chin lifts, forcing herself to sit with what she’s said and its consequences. It’s up to me to decide what those are.

This time, I let myself laugh, and it’s not as hard as I feared it might be. ‘If you’re not careful, my ego’s going to become unmanageable,’ I tease, saving us both from something I’m not sure we should step into yet. ‘But yeah, I will take that ice pack. Thanks.’

She lets out a soft breath that’s followed by another one of those pretty little smiles, relieved that I haven’t taken the bait she accidentally set. ‘Be right back.’

I should be asking if *she* needs anything, but she stands and moves off toward the galley like I’m the one doing her a favor. Sami wastes no time sliding into her vacated seat and propping his chin on his hand, staring at me with thick eyebrows raised.

‘I don’t think you could have picked a nicer woman to knock up,’ he says, and I nearly groan in reply. Of course he’s here to share his opinion now that they’ve met. What more could I have expected? ‘She’s beautiful,

funny, has her shit together . . . You better hope your kid turns out like her, because she's the full damn package.'

'You make me sound like chopped liver.'

'You're all right, I suppose.' He pauses to rub a hand across his jaw, sobering some as he searches my face. 'Really, Zaid. She's great. She's looking forward to being a mother.'

I blow out a heavy breath and let my head fall back against the seat. 'She's wanted this for a long time. I'm just sorry she's stuck with me.'

'Don't do that,' Sami scolds. 'She told me she's glad you want to be involved.'

I go still, eyes cutting to him. 'She did?'

Sami purses his lips, considering his answer before quietly replying. 'I get the feeling all she wants is for this kid to have as much love and support as possible.'

I want the same. But in order to do that, I have to be present. I can give them everything else they need without being there, but my time and attention are more valuable than anything.

There are plenty of drivers who have spouses and kids and feel like they're doing just fine on all fronts. I wish I could have that same mentality, but there's a reason I've gone this long without getting married or having kids – I couldn't be fearless on-track knowing they'd be waiting for me to come home safely. I couldn't be the driver I need to be to win championships. I couldn't take the risks required to stay at the top of my game. Conversely, I couldn't be the present father I want to be if my thoughts are consumed by racing. How could I be there for a family that would always come second in my priorities?

But things have shifted, turning my world on its axis and reordering what matters to me. Racing is no longer the one true love of my life. It's starting to feel like a relationship I've stayed in for too long, like the breakup has been imminent but I've been too afraid to see the handwriting on the wall. Except I see it clearly now and there's only one message.

I have to walk away.

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CHAPTER 15
Ava

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sunday 19 May

> Ava Farahani and Zaid Yousef are pleased to announce they are expecting their first child together in autumn of this year. They ask for privacy at this exciting time.

Monaco

With the press of a button, Zaid and I have triggered a shitstorm.

He was smart to wait until we landed in Monaco to give his PR team the green light to post our joint statement. By the time we were stepping off the elevator and into a penthouse in one of the most exclusive buildings in the city – and my new home for the next week – the news was just starting to hit social media. Now, as we stand awkwardly in the living room, our continuously buzzing phones are a reminder of how fast news travels in the digital age.

I don't waste any time powering mine down and tossing it into the depths of my handbag. I've already either deleted my social media accounts or set them to private, and I've gotten in touch with anyone who might need to contact me in the next twenty-four hours. I've learned that it's best to disconnect from it all in the beginning – something that Zaid is having a slightly more difficult time with.

I've watched him open and close a few messages, grimacing as he reads, probably wondering what he's gotten himself into. Guilt threatens to start simmering in my stomach, but I refuse to give it the time of day. He had

options and this is the one he chose – if he's regretting it now, then that's a problem he's going to have to deal with.

A few more seconds pass before he finally sighs and drops his phone onto a side table, glancing back over at me and offering the barest hint of a smile. 'Let me show you to your room,' he says, grabbing the handle of my giant suitcase and nodding to the hallway in front of us.

We're holing up here for the rest of the week, riding out the storm until it's time for the next grand prix weekend to begin, when hopefully some of the furor will have died down. I still expect it to be pretty bad, but at least Zaid can use the excuse of wanting to focus on racing instead of straight up telling the media to piss off and mind their business.

The apartment is, as I expected, egregiously large, and I swear I count three other bedrooms before Zaid pushes open the door to the one meant to be mine. I'm greeted by lush white carpet, a sleekly modern king-size bed, and a wall of glass doors that overlook an expansive balcony and the Monte Carlo harbor. The water glitters and gleams under the night sky, moonlight reflecting off it as the lights from boats – let's be real, they're superyachts – twinkle back. I've spent more time in Monaco than your average person by rights of being involved in F1, but this tiny dot on the map never gets old.

As I continue to gape at the view, Zaid wheels my bag in and hauls it up onto a luggage rack in the corner, going so far as to even unzip it for me, though – gentleman that he is – he doesn't peek inside. When he turns around again, it's to point out the door to the en suite bathroom, and then the array of items on the dark wood bedside table.

'I've been doing some research on morning sickness. There are crackers, ginger sweets and sparkling water, all in easy reach.' He pulls open the narrow drawer to show off the additional items tucked away. 'Chewable antacids too. My sister-in-law said her heartburn was unbearable.'

It's so thoughtful that the backs of my eyes start to burn with tears, but I distract myself from them by rubbing the base of my throat. 'She wasn't wrong about that,' I say. 'How old is your nephew now?'

'Eight months.' The corners of his mouth pull up, part fond smile, part grimace. 'He was born right before the Singapore Grand Prix. With my injuries, I wasn't able to hold him until he was about nine weeks old.'

This detail pains him, and it's one I didn't expect him to admit, but I get the feeling he's trying to hint at something more. Is he afraid that he might not be able to hold our child one day? That he'll either be so injured again that he's incapable of it or, worse, not alive to see them?

He could have died last year, so it's a valid fear to carry. I'm tempted to push and ask if that's what he means, but after a long race day, I'm too exhausted to get into it. I didn't even drive, so I can only imagine how tired he is. It will just have to be another topic that can wait.

When I do nothing more than nod in acknowledgment at his confession, Zaid clears his throat and says, 'Let me know if there's anything you need. More than happy to get it for you.'

'Or I can go get it myself because I'm a perfectly capable person,' I tease, trying to lighten the mood. If we're going to be flatmates for the next week – and co-parents for the rest of our lives – then I want this to be as pleasant as possible. 'See you in the morning.'

He dips his head, leaning in toward me, and for a brief moment I think he's about to kiss me. I think I *want* him to, despite everything I've said about just being friends.

But before I can pose the idea, he grazes his lips chastely across my cheek, and I bite my tongue to keep from sighing in disappointment. It's probably for the best.

'Good night, Ava,' he murmurs, eyes flicking down to my belly. 'Sweet dreams to you both.'

———

There's warm sun streaming in through the doors and cracker crumbs on my cheek when I wake.

As I've learned over the past few weeks, eating every few hours is the only way to save myself from the nausea. Bless Zaid for keeping me from having a miserable morning, and bless him even more for setting me up with the ingredients for the best sleep of my life: million-thread-count sheets, an expensive cushy mattress, and best of all, a full-body pregnancy pillow. My bump isn't nearly significant enough to truly warrant using it,

but even once the baby's born, I can't see myself sleeping without one again.

Talking to his sister-in-law about her pregnancy clearly led to more than just buying antacids and ginger candies, and I'm touched knowing he's done his research. Hell, he's gone and talked to primary sources. He's invested – I have no doubts about that any more – and he's made it clear through caring for me. I can't remember the last time I had that.

I rub my hands over my bump, quietly saying good morning and still trying to wrap my head around the fact that in a few short months, I'll finally be able to hold my baby in my arms after years of dreaming of it. As usual, my bladder ushers me out of bed, and I take my time getting ready to face the day. Or really, face Zaid.

I have no idea what living together this week for our trial run is going to look like, especially in the moments when he isn't working. What does a man like that do in his leisure time? If he's anything like Axel, then he'll be sitting around in his boxers and sim racing all day, shoveling cereal in his mouth because he has no idea how to cook.

But Zaid is *not* like that, and I get my first hint of what he actually gets up to when I work up the nerve to leave my room. While there *is* a racing simulator set up in one of the rooms I pass by, it takes up only a corner of the space. The rest is an artist's paradise – a cluttered drafting table, drawers overflowing with paints and pencils and charcoals, and a handful of canvases leaning against walls. It would be so easy to step inside and get a better look – aka snoop – but as curious as I am, I couldn't possibly invade his privacy like that.

My attention's grabbed by the scent wafting from the kitchen anyway, and my stomach makes it known that if I don't eat again soon, it's going to stage a revolt. With one last glance, I round the corner into the sunny kitchen, finding Zaid carefully folding an omelet. It's a far cry from the cereal I was bracing for.

He must sense me standing in the doorway, because he turns and nods toward the marble island. 'Take a seat,' he instructs. 'Breakfast is almost ready.'

I hike myself up on one of the barstools, smoothing my black cotton

dress over my knees as I watch him start plating. ‘I’ve never had a man cook for me before,’ I comment, delightfully surprised by this turn of events.

Zaid spares me another curious look as he grabs cutlery from a drawer. ‘Really? Your dad never cooked?’

I shake my head. ‘I think the man would burn water if you asked him to boil it. My mom did all the cooking.’

After she passed, it was boarding school dining halls, an obscene amount of delivery, and a chef who came by twice a week to drop off microwavable meals whenever I stayed with Dad in London during summer breaks. Thankfully, those summers were also when my maman bozorg took me under her wing and taught me her recipes, sighing dramatically every time my tahdig stuck to the bottom of the pot and pinching my cheek whenever I surprised her with a batch of her favorite shir berenj for dessert.

‘My mother made sure I could at least fend for myself,’ Zaid says as he brings the plate over to me. ‘You won’t catch me becoming a master chef anytime soon, though, unlike my brother.’

I take the proffered fork from him. ‘I think you could pull it off, Mr. I’m Good at Everything.’

‘Hey, what did I say about golf?’

I grin at the callback to what he said at the awful American-themed pub about being bad at golf, which I still don’t believe, but mostly I’m smiling at the way he’s willing to joke with me. He’s lighter today, like being home has allowed him to shed the facade he puts on for the public. It’s a good sign that he can feel like this with me here, that I’m not adding to his already heavy load of stress. At least, I hope I’m not, but judging from the way his shoulders hang loose under his linen button-down, he’s comfortable with my presence. And I’m more than happy with his.

I take a bite of my omelet and sigh contentedly. His mother may have only taught him the basics, but they were the important ones, like how to cook eggs perfectly. When I tell him as much, it earns me a small, quick smile before he turns back to the counter.

I’ve just finished eating when he sets another plate in front of me, full of neat slices of mango, the paring knife still in his hand.

‘Extra vitamin C,’ he explains, seeming almost embarrassed to be serving me this. ‘You’ll need it for all the traveling. Can’t let you get sick.’

I want to thank him for being so considerate, for all that he’s done for me so far, but there’s a lump of emotion in my throat that keeps the words from coming out. So I just nod and take a slice, savoring the juicy ripeness and doing my best not to cry on the plate over this man casually cutting fruit for me. As I eat and attempt to compose myself, he turns away to clear up the dishes.

‘Have you turned your phone on yet?’ he asks over his shoulder, hands deep in soapy water.

The reminder of the outside world has my tears drying faster than anything. ‘Hadn’t even thought about it,’ I admit. ‘I should probably face the music soon.’

I should at least check in with Edith and my neighbors who have been graciously cat-sitting for me over the last week and a half, then cross my fingers that I don’t succumb to the pull of social media. I’m content right here in this Monaco penthouse bubble and I’m not ready for it to burst.

‘I’ll save you the trouble,’ he says. ‘Other than the gossip pages spewing their usual hate, most of the media is speculating how long we’ve been secretly together, and everyone else is screaming that our kid is destined to be an F1 champion in eighteen years. It’s definitely invasive, but not overly negative.’

I slump in relief, because it certainly wasn’t like this last time, although I’m sure there are plenty of people currently paying Etsy witches to put a hex on me.

‘So, how long have we been secretly together, Zaid?’ I ask dryly. ‘Six months? A year?’

‘Obviously we’ve been together for several years,’ he tosses back. ‘This was very much a planned pregnancy.’

I snort. Honestly, it kind of *was* on my part, and from the wry look Zaid shoots me as he dries his hands and leans against the counter, he knows exactly what I’m thinking. But soon his expression turns thoughtful.

‘Have you always known you wanted to be a parent?’ he asks.

I consider his question for a moment. The short answer is *Yes, I have*, but

there’s more to it – a deeper, ever-evolving answer.

‘When I was a kid, you could usually find me with a baby doll in one hand and a Hot Wheels car in the other,’ I tell him. ‘I never doubted that it was something I wanted. Plus, I . . . I thought my mom was the coolest person on the planet. She was my mother, best friend, and partner in crime all in one. I wanted to be like that for my own kid one day.’

Judging from the way his dark eyes lower, I’ve struck a chord with him. The way I was with my mother, I imagine he was the same with his father, and going through life without them by our sides is the kind of pain I wouldn’t wish on anyone.

‘I don’t know if you feel this way,’ I hedge, but I think he might understand. ‘And maybe it won’t even make sense but . . . when my mom died, I was left with all the love I had for her but nowhere to put it. That unconditional love, you know? The kind that’s so specific to a parent and child. I was young, but that’s when I really knew I wanted to raise a kid one day. Someone to give that love to.’

Zaid’s gaze stays on the floor, Adam’s apple working as he swallows, because, yes, he knows what I’m talking about. He knows that deeply rooted love that lives within us both that has nowhere to go now. We pour bits of it into other people we care about, of course, but for me it’s not quite the same. Some people find amazing outlets for that love, are able to let it all out and not feel like it’s choking them. There were so many days when I wished that could have been me.

But I have someone to give that love to now, and I have Zaid to thank for making that happen.

‘I get it,’ he says, voice scratchy as he finally looks back up at me. ‘It’s why I want to be the same kind of dad my father was.’ He pauses, drawing in a breath that shudders slightly. ‘I feel like I’m ruining your plans, though. You were so prepared to do this on your own, and now I’m forcing my way in. Are you really okay with us raising this kid together?’

‘You’re not forcing your way in,’ I say gently. ‘I can’t lie and say I’m not scared about how this is going to work, because I really, really am. But I’d never deprive a child of having two parents who love them.’

A relieved sigh escapes him, and I swear the tension around his eyes

eases too. ‘Thank you, Ava.’

‘You don’t need to thank me.’ I tilt my head and flash him a slightly smug grin. ‘Honestly, I should be thanking *you* for signing on to change diapers and do middle-of-the-night feedings.’ But some of the humor leaves me when I think about it, another complication popping up. ‘I guess we should talk about what our living situation’s going to look like after the baby’s born. Kind of hard to shuttle a newborn between houses, let alone countries.’

‘Would you be open to living together for the first few months?’ he asks. ‘I want to do my fair share, but I can’t do that if we’re in different places.’

It’s the logical thing to do, but *am* I open to it? Traveling with him for a short part of the season is one thing, but making that arrangement semipermanent is another. It requires completely uprooting my life and figuring out a brand-new game plan, because, let’s be real – there’s no way Zaid can move to the US with me. He has a season to finish, first of all, and more career responsibilities than I can wrap my head around.

In contrast, I don’t have much going on besides a job I can do from anywhere and my cats. I’m the one who can easily shift their life to accommodate, and honestly? If it means this baby’s going to have the love and care they deserve from their other parent, then I’ll do what I have to for them to receive it.

‘Yeah, okay.’ I pause, taking a moment to settle into the idea. ‘Would we live here? In Monaco?’

In this bougie building I could never afford on my own? I nearly tack on, uncomfortable with the idea of letting him take care of all the finances. But what can I really contribute to a multi-championship-winning F1 driver who’s used to a particular lifestyle?

‘If you’re open to it,’ Zaid says. ‘We could split our time between here and London with our families. I know mine will be more than willing to help us.’

Mine will be too, once they get over the shock of it all. ‘That would be nice. It’ll be great to have that support while you’re finishing up the season and when the next one starts.’

I swear he winces at the reminder of our unorthodox situation. ‘It won’t

always be like that,' he says quietly, gaze dropping to survey the gleaming island between us. 'I won't be racing forever. I'll be around more.'

'Eventually, yeah,' I concede. 'But there are going to be some years where it's mostly me and the baby, especially next season.'

Zaid is silent for a few long seconds. 'There's not going to be a next season, Ava.'

'What?' I freeze, heart stopping in my chest. 'What do you mean?' I press, voice wavering, but I already know.

He's been dropping subtle hints that I've either pretended not to pick up or flat-out ignored because it just seemed impossible. I went so far as to convince myself I was imagining things. So I need to hear him say the words before I can make myself believe it.

'I'm retiring at the end of the season.'

The declaration hangs in the air between us, and Zaid lifts his eyes to mine again, a clarity in them that's unmistakable. He's serious.

'But you—' I cut short because I don't actually know what I want to say. I don't know what there *is* to say to that.

How can he retire? He has several years left on his contract, doesn't he? Sure, drivers can wheedle their way out of them using the tiniest loopholes, but . . . is that something he wants? Is it something he's truly serious about or is it just an idea that's been bouncing around in his head with no merit to it?

Judging by the way he's looking at me, mouth set in a line and a transparency in his expression, he's serious. This is something he's put plenty of time and thought and weight into.

'Why?' I blurt, but my heart is already thudding the answer. 'Is this because of the baby? Because of – of me?'

I don't want him to say yes. I don't want him to tell me that I'm responsible for ending his career. He told me not to worry about how this would affect his driving and I forced myself to believe that. Now here we are, his gaze softening as he takes in my question, and I nearly close my eyes to avoid seeing it because I've ruined everything.

'I still love racing,' he explains, skirting what I've asked, but it's still an

answer in itself. ‘I always will. But I don’t love it the way I need to in order to stay.’

My head is spinning, trying to wrap my mind around what he’s confessed. Okay, so maybe the baby isn’t the *whole* reason he wants to leave, though it’s clearly part of it, but I don’t understand how I haven’t noticed his waning love for the sport.

Then again, maybe I have. The way he’s been driving this season is drastically different from the past few years. There was a controlled power to his style before, but it’s been more chaotic lately. Has that been him fighting to get that love back? To feel the way he used to before the Singapore crash? To feel *anything*?

‘This is really what you want?’ I ask, surprised I even get the words out through my shock.

He nods. ‘I’ve felt like this for a while, before you told me about the baby.’

That changes things, though not by much. ‘Okay, but what if you don’t win your eighth championship this season?’ It’s blasphemous to put those words out into the universe but I couldn’t imagine him walking away from that record.

‘Then I top out at seven and that’s that,’ he says simply.

‘But you *want* the eighth.’

‘I want to be around for our child more.’

I’m stunned into silence, heart in my throat, hot from head to toe. Men like him don’t walk away when they’re winning. And he *is*. He’s expanded the points gap from Axel to twelve, and other than the disaster in Miami, he’s been on the podium for all seven grands prix so far. He’s even the favorite to come out on top here in Monaco, a notoriously difficult circuit. As much as I believe in Axel’s ability to beat him, Zaid is inching toward untouchable status already this season.

So to be on top of the world and want to walk away instead of seeking a ninth, tenth, or eleventh record-breaking title . . . he really wants this. Racing isn’t everything to him any more, and he’s willing to shape his life and the end of his long and storied career around our child.

I dig my nails into my palm to stay grounded, to not get up and take his

face in my hands and tell him that no matter what he chooses to do with his career, I'll support him in it.

'Have you told anyone else yet?' I ask, voice trembling with the tears that are threatening to fall.

He shakes his head. 'You're the first. I only just decided last night.'

It's gratifying that he trusts me, but it's a heavy weight to carry with him. 'When are you going to announce it?'

'Not until we get closer to the end of the season. Maybe not until it's over.'

I nod and relax my fingers, glancing at the half-moon marks left in my palm and steeling myself to keep this secret. I don't blame him for wanting to hold off. Maybe he'll change his mind, or maybe he just doesn't want the fuss that will come with it – we're already dealing with enough as it is. Either way, it's his choice, but I'm prepared to do whatever I can to help.

I take a breath. Let it out again. Rub my hand over my stomach for good luck because I know we're going to need it.

'Okay. Let's get you that eighth title.'

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CHAPTER 16
Zaid

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Saturday 25 May

It's been nearly a week since the news dropped that Ava Farahani and Zaid Yousef are expecting a baby together, and personally, we're still in shock. Honestly, this is some Montagues and Capulets kind of chaos, because who in their right mind knocks up the boss's daughter from a rival team? That's bold, if we do say so ourselves.

The two stepped out together publicly for the first time today in Monaco and we've seen photos of them from every paddock photographer, including close-ups of Ava's (admittedly kind of cute, ugh) baby bump.

Guess we're adding Zaid to the list of DILF racing drivers, but is anyone else worried about how this is going to affect his championship chances??

COMMENTS

no1_axel_berg_fan who wants to bet that baby's actually Axel's

Mascort4Life It has to be Axel's. There's no way Yousef would be dumb enough to knock up OMID FUCKING FARAHANI'S daughter. Bergmüller, though? Nothing but rocks in his little head. He probably thinks that's his way to earn a place permanently in that family since his own father hates him

mrsreidcoleman i hope its axel's baby they would be so cute together omggggg

vivelamarchand VINDICATION.gif i KNEW they were together all those years ago. can't believe they thought they could lie to us about it

deck_me_decker do you think they've been a couple this entire time??? I swear I haven't seen anything about Zaid with other women since they were linked years ago so I kinda wonder . . .

dambrosiclownshow i should have known they were together, did you see the closeup shots of her in Imola on sunday? she was literally WEARING HIS NUMBER ON A NECKLACE it was so fuckin obvious we were so blind

jimboracingman big nose bitch

gridgrrrrrrlz there's gonna be a new world champion in about 18 years mark my words

zaids8thchampionship fuck me it's so over for my GOAT

formulafans4jesus literally what does he see in her why would he risk it all for Specter's Spy

hopelessly_DEVoted what's that saying about having a wife and two kids at home?

The media is number one on my shit list this week.

They usually are, week after week, but I mean it more than ever. There's a horde of photographers crowding Ava and me as we walk through the Monaco paddock, attempting to reach the Mascort motorhome. Adnan and the two extra bodyguards hired by the team do their best to clear a path for us, but they're barely holding back the crush of bodies.

It's Saturday, qualifying day, which will essentially decide the outcome of tomorrow's race since it's so difficult to pass on this circuit. It's also the first time Ava and I have been seen together since the photos at my father's memorial leaked, let alone since our press release. This time, it's an official debut instead of a violation of privacy.

Still feels like a violation, though, especially with how many people are pushing in. It's not just the press, but fans too, some with no concept of how to conduct themselves in public.

I keep my hand on the small of Ava's back so she doesn't get lost in the melee, wishing I could tuck her fully into my side and bark at everyone to back the fuck off. The stress of this can't be good for her or the baby, and I regret ever selfishly asking her to travel with me. But this entrance was her idea, to give these bloodsuckers a taste and satiate their curiosity just enough that they back off in other ways.

'I think we should get it over with,' she said last night when she told me her idea. 'The longer we drag it out, the worse it'll be.'

I'm sure she's right, but it feels spectacularly bad right now. And yet, like the princess she is, she's smiling and giving little finger waves to the people who call her name, ducking her head and blushing when they yell their congratulations or ask when she's due. It's better than focusing on the less-than-wholesome things others are shouting.

I can tolerate most of the inquiries, like *How long have you been dating?* or *How is this going to affect your racing?* I have to fight to keep my expression impassive when one of them asks if I'm considering retirement, but I pretend I don't hear and let the words bounce around in my head.

Telling Ava my decision was nerve-racking enough, so I can only imagine what it'll be like when the secret circle expands to my friends and family, let alone when I have to tell Mascort as a whole. They've been my team for ten long years and I'm going to walk away from them, gone for good instead of just across the paddock like it was when I left Deschamp.

'You okay?' Ava murmurs, loud enough for only me to hear over the chaos.

My eyes flick across her face and then down, making sure *she's* okay before I can give her a proper answer. Her dress today reaches the tops of her sandals but the stretchy black material clings to her every curve, including the small one of her bump, which she has a protective hand over.

'I'm—' I start to say, but I'm cut off by another shout from the crowd.

'Did you knock her up just to get one over on Specter Energy?'

The man's tone is joking, cajoling, like we're mates who sit around and take the piss out of each other. He carries on, this comment a little sharper than the last, far less friendly.

'Or did you just want a quick fuck and got more than you bargained for?'

My blood is near to boiling as my head snaps up, searching the mob for whoever's said it. He's easy to spot, with his smug grin and combed-back blond hair, a VIP pass around his neck that he spent entirely too much money on. But isn't that the whole point? To prove that he can buy his way in here? Prove that he's just as important as the rest of us, even though he's done nothing to earn it?

Doesn't matter. What matters is he's here and he has the fucking gall to talk about Ava that way. I can feel her edging closer to me, pulling away from where the man lingers on the outskirts of the crowd, and I don't hesitate wrapping my arm around her waist to keep her to me, my hand curving around the swell of her stomach.

'Speak that way about the mother of my child again and you'll never see another paddock,' I snap before I can think about the consequences.

Camera flashes and shouts and general murmurings pick up at my outburst, and it's sure to end up online in the next few minutes if it hasn't already been live-streamed. Basil will certainly have some choice words for me when I get to the garage. Hell, I might even end up getting reprimanded by the FIA. But I can't say I care. Lucky for them, I've had enough media training that I didn't threaten that man's shitty life or drive my fist straight into his face.

All I can think about is Ava. Not just the fact that she has to face this now, but all the shit she dealt with previously because of me. I stood back for too long then, listening to everyone who told me to ignore the vicious whispers and let it die out on its own. It didn't, though, and she suffered for it.

I'm not letting that happen again.

Thankfully, the Mascort motorhome is within sight, and I carefully guide Ava along until we're up the steps and inside, the press and fans kept out by security. I keep moving until we're out of view through the glass walls of the building's front, then slow to a stop, reluctantly dropping my arm from around her waist.

'Well,' Ava exhales, self-consciously patting her hair as she looks up at me with those wide doe eyes. Somehow, she's still smiling, even if it's a bit dazed. 'That was an experience.'

I blow out a matching breath but I'm not amused. 'I'm sorry about what that man—'

'You didn't make him say that stuff.' She shrugs, somehow letting this all roll off her. 'It's not your fault. Besides, I've gotten worse.'

Hearing that is a kick to the chest, but the pain is dulled by Ava running her fingers down my arm until she's grasping my hand. 'Thank you for defending me,' she says softly.

I swallow hard because she shouldn't feel the need to thank me. I want nothing more than to keep her safe from anything and anyone who would ever dare to harm her. 'From now until forever, princess.'

A beat of silence hangs between us and I simply ground myself with the sensation of her warm hand in mine. I don't let go until my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I murmur for her to give me a second as I check the

notification from Sami, who's supposed to be off coordinating with my press officer.

It's a link to a gossip page I'm unfortunately all too familiar with, but I don't bother tapping on it since I can guess what it is. Sami's message underneath is Especially liked the part where they called you a 'bad boy baby daddy.' What a stunning piece of journalism. As I'm staring at the screen, another message from Sami comes in. I've watched the video of you snapping at that man three times already. Also, tell Ava she looks great, truly glowing.

I lock my phone and slip it back into my pocket, annoyed and a little amazed at how they got that post up so quickly, but everyone wants to be at the scene of the crime. The one thing Sami's right about is that Ava looks great.

People talk about the glow pregnancy can give, but Ava has always glowed. Now, though, it's like the intensity's been turned up, like the happiness that radiates from her has reached a new level. This pregnancy, as rough on her physically and emotionally as it's been so far, has brought her incandescent joy. It's made it even harder to take my eyes off her.

I clear my throat to ease the viselike grip that's suddenly tightened around my heart. 'Are you sure you want to hang around?' I ask her, needing to get my mind on something else. 'You've already had a fair bit of attention today.'

Ava waves it off. 'I'm fine. I've always wanted to see how Mascort operates.'

'Sure, but—'

'Zaid,' she interrupts, eyes alight with humor. 'This isn't my first rodeo, you know.'

I level her with a mock-serious stare. 'But it is while pregnant and you *really* shouldn't be on a horse in your condition.'

She laughs at my terrible joke and it even makes me crack a smile. 'I'll be okay,' she promises.

I'm prepared to protest again, but someone calls my name before I can, and I glance over my shoulder to see Dev coming our way. There's a woman holding his hand, and it takes me a moment to recognize her dressed in something other than D'Ambrosi red for once.

‘You’re not working today?’ I ask Dev’s girlfriend when they reach us, bending to give her a quick hug.

Willow beams up at me when I pull back, tucking a curl behind her ear. ‘Reid was kind enough to give me the weekend off. Thought it might be nice to watch from a different garage.’

I can only imagine Willow’s life is nonstop F1 drama since she’s dating one driver and working as the social media manager for another, but she always seems delighted to be in the paddock. I met her last season in the aftermath of the Singapore crash, just hours after the higher-ups at Mascort made the decision to bring Dev in from Argonaut to replace me for the remaining races.

Maybe it was the morphine drip talking, but I demanded that Dev come see me so I could instill in him how serious of an undertaking this was. He showed up with his girlfriend in tow for moral support and proceeded to reassure me he was ready. I believed him – partially because of how Willow looked at him with the kind of pride that only comes with sheer faith. That faith wasn’t misplaced, thankfully, considering he’s currently sitting third in the points behind me and Axel.

I make introductions and stand back as Dev fawns over Ava, while Willow watches on with a knowing smile. We let Dev put on his typical comedy show before Willow steps in and asks Ava if she wants to grab some food. I made sure she ate before we left for the paddock, but Ava still enthusiastically agrees, either because she’s hungry again or because she wants an excuse to get away from Dev’s stand-up routine.

I try not to stare as they walk off toward the buffet that’s been set up on the back wall, but Dev’s elbow finds my ribs, telling me I’m not doing a great job at it.

‘She’ll be fine,’ he reassures me, as if he can read my mind and all the worries currently racing through it. ‘Willow will make sure she’s taken care of.’

I cut my eyes to him, something dawning on me. ‘You asked Willow to keep Ava company today, didn’t you?’

Dev rocks back on his heels as he looks anywhere but at me. ‘I will neither confirm nor deny this.’

A little of the tension in my chest loosens. ‘Thank you, Dev. And thank Willow for me too. I’m sure Ava appreciates the company.’

And I appreciate knowing she won’t be alone today, that someone will be looking out for her, especially someone who’s universally loved by Mascort despite working for a different team. Hard to pull that off, but Willow’s done it with ease, and it makes me hopeful that the team will welcome Ava too.

‘Come on,’ Dev says, slinging an arm around my shoulders. ‘It’s almost time for you to teach your Monaco qualifying master class.’

I scoff as he turns me away from the two women laughing together on the other side of the room. ‘Are you trying to jinx me?’

‘Maybe,’ Dev says, teasing as always, but I don’t think he’s joking. ‘Because if I don’t, there’s no chance for the rest of us. You’re *that* good, Yousef.’

I am. I know that. And this is the last season I’ll ever have to prove it to anyone else.

———

Qualifying in Monaco is an exercise in bravery.

The margin for error is literal centimeters. Flick the wheel a little too far, brake a little too late, pick up a little too much speed and you’re in the wall before you realize what’s happened. Like any racing driver, I’ve had my fair share of close calls and all-out disasters here, but today I’m determined to ride the line of bravery and delusional confidence.

I’ve won here three times and I hold the track lap record – set a few years back and still not broken – so I’m more than familiar with the two miles and nineteen turns. I was at the top of the timings in the first and third free practice sessions, Dev eking me out in the second, which bodes well for the car’s performance today. Still, it’ll be hard in Q1 to find a clean lap with all the other cars out with me, and it’s where I’ve had my race all but ruined before. You can kiss the podium goodbye if you qualify outside the top five, and even if you make it, you’ll need a strategist with a direct line to the racing gods to pull off a clean win.

My race engineer updates me on driver positions as I pull out of the garage and join the traffic on-track. Every year our cars get bigger but the Monaco circuit stays nearly the same, forcing us to squeeze through narrow gaps and risk touching the barriers in far too many places. I have to slow and pull to the side to let through cars that are already on push laps, checking my mirrors and mentally crossing my fingers that I won't get caught up in the mayhem if anyone spins or crashes or is just having an extraordinarily bad day.

When there's finally a gap in traffic for me to put in a lap, I don't waste a second. As long as I'm not one of the five slowest cars in this session, I'll make it through to Q2, but I don't want the sick adrenaline rush that comes from barely squeaking by. I want to start my supposed master class early. And maybe I want to show off a little for Ava, to give her something to cheer for.

It all starts with the right-hander of Sainte-Dévote. Climb the hill to Casino Square, make my way through Mirabeau Haute, then around the iconic hairpin. It's the tunnel next, facing a blind moment when I have to trust that the slow cars ahead won't accidentally impede me, followed by the shock of sunlight as I exit again. Heavy braking and the Nouvelle Chicane, more slow cars ahead, and then it's clear again at La Rascasse. One more push and I'm across the line.

I'm climbing up the hill for my cooldown lap when my engineer comes back on the radio.

'That's P1 for now,' he reports. 'Have a look at your delta when you can.'

The track's still rubbering in and evolving, so I'm sure I won't stay in the top spot for long as grip improves, but it's more than enough to get me through to Q2. Still, I do one more run for data gathering before pulling into the pit. As the mechanics push me back into the garage, I get the report that Axel and Dev are through as expected, but Raphael is out and will start tomorrow in P18. It will set Specter Energy back in the Constructors' Championship if he can't make his way up into the top ten to score points tomorrow, but I certainly wouldn't mind it.

The mechanics lower dual screens in front of me and I flip open my visor for a better view. On one screen is data from my lap for me to analyze and

compare to Dev's. The other is a live feed of the session, the same one being beamed out to viewers around the world. I keep my focus on the data – until the feed switches to the in-car camera facing me and my helmet appears on the screen, only my narrowed eyes visible. I spare a glance at the camera to show I'm aware of what's happening, but I'm quickly back to the data, planning what I need to do when I'm back on-track.

All those ideas are put on hold when the live feed shifts to a different camera, because it's Ava on the screen now. She's up in the Paddock Club with Willow, once again laughing, her head thrown back with her hand resting on her bump. It takes a moment before a banner appears at the bottom of the screen to identify her, and I stop breathing when it does.

AVA FARAHANI, it reads. ZAID YOUSEF'S PARTNER.

Partner. It's the word the broadcasters use to describe all the girlfriends and public situationships, never wanting to accidentally mislabel a relationship. And yet they've done so here, although I can't say I mind it.

Ava and I have been skirting that topic, both publicly and privately, just like we have been with the undercurrent of attraction between us. If anything, it's gotten stronger, pulling and holding me under like a riptide. I'm not even sure I want to come up for air.

So if they want to declare that she's my partner to stir up those rumors and give them a little more validity, then I'm not going to complain. Ava might have a different opinion of it all, but I'm more than happy to let the world believe the label, because I like it more than I should.

The feed changes after a few more seconds, and I'm back to staring at myself. My eyes are still narrowed, but they're heavy-lidded and crinkled at the corners, the way I've seen them go in the photos where I'm smiling. Even though the rest of my face is hidden, there's no denying what's going on underneath my helmet.

A mechanic lifts away the screens a moment later, but I didn't need to see myself to know what Ava does to me. It's already igniting in my chest, spurring me on.

I have a championship to win, and the greatest reasons to do it.

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CHAPTER 17
Ava

Zaid sticks it on pole like it's the easiest thing he's ever done. And when he wins on Sunday, I don't think twice about rushing down to parc fermé to celebrate it.

I'm buzzing, body practically vibrating with excitement as I wade through the crowd of Mascort mechanics and engineers waiting to congratulate their – *our* – two drivers. Willow's hand is clutched in mine as I try not to lose her in the chaos, and the team is kind enough to clear a path for us to get to the metal barricade that separates the onlookers from the end-of-race happenings.

It's been two years, nearly to the day, since I last did this, but the rush of watching my team win in person hasn't changed. It still burns as brightly in my chest as it did before, prompting me to laugh and clap and cry just a *little* bit – damn hormones – as our drivers pull into their designated spots for first and third. The only thing different is the team I'm cheering for.

Willow flashes me a grin when we make it to the front and I know she's as thrilled as I am that Zaid and Dev have finished on the podium. She's been great company this weekend, someone to show me the ropes of a new team and all the dynamics that come with it, plus what it's like to be a WAG – even if neither *wife* nor *girlfriend* is my title. I don't think there's an acronym for those of us who aren't in a relationship with a driver but are instead tied to them by a baby. Might be up to me to invent one.

I'm careful to stay on the black-and-silver Mascort side of the celebrations despite the tug in my chest pulling me toward the swarm of navy and neon yellow off to my right. For so long I stood among them, united and matching in our team kit. They're undoubtedly disappointed by Raphael's lap-one crash, but Axel's P2 finish is a buoy, and I'm sure the parties tonight will be wild.

Not far from us, Dev and Zaid slap hands and shoulders after climbing

out of their cars, congratulating each other. Axel pats Dev on the back as he passes by, heading toward the whooping Specter Energy pit crew, but he doesn't even turn his head when he passes by Zaid. He does, however, do a double take when he spots me at the front of the Mascort crowd, eyes narrowing before nodding to me and moving on.

We haven't spoken since I told him the news, even though I've typed and deleted too many texts, wanting to reopen that line of communication yet knowing he'll only reach out when he's ready. His dismissal stings, but I don't have long to dwell on it, because Dev is pulling me and Willow in for a hug.

'I didn't crash!' he rejoices, rocking us back and forth.

Willow gives him a kiss on the cheek of his helmet before shooing him off to greet the rest of the team. I watch him jump around for a few seconds before looking back to the rest of the chaos, and I find myself staring at Zaid.

He's just finished being weighed by an FIA official, his helmet and balaclava clutched in one hand as he moves toward his designated stand to set them down. He glances our way, the corner of his mouth quirking up when he sees Dev being lauded by the team, but he seems content to let his teammate have the spotlight.

I unabashedly watch as Zaid grabs the towel from the stand and scrubs it over his face, pushing his black hair back from his forehead, though an errant lock of it immediately falls back over. I'll admit that I'm already a little warm standing in the sunshine, but I flush with heat when he drops the towel and is suddenly looking at me. When a true, delighted smile blooms on his face, I'm close to combusting on the spot.

Zaid's beautiful on a regular day. He's gorgeous first thing in the morning, still half asleep and rubbing at his forehead as he expertly brews me the one cup of coffee I'm allowed per day. I'm always tempted to murmur *Whatever you say, handsome* when he's lecturing me on getting enough nutrients in my diet, and then happily nod along when he hands me yet another perfectly balanced snack every three hours on the dot. And I don't know if I've ever witnessed a lovelier sight than him humming an old

Iraqi pop song as he sits in his studio and sketches something I haven't been brave enough to ask him about.

But Zaid after a win, exhausted and sweaty and one step closer to breaking yet another record . . . I'm powerless against the force of it. My weak knees have nothing to do with my body working harder to grow a human and everything to do with the allure of this man and the way he makes this all look so easy.

It's a privilege to know Zaid's retirement plans, because I can truly cherish every win of his, since after this season there will be no more. No more races, no more wins, no more of these celebrations. I've always rooted for him in the background, even when Axel and his teammate du jour were meant to be my main focus, and it'll be a dramatic change not to see him on-track any more.

Then again, I suppose he'll be by my side instead, helping me raise this baby – *our* baby.

I have to fight to find my breath when he tosses the towel down and comes my way, still smiling. It's the biggest reaction to a win I've seen from him all season, like a weight's been lifted from his shoulders and he can finally enjoy what he's accomplished. This isn't just a win, but a victory lap for his career.

I throw my arms around his neck when he makes it to me, proud and gleeful and overwhelmed, and I want him to know it.

'Congratulations,' I murmur against his ear, pushing up on my tiptoes to reach, though I'm almost completely swept off my feet when he wraps his arms around my waist to hug me back. My bump presses between us, though not yet big enough to keep us apart. 'That was an amazing drive.'

'Thank you,' he says, squeezing me tighter before letting go. He dips his head to assure I can't avoid his gaze. 'And thank you for being here.'

'Happy to be.' I won't lie, though – as much as I've loved attending race weekends again, two in the past two weeks has been *a lot*. But it's not going to stop me from tagging along for the rest until the summer break. Our trial period is officially over, and I've made up my mind. 'Can't wait to head to Canada.'

Zaid's eyes light up at the mention of the next grand prix. 'You're going

to join me?’

I nod, my smile so broad it almost hurts. ‘For as long as I can.’

I blink, and suddenly he has my face cradled gently in his hands, thumbs swiping over my cheekbones to brush away the lingering happy tears that I forgot were there.

‘Tonight,’ he says softly, ‘just you and me. We’re going to celebrate.’

I know he has to go back to England this week for simulator work and meetings with the engineers at the Mascort factory, plus attend a few events for his foundation and sponsors, so the fact he’s carving out this time for us has my already weak knees turning to jelly.

‘Okay,’ I reply, far too breathless. ‘Now, go spray champagne in Axel’s face.’

———

I guess what Zaid meant by *just you and me* was *just you, me, Dev, Willow, and the entire Mascort Formula 1 Team*. But honestly? I don’t mind it.

We’re seated in a private dining room in one of Monaco’s best restaurants, the table so long I can barely see the other end of it, but Zaid is seated right next to me. His arm is draped across the back of my chair, fingers hovering near my shoulder and sometimes brushing the skin that my strappy black dress has left bare. It’s joyfully loud in the room, everyone celebrating, and he has to lean in close when he speaks.

‘Just so you know,’ he says, mouth at my ear, breath stirring the little hairs that have escaped my messy low bun. ‘This isn’t what I had in mind for our celebration. I made the mistake of telling Dev where I wanted to take you for dinner and he turned it into . . . this.’

I grin, tilting my head closer so that he can hear me in return. ‘I figured as much when he dragged us in here and you looked like you wanted to beat his ass.’

‘I like Dev.’ The words are careful and measured, though I can hear the amusement he’s trying to hold back mixed in with his exasperation. ‘But if that kid ever fucks up my plans with you again, I’ll get him kicked off the team.’

I know he's only joking, but I don't doubt he has the power to do exactly as he's promised, and the idea of him using that sway because he wants time alone with me . . . I'm overheated and it's not because of how many people are packed into this room.

'Aw, but I'd miss him,' I tease back. 'And Willow's just a doll. She's made me feel so welcome this weekend. Everyone here has, honestly.'

The Mascort employees – from the mechanics I've randomly chatted with in passing to the fleet of folks keeping the hospitality suite running – have been nothing but pleasant and kind, making sure I'm well taken care of. Sure, there have been a few confused and hesitant glances, but there's been little outright hostility, aside from one or two people who eyed me with open suspicion. Can't really blame them. I'd probably be suspicious too if I watched a rival team principal's daughter waltz in out of nowhere.

'Good,' Zaid says, and the way he strokes my shoulder this time is definitely on purpose. 'Tell me if you have issues with anyone. I'll take care of it.'

I almost laugh and scold him that I can handle it myself, but I don't think my words would do anything to deter him. I'm not used to having someone step in and fight for me, and when he did it the other day with that horrible fan in the crowd, I could only swallow back the complicated emotions it stirred up and thank him. I didn't expect it to become a common occurrence, though, despite his vow of *from now until forever*. The sentiment is lovely and I certainly appreciate it, even if I don't fully believe it, only because I know how easy it is to be left behind.

For now, though, I smile at him and watch as the corners of his mouth tip up in return.

'So, Ava,' Basil Maynard calls across the table, dragging my attention away from Zaid. 'Who's the better team principal: me or your dad?'

'You don't have to answer that,' Zaid says loudly, which makes Basil throw his head back and laugh, ruddy cheeks aglow.

I pat Zaid's knee under the table to show it's all in good fun, and I nearly jump when he puts his hand over mine, keeping it there. I do my best to ignore the electricity that tingles up my arm as I call back, 'I need to spend more time around here before I can decide!'

‘In that case, I expect to see you at all the races until you pop,’ Basil declares, lifting his wineglass in toast. ‘You and that little one are part of the Mascort family now.’ His head bobbles around as he looks for someone at the table, eyes widening when he spots them. ‘Cordelia! Make sure marketing gets that baby onesie up for sale on the website ASAP, yeah? And send a box of them over to the Yousefs.’

The Yousefs. A family unit. Mommy and Daddy and baby.

We haven’t done anything to dispel the rumors that we’re in a relationship, and I’m sure after our showing today they’re only going to get bigger and louder. Even Edith sent me a text after the podium celebrations asking me if there was something going on between Zaid and me, attaching the photo of us together down in parc fermé, his hands cupping my face as I beamed up at him and he stared tenderly down at me. I don’t remember it being that much of a charged moment, but the photograph says different, and I have to admit that I *may* have saved it to my camera roll.

I’ll get back to her eventually with an honest answer, that *no, there’s nothing to report*, though it’ll probably exclude the part about how I’m starting to wish there were. Maybe she was right that I should go after *everything* I want from him. For now, I’ll enjoy this lovely dinner with Zaid and the team and try *not* to think about how much I like his fingers wrapped around mine.

A fleet of waitstaff step into the private room a moment later, placing family-style platters of food along the table. I’m reluctant to slide my hand out from under Zaid’s, but I’m starving, and the steaming bowl of potatoes au gratin in front of me is singing a siren song. Before I can reach for the serving spoon, though, Zaid’s hand is lifting off mine and grabbing my plate, holding it aloft as he dollops potatoes onto it.

‘I can serve myself, you know,’ I tease, but I mean it.

‘I know you can. But let me do it for you.’

Again, I’m thrown by the resolve in his voice, like helping me – literally serving me – in this way is what makes him feel good.

Odd as it is to experience, I sit back and let him make my plate, shamelessly admiring how the tendons in his strong forearms flex as he does so. He even spreads my napkin across my lap for me like the fanciest

waiter, and I have to stifle a smile when his fingers brush over my bump. Considering I can barely keep my hands off it, I won't begrudge him a sneaky touch.

By the time we're finished eating, I look several more weeks pregnant than I actually am and I'm almost certain Zaid's going to have to carry me out of here. The last few days have given me a – hopefully permanent – reprieve from my nausea and I've been making up for lost time, giving in to the cravings that have now hit me full-on. Honestly, I just want to have a tub of ice cream in my hands at all times. I've even considered moving into the gelato shop around the corner from Zaid's apartment.

'Can we order dessert?' I whisper to him as the staff returns to clear away the plates and platters. 'Like, right now?'

We're sitting so close that I can feel his smile against my cheek. Our hips are practically melded together, his arm again on the back of my chair. I know we all squeezed together when a few more team members wandered in late and we insisted on making space for them, but I didn't realize it had put us *this* close.

Zaid doesn't seem to mind, and I'm not interested in moving, so I take the chance to unabashedly admire him from the corner of my eye.

'Can you hold out for ten more minutes?' he asks, fingers absentmindedly stroking up and down my arm.

I pout, but it's to cover up how his touch has sent the good kind of shivers down my spine. 'Ugh, I *guess*.'

'Good girl.'

I barely have time to react to the praise and the desire it sends flooding through me before he's pushing back his chair and taking my hand to help me stand. He doesn't let go once I'm up, holding tight as we wind our way past people offering goodbyes and congratulations to us both. I expect him to guide us to the valet stand when we step out of the restaurant, but instead he turns the corner and keeps going, glancing back at me to make sure I'm following, even though he hasn't dropped my hand.

'Where are we going?' I ask, curious but not put off by his secrecy.

'You'll see.'

A moment later, we're stepping into a gelateria, an employee holding the

door open for us, and I have to laugh.

‘Guess I haven’t been very subtle with my cravings,’ I say, grinning as we approach the display case. ‘This baby’s going to come out with the worst sweet tooth.’

Zaid chuckles and finally releases my hand. ‘Go taste them all.’

‘Don’t tell me that, or we’ll be here all night.’

He moves to the small table in front of the plateglass window and takes a seat, settling in, crossing an ankle over his knee. ‘Fine with me.’

I playfully roll my eyes, though I glance around to make sure I’m not holding up anyone else in line, but the place is empty save for us and the employee now behind the counter. ‘I’m surprised they’re not busier. I thought there would be huge crowds everywhere after the race.’

‘They’d be heaving if I hadn’t bought the place out for tonight.’

My head snaps in his direction. ‘You didn’t.’

‘I wanted you to have whatever you liked,’ he says, like it’s really that simple. ‘And I didn’t want you to feel rushed. Or harassed.’

At the last bit, he glances at a group of girls snapping photos from outside. They rush off in a fit of giggles upon being spotted.

It’s so thoughtful that I could kiss him in thanks, though I think that might be frowned upon considering, number one, we’re very much still in public, if the people walking by and staring at us through the window count for anything. And two, we definitely need to have a new conversation about where things stand between us.

Despite all that, I’m not deterred from rushing over and hugging him, savoring the way his hand lands on my lower back to keep me to him for a second.

‘Thank you,’ I murmur. ‘But you better hope I don’t have gestational diabetes.’

That drags the kind of laugh out of him that I’ll never get sick of hearing. ‘In that case, maybe I should let you try *one* and then get you home.’

‘Absolutely not.’ I pull back after dropping a quick kiss on his cheek, as bold as I’m willing to be. ‘But I’ll start with my favorite, just in case you make good on that threat.’

‘What *is* your favorite flavor?’ he asks as I approach the counter, pointing

out the one I want to the employee, who immediately starts scooping.

‘All of them,’ I answer honestly. ‘If my options are just the classics, probably pistachio or hazelnut. But of all time? It’s sour cherry.’

Thankfully, they have it here, and I’m handed a heaping cup a moment later, a tiny mint-green spoon peeking out of the mountain.

‘I never would have guessed that,’ Zaid says as I join him at the table. ‘You seem more like a bubblegum kind of girl.’

‘My mom made a lot of sour cherry dishes when I was a kid,’ I explain. ‘I’ve always loved albaloo, partially because it reminds me of her.’ Tonight, grief is a quick squeeze around my heart before it dissipates with the sharp tang of cherries. ‘Want a taste?’

I scoop more onto my spoon and offer it to Zaid, expecting him to take it from me. Instead, he leans forward and lets me feed him, licking away the bit that ends up on his bottom lip. I have to bite my own lip to keep from letting out an incriminating giggle because god*damn*, what a sight.

‘I like it,’ he says, leaning back in his seat again, perfectly relaxed while I’m coiled tight with a longing I wasn’t expecting. ‘I’ll keep it stocked for you wherever we go.’

I’m probably reading into it too much, but the way he meets and holds my gaze as he says it has me even more flustered.

‘So,’ I blurt, eager to change the subject, preferably back to the reason why we’re both sitting together in this gelateria in the first place. ‘I’m heading back to Virginia tomorrow to rest and repack, and then I’ll join you up in Montreal next week for the grand prix. I have to go home again after that since I have a doctor’s appointment, but I’d like to join you for the rest of the European races, if that’s okay.’

Zaid nods, accepting my plan. ‘I have to go back to the factory after Canada, but I’ll meet you at your house the Sunday after. We’ll go to your appointment and then head to Spain together.’

I nearly say *Okay, sounds good* before the full extent of his plan hits me. ‘Wait, you’re coming with me?’

‘I’m not missing an appointment, Ava,’ he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Definitely not your twenty-week scan at that.’

‘How did you—’ I cut short, remembering the baby books that seem to be

populating at an alarming rate around his apartment. I should have known better than to think he wouldn't come, even if it means a dramatic schedule shift, and I have to admit, I'm glad I won't have to go alone.

Exciting as the first appointment was, and as much as I had prepared to experience a pregnancy on my own, actually being in there by myself was . . . overwhelming. Lonely, even. Sure, I could have had someone come with me, and looking back, I probably should have, but knowing Zaid will be beside me this time is a comfort.

Again, I'm struck with the urge to kiss him senseless in the most aggressive form of gratitude. But even with all the hormones screaming at me to do it, I still have *some* semblance of self-control.

So I swallow hard and say, 'I can't wait.'

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CHAPTER 18
Zaid

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Sunday 16 June

No race this weekend means more time for gossip! Zaid Yousef was spotted at Dulles Airport in Virginia today getting off a flight from London, likely on his way to visit his baby mama. While we still can't believe these two are having a baby, recent photos of them at the Canadian Grand Prix have made it clear that they are absolutely a couple. If you swipe to the third photo of this post, you will see a disgustingly lovesick man who is apparently also a seven-time champion.

Can you two just hurry up and confirm you're in a relationship? If Ava shows up in the paddock again in Spain this upcoming weekend, we're going to take it as proof, m'kay?

COMMENTS

user9780593818169 specter's slut needs go back where she came from leave zaid alone

mrsreidcoleman do u mean back to specter energy or wherever her kind of brown people are from becuz i agree on both

no1_axel_berg_fan what the fuck is wrong with you people

Northern Virginia

I add another trophy to my collection in Montreal.

My win, combined with Axel's fourth-place finish, has expanded my lead in the championship to an encouraging thirty-two points. It's a gap that could easily be lost if I'm not careful, or if a string of bad luck finds me, and there's always a chance of that happening in this sport.

Adnan's behind the wheel of the rental SUV with Sami next to him, driving me from the airport to Ava's neighborhood outside Washington, DC, where there are green lawns, giant oak trees, and squat redbrick houses that

are three times as wide as they are tall. It's so quintessentially American, down to the flags that hang outside of some of the homes, that I nearly chuckle. This is the last place I'd expect a woman who spent the last ten years of her life in London to live.

When we finally pull into the driveway of a house with a smattering of wildflowers lining the pathway up to the front door, Ava wastes no time bursting outside, her long cotton dress swishing around her legs as she bounds over. I expect her to come to me as I step out of the car, but it's Adnan she greets first, thrusting a container full of little star- and heart-shaped cookies at him.

'I made nokhodchi for you and Sami,' she says, a little breathless, like the ten-foot sprint was a concerted effort. 'Just a little way to say thank you for everything.'

Adnan takes the container, staring down at it for a moment before his eyes lift to her again. There's a change in him now, the shift from tolerating her presence to appreciating it. He's been hesitant about new people for the decade I've known him, which is essential for his job but less convenient when it comes to personal connections, and yet Ava's made her way past the wall of defenses he has up.

'Cheers,' he murmurs while Sami demands he hand the cookies over immediately.

The pleased flush on Ava's cheeks has me grabbing my bag and moving up beside her, wanting to see the color up close – and maybe be a buffer between her and Adnan. There's a green-eyed monster growling to life in my chest, and while I have no reason to be jealous of her attention on him, I'd rather have it on me.

'Ring if you need anything,' Adnan says, watching me put a hand to the small of Ava's back. 'Sami and I aren't staying far.'

I nod to him and nudge Ava in the direction of her front door. 'How are you feeling?' I ask her.

She turns that smile up at me, head lolling slightly to the side in obvious relief. 'I *finally* got that second trimester energy boost that everyone talks about. I've been using it to get caught up on work, to cook, and – *oh shit*.'

She bolts away with an apology that she left something on the stove, and

I’m left to catch the glass storm door before it slams in my face. Ava’s already ditched her sandals in a heap next to the entryway’s shoe rack when I enter, and while I can’t see where she’s disappeared to, I can hear her footsteps on the other side of the living room wall.

‘All good!’ she shouts. ‘Didn’t burn the rice!’

I smile as I take off my trainers and place them on the rack next to the crooked assortment of Ava’s colorful shoes. Straightening up, I pause to observe my surroundings, and even if I didn’t see Ava come running out of the place, I would have known it was her house with one glance.

The front door leads straight into the living room, where the walls are a soft taupe with a chocolate-brown sectional sofa pressed against one. A dark wooden coffee table sits in front of it, her laptop resting in the center with one of her graphic design projects open, and far too many empty mismatched mugs surrounding it. There are hand-stitched throw pillows galore, colorful art in golden frames on the walls, a variety of lamps with funky lampshades sitting on nearly every flat surface, and mismatched Persian rugs on the floor. It’s kitschy. Earthy and warm. It’s perfectly her.

I’ve taken a few steps forward and am admiring the watercolor painting of a split-open pomegranate when Ava comes sliding back around the corner. The compliment I’m about to pay her decorating dies on my lips when I see something clutched in her arms.

‘What is *that*?’ I blurt instead.

I’m staring at a slightly cross-eyed Siamese cat that must be about two thousand years old. Logically, I know cats can’t live that long, but its face speaks of centuries of horrors witnessed.

‘This is Timmy,’ Ava announces brightly, holding up the cat *Lion King* style, body dangling in a way that shows off its soft cream-colored belly and unnatural length. ‘One of my cats.’

I freeze, eyes darting around the space. ‘How many cats do you have, Ava?’

‘Just three. The other two are around here somewhere.’

At the sound of her voice, one comes running into the room and moves straight to me, weaving in and out of my legs. It’s another old Siamese, eyes

even more dramatically crossed than Timmy's, and he's loudly chattering away.

'And that's Robert,' Ava introduces over the din. 'He doesn't mind if you call him Bob.'

I don't know what to do other than stand here and let the creature rub its face on my leg as it continues to meow throatily like a pack-a-day smoker. A flash of motion out of the corner of my eye has me turning to the sofa, where a regal Persian cat with a fluffy, pushed-in face and crooked whiskers sits glaring at me.

'Who's this?' I ask, nodding toward the latest addition. 'Richard? Jonathan? Charles?'

'No.' She laughs as if those would be the most outrageous names for a cat. 'That's Soup.'

'My mistake.' I continue my stare-down with Soup for a moment before looking back to Ava. 'You didn't tell me you had cats.'

She sighs softly as she bends to set down Timmy, who wobbles over to join his ancient brother beside my legs. 'I didn't want to come off as a crazy cat lady. Men have made fun of me for it before.' She offers me a weak smile. 'Let's just say dating hasn't gone particularly well.'

I've heard similar stories from people in the circles I run in, some of whom have given up completely on finding a partner because of the shit others have put them through. It's been five years since my last relatively serious relationship ended, and I can't say I've been looking for anything committed since. But I've had my reasons, the biggest being that racing has forever been my first and longest love. No one could have replaced that. Now, though . . .

'That's why you decided to have a baby on your own?' I ask before I can follow that dangerous rabbit down a hole. 'You didn't think you'd find someone?'

It's hard to believe she might think that, because . . . I mean, it's *her*. She's beautiful, intelligent, and the purest ray of sunshine. Our week in Monaco was one of the happiest I've had in years. How could anyone look at her and not want to do everything in their power to be with her? To make

her lips tip up in the warmest of smiles? To keep her safe and show her she deserves to be taken care of?

Because I know I want to. Even if she weren't carrying my child, I'd feel the same, and I have no doubts about it because the urge has been there long before she came to me with the news. Only now have I been able to nurture it from a glowing coal into a full-fledged fire, growing bigger by the day, and it's getting harder to keep it disguised.

Ava shrugs, looking away from me as she goes to sit with Soup on the sofa, pulling the ball of fluff into her lap. Despite his permanent scowl, he leans willingly against her chest, purring so loudly I can hear him across the room.

'I had a couple of long-term relationships that I thought would lead to marriage and kids,' Ava says, stroking the cat's head. 'I was with one guy for four years when I was working at Specter Energy HQ, before I was asked to be trackside all season. We broke up because he changed his mind about wanting children. Before that, there was a two-year relationship that ended because he was taking a job in a different city . . . and told me he didn't want me coming with him.'

Her original shock when I asked her to travel with me makes a little more sense now, considering the experiences she's had with other men. She's not single from lack of trying, but it's clear she wasn't going to waste time finding a partner when she didn't need one for her end goal of motherhood. Again, I feel like an interloper, though the weight on my chest eases when she pats the cushion next to her for me to come sit.

'But it's all okay,' she goes on, face lighting up with a smile as I move a few throw pillows so I can lower myself onto the sofa. 'Everything led me here.' She cups a hand over her belly, running it back and forth as she stares fondly down at the bump. 'I got what I wanted.'

'So, you're . . . happy?' I ask before I can think about how loaded the question is.

She has plenty of reasons to be unhappy about the current state of things. There's the unwanted media attention, her father's disappointment, the cruel things people are willing to say about her. And there's . . . well, me. I'm not

exactly the biggest plus in this situation. I'm the root of all her problems, starting two years ago and coming back around.

Her eyes lift to me again, soft and sincere. 'Of course I'm happy.'

My stomach swoops and the effort it takes to keep from leaning in to taste that smile on her lips is monumental. It's still a strong thought even when her eyes go wide, a hand flying to her cheek.

'Sorry, I'm being a terrible host!' She sets Soup aside and stands, struggling a little with her new center of gravity, but she's up before I can reach over to help. 'Let me show you your room, then we'll have dinner.'

We agreed it would be easiest if I stayed here with her instead of risking our privacy in a hotel, and with it just being two nights before we're off to Spain, it only made sense that I sleep in her guest bedroom.

'You can't laugh, okay?' Ava says nervously as she leads me down the hall, pausing in front of a closed door. 'But this is both the guest room and the nursery. It's only a two-bedroom house, so I just thought—'

'That's completely fine,' I cut in before she can spiral, though with the way she's wringing her hands, she's already started. 'Can I see?'

She blows out a breath and reaches for the door. 'I organized the best I could, but it's still a bit of a mess, I'm sor—' She stops herself, eyes cutting to me before she can finish the apology. 'Just be careful if you get up in the middle of the night.'

'I will be,' I promise as I step into the room and take it all in.

The walls are painted a soft sunshine yellow, and the paint can sitting in the corner tells me this was a recent change. Inspiration photos for what I assume will one day be a mural are taped to the wall above the crib, mostly Beatrix Potter characters and forest scenery. If I had more time here, I'd offer to paint it for her, but it puts the idea in my head to start sketching something for the future nursery in the Monaco apartment. I'll hire out for here and London, but I'll make sure Ava gets her vision brought to life.

There's a double bed on the other side of the room with a floral duvet and so many throw pillows that I'll have to go on an excavation mission just to reach the mattress. She wasn't joking about needing to be careful in the dark, considering there are boxes of nappies, wipes, baby clothes, and other terrifying-looking postpartum machinery stacked wherever there's space.

‘Is it okay?’ she asks. ‘I’m sure there are plenty of hotel rooms available if you’d rather—’

‘It’s perfect,’ I interrupt. Then, without overthinking it, I grab her hand and squeeze. ‘Thanks for letting me be your houseguest, princess.’

The action soothes her, her shoulders relaxing and her smile returning, sly this time. ‘We’ll see if you’re still thanking me in the morning. Timmy likes to cuddle.’

———

As it turns out, Timmy *and* Robert are cuddlers. Soup, however, is a budding voyeur.

‘I think he watched me all night,’ I complain to Ava as we walk down the hall of the medical building, heading to her ob-gyn’s office. ‘Every time I woke up, there he was in a new place, staring at me. I was afraid he’d end up on my chest like some sort of sleep paralysis demon.’

Ava’s laughing so hard that there are tears in her eyes. ‘Usually it’s me he’s staring at, but I guess you’re more interesting,’ she says when she recovers. ‘I should have warned you about his tendencies.’

‘It’s fine, just going to take some getting used to,’ I admit. ‘But hopefully he’ll like staring out all the windows in the Monaco flat better than watching me sleep. They’re coming with you, right?’

I can only assume the cats will be moving in when Ava does, because they’re clearly her children too. When she kissed each of them on the top of their head before shooing me out the door this morning, I made a mental note to ask Sami to organize getting them to Monaco.

Ava nods, a little sheepish. ‘I adopted them when I moved back to the US and didn’t think I would be traveling so much. My neighbor and his husband take care of them when I’m gone, but I don’t want to be away from them more than I have to.’

‘Of course. I’m sure you miss being watched all night.’

She laughs again, slowing as we reach the door to the office and turning to me. ‘Thank you for letting us all move in with you. And thank you for

being here today. I know everything's been chaos, but it's nice being able to share all of this with you.'

Again, it's something she doesn't need to thank me for, because it's all I want to do. Being there for her and for our baby – and for the cats too, I guess – brings me the kind of peace and purpose I've been searching for.

'Thank you for letting me be a part of it.' I put a hand on the small of her back and the other on the door handle. 'You ready?'

'Ready.'

I hold open the door, letting her enter first and lead us to the reception desk. I don't expect to be recognized here, and considering she has one of the first appointments of the day, the waiting room is mostly empty. Still, I keep my gaze low as Ava checks in. We've barely had a chance to sit down before she's called back.

'I meant to ask you,' she says quietly as we follow a nurse with a swinging blonde ponytail through a set of double doors. 'Do you want to know the sex of the baby?'

'Only if you do,' I answer, and while it's not the whole truth – because yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing – what she wants is and will always be more important.

'Come on,' she wheedles. 'You *do* get a say in this, you know.'

'I know. And on this one, I'm deferring to the person who's doing the heavy lifting in this situation. I'll be happy no matter what you decide.'

She blows out a breath, and it's the first time I sense any nervousness from her about today's appointment. 'It doesn't actually matter since all I care about is that we have a healthy baby, but . . . I *really* want to know. Plus, it'll make it a little easier to pick a name.'

'Then, it's settled.'

After taking Ava's blood pressure and temperature – thankfully both normal – in a small triage area, we follow the nurse farther down the hall to the imaging room, where an ultrasound tech greets us with a broad smile. I'm directed to a stool in the corner next to the exam table Ava's instructed to lie down on, and I glance away to give her a little privacy when she pops the button of her jeans so the tech can prep her.

I don't look back until the tech announces, 'I'm going to take some

measurements and pictures for the doctor to review, then I'll show you both what's going on in there.'

My eyes land on Ava's belly, rounded and glistening with conductive gel, and it hits me how much bigger her bump has gotten in the past week while we were apart. She's already halfway through this pregnancy, and there's an ache that comes with having missed so much of it, though it's soothed by the idea of getting to meet our baby soon.

I don't want to miss any more of this, but pushing for an eighth title means I'll have to. There's training and events and meetings galore, and there will still be a few more grands prix once the baby arrives. Keeping my focus on that and not on Ava, or finding a way to split my attention, might actually kill me.

'You okay?'

My eyes lift to Ava's at her whispered question, as if she doesn't want to distract the very focused tech from the work she's doing. 'Shouldn't I be asking *you* that?' I whisper back. 'You're the one on the table.'

Ava shrugs, then seems to think better of moving, eyes flaring wide before she grins at me. 'You looked a little more freaked out than me.'

I scoff, attention flicking to the smirking tech before focusing back on Ava. 'I do not look freaked out.'

'Fine, then *broodingly grumpy*.' She mimics my expression, brow furrowed, lips tilted down dramatically. 'Is that better?'

I have to fight to remain *broodingly grumpy*, because all Ava ever does is make me want to smile. 'I'll accept that terminology.'

She playfully rolls her eyes before recounting the story of her first ultrasound and how nervous she was, and how she almost peed her pants on the way there because they asked her to come in with a full bladder. Her tone is light, as if she can look back and laugh at her past self, but it only reinforces my desire to be there for every next step.

'All done,' the tech announces not long after Ava finishes her story, her attention shifting back to us. 'Dr. Khan will discuss our findings with you in a bit.'

Her bearing is perfectly calm, giving me no reason to be concerned, and yet I'm still on edge. 'Is everything okay?'

‘Baby looks great,’ she soothingly reassures, but it’s not the full confirmation I’m looking for. ‘Would you like to hear the heartbeat?’

‘Yes, please,’ Ava rushes to answer, glancing my way, and I nod without hesitation even though I don’t care for the way I’m being redirected.

The tech hits a few keys on the machine and then the whooshing sound of the baby’s heartbeat fills the room. It’s fast, strong, and steady, the most perfect thing I’ve ever heard. It’s all I ever want to listen to.

On the edge of the bed, Ava’s hand brushes against where mine is resting, and without thinking, I hook my pinky around hers, holding tight. Our eyes meet when I look over and I already know she’s thinking the same thing I am: We have to be the luckiest people in the world.

‘And would you like to know the sex today?’ the tech asks after a few more moments of letting us listen.

‘Yes,’ I answer this time. ‘Please.’

With a knowing smile, she turns the machine’s screen toward us so we can see the image of the baby. Ava showed me pictures from her first ultrasound but I couldn’t make much out past it being a small smudge on the paper. But now there’s so much more to see, and there’s no mistaking the slightly alien shape of our baby, even as it wiggles on the screen.

‘It’s a girl.’

The sound that leaves Ava is a cross between a laugh and a scream, and she’s quick to smother it with a hand over her mouth. Even still, I can tell she’s smiling underneath, eyes welling with tears as the tech points out fingers and toes and remarks on how active the baby is.

In contrast, I’m frozen as I stare at the screen, stuck in a state of awe that Ava has created this. *That’s my daughter* is all my mind can repeat on a loop as I watch her tiny body move, and I’m convinced I’ve forgotten how to breathe.

Walking in today, I didn’t care what we were having, despite being curious to know. I didn’t let myself imagine a life with specifically a son or a daughter, just vaguely *a child*, a little version of me and Ava combined. It wouldn’t have mattered either way, because my hopes and dreams for this baby would have been the same no matter what.

But a *daughter. My* daughter. It just feels right to be able to say, and now

I want to scream it from the rooftops.

I'm disappointed when the tech finally pulls the probe away and announces that she'll step out and let Ava get cleaned up, then will bring us over to a different exam room. I move without much thought for what I'm doing, taking the towel next to Ava and gently wiping away the gel on her belly until she's clean.

'Are you upset?'

I glance up from my task at the sound of Ava's quiet voice. Her former excitement is subdued as she catches her lower lip between her teeth, like she's afraid to hear my answer.

I'm still trying to silence my swimming thoughts, to organize them into something coherent so I can reply to her question. 'Upset?' I repeat for my own sake. 'That we're having a girl?'

She nods, still hesitantly staring up at me, and it hits me that my reaction probably left something to be desired. I'm so used to keeping my emotions locked down for the sake of my reputation that it's become second nature.

'Ava, no,' I rush to reassure her. I toss the towel aside in favor of grasping her shoulder, helping her sit up and bringing us eye to eye. 'Of course I'm not upset.'

But because she's an overthinker and people pleaser extraordinaire, that isn't enough to convince her. 'I mean, I understand that some men want sons to carry on their legacy,' she rambles on. 'And obviously you're giving them some pretty big shoes to fill, so I—'

'Our daughter will do that just fine,' I gently interrupt. 'I'm excited, princess. I really am.'

Thankfully, the cloud of anxiety around her blows away with my reassurance, and I'm left once again staring at my personal sun.

'Me too,' she says, giving me a smile that makes me want to match her joy. 'I can't wait to meet her.'

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CHAPTER 19
Ava

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Wednesday 19 June

Hola, chicas. Welcome to Barcelona for the Spanish Grand Prix. We have airport arrival photos from the last few hours. It looks like Dev and Reid flew together on Reid's private jet (when are you going to buy your own, Dev? you're making that big Mascort money now) with Willow Williams (Dev's girlfriend and Reid's social media manager) in tow, while Thomas and Raphael flew commercial (our environmentally conscious kings). Axel took his own jet and arrived with team principal Omid Farahani, both looking less than pleased to be there.

We wonder if their discontent has anything to do with the happy couple who arrived at the private hangar just an hour before. Although, Zaid looked considerably less happy when he spotted the photographers and quickly hustled Ava into an awaiting SUV.

There's plenty of chatter happening about the divisions that little bun in the oven has caused between Ava and her Specter Energy family – and it's made everyone question where Ava's loyalties truly lie. Is this a return of Specter's Spy? Or is she firmly on Team Zaid these days?

COMMENTS

Mascort4Life That woman is a distraction neither Zaid nor Axel needs (much as that last bit pains me to admit). If their performance suffers, I know exactly who I'm blaming.

hopelessly_DEVoted right, right because it's always a woman's fault, isn't it 🙄

Mascort4Life @hopelessly_DEVoted It is when the same woman is constantly causing trouble. She needs to know her place and back off.

Barcelona

Axel's going to be furious when I tell him Zaid's motorhome is nicer than his.

Well, he will be if he ever talks to me again. I knew he wasn't happy about my pregnancy, but I didn't expect him to be so upset that he'd avoid me for an entire month. I have to wonder if his hesitance to talk to me is partially due to my dad, another man who has refused to acknowledge me lately.

I don't love it, but that's the current state of things, and I'm not going to sulk over it no matter how much it makes my heart ache, because why should I? Why would I dwell on the worst of it when the good is so amazing?

'This is *nice*,' I say, spinning slowly as I take in the common area of the motorhome, done up in plush fabrics and soft neutral colors. 'How many rooms are there?'

Zaid puts his hands on my shoulders to stop me before I tumble over one of the sofas, setting me back on a straight course to the kitchen. 'Three bedrooms and two bathrooms,' he answers. 'There's also a small storage room I converted into a gym.'

I'd give an impressed whistle if I could whistle. Instead, I settle for snooping some more, taking in the kitchen's luxury fixtures and appliances. I even go so far as to peek inside the fridge, finding it stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables, and my mind whirs with ideas of what to cook.

I'm sure Zaid has his set meal plan and the folks in hospitality will make sure his every want and need is taken care of – and mine too – but it might be nice to have a home-cooked meal at some point on the road. If not this weekend while we're here for the Spanish Grand Prix, then maybe another during the triple-header that's about to kick off.

This weekend marks the beginning of three back-to-back weekends of racing, ending with the British Grand Prix at Silverstone, Zaid's home race. It's also the grand prix his family will be attending, and we agreed to spend a few days in London before then so I can finally meet them. It's nerve-racking to consider, so there might be a lot of stress cooking happening over the next couple of weeks in an attempt to distract myself.

When I'm done searching the fridge, I open the freezer for good measure. But instead of finding frozen fruit for smoothies or premade meals like the ones Axel prefers, I'm staring down at rows and rows of gelato containers.

The majority are sour cherry, with a few hazelnut and pistachio thrown in for good measure.

My vision blurs as tears burn the backs of my eyes. These ridiculous hormones make every emotion that much more intense, and my gratitude toward Zaid is pouring up and over, spilling down my cheeks.

'What's wrong?' He's immediately by my side, hand on my back and head dipped so he can search my face with concerned eyes. 'Sweetheart, talk to me. What's made you cry?'

'*You* did,' I say, but it comes out as more of a wail.

He blanches before I can elaborate, horrified. 'Tell me what I did wrong, princess,' he pushes. 'Let me fix it.'

I shake my head and hiccup as I try to control my breathing. 'You didn't – you didn't do anything wrong.'

'Then why are you crying?'

I fling a hand toward the freezer. 'It's the gelato.'

'Okay.' He nods, processing for a moment. 'It was clearly too much. I overstepped. I'll get rid of it, I'll—'

'No, it's perfect,' I interrupt, finally getting a handle on myself. 'These are happy tears, I swear.'

He lets out a breath before gathering me to him, a hand cradling the back of my head as I press my damp cheek to his chest. 'Don't scare me like that,' he murmurs. 'Had me thinking something was seriously wrong.'

I wrap my arms loosely around his waist in return, unable to resist the contact. He's been a little more touchy-feely since my ultrasound two days ago, and especially since we spoke to the doctor afterward. The ultrasound tech didn't lie when it came to the baby looking perfect, but my doctor broke the news about my problematic placenta and its low-lying position, partially blocking my cervix. My stomach dropped when she told us, worried this complication could have devastating consequences, but she was quick to reassure me that while, yes, there were risks like bleeding and preterm labor – especially with my ridiculous *advanced maternal age* – they were low.

It's left me to cling to her professional optimism and simply be as careful as I can under the circumstances. She suggested scheduling a C-section at

thirty-nine weeks, even though she was confident my placenta will move up as the baby grows, but better safe than hemorrhaging in the delivery room.

Besides, by scheduling it on a day when there's no grand prix business, Zaid can be there. He's made it abundantly clear that he wants to be, even though every time he's brought it up he's been cautious to add, 'but only if you want me there.' The long and short of it is that I absolutely want him with me, because I can't imagine doing any of this without him any more. I may not *need* him, but I sure as hell *want* him – in far too many ways.

One of those ways is creeping up my spine now as he holds me to him, his hand running up and down my back. It's meant to be soothing, but it's making me hyperaware of every nerve ending instead, blazing a path everywhere his touch lands.

Okay, so not only have these hormones caused the wildest of mood swings, they've also made me unbearably horny. Specifically for the man I've been minorly obsessed with for a good chunk of my life.

The pamphlet Dr. Khan handed over on our way out of the office haunts me with its directives for 'pelvic rest' to keep me and the baby safe. *No strenuous activities. Avoid standing for long periods of time. Be cautious with travel. Avoid sexual intercourse and orgasms.* I'm practically praying that when I go back in for my next scan at twenty-eight weeks, they'll tell me that my traitorous placenta has moved the hell out of the way. The idea of no orgasms, no matter how they're brought on, is hell. Saying goodbye to my vibrator was a tragic affair, but it's not like I can leave Zaid at home in my bedside drawer to keep him from tempting me.

Zaid has, of course, read the pamphlet too and undoubtedly has it memorized. He won't do anything to risk my or the baby's health, so all these heated feelings are useless, just a reminder of what I can't have – what *we* can't have. I'm certain I'm not the only one who feels the tension, because there have been times when I swear he's fighting just as hard as I am to keep his hands to himself.

Right now's one of them. Maybe he doesn't notice how low his hand is sliding down my back, or maybe he's unaware of how our bodies are practically molded together. But I certainly know, and there's not much more of it I can take before I implode.

‘I’m okay now, I promise,’ I say, lifting my cheek from his chest, but he doesn’t make to release me from his embrace.

I tilt my head back to look at him and find him already staring down at me, gaze too hooded to be oblivious to what’s going on here. Our faces are so close that it would be so easy to press up on my toes and kiss him. And judging from the way his eyes drop to my mouth and linger for a beat too long, he knows it.

This pull toward each other is getting difficult to ignore, and the past few weeks we’ve been together haven’t helped. I can’t imagine how I’ll feel when we finally decide we can co-parent from different parts of the world. I’m afraid I might not want to let him go by then.

But also . . . will I have to?

We’ve been dancing around what we want from each other, focused on the baby and his last F1 season like we promised we would be. There’s been a shift, though, and I know we need to talk about it before it builds to something unbearable. I just don’t know when either of us will be brave enough to take the first step toward that conversation.

Zaid’s lips part like he wants to say something, but there’s a sharp rap on the motorhome’s door before he can get the words out.

He blows out a soft sigh instead, his hold on me relaxing, though he doesn’t completely pull away. ‘That’s Sami,’ he says, nearly grumbling. ‘I have a sponsor event to get to. Will you be all right on your own for a bit?’

I nod, finally able to pull away some, but Zaid’s hand on the back of my neck keeps me from going far. ‘Go. I’m fine. I’m done being a crybaby.’

His touch shifts from my neck to my jaw, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone as he levels me with a knowing stare. ‘You cried over a dog food ad last night while watching *Taskmaster* reruns. I can’t say I believe you.’

‘Look, it was a very cute shelter puppy. It would have made anyone emotional,’ I huff. ‘Now, *go*.’ This time, I give him a half-assed push toward the door, where Sami’s knocking again.

He finally lets go, though he pauses to give me an assessing once-over that leaves my cheeks warm.

‘I’ll be back later tonight,’ he says. ‘Don’t get into any trouble while I’m gone.’

Not sure how much trouble I can get into on a Wednesday night in a mostly empty campground near the circuit with some of the best security in the world, but I still give him a cheeky smile. ‘No promises.’

———

There’s nothing quite like the special hell of trying to sleep when you have the worst heartburn known to man.

‘I love you with my entire being,’ I mumble to my bump as I throw back the duvet and plant my feet on the floor. ‘But you are making me just a *little* bit miserable.’

I stand and then shuffle my way out of my bedroom, heading to the kitchen for the only thing that takes the edge off whenever my antacids aren’t strong enough. The under-cabinet lighting provides the necessary illumination to guide me to the freezer, and I find what I need before settling back against the counter.

I’m three bites into one of the pints of sour cherry gelato when the door to Zaid’s bedroom eases open, and I wave to him with my spoon.

‘Ava?’ he says as he steps out – and dear god, the man’s only wearing boxers.

In contrast, I’m wearing bright pink sleep shorts and a Celine Dion T-shirt I’ve had since college, because none of my cute pajamas fit any more, and I’ve been too busy – okay, lazy – to go shopping for more. It’s probably for the best that I look a little ratty, because the lack of confidence is keeping me from marching over and running my fingers down the ridges of his abs. I can’t imagine he’d want the gremlin with her hair sitting like a nest on the top of her head and currently wolfing down gelato to touch him.

‘What are you doing up?’ he asks, voice scratchy from sleep.

It takes a moment before I can stop staring at just how low his waistband is sitting and reply. ‘Needed a dose of heartburn medicine,’ I finally say, lifting the tub of gelato as evidence. ‘Sorry if I woke you.’

He shakes his head, dismissing my apology. ‘Just wanted to make sure you were okay.’

‘Perfectly fine, except for my esophagus being on fire.’

He pauses, considering something as he drags a hand through his hair, and *fuck* if that isn't the best and worst and sexiest thing he could have done. I fear the gelato I'm holding is going to melt in five seconds flat after how hot he's made me with one thoughtless move. Absolute bastard.

'Come sleep with me,' he declares.

I almost choke on a chunk of cherry. 'Excuse me?'

'I have an adjustable bed,' he explains, either ignoring or not picking up on my distress. 'Keeping your upper body elevated should help with the heartburn, so you'll sleep in my room instead.'

'Absolutely not,' I blurt, not even considering his offer. 'You won't catch me kicking an elite athlete out of his bed. I don't want you sleeping on an unfamiliar mattress that makes you get a crick in your neck and then you can't race.'

'I never said you'd be kicking me out.'

I nearly drop the spoon. 'Oh.'

'It's a king bed,' he goes on, again so nonchalant that he really must not hear my heart racing. 'Each side has its own controls, so sharing isn't a problem.'

Maybe not to him, but if I roll over in the middle of the night and accidentally make contact with any part of what he currently has on display, I'm going to be in deep trouble.

'I'm fine,' I rush to say. 'Maybe tomorrow night if it's still bad then.'

But Zaid levels me with a stern stare. 'Ava. Come on. It'll make you feel better. And you need to rest.'

I could fight him on it, but I get the feeling he'd just scoop me up and dump me in his bed. And since I need to maintain the least possible contact with him so I don't lose my mind, I shove one more spoonful of gelato into my mouth, put the container back in the freezer, and follow him into his bedroom.

His room is only slightly bigger than mine, done up in the same calming neutrals, everything luxe and nondescript. I wait as he grabs a remote and hits a button to raise the head of my side of the bed, then I climb under the duvet and attempt to make myself comfortable on my left side. It leaves me facing him in the darkness, but thankfully the bed's big enough that I can't

make out too much of him over there. The only bad part is that the sheets smell like him, soft oud and a hint of lavender, and that is *not* doing anything to help my current state.

‘Well, good night,’ I say. ‘Thanks for letting me steal the other side of your bed.’

Zaid’s soft chuckle makes me press my knees together a little tighter. ‘It’s yours anytime you’d like. Sweet dreams.’

I fear my dreams are going to be less of the sweet variety and more of the R-rated kind, but a girl can hope.

I burrow down farther under the covers, then do my best to lie still so I don’t disturb him. Tomorrow’s only media day, so it’s not like he has to drive, but I still worry. We’re fifteen races away from him being able to lift that eighth championship trophy and I’ll do everything in my power to make sure it happens.

That would normally mean not frantically gripping his shoulder five minutes later, but I can’t help it – because that’s when I feel it. It’s like fizzy bubbles low in my stomach, a little butterfly fluttering, something I’ve not quite felt before. It’s subtle, but I’m certain I know what it is.

‘Zaid,’ I whisper, like this is a nature documentary and I’m afraid of scaring off the wildlife. ‘I think – I think the baby just moved.’

He, however, doesn’t share in that fear, if the way he immediately shifts toward me is any indication, and in the soft light coming in through the bedroom’s small window, I see the lifted corners of his mouth. ‘Really?’

I nod, words failing me as my eyes well with happy tears, a watery laugh escaping when I feel it again. This baby is . . . real. Obviously I knew that before from all the tests and seeing her on ultrasound images, but to *feel* her? It’s an entirely new reality opening up to me.

‘Oh god, I can’t believe I’m crying *again*,’ I sniffle, covering my face with one hand while my other rubs over my bump, as if that will get her to keep moving. I never want her to stop. ‘I’m just – I’m just really happy.’

‘Come here, princess.’

Zaid’s wrapping me in his arms before I can think to avoid the contact, but the warmth of his body and the ease with which he tucks me against his chest have me melting like a chocolate bar in the desert.

‘Can I?’ he asks, and it takes me a moment to realize his hand is hovering over my bump, waiting for my permission.

‘I don’t know if you’ll be able to feel anything, but yeah.’ I gently wrap my fingers around his wrist and guide his hand down until his palm is splayed across my belly. ‘And you can talk to her if you want. Apparently she’s starting to hear things.’

I talk to her constantly when he’s not around, narrating everything I’m doing as if she’s my tiny, clueless friend, but I’m not about to confess that entirely-too-embarrassing tidbit. Thankfully, he doesn’t need any encouragement, because he pulls back and dips down until he’s eye level with my abdomen, almost as if he’s been waiting to do this.

‘Hi, ya hayati,’ he says to my T-shirt-covered bump, hand smoothing over it in slow circles. ‘It’s your baba. I can’t wait to meet you.’

My breath catches at the endearment he greets her with. My Arabic isn’t great, but between the one semester I took in college and the Kuwaiti soap operas with terrible subtitles I grew up watching with my grandmother, I know a little bit. I certainly know this one.

Hayati. My life.

You just gave me something to live for.

I have to clear my throat to shock myself into breathing again, trying to push away Zaid’s words echoing in my head.

‘You want her to call you baba?’ I ask him, trying to distract myself from whatever’s squeezing my heart and screaming at me to make this man more than just my baby’s father.

Zaid nods as he looks up at me. ‘It’s what I called my dad as a kid.’

‘I did too.’

The mention of our fathers brings a heaviness into the room. His is gone and mine is . . . gone in his own way. The man I knew disappeared the day Mom died and I’ve only gotten flashes of him since. Right now, he’s not much more than a specter across the paddock, and I don’t know if I’ll ever truly get him back.

As if he knows what I’m thinking, Zaid gently asks, ‘Have you spoken to him lately?’

I shake my head. ‘I’ve called a few times but he hasn’t answered.’

It hurts, no matter how much I don't want to admit it. I know things haven't been good between us and I know he's disappointed in me, but it doesn't negate the fact that I want my dad in my life. And I want him to be in his granddaughter's life too, hopefully in the ways he couldn't be for me.

'When did things change between you two?' Zaid asks, propping himself up on his forearm, though his other hand remains protectively on my bump. 'After everything with me?'

'That didn't help things,' I confess. 'But it started after my mom died. He took her death hard.' I pause to breathe, to prepare myself to recount it, because even two decades later it's still difficult to talk about. 'It was sudden – an aneurysm when they were driving home from an IndyCar race. I think he blamed himself for not being able to save her, even though there was nothing he could do. He just . . . had to focus on himself for a while after that. So he sent me to boarding school and followed his dream of being an engineer in F1.'

'Wait, wait.' Zaid frowns and searches my face. 'He just left you?'

'I mean . . .' I shrug at the blunt phrasing, but there's really only one answer. 'Yeah, he did.'

'How old were you when she died? Fourteen?' When I nod, his frown turns indignant. 'You were a *child*. He had a kid to take care of and he *left* you.'

'He wouldn't have been a very good parent to me if he'd stayed,' I admit quietly. 'It was probably for the best.'

I've been told before that I'm making excuses for him, and sure, maybe I am. But those excuses are for *me*, so *I* can move on from the worst parts of my life and not dwell on what could have been.

I've sewn myself back together so many times over the years that it feels like second nature. I pick myself up and dust myself off and keep going because what other choice do I have? If I simply stop moving, if I stop to let myself truly recover, I fear I might never get up again.

But Zaid looks at me like he can see every scar I've done my best to cover up. Like he wants to undo every self-inflicted stitch and heal them properly.

'You deserved better, Ava.'

‘I know.’ Years of therapy and space to understand allow me to mostly believe those words. ‘But every time my dad looks at me, I think he sees her, and then he remembers what he’s lost. That has to be tough.’

Losing a mother is hard, yes, I can’t deny that. But I can’t imagine the pain of losing the love of your life, the person you thought you’d grow old with, your soulmate. Maybe it’s why I haven’t been able to settle down with anyone – there’s a deep-seated fear of experiencing that loss for myself. But, honestly, I don’t believe it’s strong enough to stop me from loving the right person. I *want* romantic love. I want to *give* love. I just hadn’t found the person I felt like I could pour all of that into, and I wasn’t going to wait on them to waltz into my life if it meant delaying my chance to embrace motherhood.

But lying here with Zaid, with his broad palm on my belly, I think I’ve found someone to overcome any lingering fear for, no matter how much comes along with him.

When his hand lifts from my bump, I immediately miss the warmth of his touch, but I don’t go without it for long. He sits up and brushes his fingers across my cheek, sweeping away the hair that’s found its way in front of my eyes.

‘You’re always so worried about everyone else,’ he says quietly, his gaze holding mine. ‘But you never let anyone worry about you.’

‘Because they don’t need to. I’m okay.’

‘Even if you are,’ he gently concedes, ‘you deserve to be taken care of too. And I promise to be the one to do it.’

‘Zaid, you don’t—’

‘That’s not up for debate.’

He dips closer to me, lips finding my forehead to drop a lingering kiss there before he lies back and tucks me against him. I go willingly, nose resting in the crook of his neck, soothed by his steady heartbeat under my palm.

‘Let me take care of you,’ he murmurs against my hair, his touch smoothing over my belly again. ‘Both of you.’

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CHAPTER 20
Zaid

Top of the Podium magazine

Monday 1 July
By Damian Larson, columnist

BACK TO BERGMÜLLER

The championship is like a pendulum this season, swinging back and forth between Axel Bergmüller and Zaid Yousef. After the Spanish and Austrian Grands Prix, Bergmüller is currently leading the charge following two back-to-back wins, while Yousef has fallen behind in the points after the disappointing weekends.

But what led to this lack of performance from Mascort's number-one driver? While the reliability of the car has certainly been an issue lately, we can't completely lay the blame at its wheels, as there's been a dip in Yousef's capabilities too.

There's speculation that his personal life is serving to be a major distraction for the seven-time world champion. Things seemed to be fine with Yousef before the public announcement that he was expecting a child with Ava Farahani, daughter of Specter Energy team principal Omid Farahani. If that's what's causing his issues, it might be time for Mascort to put their foot down and insist Ava go back to Specter Energy – or leave the paddock completely. There's no room for distraction in a championship this tight.

As we head to Silverstone this week, can Yousef make a comeback for his home grand prix? Or will it be just another disappointment for the Iraqi Brit?

London

The Spanish Grand Prix didn't end well for me. In fact, it didn't even start.

A gearbox issue had me stalling on the formation lap and unable to make it to the starting grid, leaving me to watch the race with the engineers in their designated back room. My mechanics were apologetic, promising they'd have the issues sorted by the next race of this triple-header in Austria. I at least started that race. But everything about the car felt wrong, and I spent the seventy-one laps cursing and banging my fist against the wheel for a ninth-place finish.

Two shitty grands prix and I've lost my lead in the championship to Axel, trailing now by sixteen points after he racked up two more wins. It's a slim gap, one I can close if I keep my head down and everything else goes right for me, but fucking hell, what an infuriating position to be in.

To top it off, my wrists have been giving me grief, and by the time I crossed the line in Austria, I could barely grip the wheel without pain lancing up my arms. I've been popping more anti-inflammatories than is healthy, my trainer has been working overtime trying to reduce my pain levels, and the team doctor has essentially told me there's nothing else nonsurgical she can do to help me. The stress I put on my wrists every grand prix weekend is simply more than the pins and screws holding them together can handle, and unless I want another surgery to possibly add *more* supportive hardware, I'm out of luck. I just have to push through the pain.

If I hadn't already made up my mind about retiring at the end of this season, this would have been the nail in the coffin. Sure, maybe a winter off for rest and recovery might be enough to get me back to a better normal than this, but what if it's not? What if racing is something I never should have even come back to this season?

The only reason I haven't quit already and announced my early retirement is because of Ava's encouragement and unwavering belief that I can keep going. She's now the first face I seek in the crowd after climbing out of the car, drawing energy from the endless well she possesses and using it to propel myself into the next weekend. Without her, I don't think I could do this. I wouldn't want to fight as hard as I am. Because I *do* want

this. I want to see this season's championship through to the bitter end, and Ava's encouragement is the constant reminder I need.

Having her in my bed every night has been some of the best motivation too.

There have been a fair few times we've woken tangled up in each other, our legs intertwined, her face buried in my neck. I've heard her soft exhales and felt the press of her thighs against my hips, and had she not immediately rolled away from me with mumbled apologies, it would have been much harder to heed the warnings from her doctor. We fit together like we were made for each other, and resisting that feels like pure torture.

We'll be apart tonight, though, which is for the best. It's back to separate bedrooms while we stay at my London house until we head up to Silverstone for the British Grand Prix. It's my home race, and for that reason alone, I'm determined to win, but even more so because it'll be the last home race of my career.

My lack of performance has been the hot media topic of the past couple of weeks, and the press hasn't been particularly kind about it. Worst of all, they've been ripping Ava to shreds, blaming her for distracting me. If only they knew she was the only reason I'm still out there fighting.

I know I need to tell the team about my retirement plans soon. I've been in meetings regarding next year's car, been asked for my input and expected to be very clear about what I want. Each time, I've deferred to Dev, using the excuse that he needs to be happy with the car as well since it takes both of us to win the Constructors' Championship, that maybe fresh eyes will find something I've missed.

Dev certainly suspects something, but he's smart enough not to mention it in meetings. He'll corner me soon enough and ask what's going on, although I'm not sure if I'll tell him the truth.

I'm doing my best not to think about my retirement announcement or the upcoming grand prix, because the only thing more stressful than racing at two hundred miles an hour is happening this evening – Ava is finally meeting my family.

Right now, she's standing in my kitchen, holding a tiny metal contraption over the stovetop as something within it starts to pop and smoke.

‘I’m burning esfand,’ she explains before I can even ask, ‘to get the evil eye off us.’

I was only gone for five minutes while I dropped my bags in my bedroom and I’ve come back to this scene. I guess I can’t fault her for doing whatever’s necessary to protect us from negative energy. I’m not a superstitious man, but I’ll believe in all the things she does if it makes her happy.

‘You travel with all that?’ I ask, only slightly astounded that we haven’t been arrested by airport security if this has been in her bag the whole time. Bad enough that we already get extra ‘random’ screenings when we deign to fly commercial.

‘Don’t get sassy with me,’ she shoots back. Then she turns and waves the smoke around my head, murmuring something in Farsi. ‘There.’ She’s bright again, beaming up at me through the haze. ‘All better.’

I smile back at her in the way only she inspires. ‘Thank you, princess.’

I take a seat at the island as Ava returns the esfand to the stove. She pauses there for a moment after she turns the burner off, her back to me, and I let my eyes rove over her. Despite her brightness, her shoulders are nearly to her ears and her hands restlessly smooth up and down over her bump. She’s nervous.

‘Do you think your mom is going to like me?’

I focus on the side of her face that’s barely in profile. ‘Of course she will,’ I reassure. ‘I can’t imagine anyone not liking you.’

‘Plenty of people don’t, and that’s their right,’ she says breezily, and I wonder if she’s been sneakily reading the articles written about us in the moments I’m not looking. ‘I just really want her to be in the baby’s life. And if she doesn’t like me, it’s going to make everything harder.’

Even though her tone is light and she moves around the kitchen with a spring to her step, it’s obvious this is weighing on her. It cracks my heart that she thinks my family will shun her, but I guess it comes down to losing her mother and the strained relationship with her father – she doesn’t expect anything other than to be abandoned.

‘Come here,’ I tell her firmly.

Ava hesitates for only a moment before she moves over to me, stopping

about a foot away until I grasp her forearms and pull her closer. Once she's standing between my knees, I slide my hands down until I'm gripping her fingers, her skin soft and warm against mine.

'My mother's going to love you,' I say, determinedly holding her gaze so she won't brush me off. 'My whole family will.'

It would be impossible not to love you, I want to tell her. *I can't imagine there's anyone easier to love.*

'You're sure?' she hedges, some of her brave facade falling away, letting me see the vulnerability she hides behind a smile.

I've always wondered how she does it – how she stays so positive even when facing such massive anxiety – but I see it for what it is now. It's her defense. Defense against disappointment and against letting anyone down. Defense against getting her heart broken.

I appreciate this peek behind the curtain, and it makes me double down on what I've already realized – I never want to be the reason she puts on that front. I only ever want her joy to be genuine. And I'll do everything in my power to make that happen.

'Yes, princess,' I murmur. 'I'm sure.'

———

My younger brother is waiting just inside the door when we arrive at the redbrick semidetached house in Wood Green, the same one we grew up in and still can't convince our mother to move out of.

'I love this child with my entire heart,' Elias says as he hands his babbling son over to me the second I step into the tiny entryway. 'But I need a *break*. Emiko escaped by offering to help Mum cook, and then all the women kicked me out of the kitchen so they could gossip.'

He frowns as if this is a personal affront. And I guess it is, considering he's been Mum's sous chef since the day he was old enough to stand on a step stool and stir a pot. He worked as a private chef for nearly a decade before becoming a stay-at-home dad, but that doesn't count for much in a kitchen full of aunties who've been cooking for longer than the thirty-five years he's been alive.

I snort and move Noah to my hip to avoid the strain on my wrists. It's just a twinge of protest, unlike when he was first born and I could barely hold him, but it's not encouraging.

'If you go now, you'll be able to nap before dinner,' I offer. 'And I won't snitch if your wife asks where you are.'

He makes a sound that's a cross between an appreciative cry and an exhausted groan as he claps me on the shoulder in thanks. I have to blink when he smiles, because I'm not staring at my brother any more. I'm looking at our father.

Elias has always been the spitting image of Dad – pale skin, curly dark hair, even darker eyes that dip down in the corners – and sometimes the resemblance is too much to bear. Right now, with circles under his eyes from lack of sleep and a heavy layer of scruff on his jaw, he could be Dad from twenty-five years ago, the one from our best childhood memories and our overstuffed photo albums. Just looking at him makes grief punch me straight in the gut.

'This'll be you pretty soon,' Elias says, distracting me from the ache. 'Sleep deprived, constantly covered in baby sick, and so in love that you wouldn't trade it for anything.' He peers around my shoulder to see out the door. 'Where's your baby mama?'

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'She told me to head in while she instructs Sami on which gifts to bring into the house first.'

'Gifts?' Elias repeats. 'Plural?'

'She said it would be rude if she showed up without something for everyone.'

'Jesus. She's really worried about us liking her, isn't she?'

'Incredibly.'

He heaves a sigh, nudging me out of the way so he can step outside. 'Forget the nap. Let me go show her we don't bite. You go say hi to Mum.'

Before I can tell him that it's not necessary, he's out the door, already beaming and waving, looking like a clown as he approaches Ava. But that's my brother – warm, welcoming, and willing to make a fool of himself to get people to smile. It's another way he's like our father, and once again there's a split second when I swear it's Dad jogging in her direction.

I glance away when Noah's chubby hand slaps my cheek. His uproarious laugh when I pretend to eat his little sausage fingers has me even more eager to welcome my own kid into the world, to play these silly games with her and bask in her laugh. I imagine she'll have Ava's smile and hopefully her humor too. If not, maybe the genes from Dad that passed me over will find her instead. Because I'm my mother through and through.

I'm her golden skin and sharp eyes, her wavy black hair and regal bearing. I see myself in the way she moves, cautious and careful as she slips past her sisters, but viper quick as she swipes spices from their hands to sprinkle in the dishes she's taken charge of. She doesn't smile when I step into the kitchen, just assesses me slowly, cataloging all the changes from the last time she saw me.

I approach when her eyes meet mine, and I dip down so that she can take my face in her hands, pressing kisses to my cheeks before she drops a few on Noah's for good measure. When she's done, my blood aunts and various aunties from the neighborhood descend on me, asking in a mix of English and Arabic how I've been, if I've been eating well, and where Ava is.

Her name alone is a reminder of the different cultures we come from and it's strange hearing it on their lips. When I promise them that Ava will be in as soon as she gathers the gifts she brought, I'm freed from their circle as they extol what a good girl she is. It's also a shock to hear, considering the nontraditional way we're bringing a child into the world – but their praise is better than the alternative.

I see the knowing glance that Mum and Emiko share as I pass Noah over to his mother, and it's obvious they've been meddling, making sure the gossip in this kitchen paints Ava in the best light. It's a small thing, but it means more than I can express. All I want is for them to welcome her with open arms. She deserves it.

Mum waves me over to the stove where every burner is occupied. 'I

made fesenjoon,' she says, a dish popular in both Iran and Iraq. 'And you said she likes albaloo, so I tried my hand at sour cherry rice.'

Before I can thank her for the effort she's put into tonight, there's a commotion of aunties rushing for the doorway. I don't have to look over to know that Ava's appeared, but my head still turns like I've been summoned, eyes landing on her nervous smile before she's practically blocked from view by cooing, chattering women.

'I forgot how beautiful she is,' my mother murmurs, and I glance down to find her staring at Ava. Her expression isn't exactly fond, but it's soft. 'I remember seeing her in the paddock when she was younger. She was always a cute girl, but she's grown up well.'

For the first few years of my F1 career, my mother attended as many grands prix as she could while running the high street shop she and my father owned. As Dad charmed his way through the paddock, making friends with anyone and everyone, Mum hung back and observed, then took care to tell me what she'd seen. Thanks to her, I knew of driver swaps, sponsor shakeups, and team principal firings days or even weeks before they happened, all because of her careful attention to the smallest things. But I never knew she paid any attention to Ava.

'Did your father ever tell you about the time he fell over in the paddock and she walked him all the way to the medical center?'

'What?' I frown down at my mother. 'No. He didn't.'

I'm sure there are plenty of things Dad never told me, stories I'll never know with him gone, and my lungs constrict thinking about it.

Mum heaves a sigh, the kind she always reserved for her husband, somehow full of both love and irritation. 'He was playing footy with a bunch of kids in between free practice sessions and forgot how old he was while trying to do a trick shot.' She shakes her head at the memory, though her lips quirk, because that's just the kind of man Dad was. 'He fell hard, had a gash on his knee that wouldn't stop bleeding. Ava must have been close by, likely saw it all happen, because as I'm yelling at your father for being so careless, she's rushing over and pulling a first-aid kit out of her bag. She had him patched up before she tucked herself under his arm and dragged him herself to the medics.'

‘He never told me that. Neither did Ava.’

‘I don’t know if she realized who we were,’ Mum confesses. ‘She saw someone who needed help and helped them.’

It’s exactly what she did for me during Dad’s memorial and the night of the pre-season party. Her help may not have come in the form of patching up a split knee, but she saved me from myself, helped keep my demons at bay. She even showed me a glimmer of clear skies and what life could look like if I clawed the clouds away.

‘That’s just what she does,’ I say, looking back over to where Ava’s being mobbed, laughing her way through it. ‘Who she is.’

Mum is quiet, watching me watch Ava. ‘Is it serious between you two?’ she finally asks.

‘We’re not together,’ I answer automatically. Even though the words don’t quite feel like the truth, they hurt anyway.

She tuts, and the sound alone tells me plenty, but her words drive it home. ‘Then don’t look at the woman like your whole world starts and ends with her.’ Mum turns away from me, heading back to the stove. ‘Go wash up and get Ava to the table. I need to feed that skinny girl.’

———

Dinner is a shockingly pleasant affair.

Ava fits in wherever she goes, and this is no different. Sure, there are a few touchy moments with edgelord cousins and uncles with old grievances, but it’s nothing that can’t be reasoned through or outright dismissed. Or, in the case of one of my cousins, Mum simply told him to shut up.

I’m not surprised by how easily Mum has taken to Ava, but it’s been incredible to watch the women sit with their heads bowed together, talking quietly as if they’d met before. I was so worried our differences would be an issue that I didn’t think to focus on the similarities, and watching these two get on is proof that there are plenty.

It’s a weight off my shoulders, a burden I thought I was bearing well enough, but the removal of it is dramatic. Ava and our child are part of this family, accepted with what seems like no questions asked. From the small

smile on Ava's lips, it's obvious she's relieved too, if still a little nervous, but by the time dinner's done and she's politely declined dessert for the third time before letting Mum place a heaped serving of knafeh on her plate, the nerves are gone.

It's late when we finally make it to the door, my hand at the small of Ava's back. She doesn't shy away from my touch, even in the presence of my mother, and I don't miss the way Mum's eyes flick down before lifting back to our faces.

'Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Yousef,' Ava says, stepping forward after a beat of hesitation when Mum spreads her arms for a hug.

'You'll call me Mum from now on.' She doesn't give Ava a chance to reply, just kisses her cheeks and then shoos us off. 'Take her home, Zaid. She needs to get off her feet. And don't forget to make her a cup of mint tea before bed.'

Not one to disobey my mother, I gently guide Ava outside into the cool summer night, then settle her into the car. There's a sheen in her eyes when I look up from buckling her seat belt, making sure it's settled safely under her bump, and my heart twists that something's upset her.

'You all right?' I ask, brushing my fingers across her cheek to see if any tears have fallen in the darkness.

'Yeah,' she whispers, managing a smile. 'Just a little overwhelmed. Hormones, you know? But I had a really nice night.'

I nod, lingering until she promises me that she's okay, then hustle around to the driver's seat. Stealing glances as I pull away from the curb, I can't help but reassure her over what I think is the issue. 'My mother adores you,' I say. 'But if you're not comfortable calling her Mum, you don't have to.'

Ava lets out a small laugh. 'How did you know that's what I was thinking about?'

Because I know you. 'Just had a feeling.'

She's quiet for a moment, considering her words. 'I—' She pauses and swallows hard. 'I don't mind. It took me by surprise, that's all.'

It must be strange for her, not only to be thrust into another family so

suddenly, but to have someone stepping up to be a mother to her after twenty years of being without one.

‘She’s so excited about the baby,’ Ava goes on, a happy note back in her voice. ‘I’m glad our daughter is going to have a grandmother who loves her.’

I reach over and place a hand on her belly, delighting in the swell of it under my palm. Ava makes a soft contented sound as I rub slowly back and forth. And then her hand is over mine, moving together until she stills my motions so she can thread our fingers together.

She doesn’t say a word and neither do I. The moment speaks for itself in the darkness. It’s perfect. *She’s* perfect.

This should be enough for me – this ease, this camaraderie, this bond over caring for our daughter – but it no longer satisfies the hunger behind my ribs. I want more from her, want to give her more. I’d hand her my heart on a platter if she asked, let her do with it whatever she pleased. It’s already hers anyway. I can’t take it back. I don’t want it back.

I just want hers in return.

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CHAPTER 21
Ava

Mum won't stop fussing over me.

Not *my* mother, of course – that would be a terrifying feat of the supernatural – but Zaid's mother. Mariam. The woman who leveled me with a chilling stare when I called her Mrs. Yousef this morning and grimaced whenever I tried other honorifics. *Auntie* and *Umm Zaid* by far went over the worst, and the idea of calling her anything mother-in-law related in either Farsi or Arabic also felt too weird, so . . . Mum it is.

She's currently watching me sip from the bottle of mineral water she's forced upon me, and I've just finished the snack she whipped out of her handbag when I dared to mention that the last time I ate something was over an hour ago. If I wondered where Zaid got his caretaking tendencies from, I've found my answer.

We're waiting for qualifying to start, and she's convinced me to watch from the garage instead of up in the suite. It's still strange being in Mascort's bay instead of Specter Energy's, but having Mariam with me is a comfort.

'I used to come to more races when Zaid was younger – when *I* was younger,' she corrects herself in that same self-deprecating way I've heard from her son. 'The travel got to be too much. Luckily, he had his father, who was more than happy to run around the world. Couldn't keep him away from this.' She exhales at the mention of her husband, a little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. 'I've been trying to come to more since he passed, but Elias needed my help with the baby, so I've slowed down again.'

Like my father, this is someone else who lost the love of their life – but she didn't abandon her children. Yes, they were grown men, and yes, she had far more time with her partner, but she didn't disappear into herself or

run off to another part of the world upon losing him. She stuck around and went out of her way to do what she could for her sons.

‘Do you spend much time with your family?’ she asks before I can get lost in the lingering bitterness that I’ve tried so hard to do away with.

‘A little,’ I say. ‘My dad’s family at least.’

‘And your mum’s?’

I shake my head. ‘They never left Iran. My parents met in grad school in the US and settled down there. My mother’s family never seemed all that interested in getting to know me, so . . .’

I’m detached enough from them that it doesn’t bother me, but Mariam frowns on my behalf and slips her arm around mine, tugging – okay, more like yanking – me against her side.

‘You’re part of this family now,’ she says, so firm that I’d be a fool to doubt her. ‘Even if you and my son claim to not be in a relationship.’

My cheeks flush with heat. ‘We’re not.’

She tuts, not believing me. Because no, we’re not together, even though I was overjoyed to sleep next to him again in his motorhome this weekend. We’re not together despite him leaning down to kiss my belly every night and then smiling like this baby and I have truly made him happy. We’re not together, but I can’t stop imagining what it would be like to actually *be* together.

Thankfully, I’m saved from whatever comments she has when Zaid’s car roars out of the garage. And as Mariam whispers what sounds like a prayer, I say one of my own to the universe, asking for it to bring Zaid safely back to us – and to give me the bravery to go after what I want.

———

Zaid qualifies P2. And in a strange turn of events, Thomas Maxwell-Brown is P1.

‘Still don’t know how he did it,’ Edith says as we sit at a secluded corner table in Mascort’s motorhome, sipping cups of tea to ward off the unseasonably chilly July weather as we watch the chaos of the paddock pick up outside. ‘But I’m certainly not going to question it.’

We’re reunited after a few weeks apart, a grand prix she wouldn’t dare miss since it’s her brother’s home race, but she’s been so busy with work that race day is the first time she’s managed to make it to the track. Even if she’d been here for the entire weekend, I wouldn’t have had much time to spend with her since Zaid’s mother, brother, sister-in-law, and adorable nephew have kept me plenty busy.

‘Maybe the rumors about McMorris re-signing Arlo lit a fire under his ass,’ I suggest, having heard the recent whispers around the paddock.

Edith sniffs in distaste at the name of Thomas’s traitorous teammate. ‘As it should, because it’s bloody outrageous that they’d even consider it after what that boy did. He can claim he didn’t mean any harm by sharing that video all he wants, but I’ll never believe it.’

Last season, a few months before the crash in Singapore, Thomas was caught on video saying some . . . less than kind things about Lorenzo Castellucci. It was a heated moment in the aftermath of Lorenzo pushing Thomas off the track, nearly causing a terrible accident. Thomas had every right to be upset, though he *probably* shouldn’t have said that he hoped Lorenzo died one day from driving so recklessly. It was made even worse when Lorenzo did nearly die in Singapore because of his own on-track choices.

But Thomas said all that in private to McMorris’s team principal, not expecting his words to be broadcast out to the world. Unfortunately, someone had been recording him – and then uploaded the video anonymously online. Turned out, that someone was Thomas’s teammate, Arlo Wood, for reasons most of us still don’t understand. I’m with Edith on not believing Arlo’s public apology in which he said he’d posted it as a joke, thinking everyone would get a good laugh out of it, when it only succeeded in making Thomas the most hated man in motorsport for a while.

Still, the higher-ups at McMorris believed Arlo and only gave him a small slap on the wrist for his actions when he should have been sacked. I’d never want to stay at a team that kept around someone who tried to ruin my reputation.

‘Do you think Thomas might want to go to another team?’ I ask quietly.

‘He’s probably considering it,’ she says breezily, dismissively even.

I've known Edith long enough to notice how much closer she and Thomas have grown over the past few months, and I get the feeling there's something in the works that she's yet to tell me about. With her successful coup, the keys to the kingdom – and all the cash A.P. Maxwell International brings in – are at her disposal. She's the one who decides where the sponsorship money currently backing Thomas at McMorris goes. And if he doesn't want to stay there, the money will certainly follow him wherever he ends up.

'How's my niece doing?' she asks, reaching over to rub my bump like it's a genie's lamp. 'Cooking away like she should?'

While I know she cares about my and the baby's well-being, this feels like she's trying to guide the conversation away from her brother. I'm torn between asking her if something's going on and just letting it slide, because I really do want to talk all things baby while she's here with me instead of over a late-night phone call, which is all we've been able to do lately.

'Yeah, and making me feel like I can't catch my breath any more,' I groan. 'I'm only twenty-two weeks and she's already shoving all my organs into places where they absolutely do not belong. And don't get me started on how weirdly congested I am.'

Edith makes a sympathetic sound. 'I had the *worst* stuffy nose with every pregnancy, but the second I gave birth, I could suddenly breathe again. Being pregnant is just one strange symptom after another.'

'And yet I wouldn't trade it for the world,' I say, lifting my teacup in toast.

Edith snickers and taps the rim of her cup against mine. She takes a dainty sip before innocently asking, 'How are things with Zaid?'

A few droplets of tea nearly go down the wrong way, and I cough before I can answer. 'Things are . . . things are good.'

She shoots me a *come on, elaborate* look and keeps quiet as she waits for me to do exactly that.

I glance around, making sure there's no one within earshot listening. 'I mean, he's perfect,' I whisper as my cheeks grow steadily warm. 'Other than the whole, you know, F1 driver thing, he's exactly the kind of person I'd want to co-parent with. He's kind, attentive—'

‘Hot as hell,’ she supplies with a smirk. ‘You can’t possibly tell me *all* you want to do is co-parent with this man.’

I scrape my teeth over my bottom lip, stomach twisting as the confession threatens to worm its way out. ‘You’re right. That’s not all I want.’

What I want is to lean over and kiss him good night after he’s done talking to my belly. What I want is to hold his head in my lap and stroke his hair after tough practice sessions and races that don’t go his way. I want to let him hug me and not feel like I have to pull away in order to keep things platonic. I want to gush about him to anyone who will listen, because everything he does somehow manages to impress me, no matter how minute. And okay, yeah, I want to feel his lips over every inch of my skin, but *that* can’t happen until my body decides to behave, so I’ll leave it off the list for now.

But it all adds up to *more*. I want *more* with Zaid.

Edith sighs, seeing the struggle in my expression. ‘What have I already told you, Ava?’

I blow out a matching breath and avoid her gaze. ‘To go after what I want,’ I grumble into my tea.

‘Exactly. And if you want him as more than just your baby daddy, it’s time for you to make that clear.’

She’s right. I need to buck up and have that conversation with him, to take back what I said about being just friends while we figure everything else out. I’m almost certain he feels the same, or at least wants to explore where things could go between us, but handing my heart over to Zaid Yousef is more complicated than just hoping he treats it kindly.

There’s the obvious worry – the one of literally losing him. Counting today, there are still thirteen grands prix left in the season, thirteen more weekends of him risking his life in a race car. My stomach churns to even consider it, but I’ve seen how easily lives can be taken and changed in this sport. There’s no guarantee that anyone will walk away safely, and it’s bad enough to worry about him as a friend, an idol, and the father of my child. But as more than that? It might break me completely.

Barring that horror, there’s the ever-present fear of him just up and leaving me. Of him saying he’s done and walking away. It’s happened to me

before and it can happen again, and while I can't imagine him doing that, I can't rule it out. How badly would that hurt me, especially considering there's going to be a child involved?

Then there's the simple fact that the consequences of things going wrong between us are higher than if he were a normal person. We have the press to worry about, plus his reputation, and I've already had my life turned upside down twice now from being involved with him. A high-profile breakup would mean increased scrutiny and no privacy for not just us, but our kid too. And what if things go so badly that they end in legal battles and ugly custody fights? For the sake of our child, maybe I shouldn't ruin the careful balance we've established.

But . . . what if things go right? What if we can be the family the world at large already thinks we are? What if I can get everything that I dreamed of once upon a time – not just the baby, but the partner too? What if I have a chance at the love I've always wanted?

'I'm afraid of messing everything up,' I hear myself say a moment later, and then I scald the confession away with a gulp of tea.

She levels me with a no-nonsense stare. 'Messes are part of life. You know that.' When I don't immediately reply, she rolls her eyes and goes on. 'If things don't work out, then you just go back to being friends and co-parents. You're both level-headed adults, and there are plenty of children whose parents aren't together who grow up to be wonderful people. Don't let that fear stop you from letting love in.'

As I choke on my tea at her invocation of the L-word, she sets her cup down and pushes it away. 'Or at least don't let it stop you from getting your rocks off once you're allowed to again,' she says airily. 'I know what those pregnancy hormones are like, and you are *really* missing out on some fantastic orgasms.'

'Oh my god, Edith,' I groan, but it's practically a laugh as the tension breaks.

'Just telling you the truth,' she says, glancing down at her watch. 'Look, I've got to run. I promised Thomas we'd chat before the race starts. But everything's going to be okay. You just need to stop being a chicken and tell that man you're ready to wife him up.' Her gaze darts away from me when

she notices someone coming our way, but it’s back with the addition of a knowing grin when she sees it’s Mariam. ‘Have fun with your future mother-in-law.’

She presses a kiss to my flaming cheek before striding off, nodding to Mariam as they pass each other. Zaid’s mother watches Edith go with thinly veiled amusement before her attention shifts to me.

‘Come,’ she says, a command as she nods to the doors of the motorhome. ‘It’s going to rain soon. Let’s get you and my granddaughter to the garage to wish Zaid good luck.’

I hesitate when she holds her hand out to me, but the expectant arch of her eyebrow has me lacing our fingers together, and I let her guide me through the maze of tables and team members until we’re down the front steps and out in the paddock. The air is thick and heavy with an impending storm, and Mariam tugs me closer until we’re shoulder to shoulder, her narrowed eyes on the photographers flocking our way.

‘Smile for the vultures, habibti,’ she instructs.

My smile might have been fake without her deadpan delivery, but with it, I’m grinning. If there’s anything I’ve learned over the past few days, it’s that Zaid is the carbon copy of his mother, dry and witty and sly.

It’s strange to be mothered again, and there are moments when I want to pull away from the tenderness Mariam shows me, not sure how to receive it. But every move she makes toward me is the same one I want to perform for my daughter one day. I want to brush the lint from her blouse and smooth the flyaway baby hairs that escape her ponytail. I want to sneak her little treats and fuss when she’s not drinking enough water. I want to lovingly tease her about her crushes and jokingly roll my eyes when she denies them. Little things, all of them, but every single one is drenched in love.

I let her keep me close as we walk toward the garage, listening fondly as she recounts the story of how she once took a garden hose to a horde of paparazzi who had set up camp outside her house in an attempt to get photos of Zaid. I laugh when she proudly describes how much one of them looked like a drowned rat, but the sound dies in my throat when I spot my dad walking in our direction.

He’s flanked by Specter Energy’s technical director on one side and the sporting director on the other, each one angled in to hear whatever he’s animatedly speaking about. He hasn’t spotted me yet, which is probably for the best, because I have no idea how a public confrontation might go.

It’s been nearly two months and the only communication we’ve had is one email last week – as if we’re colleagues and not father and daughter – in which he inquired about my health. My reply was probably a little too heartfelt, telling him everything I’ve been eager to share about the experience so far and how excited I am for the future. I even went so far as to invite him out for dinner whenever he’s next free.

Days have gone by without a response. At this point, I probably won’t get one. I could bug Axel about it, since he’s finally started texting me – mostly checking in to make sure Zaid is treating me well in case he has to take matters into his own hands – but I don’t want to risk the tentative relationship we’re rebuilding. No matter how I look at it, the family I once had with them is fractured, and I don’t know how to fix it.

But I have another now in the Yousefs, plus a daughter I would never walk away from. It’s more than enough.

We’re a few feet away from each other when my father finally spots me. He does a double take that I might have laughed at if the circumstances were different, but I do my best to smile when his attention settles on me.

My bump is much bigger now than the last time we encountered each other, and his eyes linger there, lips dipping into a frown. I’d take it as a look of disappointment if it weren’t for the way his eyes go soft, a hint of melancholy draping over him, and it doesn’t lift even as he looks back up at me. We’re close enough that we could speak to each other without needing to shout, and for a brief moment I swear he’s about to say something.

But when the flash of a camera goes off, his mouth clamps shut and his eyes return to the path ahead of him, leaving us to pass each other like ships in the night.

I try to buoy my heart with positive thoughts, but it dips anyway, though not as far as it could have without Mariam squeezing my hand.

‘He’ll get over himself soon enough,’ she reassures me, her chin lifted

with a confidence I wish I could feel. ‘Men take more time to understand how stupid they’re being.’

Can’t argue with that.

The crowd parts and people move out of Mariam’s way as we step into the back of the Mascort garage. Basil nods to her as he hustles by to the engineering room, as if she’s the queen of the castle and he’s just a peasant under her rule instead of team principal. When we finally make it to where Zaid is, I hang back a few steps as he bends to let his mother kiss his forehead. They exchange a few more words before he nods and Mariam pats his cheek, then she wanders off to strike up a conversation with a harried mechanic. And I’m left with Zaid staring right at me.

My body aches to close the distance between us but I approach cautiously for my own sake. He’s dressed and ready for the race, fireproof shirt clinging to the contours of his muscles as the sleeves of his unzipped race suit flutter down by his thighs, his hair a little messy from repeatedly dragging his fingers through it. A black-and-silver headset rests around his neck, telling of the conversations he’s been having with the team both here and back at headquarters. He’s focused in and prepared for the race ahead, and excited as I am to see him out there, I don’t want him to go.

Watching him drive has become a nerve-racking endeavor. He didn’t start the race in Spain, which saved me some stress, but seeing him bunched up in the midfield in Austria was a new form of torture. Now, observing him preparing for another race start has every inch of me thrumming with a rush of adrenaline. I’ve never worried about someone else this way, not even Axel, who I can grudgingly admit I love in my own special manner. This is . . . different. A different kind of love.

God, I just have to say it. I think I’m falling in love with Zaid.

I rub a hand over my bump in an attempt to self-soothe and distract myself from the thoughts that are too dangerous to have in this moment. The baby’s doing her usual gymnastics routine in there, twisting and squirming and only adding to the sensation of butterflies in my stomach, like she’s also aware that her father’s about to climb into the car. I comfort us both with the knowledge that he knows what he’s doing. Eighteen years in F1, seven world titles, so many race wins and podium finishes that I’ve

lost count. There’s no one out there with more experience than him. In my heart, he’s the greatest of all time.

A shiver ripples across my skin when he brushes his hand against mine, fingers drifting up my wrist to my elbow as he steps closer, so that I’m the only one who can hear his words.

‘Mum made me promise to be on my best behavior out there,’ he says, and it’s a relief to hear him so relaxed.

‘I like it better when you’re not,’ I volley back. ‘Up to you who you listen to.’

His smile is small but warm. Personable. Another one just for me.

I won’t tell him not to take risks. I won’t tell him that I’ll be watching through my fingers as the lights go out. I won’t be the kind of person who stops him from achieving greatness because I’m scared for him.

I just press up on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck, one hand cradling the back of his head as I pull him down so my lips meet his ear.

‘Drive hard,’ I whisper, a prayer and a wish. ‘And win.’

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CHAPTER 22
Zaid

I’ve always loved Silverstone.

It’s the circuit where I attended my first grand prix and decided I wanted to be a Formula 1 driver. It’s where my father brought me every year until I was the one bringing him into the paddock. And it’s the circuit where, after nearly two decades of being in F1, I’ll drive in my last home race.

The fact that it’s my last is a secret only Ava and I share, but it feels like the world around me knows too. The air is heavy and the crowd’s energy is electric, like there’s a current running through the track and feeding into us all. Gray clouds hover, threatening rain in the future, but for now the track is dry as I pull into my P2 grid box at the end of the formation lap. Thomas is one place ahead of me, Axel is one place behind, and Dev sits beside him in fourth.

The UK press had a field day when Thomas narrowly stole pole position from me on his final run in Q3. Two Englishmen locking out the front row at the British Grand Prix was a feat of patriotism, one even I was pleased with despite being second best, though it didn’t take long for the feeling to sour as more headlines appeared and the tone shifted.

When a white Brit outperforms me, they’re almost always viewed as the righteous bearer of our nationality, while I’m only celebrated as British when I’m winning. I’m used to it, and I won’t deny I have some complicated feelings about it, but the truth they all hate is that it will be a long time before any other British racing driver will come near all the records I’ve set.

I take comfort in that as the rest of the grid lines up behind us, though it does nothing to quell the adrenaline rush when the first red light flashes on overhead. I want to win. I want to give Ava exactly what she asked for. But more than anything, I want to make it back to her.

My heart pounds as the rest of the lights come on one by one, lingering

for the briefest of moments before going out.

I cut the wheel to the left and head off Axel going into the first turn, slotting in behind Thomas. My getaway off the line was good, but Thomas's was just slightly better, leaving me to stick tight to his rear wing as we twist our way around the track on the first lap. I search for gaps, a chance to surge down the inside and take the lead, and yet I'm denied each time by Thomas shutting the door.

I fall back as we go on, seeking clean air and attempting to preserve my tires for what could potentially be a long first stint. But with the sky steadily darkening, that could all change in an instant. The strategists are going to have to fight for their lives trying to figure this out.

'There will be rain in about twenty minutes,' my engineer reports over the radio after giving me updates on Thomas's and Axel's lap times. 'It's the first of two cells we're tracking.'

And as if he were an oracle with the best meteorological knowledge, the first drops hit my visor on lap fifteen. It's not quite a deluge in the following minutes, but it's not a gentle mist either, and it doesn't take long for the asphalt to darken with wetness. I see Thomas fight a snap ahead of me when he hits a damp patch, though he recovers and pushes on.

If I want to get around him soon – and I desperately do – I have to either pressure him into making a mistake or bide my time and wait for him to make it himself. With the rain getting heavier, I'm almost certain I won't need to do a single thing.

He starts to struggle around lap eighteen, finding no grip on the wet surface. The car slides and wiggles, and he has a few issues in the lower-speed corners, giving me a chance to easily make up some distance and start closing the gap between us. I hunt him down, then wait for the right place to overtake, and when the moment presents itself at Stowe corner, I swoop through on the inside to take the lead while he fights to keep the car on the track. He's a damn good driver, but he's still young, lacking confidence in conditions like this, and he's all but handed me this gift.

'Be cautious in the wet,' my engineer warns instead of praising me for the overtake. 'This cell should only last a few more minutes before clearing. Let us know what you think of these tires.'

I can make these tires work if the rain doesn't last too much longer, and according to the constant stream of information I'm getting now, I should be able to hold out.

'They're fine,' I reply – and then immediately have to battle my way through nearly losing the back end.

My heart surges up into my throat, another rush of adrenaline hitting me. That was too close of a call, undoubtedly, and I can taste the bitterness of it at the back of my throat.

My engineer comes back on the radio a few moments later. 'We think it might be time to switch to inters.'

Yes, it's slippery and the car keeps wanting to wander to the outside, but I can survive this cell of rain without the much slower wet-weather tires. If I'm on those when the clouds clear and the track dries out even a *little*, the rest of my race will be fucked. I have to survive this. I have to push my way through this and the upcoming dry laps, *then* come in for intermediate tires when the next cell rolls in. Nothing sooner than that. I can handle this.

'No.' I don't explain myself further because I don't need to. He'll either trust my judgment or nudge me to elaborate if absolutely necessary, because while making the wrong strategy choice is always a risk, indecision can cost you just as much.

'Okay, then. Copy,' he says.

I'm thankful to have an engineer who trusts me and strategists who are willing to take my informed opinions into account. They know me, know what I'm capable of, know that all my knowledge and experience and time on-track have made me into nothing short of an expert. It's an inherent trust that I'm going to miss more than anything when I give this up.

I know I've made the right call about the tires when the skies lighten again, the sun warms the surface of the track, and more dry patches appear along the racing line. Had I put on the intermediates – like my engineer is reporting several other drivers in the back of the pack did – I'd be struggling right now. As is, I have just enough grip to expand my lead from Thomas and Axel, who's not far behind him.

'Thirty minutes of rain starting soon,' my engineer says. 'Expected to last until lap forty.'

The rain is heavier this time, my tires kicking up spray behind me. Axel pits on lap twenty-seven for inters, likely trying for the undercut, which means I'll need to come in as soon as possible to keep him from getting it. A few seconds later, I get the call to box on the next lap, an order I finally agree with. But it's imperative that we make this pit stop quick. If we don't, the win is going to slip through my fingers.

Thomas dives into the pit right behind me, playing the same game. But in a stroke of luck, his stop is slow.

'He was held in the box to prevent an unsafe release,' my engineer reports as I rejoin on the track with fresh tires.

Thomas comes out behind Axel, who I know will do everything in his power to hold Thomas up. He doesn't do it for as long as I hoped for, though, and Thomas is back in my mirrors far too soon.

When there are just fifteen of the fifty-two laps left to go, the rain eases and the sun begins to stream through the remaining clouds, warm and bright. It feels like a good omen. I can do this if I just stay focused – and stay out of Thomas's reach.

I'm called into the pits on lap thirty-nine to get rid of the intermediate tires and switch back to slicks now that things are drying out. I come out behind Dev, who hasn't pitted yet, so he isn't going to be an issue. Thomas, however, is still proving to be a problem, so close on my rear tires that it's amazing he doesn't clip me as I exit the pit lane.

'Fucking hell,' I mumble, glancing at him in my mirrors, taking in the way he darts across the track to find the dry line.

Thomas is driving angry, like he's trying to prove something and getting frustrated that he can't. But the only thing driving angry will do is put you into the wall, especially in conditions like this. The track is drying out, yes, but if you find that one wet patch? Your race is done.

I manage to put some space between us with ten laps to go, but my wrists are feeling the toll. The pain starts in the joints of my thumbs and radiates up, occasionally zinging into my shoulders. Despite the intensity, I can ignore it for the most part, though my grip is faltering and every press of a button on the steering wheel is a game of Russian roulette as to how bad it'll hurt.

‘Gap to Maxwell-Brown is—’

‘Just leave me to it, mate,’ I interrupt, because that information isn’t going to help me now. I need to keep my head down and drive.

I’m flat out at this point, giving everything I have left in me. The team has done the same, from my mechanics to my engineers to the strategists. They want this win as much as I do. Mascort may technically operate as Swiss team, but our factory has been in the UK for decades and the majority of the employees are British. This win will be one of the last gifts I can give them if I just hold on.

Five more laps. Four. Three, plus a few back marker cars to get around before I’m in the clear. Two laps. One.

And then there’s the checkered flag and my mechanics hanging over the fence to cheer me across the line and the Union Jack clutched in the fist of a marshal I pass by. The grandstands are a blur as I start my cooldown lap, waving to them all as my team congratulates me over the radio.

‘Absolutely brilliant drive,’ my engineer commends, with the shouts and applause from the rest of the garage audible in the background. ‘You’ve done it again.’

Any lingering tension from the drive leaves me in a rush of exhausted laughter. It’s not quite a joyful thing, but it’s heavy with relief, the dominant emotion I feel after a race win these days.

‘Cheers, mate,’ I tell him, and I can hear how tired I sound, despite this being a relatively straightforward race. I’d never call any of them easy, but in the grand scheme, this shouldn’t have been as hard as it felt.

‘I’m grateful for all the hard work everyone has put in. Thank you to everyone back at the factory. And thank you to all the fans. I couldn’t do this without you all.’

Basil comes on next. ‘Beautiful work, Zaid. Enjoy this one.’

I guide the car to parc fermé, coming to a halt in the winner’s spot. Even through my helmet and ear pieces I can hear the roar of the crowd. They chant my name and scream their joy, and I simply sit there for a moment to take it all in. My last home race. My last British Grand Prix, and a win at that. I could lose the championship and still feel at peace with what I’ve

accomplished, because this . . . *this* satisfies the high I've been chasing year after year.

I have to swallow past the growing lump in my throat as I free myself from the cockpit, climbing up to stand on top of the car, throwing my fists in the air in celebration as the noise of the crowd surges to a new high. When I jump down, Thomas is waiting for me, his visor flipped up so I can see the way the corners of his blue eyes crease with a smile. All his anger has been left on-track, as it should be.

He throws his arms around my shoulders and tugs me close. 'A British one-two,' he says, so posh and so delighted. 'If I had to lose to anyone, I'm glad it was you. Congratulations, mate.'

'Your time will come,' I promise him as I slap his back. 'Sooner than you think.'

I don't miss the question in his eyes as I pull away and start toward the barricade holding back my family and the steadily increasing number of Mascort team members who've come down to celebrate. I don't bother taking off my helmet or knee pads before jogging toward them, nodding to Axel when we briefly cross paths, getting a nearly imperceptible nod back.

I spot my mother first, who blows me exaggerated kisses as she laughs. My brother stands next to her, bouncing a squealing Noah on his hip while Emiko claps and Sami wolf-whistles. Adnan stands behind them all, making sure people are keeping a respectful distance, but he's grinning along with everyone else. For a brief second, I search for my father's face in the crowd, and my heart twists when my memory catches up to my mindless habit. For so long, he was the first person I looked for when I climbed out of the car. It doesn't matter how many days and months and years have gone by without him – I'll always look.

But in my search for him, my eyes land on Ava. She stands at the front of the barricade on my mother's other side, hair damp and curling at her temples from the fine mist of rain that's steadily picking up again, fingers brushing the base of her throat where the familiar silver 45 charm rests. I'm drawn to her like there's a string between us, tugging me forward until I'm close enough for her to reach out and cradle my helmet between her palms. Now I'm wishing I'd taken it off, but with adoration in her eyes and a smile

I’m desperate to feel, it’s probably for the best that I’ve left it on. I want to kiss her – I want to taste her happiness and drink it down. I want to show her what she and this moment mean to me in a way I’ve been dying to do for months.

But I don’t want anyone sharing in that moment with us. I want it just for us.

‘You did it!’ she shouts, more excited for me than I am for myself.

‘You told me to win,’ I tease her. ‘I was only following orders.’

She laughs, and it drowns out the sound of everything else in my head. ‘Does that mean you’ll do everything I say?’

She gazes up at me like there’s no one else around, eyes only for me, and for a blissful moment I don’t belong to the world. No one else can consume me. I’m hers and hers alone.

‘There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Ava.’

Her smile falters and her lips part, searching for words. But before she can say anything, the world rushes back in and I’m tugged away by more hands, thrown back into a universe that’s more than just me and her. I go with little resistance, only because I know she’ll be waiting for me when the whirlwind spits me back out.

And when I find her again, when it’s just the two of us – when the world has narrowed back down to me and her – I’m going to make good on all my promises.

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CHAPTER 23
Ava

Instead of staying to party with the team after the podium celebrations, I head back to London with Zaid's family.

It's mostly at Mariam's insistence. The woman literally timed how long I'd been on my feet, and apparently I hit my daily limit hours ago. I didn't dare disobey her orders – and to be honest, my back was killing me and my ankles were verging on becoming cankles – so a car ride back to London was the perfect reprieve. Besides, Zaid still had meetings and debriefs and press to do, and I would have been stuck lingering in some corner otherwise, so waiting for him back at his place feels like the best option.

I spent most of the drive replaying what happened down in parc fermé. Even now, hours and hours later, after they've dropped me off at his house and gone on their merry way, I can't get his murmured *There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Ava* out of my head. It loops on repeat as I try to distract myself with trashy reality TV shows and mindless internet scrolling, and every time I stumble upon something that reminds me of him – or is actually *about* him – I end up reminiscing about the coolness of his helmet in my hands and the contrasting heat in his eyes. And it *really* makes me wish I could take care of the ache between my thighs that the memory inspires.

It's not as late as I expect it to be when I hear the front door open and shut. A moment later, Zaid comes around the corner to the kitchen, where I'm distracting myself from not-so-pure thoughts by making a cup of tea. I flash him a smile as my heart trips over itself, because, oh god, did I accidentally conjure his presence by thinking about him too hard?

'What are you doing back so early?' I ask as I finish stirring sugar in my mug. 'You should be out chugging celebratory champagne. Did they run out of bottles that quickly?'

The corner of his mouth tugs up as he approaches, stopping on the other

side of the stove from me and leaning a hip against the counter. He's showered and changed since the end of the race, back in jeans and a Mascort shirt that hugs his biceps in an almost obscene way. His hair is still a little damp, falling in waves across his forehead, just begging for me to comb my fingers through to put it back in place. I mean, I'm nothing if not helpful, right?

'There was still plenty of champagne when I left,' he says. 'But I was more interested in celebrating with you.'

'With me?' I'm flattered, but I don't quite believe him. 'Your baby mama who can't drink alcohol and isn't even allowed to stand for too long? I mean, if you want to sit on the couch and sip tea with me, you're more than welcome to, but it doesn't sound all that entertaining.'

He nods, eyes crinkling at the corners as his smile widens. 'Sounds like a perfect night, actually.'

I laugh, but it comes out incriminatingly breathy as fireworks explode in my chest. 'Okay, liar. But I'll let it slide this time, only because you drove so well today. Winners get to do whatever they want.'

I don't realize how loaded the statement sounds until he cocks his head to the side, his eyes going heavy with something I'm too nervous to name.

'Do they?' he asks, voice low and warm.

The question wraps around me and slinks down my spine, daring me to take back my words and play it safe. And I could. I maybe even should. Things are so good between us, so why take the gamble and chance ruining it?

But there's a voice in the back of my head that sounds suspiciously like Edith telling me to lean into the words – to lean into *him* and tug on this thread to see where it leads. Isn't that what being brave is all about?

'Whatever they want,' I repeat, tossing the choice back to him. But judging from the way he's looking at me, like he's trying to memorize every line and curve and valley of my face, I'm not the only one who's ready to lean in.

He's pushing away from the countertop a moment later, slowly closing the distance between us and reaching out like he's going to touch me. My breath catches, waiting for the contact, but all he does is take the steaming

mug from my hand, carefully setting it aside. I almost groan at the letdown, at how silly it was to think he'd push me up against the counter and have his way with me. But the sound dies in my throat when his hand lifts again and his fingers curve behind my neck.

The possessive touch encourages my head to fall back, leaving me nowhere else to look but up at him. There's an intensity in his expression that has me both nervous and enraptured as I wait for him to make another move, but I won't dare predict what's coming next.

'What I wanted . . . was to kiss you the second I climbed out of my car,' he confesses, a rough edge to the words. 'I wanted to throw my helmet to the ground and show you what I've been dying to do for months.'

It's getting harder to breathe, my chest brushing his with every deep inhale I force myself to take. I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip and Zaid's eyes follow the motion, lingering there. 'Then why didn't you?' I ask.

'I wasn't sure if you wanted me to.' His thumb strokes the nape of my neck as his eyes hold mine. 'We agreed to keep things friendly, and that would have been the furthest thing from it. But more than anything, I didn't want anyone else witnessing that moment. I didn't want them watching.'

'What, you didn't want to show me off?' I tease. I sound bolder than I feel.

'I always want to show you off, Ava,' he says, refusing to abide my jokes. The way his grip tightens on me makes any humor flood from my body, desire taking its place. 'But this? I needed it to be just for us.'

When his fingers sink into my hair and his mouth slants over mine, I don't doubt that he means it. This is a kiss meant to claim, to bind us in a way that the rest of the world has no business witnessing. He's a man whom millions of people take pieces of every day, but he's giving me a part of him that's only mine to possess. He's made sure that no one else can touch this moment, that no one can ruin or intrude on it like they have in the past, and that's a gift in itself. I don't want this to belong to anyone but us either.

I lift my hands to the hard plane of his stomach and curl my fingers into his shirt, grounding myself in him before melting into his touch. His tongue brushes against mine and I taste the lingering sweetness of champagne, of

victory. It’s a heady, exhilarating reminder of not only what he’s accomplished on-track today, but my own wins too – because out of all the places Zaid could be right now, he’s come back to *me*.

There’s no denying that our daughter has united us, but this pregnancy isn’t the only reason he’s kissing me like he’s been yearning for this. That lingering, mutual crush never truly went away, not really, and all the time we’ve spent together lately has built it up, brick by brick. We’ve laid the foundation for more. And I’m ready to build a home with him.

I gasp against his mouth when he wraps an arm around my waist and lifts me onto the counter, bumping my knees apart so he can stand between them. My arms twine around his neck, keeping him close even when his lips leave mine to trail a burning path of kisses from my jaw up to my ear.

‘I love the way I feel when I’m with you,’ he murmurs against my skin. ‘You make everything else fall away. You’re the only one who gets me out of my head, who can make me see there’s always a light to follow.’ He places more kisses down my jaw, working his way back to my lips until we’re sharing the same breath. ‘You’re that light for me, Ava.’

My head spins as his confession seeps into me. I never imagined I could be a light for someone, even though I’ve always tried to be one for myself. So to be that for him? To be the reason he can see the sun when he’s lingering in the dark? It fills me with a power that I’ve only ever dreamed of having.

‘I’ve never felt like this with anyone else,’ I whisper, our lips brushing with every word. I feel desired with him. Understood. Breakable in the best way, yet strong enough to be exactly what he needs. ‘You’re a light for me too.’

It’s both freeing and overwhelming to finally admit this to each other, like the floodgates have opened and everything we’ve kept in is washing over us. No matter how scared I am of drowning in these uncharted waters, of being steered off course and into a storm that could rip apart everything we’ve established, I’m ready to take the risk. The chance of discovering a beautiful destination together is worth it.

Zaid’s hand slips from my hair so he can cup my jaw, pulling back just enough to look into my eyes. ‘I’ve been waiting to do this ever since I

walked away from you months ago. I thought about you every single day we were apart.'

I look up at him through my lashes, surprised. 'You did?'

'God, Ava, I couldn't get you out of my head,' he says on a pained exhale of a laugh, like he's reliving the suffering of it. 'I *still* can't, and I don't think I ever will. You coming back into my life after that was the best thing that could have happened to me.'

My cheeks heat, and I'm sure he can feel the warmth against his palm. 'When I sent you that note in Miami . . . I wasn't sure you'd want to see me again. We agreed to one night and I thought—'

'I never wanted it to just be one night,' he interrupts. 'I went along with it because that's what *you* said was best. I wanted more, even then. I've just been waiting for you to tell me you wanted the same, but I was never going to push you.' He brushes his thumb reverently across my cheekbone. 'I can't get enough of you. I'll take whatever you're willing to give me.'

I stroke the back of his neck, keeping him close as I search his eyes. 'Do you remember what I told you that night?'

'That I could have as much of you as I wanted,' he recounts, like he's never forgotten a word that's come out of my mouth.

'I meant it then, and I mean it now.' My heart pounds so hard that I swear it's going to leap out of my chest. 'You can have all of me.'

I feel something roll through him, like a rumble of thunder across heavy summer air. 'Say you're mine, Ava. Tell me you want this to be more.'

More. It's exactly what I decided I needed, whatever *more* entailed. But now I know it's this. It's us. Truly together.

'I'm yours.'

Zaid exhales, the last of the tension in his body slipping away as he closes his eyes and presses his forehead to mine. 'You have no idea how long I've wanted to hear that.'

'I'm sorry I made us wait,' I whisper, watching his eyes slowly reopen. 'I'm sorry I couldn't take that step back then.'

'I told you before, never apologize for asking for what you need.' He kisses me softly to ease the gentle burn of the scolding. When he pulls back again, it's to look me hard in the eyes, determined to make me believe what

he's saying. 'You were right that we needed to focus on the baby and settling into our new futures before anything else happened. We needed that time to really see what was on the road ahead of us. And I don't regret a second of it, because being with you in any form is a privilege.' His hand on my cheek moves to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear, fingertips lingering on my jaw. 'I love you, Ava. I may not have said it before, but I hope that's not a surprise. I hope I've done enough to show you.'

He has. And I hope I've done the same. 'I love you too,' I whisper. The words have been sitting on the tip of my tongue all day. '*God*, Zaid, it took everything in me not to tell you before you went out on-track today. I can't ever let you do that again without being sure you know how I feel.'

I'm suddenly hot all over from the confession, but there's no sense in keeping it in. I love this man, and I love every gift he's given me, including the one currently doing flips in my belly as if she knows exactly what I've done.

'I knew you were it for me the second you dragged me to that horrible pub and lied about being good at darts,' Zaid says with no hesitation. If anything, it's relief I hear in his voice, like he's finally free to let this out after holding himself back. 'How could I not love you after that?'

A laugh bubbles out of me even as my eyes start to sting with happy tears. 'I don't know, a lot of people might have added me to their list of mortal enemies after that.'

'Not me. Never me.' He wipes away my tears one by one. 'You helped me see that my life doesn't have to start and end with racing.'

'I think you already knew that, Mr. Gallery Owner Humanitarian Oscar Winner.'

Zaid grins at my joke, dark eyes alight. 'Maybe. But you also made me feel like the rest of the world couldn't touch me for once in my life.' The arm he has around my waist tightens as he pulls me closer again. 'You make me feel that way every time we're together. Like my world is just you – and her.' His hand skates around until he's palming my belly. 'That's all I want.'

It's all I want too, and this is the moment I'll cling to when the world comes to claim him again.

Tonight, though, it's just us. Me and him and our baby. And it's all I'll

ever need.

———

There’s an empty space next to me in bed when I wake in the morning.

Despite having separate bedrooms in this house, I’ve gotten so used to sleeping beside Zaid in his motorhome for the past three weeks that I couldn’t bring myself to sleep alone last night. Even better, I no longer had to resist the urge to cuddle up to him when I got cold or move away upon waking up to discover we were tangled together – it’s all fair game now.

But bless Zaid for having the willpower to pull away from our kisses before things could get too heated, gently reminding me of why we couldn’t take things further. Even when I slyly reminded him in return that it was only me who had to be careful, that there were plenty of things I could still do for him, he kissed my neck and murmured, ‘Until you get to come, I don’t either.’

I smile to myself, pressing my face into the pillow to keep it from growing wider, then force myself to get up. The scent of coffee brewing floats through the hall as I head back to my bedroom to shower and dress, and I find a steaming mug waiting for me on the kitchen counter when I finally emerge. There’s no Zaid to be found, though.

Cupping the mug in my hands, I shuffle out to the living room and spot him in one of the armchairs by the windows. It’s an uncharacteristically sunny morning for London, yesterday’s storms a thing of the past, and the rays stream in to halo him in light. He’s dressed only in loose cotton pajama bottoms, chest bare and all too inviting, but it’s the sketchbook in his lap that catches my attention.

‘Come here,’ he says, not looking up from where he’s sweeping a pencil across the page. ‘I want to show you something.’

I pad over and perch on the wide arm of the chair, trying to steal a glance at what he’s drawing as I sip my coffee. ‘Whatcha got there?’

‘I sketched a mural for the nursery.’

He turns the sketch pad toward me, and then I’m looking at the vision board I had tacked on the wall in the nursery at my house brought to life.

There are bunnies and squirrels and adorable little mice skittering across a forest floor, friendly-faced owls hooting down at them from old oak trees, and sly foxes rolling merrily on their backs. There are notes about color choices scrawled in the corner of the page and questions to himself as to what else to add, including *More birds???* and *Ask Ava her opinion on mushrooms – ugly or nice?*

My throat immediately goes tight. I didn't realize he'd even noticed my collection of photos and paint swatches, let alone paid enough attention to meld them into the perfect illustration. It's everything I could have wanted and more.

'Zaid,' I sniffle-whine, looking up at the ceiling to keep my tears from dropping onto the page. 'Why are you so obsessed with making me cry?' When I'm certain I won't ruin his masterpiece, I look back down at him, though the soft smile I'm met with only makes me cry harder. 'It's perfect and you're the *worst*.'

'I know,' he soothes, fighting a laugh as he rubs my back. 'I'll start on it when we get back to Monaco. I figure that's the nursery where we'll be spending most of our time with her.'

I swipe at my cheeks as his attention drops to my bump, mostly hidden under one of his Mascort T-shirts. 'She's going to end up having, like, three nurseries,' I point out once I can speak again. 'One at my house for right after she's born and while you're racing in the Americas. One here for when we visit our families. And then one in Monaco. You up for drawing three murals?'

'Whatever you want, princess.' He nudges me off the chair's arm and down into his lap, holding me tight with his hand splayed across my bump. 'I was thinking about incorporating her name somewhere in the design, so it's probably time we get serious about picking one. I'm going to take a wild guess that you've been brainstorming baby names for most of your life.'

'I *may* have six different lists based on how many syllables each name has and a separate list for all the possible middle name pairings.'

'Of course you do,' he says fondly, outright chuckling this time as he

presses a kiss to my temple. ‘How about you give me your top ten and we can narrow it down?’

I make a sound of discontent at the perfectly reasonable idea. ‘Asking me to do the impossible,’ I jokingly grumble, nuzzling into his chest as I take another sip of my coffee, and it’s the highest level of bliss. The man of my dreams is holding me and our baby, the child I’ve wished so hard for, making plans to paint her nursery without me having to lift a finger. All I can do is invent things to be dismayed about, because everything is perfect.

Zaid sighs, and he sounds just as satisfied as I feel. ‘Our daughter’s going to end up with five different names, isn’t she?’

‘It’ll be no less than ten if you’re lucky.’

‘I wouldn’t have it any other way.’

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CHAPTER 24
Zaid

Top of the Podium magazine

Monday 29 July
By Damian Larson, columnist

WHO WILL DOMINATE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE SEASON?

Today is the first official day of the summer break, three weeks when we can all take a breath and recalibrate for the second half of the season. The first half brought us one of the most intense rivalries we've seen in decades, another iteration of Bergmüller vs. Yousef, but with an undercurrent of chaos that was unlike anything we've witnessed before. We've seen vitriolic battles between rivals in the past, including just last season between these two, and yet there's something different about this. It feels more like a no-holds-barred bare-knuckle underground fight than a match-up between gentlemen.

I hate to buy into rumors and speculation, but they've become hard for even the most serious journalists to ignore – does this new intensity have anything to do with Ava Farahani?

Monaco

After a win in Hungary and P2 in Belgium, I'm still trailing Axel in the championship as we head into the summer break.

Is it where I want to be? No, definitely not. But I'm only behind by seven points, a number I can make up in the second half of the season, and it's a

small enough difference that my mind is at ease over it. Besides, I have better things to focus on.

Ava and I are back in Monaco for a few days to decompress after the doubleheader and to prep for her to move in with me after the season ends. Much to her chagrin, I've had my team handle everything regarding the move, from visas to opening new joint bank accounts to making sure the cats have the requisite papers and vaccinations to travel, all so she doesn't have to do a single thing.

'Your only job is to grow that baby,' I remind her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head as we step into the penthouse. 'Stop trying to make trouble.'

'Trouble is my middle name,' she shoots back, kicking off her shoes and heading for the kitchen – likely straight to the gelato I told her was waiting in the freezer.

'I've seen your driver's license,' I call to her retreating back. 'I know it's Lotus!'

Named after her mum's favorite flower, she told me. After learning that, I asked what her own favorite flower was, and I've made sure to keep the motorhome stocked with sunflowers ever since. She'll find a vase of them on nearly every table here too.

After setting down our bags, I head to the soon-to-be nursery, determined to start on the mural so that I can have it finished before the end of the break. We won't have much time back here after the season restarts, and then there will come a point when Ava can no longer travel. Considering that'll be around the stretch of races I'll have in the Americas, her house in the States will be our base until after the baby's born and old enough to safely travel.

And then this will be home. Our home.

Ava strolls in a few minutes later as I'm about to start sketching the rough outline on the wall. She leans into my side, gazing up at me with those big doe eyes that melt my heart every time, and it takes me far too long to look away and remember the task at hand.

'You can keep me company while I do the outline,' I tell her, motioning for her to sit on the sofa pressed to the opposite wall, the only furniture

currently in the room. ‘But I’m kicking you out once it’s time for paint. Don’t want you inhaling those fumes.’

She rolls her eyes, lips twisting to the side as she fights a smile. ‘So bossy,’ she taunts as she saunters away. ‘I’ll be over here supervising, then.’

The sofa is small but just big enough for her to stretch out on, with one elbow on the armrest and her head in her palm, her other hand resting on the gentle swell of her belly. Her dress is a deep red today, like the cherries she loves so much, and the hem settles just above her knees as she makes herself comfortable. I need to be working on this mural, but I’m itching to capture her in this moment instead.

‘When I’m done with this,’ I tell her, vaguely motioning to the wall even though my eyes never leave her, ‘I want to paint you.’

Her smile is cheeky, pulling up on one side just a little more than the other. ‘Do you paint all the women you’ve been with, Mr. Yousef?’

I huff a laugh, finally turning back to the wall and drawing the first sweeping arc of what will become a forest scene. She knows there have been plenty of women in my past, having witnessed years of playboy antics in my twenties. I was young, rich, and on top of the world. I couldn’t drink and eat and party like a lot of my age cohort were out doing, thanks to the fear that it would affect my racing, so women were my vice.

‘I never painted any of them,’ I answer, because I never wanted to.

They were all beautiful in their own way, but I felt no compulsion to even lazily sketch them. Ava, though . . . She makes me want to pull out the biggest canvas and use every color under the sun. I want to capture each element of who she is, even though I know it would be impossible to reproduce the sheer *life* she exudes.

‘Really?’ she teases. ‘Not even that K-pop star? Or any of the actresses? Ooh, maybe that gorgeous human rights lawyer – she had cheekbones to *die* for.’

‘None of them. It will only ever be you, Ava.’

I expect another quip, but instead I’m met with silence. When I glance over my shoulder again, she’s staring intently at the ceiling, her chest lifting with a deep breath, lips turned down at the corners.

‘You all right?’ I ask her, hand dropping from the wall.

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‘I’m trying *so* hard not to ruin my eyeliner,’ she says, voice wobbling a little. ‘It looks *really* good today.’

I can’t help but chuckle, and thankfully it has her snickering along with me, even if it’s joined by a few sniffles. In the interest of protecting her makeup, I change the subject.

‘Have you narrowed down your list of baby names yet?’ I ask, tracing the beginnings of an old oak tree. ‘Whatever we pick, I want to make it look like her name is carved into one of the trees.’ And my plan is to put mine and Ava’s together on another, though that will stay a surprise until the mural’s done.

Ava clears her throat, and when she speaks again, she’s back to her usual impish ways. ‘I think you’re going to love my shortlist,’ she boasts.

‘Let’s hear it, then.’

‘Monza,’ she announces grandly, and I have to close my eyes for a second to prepare myself for what else is about to come.

‘No.’

She takes my rejection in stride. ‘Suzuka?’

‘Ava,’ I warn.

‘Emilia Romagna, but we’d call her Imola.’

‘You’re an absolute pest.’

She laughs, throaty and loud, and it’s like my whole world gets a little bit brighter. I don’t dare turn and look at her for fear that I’ll never be able to look away.

‘All jokes aside,’ she says when she’s recovered, ‘I’ve always loved the name Noor. It’s been at the top of my all-time favorites for a while now, and honestly . . . I’ve been calling her that in my head ever since you told me to narrow down my list.’ She pauses, then rushes to tack on, ‘But if you don’t like it, we can go with something else.’

My hand slows then stills as I take in her suggestion, letting it settle over me, but I already know it’s our daughter’s name. ‘That’s perfect.’

‘Really?’ Ava sounds surprised that I’ve agreed so easily. ‘You don’t even want to look at my lists?’

I shake my head. ‘No. Her name is Noor.’

Ava goes quiet again, but this time when I glance over at her, she’s beaming. My ray of sunshine, carrying the light of my life, named exactly for that, and I’ve never felt warmer.

We contemplate whether we want to give her a middle name as I continue sketching – ‘Okay, but you have to admit, Noor Emilia Romagna *really* has a ring to it,’ Ava says at one point, which I again shut down – and by the time my wrist starts to ache, we’re no closer to agreeing on that part of our daughter’s name.

‘Take a break,’ Ava orders, coming over to take the pencil from my hand. ‘Sit with me.’

I’m only about halfway done, but pushing through the pain won’t do me any good, so it’s in my best interest to obey. I let her gently take my hand and guide me to the sofa, grinning when instead of squeezing in beside me, she chooses to straddle my lap, her knees on either side of my hips. She cups my jaw, thumbs drifting over the stubble on my cheeks, holding me so adoringly that I don’t doubt for a second that every inch of her is devoted to me.

‘Thank you for this,’ she murmurs, eyes holding mine. ‘Not just the mural, or for everything you’re doing for Noor, but for making room for me. It’s been . . . it’s been a while since I felt like I fit somewhere. Or like I was wanted there. But you’ve made space for me as if I was always meant to be here with you.’

Deep in my chest, I feel the same tug of destiny. We’ve landed here after a decade and a half of moving in each other’s orbits, circling close but never quite intercepting – not until one of the hardest moments of my life, then again in another when I was ready to give up everything I’d worked for. It was like she’d been dropped directly into my path. I ignored it once, let her go, and let it all crumble down, but I somehow knew to hold tight this time.

‘I can’t imagine you anywhere else,’ I tell her. Up this close, I can see the

little flecks of amber and caramel in her irises, like golden stars, an infinite light. ‘I’ll always make space for you, princess.’

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CHAPTER 25
Ava

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Monday 12 August

Ah, summer break. A time for drivers to relax on a yacht in the Mediterranean (Zaid Yousef and Ava Farahani, slide 1), go back home to their families (Reid Coleman and his adorable grandma, slide 2), and be a proud trophy husband (Thomas Maxwell-Brown at the grand opening of yet another Stella Margaux's location, slide 3). It's nice to see everyone having a chill time away from the chaos of Formula 1. Enjoy your break, kids! If only the rest of us could be as rich and carefree as you all!

Northern Virginia

It's finally happened: my placenta has officially moved the hell out of the way. In fact, the doctor's certain that, with how big the baby is measuring, I've been out of the woods for weeks now. That might have been nice to know sooner, but I'm still taking this as a win.

'I'm *free*,' I exhale as Zaid and I step out of the medical building and into the August heat. 'No more storm cloud of worry hanging over me.'

Well, at least not a metaphorical storm cloud, because there's a literal one starting to block out the sun, a classic East Coast summertime gale rolling in. And sure, there's always something to worry about when it comes to growing a human, but this is a huge issue off my mind. While the restrictions were annoying, nothing was worse than the lingering fear of being at a higher risk of something going seriously wrong.

'Do you want to cancel the C-section?' Zaid asks, a question that the doctor told us to think on since it's no longer necessary, but I already have my answer.

I shake my head. 'It's the best way to make sure you can be there for the

birth. Besides, you heard the doctor mention how big the baby already is. Might actually be my best choice.'

'Whatever you want, princess.'

He takes my hand as we move toward the parking lot, keeping me close to his side. I lace our fingers together, practically skipping to my car, which he's been graciously chauffeuring me around in over the last few days we've been staying at my house. I would have happily driven us, but I know how racing drivers are about control.

I'm still adjusting to all the little ways he insists on taking care of me, including the way he puts on my seat belt and double-checks its placement while I simply sit and smile. Honestly, I'm getting to the point where I'm happy to accept all the help I can get. The size of my bump has hit a point where it's vaguely cumbersome, but thankfully baby girl has decided to take a nap after spending an hour fighting with the ultrasound tech, a reprieve from all the kicking and punching she's been doing lately. Based on her performance, there's a strong chance she'll grow up to be an MMA fighter.

The sky cracks open just as Zaid climbs behind the wheel, and raindrops splatter against the windshield. The downpour makes me miss the gloriously sunny week we spent traversing the Mediterranean on his yacht, the only time Zaid really allowed himself to take off from all of his responsibilities during the summer break so far.

The past couple of weeks have been packed with work for his foundation, photo shoots for sponsors, and even an interview with *Rolling Stone* about the next documentary he's executive producing. I tagged along for most of it, hanging out in the background and watching him be *the* Zaid Yousef – the man, the myth, the legend. And yet, despite everything he packed into his schedule, he still had time to make my care and comfort his priority.

We've been back in the States for a few days, getting my house ready for the weeks I'll spend here right before and immediately after the baby's born, since it'll be another month before Zaid's season ends and I'll be able to safely travel again. Now that this latest doctor's appointment is out of the way – and now that we've been given the all-clear – we can enjoy the

waning days of the summer break before we're off to the Netherlands next week.

And I plan to *really* enjoy myself because I can finally – *finally* – do what I want with him.

Zaid and I chat idly about baby things we still need to buy and whether we should bother with prenatal classes as we drive back, though I spend most of it fidgeting in my seat, antsy to get to the house so I can set my plan in motion. He shoots me a curious look at one point, his free hand coming to rest on my thigh as if to calm me. If only he knew it was adding to the growing blaze of hormones and horniness that I've been trying to repress for months. Then again, with the way he keeps glancing over at me, eyes skimming up my bare thighs to the hem of my shorts, he might just have the exact same thing on his mind.

I undo my seat belt the second he parks in my driveway, already reaching for the door handle, but he catches my hand to stop me.

'Let's wait for the storm to taper off,' he says over the din of heavy rain coming down on the roof.

Water slides over the windshield in sheets, blurring the shape of my little brick house a few yards away. He's right that we should hold off if we don't want to get drenched, but I'm so tired of waiting to get my hands on him that I could scream.

'I'm heading straight to the shower anyway, might as well get a head start,' I say, throwing open my door before tossing him a look over my shoulder. 'You should join me.'

I watch his eyes go molten before I jump out and scurry up the driveway. I've made my intentions clear, put what I want out there, because I can't imagine Zaid – cautious, considerate Zaid – would have made a move without at least a hint from me.

My clothes are soaked before I can even make it up onto the porch. I've traded in the breezy dresses I've been wearing around Europe for cut-off jean shorts and a tank top, too hot in this unbearable heat and humidity for anything else. The white cotton of my shirt is see-through now thanks to the rain, and the denim clings to me, begging to be peeled away. Preferably by the man coming up behind me.

He catches me around the waist just as I reach the door, and I laugh as I fumble to get my key in the lock. We're dripping when we stumble inside, the door slamming shut behind us to keep out the driving rain. From somewhere in the house, Timmy and Robert give a series of plaintive meows that sound more like the howls of evil spirits in the way that only Siamese cats can manage, but it has Zaid laughing as we kick off our shoes, a deep rumble in his chest that vibrates against my back.

'Of all the cats you could have adopted,' he says, hand splayed high across my belly, keeping me from going anywhere, 'you picked the ones that could have been stars of a horror movie.'

'The shelter did warn me that they might be possessed by the tortured souls of Victorian-era twins,' I say. 'But I thought that sounded delightful.'

'I wouldn't expect anything else from you.' He brushes my hair away from the nape of my neck before pressing a kiss there. 'You can't pass up a tortured creature.'

I can tell he's including himself in that statement. I'm glad whatever it is about tortured beings that draws me to them brought me back around to him. 'What can I say? They're my favorite.'

I try to step forward, intending to drag him along with me to the shower, but Zaid catches me by my belt loop, hauling me back against his chest.

'What are you doing?' I ask through a laugh as I glance curiously over my shoulder.

His hand moves across my hip, skimming the top of my shorts and the sliver of skin above it. 'I'm making up for lost time.'

And then he's popping open the button and dragging down the zipper, his fingers slipping past the lace of my underwear and – *fuck*. Fuck. He's going to make me come standing right here in the middle of my living room.

I exhale a moan as his fingertips slide down the seam of me, teasing up and down before he finally pushes inside.

'Fuck, you're so wet,' he murmurs against my ear as his fingers pump slowly, and I can hear just how soaked I am for him with every move.

'I mean, I *did* get caught in the rain,' I muse, but the words come out too breathy to give any weight to my joke.

'Brat.' He presses his thumb to my clit, rubbing tight circles around it,

and I can't help but grind against his hand. 'I should have made you wait.'

I gasp when he presses a little harder, crooking his fingers up into just the right spot to make my hips buck. 'You wouldn't dare.'

'You're right,' he agrees, voice low and gruff. 'Because it's been torture keeping my hands off you, princess. This is *me* being selfish.'

He can be as selfish as he wants if it means I get to have him touch me like this. He drags his lips down my neck, kissing and biting and sucking, determined to leave his mark. I twine an arm up behind me to clutch at him, wanting more yet barely able to handle how incredible this feels. My other hand grips his forearm banded underneath my breasts, nails digging in hard enough that I know I'll mark him in return.

'Oh my god,' I moan as the pressure builds. 'Keep doing that.'

His fingers move faster, pumping in and out and creating a friction that's bound to send me over the edge in no time at all. I'm more sensitive than I've ever been, full of pent-up desire and need on top of it all, and just a little more – just another flick of his thumb, the curl of his fingers – has me hitting a peak I've been desperate to reach again.

I curl into his arm as the orgasm rips through me, letting him hold me up as I shatter and then slowly knit back together. '*Fuck*, Zaid,' I exhale, legs still trembling as I float back down to earth. 'That was—' I cut short to suck in a breath and reorganize my spinning thoughts. 'Is it greedy to tell you I want more?'

He chuckles against my temple as he gently slips his fingers from inside me. 'So greedy. Good thing that's what I like.'

I feel my wetness on his skin as he takes my hand and gently tugs me into motion, guiding me through the living room to the hallway and eventually into my bedroom. I don't even get the chance to warn him that we have an audience as he shuts the door behind us and backs me against it, his lips crashing down to mine a moment later and stealing away every thought I might have had other than how magnificent it is to kiss him.

His tongue slides across my bottom lip and I open easily for him, moaning softly when he presses our hips together, letting me feel his hardness, his want for me. My hands roam over his back and down to his

waist, fingertips wandering until they brush over his abs and slide underneath his damp T-shirt, his muscles flexing under my touch.

He tilts my head back, deepening the kiss, and I'm so weightless under his touch that I could float away if he weren't holding me down. I'm drunk on him by the time he pulls back to breathe, and his eyes are so heavy-lidded with lust that I imagine he feels the same.

'We should get you out of those clothes,' he says, the sound a low rumble in the quiet of my bedroom.

'I agree,' I pant, but I stop him as he reaches for the hem of my tank top. 'Though maybe not in front of the cats?'

It takes a moment before he can tear his eyes away from me and glance over his shoulder, mouth settling into a hard line when he sees all three cats sitting on the bed. Timmy and Robert are quick to jump down when Zaid turns to lovingly shoo them away, but Soup stays in a loaf in the center of the duvet, daring us to move him with a narrow-eyed glare.

'How about that shower?' I suggest as Timmy and Robert twine in and out between my ankles. 'It's one place they won't follow.'

Zaid and Soup continue their standoff for a few more beats, but Zaid looks back to me when he realizes he won't win and nods toward the bathroom. I do my best not to trip over Timmy and Robert as I head into the en suite with Zaid close on my heels. He kicks the door shut for good measure as I turn on the shower, and when I step back out of the enclosed glass stall, he's already staring at me again, drinking in every inch with reverent fascination. My hair is plastered against my neck, my clothes are disheveled, and I'm sure I look vaguely drowned, but under his gaze I've never felt sexier. No one else has ever made me feel this way.

My pulse thuds as he slowly approaches and it echoes between my thighs, need flaming through me. He grips my hips to pull me to him, and then his hands are on the bottom of my tank top, pulling it up until it's off over my head. His eyes linger on my breasts, which are practically spilling out of the cups of my bra thanks to how much they've grown throughout this pregnancy, and when he frees them from the fabric, it's only a moment before he's dipping down to bury his face between them.

'You're so fucking perfect,' he mumbles against my skin. 'Every inch of

you.’

My nipples are so sensitive that I cry out when he swirls his tongue around one, and when he pulls back to lavish the other with attention, his hand cupping and squeezing the one he just left, I moan and arch for more.

‘I need to taste all of you,’ he says as he places open-mouthed kisses down my sternum and over the swell of my belly.

He drags my shorts and soaked underwear down my legs, holding my hand for balance as I step out of them. When they’re gone, he backs me up until I bump into the vanity, and then I’m being lifted onto the counter next to the sink, the wall supporting me behind my shoulders. He nudges my knees apart until I open for him, his hands curling behind my thighs as he kisses the inside of my knee. The scruff on his jaw scratches against my skin, and I’m thrown back into our first night together, when he pushed me against the dresser as he worshipped me on his knees. To think *that* has led to *this* nearly makes a laugh bubble up and out of me, but the sound that escapes is breathy as his tongue swipes over my clit.

He tastes and teases, slipping one and then two fingers into me as I inch closer and closer to the brink. It once again doesn’t take much to get there, the vibration of him murmuring how good I taste and how he’s been dying to do this again pushing me to the highest heights.

I tremble as I come down on the other side, somehow both satiated and desperate for more. I capture his lips with my own when he rises again, and he kisses me like a man starved, tongue tangling with my own. I wrap my legs around his waist and slide my fingers into his hair, wanting him closer than we already are. But it isn’t mere *want* any more.

‘Please,’ I pant against his mouth. ‘I need you inside me. I want to feel you.’

Zaid’s exhale shudders through him, like my words have unlocked something. ‘God, you have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to hear you say that.’

‘Seven months?’ I try, nipping at his bottom lip, because that’s how long *I’ve* been waiting – ever since he rolled out of my bed the first time. I could pretend all I wanted that one night with him was enough, but it never would

have been. Even now, even with the idea of forever ahead of us, I'm eager to make the most of every moment we have together.

He chuckles as I let go of his lip, getting his revenge by sweeping his fingers between my legs again. 'Something like that.'

My breaths come in shallow bursts as he lazily strokes my overly sensitive clit. 'I don't have condoms,' I babble, head falling back as he dips to kiss my neck. 'But you've been to practically every one of my doctor's appointments, so you've seen all my test results. Not like you can get me pregnant again either.'

'I'm tested at the start of every season,' he says after dragging his teeth over my collarbone. 'And I haven't been with anyone else since you.'

I'm flattered, but it makes sense. He's a busy man with an impossible schedule. And considering he was sleeping right next to me for several weekends, I know he wasn't sneaking around with anyone. Still, I can't resist toying with him.

'Really?' I tease, though it's almost another moan. 'Was I just so good you knew no one else would ever compare?'

He lifts his head again, fingers dragging away from my clit, making me nearly pout and whine, but I freeze when I see the weight in his gaze.

'Once I had a taste of you,' he says, 'I couldn't imagine ever wanting anyone else. It will only ever be you, Ava. For the rest of my life and everything beyond it, I will only ever want *you*.' He closes the distance between us again, lips capturing mine in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless when he pulls away. 'And I'll do anything to make sure you never forget that.'

I don't think I could ever forget it, but especially not when he orders me into the shower and lets me watch him undress as the hot water cascades over my even hotter skin. By the time he joins me behind the glass, I'm near to overheating from just the sight of him, but his touch over my waist and hips sears me further.

'Turn around.'

It's a command, firm but gentle, and I obey when he releases me from his grasp, stepping out of the spray to face the white tiles.

His breath ghosts over the back of my neck. 'Hands on the wall,

princess.’

A shiver of desire rolls down my spine as I bring my palms up and shift my hips back, brushing against the heat of his hard length. I want to push back farther, to feel more of him, but he firmly grips my hips to keep me where I am, to keep me perfectly safe and steady, grazing his nose along the side of my neck.

‘Is this what you want, Ava?’ he asks, cock sliding against my slick skin, coating himself in my arousal.

‘Absolutely. Yes. Please,’ I breathe out. I’m practically shaking with anticipation. ‘I want this. I want you.’

He makes a hungry sound deep in his throat and I answer it with a sigh of satisfaction when he buries himself inside me in one slow, controlled thrust. The stretch is almost too much, yet achingly perfect at the same time. He pauses when he bottoms out, giving me a moment to adjust to him before sliding back out a few inches and then pushing home again.

‘You feel so good,’ he rasps, fingers tracing the length of my spine, up and down and up again until he’s wrapping my hair around his fist. ‘Like you were made for me.’

I drop my forehead to the cool tiles, wanting him to go faster and give me the friction I so desperately need, but I’m already overwhelmed by the way he fills me. No matter how many times I’ve thought about our first night together, fantasizing about what it would be like to have him again, nothing could have prepared me for the way it feels so *right*.

He’s a shelter around me as he leans in to kiss the nape of my neck, hips pressed hard to mine, holding me in such a way that I’ve never felt more protected. ‘I love you so much,’ he whispers. ‘You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.’

I try to tell him the same, that he’s turned my life upside down in the best way, that I wouldn’t change a single thing about everything that’s happened, but I’m left speechless when he starts to move with deep strokes. His pace is steady and unhurried, like he wants to drag this out for as long as possible. A needy whimper escapes me as he rolls his hips, and I clench around him, my body’s attempt to urge him on, but Zaid keeps up the torturous rhythm.

‘That’s it, love. Let me feel you. Show me how much you want this.’

The encouragement melts me from the inside out, but it also feels like a taunt. He’s being the perfect gentleman, reserved and controlled, when all I want is for him to give me everything he has.

‘More,’ I plead. ‘Faster.’

He tugs on my hair, making me arch my back and look at him over my shoulder. His next thrusts are rough snaps of his hips, making me hiss when he hits a spot inside me just right, and the smirk that pulls up one side of his mouth tells me I wasn’t wrong to think he was teasing me this whole time.

‘That’s my girl,’ he says, voice a low rumble. ‘Ask for what you want. Let me give it to you. No one else makes you feel like I do.’

It’s a bold statement. Cocky. This is a champion, a record breaker, the man I’ve always been drawn to even in his quieter moments. He deserves the recognition, even when he’s making me beg.

‘You’re right,’ I breathe out. ‘Only you.’

As if to praise me, he reaches around to dip his fingers between my thighs, circling my clit as his pace picks up. I’m burning all over, turning molten under his touch. Every nerve ending where we touch is alight.

‘Zaid,’ I moan, thighs beginning to tremble as the pleasure crests. ‘Don’t stop, please don’t stop.’

He heeds my pleas, keeping me perfectly on the edge for another moment, and then I’m crying out, clenching around him as I shatter in ecstasy. Through the hazy waves of my orgasm, I feel him move faster, skin slapping as he lets go of my hair in favor of gripping my hips once again.

His breath hitches, and then I feel the heat of his release as he pumps into me one last time. I exhale as he slowly pulls out, though it quickly turns into a whimper when his touch returns to my core, fingers sliding possessively through the mess we’ve made before settling on my thigh.

His voice is ragged when he speaks again. ‘This is all I want to do for the rest of the summer break.’

A spent laugh escapes me as I let my head fall back on his shoulder, heart still thundering in my chest. I wouldn’t mind staying right here, wrapped in his arms, for the rest of my life. ‘We can make that happen.’

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CHAPTER 26
Zaid

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Sunday 25 August

Summer break is over and the boys are back! As much as we loved having a little time to catch our breath after that wild first half of the season, we're ready for more action. Zandvoort always brings a surprise or two – like the double D'Ambrosi DNF of last season or the rainy race start disaster of three years ago, when we witnessed three drivers not even make it to the starting grid and four more spin out on the first lap. What chaos do you think we'll see today?

Zandvoort

The first race after the summer break is always either a bore or a shit show. And this year, as a treat, it's a complete and utter shit show. So much of one, in fact, that I'm currently sitting in between Axel and Dev in Zandvoort's medical center like some sort of exclusive DNF podium.

'I would like to say, from the very bottom of my heart,' Dev announces, '*fuck* Raphael Marchand.'

'Seconded,' Axel grumbles about his teammate, who torpedoed his way down the outside of the first turn, had a lockup, and then shunted us all into the barriers as a result.

I'm left to grunt my agreement as I lean my head back against the wall. We're all fine, but we're here because of tripped g-force sensors that automatically earned us a visit to the medical center. I've already been examined and cleared, but I'm waiting for Dev to get checked out before I leave. We're expected to be in the media pen and then the team debrief once we're done, and I have no interest in fielding extra pitying looks and sad slaps on the back while I wait for him, so I won't be heading over any sooner than I have to.

The only saving grace is that Axel was taken out in the same crash, meaning we've both finished with zero points today. We'll go to Monza next week on the same points we came here with – another week of me still trailing by seven. And since Specter Energy and Mascort lost all four drivers in the incident, the Constructors' Championship won't budge either. Not that it matters much for them, considering Raphael hasn't been pulling his weight and Specter keeps falling further behind. I can't imagine his contract negotiations for next year are going well.

Dev stands when someone comes to retrieve him for his exam, brushing lingering sand and gravel dust from his race suit, a parting gift from the crash.

'All right, boys, off to get my head examined,' he says, nodding to us. 'Let's hope I have a brain somewhere in there. Thoughts and prayers appreciated.'

'Bon voyage,' Axel deadpans.

'Godspeed,' I tell him.

When Dev disappears, it's just Axel and me, though I'm not sure why he's still here. He was checked out at the same time I was and could have left when he was cleared. Instead, he took up in the hard plastic chair next to mine and has been staring at the floor ever since.

We haven't been paired together for any press conferences since Ava announced her pregnancy, and he takes care to sit on the opposite side of the room from me in driver briefings. He's made it clear that he doesn't want to be anywhere near me, and I'm not interested in spending more time than necessary in his presence either, so his lingering is odd.

'I'm avoiding Omid,' he mumbles a few seconds later, as if he's read my mind. 'He's been on my ass about preparing for Singapore. This crash is just going to make him even more annoying about it.'

I tense at the mention of the Singapore Grand Prix, something I've been doing more and more over the past few weeks as the calendar counts down to it. I've upped my sessions with my psychotherapist from once a month to once a week in order to talk out my anxieties, and my physio has been working me to within an inch of my life so that I'm ready for the strain the race will put on my body. Basil hasn't talked to me about anything

regarding Singapore aside from offhandedly suggesting I get more time in the simulator back at the factory, but clearly Omid's being heavier-handed about it.

If Axel is feeling anything like I am, Omid is right to worry that he's prepared for it. Most of my fear of returning to racing faded away when I got back behind the wheel for testing, but it's creeping up again at the idea of driving the circuit where I could have died.

There's a well-known piece of advice in racing that when the fear starts to win, it's time to leave. There's no time or place for it out on the track, because when you're afraid, you hesitate. And a split second of hesitation can mean the difference between winning and losing – or life and death.

I haven't hit the boiling point of fear yet, but the temperature is edging up day by day. Is it the same for Axel?

Being competitors, especially ones who are only fighting each other for the title, I shouldn't ask. It's his secret to keep, his possible weakness to overcome, and one I would exploit if I were smart. He knows it and I do too, and I'm sure he wants to do the same to me. But he's also one of only nineteen other people who can fathom what I'm going through. More than that, he's the only one who knows exactly what it's like to experience a life-changing crash and then be forced to return to the scene of the crime. The evidence may be physically hosed away, swept up, and paved over, but it will forever live in the shallow scars on our bodies and the deeper ones in our minds.

Competitors and comrades. Survivors and rivals. We're the epitome of this sport in a nutshell.

'Speaking of Singapore . . . how are you feeling about it?' I ask. He can tell me to fuck off or he can answer, I don't care either way, but at least I'll walk away knowing I tried to bridge the sea of animosity that has grown progressively deeper between us.

Axel runs his tongue over his teeth, considering the question. 'I'm not particularly interested in racing there again, if that's what you're asking.' His eyes finally drag up, not quite to me, but somewhere near my shoulder. 'You?'

'The same.' I should leave it there. That's all our conversation really

needs to be. But I still say, ‘Even on the sim it’s a bloody nightmare.’

He practically slumps at my admission. ‘It’s like I’ve never driven the circuit in my life,’ he grouses, folding his arms over his chest. ‘Might as well be someone’s granny with how slow I am.’

A snicker escapes me before I can stop it. I won’t say that I hate Axel. I won’t say that I like him either, because – even barring his cutthroat on-track behavior – there are things he’s said and done that will never sit right with me. I have, however, watched him grow from an intolerable little shit into a slightly less intolerable one, something that likely had to do with Omid Farahani’s influence. Maybe even Ava’s too. So I don’t feel too bad laughing at his self-deprecating joke, especially because I know exactly what he means.

‘I guess neither of us has to worry about fighting for pole then.’

Axel huffs a breath. ‘I’ll be happy if I’m P-fucking-19.’

‘I’ll shoot for P18, then.’

Strange as it is to joke about this, it’s a weight off my shoulders knowing I’m not the only one struggling. This is as close to a heart-to-heart as we’ll ever have.

It’s quiet again as Axel sinks farther down in his chair. He still hasn’t looked at me full-on, but I can feel his eyes dart over before he asks, ‘Is Ava doing all right?’

I blink in surprise, not having considered we’d ever talk about her beyond his righteous threats. He already knows how she’s doing considering they’re back in touch after weeks of him ghosting her, but I suppose he wants me to confirm it.

‘She is,’ I answer, forcing myself to leave it at that despite wanting to rave about her to anyone who will listen.

Axel nods, swallowing thickly. ‘How’s she handling all the media attention?’

I’m cautious with my answer, wondering where he’s going with this line of questioning. ‘Fine. She’s learned to ignore it, I think.’

It’s only then that he looks over at me. His gaze is guarded, just unreadable enough to be unsettling, but I recognize the set to his jaw and the dip of his brow. He’s worried about her.

‘I remember what it did to her the last time she got close to you,’ he says quietly. ‘I watched her gather the pieces of the life you blew up. I don’t want to see that happen again.’

There’s a part of me that’s tempted to get defensive, to snap that I would never let that happen, annoyed that he’s pinning the public’s treatment of her on me. But he’s not wrong. It *is* my fault that she was put through the wringer then and that she’s dealing with it again now, no matter how much we try to block it out.

Was I selfish to have publicly claimed the baby as mine? To have thrust Ava into the spotlight that way? To have guaranteed that she and our daughter have a life of endless media attention and limited privacy? It’s a sentence I could have prevented by not taking responsibility, but the idea of not having either of them in my world is almost too much to bear.

So, no, maybe I shouldn’t have brought this hellish attention upon her, but what’s done is done. And what’s going to be different this time is how I support Ava. How I love her through it, proudly and out loud.

‘I won’t let that happen,’ I vow.

‘We both know that’s not a promise you can keep.’ He exhales a defeated laugh. ‘Just . . . take care of her. As long as you’re racing, there’s going to be a target on her back.’

‘It won’t be that way for long,’ I reply without thinking, nearly giving away what I want to say. *I’m leaving this all behind while I still can.*

Axel’s brow dips, lips parting like he wants to question me, but we’re interrupted by Dev swanning out of an exam room, arms lifted above his head as he declares, ‘Turns out I *do* have a brain.’

‘Could have fooled me,’ Axel grumbles as he shoves up from his chair, stalking toward the exit.

Dev presses a hand to his chest like Axel’s stabbed him straight through the heart. I know there’s no love lost between those two, and the glint in Dev’s eye tells me the bad blood is still pumping strong.

‘What crawled up his ass and died?’ Dev asks, eyes swinging back to me. ‘Did you two get into it or something?’

‘Or something,’ I mumble, grabbing my helmet and standing up as well. ‘Let’s go.’

I catch the door right before it can slam in my face, stepping out into the sunshine and the breeze coming off the ocean. Dev's and my respective press officers and trainers are waiting for us, ready to escort us back to the pit lane and double-check that we're all right – but it's Omid who's waiting for Axel. It's not often you see a team principal come to retrieve their wayward driver, unless they want to be the first to yell at them after making sure they're alive. I doubt he'd be here if he still had a driver in the race, but since both are out, I guess he decided to make the trek down here.

Omid looks like he's ready to launch into a furious lecture, but stops short when he catches Dev staring, nosy little shit that he is. When his eyes drift over to me, his jaw goes tight and the enigmatic team principal facade is back in place. Only Axel looks relieved by the standoff happening, his reaming put on the back burner and allowing him to silently slink away.

'You both all right?' Omid stiltedly asks Dev and me, dark eyes going from one to the other and back again until they settle on my teammate, pointedly avoiding me.

Dev nods and thanks Omid for asking, but I don't deign to answer. When the silence grows awkward, Dev takes a big step backward and flings up finger guns. 'I'm gonna let you two talk,' he drawls, ever so American. 'Catch you in the media pen, my guy.'

He bounds off, leaving his trainer and press officer to run after him – and leaving me to wait and see if Omid will dare look me in the eye.

It's the first time I've seen him up close since Ava broke the news of her pregnancy, and I get the sense that he's been careful to avoid me, just like Axel has. I haven't sought him out either, mostly at Ava's insistence, but now that he's standing in front of me – and now that he's finally met my gaze – I'm just going to have to ask for her forgiveness later.

'Ava is going to be furious that one of your drivers crashed me out,' I say, trying to tamp down the anger slowly creeping up my neck over Omid's treatment of his daughter. Not just recently, though that would have been more than enough to justify it, but for practically her entire life. She deserved a better father than what she got, especially since he seems to have plenty of time for a driver he has no relation to.

Omid winces almost imperceptibly, either at the reminder that Raphael

has been a waste of time and money so far or that I'm with his daughter. Whichever it is, or maybe it's both, I take a sick sense of pleasure from it.

'I don't need an apology,' I go on, shifting to make sure he can't avoid my gaze when he tries to look away. 'But she deserves one.'

He's a smart enough man to read between the lines, understanding that it's an apology for not only putting her through the stress of watching me climb out of a ruined car, but for everything else he needs to atone for.

A beat passes before he sighs, some of the fight flooding out of him, and I get a glimpse of an exhausted father who knows he's done wrong too many times in too many ways.

'What I said to her . . .' He trails off, taking a cautious moment to find the words he wants to say. 'I – I made a mistake. When she came to me, I should have been supportive. I should have been happy for her. But I wasn't. And I can't take that back.'

'No, you can't,' I agree. 'But you can do better now.' I take a step closer and lower my voice, not wanting to be overheard but willing to say this so that Ava can have back the family she desperately wants. 'Just *talk* to her. Make a fucking effort for her like you do for your team. She deserves it, and you know that.'

Omid stays quiet this time. I can't begin to guess what's going on in his head, but he softens some when I quietly tell him, 'She misses you. She wants you in her life – in our child's life. Don't punish them just because you have your own grudges.'

He swallows hard, and for a moment I have hope that he might finally come around to what I'm saying. But then a camera flashes and the mask is back in place. I'm no longer talking to Ava's father, but the boss of a rival team, a man who has faced the same racism and doubts that I have over the years and has developed plenty of defense mechanisms to handle them.

'Rumors are going to start that you're coming to Specter next year,' he murmurs, eyes flicking disdainfully to the photographer a few feet away. 'Might as well ask if you're interested in being Marchand's replacement. It looks like I'm in the market for another driver.'

Irritating as it is to have lost the thread of our conversation, I can't blame him for changing the subject. These are things we can't talk about out in the

open and he knows it. Still, I hope some of what I've said has slipped through the cracks in his armor for Ava's sake.

'Only if I'm the number-one driver,' I toss back. 'And Axel will never be anyone's second.'

Omid lifts his chin, and I swear there's a hint of disappointment behind his eyes, though it's gone when he blinks. 'I suppose I have my answer, then.'

When more photographers descend on us, it's time to go. I nod goodbye before turning back to my trainer and press officer, ready to head back to the pit lane – ready to see Ava.

She's waiting for me in the back of the garage when I arrive, and she doesn't hesitate to slide her arms around my waist and rest her ear above my heart.

'You're okay?' she asks.

'I'm okay,' I promise. Because this time, I am. I just hope it stays that way.

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CHAPTER 27
Ava

Top of the Podium magazine

Monday 16 September
By Damian Larson, columnist

TRIUMPHANT RETURN OR CRASH AND BURN?

With the Singapore Grand Prix this weekend, last season's horrific crash is at the forefront of all our minds. As tragic as it is to no longer see a promising talent like Lorenzo Castellucci racing – though, in a recent interview, he revealed that he has regained the ability to walk and drive – it was a relief when Zaid Yousef and Axel Bergmüller declared they would return to the sport this season, having overcome their respective injuries. However, I can only imagine that coming back to the circuit where they nearly died must be a test of mental fortitude.

Both drivers will go down in the history books as being some of the greatest racing drivers the world has ever seen, but are they strong enough to return to the Singapore circuit and thrive? More than that, considering there are only seven more races to go – who will take the title of greatest driver this season?

Singapore

As the weeks and the races creep on, I can feel Zaid's anxiety over the Singapore Grand Prix rising.

We land at Changi Airport on a Monday morning in mid-September, having flown directly from Azerbaijan after Zaid took the top step of the

podium. It's put him back in the championship lead after Axel had two less-than-stellar races, finishing fifth in Monza – where Reid Coleman pulled off a surprise win in front of Scuderia D'Ambrosi's home crowd, with Zaid as the runner-up – and second yesterday.

Zaid is antsy as we make the drive from the airport to the hotel, knee bouncing as he stares out the window. My hand's been clutched in his since the moment we got off the plane, and even now his thumb brushes back and forth over my knuckles as if the contact is grounding him. He spent the entire flight checking in on me and making sure I had everything I needed, being borderline overbearing with it, but I think taking care of me was the best distraction he could find.

So I sat back and let him cater to my every whim, including giving me a foot rub and fetching too many snacks to count. I've hit the point in this pregnancy where everything aches and it takes a concerted effort to do . . . well, anything. As much as I hate that this is the last race I'm attending before the baby's born, part of me is glad I won't have to keep squeezing myself into tiny airplane bathrooms every five minutes. And I really won't miss having to wear compression socks on every flight, although watching Zaid kneel at my feet to help me put them on has been both mortifying and strangely sexy.

'Sami will be here soon with a few gowns for you to choose from for tonight,' Zaid says as he ushers me into our hotel room, the door closing softly behind him. 'But if there's nothing you like, I can take you shopping.'

Other than the gala tonight, thrown by the national airline to celebrate the grand prix, I have no interest in leaving this room, especially not after facing the chaos of the crowd waiting for us outside the hotel and on the streets nearby. It was hard enough to get here, and it will be even worse leaving this evening. I won't put myself through that until we absolutely have to.

I've been (unfortunately) a little more tuned in to fan opinions and social media lately than I should be. With the championship battle between Axel and Zaid heating up, I'm back to being in the crosshairs, the center of

baseless rumors and speculation as to why the performance of one or the other has soared or soured.

If only they knew the main way Axel and I communicate is via texted memes and that my father has just started emailing me back, asking about how I'm feeling and occasionally sending old family photos of me, him, and Mom at IndyCar races. It's more of an effort than he's made since he fired me, and it's been nice to be in contact again, but it's far from the team secrets that the internet at large thinks he's been sharing with me.

'I'm sure Sami will find me something nice,' I say, kicking off my shoes and heading straight for the chaise by the balcony doors overlooking the Singapore skyline. 'I trust his taste.'

Zaid snorts. 'Bold choice.'

I roll my eyes but wave him over to sit with me, then snuggle into his side when he drapes an arm around my shoulders. 'How are you feeling?' I ask him as we stare out at the city.

He draws in a breath deep enough that it faintly shudders through him. 'Not . . . great.'

I appreciate his honesty, the vulnerability he's willing to show me instead of pretending everything is fine. 'You wanna talk about it?'

Zaid shakes his head and draws me closer, lips finding the corner of my jaw. 'I just want to sit here with you before the week gets crazy.'

I can't fault him for that. So I let him hold me and keep my own worries to myself.

———

Maybe Zaid was right about my trust in Sami's taste being a bold choice, because if there's any way to describe the dresses sent up for me, it's *bold*. All five options are stunning and fit like a dream, but I'm almost certain he forgot to take into account how pregnancy has affected certain . . . assets of mine. In other words, I hope no one minds a little bit of – okay, try a *whole lot of* – cleavage.

'I need your opinion on this dress,' I call through the bathroom door as I

finish adjusting the knot of the shimmering silver silk halter-neck gown. ‘And you can’t laugh.’

‘Why would I laugh?’ Zaid questions from the bedroom. ‘Did he buy you a clown costume? Is there a rainbow wig involved?’

No, but there’s a chance I look just as silly. I fling open the door and step out, turning in a small circle for him to see the full look. ‘So?’ I prompt. ‘What do you think?’

There’s a heavy beat of quiet when I face him, and my eyes drag down to where he’s sitting on the ottoman at the foot of the bed, already dressed in his tux for tonight.

‘Fucking hell, Ava,’ he says, voice strained, gaze slowly drifting over my body.

My face heats at his appraisal. ‘It’s too much, right?’ I turn back for the bathroom, determined to change. ‘I thought this might be my best bet but I can try something—’

‘No.’ The firmness of the word stops me. ‘It’s perfect. You’re perfect.’

When I dare to glance over my shoulder, he’s looking at me like there’s nothing worthier of his attention. And when he stands, hands already reaching for me, I’m certain that I’m the only thing that exists to him right now.

‘No matter what you have on, I will always think you’re the most beautiful woman in the room,’ he murmurs as he slides his hands over my hips. ‘The most beautiful woman in the building. In the country. In the world.’ He grips me possessively, just tight enough that he won’t wrinkle my dress. ‘Nothing will ever change that, Ava.’

I exhale a shaky breath as I stare up at him, heart speeding behind my ribs. I can’t speak, but even if I could, he would have stolen my words with the sweet, aching pressure of his lips moving over mine.

‘And right now?’ he says when he pulls back ever so slightly. ‘I want to bunch that dress around your waist and worship your pussy the way you deserve.’ I make a sound of displeasure when he disengages fully, hands falling from my hips again. ‘But I don’t want to ruin your dress before everyone else has a chance to see you in it, so that will have to wait.’ He

then offers me his elbow, smirking as I attempt to get the world to stop spinning so fast. ‘Now, shall we go?’

———

By the time we’re in the back seat of the SUV headed to the event, I’ve mostly recovered from the minor cardiac event Zaid inspired. As he takes a call from his manager, I keep my face glued to the window as the sights of Singapore stream by. It’s dark enough that everything has come to life, colorful lights illuminating landmarks and dancing across the sky. It really is the perfect place for a night race, one of the few of the season, and while I’ve seen most of the city before, like the grand Marina Bay Sands hotel looming in the distance or the Singapore Flyer slowly turning, it’s extra special this time around.

I once thought I’d never travel like this again, that I’d never find myself back in the circus of F1. My goodbye two years ago was unceremonious and incomplete, but now I get to do it right, to take it in and store it carefully away in my mind for when it all ends. With this baby coming and Zaid retiring, I’ll be distancing myself once again from the world of motorsport, and yet I won’t grieve it as much as I did before.

Zaid ends his call as the SUV rolls to a stop behind a line of cars releasing their passengers onto a red carpet. Ahead of us, Thomas and Stella step out, pausing for a kiss before they start their slow trek down the carpet, posing regally for photos along the way. According to the texts she’s been sending me for the past half hour, Edith is already inside and waiting for the rest of us to show up, so at least her brother and sister-in-law can keep her company before I make it in.

The car inches forward as our turn arrives, and as I brace myself for the onslaught of photographers, Zaid grabs my hand.

‘We can sneak in through the back if you want,’ he offers, and for a moment I consider taking him up on it.

Instead, I shake my head. As much as I don’t love having my photo taken or having random men shout at me, I’m willing to put myself out there for

his benefit. ‘No, we should do this. I know your team will enjoy the PR moment.’

I shoot him a look that I hope he interprets as *Give them what they want now because they’ll never get it again*. Thankfully, he seems to understand, and gives my hand a supportive squeeze before letting go.

The humidity hits me the second the door opens and I can only pray that all the time I spent smoothing the frizz from my hair wasn’t in vain. Adnan extends his hand to help me out of the back seat, murmuring to me that he won’t be far behind us if we need him to escort us in. I smile gratefully as he passes me off to Zaid, who places my hand in the crook of his elbow as his eyes warmly skim over me.

We pose for the cameras, moving step by slow step down the red carpet, and I do my best not to react to the things the photographers shout at us. Most of them are instructions – *Turn a little to the right, that’s it, show us the bump!* – but some are invasive questions, and others are thinly veiled insults meant to get a reaction out of us.

Zaid’s grip on me tightens when one of them tries to insinuate that I’m *too big* to be dressed the way I am, and I squeeze him back when I see his lips about to move. It pulls his attention down to me and I flash him an unconcerned grin, reassuring him that I’m not bothered. Who cares what some random man thinks about how I look in this dress when the man I love can barely take his eyes off me. I’ll endure whatever comes my way if it means I get to have him by my side. It’s a perk I didn’t have last time.

The corners of Zaid’s lips tip up in response, his eyes softening in the way I’ve only seen them do for me. The camera flashes increase – the photographers are not about to miss out on a rare Zaid Yousef smile, brought on by something other than a race win or a championship. I’m the prize tonight.

Finally, the carpet ends and we’re swept inside the sparkling venue, immediately greeted by a few members of Mascort’s press and marketing teams, who guide us into conversations with important sponsors. It’s a long hour of schmoozing and sipping club sodas that Basil is kind enough to fetch me, making sure I’m okay in the moments when Zaid is tied up in

conversation. As far as team principals go, he's currently my favorite on the grid.

I spotted my father across the room when we arrived, but after receiving a quick wave, I lost him in the crowd and haven't seen him again. Since Axel is – shockingly – still here, I can't imagine Dad would have left already, so he must be around somewhere. I just don't know if I want to bother seeking him out.

I am however ready to find a bathroom, since this baby's lodged herself against my bladder and seems mighty comfortable there. I'm also interested in locating Edith, who never replied to the text I sent her nearly half an hour ago asking where to find her.

During a break in conversation, I put my hand on Zaid's shoulder and wait for him to bend down so I can murmur in his ear. 'I'm going to wander for a bit. Will you be okay on your own?'

He nods and then kisses my cheek. 'Come find me when you're ready to go.'

I slip away through the crowd toward the restrooms, smiling at the people I recognize and ignoring the sets of curious eyes that follow me. I'm about to round the corner to the back hallway when my heel catches on a bump in the carpet and I stumble, reaching out to catch myself on the wall. But my hand lands on someone's tuxedoed shoulder instead.

'Careful,' the man says as he holds my other elbow. 'You have precious cargo.'

My head snaps up at the familiar voice. 'Dad,' I blurt as he rights me. 'I didn't – I was meaning to—' I cut myself off, settling on just saying 'Hi.'

His smile is cautious, but at least he's looking at me directly for once. 'Are you all right? No damage done?'

'Yeah, I'm – I'm fine.' I clear my throat, working myself up to ask how he's doing, but any words stick in my throat when he lifts his hand to my cheek.

'It's good to see you, azizam,' he says softly, thumb stroking over my cheekbone before dropping again. 'You look lovely.'

I'm still trying to figure out how to speak, but I can at least offer him a small smile.

‘How’s the baby?’ he asks, gaze dropping to my belly, and there’s no missing the way his eyes soften.

‘Currently terrorizing my bladder,’ I joke before sobering again. ‘Zaid and I are really excited to meet her.’

Dad’s eyes lift back to mine at the mention of Zaid, and he’s quiet for a thoughtful beat. ‘I’m glad you two are making things work. I know I warned you away from him, but . . . I just wanted the best for you, Ava. I didn’t think he could give that to you.’

I blink, surprised by how sincere he sounds, and it’s obvious this is merely a precursor to what he really wants to say.

‘I need to apologize for how I spoke to you when you told me you were pregnant,’ he pushes on, like this has honestly been weighing on him and he’s desperate to get the words out. ‘It came from a place of fear. I didn’t want your child to face the same things I put you through. I was concerned that Zaid would put his career before you and your child, because . . . most drivers do. But I was wrong about him. About you two – together.’ His eyes don’t leave mine, driving his admission home. ‘I’m sorry.’

It’s strange to hear those words from my father, because I’ve never heard them said so openly before.

‘I want – I want things to be better between us.’ He takes a shallow breath. ‘And I want to know my granddaughter, if you’ll allow me the privilege.’

With his request, I can feel the wall that’s been built up between us start to crack and crumble. We still have our issues to work through, undoubtedly, but knowing he wants to make the effort heals a tiny part of my heart that’s been broken for decades. Our relationship won’t be fixed overnight, but this is a start.

I nod. ‘We can talk about it.’

His smile widens, and he’s about to say something else when a blonde woman pops out of the doorway right behind him, the same one he came out of before nearly running into me.

Edith’s eyes land on Dad first, unsurprised to see him there, but she freezes when she sees me. It takes a moment for Omid to notice what has

me speechless, but once he glances over his shoulder, his expression settles into grim acceptance that I'm about to discover what's going on.

'You can tell her,' Dad murmurs to Edith. 'I trust her.'

With that, he squeezes my arm and then disappears around the corner back to the party.

'Edith,' I say slowly, trying to wrap my head around the events of the last minute. 'What's going on?'

With a heavy breath, my best friend loops her arm around mine. 'Come on, then. Time to bring you in on the secret.'

She guides me into what looks like a small conference room, then kicks the door shut behind us. I don't move when she lets me go and takes a step back so that she can look me in the eyes.

'Thomas wants to leave McMorris.'

This statement in itself is not shocking. I'd want to leave a team too if my teammate had tried to sabotage me. I'd want to leave even more if the team re-signed said driver on a multiyear contract, despite what he'd done. Thomas has every reason to get the hell out of there, especially since McMorris hasn't even been fighting for race wins this season and have fallen behind D'Ambrosi in the constructors' battle. He's a fantastic driver who could do better elsewhere if he was given the chance, and there's plenty of sponsorship money from his family's company following wherever he goes.

So no, I'm not surprised by that. But what Edith has *really* said is that Thomas wants to leave McMorris – and wants to go to Specter Energy.

'You've been negotiating with my dad,' I mumble, unsteady on my feet all over again, but for a different reason this time. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

For a split second, I worry that our years of friendship have been a lie, that she's been using me to get close to the team and my father in order to advance her brother's career. But that idea quickly goes out the window when I remember how she stood by me through my scandal and getting fired. I wouldn't have been useful to her at that point, so why would she have stuck around if this wasn't real? Besides, it wasn't until this year that she even had any say in where A.P. Maxwell International's sponsorship

money went – she never expected to be fighting for the CEO position this soon either.

I never want to believe the worst of someone, so I'm choosing to trust that she wouldn't do that to me.

'There have been talks,' she concedes. 'I never told you because I didn't want this to be one more thing that came between you and your dad in case it went wrong. Plus, you've had all the baby stuff to deal with. I didn't want to take the focus off how exciting that is.'

I relax a bit at her reasoning, glad she didn't drag me into a negotiation that's probably been messy at best and downright ugly at worst. 'I get it,' I tell her. 'But . . . why Specter?'

She shrugs, like she's not fully sure but is going along with it anyway. 'It's what Thomas wants, and they're looking for a new second driver. Raphael's not performing well and his contract's up this season.'

I frown, a little taken aback that a driver with Thomas's talent would so readily accept being second to Axel. 'And he's okay with being Raphael's replacement?'

'Better than staying at McMorris and being treated like shit for barely anything in return.'

I suppose I can see her point, even though the *barely anything in return* she speaks of is still several million dollars a year. At least at Specter Energy, if they keep up the trend of designing spectacular cars, he has a better chance at being on the podium or even winning the odd grand prix if Axel ever has a bad weekend. And without Zaid in the equation next season, every driver will have a better chance at glory, more so for the ones at top teams.

There's going to be a power vacuum when Zaid leaves. I can't think of a single driver who can fill his shoes, no one who currently lives up to his legacy. And I don't have a clue who Mascort will put in his place when he finally tells them he's retiring, but it's a spot plenty of drivers will be fighting for.

Thomas could be one of those drivers – if he doesn't sign with Specter Energy first.

Part of me wants to tell Edith to have him hold out, to wait a little longer

to see what comes up, but it's not my secret to share or situation to meddle in, no matter how much I want to.

But she seems to know I'm holding back, and when she offers me a small, wry smile, I get the feeling she's already figured it out.

'Zaid's retiring at the end of the season, isn't he?' she says, but it's more a statement than a question.

I fight to keep my expression neutral, but my heart has found its way into my throat. 'I don't know what you're—'

She holds a hand up to stop me. 'You don't need to confirm it, keep the plausible deniability. I only guessed because of how you talk about the future.' I make to protest, but she stops me again. 'Don't worry, you've been good about not actually spilling anything, but I *know* you, Ava. If Zaid wasn't going to be around to help you raise the baby, you'd be doing things very differently.'

I want to argue, but it's a moot point because she's already seen right through me. 'Who else knows?' I ask weakly.

'No one,' she says firmly, and I believe her. 'I won't be telling anyone either. I certainly didn't say anything to your dad, I'm not that daft.' She pauses, her smile turning sheepish, and I freeze in response because Edith is *never* sheepish. 'Can I confess something, though?'

'What did you do?' I hedge, fearing the worst.

She clutches her hands demurely in front of herself. 'During my chat with your father, I *may* have gone off on him about how he's been treating you.'

My jaw goes slack. 'You *didn't*. How was that supposed to help Thomas get a seat there? You could have jeopardized a deal!'

'And if I had, it would have been worth it,' she tosses back. 'I love my brother – don't you *ever* tell him I said that – but I love you too. There are people willing to fight for your happiness, you know.'

There's a lump growing in my throat that I can't seem to swallow past. 'Edith—'

'And as it turns out,' she goes on, 'I wasn't the first person to yell at him about it. He told me Zaid had words for him too.'

I was nearly speechless before, but I certainly am now. She doesn't seem

to mind, though, her grin losing all of its self-consciousness and turning cheeky as she puts a hand on my shoulder.

‘Now that you know what’s going on,’ she says, backing me toward the door, ‘let’s get you back to your man.’

When I return to where Zaid is – after a trip to the bathroom and a pit stop at the bar to live vicariously through Edith as she chugs a glass of champagne – he’s surrounded by a small crowd of people, including a stunning Singaporean actress who’s regaling the group with a story. I’m a few feet away, lingering on the edge of the crowd, but Zaid still looks over as if he can sense I’m there. Our eyes catch and the smile that lights up his face makes my chest ache in the best way.

He’s quick to excuse himself from the group and stride my way, his touch immediately finding my waist to pull me to him.

‘You were gone too long,’ he murmurs, dipping his head to press a quick kiss to my lips, as if that short time apart left him wanting. ‘Everything okay?’

I nod and steal another kiss, this one lingering, and I hope he can feel my love and gratitude in it. ‘Yeah,’ I breathe out. ‘Everything is perfect.’

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CHAPTER 28
Zaid

Thursday. Media day, the worst day of the week. And as luck would have it, it's my turn to join the drivers' press conference.

Today's interview lineup consists of me, Axel, Thomas, and Reid. I'm sure if Lorenzo Castellucci were still racing, he would have been here instead of Reid, his ex-teammate, but I guess they wanted at least one guy in red. To round out the group of five, they've thrown in Theo, fresh-faced and wide-eyed in comparison to the rest of us grizzled veterans who barely walked away with our lives – or reputations, in Thomas's case – here last year.

Steven Watters, our interviewer, is practically vibrating with excitement as he surveys us all squeezed together on the couch. Axel and I are on the ends like two Titans who have to be kept apart for everyone's safety, with Thomas next to him and Reid next to me. Poor Theo is in the middle like a deer caught in headlights, microphone clutched against his chest like he's afraid someone might snatch it away and tell him he's not supposed to be here. I think he might even be hoping for it.

'A very warm welcome, everybody, to the drivers' press conference ahead of the Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix,' Steven announces grandly to camera, eyes briefly flicking to all the journalists in the room. 'We have the first group joining us now. Welcome to you all. Let's start with who's closest to me: Zaid Yousef.'

Fucking great.

'Zaid,' Steven says like this is a reality show reunion, shifting in his leather armchair to face me. 'We all remember what happened here last year. How are you feeling about returning to the track where your career – and life – nearly ended?'

Well, he's not going light on the dramatics today. It takes an effort to remember my decades of media training and keep my expression neutral as

I lift my microphone. ‘I’m looking forward to it,’ I lie. ‘Singapore has always been one of my favorite tracks, nothing has changed that. And with our latest upgrade package on the car, I think we can expect a good result this weekend.’

We could expect that if I thought I could drive more than sixty miles an hour around the circuit, but right now, the idea of going flat out makes me queasy. Judging from the scoff that comes from the other end of the couch, Axel doesn’t believe a word of what I’m saying, probably because he feels the same.

Steven nods like I’ve given an incredibly insightful answer when it was really all just bullshit. ‘And how would you describe your mental state?’ he goes on. ‘Are you locked in or are there . . . *distractions* keeping you from focusing?’

The coded language and unnecessary emphasis have shown up, but I do my best to take it all in stride. ‘I’m focused on the weekend ahead, yes.’

He waits for more, but when I don’t give it to him, he shuffles the note cards in his hand and clears his throat. ‘Of course. But there *are* things outside Formula 1 taking up your attention. Namely, the baby you have on the way with Ava Farahani, daughter of Specter Energy’s team principal.’ He pauses, giving me space to butt in if I so choose, but I stay quiet and hold out for him to actually ask a question. ‘Do you feel your performance is going to suffer the closer you get to becoming a father? Considering how tight the championship battle is between you and Axel, do you feel it’s already declining?’

I’ve gotten this same question a thousand times already in other interviews, and every reporter finds a way to rephrase and re-ask it every week. This time, Steven’s put it in a way that bristles, and my fingers squeeze tighter around the microphone to temper my annoyance.

‘You act like I’m the only driver who’s ever had a child,’ I say, doing my best to infuse humor into my voice, and based on the scattered chuckles throughout the audience, it works. ‘There are two people currently on the grid with seven kids between them. Are you going to ask them about how their children affect their performance the next time they’re in here?’

‘So you really don’t think having a baby is going to interfere with your

racing?’ Steven shoots back at me, sidestepping my question.

I’m so close to telling this guy to fuck off when I spot Axel leaning forward, microphone lifted to say something.

‘Speaking of babies,’ he cuts in before I can answer, his attention locked on Steven. ‘Were you dropped on your head as one?’

There’s a collective intake of breath from the crowd of journalists and the telltale groan of his press officer in the back of the room.

‘No, really,’ Axel continues as Steven splutters. ‘You must have been to ask a question like that. Shall we call your mother and confirm? What’s her number? I really do think we should have a chat about how she raised you.’

Down the couch, Thomas has his face in his hands as he shakes with silent laughter and Reid is pinching the bridge of his nose, but I’m just staring in awe because underneath all the insults . . . Axel Bergmüller is defending me.

‘You all need to fuck off’ – there’s another pained press officer groan – ‘with those kinds of questions and stick to talking about racing. You’re shit enough at that, but at least it’s in your job descriptions. Stay out of our personal lives.’

This time it’s a nearly sobbed ‘Oh, Christ almighty’ from the back of the room, but Axel pays it no mind and leans back against the couch cushions, completely unfazed. I, however, have to wonder if I’m dreaming.

‘Right, I think we’ll move on now,’ Steven announces nervously. ‘Theo, coming over to you. Your performance has been . . .’

I tune out the rest of the press conference until it’s time for audience questions, but everyone is cautious with what they ask after Axel’s outburst.

When it ends, I don’t waste a second getting up from the couch and off the stage. I linger in the back hallway until Axel steps out, then fall into step with him as we head for the team motorhomes.

‘How much trouble do you think you’re going to be in for that?’ I murmur to him as we walk, knowing once any photographers spot us they’re going to have a field day, but I can’t ignore what he did for me.

Axel shrugs. ‘Who cares. Let them come after me. They can fine me, give me a race ban . . . But maybe it will finally stop these leeches from treating us like we aren’t human.’

I've had similar conversations with other drivers in private, of how the strain of having no privacy and people prying into our lives can be enough to make us want to quit. The love of motorsport keeps us here, but after a while, it's no longer enough.

Not many drivers have dared fight back, though, not like Axel just has. Sure, we put out bland PR statements asking for privacy and minorly scold some reporters for pushing too hard, but never like that. And it seems like this is just the start for Axel.

'Besides,' he continues, 'better me saying something than you.'

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. 'What do you mean?'

'We both know they'll go easier on me than if you'd said it. I've watched you try and they always ripped you to pieces, even though you were right to call them out and did it so gently. So, fuck it, I'll do it.'

He takes a casual sip from the Specter Energy drink can he's almost always clutching when wandering the paddock, like he hasn't realized the weight of what he's declared. Or maybe he has. Maybe this has been in the making for a while now, and he's finally found the moment to let it shine.

'You were never like this before,' I comment, still watching him.

He was quiet in his rookie season, mostly keeping to himself, nothing like Dev and Thomas, who followed me around like lost puppies, or even like Reid, who became a media darling with his honeyed American drawl at a storied Italian team. In press conferences, Axel never said more than he had to and pushed journalists to the edge of their sanity to get a decent quote. He opened up a little once he started winning races, and a little bit more once he won a championship, but he wasn't interested in the press or making friends. Hell, he was barely interested in talking. So this outburst? It's unexpected.

'What's changed?' I ask.

'Remember that time we almost *died* here?' Sarcasm drips from every word as he rolls his eyes, but when his gaze lands on me again, he's serious. 'I'm done shutting up to keep people happy. I get why you had to – why you put your money where your mouth is instead. They never listened to what you had to say, so you made it so that they couldn't ignore you.'

He's right. I had to go through different channels than most to have my

voice heard, simply because I'd be labeled as angry, uncivilized, and ungrateful for simply pointing out the negatives of this sport, including the inequality. So I started my foundation to encourage more girls and marginalized kids to study STEM and introduce them to motorsport. I donated millions to organizations that support similar initiatives and acted as a brand ambassador for companies that aligned with my values. All because money speaks louder than words in this sphere of ours, especially if you look like me.

But Axel is clearly ready to scream it from the rooftops, and I hope, for all our sakes, that people will start to listen.

'Me, though?' he says loudly, drawing attention as he climbs the steps of the Specter Energy motorhome. 'I'm going to do what I do best – be a fucking nightmare.'

———

Friday. The first free practice session, and the first time back out on this circuit.

I'm not as sick to my stomach as I was when pre-season testing began, and I'm giving all the credit to Ava. She pressed a kiss to my jaw before it was time to climb into the car, whispering to me to show the world what a champion is capable of.

My gut still twists when I receive the thumbs-up to pull out of my garage bay and into the pit lane, and my out-lap is cautious as I get a sense of the surface beneath my tires, but . . . I'm okay. I haven't totally lost the feel of the track, no matter how my performance on the simulator might have suggested otherwise.

Ava's right – I know what I'm doing. And with each lap my confidence grows. One might even say I get a little *too* confident toward the end of the session when the edge of my tire kisses the wall as I go through the exit of turn nine, sending up a spray of dust, but it thankfully doesn't feel like I've done any damage. This is a circuit that demands perfection, and the smallest mistake can mean an end to it all.

Ava is waiting for me in my driver room when I'm done for the night,

stretched out on the small love seat, one hand smoothing back and forth over her rounded belly while the other clutches a printout of my lap data that someone must have smuggled to her. My money's on Basil.

'You know where you're losing time, right?' she asks as I place my helmet on its shelf.

I do know, but I ask her to tell me anyway as I drop to my knees beside the sofa, resting my head on her bump and letting her stroke my sweat-damp hair. The anxiety simmering in my chest settles as Ava explains, our daughter kicking steadily beneath my cheek, and I let them reassure me in their own ways that everything is as it should be – that everything will be all right.

———

Saturday's qualifying goes better than expected, all thanks to a red flag late in Q3 that kept several drivers who might have outqualified me from finishing their flying laps. Tonight, I'm starting in P2 next to Raphael, who got exceptionally lucky and grabbed pole because of the incident. Axel's in P3 with Dev in P4 – only Mascort and Specter Energy on the first and second rows.

Despite the decent qualifying, I still woke up unsettled today. I steal Ava away when it's nearly time for me to climb into the car, needing a moment of peace with her. She's been holding her own down in the garage this weekend, my anchor keeping me steady in the thick of the storm, and I can't imagine doing this without her. We'll be apart for the remaining races of the season, but if I can make it through this night, I can get through everything to come.

'Gonna miss seeing you up close and personal in this race suit,' she teases, smoothing her hands over the sponsor logos on my chest. 'It's *very* flattering.'

I let out a soft laugh, my shoulders relaxing at her warmth and ease. 'I'm just glad the black hides how much I'm already sweating.'

Ava grins, her cheeks flushed that pretty shade of pink I love thanks to

the Singapore heat. ‘You know you look good no matter what. I bet you’ll somehow look even better after the race.’

After the race. Despite her compliments, those are the words that stick out the most, all because she believes that everything will be okay. That I’ll get out of the car after I cross the finish line and be fine.

She must see a change in my expression, because her smile turns tender. I bend when her fingers curl into my race suit and tug, lowering my head to let her whisper in my ear.

‘Come back to me,’ she says as my hand brushes the curve of her belly, feeling our restless daughter inside. ‘To us.’

I nod to make the promise, not trusting myself to speak, because I know this isn’t something I can swear. None of us out there can, and yet we pretend anyway, pushing down the fear that creeps up our necks.

But the truth is, I no longer fear death. I only fear for what I’ll leave behind.

———

Bright floodlights illuminate the dark asphalt as I pull out onto the track, putting in a couple of reconnaissance laps before I’m wheeled onto the grid by my mechanics. Everything’s a blur as I get out of the car again – talking to my engineers, the national anthem, the brief interview I give to one of the on-track reporters – but it all comes back into hyperfocus as I’m buckled into the cockpit again and heading off for the formation lap.

The engine rumbles behind me as I creep into my grid box, breathing deeply to calm my nerves while I wait for everyone else to fill in. In the moment of quiet, I can’t stop my mind from flashing back to last year’s crash, to the moments when I wasn’t sure if I would walk away with my life.

Though Lorenzo Castellucci undoubtedly triggered the carnage, the events that followed were just unlucky. Instead of hitting the more forgiving Tecpro barriers just a little farther down the track, we collided with solid concrete. It was sheer chance that I hit the wall head-on and let the front of my car take the brunt of the impact, because if I’d hit to the side – like

Lorenzo did – my body would have taken the worst of it. It's why I walked away with broken wrists instead of a broken back.

But it wasn't just the impact that made it all so dangerous. Metal against concrete and asphalt meant sparks. Sparks and damaged fuel tanks meant fire. Fire meant being trapped for the longest few seconds of my life. Again, it was sheer chance that I escaped with only minor burns, my fireproof suit, gloves, and boots protecting me like they were designed. Axel, however, was trapped for much longer, far past what the capabilities of fireproof technology could protect him from.

It really is amazing that we're all alive. Battered, scarred, and broken in our own ways, yes, but alive.

Soon, the last car is on the grid and the five lights come on one by one, extinguishing a split second later and sending adrenaline rushing through my veins.

It's only ninety meters down to turn one and Raphael holds the lead off the line, though I'm close on his rear wing as I fall in behind, twisting into the next set of corners. The most obvious opportunity to jump him has slipped through my fingers, but we still have sixty-one laps and plenty of strategy to play with. It's nowhere near over.

It rained last night, washing away the rubber our tires laid down on the circuit during practice and qualifying, and finding any grip for the first few laps is near impossible. As the track evolves, it'll get easier, but fucking hell, I'd love for my rears to stop sliding so much. A quick glance in my mirrors shows a colorful streak of chaos unfolding, but it's thankfully far enough behind me that it's not going to be a problem for my race.

One thing that will certainly be a problem is how humid it is, and it already feels like I'm breathing swamp water as my body does its best to regulate in the tropical heat, but it's mind over matter. Feeling like shit can wait until the end of the race.

By lap fifteen, Raphael's ahead of me by nearly ten seconds, far out of sight on the track, and Axel is behind me by the same margin, keeping him from being much of a threat. As much as I don't want to let Raphael get too far ahead, I have to manage my tires and eke out every ounce of performance I can. But by lap twenty, he's up by fifteen seconds, and it's

clear he’s trying to expand the gap as much as possible to preserve his lead once he pits for fresh tires.

‘Marchand has been instructed to up his pace,’ my race engineer reports, and I would roll my eyes if I could risk it.

It’s exactly what I expected, and to Raphael’s credit, he grows the gap by another five seconds over the next five laps. Specter Energy’s car is spectacular, and Raphael wouldn’t have survived years in F1 if he weren’t a decent driver, but it’s still a kick in the teeth that I can’t catch up. Is this a sign that I’ve officially lost my edge?

I push the thought from my head because *no*, this is just racing. Axel is still several seconds behind me and everyone else is battling farther back – this is plenty of proof that I’ve still got it. I may not be headed for a win, but if all goes well, I’ll still finish ahead of Axel and keep my lead in the championship.

I pit on lap thirty and come out behind Raphael, Dev, and Axel. Raphael dives into the pit lane on the next lap and comes out ahead of us all again thanks to the massive gap he established, even though he had a relatively slow stop. When Dev and Axel finally pit not long after, I’m back to hunting down Raphael.

‘Marchand is complaining of possible front wing damage,’ my engineer says, and based on how quickly our gap is reducing, I believe it. I’m driving hard, but this isn’t all just my doing. ‘Apparently he brushed the wall in sector two.’

I feel for him, because it’s entirely too easy to do. It only takes a tiny lapse in concentration to touch the walls around here, and they have a tricky way of making you think they’re closing in. By this far into the race, forty-five laps out of sixty-two, you’re practically on autopilot, struggling to maintain focus when the heat is unbearable and the lights are tunneling your vision. Drift just a little too far into a corner and your race is over in the blink of an eye.

I nearly have a moment coming out of turn nineteen on lap fifty, brushing my rear tire but managing to hang on. I make a note of it to my engineer, who comes back on a moment later to reassure me that he doesn’t see any damage.

‘Keep calm,’ he reminds me. ‘You’ve got this. Five laps to overtake.’

I’m nearly there. My wrists are screaming, forcing me to ease my grip on the steering wheel to find some sort of relief. But I can do this. I can get ahead of Raphael and win this. I can rewrite my history on this track and end my career as a victor here instead of a victim. I can—

My body reacts before my conscious brain can identify what’s happened, but I’m swerving to avoid the hunks of debris that litter the track, nearly missing a tire that’s come untethered and hurtles across my path. I’m past it all and sweeping around the next corner, attention shifted to my mirrors, before the realization catches up to me.

Raphael is in the wall, and the entire front end of his car is gone.

‘Red flag,’ my engineer says, but I already know from the flashing lights around the circuit – and from what I’ve seen with my own eyes. This isn’t something a mere safety car can handle. ‘Come into the pit lane.’

‘Is he okay?’ My heart is in my throat, choking me as I try to get words out, hands weak around the steering wheel as I head for the pit lane. ‘Is – is he out of the car yet?’

It’s a long few seconds before my engineer crackles over the radio again. ‘He’s all right, but he’s being taken to the medical center as a precaution. Probably looks worse than it is.’

That doesn’t stop the bile from creeping into my mouth, forcing me to swallow it back as my body flushes with a new, horrible rush of heat. I could have so nearly been wrapped up in the crash with Raphael. If I’d been any closer, been any later to react, been distracted in any way, I would have been spinning out of control. It could have been last year and Lorenzo Castellucci all over again.

Once I’m parked in the pit lane, I shove out of the car and rip off my helmet so I can take a true deep breath, then stalk into the garage under the excuse of needing a comfort break. I spot Ava lingering toward the back, black-and-silver headset resting around her neck, gaze growing concerned the longer she looks at me. When I’m close enough, she gently wraps her fingers around my throbbing wrist and guides me around the partition to where the engineers are tucked away and the cameras won’t dare to go, settling us in a secluded corner with my back to the rest of the team.

‘You’re okay, Zaid,’ she murmurs. Like Axel leaning over my wrecked car after our crash in Miami, she’s not asking me how I’m feeling, but telling me that I’m safe, pulling me back from the edge of panic. ‘Breathe, joonam. Just breathe. Inhale with me.’

As she draws in a breath, I make myself do the same, chest shuddering as my lungs expand. I blow it out in sync with her and then repeat, again and again, until my hands no longer shake.

‘I don’t – I don’t know if I can get back in the car.’ The words are hushed and rough. I doubt she can even understand me. ‘I don’t know if I can do this.’

‘You can.’ Ava sounds so sure that I nearly believe her. ‘This is not your ending. You didn’t come this far to walk away now.’

‘Maybe I did,’ I practically babble. ‘Maybe I was never meant to come back. Just . . . tell me to retire. Right now. Tell me to leave this behind.’

She shakes her head. ‘No.’

‘Do it,’ I plead. ‘If you tell me to, I will.’

‘I’m not going to.’

My stomach twists and churns. I’m somehow hot and cold all over, sweat dripping down my spine, panic still threatening to take over. I need her permission to do this, because I can’t give it to myself. ‘Why not?’

‘Because you want this, Zaid.’

I do. I do want it, but not more than I want to be alive to watch our daughter grow up and love Ava for all the decades to come. Still, I know, deep down, if I don’t get back in the car, if I retire right this second, there will come a time when I’ll look back and wonder what could have been. It won’t be regret, but it will be a curiosity I’ll never escape. I have to do it.

She squeezes my hands before placing them on the sides of her belly, where Noor immediately kicks under my right palm. ‘You want this,’ she repeats, letting the affirmation settle between us. ‘And you’re going to do it. You know you can.’

She’s right. She always is. She knows what lives inside my chest right behind my breastbone, beating in tandem with my heart and driving the fear back into its cage.

She believes in me. I just need to believe in myself.

When the ten-minute warning of the race restart comes, I brush my lips over hers and whisper my love before heading back out into the pit lane. I'm handed my balaclava and helmet as I have a quick, tense chat with the engineers on the pit wall, then I'm buckled back into the car.

It's a standing restart, so the safety car guides us back around the track and to the grid boxes, and this time I line up in P1. For the remaining ten laps, I have to keep Axel behind me. I'm lucky Dev's in P3 and will fend off anyone else who might try to inch their way up, or even force Axel to battle him instead of coming after me, but it's still going to be the challenge of a lifetime.

I have a solid start when the lights go out again, but so does Axel. It's not enough for him to beat me into turn one, though, which lets me keep my lead in the most precarious moment. But I know better than anyone how good Axel is, and if I give him even a centimeter's worth of space, he'll claim it.

Thankfully, Dev is proving to be a first-class teammate and is forcing Axel to fend him off, allowing me to get farther ahead.

'How is this pace?' I ask my engineer.

'We'd like a little more.'

Fuck. Despite the fresh tires the pit crew put on during the red flag, I don't know how much either I or the car has in us. Still, I push, checking my mirrors every few seconds to see how close Axel is. The answer is always *too close*.

I grit my teeth and ignore the pain lancing up my arms with every gear shift and button push as we count down to the last five laps. Axel tries to make a lunge on me, but I shut the door in the next corner, forcing him into my dirty air. He tries it one more time, striking in a spot where he barely has a chance – and is left to back out unless he wants to crash – but it tells of his desperation. Of mine too.

I have to hold on. Just hold on.

It's down to one more lap. Nineteen corners. So many places for things to go wrong. I've seen drivers lose it in the last lap thanks to the smallest errors.

But I won't let that be me.

Checkered flag in sight, I cross the line first, yelling into my helmet in relief and exhilaration. Ava was right to believe in me, to push me back out here, because I had it in me after all. I've written a new chapter of my history, and she's the reason for it.

'That's P1,' my engineer announces, and I can hear the grin in his voice along with the cheers of the garage in the background. 'What a superb drive, Zaid. Absolutely wonderful.'

The tension leaves my body with an exhausted laugh. 'Thank you, mate. Thank you to the entire team, especially everyone back at the factory.' I swallow the emotion welling in my throat. 'And thank you, Ava. I couldn't have done any of this without you.'

I take a breath, letting my lungs fill, no longer constricted by the fear that once banded around them. It's so freeing that I nearly scream.

'Congratulations,' Basil comes on to say, his voice thick. 'I know how much this one means to you.'

I grin as I guide the car to parc fermé. 'Are you crying, Basil?'

'You know I bloody well am.' He laughs before sobering again. 'One step closer, Zaid. You're almost there.'

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CHAPTER 29
Ava

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Sunday 3 November

Bom dia, babes. It's Brazilian Grand Prix day, and the world's most passionate fans are out in force. However, we haven't seen Zaid Yousef's biggest fan lately. Ava Farahani apparently hasn't been spotted in the paddock since Singapore, which has us wondering if Baby Farahani-Yousef is with us yet or will be here soon. Analyze these bump photos and leave your guesses in the comments about her due date!

COMMENTS

gridgrrrrrrlz can we PLEASE stop commenting on women's bodies it's so gross

Mascort4Life I'm not one to typically buy into rumors, but I'm really starting to wonder if Zaid's planning to move teams. He's been acting so strange lately. I think Farahani's daughter has convinced Zaid to leave Mascort and go to Specter Energy. If he does, it will be an absolute betrayal.

dambrosiclownshow 'I'm not one to typically buy into rumors' you're literally on a gossip page mate

no1_axel_berg_fan I thought he would retire before ever considering going to specter. if they try to make him the number 1 driver over axel I swear to GOD I will burn the whole team down

lala09678 that's a fake bump there is no baby

mrsreidcoleman i've been thinking the same thing she's been pregnant for soooo long it has to be fake

no1_axel_berg_fan lord send the flood I can't believe I have to live on the same planet as you people

Northern Virginia

The time has finally come. I'm officially too pregnant to travel.

I thought I might struggle with no longer being able to follow the circus, but honestly, it's been nice to slow down and finally start nesting. I've set up camp back home in Virginia with the cats and – of all people – Zaid's mother. There were a few vague conversations about her coming to help out *after* the baby was born, but I must have missed the part about her showing up two weeks before my C-section date and declaring she was here to take care of me. I guess that's just how moms operate – they simply arrive on your doorstep with a suitcase and sheer audacity.

Together we've weathered watching Zaid taking the second step of the podium in Austin and Mexico City, our hands clutched together as we shouted at the TV and grumbled over Axel's wins. In secret, I messaged Axel my congratulations, though I think Mariam might have known what I was up to, considering she only offered me one snack that day instead of the five she usually tries to force on me.

Now, tomorrow's my C-section, and I'm ready for this baby to be in my arms instead of kicking my ribs so hard I swear they've all cracked. But no matter how ready I feel, I'm nervous for what's to come. My life is about to change in a major way, one I've been looking forward to for years, and now that it's imminent, I can't help but worry over what could go wrong.

I've thought more about my mom lately than I have in years, wishing I had her here to walk me through this new phase of life. I'm torn between smiling at the good memories and crying over the fact that we'll never make more together. That she'll never meet her granddaughter. That I won't have her here to stroke my hair and tell me everything's going to be okay.

But I take comfort in the fact that I'm not motherless. Every night, Mariam rubs my belly, speaking to Noor in Arabic and promising her the world. Edith calls in the mornings to check on how I've slept and regales me with tales of her own pregnancies, reassuring me that everything I'm suffering through now will be over soon. Even my maman bozorg calls and tells me in a mix of Farsi and English exactly how to care for myself after the baby is born and all the remedies that will help along the way.

These women, these mothers, are all here for me in ways I know my own mom would be if she could, and their care is everything I need.

Of course, I'm lucky to have a partner who's willing to do anything for me too. Zaid flew in after the last two races, spending a couple of days here before moving on to the next destination, and it made me even more grateful for his retirement plans. I was right to not want a racing driver for the father of my child – the stress of hoping and praying they come home safe to you is the worst of it all, but the ridiculous schedule doesn't help either.

Today marks the end of a grueling triple-header in the Americas, and when Zaid's flight touches down in the early hours of tomorrow morning, he'll have two weeks to spend with me and our baby before the last three races of the season kick off. I'm desperate for that uninterrupted time together, for us to bond with Noor and adjust to the life of being new parents. But first, I need him to make it through the Brazilian Grand Prix.

The race hasn't even started and I'm already pacing, mostly because I have a metric ton of anxiety to work off thanks to the narrow margin Zaid is carrying in the championship, but also because I'm too uncomfortable to sit for very long these days. I'm exhausted and achy and teary and restless, juiced up with hormones that have me laughing one minute and sobbing the next, all while this baby kicks and punches my already bruised organs.

This has been the hardest thing I've ever done and I've had an *easy* experience, all things considered. I'm grateful to my body for growing this child and for the opportunity to even be pregnant, but *fuck*, it hasn't been all sunshine and rainbows. The struggles have taught me lessons that I've needed, though, like it's okay to let myself be cared for and to accept that I can't control everything. Most of all, it's been a lesson in letting love in.

I keep pacing as Mariam and I watch the last of the pre-race show, still moving as the cars file to their grid spots. I only stop when the first of the red lights flicks on, then hold my breath until all five are aglow, and the air leaves me in a rush when they go out. Zaid is quick off the line, leading everyone into the first corner and keeping his P1 spot as the lap twists on. My pacing picks up again as Axel attempts to charge down the inside, but Zaid makes fending him off look like easy work.

I finally sit when Zaid has a five-second gap between himself and Axel, gingerly lowering myself down beside Mariam, who immediately grasps

my hand in hers. It's probably to keep me from getting up to pace again, but I appreciate the comforting gesture nonetheless.

'He's going to win,' she says, so serene that I almost ask her what drugs she's on and where I can get some.

But all it comes down to is pure belief. She knows her son can do this and doesn't have a single doubt about it.

'He can do it,' I tell myself.

And he does. After seventy-one laps, he crosses the line with Axel a full ten seconds behind him, growing the points gap of the Drivers' Championship in his favor. Mascort already claimed the Constructors' Championship back in Mexico City, thanks to Zaid and Dev's solid teamwork, but it's been too close to call the Driver's Championship yet. All that's left to determine is the battle between Zaid and Axel.

I don't look away from the TV as Zaid climbs out of the car, taking a moment to thrust his fist into the air in victory. When Mariam squeezes my hand again, I glance over to find her grinning, and soon I'm mirroring it back at her, the stress of watching Zaid race melting away.

Zaid's smiling too when he walks over for the post-race interview, hair damp with sweat as he pushes it back from his face. He's happier today than I've seen him after any race so far this season, and even the answers he gives the interviewer are upbeat and teasing. It's a glimpse of the Zaid the world used to see more of in years past, the one that slowly disappeared as the seasons got longer and the stress got heavier. He's lighter now, with a spark of life in his eyes, and I can't wait to have him back beside me.

'We'll have to make this podium quick so I can get out of here,' he tells the interviewer before turning a wide smile to the camera. 'I'm about to be a dad.'

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CHAPTER 30
Zaid

Our daughter is born in the early morning on the fourth of November, and she's nothing short of perfect.

Noor and Ava spend three days in hospital before coming home, where my mother and – shockingly – Ava's father wait for our return. Mum has already met her granddaughter, so she rushes to Ava's side when we arrive, determined to escort her straight to bed. After a stilted greeting and press of his lips to Ava's forehead, Omid comes my way, where I have a sleeping Noor in my arms.

I've witnessed nearly every second of my daughter's life so far – her screaming entry into the world, her first slow blinks, her little grunts and sighs as she nuzzled against Ava's chest for the first time – but I'm still awestruck at the sight of her. Judging from Omid's sharp intake of breath and the way his hand trembles as he strokes the tiny cotton hat covering Noor's shock of black hair, he feels the same way I do.

'She's beautiful,' he whispers, gaze unblinking as he takes her in, like he's afraid to miss an inch of her. 'She looks just like Ava.'

I've seen a few baby pictures of Ava, and he's right – Noor is her spitting image. I can only imagine what's going through Omid's head now, but I'd bet he's caught in memories of Ava's childhood, which I'm sure are tied to thoughts of his late wife. While I'll never understand how a father could all but walk away from his grieving child, loving Ava has made me conscious of how easily I would break if I lost her. Noor is my life, the light of my eyes, but Ava is my soul. Without her, I would be nothing more than a shell.

Omid and I are pulled out of the trance we're in, simply staring at Noor, when she starts to fuss, face scrunching and tiny fists balling.

'She's hungry,' I say. 'I should take her to Ava.'

Omid clears his throat, voice thick as he murmurs, 'Right. Of course.'

When I finally look over at him, I see the red rims of his eyes and the

sheen of unshed tears. I turn away to let him have this moment privately and come to terms with the emotions that have hit all at once.

My mother is coming out of Ava's bedroom as I brush by with Noor, and she offers me a small, reassuring smile that tells me all is well. She's been a godsend these past few weeks, caring for Ava in all the ways I couldn't while off racing, and will once again be our saving grace as Ava recovers from her C-section.

When I step into the room, Ava is propped up in bed with a mountain of pillows that my mother undoubtedly arranged with careful consideration. Timmy, Robert, and Soup sit sentinel on the floor next to the bed, watching over Ava and craning their necks to see what's going on when I pass Noor to her.

Like I always do whenever our daughter is in her arms, I stand back and pause to take them in, heart so full that my chest aches. My life and my soul are in front of me, nestled to each other, and I'm the luckiest man in the world.

Maybe tonight calls for an alpha with a soft spot—or a heroine who refuses to back down.

See what fits the mood at **Lokepub**.

After a moment, I sit on the edge of the bed next to Ava as she settles Noor in to nurse. 'Did you know your dad was coming?' I ask her quietly, stroking a thumb across our daughter's soft cheek.

Ava nods, the shadows under her eyes a little more pronounced in the light of her bedside lamp, but there's a tender joy to her exhaustion. 'He called right after the race on Sunday and asked if he could be here when I got home from the hospital. I told him yes. I'm sorry I didn't say anything to you, but I wasn't sure if he'd even show.'

'No apologies,' I remind her. 'I'm glad he wanted to meet his granddaughter.' And I'm glad he kept his promise to Ava to be here.

'It's going to take us time to fix things,' she murmurs, eyes lovingly tracing our daughter's face, 'but this is a start. And I want him to know Noor.'

I have a lot of respect for Omid as team principal, but as a father he has plenty of making up to do. My hope is that he'll be a better grandfather and that Noor will have grandparents who spoil and adore her in the way she deserves. In the meantime, I'll do plenty of both for her and for Ava.

'Besides,' Ava says as a small smile quirks up the corner of her mouth. 'Your mother will never let him get away with any kind of bullshit.'

I chuckle. 'You're right. She'll make sure he's on his best behavior.' Just like she does with all the rest of us.

Ava's smile widens and warms me from the inside out, her happiness radiating. 'I love our little family.'

I love it too. And that love makes me want to stay right here with them instead of returning to my job. But in order to give them my everything, I have to see the rest of my commitments through. I have to know that I gave my best effort in this final chance at breaking records, that any kid who follows in my footsteps will see I left nothing on the table, and I'll encourage them to do the same. I want to cement my place in the hall of greats, even in my own mind. I want to have no doubts that I laid it all out there and had nothing left to give to the sport that gave me so much in return.

When that's all over, my next commitment will be to Ava for the rest of my life and everything after. The ring to seal that promise is currently burning a hole in my suitcase, waiting for the right moment. I picked it out the day after the Singapore Grand Prix from a specialty jeweler who specializes in vintage rings. It's one of a kind, just like Ava, and I can't wait to see it sparkle on her finger.

One more month. Three more races. Everything still to play for.

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CHAPTER 31
Ava

@LIGHTS_OUT_GOSSIP
Monday 18 November

Viva Las Vegas, baby! It's off to Sin City for this week's grand prix. We can't wait to see the drivers step into the paddock and be accosted by Elvis impersonators. That's our favorite genre of photos tbh.

And we can't forget to say happy anniversary to Thomas and Stella Maxwell-Brown! The two are celebrating their first year of marriage after their spontaneous Las Vegas wedding this time last season, right before the grand prix. Considering they've had another wedding since then and look obsessed with each other every time we see them together, it seems like their marriage is going strong.

Hopefully someone else will follow in their Vegas wedding footsteps – maybe even Dev and Willow now that those two are engaged. Vegas definitely seems like Dev's vibe, doesn't it?

The next two weeks fly by in a haze of never-ending diaper changes, two a.m. feedings, and more love than I ever thought possible. But the day has finally come for Zaid to return to the circus.

Sami and Adnan are currently cooing over Noor in her nursery, the two of them here to escort Zaid to the airport so he can head for Las Vegas, while he and I sit together in the kitchen sipping coffee and refusing to say goodbye to each other just yet.

'I'll be back right after I'm done in Vegas,' he tells me for what must be the dozenth time today alone, but it's more for his sake than mine. I know he needs the reminder that he'll see us again in less than a week, even if it's only for a handful of days before he heads to Qatar for the penultimate race. 'I'll fly out as soon as I'm done with the team debrief.'

'We'll be waiting for you,' I assure him. 'But really, if there was ever a time for you to be away, it's now. All she does is eat, cry, sleep, and poop. You're not going to be missing much.'

We both know he'll miss more than that, but I'm not completely wrong, and I hope he can take some comfort in it. I couldn't imagine being away from Noor at this point, and even though we've both known this moment was coming, it's still tough.

'Oh, be sure to tell Thomas and Stella happy anniversary for me,' I tack on, wanting to change the subject. 'I asked Sami to send them a gift from all of us.'

Zaid sighs and lifts his coffee mug. 'I'm only going to that anniversary dinner they're hosting because of you. Hopefully you'll be ready to travel again when Dev and Willow finally have their engagement party, because I am *not* going to that one alone.'

I laugh, not surprised by his grumbling, since he's been complaining about how insufferable Dev has been since he and Willow got engaged last month. I know he's happy for them – and I absolutely screamed when Willow texted me a photo of her ring – but I understand that this is his anxiety manifesting, and I don't doubt that Dev *has* been insufferable with his adoration of Willow.

But if anyone could see us right now, I'm sure they'd think we were just as insufferable, especially when Zaid sets his mug down and reaches for my hand across the table, bringing my knuckles to his lips. He kisses each one before turning my palm over and pressing his lips to the pulse point of my wrist, which flutters under his touch.

'I haven't even left yet and I already miss you,' he murmurs against my skin.

'That sounds like a real problem,' I tease, but I lift my hand out of his grasp to cup his stubbled jaw. 'I'll be counting down the days until you're back with us. Do us both a favor and win as much as you can, yeah? Preferably the entire championship.'

He chuckles and leans into my touch, dark eyes closing for a moment before reopening and focusing on me. 'I did promise I'd do anything for you, so I guess this counts.'

He turns his head to teasingly nip at my hand, making me laugh as I pull my fingers away. He stands a moment later, coming to my side of the table and planting a hand on the back of my chair so he can lean down, his face

close to mine. When our lips touch, it's with a tenderness that says just how hard this is for both of us, and it's a long moment before Zaid pulls back again.

'See you soon, princess.'

———

On the morning of the Las Vegas Grand Prix, I'm woken by the sound of my phone chiming. The text on the screen from Edith reads Open your door, it's bloody freezing out here.

I throw on my robe and pad quietly to the front door, not wanting to wake Mariam, who handled the night shift with Noor and is sleeping in the nursery–slash–guest room. I've never been so grateful to a person in my life, especially one who babies both me and my actual infant child. She deserves all the rest in the world.

When I open the door, Edith immediately kicks her off her stilettos, sheds her heavy designer coat, and strides past me while asking, 'Where's my baby?'

I grin and point to my bedroom, taking my time following her as she disappears around the corner. She's just come out from the bathroom after washing her hands when I find her again, and this time I'm spared a grateful smile before all her attention goes to a sleeping Noor in her bassinet by my bed.

'I think she might be the most beautiful baby I've ever seen,' Edith whispers as she stares at my daughter in awe.

I cut her an amused look as I come to stand beside her, but pride warms my chest. 'Sometimes I wonder if you forget you have four kids of your own.'

She waves me off, still not looking over. 'Love them with all my heart, of course, but this . . . this is our little dream come true.'

My hormones remain a mess, and I'm sure that's part of the reason why my eyes well with tears at her description of Noor, but also . . . Edith is right. She *is* our little dream come true. Edith has been along for this ride since the very beginning, from the months I spent trying to get pregnant to

the surprise of the positive test. Through my pregnancy, she's been the person I could text at all hours of the night to ask *Is this normal???* or to simply vent about how I was feeling. And now, as she stares adoringly down at Noor, I know Edith will always consider this baby one of her own.

'I know we've been talking about this for years and it's a given at this point,' I say to preface the question I'm about to ask, 'but . . . will you be her godmother?'

Edith's silent for a moment as she continues to stare, and I nearly jump when a sound escapes her that I never expected to hear. When she lifts her head again, her bottom lip is trembling and there are mascara tracks on her cheeks.

'I wasn't even this emotional when Peter proposed.' She sniffles. 'But yes, Ava. Of *course* I'll be her godmother.'

I wrap an arm around her waist and lean into her, sighing contentedly when she tugs me closer. We stand there like that until Noor starts to wake from her nap, and I gladly let Edith lift her from the bassinet to soothe her.

'How's Zaid taking to fatherhood?' she asks as she bounces and sways.

'Like it's the easiest thing in the world,' I confess, still amazed, because even though I prepped and planned for years, my adjustment to motherhood has had its speed bumps. But him? I've never seen a person so perfectly made to be a parent. 'He has a nephew, so obviously he's spent time with a baby before, but I swear, the man is magic. All he has to do is be *near* Noor when she's fussy or crying and she settles down in a heartbeat. And if competitive swaddling was a sport, he'd be a world champion in that too.' I smile to myself. 'It was almost impossible to get him to leave for Vegas. All he wants is to be here with us.'

'You're going to have that soon enough.'

I am, though that's still a secret we're keeping from everyone else in the world. I'm so relieved that he hasn't wavered on his plans for retirement, because I wouldn't be able to take this stress season after season, no matter how much I love watching him drive. I've never had more respect for all the other WAGs than I do now. It's a life I'm not cut out for.

'I can't wait,' I say honestly. 'I just hate that I can't be there for the last race of his career.'

Edith motions for me to get comfortable on the bed so she can hand Noor over for me to feed her. ‘Who says you can’t be?’ she challenges, not even blinking as I open my robe. ‘If you want to go, I will put you on my family’s jet myself.’

I shoot her a look as I settle Noor against me and the nursing pillow. ‘I can’t ask that of you, Edith.’

‘You’re not asking. I’m telling you.’ She sits down on the bed and gently adjusts Noor’s position to help her latch. ‘If you feel up to it, and if you get clearance from your doctors, then you’re going to be there to watch your man win the last race of his career.’

I stay quiet for a moment, staring down at Noor and listening to the soft sounds she makes. Tradition says I’m not supposed to do much for forty days after giving birth, but I’m willing to fudge the numbers. Besides, I’ve already been to one postpartum appointment where my doctor said that if I was feeling healthy and up for it, I could travel once Noor was four weeks old. She’ll be a little older than that the weekend of the last race in Abu Dhabi.

Right now, even though I’m recovering well, I still feel like all my internal organs are trying to find their rightful place, and my stamina is nonexistent. I imagine I’ll be feeling better in two weeks, but will it be enough of an improvement to brave a fifteen-hour flight with a newborn?

‘I’ll think about it,’ I tell her. ‘But . . . maybe keep the jet on standby.’

———

I’m sitting in the kitchen with Mariam the next morning, waiting for Zaid to get home, when there’s a knock on the front door.

‘Must have forgotten his keys,’ Mariam says, motioning for me to stay and enjoy my coffee while she goes to retrieve him.

But I nearly spit out my sip when she comes back around the corner with someone in tow – someone who is definitely *not* Zaid.

‘What are you doing here?’ I splutter to Axel, setting my mug down with a surprisingly hard *thunk* on the table. ‘And how did you get here before Zaid?’

‘I have a better jet than him,’ he says, so casually smug, but I see the hesitance in his eyes. He’s less than sure of himself right now. ‘Is it . . . is it okay that I’m here?’

Despite my shock, I nod, swallowing past the emotion welling up in my throat. ‘Yeah. I’m – I’m really happy to see you.’

Mariam, on the other hand, looks displeased to have her son’s biggest rival standing in my kitchen, but she’s gracious enough to excuse herself by saying she’s going to go get started on the laundry.

Axel relaxes a bit when she disappears around the corner, but his eyes flick to the empty doorway when he whispers, ‘I thought she was going to shut the door in my face when she saw me out there.’

‘I’m genuinely shocked she let you in,’ I whisper back. ‘Something tells me she’s not your biggest fan.’

Axel snickers and sheepishly ducks his head, and I’m reminded of the shy teenage boy I first met all those years ago, the kid who would become my brother in practically every way except legally.

‘Can’t blame her,’ he says, and then his eyes flick over me, cautiously taking me in. ‘How are you feeling?’

I blow out a breath and lean back in my chair, pressing a hand to my still-healing scar. ‘Like I was sliced open and had a human yanked out of me. But fine otherwise.’

He grimaces at the mental image. ‘And the baby? She’s okay?’

‘She’s perfect.’

‘Good,’ he says on an exhale, as if that’s been a worry on his mind. ‘That’s really good.’

I pause, taking a moment of my own to assess him. We’ve been in contact with each other recently, but it’s only been cursory, never anything emotionally deep. Checking on each other, but not past the surface level. There are shadows under his eyes and I swear he’s a little thinner than usual, like the past few months of his battle for the championship have taken their toll on him. Once upon a time, I would have been the first person he would drop his anxieties and complaints on, but that went away the second I told him I was expecting a baby with his rival.

The fact that he’s here now means something must have changed, that

maybe he's gotten over his hangups and is ready to have me fully back in his life. Maybe he's ready to be the uncle to my daughter that I hoped he would be.

'Can I see her?' he asks timidly.

I have to blink away tears as I smile and stand. 'Of course.'

In the nursery, a snugly swaddled Noor is sleeping peacefully, but it's Axel I watch as we stand beside her crib. He's quiet for a long while, simply taking her in, and I let him have the space to process whatever he's feeling.

'I hate to say anything nice about Yousef,' he murmurs, eyes still locked on Noor, 'but you two really did make a cute kid.'

I bite my lip to keep from snickering, but it doesn't stop my grin. 'I know how painful that was for you to admit.'

'Don't ever expect me to say it again.' He spares me a quick glance before looking back to Noor, speaking directly to her this time. 'Hopefully you'll inherit my driving skills over your dad's, yeah? We both know I'm better. And I'm going to be the one to buy you your first kart when you turn three.'

I let out a half laugh, half exasperated breath. 'No earlier than four, Axel.'

He shoots me a disgusted look. 'You have to start building a champion early, *Ava*. Don't deprive my niece of that.'

'Okay, time for you to go, weirdo.'

It takes some convincing to get him out of the nursery, but we linger by the front door.

'So,' I say, not really wanting to kick him out but knowing it's probably best he's not here when Zaid arrives. 'Are you finally over hating me for this?'

Axel rolls his eyes, back to being a brat. 'I never *hated* you,' he points out. 'I just didn't like you for a while.'

'Oh, *wow*, big difference.'

'Yeah, huge.' His eyes find mine after a beat, and there's a sincerity in them that I don't often see from him. 'I'm sorry it took me so long to get over myself.'

'It's okay. I get why you needed that time.' I brush my fingers over his

wrist before pinching him in revenge lest this get too deep into heart-to-heart territory. ‘But I missed you, you little shit.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he says, turning from me to hide his grin as he opens the door. ‘I guess I missed you too.’

He can say it as grudgingly as he wants, but he wouldn’t be here if it weren’t the truth.

My family is knitting itself back together. Slowly and gingerly, sure, but they’re coming back to me.

‘Tell Zaid I say hi,’ Axel calls cheekily as he steps outside. ‘Hope he’s looking forward to me beating him again.’

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CHAPTER 32
Zaid

Top of the Podium magazine

Saturday 7 December
By Damian Larson, columnist

ONE LAST DRIVE

The last race of the season is here and we have yet to crown a champion. Currently, after two consecutive P2 finishes in Las Vegas and Qatar, Zaid Yousef is sitting on 420 points. His rival, Axel Bergmüller, is narrowly ahead with 425. Today's qualifying landed Yousef P2 for tomorrow's grand prix and Bergmüller a shocking P4, which should make for a very interesting race day.

But it all comes down to this. Will Zaid Yousef break another record? Or will Axel Bergmüller steal it out from right under his rival's nose?

Abu Dhabi

I'm trailing Axel by five points when I arrive in Abu Dhabi for the last grand prix.

I've had plenty of seasons come down to the wire, but none so hard fought as this. Axel is one of the best competitors I've ever come up against, and I'm certain his name will be on the list of greats in the future – but I'm not going to make that journey easy for him.

I have to win this weekend if I want to secure my eighth championship. Second place on the podium won't be enough to take home the title if Axel finishes in first. There are a few other circumstances I can win under – like

Axel scoring no points for finishing outside the top ten while I finish P7 or above – and I've considered every outcome. But the truth always stays the same: If I really want this, I have to win.

My odds are looking good but not great after qualifying today. Dev, of all people, put it on pole while I have to settle for starting P2 tomorrow. Axel's on the second row, in P4 next to Reid in P3. It's not exactly the straightforward ending I expected, but that's racing for you.

I'm on my way back to the hotel from the circuit, sprawled in the back seat of the SUV, trying to resist the urge to call Ava until I'm in the privacy of my room, as Sami and Adnan talk quietly up front. But the need to hear her voice wins out, and I'm dialing her a second later. When the call rings out to voicemail, I frown.

'Sami, have you spoken to Ava or my mother today?' I ask as I tap Ava's name on the screen again.

He turns in his seat to look at me. 'Yeah, just a little while ago. Said they were taking Noor for a walk, so if Ava isn't answering, she probably just has her hands full.'

Sami's answer offers me a bit of solace as the call goes to voicemail once more, but it doesn't stop disappointment from sinking in my chest.

'Absolute lovesick puppy,' Sami admonishes with a grin as he turns back around. 'Don't worry, you'll see her soon.'

He's not wrong, considering I'm not sticking around longer than necessary after the end of tomorrow night's grand prix – not even if I win, and especially not if I lose. By Monday afternoon, she and Noor will be back in my arms, but that still feels too far away.

I drag myself up to my room when we arrive at the hotel, mentally going over everything I need to do tonight. I should get in one more quick gym session, eat whatever bland meal my trainer sends up, and do some visualizations before bed. Hopefully Ava will call back at some point, but if I haven't heard from her in the next hour, I'll—

The scent of jasmine brushes my nose as I step into the room, and I freeze. There's a chance I'm hallucinating merely because I miss her like a part of me has been ripped from my body, but that's Ava's perfume. I'd

know it anywhere. If you wafted the scent of her over my grave, it would bring me back to life.

My feet move before my mind can catch up, stopping short again when I turn the corner and find her perched on the edge of the bed, smiling in that coy way that makes my heart skip.

‘You’re here.’

Her smile widens at my dumbfounded words. ‘Perks of having friends with private jets,’ she teases, but she’s earnest when she says, ‘I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.’

I’m in front of her a moment later, hands on her cheeks as I crush my lips to hers. She kisses me back eagerly, like she’s as desperate for a taste of me as I am for her.

‘I missed you so much,’ I mumble against her mouth when we break to breathe, my fingers slipping into the silky waves of her hair. ‘I don’t ever want to be away from you this long again.’

‘I don’t either,’ she says, pressing her hands to my chest, my heart thundering under her palms. ‘After tomorrow, we’ll never have to be.’

She’s right. This is it. The end of this season, the end of my racing career, the start of a new life with her and our daughter and all the light they’ve brought into my life. I’m ready to run toward that future. Run to them. To Ava.

I tilt her head back for another kiss, a vow that I’ll do anything to be with her. I skim my hands down her shoulders until I grip her elbows, gently guiding her to her feet so I can pull her closer. Ava melts, molding against me like this is the place she’s always meant to be, letting me hold her in a way I was once only able to dream of.

I stroke a hand up and down her spine, reveling in the feel of her for a moment longer before asking, ‘Where’s Noor?’

Ava laughs softly against my shirt, like she’s been waiting for me to ask. Our little girl has me wrapped around her tiny finger. ‘Down the hall in your mother’s room with her and your brother,’ she answers. ‘I wanted our whole family to be together.’

It’s a comfort to know all the people I love are in one place, so far from

home just to support me. But my home is wherever Ava and our daughter are, no matter what corner of the world they're in.

When she eventually pulls back, her eyes lift to mine and I see the rest of my life staring back at me. From my suitcase across the room, the engagement ring calls out, daring me to slip it from the zippered pocket I put it in for safekeeping. I tried to imagine what the perfect proposal would look like, but I can't think of a moment better than this when it's just us. A moment only we'll share.

'I need you to close your eyes, princess.'

Ava's brow raises before she grins and acquiesces, trusting me without question. 'Ooh, do you have a surprise?' she teases, fingertips trailing after me as I step back from her.

She gave me the best surprise by coming here, so it's only fair that I give her one too. Though, really, how much of a surprise is it that I love her with everything in me?

'Something like that,' I answer.

I keep my eyes on her for a second longer before turning to my suitcase, swiftly reaching inside for the little velvet box. I glance over my shoulder to make sure she hasn't seen what I'm doing, but, true to who Ava is – pure sunshine with love for a hint of whimsy – and the faith we have in each other, she hasn't peeked.

Drawing in a deep breath, I move back to her, quietly dipping down onto one knee as I stare at the lifted corners of her mouth. I expected my heart to race in the buildup to this moment, but it's a steady drum.

'Open your eyes, princess.'

Ava's lashes flutter and then her dark eyes are open, searching the empty space above my head for a moment before her attention darts down. She inhales sharply, the sound catching in her throat as she blinks over and over again, her humor morphing into shock.

'Zaid,' she finally breathes out, a trembling hand lifting to my cheek. 'Is this real?'

I can't help but laugh as warmth floods through me. 'It's real,' I reassure her. 'I've been waiting for the right moment to do this, to plan something perfect for you, make it clear just how much I love you, but I couldn't wait

another second.’ I gently take the hand she has on my cheek and pull it to my lips, brushing them across her knuckles. ‘I want you by my side for eternity, Ava. You’re it for me. There’s not a moment I want to spend without you. Whatever this life and everything that comes after it brings, I want you there. There’s nothing I want more.’

Her chest heaves with the effort it takes to keep breathing steadily, but she knowingly holds my gaze. ‘Really?’ she says, only a slight tremor in her voice. ‘Not even an eighth world championship?’

I smile indulgently at her joke, but I’m serious when I say, ‘I’d give up every one of my championships just to be with you.’

The sound that leaves her is a cross between a laugh and a sob, and tears streak down her cheeks as I open the velvet box. The diamond sits against a platinum band, a perfect complement to the little silver 45 she still wears at the hollow of her throat.

‘Ava,’ I say. ‘Will you marry me?’

She’s nodding fiercely before I can even get the question out, already blurting, ‘Absolutely. Yes. Please.’

It’s the only answer I could have hoped for.

———

The garage is awash with excitement as I ready myself to climb into the car.

There’s an undercurrent of tension that can’t be ignored, growing thicker with each second that ticks away leading to the race start. I feel it wrapping around me, squeezing tight, but instead of putting me in a chokehold, it feels more like an easy embrace. It’s a stark difference from the start of the season, when I feared I would suffocate within the confines of the cockpit, but tonight, I’m comforted by it.

Mechanics buzz around me, their chatter and laughter mixing with wheel guns shrieking and engines roaring to life down the pit lane. I drink it in, savor it, do my best to catalog every minute detail so I can return to this moment when the ache of missing this world seeps in. I’m making the right choice to walk away, I know that, but there will be times when I’ll wonder if I should have stayed a little longer. If I just could have stuck it out.

But for what? For more glory? More money? More attention that I really don't want or need? I've already achieved more than anyone thought possible. I've changed my life and the lives of countless others who benefitted from my successes. I've done my part to make this sport better in a myriad of different ways. I've made myself, my family, and – most importantly – my father proud. I've done enough.

From across the garage, I can feel Basil's eyes on me, and I glance over to find him watching. His expression is impassive, but there's a storm behind his eyes, warring between soul-deep understanding and grief.

I broke the news of my retirement plans this afternoon in a one-on-one meeting, and while he took it well and reaffirmed that he wouldn't trigger anything in my contract to keep me from leaving, it was still clearly a heavy blow. It's hard enough to say goodbye to a driver who's brought you hundreds of podiums, but one you've known for more than half of his F1 career? It's like saying goodbye to family.

I nod to him and wait for him to nod back before turning away, focusing my attention on the VIP pen at the back of the garage. The diamond on Ava's ring finger catches the light as she lifts her arms to beckon me over, then slides them around my neck when I step in close. The camera crews are certainly catching this, just like they homed in on the engagement ring when we walked into the paddock together earlier, but I don't care who's watching now. I want them to see how much I worship this woman.

'Noor told me to tell you that she hopes you win today,' Ava says, sparkling eyes on mine like I'm the only person she sees. 'But she'll still love you even if you don't.'

Our daughter is back at the hotel, being babysat by Edith Maxwell-Brown of all people, although I've been told I have her to thank for Ava being here this weekend.

I settle my hands on Ava's waist. 'Amazing how she speaks to you in full sentences. I can barely get a coherent grunt most days.'

'Don't worry, you're going to have plenty of time for conversations with her soon enough.'

I am, and I can't wait. Or, at least, I can wait a *bit* longer – long enough

to see this last race through and make it across the finish line, hopefully for the win.

I'll give it my all, like I always do. I'll fight for it. I'll do everything in my power to bring it home one last time for everyone at Mascort. For Ava and my family and all of my supporters. And, most importantly, for myself.

I press a lingering kiss to Ava's lips before she wishes me good luck, arms slipping down from around my neck until only our fingers brush. When the contact is gone, I turn from her and finish the rest of my pre-race rituals. Once I'm in the car, the world feels quiet, even though it's screaming all around me.

And when it's time to head to the grid, when my lead mechanic gives me the signal to pull out of the garage, the breath I take is steady. There's no flood of adrenaline or surge of anxiety this time, only a wash of calm.

Because win or lose, I already have everything I want.

I have the ending I deserve.

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EPILOGUE
Ava

Top of the Podium magazine

Friday 20 December

8-TIME WORLD CHAMPION ZAID YOUSEF ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT AT FIA PRIZE-GIVING GALA

Two weeks later, December – London

I lock my phone and toss it to the side, having seen the same headline a million times already. It's not surprising that the media hasn't moved on yet – this was major breaking news to pretty much everyone except for me – but in the world of Formula 1, there's always another big story waiting in the wings.

'You almost ready?' I call to Zaid, who's still rambling around the walk-in closet of our London home. 'Adnan will be here any minute now.'

We're supposed to be heading for Zaid's charity's annual gala, and this event is slated to be the biggest yet, with a celebrity-packed guest list and an auction that's sure to bring in millions of pounds. But if my fiancé takes any longer to get ready, we won't even get to laugh at people bidding to win a date with Axel. How I got him to agree to participate is still a mystery, but my heart goes out to whoever wins – it's going to be the worst date of their life.

Zaid steps out a moment later, still adjusting his cuff-links. He's in a tux tonight, and no matter how many times I've seen him all dressed up in the months since the pre-season party that reunited us, I can't help but think about how unexpectedly perfect that night was. Without it, we wouldn't be here – with our daughter asleep on the bed next to me, a wedding on the

horizon, and a future together that's so bright I can practically feel its warmth. That one night changed everything.

'Sorry,' he says. 'Reggie called and I needed to take it.'

I can't begrudge him a chat with his manager, especially with how much attention he's been getting ever since the retirement announcement. With his schedule no longer dictated by racing, every company, charity, and organization that ever hoped to work with him is coming out of the woodwork. Even *I've* been getting job offers and sponsorship opportunities left and right.

But the main role I'm interested in right now is being a mom. Besides, we're looking for *less* attention these days, and right now I'm happiest when I'm home with Noor, Zaid, and the cats.

I'll probably want to find a way back into the thick of motorsport at some point, because I've resigned myself to the fact that there's no keeping me away. It's in my blood, and I still have family wrapped up in the traveling circus of F1 anyway. I'm sure if I asked nicely, Dad or Axel would be willing to invite me back into the fold. Not like I can cause any *more* drama than I already have.

There's plenty of time to consider what the future of my career looks like, and for the time being, I'm still focused on helping Zaid wrap up a major part of his. Tonight's event is the first time he's been out in public since the FIA Prize-Giving gala when he announced his retirement. No doubt everyone in attendance is going to be cornering him with a million questions, and he'll need someone to rescue him when it gets to be too much – a job I'll happily perform time and time again.

With his cuff-links done up and his phone tucked away, Zaid's attention has shifted to me, and the weight of his gaze is potent.

'This dress,' he murmurs, eyes dragging down my body as I rise from where I've been sitting on our bed, watching a sleeping Noor. 'You're divine. How did I convince a goddess to be my wife?'

'I'm not your wife *yet*,' I remind him as he takes my hand and makes me do a spin for him. 'And eight world championships might have had something to do with it.'

He smirks and tugs me to him, my chest bumping his. 'You agreed before

I even won the eighth. I could have saved myself some work.'

'I had a feeling you were going to get it,' I say as I slide my arms around his neck, tilting my head back so I can gaze up at him. If anything, he's more handsome these days than he was while racing. Fatherhood and retirement suit him better than I could have ever imagined.

'That's right,' he murmurs, dipping so that he can brush his lips across the corner of my mouth. 'You've always believed in me.'

He kisses me before I can tell him that he made it easy, that cheering for him has always been second nature for me. I can barely even think it with the way his mouth moves over mine, my entire brain going blissfully blank as I melt into him. I'm breathless when he pulls back again, and it takes a moment before I can will my eyes to open, still under his spell.

'What do you say we pull a Stella and Thomas and just go get married in Vegas?' I suggest a little dazedly, only half joking at this point.

Zaid's wide smile is the most beautiful sight. 'Whatever you want, princess,' he says. 'As long as I get to be with you.'

He kisses me again and I'm tempted to ask if we can be a little late for the gala, but the sound of Noor starting to fuss drags me back into the present.

'I'll get her,' Zaid insists, gently squeezing my waist before stepping to the side and then bending to scoop our six-week-old daughter from the bed. 'That's right, ya hayati. Baba's got you.'

He keeps murmuring as he sways with her, promising that Mama and Baba will be back soon, that her grandmother will be here with her the whole time, that he loves her more than anything in this world. I don't think there's ever been a better sight than the man I love wearing a tuxedo and smiling at our daughter before glancing at me as if to silently ask, *Isn't our life perfect?*

And he's right. We've built a life I only could have dreamed of a year ago.

It's all nothing short of a fairy tale.

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I'm one of those lucky people who got to have not just one mom but two. Mom D, you may not read my books (it's for the best), but I know you're my biggest fan. Thanks for all that you do. I love you more than words can say.

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A Team, thank you for always coming together to rally around me. We need to take another trip ASAP. Hopefully there will be a little less Ed Sheeran this time.

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Read on for an extract from the first book in the Lights Out series

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PROLOGUE
Dev

October – Austin, Texas

I've fucked up. Boy howdy, have I fucked *all* the way up.

My race engineer is in my ear, asking questions like *What happened?* and *Are you okay?* and, most importantly, *How much damage did the car sustain?* I need to answer him – need to reassure him and the team that I'm conscious after skidding through gravel and hitting a barrier at nearly a hundred miles an hour. For now, they'll have to trust my vitals displayed on the pit wall computer screens, because I can't seem to form the words to tell them. Not because there's anything physically wrong with me. It's just that my brain is . . . not present. It's taking a day off. Fully out to goddamn lunch. And it's not because of the crash.

'Dev?' Branny's voice breaks through the fog, his concern deep and clear over the radio. 'Can you hear me? Are you okay? Repeat, are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' I choke out, still clutching the steering wheel. My knuckles are probably white underneath my gloves. 'Car's done, though. I'm sorry, everyone. This is on me.'

Like any good engineer, he'll want to question what the problem was, but he knows better than to ask it over the team radio where anyone in the world could be listening. It'll wait until the debrief, and then I can get my ass handed to me by our CEO, our team principal and my lead mechanic. And I'll deserve it, because this really was on me.

This was no fault of the car, the track surface, another driver, or a force of nature. No, I committed a mortal sin while behind the wheel.

I got distracted.

It shouldn't have happened. It's *never* happened in all my years of racing, and certainly not during the five I've spent in Formula 1. I've never let my

mind wander so far that I braked too late and lost the back end. I barely had time to react before coming to a bone-shuddering stop in the barriers.

‘Turn the car off and come back to the pit,’ Branny instructs.

I do what I’m told before I ruin anything else. I can only imagine what the TV commentators will have to say as they discuss the possible reasons for my crash. I can practically hear them saying, *It’s such a disappointment, but what matters is that he’s okay.*

But I’m not okay. I’m far from it. I screwed up big time – and I don’t mean the crash.

I can’t stop thinking about it, even as I pull myself out of my ruined car and walk away from millions of dollars of damage. If I’m being honest with myself, things may never be okay again.

Because I kissed Willow Williams last night. And now I’m a dead man walking.

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CHAPTER 1
Willow

Seven months later, May – New York City

I've nearly set my apartment on fire. Again.

Making macarons should not be this hard. They're small and cute, and the recipe calls for super simple ingredients – it's just egg whites, almond flour and sugar. So why, oh *why*, can't I make a single batch without completely messing up?

'Oh no, oh shit,' I mumble as I snatch an oven mitt off the counter and pull out the now-smoking confection. According to the timer, they shouldn't be done for another five minutes, and yet these are nearly burnt to a crisp. Either the recipe was wrong about the baking temperature, or my oven was sent straight from hell. I'm betting on the latter.

I'm desperate to recreate the infamous Stella Margaux Bakery's classic macaron because, as of a month ago, New York City's one location closed for renovations, and I simply can't live without them. The news was enough to make me consider moving back to the West Coast, where there's a Stella's practically every hundred feet.

Then again, I might not have a choice about returning to San Diego to live with my family if I can't find a job in the next couple of months. I came to New York four years ago for college and had plans to stay for possibly the rest of my life. My education was bankrolled by my amazing parents, with the stipulation that after graduation, I'd support myself. Truthfully, they'd have no problem continuing to help me, and they absolutely have the means, but it's the principle of it all. I made a promise, and I plan to keep it. I just didn't think it would be this difficult.

I busted my ass during undergrad with a double major in communications and sports marketing, a minor in English, and a new internship every semester. With all that experience, I thought it would be easy to find a full-

time position working in the marketing department of a professional sports team – a.k.a. my dream job. But after dozens of flat-out ignored applications, zero callbacks after interviews, and endless *we'll be in touch* lies, I'm still unemployed.

It would be so much worse if I'd graduated ages ago instead of just last week, but I've been applying for positions for months now, hoping to have a job in place by the time I was handed my diploma. My brother landed one in his field months before graduation, so I figured there was no reason I couldn't do the same.

Ha. Joke's on me, because here I am with no job, a dwindling sum in my bank account, and a two-hour drive from the closest Stella Margaux's. This is not what I call *living my best life*. But damn if I'm not trying.

'What's on fire?' Chantal asks from the doorway to the kitchen, grimacing at the smell.

I sigh and move to open the window, sparing a glance back at my roommate as I do. 'My hopes and dreams.'

'Figured. Smells awful.'

Can't argue with that.

'This is the fourth batch I've ruined today,' I lament as I shuffle over to her. Seeking comfort, I rest my temple against her upper arm. It's not quite her shoulder, since I'm five-foot-nothing and she's a six-foot-one angel. 'The first ones weren't sweet enough.

The second ones were flat as crepes. The third were under baked, and these are—'

'On fire.'

'*Singed*,' I correct, pulling back and giving her a warning look.

I can't be too mad, though, because they *were* kind of on fire at one point. 'I can't get it right and I don't know what I'm doing wrong.'

'Take a break,' Chantal instructs. Her tone is firm, but there's a tenderness in it. 'You can try again tomorrow.'

She's right, and I'll absolutely pick myself up and dust myself off for yet another attempt, just like I always do. But she knows my frustration isn't just about macarons. She knows how badly I want my life to be perfect and how upset it makes me that I'm struggling to pull it off. As my roommate

since our freshman year, she's witnessed plenty of my highs and lows, and is well-versed in all my hopes and dreams. I'm lucky that her own dream job as a financial analyst – go figure – is keeping her in New York, because I don't know what I'd do without her.

'I'll order takeout so no one has to enter this disaster zone,' she says, pulling her phone out of the back pocket of her denim shorts that showcase her long, deep-brown legs. 'And check your phone, would you? It keeps buzzing in your room, and it's driving me nuts.'

I flash her a bashful smile. 'Sorry. I didn't want to get distracted, so I left it in there.'

She cocks a brow playfully. 'You mean you didn't want to risk dropping it in the batter again.'

My face flames at the mention of that specific baking attempt. 'It only happened one time!'

She flips her braids over one shoulder as she strolls out of the kitchen, the delicate beads at the ends clicking together as she goes. I helped her pick them out last week, the gold and deep azure perfect for the warming temperatures, and one last hurrah before she starts her new job and has to have a 'professional' hairstyle. It'd be great if the world could stop telling Black girls what's appropriate when it comes to our hair, but today is not that day.

Sighing, I undo my apron and hang it on the hook by the window. The pastel-pink cotton flutters in the warm breeze, silently mocking me and my failure. I don't even bother looking at the charbroiled macarons as I leave the kitchen and pad down the narrow hallway to my bedroom.

I pass Grace's open door along the way, catching a snippet of the conversation she's having on the phone. Judging from the occasional groan and the (very few) words in Cantonese I understand thanks to the lessons she's given me over the years, she's talking to her mother. She's probably assuring her that she won't miss her flight to Hong Kong tomorrow, which she's done twice before.

She gives me a finger wave as I walk by, and I blow her a kiss in return before slipping into my room next door. The sun streams in through my gauzy curtains, casting short shadows across my desk. My phone sits on the

surface, wedged between a few skincare products and a mug full of glitter gel pens. The screen is dark, but when I scoop it up, a litany of texts and missed calls, all from my brother, greets me.

Most people would assume there'd been some kind of emergency, but this is just how Oakley operates. If he can't get ahold of me – or anyone, for that matter – on his first attempt, he'll keep calling and texting until they pick up. There's no subtlety with him.

I don't bother looking at any of the twenty texts. They're probably just emojis and the sentence *pick up!!!!* over and over again. Instead, I tap his name and put the phone to my ear, flopping onto my ruffled duvet to stare out the window at the brick apartment building across the street.

'Took you long enough,' Oakley grumbles when he answers.

'I was busy,' I say vaguely. If I confess my baking catastrophe to him, he'll never let me live it down. 'What's up?'

'Do you want to go to Monaco?'

Another thing about my brother – he doesn't beat around the bush.

I'm used to it, but the question still throws me. 'Monaco?' I repeat. 'Like, the country?'

'*Yes*, Willow, the country,' he mocks. 'Keep up.'

I roll my eyes, mentally flipping him a middle finger. 'God, I was just checking.'

'So?' I can imagine him prompting me by circling his hand in the air, ever impatient. 'You interested or not?'

'I mean, yeah,' I reply, even though I'm suspicious of the offer. 'Who wouldn't be? But why are you even asking?'

'Because I'm going next week and thought you might want to tag along. Plus, it's a race weekend, and—'

My snort interrupts him. 'I should have known this was a motor-sport thing.'

As a teenager, my brother's life revolved around kart racing, which led to a successful but short-lived career in Formula 3. In the end, he gave it up to have a 'normal' life and went off to college. Personally, I wouldn't have given up the opportunity to be a professional athlete for anything. But that's the difference between Oakley and me – he had options in life. I didn't.

‘*And*,’ Oakley barges on, ‘my company is hosting a huge event. I figured you might want to schmooze with athletes, then watch the race from the paddock. I’ve got passes, courtesy of SecDark.’

Part of that ‘normal’ college experience for Oakley involved studying cybersecurity. He was recruited during the fall semester of his senior year by one of the leading companies in the industry, SecDark Solutions, and has worked for them ever since.

The business was so successful that they’d recently branched out into sponsoring various sports teams and athletes, a Formula 1 team among them, which would explain the party and paddock passes. If I wasn’t so proud of my brother for working his way up the ranks of such a flourishing company, I’d be jealous as hell.

But considering I’m being offered perks from his wins, I can’t complain that he’s doing better than me.

‘I know you’re not having the easiest time finding a job,’ he says before I can ask more about the event, ‘but this could be a good opportunity for you to network. You haven’t given up on the sports marketing dream, have you?’

Rolling onto my side, I pull my knees up to my chest. I’m more embarrassed by Oakley’s gentleness than I would be if he was making fun of me for still being unemployed.

A career related to sports has always been my dream. I grew up loving baseball and basketball, loved going to games with Oakley and our father, loved the electric energy of a crowd cheering for their favourite team. I was hooked from the second Dad took my hand and led me into my first stadium. There was no going back after that.

I wanted to be like the people on the field and the court. I wanted to run bases and make half-court shots. I wanted to hear my name chanted, to have it echo throughout the stands and beat in the hearts of fans.

Unfortunately, my body kept that dream from ever becoming a reality. Even though it took years and countless doctors to get a diagnosis of hypermobility, I knew early on that I was different from other kids. That I’d never get to do some of the same activities they did. My baseball career ended after a dislocated shoulder during my first tee-ball lesson, and

basketball was simply out of the question thanks to all the running and sudden stops that my unstable knees couldn't handle. Being an athlete just wasn't in the cards for me.

So, after years of watching and learning from the sidelines, I figured sports marketing was the next best thing. I could still be immersed in a world that brought me joy, and I could share that joy with others. At least, I could if I got a job.

'No, I haven't given up.' I sigh. 'I'm still waiting to hear back from a few places.'

'Then come to Monaco in the meantime,' he wheedles. 'Like I said, the event will be perfect for networking. Or, fuck it, just consider it a vacation on my dime. A joint graduation gift and a super early birthday present.'

'All in one?' I drawl. 'Wow, you're *so* kind.'

'Let's be real. I'm only offering because Mom made me.'

'So, I should be thanking her for this invitation and not you?' 'Semantics,' he says, dismissing my comment. Then he launches back into his pitch. 'Just think of all the people you'll meet. You know how many athletes and their teams will be at this party? If you don't end up with a job offer at the end of the night, I'll cliff dive off the coast.'

I snicker. 'You'll do that even if I get an offer.' We both inherited the adrenaline-junkie gene. I just know better than to act on mine.

'Probably,' he concedes. 'But seriously, Wills. This is a great opportunity. And you don't even have to lift a finger. I'll handle everything.'

I roll onto my back and study the ceiling, twisting the hem of my sundress between my fingers. 'You promise it's worth my time?' I hedge, but excitement is already starting to bloom in my chest. 'I don't want to be away for too long and miss out on an interview.'

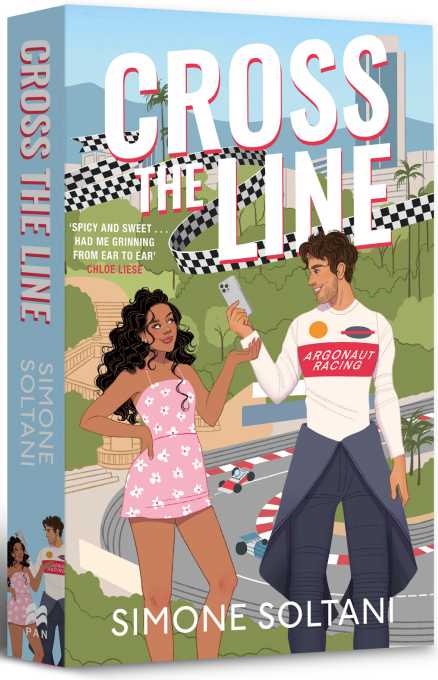
'I promise. You can fly in on Wednesday and fly back Monday morning.'

Blowing out a breath, I mull it over. He's right. It could be an excellent networking opportunity. And who wouldn't want to spend a few days in one of the coolest places in the world? Besides, who am I to turn down a free trip?

'Okay, fine,' I blurt before my brain can catch up. 'Take me to Monaco.'

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CONTINUE READING *CROSS THE LINE*



Formula 1 driver Dev Anderson's career is on the line. Recent college grad Willow Williams needs a job.

After a social media disaster leaves Dev with an angry team, he needs someone to help save his image. At a party in Monaco, he bumps into Willow, the woman who can fix it all. There's just one problem: she's his best friend's little sister. Okay, two problems: they kissed last year and neither of them has been able to stop thinking about it since.

Willow and Dev are determined to keep things strictly professional. But, in the glittering, high-stakes world of Formula 1, some lines are meant to be crossed . . .

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‘Exhilarating, fun and impossible to put down!’
Stephanie Archer, author of The Vancouver Storm series



Stella Baldwin thought life couldn’t get any worse.
Thomas Maxwell-Brown is just looking for a good time.

Being left at the altar was bad enough for Stella, but having to show up at her cousin’s bachelorette party in Las Vegas barely two weeks later feels like a cruel joke. Then she meets Thomas, a Formula 1 driver looking to decompress, and things start looking up.

Stella isn’t the woman Thomas expects to meet that night. And Thomas isn’t the man Stella expects to wake up next to the following morning – with a ring on her finger. Sometimes, what happens in Vegas doesn’t need to stay there . . .

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About the Author

Simone Soltani is a romance author and former ghost writer for a serialized fiction platform. Born and raised in Washington, DC, she holds a BA in Geography from the George Washington University, which she likes to think comes in handy for world-building in her novels. When she's not writing, she spends most of her time planning vacations she'll probably never get to go on, reorganizing her many bookshelves, and watching sports while cuddling with her dogs.

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