



Slipstream

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Category: Sport

Description: In the high-speed world of Formula 1, documentarian Lilah teams up with racing driver Arthur Bianco for a whirlwind of revenge—and perhaps something more.

Lilah Graywood never imagined she'd be spending her summer amidst the roaring engines and adrenaline-fueled world of Formula 1 racing. As a serious documentarian, her passion lies in capturing the raw, unfiltered truth. But when her best friend, business co-owner, and secret boyfriend Max decides to pivot their documentary company to film the Ignition Energy Drink Racing team, Lilah is thrust into a world she despises. Her disdain turns to fury when Max blindsides her, not only ending their relationship but also threatening the company she painstakingly built.

Enter Arthur Bianco, the charismatic and enigmatic F1 reserve driver whose career is as tumultuous as the races he dreams of winning. Initially, Lilah is supposed to document Arthur's relegation to backup driver, but together they concoct a plan to take control of Max's documentary, each with their own motives—Lilah's revenge and Arthur's redemption. Their secret alliance promises to change the narrative, both on and off the track.

As they navigate the glamorous circuits and behind-the-scenes secrets of Formula 1, an unexpected speedbump forces Lilah and Arthur's partnership to evolve into a fake relationship that feels all too real. The chemistry between them is off-limits and undeniable, and as Arthur's cinematic comeback plays out over the hot globe-trotting summer, Lilah finds herself drawn to his true charm and hidden vulnerability. But as the cameras roll and the world watches, Lilah must confront her own feelings and the reality that no script can dictate the course of true love.

Slipstream is a captivating tale of love, revenge, and the unexpected turns life takes. With its blend of humor, heart, and high-speed drama, this contemporary romance is a must-read for anyone who believes in the power of second chances and the thrill of the chase.

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Chapter One United States

Stories sell. People think of directors and screenwriters as the ultimate storytellers—human gods shaping real life into fables. But really it's me, the camera. A documentary is where metalworkers become heroes and empty store shelves become plot. Veterans in vacant fields, tiny pageant queens, real life made better. Documentarians can't promise our subject matter will stay neat and pretty after the credits roll; after all, happily ever after doesn't exist in real life.

But for a moment there, at the end of a documentary? My movies can trick you into thinking that the world makes sense.

And that's a story people want to buy.

"Hey, it's me again. I managed to find a cab, so now I'm standing out front of this... building." I blow a strand of hair from my face and squint at the intimidatingly large locked gate. "Can you text me the code to get in? I can't find it in the email."

I end the voicemail to my boyfriend, Max Black. Then I wait. And wait. He must be busy—like me, he can get distracted—so I swallow my pride and press the call button to the front office. "Lilah Graywood from Black people are likelier to invest in us if they aren't worried we're about to break up. His idea.

The woman takes my hand with a fluorescent smile. "It's so lovely to finally meet you. I'm Sarah, marketing manager here at Ignition and who Max has been emailing with since last... gosh, how long has it been now? December?" She looks at him with an equally cheery grin, almost conspiratorial, like they had to email their life stories

back and forth to arrange for this production. “Our team principal, Holmes Bianco, adores your documentary about the congressman. The one who cheated on his wife? He couldn’t stop raving about how great you made him look!”

Naturally. The big boss man of a sports team would enjoy an accidental image scrub. “I, um, didn’t realize people would be that sympathetic toward him after watching it.”

“You made him human. You have a gift. If you ever want to get away from this guy and into marketing”—Sarah winks—“we’d love having you as a videographer.”

I force a smile. She’s being nice. She doesn’t know that to me, filming expensive race cars and the problematic men who drive them feels like a personal failing. “Hey, no poaching my camera girl,” Max laughs, and now my smile is real. It’s one of our inside jokes: He’s the heart of Black it isn’t appropriate for a documentarian to talk back or show that we’re humans with emotions, too. But none of this is normal, and hopefully my time in Texas will be very short-lived. Might as well be the one person per calendar year who treats this man like a privileged asshole instead of a god.

“Dang, you caught me. I don’t know Formula 1. Please, tell me all about driving cars super fast on TV.”

Actually, this might be the first time in Arthur’s life that someone dared to be sarcastic in his presence, since he lets out a noise that’s half surprised laugh, half infuriated huff. “You think Formula 1 is just driving fast.”

“It’s not?” I think back to what Max told me. Weird-looking cars, unnecessarily spread-apart competitions, a convoluted set of racing rules mystifyingly called the “formula.”

“It’s...” Arthur is silent for a beat, thoughts twisting behind his guarded expression. “When was the last time you felt alive? Not existing. Not breathing. Alive.”

His question grinds my sarcasm to a halt. That, and the intensity in his gaze. His eyes are uncomfortably hazel. Green with mostly golden brown, like an old bourbon bottle held up to a sunbeam, left on the shelf to age.

“I don’t know,” I answer, defaulting to honesty like always. I’m not used to being on the receiving end of probing questions. “Let me guess, you’re going to tell me that you feel alive when you drive in circles and everyone claps?”

Arthur blinks at me, tiny reflections of my irritated face disappearing and reappearing from his pupils. Then he looks at my mouth, for a second that unspools for hours. Then he looks over my shoulder. “Are you dating him? That guy you’re with. Is he why you’re here?”

I swallow roughly and avert my gaze, too. No. He didn’t just—there’s no way this guy is perceptive enough to clock that Max and I are together. He’s probably just another sexist athlete who assumes I’m here to please a man. And while that’s not necessarily untrue, I’d rather eat my vintage camera collection than admit it.

I force my eyes back on Arthur’s scowl and say, “I’m not answering that question.”

“So it’s a yes.”

“It’s a nothing.”

“Right.” His scowl deepens. “You don’t want me to know your personal life.”

“Correct?”

“And yet you’re here to film mine,” he says with a crisp note of self-righteousness. “All of you media people are the same. You sweep in, sell a bit of our souls, and leave. At least Sarah’s grandfather was a driver. She makes an image for me because

she loves racing.”

Woof. This is exactly why I need to talk Max out of making this film. After living half a decade in D.C. and clawing my way for respect in one industry that idealizes toxic masculinity, I know the work that goes into making your own seat at a table that doesn’t want you. Sports is a boys’ club, too. Arthur Bianco, with his eye-rolling and uncle connection, is no different than the congressman I’d filmed, who’d thanked his male mentors during his election-night speech while my camera had been glued to his wife’s happy tears.

I adjust my glasses and decide that a stronger approach is necessary, slipping on my best and iciest documentarian demeanor. The Lilah who manhandles politicians. Wins awards. Gone is my quiet sputtering, a bubbling-over teakettle right before it starts whistling. I’m all boil now.

“Fine. I hear you,” I say. “You feel as if I have power over you in here, and that you haven’t consented to being in this film. But you need to talk to your team, not me. Because you’re rich, yes?”

Arthur blinks. “I... yes.”

I nod, unsurprised. “And famous?”

He frowns.

“So you still have all the power in real life. My—Max, he signed the contract for us. Unless I’m able to change his mind, I can’t stop making this movie.”

“Your Max,” Arthur echoes, parroting my slipup.

“Mm-hmm. My Max.”

His throat bobs, sending a droplet of water running down, down, down his neck, his collarbone, his bare chest. “You never answered my question,” he says. “Do you like Formula 1?”

Had that been the question? “Oh. Well.” I shrug and look away so he can’t see the hurt circling around my throat like a sad dog begging for attention. No. I’m a vegan Buddhist who hates sports and loves politics and will never own a car. I think this whole facility is a mockery of the human condition and waste of wealth, along with this reality TV sham of a documentary. Along with, probably, your entire life. And clearly, that doesn’t matter to the one man who matters to me.

“I don’t think I could ever enjoy a sport where—”

I’m winding myself back up for verbal sparring round two, only then Arthur whispers, “Quiet.” And I’m quiet.

“Hello, my new favorite duo! Did we have fun getting to know each other?”

Sarah’s back with her clipboard and her bouncing ponytail, and I realize that if Arthur hadn’t cut me off, she’d have heard whatever I was going to say about Formula 1. Which would’ve been bad. If I don’t act like I’m standing in the Pentagon, every little thought in my little head dedicated to safeguarding this race-car driver’s precious public image, Sarah might sniff out that my intentions aren’t pure. And I need to be the one to talk to Max, not her.

And I will. I’m going to stop hiding what I really think from him and tell him the truth. That selling out was a mistake, and we belong in D.C., together, doing important work—even if we never make millions or land a Netflix deal or whatever it is that he’s after. Even if I have to withstand being his girlfriend, because that’s what he decided one day he wanted me to be. He’s still my best friend. My only friend. And having a friend like him, who teaches me how to be me, is a one-way ticket out

of never staring at a porch light again.

I will fix this.

“We’ve been having a blast,” I promise Sarah, ignoring Arthur’s incessant frown.

“Gosh, that’s awesome.” She giggles. “You guys are going to be perfect for each other, I swear.”

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Chapter Two

Max's phone is off for the rest of the evening, my "can we talk please" texts going unread. So the next morning, I haul my iced coffee onto the stoop of my new apartment building and do the one thing Sarah asked me not to do.

I research Arthur Bianco.

Chalk it up to natural curiosity... and needing a backup plan in case I do have to get through a few days of filming. It's eight a.m.—not too hot yet—and condensation drips down my fingers as I tap through his train-wreck documentary interviews, carefully filed away on Ignition's server. Every question, any angle, Arthur shuts down the conversation. He's marginally polite at first, allowing Sarah to go so far as setting up a nice talking-head angle with him in a chair, the tacky key-shaped Ignition logo blurred behind him. Then she asks for him to say his name and he stares back at the camera, an empty smile fixed on his face.

And the articles . The press has lovingly and expertly torn Arthur Bianco to shreds. Running an internet search on his name yields half a billion results, give or take. I click through the childhood driving prodigy years, the seven-year stint with Leone Racing— that Leone, the luxury sports cars nobody can afford—then stumble on a treasure trove of Party Prince Arthur. So many photos of him in clubs, massive and hazy-smiling, a cocktail in one hand and his other arm around two models. According to the tabloids, this twenty-nine-year-old man is an international heartbreaker; there's one story about a champagne-brand heiress who was so bereft that he couldn't commit, she told her family she'd never touch alcohol again. It reminds her too much of him, says the unnamed source.

True love, right there.

Briefly, I wonder why Arthur doesn't want to be in the glitz-glam-danger movie. He's been in commercials. Magazine spreads. It isn't like he's camera shy. I wonder what his angle is; as Tolstoy put it, each overly controlling man is controlling in his own way. And being in a documentary does cleave you of a certain amount of agency. He'd be putting his life story into my hands—does he not trust people he doesn't know well? Or is there a reason I wasn't supposed to research him?

“Hey, new girl.”

I look up at the voice. An older woman in a striped dress is on her balcony, next to a withered tomato plant. She smiles and motions for me to walk closer.

“Did you just move in?” she yells down.

Good lord, the pipes on her. I clear my throat. She's on the second-floor balcony of the studio next to mine—so time to yell.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you from?”

“Kentucky, then D.C.”

She nods and wipes the back of her hand across her forehead. The heat must be worse for her. “Do you need any help with your plants?” I say loudly. “If it's ever too bad this summer, let me know. I used to garden back home. I could hop to your balcony from mine.”

She waves that idea away. “I'll give you a key.”

We talk for a while more. I learn her name is Lucia, and that she'd moved to Glory Run to be closer to her grandchildren. Like me, she lives alone. "Are you sure about that, though?" she asks when I tell her I don't know anyone in this town yet.

"Positive," I say, cracking a real smile for what feels like the first time in weeks. "Honestly, I'm not sure how long I'll be living here."

"I figured as much."

That isn't my neighbor's voice. In fact, that's a soft bass my suddenly pounding heart recognizes. I turn and find Max standing on the scraggly front yard of my run-down apartment building. "Hey," I say, lighting up. I always do when he's around.

He does not light up. "Can I come in?"

Reading people by how they present themselves is the documentarian's curse. Appearances are like personal billboards. Designer clothing, squeaky-clean shoes, wearing a watch when everyone has clocks in their pockets. People scream stories about themselves, begging us to listen to what they don't want to say out loud.

This morning, Max's scruffy appearance is screaming, Danger .

We're inside my apartment. Note the word my. We'd been able to get away with living together in D.C.—everyone needs roommates there—but Glory Run is ninety minutes of solid traffic away from Austin, there's nothing to do if you don't work for Ignition, and rent costs two nickels and a salute to the American Flag. Of course, I'd reassured Max that it was fine. I'd gone from college dorm roommates to splitting a cheap studio with him, and haven't lived alone since my birth mom's periodic vanishing acts. In a way, I'd kind of liked the idea of decorating this tiny apartment however I'd like. It'd been fun. Feminist, even.

Max eyes the Laughing Buddha–print tea towel hanging off my stove as I hand him a mug of black coffee. It’s one of the only things I’ve unpacked.

“Thanks,” he says.

I take the chair across from him. “Need any sugar?”

“Not today.”

“Oh.” I shift in my seat. He always takes sugar. “Cool, yeah.”

He looks tired. His sleepy puppy dog expression hasn’t changed a bit since we were in college and I had to explain calculus to him so he wouldn’t flunk his Gen Ed. His long black eyelashes crisscross in front of his exhausted brown eyes, the same color as mine and barely visible beneath waves of dark hair he never learned to manage.

“Lilah,” he says after a record-breaking stretch of silence.

“Max,” I reply, trying to smile. I’m nervous. I don’t know why, but I am so nervous.

“This feels kind of impossible to say.”

“So just say it.” I laugh, then stop as his eyes flash. He hates my nervous giggling. You’re always laughing at me.

“Okay. I’ll say it.” Max circles his thumb over the top of the mug, slow, steady circles that should relax my heartbeat but don’t. “There’s someone else.”

“Someone else,” I repeat back, not understanding. “Like, in the apartment?”

“No. Someone else... to me. I’ve been, you know. God, it’s so weird to say this out

loud.” He trails off, and I follow his sentence into silence. Because my brain isn’t working, isn’t beeping the right beeps and booping the right neurons, and this isn’t an ADHD medication issue since I took that this morning. This is dread, all natural.

Then, all at once, every single brain cell I have fires. “Are you cheating on me?”

Max’s puppy dog expression stalls out somewhere between sweet relief and horrible frustration. “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to. It just... happened.”

“Who? What? How?” I stare at the overpriced Criterion Collection logo on the coffee mug in front of him. Debate the pros and cons of smashing it against his phone.

“It’s, she’s... you know Sarah, who you met yesterday?”

He keeps talking. I watch his mouth shape the words. Sarah. I do know Sarah. I remember every bouncy swish of her ponytail, how she’d glanced at him for approval, how marketing-nice she’d been to me. Then I’m thinking about bubble tea. Max and I would always grab them before our night classes, buzzed on sugar and the idea of living out our dreams. We got coffee when we watched *The Big Lebowski*, brownies burning to a crisp in his oven. And that time I showed him how to sew the rip in his favorite sweatshirt, his big fingers fumbling the needle so many times that we’d cried laughing. Thrifted picture frames, rain boots, drafting documentary proposals, unstoppable together. Nobody else knows me like he does.

And he cheated on me.

“Does she know about me?” I say, interrupting whatever speech he’d been giving.

How many times have I seen Max rake his hand through his hair and let out a gigantic, frustrated sigh? Sometimes, it’s my favorite thing he does. “No,” he says, raking, sighing. “And I know this makes me the worst person in the world, but...

things would be better off if she didn't."

"You don't want to tell her that you cheated on me with her," I clarify. Slowly.

He gives me that little smile that used to bend me in half. "Yeah?"

Swallowing, I almost taste the milk-tea sugar on my tongue. There's one question I haven't asked yet. I know I don't want to ask it. But I also know that in approximately thirty minutes, once Max has inevitably left, I'm going to spiral into the cigarette-stained carpet unless I muster the courage to confirm my worst fears. This one question is standing between me and the depression moving in faster than a storm front.

"Why?" I whisper. "Why her? Why... why did you wait until I'd moved here?"

His mouth wobbles like he's chewing the inside of his cheek, as if he's the one withstanding an endless time loop of emotional land mines. "I didn't mean to be this shitty, okay? It's just... she's fun. She actually laughs at my jokes, and likes Marvel movies, and likes to wear makeup—"

"I told you I'd learn how to put it on if you wanted me to—"

"I don't want you to." Max sighs. "I want someone who already wants the same things I do. I don't have to make her like Formula 1 or make her listen to good music or make her be normal."

Like he has to with me. Had to, until today. His unspoken words send a lasso around that depression storm front and yank it closer. "I know you, Lilah. I know you only agreed to do Ignition's movie for us, and that you were probably planning on getting me to quit somehow. That means there shouldn't be an us." Max stresses that final word. Us. "We've grown apart, and this is what I want to do."

Red-hot humiliation sends a wave of heat over my face. I can't stand it when he knows something I don't, the obvious things, the social cues I miss. Here I was, determined to talk Max out of making this colossal career mistake, dreaming about moving back to D.C. together, and he's been secretly fine-tuning his brand-new life with his brand-new work girlfriend. It was never going to happen. He never would've listened to my concerns or dropped off this project now.

It was already over. I just hadn't known it.

"You could've broken it off while I was in D.C." My voice is a shredded whisper, burning its way out of my throat. "I'd still have my normal life there."

"Well, not really." Max looks down, worrying his lower lip. "That's the other thing I wanted to talk about. The company... we kind of started it in my name."

My body does that funny dream thing. You know how when you're almost asleep, and then your entire muscular structure tenses because you feel like you're about to slam into the sidewalk from a fifteen-story drop?

That.

"No, our company is Black & Graywood. We both own it."

Max has the audacity to look apologetic. "I started the LLC. Technically, everything belongs to me, including the name. Remember? You'd been swamped our senior year, and I offered to handle the paperwork."

I think I know where this is going and I can't breathe. "Don't," I say, somehow managing words of all things. "We should shut the company down, then. If we aren't, if you don't, if this is it, then Black & Graywood should be done. You can't take my last name from me."

Max's eyes harden. "I don't want to do that. But Lilah, I'm—sorry—I'm firing you."

Done. No more breathing. His words sting like a slap across the face, but more than anything, more than the embarrassment and anger and pure, sickening panic, I hate that I hadn't put this together myself sooner. Silly me, for trusting my male partner to keep my best interests in mind while filing business paperwork. Whoops for thinking that a global sports conglomerate had pursued a co-woman-owned documentary company strictly because they admired our political work. My thoughts don't stop there, either. Who reached out to who first, Max or Sarah? Over which email chain sitting in the Black & Graywood inbox did my demise begin? There had to have been signs this was coming. Zoom meetings. Calendar invites. I know we haven't been overjoyed and in love lately, but our career is hard. Max was the one who'd begged me to date him.

And now he's dumping me for another woman and stealing the business I built. And my name. Doesn't he know how much it means to me to be a Graywood, after sixteen years of waiting for my birth mom to want me? I barely feel like I deserve the name.

"You can't fire me. I'm on contract with the team," I try. "They want me to film Arthur."

"Again, Black & Graywood is on contract. I signed everything as the business. I'll text you a screenshot of the paperwork if you don't trust me." Max is slipping into annoyed. He's done with this conversation already, and frustrated that I'm somehow not, somehow clinging with my claws sunk into my life. "Also, I already let Sarah know you're off the project. She's sad, but she understands. She knew you weren't an F1 fan. I mean shit, Lilah, you can't even drive."

"I know how to drive."

“You don’t have your license.”

“I’m just... not good at parking—”

“Same difference.”

The ringing in my ears has turned into buzzing, and the longer Max is sitting at my kitchen table, surrounded by my unpacked life, the louder it gets. “Maybe you’re right. But can’t we just go back to being friends? I get not wanting to date me. I wouldn’t want to, either. But this, the business... Max, we make great films together. Please. Don’t throw that away.”

Me. Don’t throw me away.

Max’s frown widens as we grow quiet again, and it’s such a silly little thing, how much I wish my best friend was smiling at me instead. But I don’t know who else I can talk to about this except for Max. My birth mom had never been able to handle having a kid, let alone a neurodivergent one, and my birth dad had left the picture so quickly, there wasn’t a trace of him in our house. No photos. Gone. And Max is the last person who met me as that nervous, traumatized foster kid, with my new college textbooks and glittery dreams. He saw parts of me that nobody else ever will, those final wispy moments of my childhood before I became a real person. Making other friends—letting anyone else in—would mean having to reopen the wound and share that pain again.

And... I’d thought I’d gotten better. I’d thought that maybe, when I’d grown up and become a successful person, and Max had taken me under his wing and made me as palatable as possible, I’d somehow become less disposable. Because the terrible truth is that losing my birth parents had been like watching wind rip dandelion fluff from the stem—natural. A little expected.

Losing my best friend is unfathomable.

“Jesus, this is exactly why we can’t work together anymore. You never let anything go.” Max rakes his hair back and sighs sharply. “I don’t want to make sad docs about creepy old politicians anymore.”

“But we won awards.”

“Winning isn’t all that matters.”

“But—”

“I know you don’t want to be like your mom, dude, but seriously. Let it go.”

Tears. I’m officially crying. “That’s a low fucking blow,” I say, grabbing a napkin and twisting so he can’t see my red face.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. Tears always hit him right in the feelings, though he’s trying to stay in his anger. “Think of it this way. This can be positive for the both of us. We’ve become completely different people as we’ve gotten older. I’m going to make the sickest movie about Formula 1 ever, and you can do whatever weird artsy shit you want to.”

Everyone has certain words they never want to hear. For Max, it’s that he’s ugly. He isn’t, of course. He’s ridiculously striking, a Norman Rockwell painting animated into life. But his knees and arms grew before the rest of him, and getting called gangly and awkward for years warped him into a man who desperately craves positive attention. Even now, in the thick of the worst I’ve ever felt, I understand why he’d cheated. He couldn’t not. With a sporty, fun woman who admires his work, it was game over.

My fatal flaw—the words that secretly kill me? Mom, different, weird. And he’s used them all.

I swallow back acid so I can speak. “Can you just go now? Please?”

Max is on his feet instantly, coffee abandoned. “Okay.”

I almost wish he’d ask if we can talk in a few days, try to schedule closure that I could sneer and reject, but... he doesn’t. Nor does he ask what I’m going to do now that I have nothing. Max goes to the front door of my brand-new apartment and leaves with a creak, then a click. I kind of wish the door would fall off its hinges, too. Explode. My best friend of six years breaking up with me, firing me, then leaving me in a new town—no, an entirely new state—merits a more dramatic exit.

But this is real life, not a movie, and real life is quiet when it destroys your dreams.

So I lean against the door. Feel the wood against my back. And breathe, in for five, out for five.

Then I look at my phone.

It’s 8:30 a.m. on a Tuesday. I was supposed to be at the Ignition practice facility at nine so I could start filming Arthur. My argumentative, self-centered, womanizing documentary subject, who’d seemed hell-bent on making my life at Ignition unfathomably difficult. Normally, I’d call a subject to let them know I can’t make our scheduled time, but the idea of speaking to another man who wants to hurt me is pretty unappealing right now.

What is appealing, though, is getting out of this apartment. And this town. And Texas.

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Chapter Three

There isn't a coffee shop within walking distance, only a dimly lit dive bar somehow actually named The Affair. If I'd been wondering whether or not the universe was getting a kick out of my life today, that cosmic joke has been confirmed.

"Another coffee?" the bartender asks. She can't be old enough to serve me anything else. I'm twenty-four. She's a literal infant.

"Hit me," I say, then frown. "Weird phrase."

"At least you didn't call me sweetheart," she says with a small smile. "You're the nicest person I'll get all day."

"What a shame."

As I thumb between my bank account, a plane ticket website, and the online marketplace where I just listed my apartment for sublease, the baby bartender leans her elbows on the glossy wood top and peers at me. "You okay?" she asks after I've made meaningfully prolonged eye contact with the Lone Star flag in the corner. Ask me what I'm thinking! eye contact.

Also, I'd been crying off and on every ten minutes before sliding into the denial stage of grief, which had to have been disconcerting. "I moved here for my boyfriend yesterday. He cheated on me, broke up with me oh, thirty minutes ago, and fired me from what I thought was our company but, surprise, completely belongs to him."

The bartender's eyes widen. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Well, no. I'm pretty sure I'm in shock. But kind of a fun shock where I want to move away so quickly that his head spins?" It feels good to name the emotion. Strong. See what a head can do without its heart!

"Would tequila help?"

"No thank you." I wave my phone. "Lots of planning to do."

"Word. Let me know if you change your mind." She starts wiping down glasses, and the methodical rub-setdown, rub-setdown does a wonder on the my-life-is-over jitters. "What all do you have to do?"

"At the moment, just get someone to rent my apartment so I can afford a plane ticket back and a hotel for when I get there. He locked me out of the company email and server, where all our files are." I pause, needing a moment after voicing that new truth. "So I have no clue what I'll do once I'm back in D.C., but anything is better than staying here." My jaw is spring-loaded tight. I rub at my cheek and let my shoulders fall. "Sorry. I'm sure this town is cute when your life isn't in pieces."

My new therapist gives me a sympathetic smile. "Don't apologize. Men are dogs. If I could date women, I'd be out."

"I have and they still got me."

She laughs. "Dogs."

She starts to ask another question, only for the bell above the door to jingle and her customer-service instincts to kick in. "Welcome to The Affair," she chirps at the newcomer, and I'm reminded once again that The Affair is the worst name for a bar

in the history of broken pool tables and buzzy neon lighting.

The newcomer sits three creaky stools down from me, and suddenly the bartender is all smiles, the glow on her cheeks her very own neon sign blinking permanently distracted. So much for being the nicest person here all day. “Hey!” she says. “Didn’t think you were coming in.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

Swiveling with a very-subtle creak, I peek at the person. Guy. Blond. His face is in profile, but wow, what a treat. He’s all angles, nose and forehead and chin and oh my God, it’s Arthur Bianco.

I swiftly swivel away.

But we’re still the only two patrons in this bar. When he speaks, it’s to me. “Damn, Graywood. Didn’t think you’d be hitting the bottle this early. I’m impressed.”

I could ignore him. I have things to do. Ample reasons to not engage.

“It’s just coffee,” I mutter.

He snorts. “You’re at a bar at nine in the morning and you’re drinking coffee?”

“Exactly? Are you saying you’re not drinking coffee?”

I can feel his smarmy smile radiating through the air. “Oh, I was going to get blackout drunk.”

My nose wrinkles with disgust. “Charming. And then what?”

“Carmen here”—he nods to the bartender—“was going to be the absolute doll she is and give me a ride to work, where my drunkenness was going to horrify you into quitting the documentary. Great scheme for me, since I get to have breakfast beer. Or, hm, a morning Aperitivo?”

I bark out a laugh. I can’t help it; it’s a horrible plan from top to bottom, considering that he’s a professional athlete and can’t rock up to his cubicle buzzed, hoping Human Resources doesn’t notice. But then my attention snaps over to Arthur’s face, or more accurately, his eyes, and I search for the inappropriate-laughter anger that should be there. Will be there. I’m literally laughing at him.

Only it’s not there. “See? It would’ve worked,” he says, eyes gleaming at his own joke. “You hate me already.”

“I don’t think about you enough to hate you,” I reply. “But dislike? Yes. You’re easy to dislike—”

“Aw, you do think about me.”

“And you don’t need to worry much longer about having me around, by the way, so don’t go getting drunk and blaming me.”

Arthur leans toward me with a barstool cre-ee-eeak that screams for attention. “You’re leaving? Why?”

He must be made out of muscle—typical—because my barstool barely wheezes out a pathetic squeak when I turn toward him. At least he’s dressed today. Green shirt. Black pants. Big frown. He has that air of surprised impatience that beautiful rich people develop in their early twenties, after they’ve graduated from whichever Ivy League their parents paid for and get red-carpet-rolled into a world built just for them. Life is predictable for this man, and when it’s not, he frowns.

“Yes. I’m leaving.”

I sound as annoyed as I feel. He isn’t asking because he actually wants to know what’s going on with me, or if I’m okay, or how hard it is to not slip back into being an angry foster kid, screaming internally about how unfair life is. Arthur Bianco doesn’t want to know how it took my adoptive family’s backwoods Buddhism and morning meditations for the troubled girl to grow into a mostly unflappable adult. No, he just wants to make any woman with a pulse pay attention to him. He’s like the obnoxious student a teacher sits you next to in an attempt to make the boy nicer, sacrificing your education for his.

A quiet, average woman like me not unraveling at Arthur’s attention must be a blow to his ego. It was much more endearing when the bartender was trying to get to know me.

Speaking of. My eyes flash to where she’d been seconds ago, seeking out solidarity, only to find that she’s vanished. Traitor.

Oh well. I take a deep breath. “You know Max Black?”

“Your business partner.”

“You called it. We were dating.”

Arthur’s eyes narrow. “Were dating?”

“As of this morning, we’re not.” I wrap my hands around my coffee, seeking out the dull warmth. “And according to the LLC registration, I didn’t own one half of Black I’d hoped that if I ignored how close it was to me, it might go away. Now the emotions I’ve been running from punch me square in the stomach. Hearing the icy disappointment in Arthur’s voice is affirming, but painful. Someone else knows what

happened to me today—sees the emotional whirlwind twisting inside me, waiting for everything to hit, how much I’ve lost, how my life will never, ever be the same, and it was completely out of my control—and they think it sucks. Sure, this sympathy is coming from someone who probably treats his girlfriends infinitely worse than this, but hey.

“She doesn’t know he was cheating. At least there’s that.”

I wait for Arthur to smile at my sparkling gallows humor, or to start drinking now that he’s confirmed that I’ll be out of his hair as soon as possible. But he does neither. He just looks at me.

“Max is going to keep making the documentary?” he asks.

“Sure seems that way.”

“Then you need to stay,” Arthur says. “Here. You have to stay.”

My eyebrows lift on their own accord. “Excuse me?”

“We could work together.”

“On?”

“Ruining the movie.” He slides from his barstool to the one next to me, and then he’s next to me, intense and determined and so much taller than me that I have to lean back to meet his wild eyes. He’s close, wide, animated as he talks. “Do you know what a reserve driver is?”

“Like a backup quarterback?”

“Right.” He grins. “But I have an offer for a seat on another team. Leone Racing. Italian. The dream. Best in the world.” There are a few more adjectives I miss as I try to remember where I just saw that name—Leone. That was the team he used to drive for, before his headline-making party days. The fancy one. “I have to get out of my contract with Ignition by the end of the season so I can drive for them next year, and I can’t be seen as loyal to Ignition or do any over-the-top media until then. Leone will want to tell my story, to relaunch my career. That’s why I’ve been trying to get out of this documentary.”

“But wouldn’t Leone like the attention a film gets you?” I ask, trying to keep up.

His grin curls higher, clearly satisfied by my question-asking. “F1 already associates me with Ignition, since my dear old uncle decided to become our team principal after I’d signed my contract. If some idiotic film comes out about me and his team, it’ll be all the media talks about for months. Years, if Holmes has his way. Ignition wants this to be the proper F1 blockbuster that finally breaks through the American market. Merchandise, sponsors, hospitality packages—the transition to Leone would be a mess.”

I hadn’t considered the timeline on his end; Max and I were supposed to film through September 1, and then it’d have taken us months to edit the project. If Arthur is trying to get out of his contract by the end of the season—in December, I think—then the documentary would’ve launched at the worst possible time. “Have you told Ignition that you want out of your contract?”

“Told my uncle?” Arthur cocks a brow at me. “No. And you’re not going to, either. Do you know how many seats are available in Formula 1?”

“No?”

“Twenty,” he replies. “This is my one-in-twenty shot in getting to race again for the

team I need to race for. One of their driver's contracts is up. It's now or never."

"Seriously?" I squint at him, not totally buying his sob story. "I would think your fancy uncle would give you a seat at Ignition."

Something passes over Arthur's face, a cloud over the sun. Then the emotion is gone, filed away, and trapped beneath his bouncy smile. "You'd think that."

He's hiding something. That, or Ignition is. I swallow as the thought comes to me, direct, determined, forever surprised by my own instincts. Max always had to hold me back from being a bloodhound, as he called it. When I catch wind that a subject is squirming in front of my camera, hiding the truth from me, I want to distract them from the cut and press the wound when they're not watching, circle like a vulture they don't even spot. Learning things nobody wants you to know is addictive.

And Max isn't here anymore.

"But Ignition stalling my career won't matter if I have you," Arthur continues. "If we ruin this documentary, I'll get to drive with Leone, and you'll get your revenge."

Revenge.

The word makes me scrunch my nose. My glasses slip down a bit, so I scoot them up, and Arthur's excitement suspends as he watches my fingers. Then that moment ends, and his determined expression is back like there was never a distraction.

"I don't know..." I lean farther away from him and sneak a sip of coffee. "Feels like a bad idea."

"Why? Don't you want to keep Max from getting away with this?"

“Yes. But first, I don’t like to be around you. I feel like I can say that now that I’m, you know, fired.”

“And you covered it up so well yesterday,” he jokes. “Don’t worry. The feeling is mutual.”

“Because I don’t like Formula 1?”

“Because you’re a documentarian.” Arthur’s tone is surprisingly even. “And if it wasn’t for this little ex of yours pissing you off, you wouldn’t have spoken to me here. You’d have turned your nose up, remained superior, and walked into work all fake smiles or iron fist, as if you’re the first person who’s thought to make money off me by forcing me to play the same role I’ve been playing my entire life.”

Oh. “But our dislike for each other works to our advantage,” he continues. “Ignition knows I hate the media, and they think you love your career. Nobody will think we’re working together.”

“Fair,” I say, thrown off by everything he just said. But—no time to unpack it. Shock and denial are kind of nice, actually. They keep you moving right along. “I don’t really want revenge, though. I only want to make sure Max can’t keep operating as Black I do need to take out Max if I want to stop him from stealing the company and my last name. Max doesn’t let go of a plan once he’s decided on it. Making a better documentary than him, harder hitting, better researched, more exciting—alongside a real Formula 1 celebrity? That’s my kind of revenge.

And the idea of using this summer to make another film stops the panic rising from my toes to my ankles, up my legs, up my chest. There isn’t another safety net waiting to catch me, no luxury car manufacturers like Leone jumping to help. Nobody just becomes a documentarian when you’re born in a dime-sized Appalachian town where “good jobs” are an hour away, minimum. You have to want it more. Than anyone.

You have to be hungrier and stronger and maybe a little too mean. Plus, my parents had adopted me when I was sixteen, and already used money they didn't have to send me to film school just two years later. I can't go back to them for more help.

If Arthur says no, it'll take me years to fully rebuild my life without Max, prove that I'm a filmmaker in my own right, and figure out a way to fund a project... if I could even afford to stay in the city and keep working in politics.

Arthur said this was a one-in-twenty shot for him. For me, this opportunity might be one in a million.

"Please," I whisper to him. "You help me. I help you. We tolerate each other long enough to ruin a bad movie and make a good one. Then you get to race for Leone, and I get to go back to D.C. with a great new film."

Somehow, Arthur might be as desperate to salvage his career as I am, because he only stares at me for a few more tense moments. Then he holds out his hand, his expression unreadable. "Italy."

"What?"

"You'll go back to D.C., and I'll move to Italy. That's where Leone is based."

I take his hand before he can change his mind, the warmth from his long tan fingers shocking my anxiety-chilled skin. "Deal. Thank you. I mean—fuck you, and thank you, and it's going to be good. Really good."

Arthur's eyes glow with what might be a suppressed windchime laugh. It's hard to tell. "If I'm doing this with you, it's going to be the best movie anyone's ever seen."

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Chapter Four

Arthur and I exchange personal phone numbers. I try to not think about how strange it is, texting someone whose face is sold on \$120 hoodies, while we trade messages about how to pull off our scheme. If Max has already told Ignition that I'm fired, then you'll probably need to "hire me" as your own personal videographer , I text him once I'm home, sitting among my cardboard boxes.

Why is hire me in scare quotes?

Surprised you know what a scare quote is. Do you have a better idea?

Could say you're my new bodyguard.

Haha.

You know, most people use "lol."

Why is lol in scare quotes?

We don't make a lot of progress.

I'm not shocked that we don't figure out what to do as the day turns into night and then day again—it's weird to attempt strategizing with someone so fundamentally different from me. When Max and I had swapped names in Intro to Film class, it had felt like fate. Max Black and Lilah Graywood. Of course. Even better, we'd actually clicked outside the classroom. Max told me what to do, and I did it. It had been a

relief; I just had to do whatever he wanted me to all the time. And getting to call my family and report that I'd met my artistic soulmate and new best friend in college had felt like proof that I was going to be okay, and everything they'd given me was worth it. Their time, way too much money, the doctor's visits and meetings with teachers and social workers. I'd found family away from home.

Arthur is not family away from home.

He stops replying in the morning. Even after I send him not one, but five different texts asking what the plan is, hello, I'm about to call a cab to take me to the practice facility where Max and Sarah will be. I have no clue what I'm walking into today, or how Arthur and I are going to pull this off.

So I call my mom.

"Lilah," Mom answers. "I'm just getting out of a hot yoga class."

"Do you need to shower?"

"Nah, I'll do it at home."

"Mom!"

"Do not distract me." She laughs, and I smile completely to myself. My adoptive mom—or Mom, as I call her—always sounds like a cartoon teapot when she's happy, whistly and comforting, like everything is going to be okay. "How's the new job going, pumpkin?"

"Oh. Yeah. It's interesting." That's... mostly true. I look out the window of my apartment and bite my thumbnail. "There's something going on with Max I want your advice on."

“What about Max?”

Shit. Tears. Again. I let my forehead thunk against the warm glass of the window as I meander my way to breaking her heart. “Do you like him? Do you think we work well together?”

“I like anyone you like, as long as they treat you well. But”—I hear her take a breath—“it can be hard to work with men, my little Agnès Varda. You have to be careful with keeping boundaries. Does that answer your question?”

“Mm-hmm.” I slump into the kitchen chair. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. But that’s the nice part of having Max around, isn’t it? Knowing that he’s protecting you makes it a lot easier to let you live a million miles away.”

My eyes squeeze shut at the involuntary pain in my chest. Right. This is the worst part of losing Max. Yes, we were Black she’s pretending like she isn’t peeking between us. I give her the same men are so silly look from earlier. “Oh, is this about our fight? I’m sorry about whatever gave you the impression, but I never said I would quit the documentary, or Black if he’s only rising to meet my resentment, if he’s about to call off our agreement, if touching me scalded his skin, too.

“From now on, I’m driving this car,” I say. “I’m planning what we do. I’m calling the shots. And we’re not doing fake dating—fake—whatever the hell that was. Got it, Bianco?”

Pupils narrowing, he lets out a tiny huff. “The little documentarian hates not being in control.”

“Nope,” I lie, because screw him, screw him, screw him. He would make my desire to avoid getting typecast as fragile young woman, rescued by enamored rich man

sound like an overreaction. “The big race-car driver loves to treat women like meat. But hey, go ahead. Pretend like the only way to further a woman’s career is by acting like you’re into her. Having a distraction from everything wrong with Max is nice.”

Arthur’s jaw twitches, a sheen running over his skin and a reddened flush beneath it. The sun has hitched high up in the sky, and sweat sparkles across his brow. “You should be grateful that I was raised to lie to the media. Having to pretend that you’re charming enough to want isn’t easy.”

“Good thing I never asked you to pretend.” I take a step closer to him, refusing to let his towering height intimidate me. “In fact, don’t. Don’t touch me. Don’t smile at me in front of other people. Don’t play into the idea that I’m only here because of a man. I already need to process Max doing that to me. Don’t do it to me, too.”

Arthur’s chest hitches with a quick breath. “You don’t get it. This”—he waves down at us, his orange race suit, my cargo shorts and Slowdive shirt—“is going to make people talk. We’re going to be spending time together, more time than normal, and I have a reputation.”

“Of?”

“Liking pretty women.”

His face is utterly serious, too serious, and my back stiffens like there’s an elastic band tied to both ends. Arthur may be able to flirt his way into forgiveness with other people, but not me. “You said nobody would believe we’re working together.”

“And that’s true,” he replies. “Everyone will know that I dislike you.”

“Exactly. So let them think that. We hate each other. Great. I’m keeping my job. Awesome. There’s no need to make this more complicated than it already is.”

Arthur pauses again, and the air around me grows quieter for it. “People can dislike each other and still be attracted to one another,” he says with what must be aggravated stiffness, as if he’s amazed he has to spell this out to me. His voice is lower. Slightly strained. “I’m a Formula 1 driver, Graywood. I get what I want. And they’ll think I want you,” he adds before I can take another breath.

So, I don’t. I stand here, not breathing, and try to grasp what he’s saying. Arthur and me, together? Absolutely not. The idea of wanting to sleep with someone I dislike—whose mere personality makes my nervous system light up like a Christmas tree with rage—is completely and utterly bizarre. Max had always joked that I’m demisexual, that I need some incredible, earth-shattering connection in order to look twice at anyone, but that concept was never a joke to me. I don’t know what I’d label myself as, but I like that my connections start with getting to know someone. Comfort. Safety.

Anyone can see that Arthur is textbook attractive. But he isn’t comfortable, kind, or nice. I’d never feel safe with him. His good looks are just an objective truth, like how it’s objectively true that I’d never trust mixing business and pleasure again.

“Documentarians don’t sleep with their subjects,” I say, pretending like that particular taboo is the most horrifying part of this conversation. “It’s a no. I’d rather be jobless and broke than for people to believe Party Prince Arthur wants me.”

That was too harsh. But I can’t unsay it, and when Arthur scoffs out, “You would read the articles,” I feel a sick twist of satisfaction that I got under his skin. Then he leans down, the tip of his sharp nose inches from mine. “Fine, then. If you’ll excuse me, this party prince has to practice for the British Grand Prix. One of us needs to keep their job.”

He stares at me, waiting for my comeback, but I only stare back, more offended by that insult than I’d care to admit. After too much quiet, his shoulders drop, tension

uncoiling, and he says, “Are you done now?”

There can't be any worse question for a man to ask. I don't deign him with a response, and Arthur lets out an irritated sigh. “You know why I didn't have time to chat with you this morning?”

This is a trap. He's trying to restart our fight. I let my weight settle back onto the balls of my feet, defensive, and angry, and slightly nauseous from this whole conversation... but curious. Forever curious. “Why?”

“Faust is being put on leave,” Arthur says with a tense excitement I don't understand. “I'm racing for Ignition at Silverstone.”

Apparently, knowing what that means was a test, because when I repeat back “Silverstone?” Arthur gives me a long, annoyed look. “England, Graywood. You and I are going to England.”

Chapter Five

Max emails me my new three-month Black if you do it right, it's real life. Yes, you have to be able to steady your hands and operate a slightly complicated mechanical device, but I'm only a pair of eyes when I'm behind a camera. It isn't Lilah anymore, at least, I don't think it is. I'm a bird on a wire, the great big glasses billboard in *The Great Gatsby*, watching the world. It's like Barbara Kopple said: I don't create the tension.

And suddenly, it's okay that I'm silent and aloof and smart. People like those qualities in a filmmaker that they dislike in women; they don't wonder what I'm hiding (nothing) or why I'm strangely quiet (I'm having a thousand conversations in my head).

Then Thursday comes around, and I'm standing on a blinking tarmac in front of the first private jet I've ever laid eyes on, tranquilized by antianxiety medication. It's still mostly dark out—deep blue sky, too many runway lights. Disorienting. Tightening my grip on my suitcase handle, I train my handheld camera on the plane and get my first real shot of the film: A slender gray-white jet, blackened sky, nobody around except hired help and orange-shirted Ignition staff. Arthur's ridiculous, isolating wealth in a single image.

See? It's real. It might be a movie, but that doesn't make it fake.

“You have to climb the stairs to get on the plane.”

I click pause on my camera. Arthur stands next to me, dressed in an Ignition

sweatshirt and thick, patterned sweatpants. It's the first we've seen each other since our all-out, smackdown brawl, and I half expect him to cut me down to size right here on the spot. You think you're too good to be my fake unethical sex-friend? Au contraire, American swine, I have dated and dumped twenty physicists-turned-models since we last spoke.

But Arthur only holds out his tiny to-go espresso cup toward me. I frown; he shrugs. "Suit yourself," he says, finishing the coffee.

My camera hangs from the strap around my neck as he leads us to the stairs. When I'm greeted by a man in a prim blue suit—and his polite "Miss Graywood"—I turn to Arthur, who smiles innocently. The plane is beautiful, clean, and very empty. "Are you planning on murdering me now that we're alone?"

"Rude." Arthur moseys down the carpeted aisle to a plush leather chaise lounge and leans his hip against it. The top of his finger-combed blond hair almost hits the low ceiling. "If I wanted to murder you, you wouldn't be riding on the Bianco family jet. Paper trails."

I glance at the attendant behind us, who looks like he couldn't care less, as Arthur sits down, long legs spreading apart, taking up way too much space. I take the love seat across the aisle from him, trying to keep my elbows and knees away from the fancy screens and switches, and watch as he thoughtlessly clicks through buttons on his armrests. I should be filming him, but my preflight nervousness might screw up my hands. Best to wait until we're in the air.

"Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Holmes is flying out with Max on Sunday, along with Faust if he's well enough."

"How long do you think Faust will be out?"

He tilts his head. “Shouldn’t you be filming my answer?”

Shit. “I’m just wondering.”

“Ah, you’re building your narrative.”

“Wow, big word.”

“Great word. Big in racing. Never heard it before?”

“I have. Just didn’t think you’d know it.”

“Tsk, ts, love,” he says. “I’m the cocky one, not you.”

My face warms. It’s like he knows exactly how to turn my internal thermostat all the way up. “It’s three whole syllables. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Arthur’s cheek slopes in with amusement. “Three is nothing. This mouth can handle a lot more.”

An eye roll isn’t enough. “An-y-way,” I singsong, “answer the question.”

“Regrettably,” he sighs, “I wasn’t blessed with great looks, pristine sportsmanship, and psychic abilities. Best to get your footage while I am driving.”

“Because you don’t think you’ll be traveling the rest of the season? Doesn’t that make you worry what Leone will think if Ignition benches you again?”

Arthur holds my stare for a moment, a glimmer of anger curling in that sharp smile of his, but then he seems to put it away and rest back on his humor. “Well done. That’s an important lesson to learn about F1.”

“Drivers swap out often?”

“How well a driver competes comes in second place to his narrative.” He pauses. “Or should I use the word ‘story’? I’d hate to confuse you.”

“I can keep up.”

“We’ll see. You haven’t filmed me driving yet.” He grins. “I think I like that you don’t know anything about F1. It’s like teaching a baby how to walk.”

I take a deep breath. “Arthur, that is the definition of infantilizing.”

Another host comes by for my breakfast order, and I pick the faux-egg sandwich over a vegetable hash while Arthur graduates to fiddling with the air conditioner above him. He has so much energy. He’s always twisting buttons or tapping his fingers or bouncing his leg. I can see why he hates the media, beyond disliking the articles written about his heiress-dating drama. Arthur’s mouth might be a knife—smooth-talking and sharp-smiling—but the rest of his body gives so much away. He’s full of tells, or body language that seems like tells, by-products of needing enough energy to operate a vehicle going two-hundred-plus miles per hour.

And people are quick to judge a documentary subject based on leg bouncing and resting bitch face. Give an interview where you didn’t sleep well the night before, and look “twitchy”? You can’t be trusted, you’re the villain, enjoy this academically dense hate-review from a random electrician in Alabama. Forget the finer details of your own memory and get reamed by people googling the story after the fact? Oh well, you should’ve known your life better than that; faceless internet hobgoblins are going to comment “you’re fake!” on your social media forever.

That’s why I try so hard to get it right and document the truth. I don’t feel bad about asking Arthur to star in my movie, but I guess he’s being... slightly brave by doing it.

When there are footsteps at the front of the plane, Arthur's attention snaps right over, firework fast. "Good morning," he says brightly as a small woman appears. She's older, around the same height as me, with a graying mousy bun and head-to-toe cherry-red athleisure on.

"King," she says gruffly, not casting one glance my way.

"King?" I whisper once she's gone to the back.

That one corner of his mouth hooks up. "Nicknames are big in F1."

"And you're... oh, no way." I let out a groan. "Who decided to call you King Arthur?"

"My mum—"

"Your mum ."

"Who's an Arthurian professor out at Cambridge."

"Oh."

"And that's Merlin," he laughs. "My physiotherapist."

"You're kidding. Nobody would call a nice old woman that."

"Merlin is not a 'nice' old woman. She's demonic. Lovely, but evil."

After Merlin comes Arthur's personal manager, Delaney, a slender Black woman in a mint-green pantsuit that matches the charms in her goddess braids. She's wearing strappy heels on a plane, and I kind of love her for it. Then there's Arthur's race

engineer, Cameron. He's a lanky white guy, maybe in his late twenties, with light brown hair, a surplus of ghostly freckles, and the strings of his oversized black hoodie tied into a bow around his neck. They both say hi to me—I'd chatted with Delaney once or twice in Glory Run, since getting plane tickets had required yet another background check.

Then, in strolls a man who I know instantly, without having to ask, has to be James Hawke. The older Ignition driver is wearing dark jeans and a white shirt, and the way his brown hair is neatly parted and styled makes him look one hundred percent more like a plastic action figure come to life, molded cheekbones and white-toothed smile included. He flicks his sunglasses on as he weaves to the back of the plane, exchanging nods with Arthur and squeezing his shoulder as he walks by.

We're finally told to prepare for takeoff. The pilot is talking through weather patterns between here and England when Arthur notices my fidgeting. "You good over there?"

Why, why, does he have to notice so much about me? Nobody else does. I don't know when I closed my eyes, but I squeeze my lids shut tighter, as if I can block Arthur out and the rest of the world with him. "I'm fine. I've just, you know. Planes." I leave out an explanation about what overstimulation is and how I've never left the continental United States and—

As if summoned into action by my aerophobia, the plane jerks forward, and I can't breathe quick enough to stop myself from whimpering. Arthur starts to get out of his seat, but I wave quickly with the hand that isn't death-gripping my phone. "No, stay there. I—I don't want anyone to notice."

We both look behind us. Cameron has headphones in, James is thumbing through a paperback, and Merlin has an Ignition beanie pulled low over her eyes, chin drooping down. Delaney is the only one who feels our eyes on her, and she gives us a polite

smile before tapping the sticky note on the back of her laptop. Noise-canceling headphones in , it reads. Scream if you need me.

I'm close to doing just that when the engine begins to drone. Arthur reaches toward me and mouths, Phone , and I'm jumpy enough to hand my personal one over without a second thought, and then there's another scent besides the plastic plane weirdness. Arthur's scent, fizzy, floral, and indecipherably familiar as he tinkers around on my phone for a terrifying minute, then passes it back my way. Connected to the jet's Wi-Fi.

Then my phone buzzes with a single text.

Hi.

I concentrate on those two tiny letters. Block out the sounds all around me, the sensation of nothing beneath my feet other than metal and luggage.

Hi , I text back.

I downloaded an encryption app for you, by the way. Keeps people from looking at our texts.

Could they do that?

Come on, Graywood. You're on Bianco wifi. Use that big mind of yours.

This is the first we've danced around the uncle-team-movie topic since our conversation at the dive bar, and I wish I had my camera on. But I don't, and I've been curious about Arthur's motives for bailing on his uncle without trying to talk to him first. Although family means everything to me, I'm aware that Arthur and I come from different worlds. There are only two types of movie sports childhoods: the

overworked prodigy—uncomfortable to linger on, avert your eyes from their absent parents—or the marginally talented rich child, spoiled with the best coaches—not very bootstraps, roll the next clip. We love sports success until we learn how it was born, because inside every great athlete is a child who started too young, somehow.

And because it's either sob on a plane or continue this conversation with Arthur, I give in to my curiosity and keep texting him.

Is that why you want to go back to Leone so bad? You want to get away from overbearing family?

Good question. You ever drive a Leone?

Arthur.

Right. They're the best cars. Golden arrows, we call them. Go so fast it feels like you might die if you botch it, but you're a better man for surviving. I need to get back to that.

Huh , I type back.

I steal a peek at him. Maybe I was wrong about his tells, since Arthur's face is perfectly calm. He's settled back in the chaise, one long leg bent, the other stretched out, clean white sneaker dangling off the edge. He doesn't look like an adrenaline addict plotting ways to strap back into a single-seat death trap. He looks relaxed. Well, the Arthur version of relaxed: fingertips drumming on the back of his phone, bent knee swaying back and forth, corners of his mouth tucked down, ready to pounce.

My phone vibrates.

Like what you see?

Ugh. How did he catch me looking at him? His eyes didn't leave his phone.

Not really.

That was a long stare. You need to be more subtle if you don't want the love story narrative.

I reply with a . Then,

It's the movie maker stare.

Hot.

Ha.

You trying to figure me out, Graywood?

I know you already.

Go on then. I love to hear about myself.

Ahem , I type out.

Pro athlete. Close to thirty, so tri-life crisis. In-your-face confident (overcompensating?). Sexually explicit (overcompensating?). "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven" vibes.

Arthur stares at his phone for a good thirty seconds, then texts back.

I'm going to live til 90?? Wow.

I swallow a giggle.

Probably had a saltburn/succession childhood.

Are those movie titles or did you just cast a spell on me?

Have you **ever** watched a movie?

How do I say this...

David Cronenberg?? Lynch???

We've lived very different lives.

Wouldn't call yours living.

Arthur lets out a low laugh, and I peek again. He's smiling.

I suck on the inside of my cheek, oddly triumphant, and type out, What about me?

Oh, you want me to do you now?

Forget it.

How did you put it before? I don't think about you enough to hate you.

Goodbye.

No no I'll play.

Across the aisle, his thumbs barely make a sound as he types out what must be the longest message in the history of phones. Then—

You're 24. American. Young, pretty, and in denial about both. (Very American, by the way. Puritanical creatures, all of you.) Recently dramatically dumped, appropriately emotionally scarred. Too clever for your own good. Likes to fight. (Masochist?) Thinks making documentaries absolves you of media sin; should have gone to law school. Disconnected from your body, which has manifested in a frankly bizarre but entertaining hatred of sports. Would love to see you sloshed and shirtless on a table.

My stomach twists, an empty scattering, and the sensation is not at all from the flight. Is Coyote Ugly the only movie you've seen, I text back, ignoring the rest.

Well yes. I had to learn about Texas somehow.

It takes place in NYC.

Alas, that must be why I haven't seen you on a table yet.

I can't help it. I laugh, and Arthur's head turns in the corner of my eye.

My phone vibrates.

You look less like you're about to pass out. Need anything? Liquor? Mile-high club membership?

Look at that. We're up in the air, and I don't want to die. I fumble for my bag and pull out another anti-nausea pill, popping it with a gulp of soda water.

Nope. All better.

Good , he texts back, and for a second, I forget who he is. I just read that one word—good—and the casual caretaking does a lot more for my quote-unquote Puritanical sexuality than whatever blunt-force flirtation he deployed in front of Max. Good is what someone says when they care if you're not good. If they think about you.

Which is silly. Arthur isn't that worried about me. This is his basic human decency kicking in.

Thanks for the distraction

Behind me, there's a tinny buzz as a partition slides from one side of the plane to the other, shutting us away from everyone else. "Don't get cocky again. I always watch movies on long flights, and whoever sits here has to put up with it," Arthur says as he presses a button on the remote, dimming the lights. "Pull your window shade down."

I do, and the second I'm not faced with clouds, the rest of my plane anxiety vanishes. I cuddle back into my chair and pull my knees up to my chest. Out of nowhere I'm bone-tired, fatigue replacing the two-week-long panic attack about Max and Sarah and perfectly planning our secret-movie plot and how to keep my life from crumbling between my fingers, like an old film reel deteriorating from vinegar syndrome. Too much heat or humidity triggers a chemical reaction in the cellulose acetate and turns film into an acid that breaks itself down.

Relatable.

"Before you ask," Arthur says, "I am willing to watch a documentary. One. For research."

"Really?"

"Sure. Can't remember the last time I have."

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. Nobody willingly offers to watch nonfiction with me. Regular people like Arthur prefer big, splashy films with character arcs and special effects. Kino-Pravda doesn't seem like his cup of tea.

He nods to the screen. "Have you seen this one?"

"Oh. Um." I peer at the screen, then stop. Literally. Every cell in my body suspends as I notice something at the bottom of the streaming service, a little screenshot with a long gray line below the movie that Arthur's currently on: Grey Gardens .

I force my face to remain casual as I say, "I love this one."

Arthur presses play. The first moments of Grey Gardens spill across the screen. I lean my head back and let the tragedy play out in front of me, my pulse still racing.

It's a beautiful documentary. Big Edie and Little Edie, mother and daughter, the cats and the clothing and the Kennedy connection. It's up there in my top-ten list, right between Sans Soleil and Don't Look Back , one of those rare films I could watch a thousand times and catch a new piece of dialogue with each viewing. I've always wondered what kept them stuck in their estate after the wealth had withered up—the delicate psychology between two people trapped in a broken fantasy world. That, to me, is how you film politics, the upper class, any of it. Keep your mouth shut and your camera on as the interesting people dance.

It's hard to pay attention to them today, though. Back when Arthur had been on the loading screen, I saw that he'd recently watched the documentary I'd made about the congressman.

All the way, from beginning to end.

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Chapter Six England

Quick thing to know about me is that I hate liars, lying, a large amount of fiction, etcetera. I'm a documentarian with justice sensitivity; telling the truth is what I do.

My adoptive parents are old-school hippies. "Life is suffering, but I can find calmness within myself; true joy is embracing chaos" and all that. I started my own personal journey toward Enlightenment (with a capital E) and Mindfulness (capital M) when I was almost pulled out of school for my attitude and equally awful grades. ADHD wasn't a thing in my hometown, and back then, anything and everything made me angry—lying most of all. It was an interpersonal wavelength my brain couldn't understand, and the confusion boiled. I took my anger out on myself: shut down, stopped doing homework, didn't talk to people.

Then there was my birth mom. Nothing makes you hate fake happiness like being forced to pretend like you feel it, particularly as a hormonal teenage girl. Or when you're a teenager whose parent doesn't believe in your medical diagnosis, occasionally "forgets" to pick up the medication that directly impacts your brain's neurotransmitters, and tells you to stay positive when you're shuffled back to a foster family's house, since one day, everything is going to work out!

Spoiler alert: It did not work out.

But I did have time to watch a lot of movies.

This is the part where things turned around. The good bit. Some people don't ever find their passion, the reason to stay awake working until your eyes are begging you

to go to bed. I did. I was exactly the type of almost-goner who needed to fall deeply in love with something, and when I shot my first documentary in high school, it was like finding out that magic is real and I can make it.

Because you can make a documentary anywhere, with almost anything. You don't need a fancy camera or a script, only your own ethical backbone, some sort of camera, and an eye for telling the truth.

I was hooked.

I think about that—falling in love with the truth, Arthur lying about not having watched my documentary—for the entire twenty-minute car ride to our London hotel.

It's nice to have a dichotomy to chew on, at least. Arthur was dragged away for “post-flight physical therapy” once the plane touched down, so I have ample time to study the distinct lack of in-another-country excitement from Ignition staff. They don't stop walking because they're distracted by the accents churning around them. In the sleek black van that carts us to the hotel, nobody is stupefied by the fact that we're driving on the wrong side of the road and the world looks like a Doctor Who filler episode.

So, I also try to be casual. World travel! Who cares? Suddenly finding myself in the United Kingdom? Just another day in my thrilling life.

Then we make a turn, and we're being waved through a black iron gate, and we're parked outside a palatial hotel, and there goes being casual. “Did they film Bridgerton here?” I ask Delaney as I follow her into the tastefully beige lobby, complete with empty velvet settees and twin crystal chandeliers.

“Probably.”

“Unreal.” I almost drop my suitcase trying to get a photo of the actual golden cherub statues above a fountain. “Did Ignition get some coupon to put us all here?”

“This is how we travel, Lilah.”

Slowly, I lower my phone. “Everyone?”

Delaney shrugs. “It takes a team to win a race.”

“You’re joking.”

“Deadly serious. Now follow me—we need to throw our bags upstairs if we want to make our reservation.”

I’m five steps behind her, cursing my short legs. “We’re going out?”

“It’s tradition,” she says, like it’s obvious. “We always have the first Team Arthur dinner in London.”

We’re in and out of our painfully pretty hotel rooms in ten minutes; five of those minutes are Delaney rifling through her clothes for something I can borrow. Then we’re in a cab, and I keep tugging down the hem of the simple lavender dress she managed to find, since none of her pants would fit me without cuffing them and apparently, “That’s a crime.” Delaney sweet-talks the driver into taking the long way from Knightsbridge to Chelsea so she can point out a string of trees that lines Hyde Park. “And Kensington Palace is back there, maybe that way?”

It hits me then, as we get caught in the evening traffic. I’m in London. In a squat black cab, next to a woman I barely know.

And I like it.

Our destination is nestled in a strip of tall, tightly packed brick buildings with shops and restaurants along the first floors. “Best place to shop,” Delaney says as I pull out my camera and get a shot of the gleaming gold store windows.

“Oh yeah?” I murmur, distracted by the view. Twilight is settling in, layering the picturesque shops, busy sidewalks, and tall red buses with diffused blue softness. I think about how this image will look after the shot of the private jet this morning—was that still this morning? Arthur’s lonely money juxtaposed with this bustling street, all these people walking together, laughing, happy, with shopping bags swaying from their arms.

“This is Chelsea,” Delaney says. “King’s Road, to be exact.”

I glare at her. “Is that a King Arthur joke?”

“No, you’re in London, Lilah. Every street is the King’s Something.”

I get a few more shots of the street, before it’s too dark and the menagerie of lighting turns into a battle with my exposure settings. Then I drift after Delaney toward a restaurant that, unfortunately, isn’t one of the smaller, affordable-looking bistros. When you have to think about your bank account whenever you eat, you get pretty good at spotting restaurants out of your budget, and this one has all the red flags: plain all-black front, shaded windows, the words Bunny Hop painted above the awning in trendy gold letters. If a place doesn’t let you see inside from the sidewalk, I can’t afford to eat there.

My fears are justified once we go inside. The warm smell of freshly baked bread and hard-to-place vegetables makes my fingers curl with want, and my eyes drop to the glossy black-and-white tiled floor as Delaney speaks with the hostess. Through the arched doorway, I get a peek of the dining room, and there are flowers hanging from the ceiling. Fat white roses. Hanging. From the ceiling.

God. I'm going to have to say I need to leave. In Delaney's dress, after her tourist cab ride. It'll be humiliating, but oh well, what isn't? I start to open my mouth, stumbling toward the truth, when I hear a low hum.

"Look at you."

I jump. Arthur's to my right, a smug smile on his face—though his eyes are on Delaney's dress. He's changed out of his plane clothes, too, and now he's in black pants and a white button-down, and the uncomplicated combination makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Without any Ignition logos or his orange race suit, Arthur Bianco looks like a semi-normal person, and I don't know how to react to that.

"Don't you clean up nice," he says, and right. Gross.

"I, um—don't say that—also, I should go."

His eyes widen, too hazel in the soft light. "Right now?"

Okay, I'd spoken too soon before. Telling Arthur that I can't afford to eat here is much more embarrassing. "This isn't exactly in a filmmaker's budget."

A line creases his forehead. "You aren't paying."

"I'm definitely paying for myself."

The line goes away as Arthur seems to register that it isn't that I want to skip dinner—it's that I think I have to. "No." He laughs, a little rougher than usual. Travel-worn, I guess. "This is my treat, for my team. That currently includes you, doesn't it?"

"Arthur. There's ethics. Subject matters can't spend money on—"

I try to put up more of a fight, only Delaney appears with the hostess, and I'm collectively rich-people-smiled into silence. Okay, so a documentarian absolutely shouldn't accept any form of gift or money, including fancy food. Staying in a five-star hotel on the company's dime? Also bad.

But... if I turn down dinner now, the team might be suspicious. And I'd miss this chance to film Arthur's tradition.

Would one dinner hurt?

Swallowing my integrity like an extra-large pill, I follow my group through white tablecloths and beautiful people enjoying beautiful meals, to a cozy private dining room off the rose-covered main room. I linger in the doorway, casting another look at the floral centerpiece on the ceiling. "Can I film in here?"

"Sure," Arthur says confidently, right as Delaney says, "I wouldn't."

I look between them, hesitating, then take Arthur's lead. As I lift my camera to my eye, I nearly miss his quick slip of a smile, there one second then gone the next. He stands next to me as I slowly pan the roses, only speaking when a waiter asks if we've received permission to film. "We're fine," he mutters. "She's with me."

When I'm satisfied, I find Arthur smirking at me. "Is there an Oscar for 'best movie featuring a ceiling'?"

"You act like it's normal for a restaurant to spend thousands on florals."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

“Huh.” His brows lift. “I can bring your meal out here if you’d like.”

“Sure, I’ll eat in the back with the cooks. Class solidarity.”

“You know what you remind me of? We used to feed this angry stray cat out in Rome. Micetta, we called her. She bit me every time I pet her.”

“Masochist,” I mumble.

“You wish.”

Delaney is already inside the private room, next to Cameron and Merlin and a few people I don’t recognize. Orange flowers are draped over the walls, Ignition’s bombastic shade, and the blooms mingle with framed portraits of strangers—and a black-and-white photo of Arthur, Cameron, Delaney, and Sarah. It was clearly taken in the same room; they’re standing in front of the glass French doors, Arthur’s arms around Delaney’s and Cameron’s shoulders, Sarah blowing a kiss at the camera, all of them caught mid-laugh.

As I sit, I get that same swoop of longing I’ve felt on every playground I’ve ever been on, watching girls click together and trade laughter. I grew up in a one-school town. Elementary school, middle school, and high school, all in the same big building. For the kids who struck out early, clocked as imperceptibly different, first through twelfth grade was a grand psychological experiment I haven’t recovered from. Then my college years were dominated by Max and his guy friends, and I went along with it, too scared of being alone to realize what I was missing. Those were the years I was supposed to find my people.

But I didn’t, and I don’t blame anyone for that except me.

I chose to be the photographer, not in the friend-group photos.

You are so lucky , I think as Arthur pops the giant champagne bottle that's ceremoniously delivered to our table. Lucky because he doesn't look down as froth runs over his fingers, lucky because he gracefully orders food for the table—steaks and onion soup and coq au vin, and then, with a sly glance toward me, a vegetable platter. Lucky because his more irritating quirks are insulated by an inch-thick charm that seems to work on most people; when Merlin leaves after we finish eating, complaining about jet lag, she ruffles the top of his head like a shaggy dog.

But most of all, he's lucky to have friends beside him as he chases his dream. If I were him, I'd treat us to as many dinners as I could afford.

By the time dessert arrives, it's only Arthur and me and Delaney and Cameron, and Delaney asks the question I wasn't brave enough to. "Where's Sarah tonight, anyway?"

Arthur's lips press together. "She couldn't make it."

"No kidding," Cameron says glumly. "It's a total media bloodbath. Uh—" He looks at me. "Sorry."

I like these two. They feel less plastic than other F1 people. "No, it's fine. We're sharks."

"You admit it," Arthur says, leaning his elbows on the table, empty champagne flute forgotten by his plate.

"I seriously don't get why the press goes wild when a reserve driver races," Cameron continues—saving me from having to reply. "Journalists are lining up times to ask Arthur about which protein powder he's taking when they need to be looking into what's going on with Faust. When my uncle was a race engineer, people cared when drivers were sick."

My eyebrows skyrocket up my forehead. “Your uncle was an engineer?”

“Yeah?” Cameron says, puzzled. “That’s why I started here.”

“And Arthur’s uncle is the team principal.”

Arthur groans. “Don’t remind me.”

“And Sarah’s grandfather...”

“Also raced,” Delaney finishes for me, her glossy pink lips quirking with amusement as I stare suspiciously at her. “Not mine, though. I’m probably the only non–nepo baby in Formula 1.”

“Sure, because interning at Coca-Cola because your dad knows the CFO was bootstrapping,” Cameron mutters.

As Delaney and Cameron descend into bickering, my heartbeat quickens in my throat. The luck didn’t stop with Arthur. They’re all connected. And I’m very... not. Is this why Arthur and I don’t get along? I’m nothing like the people he’s surrounded by, who radiate the inner, satiated glow of having black credit cards and safety nets.

Which is a good thing, since I’m not here for dinner and friendship. I’m filming.

I get my camera back out, needing the distraction. “Really, Graywood?” Arthur sighs. “One dinner without cameras wouldn’t kill you.”

“It wouldn’t help win that Oscar, either.”

“Touché.”

I clear it with Delaney and Cameron, then dive right in with, “Silverstone Circuit, June twentieth, Lilah Graywood,” giving myself a place to pick up when I’m editing. “I’m here with Arthur Bianco, Ignition reserve driver, along with his Ignition staff team. This will be his first—and potentially only—race of the season.”

Delaney, proving her poise, jumps right into manager mode all while ignoring the camera. “I’m so excited. It’s been far too long since fans have seen Arthur behind the wheel. He’s going to crush free practice.”

“And free practice is...?”

Silence. Delaney and Arthur exchange a look, and yeah, I said something stupid. Cameron is the one to speak first, shyly waving my camera his way. “Welcome to Formula 101. Please keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times.”

“Oh, it’s okay, I’ve been researching how all of this works.”

“Sorry, doesn’t count. Life is complicated, but F1 is worse.” He smiles at his own joke. “First thing to know is that each season has twenty-something races, all around the world. Races happen on the weekend. First there are practices, then Qualifying, then the Grand Prix. Sometimes a sprint—”

“Fuck a sprint,” Arthur interjects.

“—but winning a race or scoring in the top ten gets you points. Each season has a world championship for the drivers, so the individual with the most points. The Constructors’ Championship is for the rest of us, the team, and that’s where the money is. It combines the points of both drivers. And even if Ignition did make our own cars, money is the lifeblood of Formula 1. You need sponsorships, merch sales, weird old wealthy owners.”

I've read about Ignition's owner, Bob Burroughs. Old money, the only son of a Texan oil tycoon, kindly shelling out his own millions to make energy drinks and fast cars. Ignition as a drink brand has been a hit for the last two decades. The whole Formula 1 thing has had a slower start, no pun intended.

"But every F1 team is selling something," Delaney adds smoothly. "Cars, mostly. For our sponsors, nonsensical data software suites. For the countries we visit, prestige and tourism. And for Ignition, the American dream." She smirks. "And caffeine."

"But obviously, I want to win. That's important," Arthur says impatiently. "I won two championships with Leone before I—came here."

I pan to him. "So, each team's two drivers compete against each other as well?"

"In theory..." Delaney starts.

"Absolutely," Cameron finishes. "We may need them to work together, but they're really racing against each other, too. I'm Arthur's race engineer only. While he's out there driving, I pay attention to him and his car. Plus, every team has a main driver—one they throw more money and stronger tech behind. Nobody admits it, but it's strategic. And in Ignition's case, it's Fausto Ferreira Sanchez, the sole reason any international F1 fans root for us."

"Well, that and Arthur. And Holmes," Delaney continues dryly. "Benedetto 'Holmes' Bianco was the driver a decade ago. Everyone knew him. He was a legend for staying pragmatic and avoiding accidents, but still winning. That's how he got the nickname Holmes."

"And that's not Arthur's style," I think out loud.

I zoom the camera out, quick enough to catch Arthur's gaze falling to his empty

glass, then Delaney's speaking again. "No, but people like Arthur's style. Or they hate it, if he's driving their team off the track. But either way, they talk about him when he drives. And when he wins at Silverstone, not if, Holmes will realize that he needs to give Arthur a seat. You should be prepared to follow us to the next four races, Lilah."

Click. That's why Arthur is desperate for a spot on Leone. On this team, he's living in his uncle's shadow, fighting to prove his own worth.

I understand that.

Lowering the camera, I catch Arthur's eyes, lens-free. "Where's the next race after this one?"

He tilts his head to one side, almost imperceptibly. "Hungary."

"And after that?"

"The summer break, then Belgium, the Netherlands, and—Monza."

"Great," I say, smiling. "I'll keep my suitcase packed."

Warmth dances over Arthur's features, curling up the corners of his mouth and sparkling in his eyes, and I hold the camera tighter to myself. One smile like that on film would sell this documentary in minutes. "Hold that," I demand. "Please."

I pull my camera to my face, adjust the settings, get him into focus. The dark lights, the flowers behind him, his photograph on the wall. My red recording light blinking off and on. Off and on. "Can you repeat that schedule again on camera?" I ask, hoping he smiles one more time. Warm, and optimistic, and happy.

Arthur stares me down through the lens, blinks, then looks away. His smile is gone.
“It’s getting late. Who wants to grab a cab home?”

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Chapter Seven

In the week leading up to Arthur's big English comeback, I learn a lot more about Formula 1. Mostly that it's exhausting.

Staying in a luxury hotel with an F1 team is like temporarily living in a very expensive college dorm. My room is on the pit crew and marketing floor, and I meet more people walking by open doors than I have in my whole life. Thankfully, my beige room—with its free skincare routine and bathtub the size of my first apartment—is Max-free; an only-one-bed situation would've been my final straw. Arthur, naturally, is booked in the quieter, penthouse-level suite far above our heads, a floor only accessible by authorized key card.

And I use that card. A lot.

Arthur gets up at four a.m., so I get up at four a.m. He works out before he meets Merlin to work out, indecipherable electronic music filtering from his headphones as he jogs, deadlifts, sweats. His diet is restrictive to the point of humor—egg whites, grilled chicken, plain tofu. Filming Arthur run laps in the gloomy city sun reminds me of vintage Army recruiting ads, the unattainable peak male form chiseled into flesh for reasons, recorded to make us pedestrians buy war bonds and take vitamins.

It isn't a bad metaphor. "You might like looking into the history of the sport," Arthur says as he sweats down a treadmill, upsettingly conversational for a man whose footfalls send shock waves through the floor. "I wasn't kidding about the politics."

He wasn't. I learn about the many British teams—there's Static (and their infamously

fast sports cars), Hughes (and their infamously filter-free owner), and Stark-Benzin (founded by German brothers, purchased by a New Zealand tech tycoon, then relocated to Surrey). Then there are the twin Italian teams, Leone and Cavalli, who've been locked in a rivalry since the '50s; luxurious Leone came first (based in Northern Italy), then Cavalli (based in Southern Italy). As the legend goes, Cavalli was founded by a former Leone driver and the brother-in-law of Leone's founder after a famously disastrous pheasant hunt that ended in the man moving south and, later, petitioning the Italian government to legalize divorce.

Like the single Austrian team, Wusch-Zack Crypto Banking Nummer Eins (Wusch for short), Ignition stands alone as the sole American representative on the global Formula 1 stage. That knowledge is slightly terrifying.

As is Arthur's new, dedicated, hardworking side. It's like Dr. Frankenstein flipped a switch on his laboratory table and made another Arthur, who attentively listens to Merlin as she drones on about g-force and racecraft and macronutrients. There isn't time for Arthur and me to butt heads; his days are filled with meetings, so mine are, too. Meetings with James to discuss on-track collaboration. Meetings with Marketing, where our phones are confiscated and Sarah feeds Arthur prepared statements to eventually parrot back to the press. Meetings with Cameron and the engineers who work on Arthur's car—and talk to him during races, apparently, since they make me leave when they start discussing “Plans A through F” for the Grand Prix.

It's a lot. All of this is a lot. And I can't riddle out if Arthur's more closely knit friends on the team, like Delaney and Cameron, know about his offer from Leone. No one mentions it, and he doesn't bring it up, and it's starting to feel like I might've bet on the wrong cinematic horse. While I understand Arthur's need to speed-run driver prep, I have thirty hours of career-redefining footage that, so far, involves people talking about cars more than they drive them.

Then we get to Silverstone.

I meet up with the team at eight a.m. the morning of the “Qualifying” race—the most confusing term yet, but nobody asked me. The sun has only just risen, and we’re all gathered by a massive Ignition Energy Drink concession stand outside the circuit. Imagine a county fair racetrack, then quadruple it, add in the most attractive people you’ve ever seen selling water bottles for ?14, and cover the whole thing in luxury airplane advertisements. From my vantage point on the ground, the racetrack itself almost looks like a plane tarmac. The street—road? Asphalt? I have no idea—is long and shiny gray, framed in by hundreds upon thousands of seats and an impressive track-wide banner ad for “digital-first banking.” Whatever that means.

“Thoughts on your first circuit?” Delaney murmurs as we watch Arthur charm his way through his fifth interview of the morning, the female Sky Sports hostess giggling and swatting his arm. So much for hating the media. He can turn it on when a journalist is cute.

“It’s... large.” I’ve got my camera up on my shoulder, lens trained to a mic’d-up Arthur, so I try not to move too much as I talk. I also try not to outright say that this circuit, in all its capitalistic glory, feels like Coachella for people who played too many Mario racing games. “Kind of feels like a music festival for cars?”

“Bingo. And all those seats will be full.”

“No way.”

“The Brits love their Formula 1.” Delaney stops. “You have at least seen a Formula 1 race before, right?”

I bite my lip. “Um.”

“Lilah.”

“There were only highlight reels online. And the streaming service wanted me to prepay for a year.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the hours are so different, in Texas.”

She smiles, slightly cryptic, kind of scary. “Did Sarah tell you not to watch any?”

The less I talk about Sarah, the better, so I shrug. “Typical,” Delaney mutters. “She wants you to fall in love with it.”

I must make a ridiculous face, because she adds, “No, it’s her hazing ritual. If you can, your first race should be in person.”

“That’s accessible.”

“To you, it is.” Delaney gestures to the controlled mayhem around us. Workers stocking food stands. Staff polishing the glossy Leone and Cavalli cars next to blocky race simulators. The smell of kebabs and electronics and summer sweat. The morning has been a veritable explosion of Ignition staff, sponsors, and journalists swarming to get a single picture or word in from Arthur. They adore him; every question is prefaced with how excited they are to see “the King” drive again after the practice sessions were delayed, then cut short. “This part of F1 is called the ‘circus,’ and you’ll feel like you’ve been on a merry-go-round by the end of the weekend. But it’s a culture shock, too, and you’ll know if you love it or not by Monday morning, when it’s gone.”

Interesting. I tilt my camera up incrementally, tweaking the focus on Arthur. Today has ushered in another new version of him—camera Arthur. He’s already in his orange race suit, hair camera-coiffed, a smile permanently affixed to his face. As I

watch, he cracks open twin cans of Ignition with the interviewer, cheering and drinking and laughing like everything is beautiful and life is grand. I can practically hear Sarah's prepared statements in his low, musical accent: I'm very excited to have this chance to race for Ignition. I hope you all enjoy watching me drive as much as I'll enjoy driving.

Riveting stuff.

I shift my attention to Delaney. She's sharp. Her blush lipstick matches her blazer which matches her high-waisted trousers which matches her stiletto heels, and her eyes are trained on Arthur like she's taking notes inside her head. She must come from a family of brothers if she willingly sought out a career corralling men like him around all day. And as Arthur's personal manager, it seems impossible that he hasn't told her about Leone's offer or our agreement.

Clicking through my audio channels, I switch on the built-in camera mic. Debate doing this. Do it anyway.

"If you don't mind me asking," I start, choosing my words carefully. "What do you think of Leone Racing? Arthur used to drive for them, didn't he? This will be the first weekend he's seen them since... whatever happened back then."

Another cryptic smile plays across her lips. "Is your audio on, Lilah?"

"If there's a camera around, you should assume it's recording you."

"True."

I think that's going to be the end of the conversation, but then Delaney says, "I've known Arthur for eight years. I was an employee at Leone at first, a liaison between the team and their drink sponsor Coca-Cola. He was Leone's golden boy. Racing

royalty and Formula 1's future." Her steady gaze shifts from him to me. "But I was there when Leone fired him during the post-crash season, and when every journalist hated him for taking time off, and then hated him more for taking the reserve offer from Ignition. By the time Arthur turned twenty-nine, he'd been fired by one of the most prestigious motorsports brands in the world, was living in a brand-new country under his uncle's thumb, and had been accused of ruining the Bianco family legacy. Not by drinking or flirting, of course, because that's forgivable in racing. But by losing."

Heat prickles across my cheeks. I've read about Arthur. I researched his media archive. Tried to piece together the timeline.

There weren't any articles about a post-crash season .

"So, the better question may be, do I think anyone should drive for Leone?" Delaney's more professional demeanor returns. "I wouldn't recommend it."

Silence follows. I should say something. Any second now. But I'm speechless, my flowcharts tangling in my head, any appropriate response drowned out by those three words sprinting laps around my brain. Post-crash season implies a crash season... implies an accident big enough that it merits a "before" and "after." I hadn't seen anything about a specific accident when I'd been reading about him. An accident that got him fired. And he wants to be on their team again?

I clear the nervous knot in my throat. "When was the crash? What happened?"

"Oh, that." Delaney's eyes skid away from me and my camera. "It happened in Monza at the Italian Grand Prix. Bad place for a Bianco to wreck, as you can imagine."

"Makes sense," I say, mostly to free up my mental schedule- flipping. Monza is a

name you remember. I'm pretty sure it's the last race Black I don't feel anything toward him other than impartial, unbiased curiosity. Also, he isn't even trying to stay on this team. By this time next year, if all goes according to plan, he'll be living in Italy, driving for a team that apparently hadn't treated him that well.

And I'll be back in D.C., where I belong.

"I wouldn't bring it up," Delaney says abruptly.

I snort. "The crash? Yeah. Not the best interview topic before a race."

"That's what I'm thinking." She rewards me with a tight smile. "I appreciate it."

Feeling oddly heavier, I turn my camera toward Arthur again, Ignition's drink slogan waving on the backdrop behind him: You're in the Driver's Seat . The bright orange of his race suit has thrown off my white balance, and I have to adjust between the early sunlight and the pale blue sky and his tall, annoyingly orange brilliance, the center of the circus, a temporary sun in a far-off galaxy I hadn't known existed this time last month. Irony, that we call the Arthurs of the world "superstars." They really do burn brighter, faster.

Chapter Eight

As I stand in the open door of the track-side Ignition garage, watching a Union Jack flag wave far above the jam-packed Silverstone Circuit, my ears start to ring.

Funnily enough, getting a single hint that Formula 1 might not be the safest thing in the universe is making me jumpy. A certain type of person lives in D.C.; self-important lobbyists, NDA-clad federal workers, pastel-pants consultants, and my camp, drawn to document the blood. Putting your all into your job is normal to me. Losing sleep over it, losing friends.

But car crashes? A high-speed accident that alters your life trajectory—then you get back in the car?

Damn.

Also, Delaney had been correct: the grandstands are full, people are everywhere, and the noise is overwhelming. There's fans yelling, music playing, and people all over this garage, a mosh pit of Ignition polo shirts and headsets. Really, calling this screen-covered room a "garage" instead of "mission control" feels wrong. Engineers helm every keyboard, technicians pass blanket-wrapped tires, mechanics circle like sharks. Earlier, Arthur's car was in here, and that's when I started to feel truly anxious. A Formula 1 car is not like a regular car. It's waspish but also shockingly big, all four tires and the cockpit exposed, the body too close to the ground for comfort. It'd taken three people on either side to push it, with another man in front and a woman guiding the dramatically flared rear wing. Seeing Arthur climb into it had made me seasick.

For once, he'd looked... well, not small, but like just an orange helmet in a great big orange car. That's my view of him now as he waits in the pit lane so he can go out there and, I hate to say it, drive really super fast.

"Out of the box," someone snaps, and it takes me a moment to realize they're talking to me. I nod, hold my camera to my stomach, and navigate to a spot deeper into the garage. Ignition didn't receive permission for me to film closer to the track, with the other purple-outfitted media folks, from the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile—aka the FIA. Though Sarah had promised, Footage from the garage will be just as fun!

I don't notice I'm next to Cameron until he leans over from his computer screen—by far the biggest in here—and shoots me a lazy smile. "Ready for your first Quali?"

"Um. Yes." I bite my lip. "Shouldn't you be busy?"

"I am busy." He looks back at his screen, reads something, then back to me. "Remember how this works?"

I swallow. "Yes."

Cameron motions to my camera, cutting me off. "Quali on Saturday determines the order of the race on Sunday," he tells the lens. "Fastest driver gets pole position—that's the best spot up front. There are three sessions, knockout style, with the slower drivers eliminated as we go. Drive a fast lap, move on. Got it?"

"Got it." No wonder Arthur had been in a good mood earlier. He gets to drive as fast as he'd like, surrounded by cheering fans.

"Here." Cameron grabs a spare headphone set from his desk. "This'll let you hear Arthur and me. We should be the only two on the radio, as long as Holmes doesn't

butt in.”

“Wait, the team principal can also—”

“Hold on.” He holds up two fingers, pausing me, listening to his headphones. “Sorry. Gotta go. Oh, and this.” He pulls a can of ginger ale out of thin air. “It’ll settle your stomach. My first race made me throw up.”

I smile, taking my gifts, and don’t bother pointing out that he was probably eleven at the time. After finding the only open chair in a back corner, I slip the headphones over my ears, ignore the uncomfortable pressure nipping at my glasses, and blink.

It’s... quiet.

Blissfully, perfectly quiet. Gone is the noise from the crowd and the music and the staff, canceled out completely by the headphones, leaving me with only Cameron’s and Arthur’s voices.

“How are you doing?” Cameron asks.

“God, it feels good,” Arthur replies, and it sounds like he’s saying that right into my ear. Slightly disoriented by that particular sensation, I shift my camera until it’s braced against my shoulder, then point the lens at Cameron’s back. The shot’s okay. Frames him nicely with the screen.

“It’s good to be back in the garage,” Cameron continues. “Life-affirming.”

“Try being back in a car,” Arthur laughs.

They talk like an old married couple. It’s kind of adorable. But then a deeper whine cuts through the headphones, the noise ricocheting off the grandstands, buildings,

garage. The first car is out on the track. My eyes find a screen that shows a more aerial view of the pit lane, and I lock on to the image of Arthur's dark orange single-seat car purring as he waits for his moment—his number 9 painted in white across the car's angular nose, a praying mantis of an automobile.

"Think now's the time," Cameron says. "Ready?"

"Born," Arthur answers.

Hold on , I think. This isn't really happening. Arthur can't compete in a race. He won't take it seriously enough. He's too much of a risk taker. This can't be safe for him, or the mechanics, or any of the other drivers who are already out there, driving too fast for my liking—

Arthur's out of the pit lane, and then his car springs forward so quickly that it rips the breath out of my lungs. I've never seen anything move that fast in my entire life. It's like it vanishes out of existence.

No, not it. Him .

Out of nowhere, any remaining idea that I understand Arthur is whisked into the dirty air, left behind in his wake. That isn't the snarky, temperamental man that I've argued with. That's—he's someone else. From behind the lens, I watch as Arthur guns each straight shot like a stallion down a single field of grass, barely braking enough to take the corners, the red light on the back of his car blinking off and on. I keep the camera on his spot on the screen around and around and around—and I get it, then. Why he'd asked me when the last time I felt alive was, on the first day we met, when I'd said Formula 1 is only about going fast.

Today, out there. In the car, in front of packed grandstands, on live TV.

Arthur isn't just breathing or existing.

He's alive.

Perhaps being addicted to this level of adrenaline isn't healthy, but then he starts another, quicker lap, and he's moving faster than a human being was ever meant to move. It must feel like a trade-off. He was already born into fame and chaos; if he goes fast enough, he can outrun that feeling, leave it in the dust. For a Formula 1 driver, physically outrunning your emotions might be possible.

An excited voice I don't recognize fills my headphones. I think it's somehow an announcer. "A whopping start from King as he's back in the driver's seat for Ignition Energy Drink Racing! Note here how Bianco's on softs on this fresh Silverstone Circuit. It's an audacious move from one of our favorite audacious drivers."

Audacious? I lean forward, camera following, my pulse pounding. "In front of King is Jean Baudelaire for Leone Racing, and see how quickly Bianco is catching up to that honey-gold Leone lion," the announcer buzzes. "We knew King would come out attacking, but if he catches up to his old teammate too fast, they both might end up in the grass."

What? He's right next to the gold blur on the screen.

"Don't get too cocky," Cameron says. His voice has switched tones from earlier. This Cameron is all concentration.

But then there's Arthur, his short rumbling words in my ears. "We'll see." His voice is different, too. Concentrated and tight.

"Take Maggotts and Becketts like you want to live until tomorrow."

There isn't time to wonder what Cameron means. Arthur's car blows through a series of stomach-swooping bends in the circuit. "Fine," Cameron says. "That wasn't bad."

Arthur laughs breathily. "Thanks."

"Uh-huh. Back to the road."

"Aye-aye."

Their voices melt into background noise as I follow Arthur from screen to screen, around each corner and bend and the horrible straights where he drives faster than thoughts can form, the sweet smell of chemicals and burning rubber enveloping the garage. Logically, I believe the engineer I overheard earlier who said that the first Qualifying session is only eighteen minutes long. But in this moment, I don't know how that's possible. Time loses its shape as Arthur drives the miles-long circuit in a minute and thirty seconds, a minute twenty-nine—setting aggressively fast lap after aggressively fast lap.

"Oh, look at that lap time, ladies and gentlemen. With Q1 drawing to a close, it's a minute-twenty-eight-second go-around for the King, and the best time of anyone out there yet. The prodigal son of Formula 1 is back!"

My headphones buzz. The announcer is talking, and Cameron and Arthur are back, and the driver scoreboard shuffles rapidly as the last cars finish. But I'm buzzing, too, my heartbeat hammering like a mile-high metronome. Beyond the open garage door and the long, wide circuit, fans are screaming in the grandstands, as tiny and Technicolor as spilled ice-cream sprinkles through my camera lens. When Arthur returns to the "box," the mechanic next to me jumps to her feet, clapping, yelling.

I barely hear her.

This will be the beginning of the documentary. My opening sequence. There's an entire story in this camera footage: a hero's comeback, the tenacity of a young man, the roaring public who power his journey. And it's happening in England, the country where Arthur was born. Because this isn't only a movie about Arthur's behind-the-scenes business drama. It's about the man in the car and the man outside the car and the people, all of us, watching the cars, watching him win. Arthur will be my allegory. I can show the different sides of Formula 1 through him, the frightening, the masculine, the exhilarating. The addictive, even.

We might actually do this. Arthur and I's movie might actually be amazing.

When I hear his voice again, he's sharp and breathless and as excited as I am.

"Did she really watch that?" Arthur asks.

Cameron's shoulders stiffen. There's a longer pause than usual, just enough time for me to dissolve.

She.

Who's she?

Arthur can't mean me—wouldn't, since I'm clearly watching, I'm hired to watch him—but then there's what he'd said in Texas about us, the inevitable suspicions—about wanting someone despite disliking them—and I haven't thought about it since then, so ridiculous, but it's how he said it, his tone, really watch that, it almost sounded like—"Who do you mean?" Cameron says after a second. "The doc crew? Or—"

"No," Arthur cuts him off. "Not... Never mind."

My pulse flutters distractingly. My camera keeps rolling. There's another Qualifying session. Then another.

None of that distracts me from that one word.

No . No, not the doc crew, no, not me.

No, there's someone else Arthur wants to watch him.

Once all three sessions are said and done, Cameron excitedly tells Arthur that he's "on pole" for tomorrow, and I should care about that, really. I shouldn't be wishing that the noise cancellation on my headphones would last forever so I couldn't hear the Ignition garage explode with joy as my throat twists into a knot. I should open up Cameron's ginger ale. I should...

She.

This isn't a total surprise. Sure, he hasn't mentioned having a girlfriend—but Arthur isn't the girlfriend type. And okay, right, any other subject might've mentioned a serious partner while I've been filming them, but it isn't like this is a normal documentary.

Stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I'm not upset. I'm just... When he'd said people would think he was interested in me, I'd almost believed him. No one would think that. No one has for all these weeks. And it's not like I want him to be, obviously. I don't. But why had he tried to convince me it was possible?

Why does he lie so often?

I'm grateful I have my camera to hide behind as I march past Cameron and the mechanics to the post-Qualifying media pen. One by one the drivers walk in, some smiling, some not. When Arthur appears, grinning and excited and pushing his sweaty blond hair from his face, I tune in to camera mode. Just a pair of eyes. Impartial. Unbiased.

But my body is warm, and I don't want to hear him talk, but I do, and this is such great footage. The camera loves him. I don't know why that isn't making me feel better.

The journalists ask their questions. It's filler, cute stuff about how he's liking England and how he feels about the race tomorrow, etcetera, etcetera. A smaller woman in a polished gray suit appears at the barricade with a microphone. "Good afternoon, Arthur, just one question for you. I was wondering, how does it feel to prove everyone wrong?"

Laughter ripples behind me, and with fizzling discomfort, I realize fans have gathered behind me to watch Arthur speak. "Fucking great," Arthur says with a devilish grin. "Ah— dang. Sorry. That'll be a fine, huh?"

"Probably." The journalist laughs. "My name's Katie, by the way."

"Katie," Arthur repeats. "Gorgeous name. Thanks for watching today."

"Always. I always watch you race."

"Well, then." His smile compresses into a laser just for her. "Thanks for always watching."

The fans behind me lose it, obviously amused by the Arthur Charms Women show. Great. Fantastic. Must be a regular occurrence. Maybe Arthur doesn't even have one secret girlfriend that I don't know about. He could have multiple, a list, including any media personalities he doesn't immediately hate upon meeting, like me.

When the journalists pack up, I hurry to leave with them, the nonsensical pit beneath my feet growing wider with every nauseating moment. "Hey," I hear behind me as I shove my camera in my bag. "Graywood. You all right?"

I don't turn around. That's why I don't see, only feel Arthur taking the back of my elbow, his grip warm against my skin. We're by a back door, but there are people around, and I yank my arm away from him and mutter through my teeth, "I have to go."

"No, you don't," Arthur says, concerned but not totally unhappy. Slightly plussed, let's call it. "We have the same schedule tonight."

"I said, I need to go."

"But we need to chat. Big updates going on."

His playfulness makes me suck in a breath. "Can you be serious?"

"I am."

I jerk my eyes up to meet his and I catch it again, Arthur's cologne, carbonated and sweet and— that's his scent. He smells like the chemical fumes from the track, toxic and honeyed, bad for you as you breathe them in. When I place it, the frustration that's been building inside of me goes from a splinter in my finger to the entire forest falling over.

“I get it,” I snap. “You’re handsome and talented and famous so you can usually do whatever you want, but it’s not actually great to be around on, like, a human level. We need to be on the same page! And I’m trying really hard here to not ruin my career because of you, so you can’t just come up and grab me in front of half the sports journalists in Europe whenever you feel like it.”

“You...” Arthur takes a step back from me. Swallows. “You’re mad.”

Another cutting realization from Arthur Bianco. Choosing silence, I zip my bag shut and swing it over my tired shoulder. Professionalism. Detachment. Not friends, only enemies with the same enemy. Max’s words from our fight in Glory Run simmer in my memory: You never let anything go.

Time to prove him wrong.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say with saintly restraint. “And please remember to not touch me without my permission.” Would hate to give anyone the wrong idea , I almost add.

I’m two steps away from the door when Arthur catches up. Probably took him a single giant footstep. “Are you—are you jealous?”

My stomach clenches like a fist and I swallow back something metallic and harsh. “No. Of course not.”

“You”—his voice drops—“seem jealous.”

“I’m not jealous that you called another woman gorgeous.”

“I called her name gorgeous.”

“Katie? Was she the first Katie you’d ever met?”

Arthur laughs. “It doesn’t mean any—”

“Save it. You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” I interject. “Go apologize to whoever she is.”

He exhales, a sudden gust of air, as I grab the door handle. “Lilah. You were listening to the radio? Hey, Graywood. Stop.”

I nearly do. Then I wrench the door open, step through, and let it go.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:26 am

Chapter Nine

“Arthur isn’t texting me back.”

“Oh, he will!” Sarah tells Delaney reassuringly. “I bet he’s just asleep. He crushed it at Quali today.”

I take a sip of my San Pellegrino.

Am I in the mood to be sandwiched between Delaney and my ex-boyfriend’s secret new girlfriend as they trade stories about childhood vacations to Barcelona and the Cotswolds? While seated at a huge family-style outdoor dining table on a stunningly beautiful evening at a farm-to-table Michelin-star restaurant? With aforementioned ex-boyfriend, Max, stealing glances at me from where he’s been plopped across the table?

Nope. But I’m sipping sparkling water, nodding accordingly, and playing nice. This is my first Ignition team dinner, and I’m planning on stubbornly sticking it out until the after-dinner espressos have been downed and the fairy lights swaying above us have been turned off. Unlike Arthur, who’s been incognito since he left the media pen.

Ergo Delaney’s texts.

But it’ll be fine. It’s her job to track him down and make sure he isn’t drinking himself under a table, or any other early-2000s paparazzi faux pas. Truly, I shouldn’t go running after him.

Fine. I'm a teensy bit guilty that he's skipping dinner after I snapped at him.

Okay, maybe a lot guilty, since he did well today and deserves to be celebrating with his team after winning Qualifying or however that's phrased. But that annoyingly buzzy guilt operates on the assumption that me pushing Arthur away would be the reason he isn't here, which is presumptuous and, based on my past experience with him, super wrong. Arthur loves to be pushed so he can spring right back up, like some sort of anthropomorphized punching bag that wins every fight by never backing down. On a normal post-argument evening, he would've been the first one seated at this table when I walked in, knife and fork in hand, grinning while he waited for our proverbial boxing bell to go ding-ding .

I can't be the reason he isn't here.

So, I don't dwell on it as Max passes me a plate of smoked salmon, which I then pass to Sarah. "Oh," Max says. To me. "I thought you ate fish?"

"No worries," I say, surprised that he's initiating conversation. Here, and at all.

"Was today..." He pokes his salmon lump with a fork. "Did you manage to record Arthur's last lap today? We'll need that for the film."

Ah yes. This is why we talk now: the film. I nod, keeping my eyes on my glazed carrots, despite my frustration kicking to life like a wind-up toy. "Yeah. I managed."

"Nice. Can I take a look at it—"

My saved-by-the-bell moment comes in the form of a man with a cowboy hat, standing by the head of the table, tapping a knife against his wineglass. I flash Max an apologetic look, then turn along with everyone else to the toast-giver.

“Howdy, folks. Some of you may know me as Robert, the owner of Ignition Energy Drink Racing,” he says, thick Texas accent twanging in the breeze. “But my friends just call me Bob. Let me start off by thanking y’all for coming. It’s always a pleasure to see my team all in one place.”

My eyes flick down the table of people on instinct.

Still isn’t here.

“Some of you guessed it, though—we didn’t just have this dinner to feed y’all.” Forced laughter, some louder than others. “I’d like to cut to the chase and invite up our team principal, Holmes Bianco, to discuss our driver strategy for Hungary.”

Pause.

I need a second. I need my camera. But our friend Bob keeps talking as Holmes Bianco shuffle-saunters to the front. He’s slightly shorter and older, with dark hair combed away from his round face and a thick gold pinkie ring glinting in the light. There are traces of Arthur woven through his features: identical Roman nose, same critical shine to his brown eyes. Weirdly, I haven’t seen him often.

“Salve, everyone,” Holmes says with a smile. “Yes, the rumors swirling today are true. Since Faust has, sadly, needed to step back, we’ve decided to preemptively schedule Arthur to drive Hungary, Belgium, and the Netherlands.”

Three more races? Shocked, my gaze sticks to Faust as he manages a weak smile that lasts as long as the clapping. He’s a large man, sloped shoulders, ruffled brown hair, deep tan skin. Fake happiness looks wrong on his face, as if he doesn’t have the same smile lines everyone else picks up in their mid-twenties.

When the noise dies down, he excuses himself from the table.

Max had been seated next to him. Now that the chair is empty, he leans ever so slightly forward and catches my eye in that way we always used to communicate on location, when subject matters were going bonkers and we needed to realign our wavelength.

What's going on? I can read all over Max's tuned-in face, previous conversation forgotten.

I blink back, No clue.

Our Morse code is cut short.

"Now, I love my nephew with every beat of my heart," Holmes continues from up front. "And I can't be more thrilled to see him competing again. I was the one who taught him how to drive, after all." He pauses to let that showstopping history tidbit sink in. "So you can imagine the pride I feel when he's out there. But this decision has been made with the team and the Constructors in mind. As always, the clock doesn't lie, and the best man wins."

Said no rich man ever. Anxiety swells in my gut, my mind replaying every school-of-hard-knocks lesson I was taught too young about men like Holmes who clamor into the spotlight with big smiles and bigger promises. And as he vanishes in a cloud of applause, I notice Delaney's hands are folded neatly in her lap. "Fuck this," she mutters.

Blame my sleep-deprived brain and lack of vegan protein for not expecting that to come out of her usually tight-lipped mouth. "Yeah, that was weird. Are you okay?"

"No." She picks at the single chip in her shiny pink manicure. "This isn't about Faust. It isn't even about dangling Monza like a carrot in front of Arthur. Have you seen the news yet?"

She doesn't wait for me to respond and slips her phone out. With a tap, there's an article on her screen: Ignition F1 Team Negotiating for New U.S. Circuit. "What? Where?" I blurt out, stealing her phone. Why haven't I seen this yet? This is—this industry moves too fast.

"Between Los Angeles and Palm Springs," she says dryly. "Right where they think Americans will pay the most attention to F1. Also, right by Ignition's California factory, which is surely a coincidence."

"But what does that have to do with Arthur and the seat?"

"It's the movie. I've heard whispers about this all year. Ignition is desperate to build the U.S. fanbase as the only American team on the grid. Holmes is going to use the profits from your documentary as a bartering chip with F1's media division—they're the company that holds the commercial rights to the sport itself. And now that Arthur's healthy and winning again?" She lets out an angry laugh. "Unless he can get out of his contract, Holmes is going to force Arthur to be the face of the film and Ignition. It's a win-win for him. Millions of dollars from your film and the new circuit, the Bianco family legacy on screens across the country, and never letting his nephew go. Arthur certainly won't see any of that money."

All my blood exits my body, leaving behind an iceberg of guilt. This was what Arthur wanted to discuss earlier.

This is why I need to remain emotionless toward him.

"But what if—theoretically—Arthur had another offer from a different team? Can't they pay for him to leave Ignition? Arthur's contract has to have some kind of release option."

"Lilah," she says in a low but patient voice, "Arthur doesn't have a good contract.

There was nothing I could do—he wouldn’t listen to me and signed it anyway, back when he thought no other team would want to take him. Before he knew Holmes had taken the team principal position—”

“But he can still get out of it, can’t he?”

“As of tonight, Arthur’s release clause is set at sixty million dollars,” Delaney whispers. “And any time he drives a race for Ignition and wins points for the team, that number goes up by ten percent. That’s how much another team would need to pay to get him.”

Oh shit. Oh— fuck . I swallow, then swallow again, slightly sickened by hearing that number said out loud. I can’t comprehend that much money. That’s one million dollars, sixty times, and when I think about it like that, my breath begins coming out too fast. I’m disembodied as Sarah leans over, whispering, “Would they really treat him like that?”—her surprise and hurt making me feel worse. And just as Max appears, a concerned expression on his face, I excuse myself and walk away, past him and Sarah and Delaney and this tangled Shakespearean mess.

Out on the cobblestone street in front of the restaurant, I put my hands on my knees and force my lungs to work. This isn’t just about ruining Max’s shitty pseudo-documentary anymore, or even making my own film. Unless Arthur and I can figure out a way to pull off our plan with this much money at stake, Arthur is doomed by the narrative—and my last name will forever be associated with the film that trapped him in his gilded cage. Why didn’t Arthur tell me there was a real Faustian bargain at play here? I would’ve been taking it easier on him. I would’ve understood that his cocky attitude and brash humor were ways to deflect.

Probably.

Maybe.

Either way, before now, I'd thought of Arthur as an unstoppable force, and me the sole immovable object accidentally placed in his path. Like he'd said, Formula 1 drivers get what they want.

Was that a lie, too?

"Hey."

I look up.

Arthur's standing in front of me.

Warm light filters down from tall black streetlights, painting him in dappled yellow and shadows. His thumbs are hooked in his pants pockets, back sloped, shoulders loose and relaxed. He's the picture of English countryside: crisp white cotton shirt, airy pants, leather belt, leather shoes. He looks unsurprised to see me here, in front of the restaurant, spiraling by myself. It's like he knew I'd be melting down as the sun set, and timed his entrance accordingly.

"Did they make the announcement?" he asks softly.

I straighten up. Push my own emotions to the side and say, "Yeah. I'm sorry." And then I remember how sorry I am, and add, "I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have bailed on you earlier. Delaney told me what's going on."

Arthur's eyebrows pinch in the middle, mouth folding into an unreadable expression. Either he's touched that I'm apologizing for Holmes's treatment or his mind is somewhere completely untraceable, since he says, "Leone had agreed to pay what my release clause was set at before, but if the price keeps going up, I'm worried I need to make Holmes fire me—well, not worried, but with teams, driver prices can be a matter of pride, and now that Faust is out and I'm in..."

He's not getting to the point. I haven't seen Arthur at a loss for words before, looking at me like he needs me to figure out what he's trying to say, and something about his vulnerability is like an espresso shot straight to the mind. "It's okay to be worried. What can I do to help?"

Arthur's eyes dance over my features, and I might be wrong, since daylight is fading and my brain is scrambled, but he looks grateful for my quick affirmation. "I don't know," he says. "That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"Me?"

My question makes Arthur smile with one corner of his mouth, like fully committing to grinning is too exhausting. Unfortunately, it's slightly attractive. Blame the absent birth father, mostly absent birth mother of it all, but there's just something about a tired man. My worst, most basic primal instincts scream that he's worn out from taking care of a large family and/or farm.

And... no. That's not a real thought I just had. I'm just not used to people—men, Arthur—coming to me for help. It gave me a minor contact high.

"I need you to give it to me straight, Graywood," he continues. "What's the thing that gets me out of the contract, without a doubt?"

My heart isn't beating faster. It isn't. "Shouldn't you ask Delaney or Cameron or—or Sarah?"

"The granddaughter of my uncle's best friend and the manager of my public image?"

"Right, forgot everyone's related."

He laughs quietly. "That's your power. You're an outsider."

Lovely. Outsider is code for temporary . Disposable. As Dad would say: They're not from around here. At the same time, though, Arthur isn't wrong, and I worry my lip as I go to stand next to him below the restaurant's cream awning. "Okay, so clearly, you need to get fired. That makes it so Leone doesn't have to pay anything, and with Holmes being your uncle, there's got to be a way to piss him off that wouldn't endanger your professional reputation. Something personal. That way, if Leone does hear about it, they wouldn't care. You could... crash your yacht? Tell him you're not having kids? What makes him mad?"

Arthur actually smiles, all the way. "Besides me not doing what he wants?" He tilts his chin into his hand, thinking. After a moment, his eyes find mine, and a tiny thrill shoots across my collarbones at the way he focuses on me. "We could play our ace."

"I, uh." Great. Stammering. "What's our ace?"

He takes a breath. "I believe you called it 'fake dating.'?"

Thankfully, nobody else has wandered outside, so when I make an extremely weird gasp, only Arthur hears it. "No." The shock flooding my system drags the word out into five unique syllables. "Sorry, but... I, that would be—no."

"I get it. You hate me." As Arthur talks, his gaze shifts to my hand. I've pressed a palm against the restaurant for stability. "And you don't want to play into my reputation."

"Play into me being a poor, younger woman and you being a rich, famous man, so of course, we have to be falling in love."

"It's a narrative, and the narrative would work for our plan."

"You're forgetting that they'd fire me . Not you." I stare at him, more than

incredulous. “And there’d be nothing you could do about it.”

“Only if we aren’t careful,” Arthur says, leaning to put his hand on the wall, too. But unlike me, he’s confident and clear, eyes bright, and I realize with startling clarity that he’s put thought into this plan. “Holmes needs Black & Graywood’s documentary to come out. You told me that a documentarian and a movie star—”

“Subject matter—”

“—can’t date. So we don’t date in a way he can prove until you’ve finished filming your movie. It won’t be fake dating, more like... fake courtship. Things they can cover up and scrub off the internet, which they will, because this film is a cornerstone of the marketing budget for the next five years. Everything’s riding on it. The new circuit, new fans. And they hired Black & Graywood specifically because of how you spun that congressman’s image. They want me, but they need you, too.” Arthur looks at his hand. Mine. Ours, inches apart. “And Holmes would fire me for being with you. He’s always had a plan for how I’m to live my life, and that—it doesn’t include a scandal.”

It’s a nice way to phrase it. A painful truth, but nice. We would be a scandal. Arthur has a reputation for dating beautiful, rich, famous women, many of them, and if I were his fan or sponsor or overbearing uncle, would I really want to see him pick a broke camera fiend from Kentucky, who was hired to watch him but never touch? No. Things like Formula 1 work because they’re closed off from the rest of the world. Self-sustaining ecosystems, like glass terrariums or Hollywood. As badly as us common folk may think we can break into their glamorous world, we can’t. It has to remain elusive. If anyone normal pierces the veil, it ruins the illusion that these people are special, inaccessible, important.

Arthur and I are from two different worlds. He’s fast, I’m slow. He’s rich, I’m not. There’s no happily ever after here, even for the most optimistic dreamer. That’s the

point.

He's destined for a Delaney or a Sarah or whoever he was talking about on the radio.

"I'm sorry this is happening to you," I say carefully. "Our movie was going to be great—I really felt that today. But this is real, scary money, and I don't know if I can trust that gossip about us won't leave the F1 containment zone. It's unethical to help you and really unethical to date you and... if anyone in my industry found out, either way, no one would take me seriously anymore."

Arthur's face falls. Fast, like the houses of cards I'd make at my kitchen table as a kid while the adults played poker in the other room, kings and queens and aces fluttering to the floor. Then it's gone. "Sure," he says. "Your reputation is more serious."

"And after what happened with Max..."

How can I trust Arthur Bianco? He's infinitely more dangerous than Max. More dominant, more taboo, more aware of exactly how to get under my skin. And he's chasing his own dream—one that doesn't include me, like Max's used to. Formula 1 seems to be an exceptionally expensive game of musical chairs, and I've seen what happens when I stop being useful to my partner. Who's to say that the second the music stops, Arthur won't pull out my chair from under me, so that he can sit with Leone?

Arthur pushes off the wall to stand, and I almost expect him to leave me here, now that I've shot him down. Then he sucks in one cheek and says, "Sleep on it. Don't make a decision until the race. I know this must be hard."

"Hard?"

"I'm sure you were in love with him. Max."

I blink.

Oh.

Arthur isn't the first person to throw that statement at me with utter certainty: You're in love with Max Black. Well before we tried dating, my best friend and I had been thrust together by every mutual acquaintance. He liked movies. I liked movies. He was kind of cerebral. I got stuck in my head for days. We made romantic sense, according to professors, fellow students, and congressional interns. Max even preferred audio, and I preferred visuals.

But had I been in love with him?

I'd loved dating Max. I'd loved the certainty about myself that I got from being with him. I felt like I knew who I was by way of how he saw me, like how you can only look at a solar eclipse after the light is twisted and thrown by a pinhole camera. My niche interests and burning dislikes, how much of my true self anyone else could tolerate. Having such an outspoken neurotypical partner who ticked everyone else's boxes was my own camera obscura, a bellwether for how much of myself I could get away with showing the world.

"I..." I blink at my dusty sneakers. "Yeah. I loved Max a lot. I still love him."

I don't know why I say something that feels like a lie the moment it leaves my mouth. Other than a deep-rooted fear has kicked in and I want to hide as much of my personality as possible. Scramble, tuck my soft underbelly beneath the shell of compulsory best-friends-to-lovers heterosexuality, and sidestep Arthur's bizarrely sharp observation skills. Because I should have been in love with Max. I should want to be with my best friend again.

Only I don't. The realization hits right here, in front of this fancy restaurant. I was

never in love with Max Black. I only loved working with him. Him breaking up with me would've been a welcome relief, if he just could've done it without destroying everything else.

A hundred light bulbs turn on.

No, literally. On the awning above us, the string lights awaken for the evening, warm gold light flooding Arthur and me. That's my cue. Arthur's good at bullshit, but I doubt even he could explain to the team why we've been talking out here, alone, for the last ten minutes.

"I'll think about it." I straighten up, my knees wobbly. "And about what you said?"

Nodding, Arthur rakes a hand through his hair, and I'm treated to the dark circles under his eyes, more apparent in the bright light. "Yeah?"

"I don't..." Love Max. Love. Max. I have to say it. I'm not like Arthur and Max and the people in this luxurious motorsports wonderland. I'm someone who tells the truth, a documentarian, and if that changes, I don't know who I am. "I don't hate you. 'Hate' is a strong word."

I couldn't say it.

I watch, strangely numb, as Arthur shoots me another tired smile. "I'm disappointed."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Figured you felt the same way," he says noncommittally, and that doesn't sound like any version of him I've met so far.

Chapter Ten

As rain plummets down the Silverstone racetrack, transforming the regularly slick asphalt into a glossy ice-skating rink, I wonder if my anxiety has somehow affected the local weather.

I keep going back and forth with my options: save Arthur from a \$60-million-and-counting bear trap, and trust that it won't swing shut on me once he's free. Stomach the inexcusable lying, the attention from Ignition staff who do witness our "fake courtship," the inevitable ahh when he fake-dumps me, because of course that's how our story would go. Withstand months of worrying so I can create another award-winning documentary and keep Black he's just in a very different career field.

My vague statement has him frowning more. "Made your mind up about what?"

"Us."

Arthur's jaw works, like he's overwhelmed by the word us meaning me and him. Then he lets out a breath. "Explain," he demands.

A white spark zings through my frustration.

Yup. This is why I need to work with Arthur Bianco.

Life's taught me that power is transmutable—but it usually comes from men, bubbling up naturally from the perpetual spring that is the patriarchy. Men can do anything. And yes, the rest of us can, and we should, and we do. But men have that

innate, excruciating, incredible confidence to record found footage of strangers and call it a film, or throw paint on a canvas and sell it as art, or drive cars really fast and get paid millions. Just like Max can steal my life's work out from under my nose, Arthur can look me in the eye and demand that I explain what I'm thinking, after all but telling me how little he trusts me.

Maybe that's it. Power.

Power is confidence.

I lick my lips and try to find the courage that got me to England in the first place. "What I mean is... Your glove looks like it's half off."

Arthur looks down at his gloved hands, startled. Then—slightly irritated? "My gloves are fine."

My heart is already awake and alert. It's beating louder, worried, second-guessing. "Let me see it. I—I just want to check."

Arthur's razor-sharp gaze roams up my face, attempting to peel back my sudden switch in demeanor. He doesn't stop trying when he holds up his hand, stretched out just enough for any onlooker to think he wants me to take it.

And I do. I have to use both hands to wrap around his wrist, arranging it so that his palm is toward me, fingers bent. I inspect the wide plane of his palm, then gently turn his hand around and study where his shiny gloved fingers meet his knuckles.

Arthur's voice is church quiet. "What game are you playing now, Graywood?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

“You said...” he starts too loudly. Stops. Swallows. “People are watching.”

I lift one shoulder, painfully casual, and flick my eyes back to his. I’m so not prepared. My breath catches at his expression, the wicked curiosity shot with confusion, irritation, impatience. He’s starting to realize what’s going on. The decision that I’ve sprung on him, and he’s upset, entertained, and—maybe—impressed. There’s a tiny notch between his brows, thin lines fanning from either side of his narrowed eyes.

He knows.

“Ah,” he murmurs. “You little devil. Warn a man next time.”

His tone makes warmth pool in a part of me I’ve never thought much about, somewhere between my belly button and feet. He thinks I act like a stray cat who bites his hand whenever he’s nice to me? Arthur is a damn mountain lion. Holding his hand feels like I’m offering my life up to the jaws of a hunter, and hoping he doesn’t taste something he enjoys enough to bite down.

But this isn’t real. We’re only doing this to get what we both want.

“Warn you? I’m just helping you with your glove.” I softly fold Arthur’s large hand back so I can reach the strap running around his wrist. There are two flat gray circles near his pulse point, one of them the underside of a button snap. I click it into place, pressing the snap firmly into his skin for leverage. Just enough pain to vent some of the many ways he’s annoyed me since we met.

He doesn’t even wince.

“Is that so?” Arthur tuts. “You’re touching me out of the goodness of your own heart?”

Forget my heart. That thing is racing out of this garage. “I mean, nothing could ever happen between us. It would simply ruin Black & Graywood’s film.”

“And we couldn’t have that happen.”

“Absolutely. Rumors would start flying.”

“And rumors are dangerous things,” he says. “They travel even faster than me.”

We’ve both been watching my fingers on his wrist, as if us touching is some new art film only in theaters for one night, alluring and strange and a little off-putting. I’m touching Arthur. In the garage. In front of Max, who I can’t bring myself to look at. This is past weird. This is main-character behavior, stupid and careening toward a tragic end.

Realizing how deep I’m in makes my confidence splinter. “Are you sure you want to go with this narrative? I know you have—” A girlfriend. A girl friend. Women? “A lot going on.”

Arthur meets my eyes again. After too many seconds of staring right at me, his gaze drops to my lips, tracing the way my mouth is split open by my rapid breaths. Then he looks lower. At my neck. My shoulders. Lower. He’s touching me with only his eyes, assessing.

Deciding.

“Getting caught with you is fine with me. I like playing offensively better.” He smiles, obviously not at all worried about whoever he’s seeing finding out about our scheme. Stand-up guy, this one. Though I’m not exactly surprised that Arthur doesn’t care about the emotions of whoever “she” is. Caring about interpersonal fallout seems to be a skill reserved for non-athletes.

“Did you know that these gloves track my heartbeat?” he adds.

“Y-yeah?” Ugh.

He hums, definitely and without a doubt biting back a laugh, and turns his hand so his wrist is facing up again. When he angles his arm just right, a tiny sliver of bare skin is exposed between his glove and race suit. And I think this has to be what Victorian-era men felt when they saw a wanton ankle. I’m stunned by that centimeter of Arthur, his skin, the idea that he wants me where he could get hurt—“Feel it for yourself, princess,” he says teasingly.

Right. He’s the worst person in the world. Devil in a race suit. Good-looking, bad acting. I push him and his biometric-tracking hands away, muttering, “I changed my mind. I do hate you.”

There’s that cutting smile. “Right.”

“I do .”

“I believe you.”

I frown up at him. This isn’t working. I can’t let Arthur and his expert flirting skills overpower me. If he and I are really doing this, if I’m going to prove to the world and his uncle that he’s interested in me , then I need to get him to chase me, whether he realizes it or not. If our “courtship” is going to be remotely believable and contract shattering, I have to make him show everyone in this room that he’s a changed man because of me, not just a lion toying with his prey. This needs to be a love story, not a power imbalance. Otherwise, it’s just sad.

Confidence. I need to be as confident as he is.

So, I nibble at my lower lip. From nerves... and, if it's at all possible, in an attempt to distract him as much as he distracted me with his wrist.

"Maybe this is too much," I say, going for the airy surprise of an epiphany.

"What's too much?" Arthur was about to put on his helmet, but he sticks it under his arm, pausing.

"This. You. Me."

"The jury's still out, is it?" he says roughly.

"Well, you don't seem that into it. Maybe Faust would be willing to star in a movie? He's having an interesting summer."

Arthur swallows. He's trying not to look stricken. "You don't want Faust."

"Or James..."

An engineer pops up by his side. "Hey, King, we need to get you in the car."

He ignores them. "No James."

"I guess it depends on if you actually win today," I mumble. "If you don't, then I don't need to keep touching you. Ever."

Arthur's bright eyes narrow, a spark glowing in the dead of night. "Are you challenging me to win the Grand Prix for your hand, Graywood?"

I squint at him, innocent. "If you think winning would be a challenge, I guess not."

“No. No, I’m winning this.”

“King, we really need you to—”

“I’m coming,” Arthur snaps at the engineer. Then he points at me, a real scowl on his lips. “Put your headphones on and sit where I can find you later, micetta. You’re about to watch the best race of your life.”

Then he’s gone.

Chapter Eleven

Arthur doesn't run away, per se. Just vanishes for the formation lap in three of his massive steps, and then he's surrounded by people, and I'm left to stew in my own flustered irritation as he gets swept onto the track. Sit where he can find me later?

Nope. Telling me what to do is also not how this is going to work.

I get one irritated sneaker out the back door and gasp as the rain soaks through my canvas shoes. Rain. Forgot about the rain. Bouncing back, I look for any other exit or overhanging. There isn't one. And even if I did miraculously find an escape route to another staff-only section, I wouldn't make it a minute before the Formula 1 officials had me back in here. Above us is the "Paddock Club," a fan seating area that's as expensive and security locked as it sounds. Regular grandstands would be safer.

Hm. There's an idea.

I throw a rain cover over my camera, pocket my work badge, and head to the closest grandstand, joining the fans lingering in the first row. My camera is in my hands by the time all twenty cars are at the starting line, tires warmed and pedestrians cleared off the track. In Formula 1, there are five lights that hang above the track like stoplights, and all of them have to turn red then go out before anyone can drive. The first light illuminates, and I turn my camera on. The second, and I have it up to my eye. By the third light, I've got my foot braced on the chain-link fence between me and the grass and the track, and it sways beneath my sneaker. I miss the fourth light as I get the focus right on Arthur's car—the back of his orange helmet. The fifth light turns red, and I think about his wrist, that one fragile stretch of skin.

You better win , I think to myself.

The entire crowd leans forward as the five lights turn black at once.

“Lights out,” Arthur says.

“And away we go,” Cameron replies.

Instantly, I understand why Sarah would want someone to watch their first Formula 1 race in person. I could’ve watched a thousand different videos of the first minute from different races, and that still wouldn’t have prepared me for the British Grand Prix with Arthur on pole.

I don’t know how to describe it. Imagine twenty fireworks going off at once, twenty dams breaking, flooding the earth. The overwhelming sound of engines, the booming crowd, the rain slicking clothes to skin, the announcers, information, cars, clocks, ticking.

Usually, I have trouble with noise. And crowds. And being places I haven’t mapped out fully in my mind. Then, once I start to feel anxious—or the ADHD goblins get their hooks in my concentration—it’s hard to come back. Being behind a camera helps, but not always. Filming something that my brain has deemed “boring” is like being on a horrible first date at a restaurant you love; the setting is right, the food is good, but something’s off.

There isn’t a spare second in a Formula 1 race to clock out. No breaking it down into its individual pieces and separating the cars from the noise and the people and the crowds and the action. It’s all so shockingly overwhelming and cohesive that I don’t have to hope that my natural instinct to hyperfocus kicks in.

I just focus.

Arthur is the only thing on my mind as he explodes down the circuit, nineteen cars behind him, the dark gold Leone in second place swerving as it tries to find a way around him. The Leone isn't the only one, either. Virtually every other driver is trying to pass one another, pass Arthur, weaving, dancing, and I clutch my camera like a security blanket as carbon fiber on carbon fiber comes close again and again, tires almost touching, centimeters apart.

The announcer fills my headphones. "And so begins this year's British Grand Prix, with an unlikely lead and renewed rivalry as Arthur Bianco makes it through the first turns untouched, followed by an agitated Jean Baudelaire, fast on his trail."

Damn it. I zoom in tighter to the orange blur as he careens around the bends, straining to hear Arthur's voice through the announcer's excitement.

"How's your visibility, King?" That's Cameron, and that's a bit of worry in his tone. I bite my lip so hard, I taste Chapstick and copper. I shouldn't have sprung the fake-dating thing on Arthur before this race. What if I threw him off, and now he's not going to be able to concentrate for the next fifty-one laps? The rain has to make this circuit more dangerous than usual, and he hasn't had as much experience this season, in a car, as the other guys.

My chest aches as the first real thoughts I've had in minutes take shape.

Please say you're okay. Please be safe.

Just... don't get hurt.

"Oh, I'm having a party out here, Cam," Arthur says, and hearing his voice—measured and concentrated and a touch ridiculous—makes me let out the breath I've been holding.

He's okay. He's safe.

He won't get hurt.

"Excellent," Cameron replies. "Keep your position."

"Copy."

The beginning of the race whirls by, a swirl of radioed words and minute-long breaks while the pack's on the other side of the track and my heart pounding each time a car gets anywhere close to Arthur's. Something like a line forms behind him after the first laps; it almost looks like the drivers are trying to follow where he's driving, tracking a path through the slick circuit. Then the rain lets up, and I flick my camera down the line as they race by. That Leone has dropped into third. That must take some of the pressure off Arthur, right?

"How's the weather?" Arthur asks Cameron, right on cue.

"Hard to say. Wind's going quick, though. Pay attention to your grip."

"Happy days."

There's so much strategy to this sport. Each passing car. Every one of the ninety minutes that dance by. When was the last time I thought of how many seconds pour into a minute? Felt life like a digital alarm clock, with big red numbers counting down to zero? Every second of the race burns across my nervous system as I watch Arthur drive by, and by, and by, until my fingers are numb and it's just me and the camera and the quiet that falls when the cars aren't in front of us. Focused, completely. I barely blink when there's an "incident" on the thirtieth lap, after the drizzle has cleared and the circuit is drier—two cars that were running parallel close behind Arthur touching tires, then the other bumped off, spiraling through the grass

into a fence. Arthur asks if the drivers are good, Cameron confirms they are, and then we go on. Accepting the danger and moving forward anyway.

My attention only wavers when Cameron snaps at Arthur to “box, box, box” and he pulls into the pit lane, the view illuminated on a large television screen above the track. The pit stop is a dance. Helmeted mechanics crush around him. Two grab the car. Tires are swapped. It lasts all of two seconds, then he’s back on the circuit and I’m back with him, as close as I can get with my camera. Wondering how he can trust that those faceless mechanics put his tires on perfectly—how can he put his life into the gloved hands of this many other people?

I adjust my lens. Get a better shot of the bend in the track. There’s the orange car, yellow, red, green, silver, here one moment, then gone. Arthur isn’t only trusting the Ignition crew to keep him safe while he’s out there. The drivers must trust each other, on some level. You hear the cars before you see them, engines screaming across the circuit on the approach, but you feel them before you hear them, one after the other, the air around you shifting before the sound hits. It does something ancient to my body—raw and primal, a silent whistle that something larger and faster and more powerful than me is around. And yet, there are twenty of them. On one track. Driving at a million miles per hour, all at once.

They’re who I need to film next. I have to start interviewing Arthur and the other drivers he competes against if I’m going to accurately capture this world.

“Pardon me, lovely.” There’s a bald man in an oversized Ignition parka next to me. “Are you filming for the broadcast?”

“Oh—no.” I glance at him, back at the track, him. “I’m... making a film.”

“About who?”

“Arthur Bianco?” Don’t know why his name comes out like a question.

The man grins. “You found the right spot. I’m the biggest fan that boy’s got.”

Laughing under my breath, I get a shot of the stranger’s excited smile, since I’ve got twenty seconds or so until Arthur’s car is back around the circuit. In under fifteen seconds, I learn that he’s a nurse, single, and drove here from Cardiff, a “bloody long drive, but worth it, well worth it.”

“You’re enjoying your day?” I ask.

The cars approach. We go quiet. Our heads turn left, forward, right in sync. Behind us, someone yells in French.

The cars leave, conversation resumes. “Love, this is the best day of my year.” He chuckles and takes a swig from his water bottle. “Beautiful English weather, big happy crowd, and I’ve got my boy Bianco out there again.”

I don’t feel proud or anything. That would be ridiculous, seeing as I barely know Arthur and can’t take any credit for him getting to race this weekend. Documentarians don’t feel proud of their subject matters, nor would they condone such a silly and ridiculous and gas-guzzling sport that... I...

Really like watching. In the rain. With strangers.

As Arthur goes around another time, and I follow with my camera, my seatmate narrates the action for me better than the announcer. “See that red car there? You got it with your camera? That’s Rafael’s Cavalli, real sweetheart rookie. Static’s around here somewhere, probably, if they even want to send their boys out today—they’ve got the darker yellow car than Leone. My opinion, just let the bastards cage-match between themselves and call it a day. A shame to see Static’s strategy wreck itself

every weekend. Sodding ‘mustard rules.’?”

“Do you really keep track of all twenty drivers?” I laugh.

“Like I’m their goddamn mother hen.” The man snorts. “You get on social media, the online forums, that’s half the fun of this sport. You got your good guys, your bad guys, fights, loves, rivalries.”

I take a quick, hopefully quiet breath. I’m filming the circuit but getting this audio. “Who do you think Arthur Bianco’s rival is?”

“Is that a trick question?” he replies. “We all know it’s Jean at Leone. That’s who he used to drive with.”

My breath catches in my throat. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a pattern. “Between you and me—keep this one from the big boss.” The stranger’s voice drops to a low whisper. “I’d like to see King go back to Leone, even if he’s got to put up with Jean again. He’s too good to stay reserve.”

I smile. “Good to know.”

Satisfied, I settle back into the wavelength between the voices, driver and engineer and announcer and fan, only zeroing in once Cameron’s excitement booms through my headphones. “Last lap. Stay careful and we can get third.”

“Third? Where’s your competitive spirit?” Arthur bristles.

“This is Faust’s car.”

“Mine today.”

The past half hour hasn't been kind. Jean's in first, someone from Cavalli is second, and Arthur is in third place, maybe fourth. Hard to tell when my vantage point gives me about ten seconds of the race at a time, television screen notwithstanding. The circuit is misty, though Cameron keeps talking, his excitement crisp. "Overtake Cavalli and you have a shot at second."

"I'm not getting second, either," Arthur laughs. "You see who's up there? Come on."

"King, I really need you to—slow down, slow down."

My eyes snap to the screen. On one winding stretch of asphalt, orange zooms past the side of Cavalli's cherry-red car, driving beside it for a terrifying moment, then overtaking it. Arthur pulls in front of the car, boxing it back, then accelerates hard. I don't think the driver angling for second place even saw him coming.

"Your tires are overheating," Cameron says breathlessly. I don't know what that means, but it sounds bad. "It's too dry now to go this fast. King, slow down now."

Arthur doesn't reply. He doesn't slow down. My heart begins to beat harder against my skin, realizing that he's still in second place, with that damn Leone in first. What happens if Arthur doesn't win? Will he still want me or—or want to use me? There's only gold in front of him and mist behind him and ten seconds until I know how the rest of my summer is going to go. If Arthur needs me at his side instead of behind the camera pointed at him.

If I'm going to pretend to be his.

Then he's going faster. And faster. And he isn't second anymore. He's—

"Arthur."

The ten seconds between him and the finishing line evaporate, and that's it. He did it.

Arthur won.

The air around me erupts with cheering. Second and third place cross, fourth, fifth, and my body tilts forward as the massive spike of adrenaline from the last hour and a half rushes from my veins, evaporating like sweat in summer heat. It's over. He did it. We won.

Arthur pulls to the left of the other finishing cars, slowing and slowing until there's smoke lifting from the back and a sickening bang from the front right of his car. My hand covers my mouth, and Cameron's voice rushes onto the radio... because a tire's blown out.

So that's what happens when they overheat.

"Sorry," Arthur chuckles.

"Goddamn it."

"We'll need new ones anyway."

"Faust's going to—"

"Yeah, yeah."

Cameron's breath puffs out loudly across the airwaves. "Fucking hell, whatever. You won. You won."

"Absolutely, I did," Arthur says, sounding completely confident, like there wasn't any other option. "I had to."

His words slide through me, cutting through the noise, the cheering, everything. “What are you talking about?” Cameron asks.

“I had to help someone make up her mind,” Arthur replies, a smug smile dripping from his voice.

There’s confusion after a Grand Prix. Music plays, fans jump from seats to walk the circuit itself, celebrities scamper between doorways, avoiding photographers’ telephoto lenses; after the relentlessness of a race, the living, breathing creature that is Formula 1 momentarily stops to catch its breath. My path to the winners’ podium—an actual stage above the crowd for Arthur and company to stand on—is blocked by a massive gaggle of Ignition fans taking a selfie with the racing simulator. “Doc crew? Over here,” says a tired-looking employee in an orange pantsuit, waving me through a hidden doorway vinyl-wrapped with AmEx ads.

Eventually, I make it to the crowd below the stage. The angle is bad. I’m crowded into one place, away from the front. When a particularly tall gentleman in a drenched rain jacket blocks my camera completely, I move to the single sliver of space between two metal poles, slip my foldable stool from my backpack, and hop on it.

I’m clicking through my settings as Arthur appears, grinning, to take the podium at center stage.

My fingers still.

When I’m getting the shot, the footage I have to get or the movie won’t matter, I always hold my breath. It started out of fear of jostling the camera, then became somatic. I hold my breath when Arthur waves to the crowd chanting his name, their voices blending with the British national anthem, growing louder, that final “God save the King” reverberating my ribs. Then I keep holding it through the rest; a quieter Star-Spangled Banner for Ignition as the winning team, a distant cousin of the

British royal family appearing to give Arthur a tire-shaped trophy, then a trophy to Cameron of all people, then the other two drivers in second and third place. I hold it even when, out of nowhere, Georges Bizet's Carmen overture begins, and the three drivers grab the champagne bottles at their feet, pop them, and spray each other with the frothy white bubbles that perfume the humid breeze.

It's a silly celebration. It's exciting. Despite my angle working against me, this footage is gold. I imagine someone like me, lonely and jaded, watching this years from now and feeling what it's like to stand in this very crowd, where nothing matters more than cheering on the champagne-covered winners. When I find Arthur afterward, talking to a journalist, an Ignition baseball cap is pulled over his damp hair, one or two wayward golden waves sticking out from it. Our eyes meet for a second between sentences, and I catch that smell again. Arthur's cologne. Sweet, floral, fizzy.

It isn't car fumes, never been toxic. Even before now, Arthur's smelled like champagne.

He narrows his eyes at me. Mouths hello . Then looks back to the reporter.

Breathlessly, I move my camera up to my eye and look at him through my viewfinder. Not him in a car or him on a podium. Just Arthur.

The first few times you film someone are intimate. I bite my lip as I pull him into focus, the outline of his body sharpening. Broad shoulders, muscular neck, argumentative face, winning smile. This is when I get to know his shape, how he fills the world. And without whispering a word out loud, I'm saying that Arthur matters. He's in focus. So much work goes into freezing moments in time; chemicals are used in darkrooms to develop film, and digital cameras require energy, time, effort. Most people go their entire lives without anyone else wanting to record that they existed.

Myself included.

The reporter asks another question, just outside my camera's view. "But how did you feel out there today? What was it like to be back on the track?"

Arthur's eyes stray to me again, then dart away. "It felt brilliant. I was very excited to have this chance to race for Ignition. But today's only one day. I'm looking forward to the rest of this season and next year."

"Really?" The journalist sounds taken aback, which is funny. Someone else miffed by Arthur's rebellious optimism. "This season won't last forever. Don't you find it difficult to remain hopeful about your chances?"

I hold my breath. I hold the shot. Arthur gives the reporter a funny look, as if something just occurred to him. "There's still time," he says, smiling.

Chapter Twelve

I probably can't explain how borderline illegal it is to be a documentarian dating your subject matter. To the general public, no one thinks about the people behind the scenes, the first eyes that see the shots, the hands that stitch the story together. A relationship between a muse and an artist might even sell movie tickets if it got really scandalous. But to me, the idea has always been repulsive on two levels: One, it's taking advantage of someone's trust. Subject matters crack open their rib cages and let us stick our grubby little fingers into their life story.

Then there's the career-decimation aspect of falling for someone you're supposed to be an arm's length away from. Documentarians are similar to journalists in that way; we operate on a code of ethics that creates a wall between us and the rest of the world. I'm not supposed to interfere. If the camera is rolling, and we're documenting how life really is, is it right to slip cash to someone on a street corner asking for help? Make sure the children I'm filming have winter clothes and enough food to last through tomorrow?

Or is it better to share real images of the world, knowing that you're documenting pain, and that you could change thousands of hearts by sharing reality?

When I debated ethics in college, I always landed on the side of the latter. I told myself that when push came to shove, I would be in control. Detached. An arm's length away, always.

So it's beyond weird to be literally standing side by side with Arthur at an airport.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” he mutters.

“Talked you into not taking your private jet from England to Monaco? It’s a two-hour flight, Arthur. You won’t combust being pressurized with poor people.”

“Two hours and thirty minutes,” he corrects. “And I don’t think you’re poor.”

I snort into my oat-milk latte. “Lying to someone about their own bank account isn’t flattering.”

He makes another big show of leaning over, scanning the long passport check line in front of us, and settling back next to me. “You should’ve let me buy your radioactive coffee, then.” He frowns. “Since you’re on your last dollars and all that.”

“I think if we’re going for the whole ‘you’re so into me that you’re forgoing flying on your family’s private jet to travel with me, a peasant’ thing, only buying me coffee is vaguely insulting.”

“The whole coffee shop?”

I squint at him. “What would I do with an airport coffee shop?”

“It’s important for WAGs to have hobbies,” he says, already ducking away from an arm smack that isn’t coming.

“Do I want to know what that means?”

“Wives and girlfriends.”

I groan. “So, literally reducing someone to their relationship to a man.”

A corner of his mouth turns up. “A very important man?”

“Try again.”

The corner goes down. “Yes, you’re right and I’m wrong.”

“Very good. Gold star.”

It’s been forty-eight hours since Arthur won first place in England, and the black espresso he’s clinging to says that the post-race debriefs and interviews and closed-door meetings are wearing him down more than his constant camera smile portrays. Earlier in the airport, I had to hold his bag while a crowd of teen boys holding back tears took one hundred selfies with him. Arthur Bianco is back and better than ever, according to every sports publication I’m now subscribed to. Once we get to Monte Carlo, Arthur is booked for back-to-back luxury-watch photo shoots, then a two-hour cardiovascular workout session, then a meeting with his uncle and other Ignition “stakeholders.” Will we get to sleep before we’re sent to Hungary? Questionable.

Though Holmes has preemptively emailed Arthur that, thanks to his win at Silverstone, his contract is now worth a breezy \$66 million. Just like the fine print had foretold.

Sadly for us, Arthur’s groundbreaking victory as a reserve driver and comeback kid swallowed up any conversations around our pre-race PDA. Which is why I’d had the brilliant idea to have Arthur fly with me this time. What says subtle romantic interest louder than “willing to squeeze into a tin can with you”? And it’ll give us time to discuss how we’re going to go about doing this, too. I need clear, understandable rules for our “courtship” that we both consent to.

Boundaries, if you will.

I take a video with my phone of Arthur walking to meet the stewardess outside our plane. We're flying with Ignition crew, and I need to look half documentarian, half secret fling. The worst combo.

"Your bags?" the air stewardess asks us, the last to board.

"Already checked," Arthur says. "I only have a carry-on. Same with her."

Cold air coats the inside of my throat as I look down. I had a suitcase earlier. I now... don't have it. And I can't remember the last place I saw it. Did I put it down when Arthur was taking selfies? That was miles of airport and a passport check away.

Frozen inside, I grab at my neck, feeling for the locket I wear every day. There's just enough space in the heart-shaped charm to keep my daily ADHD meds; I restock it each morning for emergencies like this. It's the only thing I've kept from my birth mom.

My pulse drums with relief when I feel the silver chain.

Okay. So I don't have my clothes, toiletries, or books. That's fine—I'll be fine. I nod to Arthur, agreeing that it's just me and my backpack, refusing to show any sign of panic on my face. As an adult, I've learned enough about how my brain works to stow my essentials on my body when I travel. I'm not a little ADHD kid handcuffed to symptoms I can't name, trying to explain how I could possibly lose my favorite library book between all the houses I lived at.

At least I have my anxiety medication.

Don't I?

Slowly, I shift my backpack around and search the front zipper. There's my big

orange tube of ADHD pills, some Dramamine, a toothbrush, and... Negative. I'm about to fake feelings for a Formula 1 driver on an airplane, sans Klonopin.

Numb from the face down, I follow Arthur onto the plane. Our first-row chairs are twin overstuffed recliners separated by iced champagne in the armrest, and he takes the window seat, then pats the chair next to him. "Your proletariat seating, mademoiselle."

I don't move.

"Lilah?" he says, sarcasm dropping. "I meant you."

Right. Me. I sit and immediately go for an anti-nausea pill. I have the tiny plastic pack half open with the champagne bottle in hand when Arthur gingerly touches my wrist. "I'm not sure you can take those together," he murmurs, easing the bottle from my icy grip. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Um." Then, realizing that is a very not-okay reply, I say, "It wasn't this bad last time." I also hadn't just misplaced my belongings during an international business trip while accompanied by a man who lives from a suitcase, literally.

"I remember." Arthur's voice is saturated with concentration. He sounds exactly the same as Grand Prix Arthur, as if my impending nervous breakdown is an upcoming high-speed corner. "What normally helps?"

"Not being on a plane?" I press two fingers into either side of my forehead and start massaging. "Okay, sorry. I don't know. Usually I can meditate when I'm freaked out, but the vibration is too much and I kind of feel like I'm going to—"

The plane begins to move and my eyes fly shut. This is so embarrassing. Why does Arthur have to be the one to see me like this? He drives race cars for a living. Flying

has to be relaxing in comparison.

This must make me look so... Kentucky.

“Shit,” Arthur exhales. “Okay, hey, here.”

There’s a click. He’s pushed the armrest between us up, champagne bottle moved. Then I feel him gently pull me closer to his side and...

He’s holding me.

Arthur is hugging me.

He moves so quickly, my panic attack is shocked out of existence. One second, I’m in my seat, normal, and the next, his arm is circling my shoulders and his fingers are wrapping around my arm, where my T-shirt ends and my skin begins.

“You-you don’t need to do this,” I whisper.

“I know,” he whispers back. “Is it working?”

For someone so large and fast, he’s very calm. And very, very warm. And I lean into him because my breath was turning into lead moments ago, and now... now it’s not. Now I have his sparkling-champagne scent whisking away the stomach-cramping smell of sterile, recycled air. I have the thick weight of his arm to keep me from floating away, his heavy muscles anchoring my body.

Safe.

This feels like I’m protected.

“Yeah.” I bite my cheek. “Thanks.”

“Anything for you.”

Snorting, I peek at his face. Still the same Arthur. Sharp nose, electric eyes, too-big mouth. Looking at him is comforting, mostly because he lifts one brow and gives me that what are you staring at? frown that’s kind of become our thing.

“Someone is definitely going to see this,” I say.

“Your master plan at work.”

I giggle, and the plane-death fear coiled in my abdomen relaxes another centimeter. “Is this typically how you introduce your girlfriends to the team?”

“Oh, so you’re my girlfriend now.” His body rumbles. He’s laughing, and we’re so close I can feel it through his chest. “Can’t say I’ve had enough to know the proper protocol.”

My stomach sinks. It isn’t front-page news that he’s not the relationship type, but I’d sort of been holding on to the idea that his mystery radio woman was... important. Long term. An indication that Arthur has secret romantic depths he hid from the world, and his heartbreaker reputation had been exaggerated by the press. Not because I care about who he dates or how often he does it. More like, on the off chance someone in the documentary industry does hear about me cuddling up to Arthur Bianco, inebriated from his European cologne, they might think I’m special to him.

But this is okay, too. For the best! I’m fake-dating a pro, and I force my train of thought back on track and say, “We’ve been around each other almost every day for a month straight. If you were actually interested in me, I think this is what you’d do. To

show people your, um, interest.”

“Ah.”

One of his fingertips slips beneath the hem of my shirtsleeve. Mindlessly, running up and down. His fingers are warm and slightly rough, calloused in places I didn’t expect. Must be from the steering wheel. Right when I realize he’s found a long-healed-over scar, tracing the raised length of it curiously, he starts talking again.

“What else would I do? To show interest?”

Ignoring what’s clearly an attempt to fluster me, I think about the big romantic gestures I’ve seen in movies, then shrink the airport runs and boom-box lifts down to the size of Arthur’s emotional landscape. Public displays of affection like this feel huge for a known playboy, ground-shaking, and I don’t really know where to go from here. “You’d probably try to buy me things. Not a coffee shop.”

“Clothing?”

“No.”

“Jewelry?”

“God, no. It doesn’t have to be something I wear.”

“It would. If you were my girlfriend, Graywood, I would stake my claim on you publicly,” he says quietly. “You’d look good in my number nine.”

The image of me in his racing jacket and not much else splinters through my brain, and where the hell did that come from? “A watch. I would tolerate wearing a watch.”

He rumbles again. “Always so serious.”

“Wanting to be on time isn’t serious.”

“Right. Maybe I’ll get you a nine anyway,” he hums. “It’s my lucky number.”

“Says who?”

“Haven’t you heard that?” His fingertip runs around the top of my scar. “Nine lives. I land on my feet every time.”

This man and his obsession with cats. “You would use your number to brag.”

“I would. So tell me, what’s the story? When we land, and my team asks me what the hell I’m doing, what should I say?”

This is a much easier question to answer. “Don’t say anything.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because we need to act like we don’t want anyone to know what’s going on,” I remind him. “It’s a courtship. Flirting. Nothing more than that. Just because... I don’t want this to implode too early. If we can make it until the race in Monza, on September 1, I can structure my film around this summer.”

Arthur takes a deep breath. “That’s when Max’s contract is up.”

He sounds surprised, which is confusing. Why does his voice go dark whenever the topic of Max comes up? Before I can ponder that for too long, Arthur recovers. “But sure, it’s smart. We stay on the down-low—deny the obvious love affair—until our final attack. Hey, Ignition’s owner, Bob, is getting married the night before Monza.

Come as my plus-one.”

“To a wedding?” I’m cringing already. I’ve gone to exactly one fancy wedding before, one of Max’s old friends who went into the Navy, and that was D.C. military fancy. I can’t see myself surviving a night of stilted rich-people small talk, non-vegan appetizers, and assholes in tuxedos, Formula 1 edition. “Don’t you need to sleep? If it’s that Saturday, that’s the same day as Qualifying.”

“I can stay out late on a school night.” He pauses. “ If I’m driving. But look at it this way—coming with me would secure you a trip to Italy. Then you could film the race. Get my dramatic ending either way.”

With that timeline reminder, two months left on the clock, I’m suddenly aware that the plane has gone still, the engine steady. I made it. We’re flying, and I didn’t fall out the window. Now is when I could pull away from Arthur, thank him for being the one person who’s successfully calmed me down through physical touch, and start up a movie. Scroll Letterboxd. Anything else.

But... I run cold. And he is really, ridiculously warm, like a blond furnace, burning through black coffee and lean protein. And since we’re subtly announcing that we’re maybe slightly a thing to the whole team, wouldn’t it be weird if I suddenly didn’t touch him for the remainder of the flight?

I have to stay nuzzled up against him. For the plot.

I wriggle closer, hunkering down, and Arthur shifts so that I can use his biceps like a pillow. “Better?”

“Mm-hmm.”

He strokes the top of my shoulder. Just once. “My girlfriend likes being touched,” he

says, more to himself than me. Like he's studying, hushed, reading out loud from a book he's trying to memorize.

It makes my face heat anyway. "Sometimes. With warning. It can be too much."

"Too much?"

Danced myself into a corner with this one. "I get overstimulated. That's why I get quiet sometimes. It isn't, like, a superiority complex." Far too defensive. How do I explain this? "Sometimes I'm—I can be slower at processing things than other people. My brain goes too fast all at once, and I get stuck, thinking everything through."

Arthur is quiet for a long moment, taking that in. Then he says, "So I have to earn this?"

I laugh. "I wish there were rules to it. But sure. Try and earn it."

"What else should I know about you?" he asks. "That's what I would do, by the way. To show my interest."

"Touch me?"

"Ask you questions."

Definitely blushing now. "You already know way too much about me," I deflect.

Real surprise colors Arthur's voice. "I know what you do for a living and your last relationship."

What else is there?

The thought slams into the side of me and oh. Oh no.

I did the thing.

You know those people who fall for everything? Billboards advertising the world's best chocolate pie, ancient Facebook screenshots about nonexistent scams? That was the woman I spent sixteen years with, who made me the cynic I am. My birth mom was the world's biggest believer in happily ever after, in good things happening for good people, sweet as synthetic chocolate pie.

Problem was, she hunted her happy ending down every day. There was always another amazing boyfriend who couldn't remember my name. Another wonderful trip to Lexington to bet on horses and play cards and feel like she was the main character, if only for a night. It was a miracle her job at the Bicycle card factory out in Erlanger kept her employed during her "dark spells"—the inevitable aftermath of catching Prince Charming with another woman and gambling away our savings. Then people would notice I was skipping school again to take care of her, and a nice stranger with a fake smile would take me away, and I began despising the beautiful promises she made about our life but never kept. Eventually, anyone would start hating happily ever after. You realize people drive themselves crazy dreaming about the last minutes before the credits roll.

And sometimes, I catch myself doing it, too. Maybe I can trust the professional race-car driver who's largely my polar opposite and has 100,000 articles written about his failures to commit. Maybe none of these very serious motorsports people will find out that I'm secretly filming my own documentary and effectively undermining their multimillion-dollar marketing plan. Maybe agreeing to move to Texas with my best-friend-slash-boyfriend-slash-business-partner won't be a mistake. Trust him. He'll always be around.

But now he isn't, and I'm sitting next to an objectively interesting and complex

person like Arthur, defining half of myself by a man who dumped me, just like my birth mom would've. Relationships with men were her favorite narratives, the fables she worshipped: One day you'll meet your own Prince Charming, and you won't have to think about yourself anymore.

"I do like to fight," I blurt out.

"Oh." Arthur sounds confused. "Right. Okay."

"Your text. On the plane to England? You were right." I inhale a tight, painful breath. "Not like our fight in Texas or after that interview but—bantering. Arguing. I don't know. There's a line, and I like it before the line. It's... fun."

Arthur is taller than he was a second ago. He's sitting up straighter, paying attention. "Okay."

"And gardening. I like plants. I won my county's largest tomato competition two years in a row."

"Tomatoes." All three syllables are soft in his mouth. "Got it."

"And sad movies. And not pop music unless it's really good. And The X-Files . I'm picky with TV romance, but X-Files is perfect. It took them seven seasons to really kiss, and then Mulder got—"

I stop myself before I ruin it. But then Arthur says, "Abducted, I know." And I must be diffusing my surprise, since he adds, "I had a thing for Scully."

"You did?"

His thumb brushes my shoulder. "There's something about a smart, serious

careerwoman who won't take your bullshit."

I nod enthusiastically. Well, as best as I can against his shoulder. "Completely agree."

Arthur does his wind-chime laugh, and I'm embarrassingly pleased. I shift until I can see his face again. "Do you think I'm weird?"

Arthur looks down at me with a half smile. "Not as much as you want me to."

I consider that for a moment, then decide I like it. I shift again, so I can't meet his eyes when I say, "Sorry. Max was my first big relationship, and he kind of just... told me what to like."

"How did that work? You made movies together." He's annoyed at Max, not me. I can tell.

"Dating him was like dating the cultural zeitgeist. Max is into whatever's popular. So I guess Formula 1 is in, and documentaries and politics are out," I explain, thinking how retrospectively funny it is to meet someone as they're passing through your life's passion, a pit stop on their way to other trends. I remember Max's first proposal about this project, him attempting to explain Formula 1, me utterly dumbfounded. "Maybe that's why he cheated. He said he knew I'd wanted to tell him to quit making this film."

Arthur stiffens. "He's not worth your psychoanalysis."

"I know. But it's hard not to." Saying this feels like a confession, like I did something wrong. Pulled into the black hole once again.

Arthur shifts. The motion pulls me into him. "Do you regret what we're doing?"

“No, no. This is—” I lick my lips. “When he first pitched this documentary to me, I’d thought it was a glitch. Like the Max I knew wasn’t thinking straight, and he’d see that you can’t make a documentary for a company, eventually.” This is embarrassing. Admitting I had hope for someone who seems more hopeless with each passing day. Even now, I don’t know what I’d do if Max learned the scale of Ignition’s plan and admitted that I’d been right about in-house documentary being a Hollywood oxymoron. On some gross level, this summer has proven how much he needs me. Needed me. I was his moral compass, a grounded and detached realist who couldn’t be won over as easily as him.

But you don’t use a moral compass if you think you’re going in the right direction.

Arthur surprises me, though, like he always does when we talk; he doesn’t press into my wound. “You’re loyal. You did it because you loved him,” he says, and then, way too fast, “Love him. Sorry.”

Present tense.

Shit.

I’d forgotten that I’d lied. Arthur thinks I’m hung up on Max. Because I literally told him that. Worse, Arthur must think that Max could win me back—and he’s still holding me. Publicly.

For our scheme, I know. To piss off his uncle, yes. This is fake. He’s fake.

But that doesn’t make what he’s doing any less competitive, fundamentally. And I don’t know, maybe kind of... hot?

“You want to make a better movie than him,” Arthur continues. “You’re proving a point.”

“Oh, yeah. Sort of.” That champagne bottle is around here somewhere. I could conk myself over the head with it. “But it was also, um, you. You never offered to throw the race, and I guess I was impressed by you and—and your drive. Metaphorically speaking.”

There’s a good ten seconds where I count Arthur’s breaths. One, two. He doesn’t inhale that deep. But then out of nowhere, he lets out a laugh so bright and perfect, I feel it inside my bloodstream. Pure golden glitter. “I impressed you ?”

The tips of my ears go warm. “I take it back.”

“No, sorry, can’t be done.” He’s talking with the same tripping-over shock of someone who’s walked into their own surprise birthday party. All his friends are here, and there’s cake. “My driving impressed the Lilah Graywood, professional motorsports hater.”

“I meant your initiative!”

“So my race didn’t impress you?”

“It was fine.”

“Fine.”

“Good.” I muffle a laugh. “Respectable.”

“I’m switching seats,” he mutters.

“No, wait.” I wonder if he’s smiling. If it’s sharp or not. “I’m stealing your body heat.”

Arthur grumbles back a “demanding American,” but he doesn’t actually go to move. So that’s how we stay for the rest of the flight. Arthur puts in his headphones, I stay curled into his side, and at one point, with fuzzy scraping electronic music drifting from his ears, I decide that this can’t be the only time I think about who I am without Max. He broke up with me, but it’s been my choice to remain broken. Apologetic. Scared. I’ve kept his voice inside my head like an imaginary friend, judging me, telling me how to act, a constant and cruel inner monologue because that’s what I thought I needed to survive. Max Black’s guidebook to a better Lilah Graywood. And I don’t need it anymore.

I didn’t love Max, but I haven’t let him go, either.

Now I will.

At least, that’s the massive decision I make as the post-race-weekend exhaustion drags me to sleep buried under Arthur’s arm, my thoughts blurring into one long sentence. Wearing someone’s driver number could be nice and electronic music sounds like car engines and I think I’d like to figure out what I like.

Chapter Thirteen Monaco

Arthur doesn't get angry when he collects his suitcase from the concierge and I just stand there, awkwardly apologetic. "Where are your things?" he asks with a puzzled frown.

"Well. I don't know."

Travel has wrinkled his shirt—definitely not the nap I took on him—and he plucks the fabric from his chest as he inspects my closed-book frown. "You don't know?"

"It's nothing." I avert my eyes. "When are we meeting up with everyone else?"

My diversion tactic is unsuccessful. "Did someone take them?"

"No. Um, this... it happens. I sometimes lose things." The prim man behind the concierge counter looks over. His eyes flick away when I meet them, judging. He heard that. I'm being weird. "It's okay. I can get more clothes. It's just stuff anyway."

I shrink under the weight of Arthur's worried eyes. His face is so much more serious when he's upset and the false bravado he wears so well drops away. The emotion adds dimension to his blond-hair-tan-skin-hazel-eyes sameness, a rich splash of ink among the gold.

"How is this 'okay'?" he asks, and there's this crack inside my chest that sounds like ice breaking underfoot, but I'm the frozen thing threatening to swallow us both up.

It's okay, because I lived out of a backpack as a kid, where homework and birthday cards went in then never came out. This is me doing great, because I'm literally a loser. I've lost everything I've ever had. "It just is." I quickly wipe under my eyes, just in case. "This isn't the first time I've left something somewhere without realizing it. I—I have ADHD. So I lose things."

Careless, easily distracted, impulsive, disorganized. Look up ADHD online, and you'll find a grocery list of traits I've either ground out of my personality or learned to accept. I'd trade it all again to be as creative as I am, to make movies. But I wish I didn't have to.

Arthur steps toward me. "Lilah."

My muscles tense. He rarely says my first name. "What?"

"You don't need to put up this much of a fight when people want to help you."

"Pretending you're okay is what strong, functional adults do," I reply. I'm going for dry humor, but it comes out as pitiful honesty. How is it that the moment I say something out loud that I've silently believed since I was a kid, I can hear how depressing it is?

Arthur's frown deepens. I'm momentarily afraid this educational boyfriend act he's doing will make him touch me again, and my spine stiffens, ready to act defensive for the rest of my weepy body. Truth is, I'd really like if he did. Hold me, like he did on the plane. But I'm not ready to process whatever that confusing development means, beyond how it's been ages since someone touched me to make me happy instead of the other way around.

With a soft sigh, Arthur slips his hands into his pockets. Farewell, potential hug. "I have an hour until anyone notices I'm missing," he says. "I was going to go walk

around Port Hercules before the photo shoot. Come with me.”

“A port?”

“It’s cool.” Arthur sucks in one cheek, then shakes his head. “Ah, forget it.”

“No.” The word comes flying out. “I mean, yes. I’ll come.”

“Really?” He’s already brightening up, a smile starting to take root. “We can rent a car. You want to drive, or shall I?”

“Oh. You. I don’t—drive.”

His eyes brush down my face, then he nods. “Works for me.”

“What?” I’m talking before thinking. “That’s weird , Arthur. Sixteen-year-olds can drive.”

“Why would I think that? I like to drive. You don’t. We’ll get along better this way.”

“Hmm.” I side-eye him. No one is this nice when I say I don’t drive. “It’s not an ADHD thing. But it’s not not one.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t tell where the car is, spatially.”

“Well, that is difficult.”

“Don’t lie, you could drive anything.”

“I could print you a book of cars I’ve refused to drive.”

“I also run into doorknobs a lot. And tables. Cabinets.”

“I’ll stay on the lookout for any rogue kitchens.” He offers his arm. “Come on. There’s a garden nearby, too. We leave now, we’ll get in before they close.”

For a second, I’m confused about why he waits for my reaction after saying that. Then I remember telling him about my prize-winning tomatoes, and that same blue-ribbon rush kicks through my leftover sadness. What if Arthur is thinking about me as someone who’s won things, just like he has?

I’ve always felt singular, like the strangest person to ever exist, an alien that crash-landed on Earth and was raised among the humans. I’ve never figured out the right mask to wear—my regular adult-woman facade slips when a conversation goes too fast and I can’t figure out how to reply, and then everyone is waiting, and then they’re not, and I’ve missed it again. The cue. The normal social interaction. But when Arthur looks at me like this, I realize maybe being unique isn’t a tragedy if it’s the reason he keeps smiling at me.

Somehow this feel like winning, too.

I start to ask if he’s positive he wants to spend his precious free hours with me, but then Arthur’s looking over my head, and his brow furrows. “Lilah, don’t talk to her about—”

“Hello, friends!” Delaney says. Her voice is caught between singsong and pissed-off personal manager who didn’t know her celebrity sports star was going to cuddle with a documentarian on a jet. “Question as someone who flew on the other, less exciting plane. What are you two doing after this?”

Arthur rents a car. It isn't a Leone.

Though it is white and sleek and shaped not unlike a beluga whale. I insist that Delaney take the front seat, she does, and then we're off, twisting through the packed dreamscape of Monte Carlo. The hill-nestled buildings begin to thin out, fading into the surprise that is the French Riviera. Before seeing the perfect blue marina for myself, I'd assumed the French Riviera was, well, a river... in France. I was wrong. Apparently, it's this whole coastline, and Monte Carlo is basically Navy Pier for the uber-wealthy, teeming with high-end restaurants and five-star hotels. And Arthur's first watch photo shoot is on his family yacht, docked in the port.

No garden today.

Arthur is carted off by photographers, and I, unsure of what to do with myself, pretend like it was my plan all along to film him getting his picture taken. Stylists flutter between photos to tweak his outfit like he's a Ken doll, and the colossal silver-and-orange diving watch hanging from his wrist is his signature plastic accessory. Then, after an hour of that, the brand team waves in other F1 drivers they've accumulated: James Hawke and a slender redhead with a beard that turns out to be Jean Baudelaire, and then three more muscular, smiley men I've never seen in my life. There's Yuzhe Lei and Clark Templeton from Static Racing, a gamer-slash-fashion-designer and "legendary rude man," respectively. From Cavalli, I meet Rafael Ramirez, a baby-faced driver from Mexico who bolts once he learns I'm filming because, "Sorry, but—yeah—be right back!" But then he does come back, dubious beer in hand, to ask me exactly what us camerapeople think when they, the athletes, drop an f-bomb on a live broadcast. "Do you get mad?" he whispers. "Or is it okay?"

"Definitely okay. This isn't live."

"And you work with Arthur?"

I nod, and his face glows. He's so shy and so young and so clearly smitten with Arthur, it's adorable. "I got into driving because of him," Rafael admits. "I hope that maybe one day we could drive together on the same team."

"That would be nice."

Rafael is scribbling his number on my hand when the infamous Jean Baudelaire wanders over. "I heard you're making a movie about Bianco," is the first thing out of the Frenchman's mouth. After that, he's busy drinking what looks to be a wineglass of flat Diet Pepsi.

"Arthur and the team. I'd love to feature other drivers, too. Would you be interested?"

Jean's short, scruffy beard doesn't conceal his grimace. "No."

"Oh, okay."

He takes another swig. "Fine. I'll ask my people."

The drivers take photos together, separately, on the top deck, leaned against the railing overlooking water so blue, so glistening, it looks fake. There are group photos, single headshots. It sort of reminds me of The Hunger Games before the game starts and the contestants do their best to rip each other apart.

I get my fill of behind-the-scenes footage, then stand by Delaney, who of course is also on the yacht. Why wouldn't she be? This is Arthur's personal life for the day, and she's Arthur's personal manager. "I didn't realize Sarah scheduled you for this," she says when she's off the phone.

"Sorry. It was Arthur's idea."

“Sure.” Delaney smiles, all curiosity and no teeth. We’re alone, by a pair of closed doors. Nobody is paying any attention to us. “So,” she says, and my stomach cramps into an origami crane. “You and Arthur.”

She doesn’t waste any time. I wouldn’t, either, if I were her and my client wasn’t quite off the rails, but getting close. I watch Arthur get rearranged by a photographer, while a hairstylist anoints him with a halo of aerosol hairspray. “Shouldn’t you be talking to him about this?” I try.

Delaney shrugs. Today she’s in a pale lavender pantsuit and shiny matching heels, one foot click-clacking as she taps it next to my silent sneakers. “We both know he’d probably deny it.”

“There’s nothing to deny,” I say, doubling down for us. There’s really nowhere else to go but down. “I’m afraid of planes. Arthur knew I was freaking out and offered to help.”

“By cuddling you. For two hours.”

“It was more like a hug. A platonic, friendly hug.”

“While you slept.”

Knew I shouldn’t have drifted off. “I might’ve taken a small nap. Very short.”

Delaney’s lips lift into an analytical smile. “I’m not trying to grill you, Lilah. I just need to know what’s going on. If there’s something I should know about, I’ve been trusting that you’d tell me.”

Delaney’s questioning confirms how perfect our scheme is: She’s suspicious of our tilt-a-whirl of a power imbalance, and all we had to do was use each other as pillows

on a plane. However I proceed, it'll seem like I'm squirreling away a secret romance I don't want her to know about. Max Black's reckless employee, endangering Ignition's film and Arthur's reputation.

But... I don't like lying to Delaney. It's been one thing to spin stories for Max and let my anger wipe my guilty conscience away. I can't hide behind Max's awfulness here. This is me, lying to a woman I think I could, maybe, one day be friends with, if we'd met under other circumstances.

"I don't want to hurt him," I say. "I can promise you that."

With a hum, Delaney sticks her hand out. I look at it, confused, until she makes a grabbing motion, and I realize she wants the camera in my bag. Once she's certain it's off, she takes my phone, then my work phone, and then inhales a deep, long breath. "I know about you and Max."

"You... do."

She arches a brow. "I vetted your social media before you came here. Max's accounts were public."

Goddamn stupid Max. "I see."

Delaney gathers herself, chin lifting, full lips pursing with an inscrutable stare. "I get rebounding. I really, really do. But you can't fuck Arthur Bianco, as tempting as it may be."

"Oh, no, I am not tempted," I rush out, feeling my face turn to a bright red crisp. "All good there."

Her mouth twitches—amused or angry, can't tell. "I mean it."

“I’m not. He isn’t... he’s so loud. And intense.”

“Remember what I told you at the team dinner?” she says, ignoring my perfectly good reasons to not sleep with Arthur. “Holmes Bianco would crucify you. Think about your career.”

“Right. Exactly. Not that I think about him like that. Clearly, I’ve dated where I worked before, and that didn’t work out.”

With a quiet sigh, Delaney crosses her arms, though her elbow-drumming fingers betray her authoritarian calm. I can see the way she’s turning her brain over, dumping out the contents, and searching the scattered mess for what to say. She’d make an incredible documentarian, I bet. How she’s able to think on her toes would set her apart from the Michael Moore wannabes with mostly broken camcorders and bad attitudes.

“You know how we’ve been able to exist in public without anyone running up to Arthur, ruining the day?” she asks, more softly.

I look around the yacht. Clearly, I’ve entered a bourgeoisie bubble where aerosol hairspray is beneficial for the ozone layer and yachts are practical backdrops for ad campaigns, but I can’t really imagine the chaos she’s describing; the fans in the airport hadn’t been that annoying.

“That’s how bad it was for him in the past, when every news story was about him and his family legacy,” she says. “It would be ten times worse if he was caught in a public relations nightmare with you. The media would eat both of you alive, and I think you know that. But I think you don’t care, because you didn’t grow up in Formula 1. You don’t understand that liking a driver is pointless if you end up standing between them and a car. You’ll only get hurt when they pick racing over you—and it happens every single time.”

Her words throw me off guard. I'd been prepared for the think-of-your-career speech. But Arthur had been adamant that Ignition would cover this up. I wouldn't have agreed to take this risk otherwise.

"Do you really think he and I would be that much of a disaster?" I ask.

Delaney doesn't respond. The pupils of her deep brown eyes are like two turned-off television screens, mirroring back my own incriminating question. Then her mouth dips into a delicate frown and oh, shit . She. The radio. I'd forgotten that there was a woman. Someone who Arthur is legitimately into. Someone who would probably despise our scheme, whether she knew it was fake or not.

"Delaney, are you—you and Arthur...?"

She blinks, once, twice, and then laughs into her hand. "Absolutely not."

Then who is it? My heart flips with an unreadable emotion as I shift my attention to Arthur. It's cloudless today, and the bright sunlight turns his already extreme features into sharp, high-contrast shadows. He's in normal clothes, nothing special, though his hair has been sprayed way back, old-school, and that's an interesting sight. Worth examining.

Then suddenly, he looks up. Right at me. And it's sort of like—I don't know, maybe—but that doesn't really track for him—

Orpheus.

"Graywood, are you done over there?" Arthur yells, waving, everyone looking over, photographers and other drivers, and I'm covering my face with my hands. "James was just telling me about this shop that's nearby. Come here!"

“Shit,” Delaney mumbles. “I need way more coffee to deal with this.”

Arthur has me film the far-off store from the yacht before we disembark, and when I nearly drop my camera in the water, distracted by how the light is hitting the windows, he’s grabbing my elbow and saving the day and leading me off the boat. “Where are we going?” I keep asking, but Arthur only laughs. “And what’s so funny?”

But he just keeps shaking his head, keeps chuckling, and normally I don’t like when it’s obvious I’ve missed some social cue, but with Arthur, it feels like a game. Everything does. That could be what I felt on the plane, really—we’re just both too competitive. I’m not attracted to him. I’m not another onlooker dazzled by his reckless persona and physics-defying body, and I didn’t lie to Delaney when I said I wouldn’t sleep with him. Not that he’d ever ask me to. He wouldn’t. And if he had walked into that Texas dive bar and offered me a rebound instead of revenge?

I would’ve said no.

After we pass Miu Miu and Hermès and Prada and stores too decadent for me to recognize—like, why would you name a clothing brand The Row? How does one pronounce Loewe?—Arthur says, “You’re overdue for your shopping montage, and I think I’m just the man to help with that.”

My excitement falters. Sure, I’d told him on the plane that I don’t want him to buy me clothes, but that’s probably code for please buy me expensive clothes in neurotypical. Having a mostly normal brain, whatever that means, makes it so Arthur can’t understand how one hour of buttoning up constrictive jeans under painfully bright lights feels like ancient medieval torture. “Thank you,” I say, sheepish. “But remember, I’m not spending your money. It’s not right, with the film and all.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, studying me. “This store might be worth breaking some

rules for. You tell me.”

Already resigning myself—I only have one pair of pants left, so this is a good idea, regardless—I peek at the display behind Arthur, expecting piles of slouchy clothing that somehow look perfect, like the stuff he always wears. Because that’s what boyfriends do in my experience, real or fake. The second you get close, they paint you and remake you and half a decade later, you’re what they want you to be, until they don’t want you at all.

Instead, a vintage camera sits in the window. And another. There are rows of them, small and black and silver, stacked next to piles of lenses and film canisters.

Speechless, I gesture at my chest. “Where are the shirts?”

“You lost your other cameras today. With your suitcase?” Arthur rolls his lip between his teeth, looks at me, then looks at the store. “Least I can do.”

My hands press against the window like two moths skittering toward a lamp. I recognize the vintage video cameras the way you do old friends—oh my gosh, there’s her, and him, and how has it been so long? There’s a thick square Sony Mavica that I’m pretty sure uses floppy disks next to a stout Handycam, round like a soda can, and then I spot the same Panasonic camcorder that I used to own, and I’m tripped by the memory. The black plastic under my palm, the click of the viewfinder flicking around, my birth mom smiling as I recorded her. And earlier than that—my birthday dinner, one of the only good ones. Her glittery nail polish sparkling as she passed a pink-wrapped gift to me. “For my little storyteller,” she’d said. “Make happy movies for me.”

The world goes quiet.

How could I have forgotten that? My birth mom had given me my first camera. I’d

tried to save up myself, serious about cookie sales and lawn-mowing, but she'd been so thrilled that I wanted to make movies that she'd scoured every thrift store aisle for a working camera. It still smelled like lemon Pine-Sol from her deep clean; it's a wonder that she didn't accidentally soak the electronics and bust it.

"Those things are beasts," I whisper, my voice threatening to crack.

Arthur's standing next to me, watching me. "Those cameras?"

"That camcorder. You could probably run over it and it'd be fine." I clear my throat. "I only have my one personal camera. And all the Ignition ones have a separate check-in process. Batteries and stuff."

His smile fades at the edges. "Ah, hell. Should we—?"

"No," I cut him off. "I want that one. The Panasonic."

Before he can say anything else, or anyone can interrupt, or I lose this newfound need to be a person instead of a moral compass or a camera or a brain in a jar, I grab Arthur's hand and pull him to the tall wooden door leading into the inexplicably placed camera store. And when the door opens with a wave of ancient leather and musty metal parts, the only smell worth maxing out a credit card for, I feel Arthur's fingers tighten and loop with mine.

The rest of Monte Carlo slams by in a daze. Days turn into seconds—filming Arthur getting filmed by someone else, filming Arthur nodding his way through virtual meetings, buying myself the cheapest new clothes I can find, getting Delaney to help me refill my meds, avoiding Max, avoiding Sarah. Nobody else rushes to my hotel door, demanding to know what happened between Arthur and me on the plane. No one asks why Arthur was spotted buying me cameras, or why we go out to dinner, or why my interviews of him veer between his childhood and mine and his dreams and

mine and the weather, what he's been reading, his memories. And I start to worry that maybe it's going to take something more extreme to get the team's attention. On the outside, it looks like I'm making a documentary about him. But on the inside?

I can't stop thinking about what Delaney said.

I've had time to sit with it. Process. And feel completely spooked and stupid. Probably an appropriate reaction to being told, out loud, by someone you respect, that you're making a wildly inappropriate decision by "dating" a Formula 1 reserve driver who's now unreserved and back in the spotlight. When I can't sleep, I pop into the hotel hallways and walk the floors like a '90s-era ghost—glasses on, striped pajama pants, freshly purchased Cranberries shirt—and think about Delaney's warning.

It would be ten times worse if he was caught in a public relations nightmare with you. Multiples! Amazing.

The media would eat both of you alive, and I think you know that. Apparently, not enough.

I think you don't care.

I care so much.

All my life, I've been someone who cares. Too sensitive, too deep of emotions, sentimental, nostalgic, reactive. You don't become a person who hides behind a camera when your feelings make sense to other people. I care about Delaney's sideways glance when I decline Arthur's invite to the Monte Carlo casino, about the whispers her and Cameron exchange on the flight to Hungary, about her eyes on me when I grab a muffin from the morning snack table after I paced for too long the night before and look suspiciously bedraggled. I care about all of it.

Most of all, I care about that camera.

Make happy movies for me.

After my parents adopted me, my birth mom left town and changed her phone number. You know, mom stuff. I heard from a cousin that she moved closer to Ohio, following a boyfriend she met up north, though I didn't buy it then and I don't buy it now. She hadn't been able to stomach living in the same town as me, without me, and rather than occasionally bump into each other at a grocery store, she'd vanished. Again. A most spectacular finale.

All I have left is my silver locket and half of my genetic makeup. But having the camcorder around makes me think about her in ways I haven't in a long time. Her, her happy endings, her hope. The scripts I used to write before I found documentaries, splayed out on the nubby beige carpet of the family room while she burned CDs for the car on her clunky computer. Lilah, Girl Detective was the longest-running series; I solved sixteen cold-case murders before she accidentally spilled orange juice on my scripts.

That's how it always ended.

Promises to make her happy. Her changing her number.

Me here, her somewhere.

I turn these facts over in my mind until the fabric of them starts to thin.

Chapter Fourteen Hungary

Arthur gets third at the Hungarian Grand Prix.

The race is a two-hour anxiety attack that kicks me in the heart and then pulls it out of my chest, fills it with helium and confetti, and releases it into the sky. When Arthur blows past the checkered flag fractions of a second before the rest of the pack, we all burst from our chairs, yelling and knocking into each other, headsets thrown, computers abandoned, a hodgepodge of absolute glee.

Even Holmes. I get a shot of him tearing up as Arthur takes the third-place medal, and sometime between him entering the cooldown room and ascending the podium, Ignition announces publicly that he'll be driving in Belgium and the Netherlands after the summer break. The team is excited. Arthur is excited. Sarah is ecstatic. "I couldn't have planned this timing better," she squeals. "We're all anyone will be talking about over the break!"

On our second-to-last day in Hungary, Arthur invites me to join him and Cameron and Delaney on a celebratory "lark," per his text message. The four of us get something called chimney cake from a food truck and eat while rambling down the cobblestone side streets, the black streetlights illuminating gold as the daylight shrinks, my tiniest, most portable camera in hand. Arthur tells the lens about the old Jewish Quarter, where we are now, and how he'd first gotten lost here when he was eighteen. "My phone wasn't working, I couldn't find Wi-Fi, so I just walked around for hours until I ran into Cameron—literally." He laughs. "Then we came here."

I pocket my camera and survey the dilapidated building in front of us. Plants are

growing out of the brown brick wall, and the door inside doesn't have a handle. "This might've been someplace when you were eighteen, but right now it's falling apart."

"They're called ruin bars," he murmurs into my ear as he ushers me through the doorway, ducking to avoid a string of icicle-shaped lights. "Fitting, don't you think?"

His breath is warm, and the inside is dark and dusty, and I work on swallowing as he leads me through a cramped lobby, around a corner... and into an enclosed courtyard.

Color coats everything. The walls are 90 percent antique posters, 10 percent dartboards, illuminated by a tangle of orangey lights. Short bedside lamps are shoved in corners, paper lanterns are flung over the skylight rafters next to disco balls. There's a bar on the other side of the table-littered space, though a majority of the people are filtering toward a doorway behind a row of slender trees. Yes, actual trees.

"Why couldn't we go to XTasy? They have bottle service." Delaney pouts. "And did you really have to invite the entire team, King?"

She can't mean... everyone. Everyone everyone. "I didn't plan on it," Arthur says. "Just told Rafael we were coming, and you know how Rafael is."

"So sweet." Cameron sighs. "And so chatty."

We've reached the bartender, and Arthur pulls out his wallet, speaking Hungarian as he trades colorful money for a glass of carbonated something. "You up for it, Graywood? Thought this place might be more your speed, but we can head out now if it's too much."

I press my lips together to hide my social-anxiety grimace. I should go. If the entire Ignition team is about to show up to celebrate Arthur's third-place win—including my ex-boyfriend and my ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend—then leaving would be the

best choice, followed by stone-cold sobriety. Arthur and I haven't done our dating-not-dating gambit in a bar setting yet, and I've literally never gone to a nightclub before. The closest I've experienced is a democratic socialist bar on half-price margarita night, and I left before it flipped from after-dinner infighting to dance-floor speed-dating.

But... the summer break is almost here. Two weeks back in Texas, with nothing to film and no reason to see anyone. Two weeks with no Arthur. His excitement. His ruin bars.

Two weeks closer to September.

"Sure." I take the fizzy drink from him. "You know me. I just love clubs, dancing, debauchery."

"Do you now?" Arthur's face glitters with a wind-chime laugh he won't let out. "Then enjoy your froccs, love."

"Pardon?"

"Hungarian specialty. Sparkling water and wine."

I sniff the rim of the glass. "Sensible choice."

Arthur's grinning now. "Everything in moderation."

As I take a sip, I can practically feel the weight of mini-devil Arthur sitting on my shoulder, twirling a pitchfork. This is not the smartest decision. But after I swallow and nod, begrudgingly giving Arthur the not-too-bad hum of drink approval, he looks so proud of himself for negatively influencing me that it's... marginally endearing.

Anyway, I've had a weird few weeks. Months. Year? I deserve one wine spritzer.

"Like it?" Arthur asks, carefully watching my reaction.

"Yeah. It's nice."

When I take another drink, Arthur smirks. "There's a good girl."

"Gross," Cameron mumbles, and goes to join Delaney on the other side of the bar, where she's talking with a more enthusiastic bartender about the merits of Hungarian red blends.

I glare at Arthur as he cracks up. "Sorry, I couldn't not."

"You could've."

"Maybe," he says. "It isn't like you're indulging because of me, regardless."

"Oh?" I say, pretending like I agree.

Our bartender returns with a tall, pale yellow beer for Arthur, and he waves him off with a tip. "Sure. Nobody can make you do something you don't want to do."

I like that version of me. She's better than the real one, who tried everything to make people like her, then gave up. "Thank you. I think."

"You're welcome. Anyway, we should be enjoying ourselves tonight." Arthur takes a sip. "I've missed getting to do this with you."

His words run over me like water, a clear film over my skin. Missed. He's missed spending time with me? Or he's missed us bread-crumbing our fake relationship

around other people? I take another big sip, and the knots woven into my legs from the million-hour days under my camera start to loosen. A few more sips, and I'll be able to handle Arthur just fine.

"Has anyone talked to you about us?" I ask.

"No." Arthur frowns. "Which is strange."

"It is?"

"I would've bet anything on Delaney or Sarah confronting me, but it's like they're too distracted by the season."

Like clockwork, I hear the Delaney warning that's been on my mind the most: Liking a driver is pointless. You'll only get hurt when they pick racing over you.

I think about Arthur, too. At night. When I pace. I think about what I do know about this person who's slid into the most important facets of my life. Like how I know he lies and has secrets and keeps things to himself, since he never acts like a human who's being crushed beneath the hydraulic press of an iconically destructive career move, so that overwhelming pressure has to go somewhere else. Since I also know that we don't talk about Leone, or Holmes, or the money, or how any of this affects him.

I steal another bubbly sip of the spritzer. It's good, fizzy without being too sweet, and slightly irritating—since he knew I'd like this drink. Somehow. That's the other thing. Arthur pays attention to people. He looks and watches and listens all the time, and still acts detached and irreverent about anything that isn't F1, like life is one big joke until we drive off this mortal coil. And I can't puzzle out why. Why does he care about people but act like he doesn't? Why is he always pretending?

Two weeks. The clock is ticking.

“I’m going to ask you something personal, and I really want you to start being honest with me, and it’s whatever, obviously,” I preface. “But do you usually... not date? Like long-term relationships.”

Arthur’s forehead creases. Only for a second, then he lets out an incredulous chuckle. “You say that like I haven’t been honest.”

I slip onto the barstool behind me and wait for more, silent.

He rolls his eyes and sits down, too. “Fine. Yes. I usually don’t date.”

“Why?”

“Well.” He sucks in one cheek, his regular swagger dimming as he thinks. “It can be difficult as a driver.”

My pulse picks up a notch. “How so?”

“I don’t want to sleep around during the season. And if I’m not sleeping around, then I’m usually not dating.” His eyes skid over to me, alarmed, like he said too much. “What I mean is—it’s hard. Getting to know someone when you’re always traveling and the press is putting labels on you. It’s hard to make it serious. Too much of a distraction, according to Merlin, and I can’t let the noise get in my way.”

There it is. Exactly what Delaney had said; Arthur will put driving first. “That’s an interesting thing to call a relationship,” I say, then go cold. “Sorry. Documentary mode. That was—”

Arthur laughs. “It’s fine. It was noise, though. Women in my life always wanted

more, or they wanted less.” His eyes swivel to the skylight. “But they never seemed to want me.”

His confession jolts me. Is this the truth? “Well, you seem universally wantable to me.” My mouth slaps shut. “To a certain type. Not, you know. Everyone.”

Arthur gives me a tired smile. “Strangely, most women don’t want to fall in love with the race-car driver who’s never home. They just want to fuck him.”

I’d been taking another sip of my spritzer; it turns into a firecracker on the way down. “Sorry,” I sputter out, coughing into my elbow as Arthur passes me napkins.

Arthur has sworn around me. But not when it’s been just us, at a bar. Not when his hand has gone to rest on the back of my seat and I know what his fingertips feel like, warm, rough, and curious, how’d he found the scar on my arm like a dog with a scent for personal history. Not when he’s talking about himself fucking. What a word.

He’s right. People are distracting.

“Then the articles about you,” I start, trying to get back to the subject at hand.

“Some were true. Some weren’t.” His jaw shifts. “I wasn’t always a good man. Probably still not. But I’m always a good time, you know? Always a laugh.” He spins his knees my way and drops his voice to a playful whisper. “What’s with the questions, anyway? You haven’t gotten yourself a real crush, have you?”

I drop my napkins. They scatter over the floor. “No . I—never mind.”

“Graywood.”

“I said never mind.”

There's a pressure between my shoulder blades. He's touching my back. "Come on, out with it."

"I'd really rather not."

"Then I'm going to assume you've realized the error of your ways with Max and have fallen feet first in love with me," Arthur says. "In which case, we should probably discuss graduating to a fake engagement. Fake wedding, even—"

"I thought you had a girlfriend. A real one," I admit, my eyes fully shut and my face fully on fire. "Or something. I don't know."

I crack open one eye to gauge his reaction. He's laughing before I can even get him into focus. "You... Me? Who?" Arthur says, elusive dimples on full display. "And you thought I'd still do this with you if I had a whole girlfriend stowed away somewhere?"

Well, shit. "I guess I wasn't worried about like, a girlfriend, but maybe a someone? Someone not insignificant."

"And why would you think that?" Arthur hums, leaning closer to me.

It's hard to think. He's so infinitely smug, and I don't dislike it as much as I used to, when it'd reminded me of sore winners gloating over board games, Monopoly money stacked in their hands.

"I, well, during that first time you were in the car, you asked Cameron if 'she' was watching," I explain. "So. That."

He's close enough that I see his pupils go from dimes to quarters, small then big then small again. Then his dimples vanish.

“Oh, that. Right.”

“It’s not really any of my business,” I continue. Shouldn’t have brought this up. Why am I still bringing it up?

“No, it is your business,” he retorts. “We’re a thing, and you don’t like cheaters. I get it.”

“I didn’t think you were—”

“There’s nobody else,” Arthur interrupts. His thumb presses against my back, finding and settling firmly against a notch in my spine. Like he wants to keep me still. “As long as we’re doing this, you have my full attention.”

“For the scheme?”

His cheek flexes. “For the scheme.”

“Then who was she?” I ask.

“She?”

“The person you want to watch you. Who is she?”

Blame the bloodhound in me, starved for scraps. But I still feel like I don’t know Arthur enough, and surprisingly, him implying his year of rest and relaxation was so messy that he now doesn’t date, but wait he doesn’t cheat, doesn’t completely gel. Something isn’t adding up. And if I’m curious about who’s managed to genuinely steal his attention, that’s just a documentarian’s innate nosiness.

And I know it wasn’t me. But... she had to have been someone new to watching his

races, otherwise he wouldn't have asked Cameron. Someone who Cameron could've seen in the garage that day. Someone Arthur might not have trusted yet to stick around for the whole thing, someone who didn't like Formula 1 and had told him that—

“Merlin,” Arthur says. He swallows and leans away, and cold air rushes to fill up the empty space where he was, his hand, the possibility that he could've maybe wanted... never mind. Stupid.

I shouldn't have asked.

“She'd gotten mad at me that day. Thought she was skipping out on it.” He plucks up a bottle cap and spins it, then slaps it down on the bar top. “Gotta keep her happy.”

I wish I was that bottle cap. Of course Arthur hadn't meant me. He'd said that then, he's saying it now. Arthur doesn't want anything from me past the end of the summer. And that's good. A relationship between us is scandalous enough to wreck a multimillion-dollar racing contract, and a documentary, and a new American circuit, and my professional image. I don't want him to want me.

Then why do I ask him, “What happens after?”

“After what?”

“Once the team breaks your contract because of me. What happens then?”

I don't know what I'm expecting. Arthur doesn't respond right away, a newfound character trait I'm unsure of how to parse. He only looks at me, his jaw tight with all the words he isn't saying. When he does decide to reply, his voice is soft and slightly hollow. “I'll go to Italy. What about you?”

My heart thuds like it's been dropped from the top of a building. "Right, sorry. Italy. I remember that now. I just got confused with all the different countries and—Italy seems like a fun place!" I'm word-vomiting, punched through the gut for nebulous reasons. Bad reasons. Fuck. "Ready to go back and find everyone else?"

For my adult life, I've worked to be the best documentarian I can be, asking questions that make people think before they speak. But I don't like it when Arthur isn't firing back at me. When he's calculating how to respond, choosing which version of himself that I get.

After a long moment, his mouth ticks back up and I hate it—when he smiles like that, I get the lies. "Sure. Let's go."

Chapter Fifteen

It's crowded. And warm. And there are so many more disco balls in the giant dark club room at the back of the ruin bar, spinning like stars. Without any overhead lighting, only bits and pieces of the space are lit up by the thousands of disco-ball reflections at any given moment. Strangers, a bar, someone who looks like Max but isn't, a booth, someone in a bedazzled suit, Arthur holding my elbow as we sidestep toward a table in a less populated corner. Evidently, it's David Bowie Night, which means the music flips between electronic remixes and karaoke, which means it's so loud. But I'm a little drunk and a little emotionally distraught and I keep thinking about Italy, clocks, time running out, let go, have fun. I can have fun. I am having fun!

"I didn't know David Bowie was popular in Hungary," I say, like a person having fun would.

"What?" Arthur shouts.

"I said, I didn't know that—"

Just as we grab the booth, a boy in a feathered Brian Eno getup begins to croon a deeply soulful rendition of "Be My Wife," and it's fine, really; I have to be grateful he picked a song with lyrics and without car crashes.

Arthur studies me. His beer is already half empty. Again. "Are you drunk?"

"Almost. Why?"

“Because you’re smiling while someone’s singing karaoke.”

“Watch your mouth. I like karaoke.”

“ You like karaoke ?”

“I like watching other people do karaoke.”

The way he chuckles and shakes his head gets his point across, despite our karaoke star belting loudly enough to drown him out. I watch as he pulls out his phone, types for a few seconds, then sends it off.

My phone vibrates in my pants pocket.

Shooting him a suspicious glance, I pull it out to read his message.

As your boyfriend, I can learn to like karaoke. My rendition of Whole of the Moon always got rave reviews.

The wine spritzers gone by bubble beneath my skin. Not reacting to this—Arthur implying that we’ll go to karaoke more than this one time—doesn’t leave me with many facial-expression options. I go with a small smile but keep my eyes on my phone, so he doesn’t notice the weird pang that’s weirdly panging through me.

I like any social setting where you’re fed lyrics instead of having to talk. Also, my mom does the weirdest Beatles covers. She harmonizes with herself.

I peek up. He’s grinning at his phone.

She must be where you get your panache from.

Haha I'm adopted, but yeah. She's a badass. She met my dad while she was hiking the Appalachian Trail by herself. His water bottle had rolled off a cliff and she probably saved his life.

This is how I like to spring the childhood topic with new people: a little truth, a lot of distractions. Arthur's smile dips, and he quickly tap-tap-tap-taps.

I didn't know. I'm sorry.

I squint at the screen, wishing I could pop this text bubble out of existence.

It's OK! I'm lucky. I'm from a small town so I was always placed with the same foster families. After a while my parents and I made it a permanent thing. My birth mom struggled.

With gambling. With men. With being a mom.

With mental health. She was the forever optimist that got crushed by real life.

I look at those texts that summarize sixteen years of trauma, then send it over. I'm starting to feel bad, vulnerable. Stumbling into a conversation I wasn't fully prepared to have.

My phone vibrates.

I can see why you like your job then. You get to be a professional realist.

Something presses against my ankle and my eyes jolt up. It's Arthur, of course. The lights swing over his face, swirls of silver circles. He's searching my eyes to see if he's offended me.

I don't know if he has.

The first few notes of "Space Oddity" cast a hush over the bar. So when Arthur leans over the table and into my personal space, I actually hear him say, "You're really good, Lilah. You could keep working in F1. Be a videographer. Do social media. Any of it."

He's inches away. I can see the dark circles buried beneath his eyes. Get a hint of fizzed florals. A single bergamot.

"I don't know about that," I say. "I'm pretty sure 'failed documentarian' won't get me hired here."

"Failure only sticks if you let it."

"Not everyone is so..." Resilient. "Bouncy."

His eyes narrow. "Why can't you bounce back?"

Maybe it's the now-empty glass sitting in front of me. Or the feeling of Arthur's eyes, heavy on my skin. But I say, "I was in high school when I started making documentaries—my social worker's idea. But that's when my birth mom had her worst episode yet, too. She was silent for weeks. Didn't eat. Just slept." I press my fingernail into the glass. "I'd already been taken away so many times, it was the last straw. And I knew it wasn't my fault, her depression. But when she signed me over, it was like, okay. I am weird. I am an alien. I could never give this person the happy daughter she wanted, and I didn't need to try anymore. The day I packed up for the last time, she was on the porch, and you know what she said?" I wrap my hand around the locket around my neck, the cold metal, the memory. "Nothing. At the very end, at our real ending, my fairy-tale-loving mom didn't have any more empty promises about happily ever after. Honestly, I think she was relieved, too."

“She...” Anger sweeps over Arthur’s face, but he stops himself. “Okay.”

“It’s okay. I had my camera. That’s the real therapy trick—you can’t screw up life if you’re filming it,” I joke. “If there’s always going to be a wall between me and everyone else, at least it’s the glass of my camera lens.”

Transparent. A window and a cage.

Arthur’s eyes dart to mine. He does that before he wrenches conversations apart—gets nervous, looks too soon, waiting for a reaction that doesn’t exist yet.

“Do you still feel like an alien?” he asks, and I feel wrenched.

I don’t know what to say. Yes. No. How does someone become a person after all that? There isn’t an easy trick to breathing air after a lifetime in outer space. “I don’t know,” I admit. “Maybe?”

The lights dip away, and it’s dark again. Arthur hasn’t moved his ankle. I don’t want him to, either.

His eyes light up gold. “I’d visit you. After this.”

Then it’s black. “In D.C.?”

Lights again. “In space.”

Then the disco balls illuminate the doorway nestled in a corner—and there’s the last person I want to see, standing next to Sarah.

Max walks in with what has to be half of the Ignition staff. Orange T-shirts take over the David Bowie costumes immediately, swarming the crowd, walking to Arthur and

I's booth. And as for me, I'm stuck in time, paused.

Sarah looks at me, and she isn't smiling, and she knows .

I see it in the way her knees almost buckle mid-step, guilt as clear on her pretty features as wiped-down glass. She starts to weave toward me quicker, abandoning Max to do so, and I'm not ready for this. The future, leaving this bubble.

So I grab Arthur's hand and yank him from the booth, away.

And away is the dance floor.

The karaoke melts into a remix, "Golden Years" and "Let's Dance" spliced together in a new and interesting way. Arthur's hands are on my shoulders. "What's going on?" he whisper-yells.

"Max. Sarah," I whisper-yell back. "She knows, and she still came with him."

His hands slide down my arms. Then he wraps his fingers around me, one hand on either side, and it's like being coated in apocalyptic-social-situation armor. Arthur is here, and he knows how to deal with people, and I have him on my side. He's mine. "You're okay. You're good. Fuck them."

"But she didn't—it's, it's not really her fault—"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does. I need to go apologize."

Arthur takes my chin in his hand. "No. You are not apologizing to them."

My heart isn't beating. His fingers are so much warmer against my face than they've been anywhere else. "Watch me, Graywood," he says. "Don't look anywhere else. Just at me."

In the dark, I only get a glint of light back from his hazel eyes, then the disco-ball gods bless me with a full swing. Arthur's face is lit from chin to pushed-back hair, dazzling and concentrated only on me, and that residual need to make myself small enough to plug up any holes in Max's sorry life vanishes into thin air. Because Arthur is right. I'm okay. I'm good. Tonight, I'm Arthur Bianco's girlfriend, and that's power.

I have my hands around his shoulders when I think to ask, "Can you show me how to dance?"

Momentarily, Arthur has the wherewithal to look conflicted. Perhaps he's able to read my tea leaves and knows in his toned gut that I'm not going to gracefully handle whatever happens next, after tonight, when I'm back to thinking instead of talking. I probably owe him an explanation, too, seeing as I've gone from tipsy-bad-childhood rant to please-let-me-rub-you-in-my-ex's-face at the speed of light.

His hesitation makes my fingers curl. I like that he's worried about where this is going, a little on the fence.

"Yeah," he says, almost too quiet to hear over the music.

Then we're falling off the fence together, and I like this much better.

In my limited experience, there's a get-to-know-you stage of physicality, awkward and adorably giggly, fingers brushing and elbows bumping. Arthur sails right past that requisite clumsiness. He takes my hips in his hands and pulls me close, drawing me into synchronicity with his body, and I must make a sound, a whimper or

something. He chases the noise with his eyes, moving me back and forth as he inspects my lips, and I didn't know that this was what dancing felt like, like he's touched me a thousand times and knows how to push the curve of my hips to command my legs, my hands, my spine.

It doesn't matter that our relationship is fake. It hardly matters that half this club is finally, officially, undeniably staring at us. I wind my fingers into the front of his shirt, let him take the lead, and ignore the rest. In the dark, being held by him is just like diving underwater. Deep, where the waves move you. I take a breath, brace my lungs for impact, and let myself get caught up in him.

When Arthur leans toward my ear and says, "He's watching," I'm shocked to remember that I'm not swimming. There was a purpose to this.

Then excitement trills up my sternum. "Don't look at him."

"Where should I look, then?"

"Me."

It's a gross demand. Needy. Arthur rumbles beneath my palms and clicks his tongue, his only chastisement. Then he slides his hands up my sides until his long fingers are curved around my rib cage, thumbs just short of the bottom swell of my breasts, and tips me back. It's like I'm falling, my body weight swaying to the balls of my feet, only he keeps me upright. And he looks. His face is moments from mine, nose to nose, breath to breath, and I'm officially not sure what my sexuality is—if I like comfort, if I like safety, if I need a deep connection—because hello, yes, this. I want... whatever this is.

Then he's closer, Arthur's annoying, rude, pretty mouth finding where my ear meets my neck. "You know about slipstream?"

“You,” I say, “talk so much.”

“Just trying to educate you,” he replies smoothly. “When I’m behind another car, it creates a space with lower pressure, pulling me ahead.” He rolls my hips into his, my heels lifting off the ground, and is he... is he trying to—“Because that’s how you win a race sometimes. When you really want something, you’re okay with being in second place for a while. Play your cards right, and second place helps you get into first.”

The air pressure between us feels ready to burst, and then there’s Max, and it does.

“What the hell is this?” he snaps, adequately loud over the music.

I spring back from Arthur, mostly. I don’t think he tries to stop me. He’s just really strong, and he also goes to step in front of me, so we kind of end up with his hand around my back and me against his side, and it looks like we’re a united front, so I don’t move any more.

“Hello, mate, what’s up?” Arthur says, as if he wasn’t just five seconds from explaining Formula 1 aerodynamics by way of non-Kentucky sex education.

“What’s up with me ?” Max shoots back. He’s all ninety-degree angles: crossed arms, locked legs, flabbergasted and furious. “What the fuck are you doing to her?”

“I suppose I’m celebrating,” Arthur replies with a hint of a smile.

Max scrubs his face. Then he turns to me. “Is this guy, like, bothering you?”

The ridiculousness of him attempting to defend my honor from a big, bad man makes me laugh, more hysterical giggle than relaxed chuckle, but Max’s eyes sharpen into points anyway. The laugh dies in my chest as he says, “This isn’t funny. You don’t

even like—never did this with—you don’t do this shit, Lilah. I knew he was into you, but why would you be into him?”

His awareness shocks me, guilts me. Gets pretty close to crushing me until I look at Arthur, who gives me an I’ve got this one nod. “We were just dancing. That’s fine, right? You wouldn’t be jealous of someone spending time with your employee, I’m sure.”

“I—no. No.” Max blinks, recenters himself. “Lilah, okay. I get it. You wanted to get me back, and you did. But you can’t—if he’s—if you’re... This is a really bad look for our business.”

Our.

“No, I’m not,” I say.

Max isn’t blinking anymore. He’s staring, unabashedly. “You’re not what?”

I could lie and say that he’s right, I was jealous. I’ve been lying for weeks. I’ve been putting up with Max for longer, though. The memories of our relationship jump into the light again, like they’ve been waiting for me to figure this out, that we were never equals, never creative partners. He controlled me. He told me to listen to top music playlists so that I wouldn’t embarrass him in front of his friends when I didn’t know song names, so I did. He wanted a girlfriend who loved sports, so I sat on our sofa as he cussed at the screen, withstood his rants, moved to Texas. I started using digital cameras instead of my vintage ones, watched the bubblegum-masculinity movies he loved, memorized the good, funny television references, had fifteen minutes of silent missionary-position sex once per week. I was even okay with him not loving me and me not loving him, because I’m logical, good, calm Lilah Graywood, who sticks to her place in the shadows and has never asked for anything. Not a better life, or a “normal” brain, or people who love me, or understanding from a world that refuses to

give it. Even getting revenge had been Arthur's idea first.

But that isn't me anymore. Max may have changed into someone else first, but I've changed more, and I don't want to go backward.

"I'm not trying to get you back. I don't even think I loved you to begin with," I tell him. And then, because on some level he might deserve it, I add, "I'm sorry."

Arthur's eyes swing to me, his body tilting and face thrown in red-alert surprise. "You don't love him?" Arthur says, right as Max laughs out, "You're sorry for not loving me?"

Maybe this was the wrong night to go with radical honesty. Arthur is still looking at me, and I'm too overwhelmed to analyze the emotions in his wild hazel eyes. He's unmasked, shield-free, and if I had an hour to pore over a photo of his face, maybe I could figure out what he's thinking.

"All right," he says suddenly. He stands up taller, staring down at Max with a deadly frown. "This conversation is over. We're leaving."

Max frowns back. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I didn't. I said we're leaving."

"You aren't taking her anywhere. She's my partner."

As he says that, Max tries to prod his finger into Arthur's chest. Arthur catches his wrist in the blink of an eye, and Max's mouth falls open like an airborne catfish.

I hate that his pain still makes my stomach drop. Before I can remember that I'm supposed to be going forward, not backward, I step around Arthur to take Max's hand

from him, hoping to help calm him down. “Max. Let’s talk in the morning. This isn’t the right place.”

There’s barely time to register the fist knocking into my collarbone before I’m falling back. I think Max meant to push me away—I hope that’s what he wanted. But his fingers were balled up tight, his cheeks pink and eyes two tight white stars, and I’m crashing into a couple who bravely try to keep me upright. Nope, not a couple. Sarah. She has her arms around my waist, and her big eyes are round and scared. “What the frick, are you okay?”

“Whoa,” Max mumbles, seeming to realize as we all do that he just made the biggest mistake of his life.

I ignore them both. “Arthur, I’m fine. Don’t. Arthur —”

“Sorry, love,” Arthur says, before he grabs Max by his sweaty arms and throws him against the dance floor.

Chapter Sixteen

Max spends an hour behind closed doors with Sarah and Holmes the following morning. I stand in the hallway, silently picking at my hoodie sleeve. When the door opens to Sarah, she shoots me a pointed glare, then saunters wordlessly down the fluorescent-lit hallway of Ignition's Hungarian office, her long hair swishing behind her. No ponytail today.

The door opens again a few minutes later, and I'm met with a hungover-looking Max and a bright and bushy-tailed Holmes Bianco. "Good morning, Ms. Graywood," he says with too much enthusiasm for nine a.m.—particularly when, at least for Max and me, the prior evening involved bloody noses and Hungarian bouncers.

"Hi," I say. "I'm really sorry about all of this."

"Nonsense. Things happen," Holmes says calmly. "Arthur's sorry he can't join us today. He's having his own independent review."

Figures. Since Arthur vanished last night, pulled away from the bar by multiple Ignition staff I didn't recognize, I haven't heard a peep from him. No texts to plan what we're going to say to Holmes, our final boss. No ideas about how to corroborate our stories. No... acknowledging whatever passed between us while we were dancing.

The worst part is, after what Arthur said about respecting our fake relationship, I'm embarrassingly surprised by the radio silence. And being surprised by Arthur not following up with me the morning after he had his body pressed against mine, his

hands all over me, on my chin, my ribs... it doesn't feel good. It's like I lost a bet I knew I shouldn't have placed. A hundred dollars on the international playboy texting to ask if I'm emotionally okay after we felt each other up on a dance floor.

At least there are only three possible reasons for his silence. First and most likely, he's busy. Duh. Second and equally likely, he'd felt nothing last night, so it wouldn't occur to him to reach out and make sure I knew that he's just a really good dancer. And last and most of all least, there's the chance that Arthur did feel a spark at the time, had enjoyed the fit of our bodies, let his mind wander—and then he hadn't texted me.

I really hope that's not it.

“So, Max here was just telling me about the misunderstanding that unfolded yesterday evening,” Holmes says. “Let me start by saying nobody is in trouble, and we can step inside the office if you'd like, but this development that transpired between you and Arthur, Lilah... what exactly is it?”

Max starts to say something, but Holmes holds up a hand, gold rings glinting. “It's her turn to talk, Mr. Black.”

“Oh. It's...” I fumble for the right words—the thing that will make this conversation end as quickly as possible. This is my moment. I need to keep the lie going. We're only pretending to be into each other so you fire him is not the answer. I'm not really one hundred percent sure how I ended up held against his hips while David Bowie remixes played also isn't right.

“There's nothing going on with Arthur and me,” I say, going for simplicity.

Holmes's brows lift. “Nothing.”

“Absolutely nothing,” I reiterate.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, relieved. “Well, then, thanks for stopping by. Max will tell you about the new guideline we’ve added to your stay, but other than that, do enjoy the rest of your time in Hungary, and I’ll see you both after the break.”

That’s... it? I look between the two men, trying to not have the open-mouth stare of someone who was expecting way worse, since that typically ushers in the way worse. “Okay. Thanks?”

Max doesn’t get the message, though. “That’s all?” he says, frustrated. To be fair, he and his girlfriend were reprimanded for an hour, while I got a slap on the wrist that was mostly a high five for saying the right lie.

That’s what happens when you steal a company you don’t know how to run, I guess. Max has to own my mistakes now.

“Sure. Ms. Graywood has said that nothing’s going on between her and my nephew, and Arthur gave the same story during his review.” He did? I blink, then hate it, because of course he did, that’s our plan, go away tiny flash of disappointment I don’t appreciate. “And to be honest with you, Mr. Black, you can’t really expect an F1 driver to not enjoy a dance or two after getting podium. You just keep your eye on your company”—Holmes smiles at me—“and we’ll be good to wrap in September and begin discussing how to incorporate this film into next year’s marketing plan. You may have seen the rumors about the new circuit... I hope you both are prepared to move quickly and loudly.”

Max’s mouth wavers, like he’s contemplating throwing me under the bus to learn more about those rumors. Then he seems to realize he owns the bus.

“Okay,” he mutters sullenly.

I should be happy when Holmes leaves us in the hall to head back into the office, his door shutting us out and away from further repercussions. Only now I'm with Max, and there's no one else around, and I don't know what to do. To be honest, I haven't known exactly how to proceed without Arthur around for weeks, and it's hitting me that I'd gone from one out-of-control situation to another. Arthur left last night. He hasn't talked to me since. He told the team that nothing is going on, and that's true—whatever fever dream I stepped into after those wine spritzers is gone, and I have to start dealing with my own shit by myself.

Nobody else is coming to rescue me, and soon, I'm going to be on my own.

“Can I start?” Max says, his voice thick.

I lean back against the hallway wall, avoiding the framed photograph of an old Ignition driver. “Sure.”

His chest rises as he chews on his already chapped lip. “I'm really sorry about last night. I'm sorry about all of this. I fucked up.” The ground shifts, but Max continues anyway. “I hope you know this, but pushing you was a total accident. That was douchebag behavior.”

I can't remember when Max last apologized like this. His red eyes seek mine out, desperate, and the remorse in them thuds against the barbed wire I've thrown around my heart. Max Black is sorry, and that hits me like the first glass of wine after six months sober, genuine guilt from someone whose feelings once meant more to me than my own.

“The thing is,” he says, “you heard what Holmes said. This documentary is going to be big, and I've been putting together a proposal to get Black & Graywood in front of other sports federations. We can make a killing if we keep making movies with teams. Like millions, dude. It'll be like we're an ad agency with style. And you can

be a part of that if you can just—forgive me. For last night.”

“An... ad agency,” I repeat.

“With style.” He smiles proudly. “Just say yes. Black & Graywood needs you. I need you.”

Magic. I’ve been clinging to the magic rush of documentaries, the ethics and the camerawork, the moral imperative of factual storytelling, while Max has been drafting a proposal to make us—my business, my last name—a marketing gimmick? “I don’t know,” I say. “Would you really want to keep working with companies like this?”

“Don’t you?” Max says beneath his breath. He’s using his interview technique on me: straight to the point, but soft. “It isn’t like we’re doing government propaganda. Making a documentary for a team just feels kind of different than making a documentary about the team.”

Propaganda. There’s the word I’ve been looking for all summer.

“What about Sarah? Wouldn’t this upset her?” I ask, vaguely lightheaded.

“Oh.” Max bites his lip again. “We broke up.”

I put a hand on my chest, pressing my fingers in to hold back a wave of emotion—surprise and anger, relief and pain, always a little pain. Max isn’t with the person he left me for anymore. Max is talking to me again, sorry for how he acted, hoping that we can leave here together...

The next wave floods the shoreline, and I’m wiped out. Max is only talking to me because he and Sarah broke up. He’s sorry because he doesn’t have anyone else. With

him, I'm always plan B, and this surprise—the Max pain—picks up the sting of Arthur vanishing again, spits in its face, and takes its rightful place in my aching heart.

“And about that guideline thing Holmes mentioned, let me explain that super fast,” Max says. “The team wants you to stay in the same room as Sarah whenever we travel from now on, since she’s the marketing manager. They said it’s just to keep an eye on stuff. But it’ll be cool, right?”

Right. “Sure,” I say, because I just want to go.

“Cool,” Max says, visibly relieved. “I’ll show you where her room is. And hey, after the summer break, you only need to stay with her in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy. We’re almost done. Then the next generation of Black & Graywood can really kick off.”

Once I’m sitting on one of the queen-sized beds in my new, cold, silent room, I realize that Max hadn’t told me why he and Sarah broke up, a question that now seems invaluable and all-important with Sarah sitting cross-legged on the other queen-sized bed. She’s staring at her phone, headphones in, which is all she’s done for the last half hour since I key-carded myself in. Once, when I padded to the closet to hang my charging cables up, it had almost seemed like she might say... something.

It’s been fifteen minutes since then, and that chance is long gone.

My heart beats in my wrists as I struggle with my new suitcase’s zipper. She’s mad. Clearly. But I don’t know if this is the anger of a woman who’s been dumped or the resigned chill of the dumper. I don’t know if—or, more likely, how —Max dragged me into it, since they walked into the club together last night. Which is when I should’ve gone over to them. Next time Arthur gives me interpersonal relationship advice, I’m turning the David Bowie karaoke all the way up.

I stow my suitcase under the bed and sit again. Our flight back to Texas is early tomorrow morning. Maybe—and this is wishful thinking—Sarah is exhausted from the drama and just isn't up for late-night chats.

She pops out one headphone, rolling it into her palm, and my heartbeat stops.

“Look. I'm only going to say this once.” Contrary to her words, Sarah isn't looking at me. Instead, she's staring at the turned-off television mounted by the desk. “I liked you. I know you're shy, and Max—screw him. But I'm a girls' girl, Lilah. I would've told me, if I were you.”

Seconds tick by as her words click together. This isn't about Max. She's angry because of me. I messed up.

“I'm sorry,” I say, my throat already scratchy. “I know. I wanted to. It's just...” Just what ? I didn't know if she'd believe me? I wanted Max to grow up and own his misdeeds? I was busy losing myself in a fake situationship with a Formula 1 driver, and telling her that she was the other woman could've gotten in the way of my sexy, secret documentary about him? A documentary that will bite Sarah in the ass, too, since she's the marketing manager. She's the Ignition employee who's been in contact with Max from the start. She probably got reamed today for not keeping me in line.

If Arthur and I pull off our plan, Sarah will have to deal with the brutal professional ramifications of letting a scandal explode under her watch. Then throw in the team principal firing a driver, losing millions in revenue, and fucking up plans for a new U.S. circuit?

I'm not just ruining Max and Ignition's movie. I'm ruining Sarah.

“I'm just sorry,” I whisper.

Her chin wobbles as she shakes her head. She tries to talk, then can't, and grabs her other headphone from her ear. "I'm sorry, too," she says, quieter, more heartbroken than before. "I don't want to be angry at you. I know he hurt you, too."

"You can be mad at me. I can take it."

That makes her laugh, then choke slightly, and she grabs her duvet cover and presses it into her face. "Screw him," she yells into the blanket, the sound mostly muffled.

I wait, and seconds later she has the blanket back on her lap, twin black eyeliner smudges on the white cotton. "I never even liked him that much," she says in a rush. "But I thought it was safe because he was, like, not a Formula 1 asshole, but surprise, he was just an aspiring Formula 1 asshole, and why is that way worse? I can't even—Lilah, I can't even tell you how many guys here have treated me like this. And it's already so freaking hard to be a woman in motorsports, and my grandfather keeps setting me up with guys who literally want me to quit my job to be their trophy wife and I... I wanted to be happy, and I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She goes quiet again, staring down at her hands. At one point, seeing Sarah go through the same Max-induced heartbreak that I had would've been a toxic fantasy of mine. Like maybe if someone else shared the unique, twisted pain of getting destroyed by a "nice guy," I'd be able to fully let it go.

Reality is a different story. There's nothing emotionally satisfying about how tears swim in the corners of her eyes. This misery doesn't like company at all.

"When did he tell you?"

"Not until yesterday, I swear. I hate cheaters. That was one of the first conversations we had. He told me that we could never meet until he moved to Texas because he had a crazy roommate who..." Sarah claps a hand over her mouth. "I'm going to kill him."

You're going to see me on the news."

"He isn't worth it. You're too pretty for serious jail time."

A sad laugh bubbles up inside her again, then she groans. "I really, really wanted to be your friend."

Two months ago, I wouldn't have known how to react to that. The older version of me probably wouldn't have believed her. But this me, who's seen how Max has been able to mess with my head?

When Sarah's eyes lift to mine, I see her nervousness, that she's scared of what I think of her, desperate to fix what she didn't break. She's another girl trying her best after getting duped, and I want to be her friend, too. It can be that playground simple if I let it be.

"Who said we can't be friends?" I say, frowning. "Whoever he is sucks."

Slowly, she turns toward me more. "I... yeah. He does."

"We probably should be friends, just to really stick it to him."

"We should?" she says tentatively.

"Definitely. I can't think of anything cooler."

"I can, but it's probably a felony."

This is the second serious revenge joke Sarah's made, and that must be why the thought crosses my mind that I could tell her about Arthur and me. Our scheme, that is. Bringing her on board would ensure that whatever we do doesn't hurt her. And

selfishly, the idea of doing this with another one of Max's ex-girlfriends is the coolest thing I can think of.

Sighing, I grab my phone and send off a text. "Who was that to?" Sarah asks, noting the new air of annoyance suffocating the room.

"Just a guy," I say, and decide that's enough. That will be the last lie I tell her.

A minute later, my phone lights up, Arthur's reply to my We need to talk text glowing gray:

Rooftop, 5 a.m.?

Chapter Seventeen

My phone rings at 4:45 a.m. I had an alarm set, so I'm awake, thankfully; I snatch it and flip it to silent before Sarah startles from her eye-mask slumber. Arthur Bianco—Personal stares back up at me, and I pop into the bathroom, shut the door, and whirl around to face myself in the brightly lit mirror.

“Hello, Lilah,” Arthur says.

Him using my first name captures my full attention, and with that one word, it's just me and his voice, deep and breathy.

“Hello, Arthur . What's up?”

“Well, I'm on the roof, and I was wondering if you were going to get here in time.”

I look over my shoulder at the shut door. “In time for what? You said five a.m. I was just about to leave.”

“I did,” he replies, entertained by something. “And let me guess... you don't like being late.”

“Way too easy of a guess,” I say, smoothing the bottom of my washed-out band T-shirt over my jean shorts. During the day, temperatures in Budapest have been flirting with mid-eighty degrees. “How does one get onto a roof, anyway?”

“That's why I called.” Arthur pauses. “I was thinking we could play a game. You get

to the roof by five and you get your surprise.”

Deep inside my chest, underneath bones and barbed wire, my heart perks up. I shove my hand against it and tell it to heel. “You do realize that I asked you to talk, and you’re making this into hide-and-seek?”

“Do you not want to play?”

I know he’s serious. With all the ways we’ve pushed each other, challenged and prodded, he has this one tone of voice that’s never a lie. His I dare you to try and keep up voice. It’s... annoying. Not cute. He has to know that I wanted to discuss our plan, so why is he turning this into a joke?

“Fine.” I slide out the bathroom door, then into the hotel hallway. “But let the record show that I didn’t ask for this.”

“Done and done.”

“Are you going to call me back if I hang up on you?”

“Try it and find out.”

I snort. “You thought I wasn’t going to show.”

“It is early.”

In the dark hallway, there’s a neon-lit sign marked plaza hanging over one door, the other completely unmarked. Plaza sounds like roof. I shoulder through it as I say, “I’ve been filming you since June. Our sleep schedules are in sync.”

There’s a weird noise, like static or someone choking. “Right,” he says. “Did you find

the plaza?”

“If I don’t get any hints, you don’t, either.”

He laughs, and the sound hits my sternum like a shot of Pulp Fiction adrenaline.
“That’s fair.”

I squeeze through another door. This side of the hotel smells like somewhere I can’t afford to be, clean and fruity; it’s figs, or black currants. Jammy. Once I get to the long wall of golden doors, I find a mirrored elevator. Elevators go up. Up equals roof.

“Still alive?” Arthur murmurs, jolting me back to reality. I hadn’t realized I’d been zoning out, and once I’m back on planet Earth, I notice how quickly my pulse is racing.

“Still alive.” There’s a final ding, the elevator glides to a rest, and the doors slide open. “You better actually be out there. Or are you going to throw me off the roof?”

“You think I’d do that.”

“No witnesses.”

“Many witnesses. Plenty of early risers in Pest.”

“I’m not hearing a no.”

“From me? Never,” Arthur says with a hint of something—pleasure. He’s happy. I ignore how that makes me feel as I head down the long portrait-lined hall to a set of large white doors. A plaque hangs above them that reads rooftop access in multiple languages.

“So what do I win when I find you?” I say, only half kidding.

I push through the doors right as Arthur says, “This,” though I barely register his voice, my eyes and mind consumed by the gold light filling the sky. A hundred silhouetted birds fly right over the roof, and the sun peeks out over rows and rows of domino buildings across the streets, white and black, brown and brick, every stretched-cotton cloud tilting toward the liquid gold sunrise. The angle is just right, the light flooding the roof, me, Arthur. He’s facing the door, his phone still pressed to his ear, and I hear his smile more than I see it. But I do see it. I see every inch of him that his smile fills, how his eyes light up and his mouth parts, exhaling uncontainable joy.

I wish I had a camera. I’d settle for any lens right now, film, digital. Anything that could capture Arthur just like this with the sky behind him, a memory I could keep once night falls.

“Best view in Budapest,” he says as he pushes away from the low wall fencing in the roof. He walks over to me, past the bistro-sized metal table and chairs set up near the edge, twin to-go coffees and plated pastries on either side, pinstriped tablecloth ruffling in the breeze. “I thought we could do a breakfast meeting, since we’re traveling later. Eat croissants, watch the birds.”

My heart hurts. It’s trying to claw its way out of my chest, ribs first. What is he doing? He didn’t talk to me about what happened between us, and this is... whatever the opposite of not talking is. This is a full-blown conversation.

“Is this you apologizing?” I ask.

“For?”

“You made a scene,” I start.

“I finished a scene,” he replies.

“ And you hit Max.”

“He hit you first.”

“And you...” Touched me like you wanted me. Didn’t realize it would hurt me. Though if I’m being fair, I hadn’t thought through the repercussions before asking him to dance, either. But I’m feeling so many of them now—tingly traces of his hands on my ribs and how he moved my body like it was as natural as breathing. He hadn’t needed to take things that far, to the exhilarating edge of my experience and what must be just the tip of his. Because if he did want me, he’d be acting on it. This is Arthur. He chases.

We don’t have that much time left together.

Arthur slips his hands into his pockets and tilts his head all the way over to one side, jaw tightening then relaxing. “You don’t have another guess?”

“I...” I worry my lip. He was supposed to let that go.

He takes a step toward me. “Come on, Graywood. Why would I do this?”

I’ve been kissed before. Quite a few times, actually. There was a boy in sixth grade who was obsessed with my blunt humor and Sonic the Hedgehog drawing skills; he’d managed to sneak one without any recess monitors noticing. Then, after occasional high school fumblings and a girl I’d really wanted to love my freshman year of college, there’d been Max, and even if I’d have preferred staying friends with him, at least crawling into bed with him had been comfortable. Like doing what was expected of me.

But right now, there's nothing comfortable about the way Arthur is looking at me. It's exhilarating. Bright and overexposed, with all the promise of what comes once the sky goes dark and the gold is gone.

And I think... I think he wants to kiss me.

No. I think I want him to.

Oh, fuck. No , no, no—

I'm attracted to Arthur Bianco because I like him .

"I don't know! Sorry," I say too loudly and push my glasses up my nose with shaky fingers, and whatever momentary trick of the light just happened splits in two. Arthur clears his throat and I brush past him, going to the low barrier wall and settling my palms against the brickwork. Good, reliable bricks. Solid things to cling to in my time of need.

Okay. So I'm not just randomly, one-off attracted to a professional athlete who regularly wows the general public with his motorsport skills and death-defying confidence. I have a crush. I enjoy his personality. I like being around him . This is extremely bad. This is Arthur. Documentary subject. Sports superstar I'll only know for another month and a half, tops.

I can fix this. I can... I will...

I'll ignore it.

Searching for a conversational topic that might make it less obvious that I was just staring at his mouth, I look around at the sunrise and blurt out, "It's the golden hour. Do you know what that is?"

Arthur's footsteps thump behind me, and my throat squeezes as my body becomes aware that he's beside me. So close that my arm tingles with his energy, though we aren't touching at all.

"I'm not sure." His voice is quiet. "Some movie thing?"

"Yeah, it's when the light is gold like this as the sun's rising or setting. The light levels between the sun and man-made lights are more balanced, and the sunlight itself is indirect, so everything feels kind of cinematic. Like magic."

"I've heard the term before, when I was sick once. L'ora d'oro." Arthur exhales quietly, then laughs. "Our coffee is getting cold."

He's changing the topic. Like always, I realize. Whenever one of us gets close to being too real, we spring away from the edge.

I follow him to the table and sit across from him. Arthur's hair is messier than usual, the longer strands swept back from his forehead, and when he passes me the tiny sugar cube plate, I get this inexplicable urge to ask him if he slept okay. Why? Why is this happening to me with him? You should be able to switch off your attraction to a person. Twist a knob and get through a conversation with them without losing your breath.

Scowling, I tear the apple strudel on my plate into two clean pieces.

"You had something you wanted to talk to me about?" Arthur says, watching me dust crumbs off my fingers.

"I can text you about it."

"Now I'm curious."

“It’s just—details. Fine-tuning our deal.”

“We have an hour until we need to leave,” he points out.

“Isn’t your coffee getting cold?”

I’m attempting to hurry our breakfast up, though my subtle and careful hints are not landing with Arthur. He leans his elbows on the table and sets his chin in his hand, lips curling as he attempts to wait me out.

I set my strudel down and glare back. “I wanted to talk to you about Sarah. She and Max broke up.”

His eyes narrow further. “They did.”

“Yeah, and she’s pretty mad at him. And... I think she would help us with our plan. I want to offer her the chance. But if she doesn’t take it, or she says we should stop, then I don’t know if we should keep going. I’ve already done enough to her.”

Arthur’s mouth has zipped shut, an emotion I can’t read running across his face like it’s being pulled by a string: tight lips, set jaw, a single wrinkle between his eyebrows. When he leans back, folding his arms over his broad chest, his expression reminds me of the way people sit for hours on those benches in the middle of museums, surrounded by art, attempting to decode the shapes and swirls in front of them. I have this feeling that Arthur would gladly, if given the chance, stand me up in a silent room and stare until he understood how I work.

“Okay,” he says, “sure.”

“Okay?” I repeat. “Sure?”

“We can tell my marketing manager that we’re pretending to fall in love. If you want.”

Oh, so now we’re falling in love. I’d make this joke if him saying in love didn’t turn me into a malfunctioning robot, moments before its final computation. “What’s the catch?”

“Well, since you asked.” Arthur smirks. “I want to tell Cameron, too.”

“Cameron?” I’m stuck on repeat. I have to stop echoing him. “Why?” Better. Small steps.

“I tell him everything. Used to, anyway. Plus, wouldn’t be fair if you got to team up with Sarah and go two against one.”

“We aren’t going to team up.”

“Says you.”

“We would all work together.”

“Cameron is a great worker. The best.”

“Okay, but if we tell Cameron, we have to tell Delaney.”

He blinks. “My personal manager. The woman who controls my life. She isn’t going to want me to go to Leone.”

That kind of makes two of us. “Then you need to have that conversation with her now.”

Arthur's cheek bows. "Anyone else?"

That's five. Me and Arthur, doing the scheme. Sarah, ensuring that we don't accidentally toss her a grenade. Cameron, for male bonding. And Delaney, who's smarter than all of us. "That's all. You, me, and three people who would already follow you to your next team. What do you think?"

Arthur doesn't reply. He's still looking at me, focusing, and I'm vaguely worried there's something on my face, though I haven't taken a bite of my strudel. Alternatively, my mouth could have transformed into a roadside sign advertising I think you are really pretty and I wish I didn't. Which, also, he can't read that on me—right? That I like him. He doesn't know that. Sure, I'm constantly thrown off by his observational skills, and we spend a lot of time together, probably more than we need to. But Arthur has famously enjoyed the company of many women, to put it lightly. Me thinking about his mouth must be cute in comparison, if it even pings his radar. Like scattered thunderstorms; slightly interesting, mildly annoying, but altogether, another day in July.

"Five it is," Arthur says. "Can we wait to tell our big news 'til we're back in the States? Might be a tense plane ride otherwise."

"Yeah. And thank you. Really."

"None needed. But if I'd known you were going to make this such a party, I would've told you to pick out a wedding dress. Really go all out with it."

"Ha-ha-ha. You are so funny."

He frowns. "Who says I'm joking?"

"You're always joking."

“You take everything seriously except for me,” he says, his fingers tapping once against the table, then stilling. There’s a flash in his eyes, a secret something, like he isn’t kidding around—and he’s hurt. If I hadn’t already figured out his bone-dry sense of humor and his preference for wearing his own mask, I’d be fooled.

“Sure. Yes. Let’s get married. That will solve everything.” Fight teasing with teasing. This always works. “Where should we live? D.C. or on the road?”

“Is that even a question?” he volleys back seamlessly. “You’d travel with me.”

“Uh-huh. And do what?”

“Anything.”

“With what money?”

“Mine.”

I learned long ago not to bother explaining to men that Arthur’s exact offer—a float tank of meaningless wealth, tethered only by a husband— isn’t appealing. So, I surprise myself when I say, “I wouldn’t like it.”

There’s that flash again. “Why not?”

“Even if I couldn’t do documentaries traveling with you, I’d need to be working on something.”

His face tilts down, as if he’s weighing this offer, as if I am offering him something instead of exploring a hypothetical while the sun rises. “I meant what I said. You could have a career in Formula 1, too.” He pauses. “There are openings for videographers all the time, and on-camera talent. You wouldn’t even need to work

with a team, just the sport's commercial owners.”

Arthur's tone makes it sound like he's trawled the job board with my stardom in mind, which is an absurd idea if he's spent more than five minutes with me. Plus, the idea of going from Max's hostile LLC takeover to getting pity-hired by the sports overlords because I'm someone's wife makes my skin crawl. “I'm, um, really not on-camera material. And how would we find the time to see each other then?”

He considers this. “You'd travel with F1, I'd travel with F1. We'd work when we had to, like most people do, and see each other when we can.”

“How diplomatic,” I laugh.

“Sure. We would be married.” He lowers his voice as he leans forward, and is it just me, or is the sunrise making it hard to see? “What about kids?”

“Oh,” I say, suddenly dying. It's way too hot. Scorching, and not in a good way. “Yes, kids. I—really want kids. And wow, we need to finish up so we can head back down.”

Arthur hesitates, staring as I pluck up my espresso and take a large, bitter gulp. Then he mirrors me, going for his coffee. I can't tell from his lingering gaze if he's concerned or curious about my reaction, or maybe let down he couldn't dissect my emotions around family and children like I ripped apart the pastry on my plate.

I do try to figure out one thing, though, as Arthur tears into his croissant: What is the magic behind the golden hour? Why do beautiful things transcend logic and affect us so deeply when we know they're going to end? The sun is everywhere, light dripping and running over the man in front of me, and seeing Arthur suspended in this ambient bliss, far away from the world, makes one part click; the sunrise is bright and overwhelming, just like him. He's a golden person. Even if you only get to be around

them for a moment, an hour, one summer, it's stunning.

And at least I know what I like now. When nobody else is telling me what to like—when they're actively saying I shouldn't—I like Arthur.

I try to hold on to that sliver of progress when I get back to my hotel room and find Sarah curled in the armchair, knees under her chin, eyes glued to her phone. Her hair is thrown back into a tight topknot, and that's how I know something is wrong. Sarah in a bun. The world is ending.

She starts to stand as I shut the door, then she stops, sitting again with a leg folded under her. "Hi. Hey." She runs a hand over her mouth. "There are a few articles."

I pause where I'm at, one shoe off, the other on. "About?"

"You and Arthur."

I brace my hand against the wall. "Me and him...?"

"Nothing big. Just photos from the club on some online forums. Like weird Reddit things nobody pays attention to, wondering who you are. Your name has been mentioned, but just once."

It's ironic, kind of, that I avoided throwing Sarah a truth bomb for as long as I did, and here she is, carefully setting one down on my shoulders and holding my hand as it detonates. I float to the foot of the bed and sit, nodding. "Okay."

"Don't worry," she adds, teetering on the brink of controlled chaos. "I've got a call with the team in an hour. They hadn't wanted us to announce the documentary yet, since rumors already leaked about the circuit plan, but it seems like the safest option to kill the story before it runs away from us. It explains why you'd be out dancing

with him.”

Second bomb. I close my eyes. “The photos are of us dancing.”

“We can handle this,” she says. “I can handle this. I’m really freaking good at my job.”

I don’t doubt that at all. If given the chance, I think Sarah, when equipped with enough caffeine and day planners, could prevent the next ice age. “Can you give me a second?”

Sarah nods, and my shaky fingers find my phone. Many missed texts from Arthur, the first reading, Fuck, just saw. I’m sorry. How do we get them to not announce the film? One missed text from Max: Sarah says she can make this go away. I run an internet search for “Lilah Graywood” with quotation marks—and there it is, a single, sketchy news article with some blurry photos of what could be Arthur and me, but could be black-and-white film grain, but nevertheless lists me by full name.

Arthur Bianco, 29, Ignition driver on a hot streak, spotted with Lilah Prestel Graywood, 24-year-old documentarian known for...

I almost drop my phone.

Prestel.

They have my old name.

How? And— why ? And then I’m taking that name and plugging it into the search bar. Lilah Prestel. Almost nothing new appears, only some dead links on my high school’s theater page. I try another spelling, all the spellings. Lila Prestel. Lilah Pressel.

Then, because I'm caught in the vortex of this spiral, I run a search I haven't in years, to see if there's a connection between us, one thread that hasn't been cut, surfaced during this reality shift. She could've seen the news. Maybe she's online, somewhere, defending my honor, waiting for me to find her .

I look up Delilah Prestel, my birth mom's name.

My phone screen blinks white, then fills with the top hit: a webpage that wasn't there before. I would know; she didn't have social media for years, no digital footprint, forever running from what she left behind. My thumb goes cold as it clicks the link, moving completely on its own, and my vision swims with a last-ditch effort to send my consciousness far away from here. But the page loads before I can dissociate, a purple background with looping pink letters spelling Scents of Peace by Delilah Prestel , and I read the block of text beneath it. I have to.

Hi and welcome to my online candle shop. Please stay a moment and make yourself at home! These natural soy wax candles are inspired by my love of nature, my hometown, and my beautiful family. After getting married to the love of my life two years ago, I was blessed to become a stepmother and adoptive mommy to his children and fill their lives with a "scents of peace" the way only a mother can.

I read the paragraph again. Just to hurt myself. One time would've been enough to have these words scorched into my memory.

She's married. She's a stepmother.

She adopted.

She got her happy ending.

The way only a mother can.

“Sarah?” I say, then swallow to keep my voice intact. “I need to tell you something about Arthur and me.”

Chapter Eighteen United States

Arthur invites the four of us—Sarah, Delaney, Cameron, and me—over to his two-story house near Austin to discuss our game plan. His house is huge, up a long driveway lined with towering oak trees, the Southern farmhouse aesthetic melting into Mediterranean blues and Zellige tile once you get inside. It's clean. His throw blankets are folded. The chef's fridge blends in with his kitchen cabinets. He has a private security guard. The experience is startling.

"Really, the setup is simple," Arthur says. We're in one of his three living rooms, a thought I don't focus on. "I have an offer from Leone Racing, where I would like to go next season. But in order to secure the transition, I needed to get out of Max's movie. And to break my contract, Lilah and I thought to play up our relationship, so that Holmes fires me."

Sarah, having already learned all of this our last morning in Budapest, delivers an outstanding acting performance of amazed and supportive friend/coworker. "Wow, you guys are pretending to be into each other, that is so crazy," she exclaims, flinging her hands out for good measure and almost knocking over the potted olive tree by the couch. "Okay, sorry, Lilah already told me, and I already convinced Ignition not to run any stories about the online rumors. But I'm in. I'm tired of letting men like Max and Holmes get away with this crap."

Delaney is less sold, predictably. "Sarah, are you kidding? This is a death wish. We could all be fired."

Sarah pouts. "Then we'll go to Leone with Arthur. If he—if you—want us?"

She looks at Arthur tentatively, and his smile at her is dazzling. “I’d love that. I was going to ask, but, well, was trying to keep this all under wraps.”

“On that note,” I jump in. “Sarah forwarded me the Black & Graywood contract. It was reviewed by the whole legal team. Everyone signed off on this film—and me—so Sarah won’t take the fall as long as we stay careful until Bob’s wedding.”

“Unlikely,” Delaney whispers.

“I dunno,” Cameron says, somewhere between Sarah’s torch-carrying enthusiasm and Delaney’s thoughtful carefulness. “It’s not a bad idea. Arthur is the only one with a morality clause. Holmes will want to smite him, and then he gets a real seat on a good team.”

Arthur leans forward, looking at Delaney. “Is this about Leone?”

Silently, Delaney purses her lips. “You shouldn’t go back there.”

“I want to.”

“Don’t you want to see if any other offers come through?”

Arthur takes a breath. “No.”

“Is there anything else you’re not telling me?”

With a half smile, Arthur drums his fingers on his marble-topped side table and says, “Nope.”

Delaney’s eyes slide to me.

I smile, too.

Mentally speaking, I'm doing really well. According to Sarah, the online chatter about Arthur and me has simmered out, starved by a lack of confirmable gossip. I don't look at it myself. Nor do I look at my birth mom's candle website, a sentence that hasn't gotten less ridiculous in the days I've had to sit with this development.

This is new for me— not looking at things that hurt—and I promise myself I'll read everything before the summer break ends. The comments, her website. I'll face reality.

Only the last drops of July drip by with dinners, bonfires, swimming. Arthur is an enthusiastic fan of summer and having time off work, and then it's his birthday and I can't say no to cake. I bake him my favorite dairy-free berry cake, with the only good vegan frosting recipe I've found online, and pipe thirty, flirty, and thriving on the top next to a squiggly Leo symbol. When I bring it over, he grins, and I ignore that distant ache, too. The Arthur-induced kick I'm learning to ignore every passing day.

"Thriving! Is that a movie reference?" he says after reading the cake.

"One you should know."

I'm wheeling my camera bag into my Glory Run apartment when I hear a quick thump behind me, the sound of a door swinging open without a worry about who might be in front of it. "Gardener," the voice says, and I turn to find my down-the-hall neighbor, Lucia. "Where have you been?"

"Uh, Europe." I steady my bag so it doesn't topple over and wipe my hands along the sides of my legs. I feel exposed, like she caught me sneaking back into my bedroom at three a.m.

Lucia's warm brown eyes sparkle with her knowing smile. "I see."

"For work."

"Sure."

Giving up, I say, "I'm sorry if you tried to get my help—I don't even think I told you I was leaving, did I? Is there anything you need? I'm here for a few more days before I head out again." To Belgium. I don't tell her this.

She ponders my question anyway, tapping at her chin with a tiny wrinkled finger. "You could tell me all about your European adventures."

Normally, my relationship with an apartment neighbor wouldn't extend beyond reciprocating chores or running errands I could leave outside their door. However, talking to someone who doesn't work with me—or would know who Arthur is—does sound nice. Sucking in a breath, I nod to my door. Lucia lets out a gleeful laugh before following me inside, and I feel myself smiling as the door shuts.

Maybe Arthur and his inability to turn down a good time has rubbed off on me more than I realized.

Lucia walks straight to the cabinets above my oven, hops on my step stool, and begins to rifle through the wicker baskets of tea. "I keep mine in the same place," she says once she's found two bags of Earl Grey. "Kettle."

It isn't a question. I run my polka-dot water kettle under the faucet as Lucia frowns her way through my meager collection of vegan honey substitutes. Once she politely refuses my shelf-stable almond milk, I ask, "Why tea?"

Lucia gives me a puzzled glance. "You're getting sick."

“I feel fine.”

She inspects me. “Either you’re sick or you’re in love.”

“Pass the tea,” I say stubbornly.

After I’ve gotten through my second cup of Earl Grey, I’ve told her about everything that’s transpired between Arthur and me, in layman’s terms: He’s like a coworker but more taboo, we’re in the process of convincing the world that we’re madly infatuated so that I can do an art project and he can get a different job, and now I’ve accidentally developed real feelings for him. Something about Lucia’s amused smile makes spilling my secrets too easy.

“But I can’t actually date him,” I say.

She gives me that impatient look only a grandmother can. The “speed it up, I don’t have all day” twinkle. “Why?”

“He’s only using me to get what he wants. It’s fake for him.”

“Which is why he set up a breakfast for you on a roof.”

“He is extravagant.”

“Coffee and pastries are quite simple.”

“But,” I press on, “the fact of the matter is, I’m only going to be around him until September. There isn’t a future where this works, if he did like me, which he doesn’t. Because if he liked me, he would be pursuing me. That’s his style. You have no idea how driven he is.”

“And him telling you all the ways it could work between you two was...?”

“Him joking around.” I sigh. “That’s what he does. And I’m very serious. To a fault, probably. I want a family. I want stability. I want to...” I trail off with a painful flutter. “I don’t want to rely on anyone like I did with my ex. And if I can ignore my feelings, then I can make this film and start a career on my own.”

Lucia holds out her hand expectantly. “Show me your conversations with him.”

I relinquish my personal phone. She hoists it inches from her face to read the tiny text, then shoots me a judging eye. “So this ‘co-worker’ messaged you that he’s been eating the birthday cake you made him as his ‘guilty pleasure treat’ and you replied, ‘Thanks’?”

“What else could I say!” I sink my face into my hands. “Fuck. I’m so bad at this.”

“You are, dear.”

“I’m better off alone.”

I try to grab my phone back from her, but she’s surprisingly fast. “And why would you ever think that?” she says.

Her question stops me cold in my tracks. I wrap my fingers back around my teacup, nerves contorting, pinching, and slowly pull the truth into the light. “My last relationship messed me up. Which is... an understatement, probably? But that time, it had felt natural to start kissing this person I’d known forever. Like, maybe we were true love like everyone told us we were. And if I can screw something like that up, the easy thing, I can definitely screw up a much more complicated thing.”

My throat tightens. I’m not only talking about Arthur. Like Cameron said way back

when, life is complicated, but F1 is worse. I've been on the road with the team for weeks and still can't wrap my head around half of the rules. Like, what the hell is an apex? Then add in Team Arthur, these kind and funny people I might want to keep...

"I'm someone that people leave," I say softly. "Having him and losing him would wreck me. So why not embrace being by myself? I can't lose this guy and his world if I never really have it."

Lucia gives me an understanding look. "You know what your problem is?"

"What?" I say, absolutely curious.

"You said you were making a documentary about this co-worker of yours."

"Yeah?"

A grin splits Lucia's soft face, like I've fallen into her trap. "You're not. You're trying to film your own story."

"No," I say slowly. "I've been filming Arthur."

Lucia shakes her head. "I used to be an anthropologist."

Now I'm really confused, but I wait for her to go on. Which she does. "A friend of mine once told me that she'd read about this great anthropologist who, when asked about the earliest sign of civilization, replied with a story about finding a healed femur bone. See, a wounded animal doesn't survive in the wild. So, because there was this discovery, this healed bone, we knew that at least one other ancient person had helped that person live. That, to this great anthropologist, was the beginning of humanity. Helping someone heal.

“But here’s my point,” Lucia continues. “I also read that story wasn’t true. Completely made up. And who knows? I wasn’t there to experience it.” She shrugs. “I think that’s your issue. Each story has two sides, and the story we choose to tell says a lot more about us than it does a broken bone.”

Slowly, her words sink into me, past the startled goose bumps ghosting my skin. “I get why you’d think that,” I say, my mouth dry. “But it’s my job to tell the truth, and there’s only one truth. That’s how truth works.”

“Will you be in Arthur’s movie, then?” she asks. “Since you were in his summer.”

That is... a question I haven’t considered. “No.” I laugh nervously. “I mean, maybe a bit, like ‘Maysles Brother in the reflection of a mirror’ bit. But no. I’m...” Unimportant. Forgettable. An outsider. “Not a part of the plot.”

Silently, Lucia takes in my answer, then she reaches over and pats my hand. Her skin is soft as velvet and warm as a hug. “I have an idea.”

“I don’t know if I can handle any more ideas.”

“Just hear me out.” She chuckles. “You said you have an extra camera. Why don’t you give it to Arthur? Let him film you back.”

“But—”

She holds up her hand, silencing me. “I’m not trying to play matchmaker. Maybe he doesn’t like you. Okay, you’ll live. But you need to see yourself through someone else’s eyes.”

“So I can see that I’m not that bad?”

Lucia gives me that look again, like whatever she's going to say is extremely obvious, but she enjoys saying it regardless. "Maybe. Maybe not. Isn't that the point?" She winks. "And next time you talk to someone about this, dear, don't mention that it's Arthur Bianco. I've been following that boy's career for the last ten years."

Chapter Nineteen Belgium

It's raining. Again.

Ever since the sun rose on the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium, rain has been plummeting from the sky in gray sheets. Sarah gathers the media team in the garage, handing out the bulky headphone sets. "Okay, people, you know the rules. Stewards don't want anyone out there that isn't a driver or pit," she explains. "Social teams, we'll get footage from the drones—ask me for the password now if you don't already have it. Video, let's plan on getting shots of the guys after. Cooldown if we get it, podium if we get it, and anything in between if, God forbid"—she knocks on the desk behind her three times—"we have to."

Delaney is sitting in a swivel chair beneath the rows and rows of screens already illuminated with the slick track and rainy sky, a bag of Belgian chips open on her lap. I sidle up to her and whisper, "What does she mean?"

Delaney offers me a red-dusted chip. "Spa in the rain has a reputation."

"It was fine in England, though."

"Turned into a drizzle while they were out there." She eats the chip for me and delicately wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist. "When it's coming down in waves like this, that's a safety concern. Visibility is shot. They're going to try it, but I give it..." Her brown eyes narrow at the open garage door. Rain is pooling on an empty Ignition Energy Drink can. "Four laps before race control calls it quits and has everyone off the track."

Nervousness lances sharply through my pulse. The cars are already lined up on the grid, tire covers off. The race is about to start. Arthur is near the middle of the pack today; he slid off the track during his fourth lap in the last Qualifying session, which technically broke the track limits rule and got his best lap time deleted. And from the races I've seen, middle of the grid isn't great. Cars will try to get around him, bottleneck, slip around. Chances are already higher during the first lap for a "racing incident" to occur, too—the kind of accidents that happen when there are twenty world-class race cars staggered meters apart, all jumping to start at the same time, with millions of dollars on the checkered line.

And since the David Bowie Night debacle, our group chat has decided that it's smartest to keep Arthur and my "relationship" under wraps until Bob's wedding. No more breadcrumbs, plane cuddling, or shopping trips. We'll stroll into the wedding of Ignition's owner, Holmes will lose it, Arthur will get out of his contract, and everyone will go to Leone... besides me.

Until then, I'm not supposed to show that I like Arthur. At all.

And I can do that.

It's only pouring down rain, and Arthur is about to drive as quickly as possible in it, and I can't show that the noise and smells and excitement of the garage are scraping down my spine, dragging me apart. And that doesn't even matter, really, because everyone is tense. I hug my bag to my chest, feeling the bulky weight of the Panasonic camera in there. He'll be fine. He'll drive. Then I'll give him this camera and ask if he'll film me per the philosophical advice of my Texas neighbor.

As if reading Arthur on my mind, Delaney adds in a low murmur, "He knows how to be safe. I promise. He just needs to stay alive and score some points."

Stay alive ? That's an actual reminder she'd say to him? "He has to be okay. He has

to. They wouldn't have me film this if something could happen."

An emotion that might be compassion softens Delaney's eyes. "Sure. Yeah. Nothing bad can happen." She shifts, growing quieter. "Did he talk to you?"

Never a good question. "About?"

To me, Delaney is confidence, the kind of strong and radiant woman I aspire to be. So, to see her draw her fingers over her lips, eyes dropping to my knees... my stomach sinks.

"They cleared Faust to race again."

No, I want to say. They can't do that, because there's a narrative to this story. Arthur is the comeback kid. He gets to redeem himself in Italy. That's how stories work.

"We know they won't put him back in until after the Netherlands race," she continues. "And about today... Cameron told me once that a million things can go wrong during a race. Fuel, parts, temperature, steering wheel, adjustment, gearbox. You have to trust your team, and that nine hundred people did their jobs right. That's the secret nobody's going to tell you, Lilah. All of us are taking a leap of faith together every race weekend. He's used to this feeling. I promise."

My throat tightens. I think about the garage cheering when Arthur won. How the pit crew moves as one with his car, pulling in and exhaling out, a choreography of synchronized bodies. Cameron's voice on the radio, the fans in the seats, Sarah like glue, Delaney like strength.

And me. I'm a part of this team, too. For now.

So I put on my headphones and hold up my camera as the last light above the track

turns red.

Nobody breathes—except for Arthur, low and soft over the radio. Rain drizzles in a thick fog over the track, throwing an opaque silver screen across the gray surface, and I watch the cars wait for the lights to go out from behind my camera. Footage I can play back later, combing through the seconds to understand how life works.

Then, the lights are out.

Rain shoots from the tires as the cars snap forward, so fast my stomach lurches. “Easy.” Cameron’s voice fills my headphones. “This isn’t King power hour. Mind your grip.”

There isn’t a reply. I can barely see Arthur’s car on the screen; everything is gray.

“Do you copy, King?”

“I got it,” Arthur bites back. “I can’t see anything. My visor’s blocked already. I need to open it.”

“Hawke’s right behind—”

Arthur lets out a blurred expletive as the red blinking lights on the back of the cars tangle in the fog. “Tell him to quit riding me,” Arthur growls, frustration darkening his voice. I’ve never heard him this angry before, and even I know that there’s very little Cameron can do when it comes to the other drivers.

“We can tap out,” Cameron says. “It’s okay.”

“I’m not quitting.”

More lights, and a cherry-red car pulls around a corner. The turn in the track must be breaking up the fog somehow. Arthur will be able to get more visibility once he's closer. He just needs to make it a little bit farther and he'll be safer. Every lap, there will be a chance for him to see clearly there, and that's good.

He can do this. This is Arthur. He can do anything.

"All right. Visibility's better in ten," Cameron says, seeing the same break in the fog that I do. "Don't worry about your position. I've got Holmes in my ear, they're going to call the race in the next two—"

I don't know what Cameron says after that.

Everything happens in the span of a breath. There's this noise, like a metal door slamming shut, and the screen that shows Arthur's camera blurs as a gold car slams into his, and then the barrier, bouncing and then twisting around, steam pouring from the tires and enveloping the camera. I'm staring in shock at the silver as there's another harsh bang, and I look at the bird's-eye screen: three cars skidding down, down, out of the fog, crumpling further as they turn all wrong, the golden Leone car flipped over, a sight as sickening as a broken bone. A fourth car emerges behind the pileup, its front-right wheel ripped off.

I think I say something. I don't know. My hand's over my mouth, and I'm standing, and I hear Cameron yell that the car's okay and ask Arthur if he's all right. Fingers grip the back of my sweatshirt and I turn, finding Delaney's wide eyes. She's just as shocked as I am, and my heart plummets. No, I think. No, you can't be scared. You know how this works, and what's actually bad, and you said you trust all 900 of us, so you can't be scared.

I've almost got the words on the tip of my tongue when Arthur appears on screen.

He pulls himself out of the car. Orange in the gray, standing on the driver's seat. Then he starts to run toward the other wrecked cars—one red, one gold. "I'm okay," Arthur says, shaken up but speaking.

Relief drenches me. He's okay. He's okay. I'm okay. But what is he doing?

"Get back in the car," I hear Holmes say over the radio, sending a jolt down my spine. "Right now."

Arthur doesn't listen. He approaches the two cars, the flipped-over Leone on top of the Cavalli, and my stomach sinks as I realize it's Jean Baudelaire and Rafael Ramirez; they were in front of him and behind him on the grid. That shy, baby-faced smile.

Delaney grabs my shaky hand in hers and holds it tight.

The livestream cuts to another angle, and now Arthur's helping medics and mechanics pull the cars apart, and his visor is open, a cut of skin between the orange, and I think he has to be helping Rafael out—but then he's grabbing on to an arm in a gold race suit and hoisting Jean up, out, and onto his feet.

"Oh my God, thank you," Delaney exhales, and my breath hitches.

He's helping Jean. Arthur ran out of his car for his old teammate. His rival.

I think he'd do it for anyone, though.

I think this isn't just a crush.

In the mist, Rafael appears beside them, then James Hawke, the driver who had his tire forcibly removed, and that makes four. All four drivers are safe. I cling to

Delaney's side as they leave the track and red flags wave between the fenced barriers. I keep my eyes on Arthur, the tiny orange pixels that mean he's alive, he's okay, he's walking, partly because I physically need to keep watching him or else I might pass out. And partly because the announcers are explaining the last sixty seconds in excruciating detail, every angle of the crash playing out on the television screens. Arthur's car getting hit again, and again, and again, and I can't watch it. I will die if I have to see any more of that.

Suddenly, there's a firm squeeze on my shoulder. Delaney. "They're coming this way. Are you all right? Do you need to sit down?"

I nod, my throat stuck. "No, I'm good. I can—I can handle this."

Her eyes drift over my mouth, as if she knows something she doesn't want to say, then she nods back and goes to talk with the group forming by the garage door, and I twist my hands behind my back as I pace to the shadows. I don't want to be around people and I can't keep still and I want to see him and I want him to tell me that it was all a joke, a prank, typical Arthur, what a lark. Adrenaline is rocketing through me, and I shift my weight back and forth between my toes and heels until—

Arthur and James appear up front. Arthur is still in his race suit, only the collar undone and the zip pulled down so he can get more air. His hair is plastered to his balaclava-creased forehead, sweat and water dripping down his sharp nose and pale cheeks, all the color drained from his skin. He keeps twisting his wrist and wincing, like he's checking and re-checking if whatever hurts still hurts. He's hurt.

People start to clap. I try to join in, pasting on a mechanical smile as Arthur works his way through the crowd... toward me.

No.

He's looking right at me. Is he going to—?

He walks past me.

Doesn't throw off a cocky one-liner or flirty quip or an explosive, cutting truth. He ignores me completely as Merlin guides him through the back, the smell of rain and fuel and what might be blood lingering in the air.

That's when I notice the eyes.

Everyone in the garage, from Cameron in his mission-control chair to Sarah to the strangers I haven't met—they're all looking at me. Because rumors do travel fast in Formula 1, and if I hadn't been sure the team was onto us before, hadn't been convinced that Arthur and I needed to reel it back to make it to the wedding, I could be sure now.

Embarrassment seeps into my cheeks as I shrink into an empty chair. Then I get up and scamper to the back door. I need space, air.

All those eyes. The staring. The curious pity.

Poor, sad me. Left again.

I push through another door and find myself in the walkway to an employee parking lot. A gazebo stands like a lighthouse in the pouring rain, and I run over to it, grateful for the first time in my life to see a tiny cigarette logo denoting that this is a smoking area.

Leaning against a white post, I try to catch my breath. God, I'm being ridiculous. Arthur just helped pull a man out of a wrecked car while he himself was injured, and I'm only thinking about how I feel. That's so selfish. I told myself that I could ignore

this—and I can. I will. I have to, for Arthur, for my friends. They all want to go to Leone together, and if I close my eyes, breathe through my mouth, block out my thoughts, there won't be this pathetic feeling gnawing in my chest, burning through my skin, begging me to find a man who doesn't want to talk to me right now. Find him. Tell him your feelings. Once he knows, he'll be the one who wants to stay.

Hope is so annoying. It doesn't make any narrative sense at all.

“Lilah?”

My fingers tighten around the gazebo's column as I recognize the voice, my panic sharpening into tension instantly. While I still have my back turned to her, I take a deep breath. Stay calm. Detach.

I turn, and my iron will snaps at the sight of Delaney standing in the rain. She's soaked, her pale pink suit a saturated fuchsia. “I know, I know, you're totally fine.” She holds up her dripping hands, palms out. “But you don't need to be. And if you aren't, and you need someone to talk to...”

Tears well in my eyes as I nod, unable to speak. She steps up to the gazebo platform and gets her slender arm around my shoulders just as the floodgates open, and then everything is raining, the sky and my eyes and my greedy, idiotic heart who wants another ending, any ending, where I don't leave here alone.

“Have you told him?” she asks. “That it's real for you?”

I take three big breaths, one and one and one, hoping too much oxygen might short-circuit my sobbing. “No. I can't.”

“Why?”

Because the clock is ticking, and Arthur goes after everything he wants, and I can't want someone who doesn't want me, who'd pick a car over my heart , I think. I spent my entire childhood having happily ever after ripped away from me over and over, living in other people's houses, watching other people's lives. I'm supposed to know better than this.

But out loud, I say, "I just can't."

Delaney doesn't ask me anything else after that. She only squeezes my back and sets her chin on top of my head, and lets me watch the rain shimmer over the grass until my chest doesn't burn.

Chapter Twenty The Netherlands

When I get to my room that night, I unbag the Panasonic camcorder, chuck it in the trash, and crawl into bed to wallow in my own self-hatred without stripping off my rain-drenched clothes. Then, ten minutes later, I pull the camera out of the trash can, cry, and fall asleep.

This is a bad idea.

By Tuesday, I have a tickle in my throat. Wednesday, a full-blown cough. I lose my voice the Thursday we arrive in the Netherlands, and begrudgingly send Max an email that I'll be "off work" while Sarah squeezes me onto the team doctor's Saturday morning schedule. "I'm completely okay, though," I rasp out, then clear my throat. "See? Better."

The elderly doctor eyes me over his wire-rimmed glasses. "Is this your first time traveling this much, Ms. Graywood?"

"Yes, but I used to move all the time as a kid."

"And how's your appetite?"

"Voracious."

"Have you been caught in any bad weather recently? Snow? Rain?"

"Well..."

He agrees that I'm probably not going to die, grabs me pills from the cabinet across the clean white room, and slaps my name on the clinic door. "You seem to be getting better, but you may be contagious. Best to stay here in our bed for the rest of the day and heal up so a cold doesn't travel through the paddock."

The official racing clinic is tiny, four private rooms with linen-covered windows overlooking the Circuit Zandvoort, so I guess it's a good thing that a sick documentarian is the only patient. Sighing, I let the doctor help me up onto the medical bed, grab me water and orange juice, and leave me with the ceiling-mounted television flickering through local news. After an hour of warm sunshine and subtitles, I'm dozing off, more relaxed than I have been in days. There may be something to medical intervention and extremely crisp cotton beds.

Only problem is, I haven't talked to Arthur since the accident—and now it's been too long and I don't know how to bring anything up when I've smelled his blood mixed with burnt rubber. Every text I start feels frivolous. Want to actually sneak around so we can get dinner? Silly. I could wear a mustache to your hotel room so nobody sees me. Ridiculous.

He doesn't reach out to me, either.

That's why, in my half-awake, partly lucid dream state, I think I'm hallucinating Arthur's quiet, angry voice from the other side of the closed clinic door.

"Who's in there?"

"Mr. Bianco, I must ask you to leave. These are private rooms."

"That name on the door—Graywood. Is that Lilah?"

I pull myself up the stacked pillows. I'm not dreaming; I couldn't mistake his British-

Italian accent for anyone else.

“That’s private medical information, even for you, son.”

“Private? Her name’s on the door!”

“Quiet down. She’s asleep.”

“Why? What’s wrong? What’s going on?” A pause. “Is she hurt?”

Oh no. Panicked, I finger-comb my messy hair and yank my gigantic Velvet Underground T-shirt back so it’s not hanging off my shoulder. But the doctor isn’t going to let Arthur stomp in here, and eventually, he’ll admit defeat like anyone else and leave me alone. He can do that. Arthur can throw in the towel.

“You know I can’t tell you a patient’s medical status,” the doctor replies.

“You have to. That’s my girlfriend.”

He didn’t.

“Oh… Mr. Bianco, I apologize. I had no idea.”

“Yeah. And if I can’t see her for myself, then you need to tell me if she’s okay. You have to.”

He did.

“Well, I can make an exception this once. Let me ask Ms. Graywood if she’s okay with—”

The door cracks open, then swings all the way, and Arthur is stepping into the clinic room. His face is pink, tense, anxious, and he keeps his broad back to the door as he shuts it behind him with one calculated hand, the doctor left on the other side. Our eyes meet, and his mask pops on: expressionless frown, relaxed brows. As if he was just walking down the hall and saw a distant enemy he wanted to say hi to.

“Hey,” he says casually.

I swallow. Does he think I didn’t just hear him on the other side of the door? “Hi.”

He nods, satisfied, like me being able to form words was the first test he wanted to run. And maybe I did hallucinate Arthur’s conversation, the fake-boyfriending, that he seemed to care why I was in here, because he seems very composed as he crosses to the stiff chair by my bed. Not frantic at all.

He sits. Elbows on the armrests, legs crossed at the ankle. Taps his fingers on the curved plastic arm. Takes a breath, and glances at my face.

“What’s up? Are you... okay?”

His words are strained. I nod, shifting to sit up more. “Just a cold. Oh, Arthur, you can’t be in here.” My hand jumps to my mouth. “The doctor said I might be contagious.”

He shrugs. “It’s fine.”

“No, really, this cough sucks.”

“It’s fine ,” he repeats.

Okay. It’s fine. I slump down, letting the plastic headboard support most of my

weight; my abdominals are currently spinning with cold meds and confusion, and aren't that great at being muscles. Arthur's eyes track my movements, then his jaw shifts, left, right, and he looks at the window.

"Why didn't you call me?" he says.

Hmm, why didn't I call the person I'm supposed to not care about at all? "Qualifying is today," I say, opting to skip past the whole you're not my emergency contact of it all.

Arthur shakes his head, clearly unhappy. "Did you tell Max?"

"Yeah, I did—oh. Sorry, I didn't even think of that. Did he come up and annoy you or something?" I blink, realizing there's a way more important question. "Why are you here?"

"Wrist sprain from Spa," he answers quickly. "Not a big deal. And no."

"No?"

"He didn't... But you should've told him to stay with you."

Okay, I'm officially very confused, and I don't think it's the slight fog from the cough meds. Arthur knows that Max sitting in my clinic room, watching me watch TV, is my personal version of Dante's Inferno—all nine spicy layers.

"It's just a cold," I say. "I don't need anyone."

Arthur's cheek flexes again. He rolls one wrist, fingers clenching, then smooths his wide hand down the length of his thigh. It's a long journey, miles of space to trek.

“You can’t be alone at a hospital, Graywood,” he says. “I’m staying here. If that’s all right with you.”

“But Quali is—”

“In a few hours.”

“But you need to race this weekend.”

“And I will.”

My eyes narrow. His narrow back. Then he looks down at my neck, obviously noticing my collarbones, and then his eyes move down to my hands. The doctor had slapped a white medical bracelet on me, which had seemed like overkill at the time and especially dramatic as Arthur’s passive frown wobbles. For a split second between frowns, I see how much it bothers him to see me here, and I suddenly remember what should’ve occurred to me days before now. Arthur’s accident in Monza, the one Delaney had told me about, had been during a race. He would’ve been carted to whatever makeshift hospital F1 had nearby.

That’s why he’s here. That’s why he used our fake relationship to check on me; he’d probably claim to be Merlin’s problematically young boyfriend if she got cooped up, too.

That... might be why he disappeared after getting in another accident involving Leone.

“I’m really okay,” I promise him, my voice softening. “And I’ll call you. Next time.”

Arthur’s chest rises. “There won’t be a next time.”

“Right. I’ll never get a cold again.”

He exhales. “Never.”

He’s always so tense. And I want to know why. At this point, with how little time we have left, I need to know. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Delaney mentioned there was an accident in Monza. What happened?”

His eyes skid over to me, surprised. “You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t find anything online.”

On some deep level, I recognize that this is it, my proverbial fork in the road for ignoring what’s happening here. When his lips tick into an unhappy smile, I feel myself land in this trap for good.

“I almost died.”

Fear. That’s all I am as he continues. “It was the Italian Grand Prix, back when I was with Leone. He got me on the thirtieth lap around the Parabolica. Next thing I knew, I was in the barrier. They said it was a freak accident. All the things that could’ve gone wrong, did.”

Died. He—that is so much worse than I thought. I fight the urge to reach over for his hand just to feel his pulse. “I’m so sorry. The videos, it looked bad, but... they all do to me.”

“Don’t apologize. I just wish everyone could move on, like I have. My TP at Leone

would bring it up every time I got into a car. Toughen up. Be a man. We can't keep you if you don't prove yourself. That makes whatever this is"—he waves to his chest—"worse."

I'm sick with anger. "What gets worse?"

He waits, the clock on the wall ticking, the silence between us louder. "Sometimes, after something goes wrong, I can't really breathe." He doesn't meet my eyes as he speaks. "It happened at Spa, and that day the team talked to me about... us, or whatever. Ever since the accident, when I think about it, I can't breathe. So I try not to, so it doesn't get bad."

Bad. It. He isn't using the therapy-speak of someone who's googled all this. "Do you mean you have panic attacks?"

"I don't know," Arthur says. "I haven't—well. I haven't told anyone. If the sponsors knew, or the teams heard. If Leone..."

He trails off, and my heart threatens to break. If the team that already fired him once after he almost died heard that Arthur was still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, that'd be it.

It's an act.

I knew that, to a certain degree. But I couldn't ever guess that a persona could run this deep. I would never judge him for his anxiety, but I know how the world views someone if their brain deviates from the norm. If the fans knew how their hot, confident, reckless driver is looking at me—like he needs me to save him, like I'm a map in the middle of a maze—his daredevil image would be toast.

"Why do you keep doing this? You don't need to race."

“I don’t quit,” Arthur says, cracking a smile. “I’ll either die in a car or they’ll kick me out of Formula 1.”

I get it then. When we first met, Arthur hadn’t just wanted me around because I could help him. He saw me about to quit on myself, and he couldn’t stand it.

This is him, dying on his feet.

“But the person who hit you, are they still out there? Do you still have to compete against them?” I hesitate, needing to know. “Was it Jean?”

Arthur’s eyebrows knit together, and he gives me a look that’s too long. “You’ve never seen my uncle race.”

“That isn’t—”

“Holmes Bianco only drives carefully,” he says, reciting an equation he’s memorized. “He was the pragmatic king of Formula 1. He retired a few years after I started.”

“You... competed against him?”

My pulse quickens as Arthur’s mouth pulls in. “He won the race I crashed. It was nice for him, I’m sure. Teaching me one more lesson. You’re... supposed to let someone pass if they’re faster than you. When he did, he bumped me off the road. Tires blew. Something was wrong with the halo that was supposed to keep my head on. Funny.” He lifts one forefinger and lets it fall on his knee. “He says I’ve never gotten it back on straight since.”

His—uncle. His uncle was the one who caused Arthur’s accident? Ruler of the family fortune. Arthur’s team principal.

Commissioner of the documentary.

“How?” I clench the blanket on my lap. “How can he get away with this? Is it legal? How—how can you work with him?”

“It’s only illegal if I have proof he did it on purpose. Otherwise? It’s just another crash. And he became team principal after I’d signed the Ignition contract.” Arthur says this like it’s a fact of life, and maybe it is; men in positions of power continue to reposition for power. “This is how I know they’ll cover us up, Graywood. He’s been covering my hospital stay for years. Called you in to help him, even. Set his narrative in stone and line his pockets doing it.”

Holmes is the reason I’m here. He’s the reason why Arthur has had to jump through hoops to get out of his manipulative contract. Moments loop back in my memory like rewinding footage: Arthur saying he doesn’t want to do the documentary, Arthur finding my scar, Arthur disappearing after David Bowie Night. Every time he’s vanished. His secret, angry smiles. He’s been hiding this pain in plain sight, and I’d missed it. Me. The bloodhound.

And then there’s the images I’ve kept spooled and hidden in the 35-millimeter film can of my mind: Arthur in that Texas dive bar with a half smile and an untouched beer, telling me to stay, the first person who ever has. Arthur at the airport, saying that I don’t have to put up this much of a fight when people want to help me, because he knew what it was like to hide from the world. He’s been here since day one, helping me, and I’ve been too wrapped up in my own life to see it. And now I do.

I see all of him.

Struggling to swallow, I look down at my fingers. They’re shaking. “Thank you for telling me. Do you... want to lie down?”

I don't know why I say it. The question comes out of nowhere. My face goes warm, and I really hope he thinks it's a cold symptom. Flushed cheeks, could be a fever. "Just, if you're driving later. This bed is really wide, and that chair looks uncomfortable. And you're here, visiting me when you don't have to, so you should be—"

"Yes," Arthur says. "I want to."

Trying my best to look calm and collected, I scoot to the right side of the thin bed, stopping when I feel the sheets scraping my bare ankles. Maybe I should give him a warning about that. Scraping. Hospital smells. Semi-sick person. This has to be triggering, a weird flashback to—

The bed sinks to the left as he sits, right on top of the covers. "Do you mind if I do this?" he says, positioning his arm on top of the stack of pillows, somewhere by my neck but not touching my neck. But close, he's close, and we've objectively done more, danced in public and slept on a plane, skin-to-skin contact to keep people guessing, but this is what's painful. This is when I wish we were touching because I want to hold him, tell him that I know it's hard, I know he's a good person. He can't hide it from me anymore.

"Go for it," I say.

He shifts again and our legs brush, separated by the blankets. "Sorry."

"No, get comfy. If you get sick, it needs to be worth it."

He laughs quietly.

I don't know what to say back, so I shift against the pillows, cross my legs, and pretend to watch TV. For once, Arthur doesn't work overtime to fill the silence. After

ten minutes, he gets out his phone, types out an Infinite Jest –length something to someone, then starts to thumb down the screen, scrolling whatever social media website or cat memes he likes. I wonder if there are secret apps just for the elite, like Reddit for the upper class. I'd heard about Raya.

I bite the inside of my cheek and ask, "What are you looking at?"

"Just reading."

"Reading?"

"Don't sound so shocked."

He tilts his phone toward me, and sure enough, the screen is covered in text. "I like autobiographies," he says. "It's just sports."

"No, that's cool." I turn to face him more. "I love memoirs. I'd read a sports one, probably."

That one treacherous corner of his mouth perks up. "Really."

"Don't sound so shocked," I tease.

"But it's you, willingly reading about sports. Wow."

"Maybe if I was in an airport and they only sold one book?"

"Reading in general, really. I didn't peg you for the type."

"It's weird, I know. The glasses trick you."

He laughs again. I love winning his laughs, even more now, when it's like a wall between us has dropped away and he's stripped down to the real him.

"What about car docs? Have you ever seen Hands on a Hardbody?" I ask.

"Nope."

"Oh man. It's so good. Best movie about cars ever made."

I glance at the ancient television that in no way can access a streaming platform. Arthur follows my eyes, also assessing that we're stuck with local channels for the foreseeable future.

"I could pull it up?" he says. "It's probably online. If you wanted."

My own phone is sitting in my backpack on the ground next to him, chock-full of internet and entertainment. And I actually like the grainy tube television and incomprehensible Dutch commercials. And I should probably take a nap and sleep off this cold, so I can get back to filming him tomorrow. Which is something we need to discuss. His secret. My documentary. Unstoppable force, immovable object. How are we going to figure this one out? How will I?

But watching another movie with Arthur is undeniably tempting. And maybe—secretly—this could be good for me. For both of us. For the rest of August, or however long we have, I can keep my walls down and be here for Arthur and enjoy this sunshine while it lasts.

"Let's do it," I say.

When he finds the documentary online, he angles himself so we can both see the teensy-tiny screen, his phone resting on his knee. Minutes pass. We sink together.

The side of his ribs against my shoulder. My arm, brushing against his thigh, then resting on top. After he chuckles at something, the bed sags more and my cheek finds his chest, like he's supporting me, and then his cheek is on top of my head, like I'm supporting him. And neither of us moves.

"Arthur?" I say after a minute.

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry I didn't ask sooner. I—this... You're worth knowing. Just in case no one's said that to you lately."

His chest stills, as if he's holding his breath, waiting. Then he lets it out, long, soft.

"Thank you."

Chapter Twenty-One

To everyone's surprise except mine, Arthur wins the Dutch Grand Prix.

It's a stroke of luck; Cavalli and Leone had penalties, Static screwed themselves over with pit-stop strategy, and one of the midfield teams, Wusch, dominated second and third place, inadvertently creating a barrier that protected Arthur's solid lead.

Notifications light up my phone before Arthur can pop the ceremonial podium champagne. King Arthur Back on Top With Dutch Victory—But Will He Drive Italy? is the title of the first blog in the queue. Even without Arthur's full Monza story being public knowledge, the next race is a big deal. For a global sport where a driver might switch to a different team in a different country depending on wins or controversies, an Italian driver winning in Italy means something major. The fans lose it, storming the track afterward in an impromptu parade.

At least, that's what Cameron explains as he picks me up from the hotel.

"Where are we going?" I say, watching a long stretch of beach and water zoom outside the open car window. Zandvoort, apparently, is a beach resort town nestled by the North Sea, and the weather is so perfectly toasty that I have to pinch myself.

"The beach. You can breathe again." Cameron shoots me a delightfully dry look. "That's a cause worthy of celebration."

"I don't think I can drink yet. Alcohol and cold medicine famously don't get along."

“We’ll do enough for you.”

I haven’t seen Arthur in person since he left the clinic on Saturday for Qualifying. He’d thought the movie put me to sleep—but it hadn’t. Not for long, at least. I kept waking up, startled that he was still there next to me, warm and real. He’d pat my shoulder and make a joke about being too scared to move and doctor’s orders and then I was out again. When he did eventually slip out of bed, he arranged pillows where he used to be, collected his stuff, and stood by the window. Not staring at me, nothing Edward Cullen creepy. Just... existing in the same space for another moment.

Once we’re parked, Cameron leads me to a sun-bleached wooden gate protecting the private beach. “Safest spot in the city. No photographs allowed.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s a nude beach.”

“It’s a—excuse me?”

“Nude beach,” he repeats, perpetually chill. “We always come here. Oh, are you, like, not cool with seeing that?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know.”

Cameron frowns. “You can totally stay dressed. And I can text everyone? We can find someplace else to go.”

My mind is a broken hamster wheel, no longer squeaking. Cameron is wearing a black shirt over white swim trunks, his pale legs and arms sticking out like gangly vegetable roots, and oh no, I’m imagining him naked, big time, no way out. Blushing, I tip my head down so the wide-brimmed sun hat I bought at a supermarket will cover

my red cheeks. Okay. Nude beach. Private beach. No grainy photographs online could be worth it. I can keep my Joy Division shirt and cargo shorts on. Sure, Arthur will be lounging on the sands in various scraps of clothing—or not—and I'll look like a Hot Topic employee. But so it goes.

“I'm ready,” I tell Cameron, my fingers balling into determined fists.

We find our group down on the clean white sand yards away from the water. Delaney is on a huge striped blanket, and Arthur is standing ankle-deep in the frothy waves. He's in the short-shorts version of swim trunks, his muscular thighs and sculpted back on full display, sunscreen glinting off every perfect line in his body.

I cross my arms over my very clothed chest.

“Hey, Lilah!” Delaney beams, and my heart thuds with appreciation at the distraction-slash-formal-announcement of my arrival. She's also dressed in a short pink cover-up, her long legs tipped with tassel-covered sandals, and I could kiss her for not being naked.

“Welcome to the real Zandvoort,” she says as I sit next to her. “Sarah had to deal with schedules, but she's meeting us later.”

“I'm surprised you could fit nude beach into your schedule.”

She smirks. “Trying to have more ‘fun’ as the kids say.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Arthur isn't turned toward the water anymore. I ignore it. Him. Whatever. “Did you bring extra sunscreen?”

“Yeah, but ask Cam.” She laughs. “He has the heavy-duty chemicals.”

“In my bag,” Cameron says, never looking up from the thick architecture magazine now on his lap. “Del, you’re going to get sunstroke without SPF 50.”

“Have I ever?”

“There was that one time, in Monaco.”

“I didn’t have sunstroke, I was pissed.”

“Why?”

“You guys forgot I was meeting you on that yacht. I walked ten miles to watch you sail away.”

Cameron taps his chin. “See, I remember texting you that I’d pick you up with the lifeboat.”

“I didn’t feel like drowning.”

“I’m a good sailor!”

“Lifeboats don’t have sails, idiot.”

I laugh as I extract Cameron’s sunblock. It’s a very unsexy, medicinal-looking tube, white plastic with plain black text. I pop the cap just as Arthur says, “Hey, Lilah, you actually came... You too, Cameron.”

“Warm welcome,” Cameron mutters.

I cast Delaney a quick peek as Arthur sits next to me on the blanket, barely fitting on the leftover space. She meets my eye and nods once. It’s a your secret’s safe with me

nod. And I actually do trust her. I kind of think we're friends.

My suspicions are mildly denied, though, when she pops up and dusts the sand from her thighs. "Hey, Cam, come grab drinks with me. Arthur, Lilah, what do you want?"

"Nothing for me," I say as Arthur says, "I'm good. Trying sobriety for a bit."

He is? Since when? Delaney's eyebrows rocket up, confirming that this is a new development, but she opts for her standard chill dismissal as she helps Cameron get up and walk off.

Then it's just me and Arthur and the sea.

There's more space on the blanket now. I could move. But Arthur also didn't have to sit directly next to me, the browned-gold hair dusting his tan leg making goose bumps prickle over mine. He picks up a smooth stone and runs his thumb across it, then sets it down and clears his throat.

"Need help with that?"

The sunblock. I'm still clutching the tube. Fuck my entire life. Momentarily, I consider chucking it into the water, though I'd rather suffer a million years of constant Arthur torture than litter.

"If you don't mind."

"Nah." He nods toward his knees. "Come here."

Here is the micro-patch of blanket in front of his crossed-knee lap. Crisscross-applesauce-style lap, actually. I think I'm dissociating. I scoot over on my hands and knees—standing would be way too difficult—and then I'm here. In front of Arthur

and his exposed legs as he squirts sunblock into one big palm. He gently moves the tips of my hair from my neck, just barely tucking it over my shoulders, and tugs the hem of my T-shirt down in the back to expose what I imagine is glaringly pale skin at the top of my spine.

“Sorry about the...” I pause. I’m not sure what I’m apologizing for. Having short hair, wearing a shirt at a nude beach, needing sunblock instead of sensual body oil glittering with scintillating microplastics.

“You’re okay,” he says. “I’m sorry if I get any on your shirt.”

“Ha. This thing’s basically a rag.”

His fingertips touch the notch at the base of my neck, wait, then smooth the sunblock in one right swipe.

“It’s cool. You always wear cool shirts.” He rubs the cold sunblock into my skin, using tiny methodical circles, heavenly and horrible. “I checked out the Velvet Underground. I think I like it.”

“You look up the bands on my shirts?”

“Yeah.” More circles, his fingers dipping beneath the fabric. “I’m making a playlist.”

I’m grateful I have a reason not to be looking at him. With his reading skills, he’d know instantly that I have a crush on him that’s crushing me. I stare at the waves, the bright blue sky over the water, and swallow down I like you, I like you, I like you.

“I’m sorry about the other stuff, too,” he adds suddenly. “I shouldn’t have unloaded on you like that at the hospital.”

That's what he's thinking about? "You don't need to apologize."

"I do."

"Why?"

He runs his thumb over the slope of my neck, where it becomes my shoulder, like he's studying my anatomy with his fingers. "Men aren't supposed to do that. Freak out and, I don't know, talk like that."

My chest twists with surprise at his quiet harshness. "That's not true. Men can feel and act however they want. And you have every reason to have baggage because of what happened." Trauma would be a better descriptor, but that's a big word to spring on him.

He pulls away briefly, and my heart drops. Then I hear the cap of the sunblock click back open. He's only getting more.

"I don't want you to think that I'm not... capable," he says.

It's the roughness in his voice that makes me confess a morsel of my thoughts, how disappointed he sounds in himself for feeling emotions that aren't win and smirk and flirt. "Arthur, I think you're so capable of everything I've ever seen you do. It kind of makes me mad how good you are at literally everything. Like, you speak one hundred languages and drive cars that could be spaceships and everybody likes you."

"Not everybody," he says, oddly distant, then I hear him rub his hands together, warming the sunblock up. "But thanks. Not trying to dig for compliments or anything."

"I'd never give you one if I thought you were."

He chuckles. Gently, he moves my forearm so that he can start applying sunblock there, shoulder to elbow in small, slow, easy sweeps that make my stomach tighten. If he touched me somewhere private, less exposed, I wonder if he'd be as gentle. Or does he not know how to hold back when he's lost in the heat of someone else?

"Your wrist," I blurt.

"Healed up."

"Are you sure?"

I start to move. Arthur presses two fingers to the outside of my arm, stalling me in place. I don't know how he does that, exactly. "I won a Grand Prix with this wrist. I can handle putting some lotion on you."

I swallow, guilty anyway. Mostly for those thoughts. Those were... some thoughts. "Okay. Yes. Also, I'm, um, guessing you don't want me to include what you told me at the clinic in the documentary?" I segue. "Sorry. We just—we should talk about it."

"We should." He falls silent momentarily, though he doesn't stop touching me. "I've only told you. I only want to tell you. That's what I want. But what do you want, Lilah?"

My media ethics classes and conversational flowcharts and carefully planned career crumble to ash. Arthur isn't asking me to keep this huge part of his life out of my film... yet. It isn't that I want to serve his trauma on a platter for the world to consume, but this is his story, the reason he is the way he is, and I wouldn't keep a secret like this for anyone else. Least of all if I thought it could hurt the person I'm keeping it for. He has panic attacks. Then drives a Grand Prix. And if I told him how scared that makes me, would he pull away again, retreating into himself?

Why did he have to tell me the giant secret? I'm the worst possible choice.

"I want you to talk to me if it gets bad like you described," I find myself saying. "Or it doesn't have to be me, of course—anyone. Not because I don't think you can't handle it, but because you deserve not to have to bear this on your own. Monza is going to be hard, if they do let you race it, and..."

I'm not going to be there in the garage anymore.

The realization steals away the rest of my words. This past Sunday was the last race before the wedding. The next time Arthur suits up, I won't be a part of the team anymore. In fact, I'll be Public Enemy No. 1.

I'd been so sick, I hadn't even realized it at the time.

Our summer is ending.

Arthur had been smoothing the sunblock up my shoulder, under my sleeve. Now he stops. Completely.

"They're letting me."

I twist around on the sand, the emotions crashing over me hushed with a clap. "You're driving Monza?"

Arthur looks surprised, glancing at my fists against the blanket, and maybe I haven't expressed how desperately I've been rooting for him because he smiles, unsure of himself, then all the way grinning. "Yeah."

I don't think as I grab his shoulders and squeal. "Arthur! Oh my God! How do you feel? Are you excited?" I catch a breath. "Or is it scary? Shit. I don't know. I would

be scared.”

He laughs, watching me pull back. “I’ve—God. I’ve been waiting years for this. The physical therapy. Not knowing... only hoping.” He’s contemplative, my excitement slowly trickling into him. “Everything I’ve done is to race Monza again. Maybe it’s stupid, but I can prove I’m the greatest Bianco driver if I can just finish that race again. Or, you know, the best one right now.”

“The greatest.”

“By your metric, maybe.”

“And mine’s the one that matters.”

His jaw twitches, surprised, and he cautiously says, “Why do you say that?”

“Because I know how hard you’re fighting, and what you’re going through. I know who you’ve had to tolerate in order to achieve your dream.” I look at his hand on the blanket, chalky with sunblock, and imagine being brave enough to take it. “Nobody could be better than you.”

“You really think that?” Arthur says, closing his eyes. I can’t help but think—no, hope—that it’s so he doesn’t see me say no .

“Yes, I do.”

“You’ll watch me?”

“Well, yeah.”

“The Italian Grand Prix.”

“Yes, okay? I like this ridiculous sport now. It’s fun.”

I sound like I’m ten years old. Nevertheless, Arthur’s eyes pop open, and I’m struck by hazel, hazel gold, hazel brown, excitement, wonder. Like I’m the one making his dream come true.

He must sense my impending blush, since he stands, holding out his hand. “Come on.”

I’m already getting up when I ask, “To?”

“There’s a beach bar close by.” His fingers slide down my palm to help me up, straight down the center. “ Killer karaoke.”

We traverse to the non-nude side of the beach, where Sarah appears with a purse full of clothing. This includes dresses for Delaney and me—a great compliment. “I thought you might’ve gotten carried away by the Dutch nudism,” she says after I’ve traded my sand-covered shirt and shorts for the soft orange dress. It’s short , tight, and the middle of the bodice isn’t even there, leaving me with a bow-tie noodle of fabric attached to a skirt. No bra would work here, and one look in the bathroom mirror has me Jim-from- The-Office -ing Sarah.

“I look stupid.”

“You look hot.”

“I’ve never looked hot in orange .”

“You’re a babe,” she says, and swats my arm in a way that feels lovingly reprimanding. “It’s vintage! From the 1960s. And it has pockets, for the practical woman.”

I look at myself again. A brunette woman looks back at me, her hair tucked behind her ears, a beaming blonde next to her. A friend. I hug my arms around my chest, overwhelmed by a swell of unnamable emotion; sisterhood, or adulthood, or getting what I've always wanted and seeing it framed in a sandy public bathroom next to a karaoke bar in the Netherlands.

"Sorry. I'm not used to the dress-up, girl-friend thing," I admit, skin tingling. "Let me start over. I love the dress."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Sarah lets out a relieved laugh. "Good. And about the friend thing, I can't say I love how we met, but I love having met you." She starts to repack her bag, then stops. "Have you thought about not leaving us?"

Us. I love that word tonight. "You know I have to. I've got a film to finish."

With a stiff nod, she says, "Nobody ever would've... let me do something like what we're doing, with Arthur's contract, before you came here. And I never would've been brave enough to help him on my own."

"It definitely wasn't bravery." I laugh. "And I think you would've."

"Thanks." She drags in a breath, then rolls off one of her friendship bracelets, handing it to me. Incredibly, the pony beads spell out I CAN DO IT WITH A brOKEN HEART. "For looking out for me."

I put it on, smiling, and we go back outside. The sky is dark, and there are lights strung across the beach, leading toward the ramshackle bar. Music spills out the open

door, weaving together the open-air patio and the people and the packed dance floor and—I blink, then cover my mouth.

Arthur's at the front of the bar, because of course he is, and he's got a microphone in one big hand and a glass bottle of Coke in the other. Sarah also brought the guys jeans, and I have to wonder why I got a Velma dress and Arthur got denim, until he spots me and grins, mouthing something.

What? I mouth back.

My color , I think he says.

My face turns as bright as the dress.

Then he holds up his bottle like he's toasting me, the glass sparkling when it catches the light. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, sorry for the wait. Without any further ado, please enjoy the best rendition of 'The Whole of the Moon' you've ever heard."

I yell. Everyone yells. You can't announce that song in the Netherlands and expect any less. And as I watch Arthur, laughing and singing and holding his phone up to record me , Cameron appearing during the pivotal bridge to turn it into a duet, Delaney pretending to play a trumpet, Sarah banging her hands on the table, it hits me that I did get one more chance at falling in love with something before I was almost gone.

And I did it right this time around.

Chapter Twenty-Two

For the rest of the night, I never get farther than three steps from Arthur's side. He takes care of me. It's really the only description for how he never lets my glass of flavored soda water get empty, and finds ways to draw me into every conversation he has, telling everyone who remotely asks how good I am at videography. "A natural," he gushes to a stranger whose name I missed. "It's like, she isn't making 'content.' She makes art that people watch. She thinks about how things should look—the composition of things." He gives me a sly smile. "She makes me look better than I deserve."

"That's high praise," I say. "And higher-than-average self-awareness."

He gives a loud laugh, and I don't even worry about everyone looking over—does it matter when they're watching because I've made him this incandescently happy? "See? So quick." Arthur rakes a hand through his salt-waved hair and shakes his head, making the other guys laugh. "Smartest woman in the world, and she's mine."

It doesn't feel like an act. I feel like his—like I belong here—by the time we meander to the seaside bed-and-breakfast flanking the beach. It isn't the Ignition-mandated lodging, though Delaney swears up and down that it's better if we crash "incognito." She's three sheets to the wind, held upright solely by Sarah and Cameron. Regardless, we trust her. I would follow blackout-drunk Delaney into war.

Once we're inside the coastal grandma house, the three of them disappear, on a mission to get Delaney into bed. The tiny old woman behind the makeshift concierge counter smiles when she sees them off, then goes back to murmuring as she looks for

two more open rooms. At least, I assume that's what Arthur asked for in Dutch. After a minute, she clicks her tongue and replies in an apologetic tone.

Arthur asks what sounds like a question.

She says a short answer.

He slowly turns to me. "She says almost all of the other rooms are full and they don't have two available. But"—my heart drops to the floor; I know where this is going—"they have a larger suite with two twin beds. Would that be all right to split?"

Oh. "That's... fine."

We make our way up, silently walking side by side. The second the sweet old lady lets us into our room, I go straight to a paisley armchair and get to work undoing my sand-filled sneakers, having learned today why people buy and wear sandals. Also, why walking on sand is in itself a workout. My legs are exhausted.

There's a muffled inhale. Arthur is by the doorway, a faint blush on his face as he politely stares at one of the two beds.

"I'm not..." I start, then stop. "I'm just taking my shoes off."

He clears his throat. "I knew that."

"Used to women getting undressed the second you're alone with them?"

Very funny. Excellent joke for me to make at this exact moment. Arthur doesn't reply as he strides over to where I'm seated and kneels down. "Let me help. Lift your leg?"

He's still in his beach clothes, a faded shirt and loose jeans, and would you look at

that, here's a new and highly specific kink I'll hide from all future partners: shoe-untying. Shifting, I angle my knee so Arthur can get to my expertly knotted sneakers. It isn't a good angle. Or maybe it's an amazing one for him—I keep one hand on the chair and the other on the traitorous hem of my dress, which is determined to give Arthur a show.

He gets one knot picked apart, then laughs softly.

I can't ask him what's funny.

He helps me get the other one off, then goes to sit on the bed, the mattress squeaking beneath his weight. "So much better," I sigh, stretching my legs out in front of myself like a satisfied cat. Because I am. Satisfied. Definitely ignoring his glance at my bare legs.

We're quiet for a beat. Then Arthur asks, "You want to shower first, or should I?"

My satisfaction dies. Evading nudity at the literal nude beach, only to be covered in sand and thrown into a single room with Arthur is the definition of irony. "Could... could you? If you, if that's—"

He saves me with a "For sure," and then he's back up, patting his thighs, and gone into the bathroom. After I hear the lock click, I regain some semblance of cognition. "I'll shower in the morning!" I mumble-yell, counting on the thinness of the ancient Dutch walls to carry my voice. "Since my clothes are already sandy and... yeah."

Another beat. "Okay," he says, and yes, the walls are paper-thin. With crystal clarity, I hear the squeaky hiss of the shower being turned on, and my imagination blasts me with a high-definition image of exactly what must be happening with Arthur, water, shower, naked. Jolted, I go to my bag and grab my shirt and shorts from earlier. Clothes. More layers will protect me. Being in cargo shorts when Arthur

returns—damp and hopefully dressed and smelling like soap and sex and clean man—will keep me from asking why he referred to me as his girlfriend all night.

Angling my arm around my shoulder, I find the small metal zipper at the top of my dress and start to tug it down.

Only... the dress doesn't unzip.

Thirty seconds of mad finger-scrambling, zipper-tugging, and shoulder-contorting pass. A pause. Another three minutes without any progress. The metal 1960s zipper is glued in place. I'm going to die in this dress, or rip myself out of it. These are my only options.

Very aware that the shower is still running—for now—I go to the full-length mirror to survey the situation. The bright orange dress fits like a glove around my chest and hips, which I'd considered a positive omen for tonight and now feels like a sign I'd missed regarding my impending doom. No sleeves, which is nice. I'm not wearing a bra because again, bad omen, and also, no need. I give the front of the dress a yank, hoping that might dislodge the metal in the back.

Nope. The dress is now twisted toward my arm, and I let out a frustrated groan.

Moments later, the room goes silent.

The shower has turned off.

No. He didn't hear that. He... "Everything okay?" says Arthur, since he's kind and the walls are cardboard and he's a caretaker, this is what he does. My soda water threatens to come back up.

"Totally fine!" I yell back. "Just—would it be all right if you slept in there?"

Big, tall-person footsteps. “No, don’t come out,” I panic. “It’s, I’m... sort of stuck in the vintage dress Sarah brought me, which was so cute and sweet, and it has pockets, and I probably won’t die from asphyxiation so—go to sleep in there if... if you don’t mind.”

Silence.

Then, “You can’t say you’re choking, then tell me to sleep in the bath.”

“I said I would live.”

“Graywood.”

“Bianco.”

We’re both thinking through how Arthur is going to word this, since I’m sure as hell not asking. “Can I... come out?” he lands on. “To help.”

Help undress me. Damn it, this dress should’ve stayed in its own era. This isn’t the free-wheeling sixties anymore, at least not between me and the last person on the planet who should see me topless. Because remember? No bra.

“Lilah,” he says, “if you don’t reply, I’m going to assume you’ve passed out and come carry you to the hospital.”

Fantastic, another new and highly specific fetish nobody else could ever fulfill besides a professional athlete. “Nope, let me just...” I cross my arms, then uncross them, then add in a quieter voice, as shy as I feel, “Um, okay. Come out?”

I bunny-hop closer to the bed in surprise, because Arthur comes power-walking out of the bathroom, his hair wet, shirt and jeans on, eyes sweeping over every possible

threat until they land on me. “Hi,” I start. “It’s just in the back if you—”

“Yup, got it,” he cuts me off. “Turn around.”

I obey his command, happy to hide how red I’ve turned from seeing him freshly showered, a whole new side of him that seems vulnerable and intimate and cozy. When his hand strokes up the small of my back, searching for the top of the zipper, I inhale embarrassingly loud.

“Easy,” he murmurs, his voice constricted. “I’m not going to hurt you, but I’m going to go quick.”

Death to vintage clothing. The front of the dress presses tightly against my chest as he manages to get his fingers around the tiny metal zipper. He gives it an experimental tug and... nothing. “Damn,” he whispers, and the irritation in his voice is torture. Talk to me like that. Let me annoy you.

He touches his palm against the curve of my lower back, says “One second,” then steps away. There are some fumbling drawer-searching noises behind me, then a satisfied hum. When Arthur’s back, he slides his hand all the way around my hip, gripping me tight.

“I’m going to do something now, but you can’t move, okay?”

“Okay.”

He holds me still as a snip fills the breathless room.

Then he holds me tighter, as my body tenses with the realization that Arthur is cutting me out of Sarah’s dress with hotel scissors.

His fingertips graze the curve of my hip bone, curling just around it, his thumb locking me into place from the other side. I fit right into the crook of his hand. Imagine that.

The scissors catch after two more snips—and there's the whisper of a blade sliding down fabric. Arthur stops at where my bra would've been latched around my back... then restarts, evidently realizing that there's nothing beneath the dress that he should avoid cutting.

“Better?” he asks, halfway down.

Worse than ever. “Totally. You're saving my life.”

He laughs tightly. “Never heard that one before.”

Change the topic, change the topic. “Was I... really loud?”

“Hmm?” He sounds distracted.

“When I was trying to unzip myself and you stopped the shower.” These are the facts. I shouldn't be blushing deeper from asking about them. “I just want to make sure if I do, um, shower tonight, I don't keep you awake or anything. Showering.”

As in, I'm jumping into the coldest water possible the second I'm free. “Oh, no.” The scissors reach the top of my underwear, and it could be my imagination, but is his hand drawing me closer to him? “I was curious is all.”

“About?”

“I wanted to know what made you moan like that.”

I'm not going to die in this dress. I am dead. "Sorry," I whisper. "Sorry, oh, shit, that's—I did not mean to make you think I was doing that."

His knuckle brushes over my tailbone. "I know," he murmurs. "You're secretive."

Pause. Rewind.

He thought I was touching myself. Discreetly.

And he... stopped what he was doing to ask me about it.

He's joking. This is how men joke when they're famously good in bed and the global sports conglomerate knows it. That, or he was offended that I was ruining the sanctity of our only-one-bedroom situation. Because I'm not going to pretend like Arthur could never be attracted to me—he just also knows me, and that usually does it for people. This summer has showcased the gross, jealous, hyper-competitive sides that I typically stuff down, giving him a front-row seat for my envy and secrets.

More importantly, any connection between us is fake for him. After tonight, we'll go back to our regular plot: documentary and deniability. Then, in a matter of weeks, I'll be cast out of his dream world with a scarlet letter and the film footage of a lifetime, while he lines up a new career in Italy. Our lives will return to polar opposites, media and muse, reality and freedom.

Arthur isn't normal. I won't run into him while buying toothpaste, or see him dating a friend of a friend in a few years. Once I leave Ignition, we're done.

"Are you finished back there?" I lick my lips. Arthur's fingers haven't moved in minutes.

He doesn't answer. Just keeps me in his hand, like the putty that I am.

“Arthur?”

“Yeah, sorry.” Cold air nips along my spine. He’s stepping back, and I grab the front of the dress before it slips down. “Go shower.”

There isn’t room in his statement for argument. I nod quickly as I turn toward him. Then I’m not nodding.

His face is red, his pupils dilated. He looks like he just drove for twenty-four hours straight, a faint sheen of sweat gathered along his cheekbones and brow, the rest of him a mess. Breathing too hard and looking away and embarrassed. And the only possible reason is me, my cursed dress, and the pair of sewing scissors he’s got gripped in his hands. I don’t need to debate it. It’s right there.

Arthur is attracted to me.

The whole world tilts. Straighter or sideways, I don’t know. But suddenly, my life is different, and I feel like we’ve jumped into another timeline, where every second ticking down to September sings he wants me, he wants me, he wants me.

“Thanks,” I say. “Again. For this.”

Arthur sets the scissors on a side table. “Sure.”

His voice is thick. I really should be walking away. But—he wants me. He wants me .
“It was nice of you.”

“Anytime.”

“Really, though.” He’s looking at me now, my eyes, my lips, the hand clutching my dress. “You’re... nice.”

Ever so slowly, Arthur folds his arms, his back straightening as curiosity flickers across his sloped mouth. “I am?”

“I guess. Sometimes.”

To my delight and fear, Arthur takes one solid step toward me. “You guess,” he repeats.

“Yeah. And tall. You’re probably too tall to be driving those cars.”

He frowns, silent, and taps his thumb on the outside of his forearm. I’ve never seen him think this hard about anything—I’m used to off-the-cuff brilliance. It’s possible I misread this, though I don’t know how this time. He’s flustered. Not moving, either. His dark hazel eyes have a hungry, honeyed haze I’ve only seen when he’s talking about driving. He’s looking at me like I’m something he wants to win, a prize right outside his reach.

I’m just about to leave when he says, “Have you changed your mind?”

My breath catches. “About what?”

He thinks for another second, a forever second, an end-of-a-race second, then practically grits out, “If two people can dislike each other and still be attracted to one another.”

Sparks scatter across my rib cage, glittery and bright. That’s what he’d told me back in Texas. What I’d laughed at. What I’d assumed he was only saying to educate me on the finer points of heterosexuality and team gossip. He... isn’t implying that he’d wanted me then, back when we could barely tolerate being in the same room. This is Arthur, and he moves fast, and he flirts brazenly, and there are so many reasons we shouldn’t do this that a new wave of stress fizzes in my throat.

If we only had three months together, why would he wait for me to figure him out?

“I... I...” I take a breath.

Slowly, so slowly, Arthur reaches over and traces his fingertips up my bare arm. Centimeter by centimeter, like I’m skittish, like he refuses to frighten me off. “It’s okay. You can say it. Nothing needs to happen.”

And there’s my answer: He’s wanted to wait for me. I feel the ghost of all of his past touches, too, his ankle against mine at David Bowie Night, his fingers studying my scar on the plane. Sunblock, the clinic, waking up against him. We haven’t spoken about any of it, and I’ve been convinced it was because he didn’t care, that he’d be the type to chase someone recklessly. Now I see the other side of the story—a man who’s patient, quiet, and more careful than anyone knows. If I hide from the world because I can’t handle being seen, then Arthur hides who he is.

But I know him now, I know him too well, and that’s why I say, “I think I feel differently now.”

Despite how good he is and how deeply I believe he’d let me act like this never happened, Arthur’s eyes widen. “You think you could be attracted to me?”

“No. I think I don’t dislike you.”

“Lilah,” he says, pained. It’s a punched-out, desperate version of my name. Li-lah. It makes me feel insane, or very, very sane, and both options are terrifying.

“But we can’t do anything about that, right? We shouldn’t. It’s almost September. I’m making a documentary about you.” A breath. “The movie is going to end, one way or another.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

“But it does. This only works if we don’t cross this line. Because the second the team finds out about us, or thinks they do, this explodes and—and then you have to go to Italy and I’ll go to D.C. and we don’t see each other again and that’s good, because we’re catastrophic enough to cost F1 millions when we’re only pretending so... it’s good.”

He lets out an almost silent sigh. “You don’t have to go.”

“But—”

“Don’t go,” Arthur says, firm. “Stay with me. Let me show you what good looks like.”

I’m shivering, plunged into cold water. “But you said you don’t date.”

“I’m dating you.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Yes, I am. To me? I am.” His face is fire, starved for oxygen, running toward the open air. “Can I show you?”

I blink. “What?”

“Can I kiss you?” he asks softly.

“Can you,” I repeat, shocked.

“May I,” he corrects, desperate enough to take my accidental grammar lesson in

stride. “Just say yes. And I will.”

When I squeeze my eyes closed, I imagine the five lights atop the racetrack, and how each one falls to the dark at the same time in melodramatic surrender. And why shouldn't they? It feels good to watch those bright red lights go out, to be a part of something meticulously cinematic. Humans love knowing the moment something is happening. Not after the fact, right then. Here is the start of something big , those five lights say. Don't blink. Don't even breathe. This is it.

“Yes,” I say. “You can—”

Arthur doesn't let me finish the sentence because then, he kisses me. Deeply, like he's getting to know the shape of my mouth. The angles, the curves and straight shots of the track, plunging me into a future I can't control or see or edit. I'm here, right now. This is it.

And all those kisses I've had before? Those feel like trial runs for whatever this is. I trace the slit of his mouth with my tongue, and Arthur's chest stiffens with surprise beneath my palms, his rumbling groan vibrating between us as he deepens the kiss. He tastes like toothpaste and sunshine and something else entirely, primal and stomach-twisting. Promising.

Then I've got my arms around his shoulders and his hands are on my neck, and when his knee slides between my legs, I open up to him with a breathless sigh I had no idea my throat was capable of making. Arthur twists his fingers into my hair and tips my head back so he can run his lips across my neck. “ Pretty ,” he says. “You make such pretty little noises for me.”

His teeth graze the tender skin of my throat, making me whimper, and I push back against his hips with mine in retaliation.

“Oh, so that’s how this is going to be.” His hot laugh spills across my collarbone. “You like to be on top? Me too.”

“Guess we’ll just have to fight about it,” I manage to say in a mostly stable voice. I slip my hand down the front of his wrinkled shirt and tease my fingers over the curve of his hipbone. Arthur’s hips stutter, wet lips parting as he angles toward my hand.

“Nope.” I laugh as I move my fingers to the outside of his thigh. “Not so fast, King.”

Heat shimmers in his eyes, his jaw ticking like he can’t believe I’m not just touching him, or he’s trying to figure out which parts of this are a game to me. I don’t know where the line is, either; if I want to sleep with him tonight or if I just want to drive this man to the edge and watch him tip over.

Either way, he seems as into whatever this is as I am—so I follow the fire. “Have you ever been with a woman who’s been with other women?” I say.

The muscle in his jaw bounces at that. “No. Not that I... not that I know of.”

“Now you have.” Pulling a page from his book, I lean up on my toes and whisper as close to his ear as I can get. “It isn’t just about penetration for me. I like everything else more.”

My past experience was a topic that Max hated discussing. He always found a way to downplay that I’d fully dated a woman since, in his eyes, that was my college phase , and now I was with him, so who cared?

Me. I cared. He did, too, since ten minutes in our thin, squeaky bed didn’t thrill me to my core. I tried to tell him that it wouldn’t thrill any woman, heterosexual or not, but he got so tangled up in his own insecurity that he shut down the conversation altogether. And I cared about him so much that I let his shame of me leak into me,

taking his guilt and making it mine.

If Arthur is going to run—or shut me down for being myself—I need to know now, before he’s seen me at my most vulnerable.

Thoughts swirl in his clouded gaze as he pushes me back against the wall. But he doesn’t look upset or uncomfortable. There’s a raw desperation in the way he studies me before kissing me again, almost... almost like he can’t believe I shared something this personal with him. He kisses me like I just told him the meaning of life: hard, thankful, shaky fingers winding in the cut fabric at the back of my dress.

“Down,” I gasp between breaths. “Push it off.”

He groans, momentarily irritated by the lack of kissing, before he realizes I’m giving him permission to get me naked. “ Everything else ,” he murmurs as he jerks the dress down to my waist. “God, you’re going to ruin me. I’ll never want anyone else.”

“Fine with me—”

I’m cut off by his hand grabbing my breast. He kneads it, teasing flinty sparks of pleasure with every touch. “Don’t think I’ll let you destroy me without taking you down with me. I’ll get you back, princess.”

“Nope.”

He scrapes his fingernails over my nipple. “Baby.”

“No.”

Smirking, Arthur rolls my nipple between his fingertips. Not fair. I grab the collar of his shirt. “Princess behavior,” he laughs as I huff through trying to lift it off his

massive neck and shoulders.

“You’d like that, me all pliant and bratty.”

“I hate to break this to you, but—”

“I’m not bratty.”

“Just pliant?”

“To be decided.”

I get his shirt off and start on his pants. When my fingers accidentally brush the part of him I’ve been careful until now to avoid, Arthur grabs my wrist and stops me. “No.”

My heart misses a step. “No?”

“You said everything else.” There’s a challenge in his eyes. “I want you to watch me. I want to see how long you last just watching me.”

His boldness makes heat settle into the damp place between my legs. This isn’t exactly what I meant by other activities, but I’m not going to complain. “Deal.”

I start to take off my glasses, but Arthur stops me, keeping my wrist locked in an iron grip by his hip. “Leave them on. Need you to be you,” he groans—and my stomach flutters at how quickly he takes himself into his own hand, his pants only halfway off. There isn’t any hesitation, no asking why I’d want to do something so weird. It was his idea in the first place.

That’s what makes me breathless as he runs his large palm over the tip of himself,

wetness gleaming in the warm lighting. He wants this.

He's this turned on by my gaze.

So I let myself look. I don't mask my lips pressing together from the sight of his tan hand running down the length of his cock, the skin there paler and flushed. When he spits into his hand and moans from the added wetness, I don't hide that I'm squirming, thighs rubbing together.

"You're not going to give in, right?" he breathes out. His words are punctuated by his own movements, and God, the slick sounds and his undone voice make me want to fall apart.

I press back against the wall. "No."

"You can wait?"

"Definitely."

"Good girl." His mouth twitches, and he pumps faster. "Eyes on my cock, sweetheart. Watch me come for you."

Sweetheart. Why is the most basic American term of endearment what makes me tug our linked hands toward my hips and grind his balled fist over the front of my underwear? Arthur's eyes darken, and he hisses out a breath, but he doesn't stop. Only slows and leans his forehead down against mine, warm and slick with sweat, his stifled gasps caught between us. His two fingers press exactly where I want them to through my soaked underwear, and I drag my lower lip between my teeth, biting hard.

"You can come first, it's okay," I whisper.

“No.” He fists the base of his cock. “Not when I’m gonna win.”

I want to laugh. Of course he’s able to focus on an imaginary prize in a made-up competition. Or maybe this is just his way of making sure I get off, too. It doesn’t matter; my thoughts scatter as he brings me closer, close, there. Trembling, I wrap my hands around his thick forearm for stability.

“Now?” he murmurs.

I nod wordlessly. Arthur exhales, and whatever lightning storm was flickering below my waist before gets swept away by the punctured gasp he makes at touching the tip of himself again. I pull his arm against my chest as I sink under, as if I need to get him as close to me as possible. And maybe I do. I’ve never had anyone of any gender take me apart with this much precision and mental foreplay. Nobody.

He’s going to ruin me for everyone else, too.

“Fuck, Lilah,” Arthur pants, and I know he’s following me over the edge, because after that it’s all Italian. I kiss his arm, the closest thing to me, and listen to the aftermath. His breathing, his soft noises, his heartbeat. No, that’s mine, pounding in my ears.

His fingers slow where they’re slotted against me, then drop to grip my thigh. “Are you okay?”

I nod. He’s not asking because my glasses are foggy and I’m having trouble staying upright. “Are you?”

There’s a muffled sound above my ear, Arthur pressing his lips against the crown of my head. I don’t totally hear what he says, but it sounds suspiciously like perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shit.

I stare at the dark ceiling of the hotel suite, not moving a muscle. It's between midnight and sunrise. I'm in a bed.

And Arthur Bianco is asleep next to me.

We'd come to bed after cleaning up, something that had seemed fine—nice, even—hours ago. He'd slept politely restrained to his side of the twin-sized mattress, until I'd wriggled over and got his hand in mine. Then he'd wrapped me in his arms, sunk his nose into my hair, and gone to sleep again. So had I, for a brief, dreamless interlude.

That's where I am now. In his arms.

Shit.

This is extreme. Not that I dislike it. I like it. But sleeping together in the literal sense is zero to two hundred miles per hour without checking to see if we have brakes. How am I supposed to act in the morning when things are awkward and strange between us? What even are we, now that we've confirmed there are feelings? Oh, wait. I'd confirmed I have feelings. I don't know if he did. And we're going to have to talk about the film at some point, and how to handle the professional apocalypse heading our way, and it's going to be awful and weird and uncomfortable and—

“You awake, Graywood?”

Arthur’s sleep-deepened voice drifts down the pillows. My head’s against his chest, his arm around my back, and when did he wake up? His breathing never changed.

“Maybe,” I admit.

He laughs, deep down in his throat. “You freaking out?”

“Also maybe.”

There’s a soft touch along my shoulder. He’s stroking my back. “You don’t need to.”

“Why?”

“We’re good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Arthur keeps stroking my shoulders, his short fingernails trailing along the thin fabric of my T-shirt. I tilt my head up, peering at his chin. It’s dark. The lights outside are muffled by the thick curtains, the clock on the nightstand glowing soft blue.

“Do you like me?” I ask. “You never said.”

His fingers don’t miss a beat.

“I like you.”

I hate having to ask, waking him up, crawling for a compliment. It makes me feel small, needy. I am small and needy when it comes to him.

“Lilah?” he says, breaking my train of thought again.

“Yeah?”

“Check my pants pocket.”

Diversion tactics. Typical. I shift over to my side of the bed and grab his discarded jeans. I’m guessing he’s looking for his phone, but I can only feel the rounded-square shape of a small box. I pull it out, then have to not yelp. It’s a tiny red velvet box, and I don’t want to hand it over to him, in case whatever is inside might change my life more drastically than tonight already has.

“Open it.” He laughs, sensing my primordial fear.

Holding my breath, I use the clock light to pop the hinged lid open—and I’m both relieved and strangely hollow at the sight of a bizarre-looking little watch. Gingerly, I pull the black band from the white satin and inspect the ticking surface. The distorted watch face resembles a melting clock painting by Salvador Dalí.

“Care to explain?”

“You said you’d wear a watch,” Arthur says from his place lying down. “It’s called a Crash.”

“ Arthur .”

“Listen. I’ve never...” He swallows. “After the crash, I threw myself into anything that kept me from feeling things. But I want you to know that this, you and me... I

feel it. So much.”

“So you’re not, this isn’t—also fake? Or it won’t be, tomorrow?”

He hums out a soft “No,” then stretches out his arm. I set the watch down, hot and happy all over, and bury myself back in his side. Arthur strokes up the back of my neck, fingertips winding along the ends of my hair.

“If you get me talking about what I feel about you, I’m gonna keep you up all night,” he murmurs. “You won’t be able to get me to stop.”

That...

Doesn’t sound bad at all.

He moves to my head, fingers splaying through my hair to massage my scalp, and I force myself not to yawn. It’s hard to keep my eyes from drifting shut, lulled by his warmth, his touch, the night. Sleep keeps fuzzing the outskirts of my thoughts, blurring the lines between Arthur and me. I wonder if he feels the same, like we’re mixed together, him and me and me and him. I wish we were.

“I wanna hear the nonstop feelings. I’m ready.”

“You sound ready. And awake.”

“I am.”

“If you say so,” he says. “I like how angry you get. I like when you prove me wrong. I like your thoughts, big and wild. I like your body, small and serious. I like the parts of you that you think are too much, too weird. They’re my favorite.”

“Okay, okay.”

“I like when I can tell you’re thinking, but I don’t know what about. I like when I surprise you, because I don’t think a lot of people do.”

“You’re full of surprises,” I grumble. “Sunrise rooftop breakfast, instant classic.”

“You like looking at beautiful things, and I like showing you them,” he continues, and I’m glad he agrees—whatever is going on here is painfully not fake. “My attempts to win you over hadn’t been working.”

“Attempts, plural?”

“Multiple. Many,” he says. “It was hard not to after that night at the club. When you said you were over that asshole, it was like, fuck, what am I going to do?”

I think back to that night, the bassy music and him close to me and sitting at the bar, mustering up the courage to ask him about...

“Oh my God.”

“The radio?” Arthur says, because of course he knows what I’m thinking. He’s been waiting for me to think it. Patiently, quietly waiting for me to see what’s been right in front of me. “They air what we say on the broadcast, by the way. You wouldn’t want to spill your secrets on it.”

“You lied about it being Merlin,” I whisper, thoroughly amazed at not realizing this sooner.

Arthur’s heartbeat drums against my ear. “It was you,” he says. “It’s been you. I’ve been driving myself crazy to keep your eyes on me.”

Surprise wedges between my brain and mouth, and anything intelligent I could say back to him is caught on the wrong side of that wall. It's been me. Arthur likes me. I own a watch.

"How long would you have waited for me to figure it out?"

"Years?" He brings my knuckles to his lips, sending an effervescent chill down my arm. "But my schedule is very transparent, you see. You'd have been able to find me once you cracked the code." He kisses my thumb. "Texas." Another kiss. "England." A kiss on the wrist. "Hungary, Belgium, Netherlands." Kiss, kiss, kiss.

"I would've hunted you down."

"Yeah?"

"I'd get on a plane to see you," I say, and this feels like the biggest confession yet.

"I know. You already have."

"Next time you understand us before I do, will you tell me?"

He goes quiet, so I don't explain any more—that I'm only starting to understand what's shifted inside me since we met. I don't want to only look at him from behind the safety glass of my camera, like a piece of art, another beautiful thing. I want to go through life with him, looking at the gorgeous, terrible world together. If I never saw him again after tonight, I'd always look for him in a crowd, scanning for a tall blond head. But I'd always look with him, too. I'd see the beauty in the dilapidated buildings and fast cars and interesting strangers, because I think I see the world through his eyes now, or at least a peek of it, a hazy glimpse at happily ever after where the guy gets the girl and the girl gets everything.

And that's beautiful.

When he finally tilts my chin up for a kiss, I'm not surprised. I feel it coming, his quicker pulse, the way his chest tenses. "I don't want to keep you awake," Arthur says against my mouth.

"Keep me," I reply, and he chuckles, his thumb sweeping across my cheekbone. "Unless you're tired. Then good night."

He does something very distracting with his tongue as he slips one hand beneath the hem of my shirt. "I'm not tired anymore."

His hand closes around my entire breast as he kisses across my jaw, toward my mouth. My body aches from the sensations; he's curious and intense and everywhere, touching me like he's learning my language. When he runs my nipple between two of his rough fingers—calloused and hot—I press into his hips and...

Arthur exhales sharply. "Careful."

Just this already has his own need pulsing against my stomach. And I don't know how he's this appealing, in the middle of the night, when sex has always been the restaurant bread basket of physical touch to me; lovely but optional. But he's so easy to work up, so reactive, and I want to feel him against my fingers, my stomach, my mouth, notched inside me. Hear him lose the last shreds of his incredible self-control.

I slip my hand between us and feel him, firm and thick. I slowly run up the outline of his cock over his underwear, my mouth going dry. He's big. I'd seen that before, vaguely registered the size. But damn, this might take work.

"Is this okay?" I ask tentatively, stroking down.

“Yes,” he growls.

“Yes, as in you like it?”

Arthur inhales. Holds it. Exhales. “Yes as in, I’m trying very hard not to fuck you.”

Oh. “You... don’t have to.”

“I know. Shit, I wouldn’t—”

“No, you don’t have to try not to. You can try. You just can.”

This close, with every light in the universe turned off except for the glowing clock, I feel Arthur realizing what I’m offering him. His body goes taut, pulled into a tight, flat need, and I really, really hope he meant what he said, that he wants to do this, because a man shutting down at the idea of being inside me might be the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced.

Then he’s not shut down.

Then, he’s alive.

Pulling me against him, Arthur grinds against my hand, then the sensitive skin of my belly, making me pant. He’s dizzying, throbbing and hard, and our clothes are useless to disguise it. My throat ties into a knot as he shifts apart my thighs in one quick movement and positions my split-open legs around the hard press of him. Then we’re meeting where I never dreamed we would, only fabric and time separating us.

And his voice. Of course he’s talkative in bed, too. “This? You want me here?” he says, stunningly serious.

“Yes. I—yes.”

“You want me to make you come again?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Arthur stares at me, his eyes gleaming black and white in the low light. “I’ll do it every day when you’re my wife.”

He doesn’t think before he says it. I can tell because his pupils go wide, then swing down to where my mouth opens with a shocked moan I try to muffle.

Neither of us speak for a beat. Me because, wow. Hello. Wife. Arthur because he must be waiting for me to declare this is one game I won’t play. Since that’s all this is, right? A game? He doesn’t want to marry me, specifically. It’s a kink. Foreplay.

And for once, I’m not going to be the person who always takes everything so seriously. I can do... whatever this is. At least, I want to try.

I run my hand up the back of his neck to tease his hair. “Every day? Won’t you get bored?”

Somehow, Arthur’s pupils blow wider as he registers my question. I shift, pressing myself closer to him, and his fingers twitch over where my nipple’s pebbled against the thin fabric of my shirt. Tempted, but not quite sure.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Tell me.”

He folds. He grasps me through the fabric, new determination in every touch. “Never. I will never get bored of you. Your mind. Your body.” He nudges his cock against the damp seam of my underwear. “Everyone will know how well I fuck you. Your feet

will never touch the ground again.”

Usually, now’s when I’d put up my own defenses—turn his words back on him and yank us out of the fantasy. Never? Seems impractical. That doesn’t feel fair, though. If I’m doing this, I’m doing it.

“You’ll carry me?” I say coyly. “But then how will you fuck me?”

“Easy. Like this.” He arches me against him by his hips alone. “And I’ll keep you full of me. Whenever you want to come, you’ll just need to ask your husband. My cock, my tongue, my fingers, anytime, anywhere.”

How is he strong enough to talk like this while using every abdominal muscle to grind against me? I can’t find the words to ask. All my focus is on where his body meets mine. “Arthur, please.” My voice is thin. “I want it now.”

“Now?” he says, faintly surprised.

I nod, and then have to throw my head back for air as he rolls his hips into mine. “Whatever my wife wants.” A jolt of arousal pierces through me at how utterly wrecked he sounds saying those two words: my wife . “Shoulders.”

Shivering, I take hold of his shoulders for leverage as he grasps my thigh. “You sure about this?” Arthur asks.

“Yes. This... isn’t boring.”

He exhales a breathless laugh as he pulls a condom from somewhere on the nightstand and rips it open with his teeth. Then he’s pushing the fabric between us to one side and nudging against me, and there’s nothing in my busy, hectic, overworked mind except how he slips right in, every spinning neuron distracted by him.

“Made for me,” he says. “Knew it. Second I saw you—heard your voice—knew I needed to be right here.”

Without moving a single muscle in his hips, Arthur somehow gets his fingers to my clit and strokes, his two thick fingers dampening any direct sensation. It’s almost, barely, just enough, and my legs twitch as he pushes in one more inch, getting my body used to this new shape. He works his fingers up, then down, patient, teasing more choked moans from me.

“That’s it. Can my perfect little wife come around the tip of my cock?”

Game, game, game. This isn’t real. My brain gets the memo, but my body doesn’t listen. Even though I’m so turned on I’m trembling, I bite my lip and say, “Make me.”

Arthur huffs. Instead of quickening his fingers, he slows to a punishingly leisurely tempo. He takes his time, and the sheer confidence of it all turns up the beat pounding in my core.

“Deeper. Please, husband .”

“Fuck.” He sounds ragged. “Say it again.”

“Please? Or husband?”

“You know which one.”

“And you know my answer. Make me.”

With a tortured noise, Arthur looks down to where our bodies meet and pushes in. He exhales a rapid-fire string of curses and jumbled praise, and I watch as he swallows,

my head swimming.

“I... I’m not going to last long,” he pants.

I dig my fingernails into the back of his neck. “Me neither, husband.”

“Screw it, then,” Arthur whispers, more to himself than me I think—since moments later he starts to really move. Cold fire burns beneath my skin, buried in my bloodstream, at the glowing mix of adoration and awe on his face as we meet, there, here. All the way. He looks at me like he never wants to go to sleep again.

“I want it. What you want. With you, only you.” He says it in soft, staggered breaths I almost don’t understand. “Wanna put a baby in you. See you round and happy ’cause of me. My pretty wife pregnant with our pretty babies. Give it to me, right now.”

Everything inside me clenches—my heart and my jaw and my thighs—before the embers collapse, and out goes the fire. And it’s better than I ever thought this could be. Excruciatingly good. And I might’ve just died but that’s fine, leave me here orgasm.

“Did you come for me?” he gasps, and I laugh nonsensically, nodding back.

Maybe it’s my laugh. Maybe it’s every way our bodies are fitting together—like he said, made for each other. Arthur hisses my name into the side of my neck. Then he’s following me, his own pleasure peaking as his lips find my skin again and again and again, whispering words about our future and our life and everything he wants to give me, children, houses, gardens, cars, his time, his life.

And I want all of that one day, I think. When this isn’t a game, if it’s ever not a game with him... I’ll want to be loved like that.

Eventually, his breathing goes from tornado to summer storm. “I told you I’d keep you up,” he mumbles, a smile in his voice.

“I’m not complaining.”

When we’re back to only cuddling, our clothes righted and Arthur curled around my back, I finally find the right words to say. Just as I’m falling asleep, my body thoroughly exhausted. “Sorry I was so slow at figuring you out.”

He laughs and pulls me closer, his heat saturating through my skin. “Sorry I fell so fast,” he replies, and it’s the last thing I hear before I’m gone.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When I wake up, my new watch says it's ten a.m., but I don't believe it. I rub my eyes, peek under the duvet to confirm I'm alone, then slide out, tiptoeing to the wide windmill-patterned curtains that cover one side of the room. Gone for breakfast , reads the note on the side table. Stay in bed.

I smile. It's a brand-new day, and I need to deal with what happened last night. But I think I'm also... happy.

Letting the curtains drop back into place, I check that my T-shirt is long enough for ten a.m. behavior and then walk over to my phone.

The screen is filled with notifications.

One hundred missed texts. Fifty emails. Missed calls , three from my mom. And it catches me by surprise, that falling feeling, dread from somewhere below me I can't spot yet. How quickly that happiness can disappear without a trace.

Hi, honey, it's me, I saw the photos and just wanted to check in and...

I exit her voicemail, my mind going numb. Photos? There shouldn't be any photos. We purposefully went to a nude beach so—my eyes snap to the ruined orange dress on the ground.

Karaoke. In clothes.

The internet unfurls under my fingertips, my own personal nightmare. My name is everywhere, every version of it, with photos from last night, nothing scandalous but a lot clearer than the grainy shots from Hungary; that's proof to the fanbase. Sports reporters have thrown up clickbait Who Is Lilah Graywood? Meet Arthur Bianco's New Girlfriend articles overnight that would be kind of funny, headline wise, if they weren't real. But they are, and it's like the internet has already chosen the narrative it's running with: Arthur and I are deeply in love, have been dating for months, and he might quit Ignition to be with me, a rumor that doesn't even make sense.

Until I look at the comment sections.

They're flooded with hate, the kind of high school bullying you only remember in bits and pieces as an adult, like when you see a water fountain and remember getting shoved into one.

PaddockClub9: He CAN NOT do this to us!!!! we've supported Arthur for YEARS and this is how he repays us! Just as he was racing again!!!

scuderia_bianco: He turns thirty and starts dating a girl from KENTUCKY I can't watch him actually marry this one and retire lmaoooo

hitmewithyourcarjean: well she is a "filmmaker" :// she's probably trying to trap him so she can live off that f1 \$\$ forever

anyonebutfaust: yeah, shes a total freak—look at her wiki

I have a Wikipedia?

Five seconds later, and that's confirmed.

If I was editing this part of the movie, I'd layer in the most dramatic stock music I

could find, because I'm in the Netherlands for a documentary and this is happening and...

I'm done.

They know. Everyone knows.

I slept with my subject and everyone knows.

A few years back, the online documentarian community was scandalized after a guy admitted to using public domain laugh tracks, layered to look like the people he'd filmed were doing the laughing. They'd ripped into his integrity and called for a boycott of his films. What I've done makes free soundtracks look like child's play and—I can't deny it. Ignition could hide it, like they've hidden Arthur's story, but could I? Would I lie to my colleagues and say that I hadn't crossed the worst line with Arthur?

No. I can't.

I won't.

My body starts shaking like I've been thrown into a freezing lake, cold sweat coating my skin. It's over. All of the people I've admired in my professional community—the political workers I've revered in D.C., the documentarians I've studied—they're going to hear about this, me, and they'll judge me, look down on me, and it's okay because I'm free. I don't need to lie anymore about what I feel about Arthur, or keep this a secret. Holmes, Max, the money, the U.S. circuit, my movie...

The truth is out, and the truth can't hurt me.

My work phone vibrates with a new email, notification unraveling. It's from Sarah, a

forwarded message with a quick note jotted at the top.

Hi love—in our hotel room, but wanted to send this before we met up... Wasn't sure if you'd want everyone to know. I got this email today from someone saying they're your mom. This is probably stupid spam and the press has done weirder but idk, it just made me feel like I had to give you a heads-up. Do you know anyone named "Delilah"? Or is there a reason why someone would use that name to try and talk to you? Sorry if this is weird, my brain is a bit mush right now.

Mine too. My lungs sting with a quick hit of air as I thumb down the email to Delilah Prestel's original message.

Hello,

I am sorry for the out of the blue email! My name is Delilah and I am looking for my daughter Lilah. We miss her so much! Can you please let her know that we want to talk to her about this exciting new—

I stop reading. I can't do any more.

Who the fuck is we ?

I get up. Put my phone down. Pick it back up. We? Her and a man I've never met? Them and their two happy, smiley, candle-sniffing children? I've been here. I've been waiting. She never contacted me before now, but the second photos of me and a famous, rich man hit the internet... here she is. My Hollywood happy ending is plastered all over social media, and I'm her daughter again.

She wants me back.

A phone starts to ring—it's Arthur's.

The door opens. Arthur's in his sandy clothes again, phone against his ear, listening to someone speak, a bowl of fruit in his other hand. There are beads of water dotting the back of his neck. He must've already worked out. Run off the news. His eyes meet mine, and he nods, and that one gesture, acknowledgment, is the hug I needed.

"I'll call you right back," he says, then he's off and setting the fruit on the nightstand. "Hi, have you looked at your phone?"

"Yeah."

"Are you all right?"

Last night, I was terrified by the inevitable what-are-we conversation. Now it feels like the lock on my life has been cracked, and anyone with internet access can see my soul. "I don't know," I say. "I've been so worried, all summer, about this exact moment, and now it's here and we're alive. And—did Holmes fire you?"

His eyes skitter away from me, back on his screen, scanning something. Scrolling. "Not yet."

"Are you meeting with him soon?"

"Tomorrow."

His phone rings again. With a frown, Arthur begins to drum his fingers on his leg.

"Sorry, are you busy?" I find myself saying, and Arthur flinches, shaking his head.

"I have meetings tomorrow with Leone and Holmes, in Italy. I'm heading out this afternoon with Cameron." He's stilted, cold. Drumming his fingers. "Stay here. Sarah and Delaney turned their room into a war room. They're going to wipe this from the

internet. Things are going to be okay, I promise. But it will take time.”

Leone? He’s going to Italy already. I close my eyes, unable to think straight when he’s tapping his fingers, his eyes desperately searching my face for my thoughts. “Why would you talk to them right now?”

“Because I have to assure them that I’m still the driver they want next season,” Arthur says, and it’s easier this way, when I can’t see him. “You weren’t—you’ll understand next year. Once I’m back at Leone, competing with them, I’m going to be myself again. My life will go back to the way it was before the accident.”

“No. It won’t. That isn’t how life works.”

His phone starts to ring.

“Sorry. Shit.” He goes to silence it. It’s in his hand, his thumb on the side switch, when we both see the name Cavalli lighting up the screen. Under that is a missed voicemail from someone at Static. And Wunsch. And other names I don’t remember.

My breath hitches. “What’s going on?”

“They’re just circling the water,” he says, and he’s using his smooth voice on me, camera Arthur, everything’s fine Arthur. “Teams that want a different driver for next year saw the pictures and assume Holmes is going to bin me.”

Irony. The happiest sentences are the most devastating, too. “You’re... getting offers from other teams?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t change what I want to do.” Arthur touches my arm. His eyes are dark, and last night comes rushing back into my memory. All that forever right within my reach. “I need to fix what happened. I need to prove to myself that I can

drive with Leone again.”

Prove himself to who? Me? His faceless crowd of fans? While he leaves me here, abandoned, with messages piling up, my own life crumbling down. “I’m coming to Italy.” Stress makes my voice stretchy, and I swallow, trying to sound stronger than I feel.

Arthur pulls his hand back. “You don’t need to.”

“You don’t have to face this on your own.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Would me going make it worse?”

He drags in a breath that doesn’t reach deep enough. “I don’t know.”

“Then what can I do to help?”

Like a flash, he steps away from me. “I’ll be right back.” Then he’s walking to the bathroom, closing the door. It’s silent. No footsteps, no shower, nothing.

My pulse ticks.

Then I follow him. I knock, wait, then think better of that and try the handle. Unlocked, the door swings open, and when my eyes adjust to the dark, I freeze. Arthur is slumped over on the tile, his back against the wall, his head in his hands. His shoulders shake, and he has his elbows on his knees like he’s trying to keep the motion in.

“Arthur?” I whisper.

“One second.”

Both words are punctuated with breathless frustration, and I take a step closer. Mayhem has its own gravitational field, and I’ve never known how to stay back. “I’m coming in,” I say.

He doesn’t respond. Just keeps breathing loudly, in and out of his mouth, too fast. He’s breathing far too quickly for the oxygen to calm his system down.

I kneel by his side. When I put a hand on his shoulder, he shies from the touch, twisting toward the wall behind him.

“Don’t,” he says. “Please. Go.”

But I can’t. I can’t go. Not when he’d asked me last night to stay with him past our ending. It had felt real—it had been real.

My thoughts stop, suddenly understanding. Short, clipped sentences. Staggered, erratic breathing. Arthur is having a panic attack. He’d left so I wouldn’t see.

“You need to do something for me.” I grip his thick shoulder in my hand. “You have to breathe with me.”

“No.”

“Arthur.”

“Lilah—please.”

“I’m not leaving.”

His chest stills. Then he finally looks up, and his bloodshot eyes are miles away from the playful hazel I'm afraid that I adore.

"I did this. This is my fault. It's been on me to protect you. But I—I got selfish. I took it too far." He sounds broken, and I hate that most of all, that he's this lovely and still breakable. "You can't get close to me."

"I'm okay. We're going to be okay."

"No, because, because you want to be invisible, you make these movies so you can be, and the team warned me, after that night in the club, that this would crush you. And I told myself it wouldn't. I wanted to think it wouldn't. But they were right. I'm going to hurt you, I was always going to hurt you, and now I have."

"I'm okay," I repeat.

"I never wanted this. I never—I want to be good for you."

"I know, sweetheart. Please, can you breathe with me?"

Needing to break through his thoughts, I peel his hand from his knee and hold it to my chest, right over my sternum, then inhale a deep diaphragm breath. As I count to five, I keep staring into Arthur's eyes. I don't blink. I don't dare. I can't let him slip back into his panic, shutting me out. Intense emotions like this can make a person act erratically. I remember it too well, trapped in my skin, boiling alive.

But he doesn't pull back. And when I get to five, Arthur starts to angle toward me, his rigid arm relaxing.

"What are you doing?" he says hoarsely.

“We’re breathing. It feels good.” I choose my words carefully; pointing out to someone that they’re having a panic attack isn’t exactly relaxing. “Breathe with me, Arthur. I dare you.”

A second ticks by. Then he inhales a noisy breath.

“Good. Hold it with me. We’re going to count for five.”

I count softly, one to two, three to four, as he looks at me. He doesn’t stop looking. Barely blinks. Slowly, his panic trickles away, revealing the desperation in his flushed face. When I get to five, I start back over at zero, and minutes pass just like that, me breathing, Arthur following, his gaze clinging to me. I shift us to breathing through our nose, taking a big, wheezy inhale as an example for him, and Arthur laughs. The broken chuckle grabs my heart and gives it a shake.

I make a vow to myself right then. I don’t know how I’m going to convince him, but I’m not letting Arthur go to Leone.

If I can, I’m going to help him never feel like this again.

His eyes trail down to his hand. I’ve got it wrapped up in both of mine so he can’t take it away from its place over my heart, our chests rising and falling in sync.

“Feel that?” I say once the color has returned to his cheeks.

The corners of his mouth wobble, and he sets his jaw, bracing against the admiration in his eyes. “Still alive?”

“Still alive,” I answer.

Chapter Twenty-Five Italy

“I’m smart. I’m capable. I’m okay,” I repeat to myself as I stare at the glass door separating me and Monza’s Paddock Club—the fanciest seating for the fanciest Formula 1 fans, above the garages with a view of the pit lane. After flying in with Arthur late last night, I’d looked up how much tickets to it cost. You know, just to see.

I’d tapped out of my internet browser before my heart gave out.

Confidence will be key today. Delaney and Sarah had volunteered to monitor the reaction online and spring the idea of “gently killing Black the three have that old-money cut to their jawline that sucks all the air out of a room.

“Lilah, you obviously know my uncle, Holmes,” Arthur says. “And this is my father, Lorenzo.”

“Hi. I’m so happy to—oh.” His father pulls me into a double-sided air kiss, his whiskery mustache tickling my skin.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Mr. Bianco says. “Please, call me Renzo.”

I’m so not doing that. A stab of anger digs into my side as I politely nod toward Holmes. It’s probably obvious from the way I can’t meet his eyes that I know what’s coming, but I don’t particularly care anymore what he thinks of me.

Mr. Bianco clears his throat. “Shall we sit?”

We sit. Arthur and me on the long couch, the two men on twin chairs. We're the only people out here besides a couple bored influencers charging their phones and a waiter on their lunch break, lemonade in hand. Arthur's arm loops around the back of my seat, and his thumb taps above my shoulder to the soft piano music. "Where's Mum?"

Mr. Bianco's brow creases. "Back at home. She didn't share my... concerns."

And away we go. Holmes lifts two fingers, flagging down a staff member, and asks for a bottle of red wine with an intimidating Italian name. "And I do apologize for calling this last-minute meeting," he says, glancing at me with his curious, burnt-chocolate eyes. "It's a busy week—but great to see you back at Monza, Arthur."

"I'm excited to be here," he says, a canned interview answer if I ever heard one.

"And you, Lilah. What a nice surprise to have our camera girl here." I inhale, mustering up a pleasantry that definitely isn't don't call me a camera girl, but Holmes slips right back into the conversation before I can speak. "It seems like you two may have lied to me about this little fling, hmm?"

"Uncle," Arthur mutters, frowning.

"What? It's the truth, isn't it?"

Arthur takes a long, silent breath. "So, concerns. What brings you to Monza, Dad?"

"This and that." Mr. Bianco picks up his damp cocktail napkin and slowly smooths out the wrinkles. "I thought it would be nice to visit. I never see you in person."

"Sure." Arthur's jaw shifts. "The three of us haven't been in a room together since Holmes retired."

I squeeze my mouth shut to hide my surprise. Holmes left driving to become a team principal after Arthur's accident. Which means... "I visited the hospital while you were out, to see my brother, of course, but you were asleep," Holmes says. "What's done is done. And family is family, right, little pigeon?"

Pigeon. I rest the side of my ankle against Arthur's foot. "What does that mean?"

Arthur pulls his foot from mine and flashes me an apologetic look. "Nothing."

"Aw, humor her." Holmes's eyebrows rise. "It's an old poker term. A 'pigeon' is a player with a bad strategy."

Mr. Bianco laughs. "He did always love those birds."

Arthur tenses beside me. "Dad."

"No, it's sweet. You always had a fondness for animals," Mr. Bianco says warmly. "Do you still bird-watch in the different cities you travel to?"

"No," Arthur says, but it sounds like a lie. My mind races backward—to breakfast on the roof, all the birds flying overhead. When he'd said he'd wanted to show me the view, I'd thought he'd meant the buildings and clouds. The golden hour.

Holmes nods, smiling. "Pigeons are wonderful animals. Lovely and obedient. Back in the day, they were bred to race. Now? They're useless without direction—thus the term."

My spine tingles as a pattern solidifies in my brain, something to grab on to in this weird conversation. "I guess Arthur isn't good at cards?" I say tentatively.

"Horrible." Holmes laughs.

The wine arrives. Holmes talks with the waiter about the year it was from, tannins, coloring, and I study Arthur. There's a low flush on his face, and he's removed his hat and pushed back his hair, revealing the sheen across his forehead. He's nervous, clearly. I don't need to riddle that out. But this is beyond anxiety. I saw his resolved, dissociated frown on a thousand faces when I was younger; it's the frown of a child doing their very best to put up with a guardian who's made their life a living hell. It isn't his dad that he keeps looking at, either. It's Holmes, in shifty glances and finger-fidgeting peeks, like Arthur can't take in the whole weight of the older man's silently crushing disappointment.

I rest my hand on his arm and take a sip of wine, since I can't do what I want to do: dump the glass on Holmes's head and pull Arthur out of here. We're stuck until Holmes frees us. All four of us know that.

I don't have to play as nice, though.

After swallowing the liquid courage, I say, "Let's get to it. We know you saw those photos, Holmes. Tell us what's actually on your mind."

Arthur's arm twitches under my fingers, but Holmes's mouth only quirks in a bemused smile. "Maybe I just wanted to talk to the girl my nephew likes so much."

"Holmes, she's right," Arthur says, more sure of himself, like my confidence is feeding his. "I'm respecting your wishes to meet. Please respect our time. I have other meetings today."

"Son, you know I've never liked telling you what to do, and that's why we sent you to study with Holmes. He always knows best," Mr. Bianco says, leaning to rest his elbows on his knees. He's in dark suit pants, the sleeves of his cream-colored button-down rolled up, and I can picture the annoyingly vague lectures Arthur must've gotten ages four through eighteen, sat down at a dining room table by a father who

didn't want to father. "But I'll say it. We wanted to meet you—I did—because you just can't date this girl right now."

This girl. My stomach plummets. I don't know what I expected, after months of being on the team, in the garage, but it wasn't that.

"It's not appropriate," Holmes adds breezily, clearly used to taking the Arthur reins. "You're a Bianco . The world watches what you do. And now with the changes Formula 1 has made in recent years—catering to 'mental health' and 'equality' and theatrics from underqualified female racing drivers—you want to have an affair with an employee? A girl who was hired to film you for the most important marketing project in American Formula 1 history? This is insanity. You'll grow tired of her, like you do all the others."

"Don't say that about—"

"Our family has invested millions in this film, all to bring the excitement and passion for Formula 1 to the U.S., for Ignition, for the new American circuit. I took this risk to help you. But we need to sell this story. There is a fortune at stake, an opportunity to become true legends in our sport, and I will not let you ruin another opportunity for our family."

"You did that!" Arthur snaps, and it's like watching a spool of thread get kicked down a staircase, how the anger he's been repressing unwinds until there isn't a single sharp smile that could hide it. "Don't act like I don't know what this is. You don't care about a movie or American fans. You both want to control me. And—and I don't need to put up with it. I can drive somewhere else."

I run my thumb over his knuckles, silently urging him to relax. He's going too fast, and I need to catch him before he startles himself into running away. "Arthur—"

“Who will take you?” Holmes says, exasperated. “Leone? They’d only do it to infuriate me. Cavalli? As if you could handle that.”

“Fuck you.”

“Language.” Pantomiming a better patriarch, Holmes frowns. “Arthur, the fact of the matter is that she was hired . She is not like us, and she will never be like us, and if you choose her, you will be vilified by her world and cast out of ours. Choosing a public partner is a matter of family business, and you cannot choose one that jeopardizes our business’s future.”

My muscles tense . Not like us. How many times have I dreamed about meeting my future partner’s happy, loving, perfect family? I know it isn’t super healthy to want to marry into a family more stable than your own, or have kids so that you get another shot. But I want it. I want Christmas mornings with the same place at the table every year, I want to be a mom and a wife who creates a better world for the people she loves. I want to fight for my family, not fight with them.

“Listen to him,” his dad pleads. “This is your moment. You’re almost back to Monza. When winter comes, Holmes can pull Faust, blame his headaches, give you the seat. You need to keep putting driving before all else.”

“I wonder why I need to do that,” Arthur mumbles beneath his breath.

Holmes’s eyes snap over, patriarchal sympathy gone. “What was that?”

“You heard me,” Arthur replies, glowering. “Neither of you are ready to admit what he did.”

No. He isn’t—is he implying...? “You needed to be taught a lesson,” Holmes scoffs. “I’m sorry for what I did that day. I had to. You know how it is when you drive—you

get competitive. But I love you, Arthur. I've mentored you since you were a child. I discovered your talent. And I pulled the strings I had to so that you could race Monza again and redeem yourself from that embarrassment I've covered up for as long as I can."

What he did that day. Holmes did it. On purpose. His uncle crashed into Arthur on purpose, and he just admitted it out loud, when—when I wasn't filming. My pulse wooshes, loud in my ears, and then Arthur is spitting back. "Please. Your movie was never an apology. You drove into me because you knew I'd get another championship, and you couldn't stand me having one more than you. You are a sad old man who has nothing left in your life except controlling mine. And you"—he turns to his father—"have never been brave enough to stand up to your younger brother."

"Enough," Holmes snaps. It's too loud, far too real, and he quiets himself down instantly, shifting in his chair. "You haven't lived one day of your life without me. You stepped into my legacy. You'd throw that away for her?"

I don't know why I flinch at the hatred in his voice. They don't like me—they'll never want me for Arthur. They agree with the online comments. I'm wrong, I'm not enough, again, always.

But when Arthur speaks, he doesn't just sound hurt. He's furious. "I already have, Benedetto."

Holmes blinks from the use of his real name, then gives Arthur a withering stare, resting back in his seat. "Fine. Then I'll give you what you want. After the Italian Grand Prix, I'll terminate your contract."

My eyes swivel to Arthur as his cut to me, then away, his cheek rippling with pent-up energy. Motorsports are dangerous. There's always risk. But I don't understand why

Arthur is just sitting here after Holmes admitted to what feels like a criminal offense, why he'd even want to drive the Grand Prix with Holmes as his team principal, knowing what he knows now. Redemption in Monza is what he wanted—what we wanted—but doesn't Holmes's admission change everything? Won't Arthur pick his safety and sanity over climbing back into the cockpit?

Arthur's brows draw in. He's thinking. Then he says, "Okay. Thank you," and I feel like I've lost him again, the Arthur I thought I knew, whisked into the air.

But maybe that version of him—who pushed and argued and stood up for himself, who asked me what I thought he should do, who made me feel like I was part of the plot instead of just watching—doesn't exist at all.

Maybe that version was just for my camera.

"Wonderful," Holmes says, back to his warmer self. "Why don't we celebrate with a game? For old times' sake."

Time slows down as Holmes pulls a deck of cards from the leather bag at his feet. It might stop entirely when he cracks it open. I'd know those cards anywhere, by sound, by smell. Bicycle playing cards, made in Erlanger, Kentucky. Once made by my birth mom.

Probably still made by her.

Holmes peels the plastic wrap off the deck. "Lilah, do you know how to play Texas Hold'em?" The plastic crinkles. "Maybe you're a better player than my nephew." He crumples it in his fist. "With how smart you've been this summer, I wonder if you can beat me."

"Apologies." Arthur exhales. "But we have to go. I have a meeting with Leone."

That's when he stands. On his feet, and up for himself. Driving for Leone. That's it. That's what he cares about the most. Not really Monza, and definitely not me. My fingers wrap around Arthur's wrist helplessly as this undeniable truth sinks in, floating on the surface of my brain, then crashing down, through the waves. The house always wins, my birth mom told me on my fifteenth birthday, written in a cheap card I'd watched her steal from Walgreens. The electric out, blankets on our laps, shuffling through the cards; King of Hearts, the suicide king. Queen of Hearts, the beheader. That's why real winners keep playing!

I'm standing, and Arthur must take my hand—but his grip slips as I get to my feet. "I'm sorry. This is... I have to..."

Arthur tries to touch me again. "Lilah?"

"I'm sorry," I whisper, then I'm out the Paddock Club door, gone, the watch on my wrist ticking like I've swallowed a time bomb.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I make it to the ground floor—down the Paddock Club’s stairs and through the crowd outside and there are too many people—before Arthur catches me, a hand around the elbow, gentle yet firm. Everyone around us is wearing red T-shirts and baseball caps, an ocean of Cavalli red and Leone yellow, and when I see the little golden lion logos, I cough out a humorless laugh that sounds as broken as my heart. The fan event has us surrounded.

“Lilah, stop,” Arthur says. “Talk to me.”

Someone looks over and notices Arthur. Then another person. The flow of the crowd is disrupted, one fan after the other stopping to see what everyone else is stopping to see.

Me.

They’re looking at me . Wondering who I am. The strange, small woman doing her best not to melt down in front of Arthur Bianco, who should be grinning in front of a camera right now but isn’t. My skin feels unbearably tight as I grab Arthur’s arm and drag him to a shaded doorway, swipe my Ignition badge, and push him through. It’s dark, cold. We’re in a supply closet, surrounded by Formula 1 advertising gear: posters, flyers, plastic cups.

Once the door’s shut, Arthur starts talking. “I’m sorry about how he is. This is why I wanted you to stay behind. But what he said about you isn’t true. You’re wonderful, Lilah. You’re perfect.”

He thinks I'm upset about Holmes's insults? Speechless, I press my palms into my eyes and shake my head.

"Please don't let him get to you. I'm going to go meet with Leone—I'll get this sorted."

By picking pain, by not walking away when his uncle admitted to harming him, by only focusing on which car he's going to drive next year. "We need to go to the FIA." My voice shakes, and I force a breath down to ease the ache. "Or-or the police. I don't know."

"Why?"

"Because you can't keep living like this!" As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I'm startled by just how much I've wanted to say this to him for weeks. Since we met, I've known something was wrong with Arthur, felt the dark outside the glow of the bright, happy circus. Suspected the lies whispered behind doors, on radio channels, in closed meetings. "Arthur, you aren't okay. You can't go meet with Leone right now. Your uncle almost ended your life, and he just admitted that in the Paddock Club."

He drops his voice. "Lilah, I... I know. But that isn't something I can do. No one would believe me over him, and drivers—all of us deal with abusive assholes in our families. This isn't any worse than what others have dealt with to drive."

I lower my hands, staring at his wide eyes and broken pain. "Why do you need to drive with Leone?"

His tongue darts over his lips, breathing uneven. "It doesn't matter that Holmes hit me on purpose. It was my fault. I lost control of the car. I didn't drive well enough. Unless I drive for them again, Lilah, it's going—I'll never get over it." He pauses,

inhaling, like he didn't know that he felt that way until he said it out loud. "I'm—I'm sorry to be this stubborn, I am, but you don't understand what it's like to fail in front of everyone."

"Don't I?" I flash him a sad smile. "Look online. Everyone knows the truth about me and nobody knows the truth about you."

"You do," he says, like that's enough, like that's ever been enough for anyone. "You're the only one I want to see me. Changing the world's mind about Holmes is a lost cause. And—and I can sign a yearlong contract with Leone. One year. Prove that I'm not a failure, then go to another team."

Here's the great big secret that anyone who's been thrown away by their family can tell you: It's humiliating. Yes, the throwing. But also, how much paranoia is stored in your body afterward, breaking down your ability to accept promises that life will turn out okay. Because maybe, if I was anyone else, I would accept what Arthur's saying. I'd see his vision of the future, him at Leone, happy and healthy, me on the sidelines, cheering and clapping.

But I'm me, Lilah Graywood, professional realist, a camera with a body, and I can see the pinhole shot at our happy ending getting smaller and smaller, a tunnel closing in the distance until the speck of light is swallowed up. I can see Arthur locking himself into another contract with another team that doesn't give a shit if he lives or dies. I can see him hiding his pain from me in locked bathrooms and dark corners.

He's setting himself up for the same pain he's always known. Family patriarch, to abusive team, to almost dying, rinse, repeat.

"No," I whisper, and the word feels wrong coming out of my mouth. I've so rarely said it. "I'm not doing this with you, Arthur. I can't pretend that I'm okay with this decision. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to—to force you to expose your secrets, I promise."

This isn't about the film, or my career, or any of that. I care about you, so much, and I want you to get everything you want and more—but not if it's hurting you. Not if you can't breathe when you think about it. You can't keep going through life on autopilot, hiding how badly you're hurting. For a job. For work." My lungs burn, but I keep going. "And you're right. I do see you. I'm not going to stop seeing you, even if you pretend that the last five years of your life never happened."

"I don't want that, I shouldn't have said that." He goes to touch me then stops, balling his fingers into his palms. "But I've seen you, too. You love being on the road with us, you love this sport, and everyone loves you, too. Trust me. Trust me that it's going to be good. You, and me, in Italy, at Leone. What's one year and then I've fixed my mistake?"

I want to trust him. God, I want to. But I feel like I'm holding a film strip of Arthur and me up to the light, searching for the one clue I've missed in washed-out amber negatives, the puzzle piece that means he can go back to Leone and the future he wants without submerging himself in his past, so deep he suffocates. And isn't this how love is supposed to be? Helping each other heal—stopping the person we love from breaking more bones—showing them that they deserve better?

"You need to listen to other offers," I say. "This isn't your only option."

"It's the only one I want."

"But what about what I want?"

"I was serious, what I said to you. I want it all with you and I see it, I see how to get there," he whispers. And I look at him, leaning and intense and endlessly hazel, his lips pressed together, hopeful. "I'd marry you today. Just let me do this, Lilah. Let me make our happy ending."

The film negative rips down the center.

That's the piece of the story I've always been missing.

Arthur believes in happily ever after. He thinks if he wants me, if he picks me, everything will work itself out, because he's a hero. He's golden. And more than anything, I know that he's an unstoppable force, and he knows that I'm an immovable object, and one of us will always have to give in, and that's why he's asking me to move out of his way. So he can do what he wants to do.

Delaney's words dance through my memory.

Liking a driver is pointless if you end up standing between them and a car.

You'll only get hurt when they pick racing over you.

Tears blur him into three figures, all of them reaching for me. I step back and cover my eyes. "No. No—I can't. If you're going to go to Leone, then do it. Go. But don't say you're picking this because you think it'll make me happy. Don't lie to me. And don't expect me to be here when you get back."

My skin goes cold as Arthur takes my hands, covers them, pushes my hair back from my face. I don't know if he believes me. He doesn't say. But he's warm, so warm, and I wonder if this is why we love the golden hour. Because it's a trick of the light. Because it's always about to end.

"Don't say that," he says roughly. "I know you've been hurt, but please, please trust me. You can rely on me. Just... stay in Italy until I'm done. Go to our hotel room and wait for me."

The rest of me breaks. "You're leaving right now?"

“They want to meet today. I have to.”

He doesn't. That's the truth; he could choose to stay. He could believe me over the ending he's told himself that we have, the one where somehow, he has me and I'm okay with him working for people who punished his pain and ingrained his anxiety into his bones, a team that blamed him for getting hurt, fired him for needing help, turned him into this perpetual actor who only cares about cars because that's why the world cares about him. A pigeon, bred to race. And I'm not okay with it. I can't be. How could I be?

Sniffling, I try a different approach. “Have you seen Roman Holiday ?”

“No.” He sounds confused, maybe irritated. Maybe. “But, Lilah—I'm sorry, I don't have time for this. I have to go.”

I nod. After that, I watch him leave. I don't move, hardly blink. And I wonder if he sees what I'm seeing; we'd teamed up to break us both free, and he'd managed to break us apart in the process. I watch as he opens the closet door. I watch as he steps outside. I don't yell, fight, or beg. I just see him pick his ending for us and silently take it in.

Quietly watching, like I used to.

Then, when I'm alone in the dark, my eyes stinging and my nose running and my throat full of tears, I call Delaney and start to cry.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I don't crash until I get to Delaney's room.

But then... I do. In every sense of the word.

When I can sleep—curled up in a pile of blankets on the floor because what did she mean, take the bed—I dream about my childhood porch and a spotlight that's always on, a lighthouse covered in salt and the birds that live on the very top floor. Then the hotel's very real housekeeper actually walks in, and all of us scream. "I'm sorry, I thought the room was empty," she apologizes for the hundredth time. There's a metaphor there, somewhere.

When Delaney and Sarah aren't in meetings, they sit with me in my burnt-out grief. I knew Delaney was going to be furious about Arthur's decision, like I am—and she is, silently sitting by the window, a bag of potato chips in her lap, as she thumbs through a long contract from Cavalli. "Static sent one over, too," she adds, almost emotionless. Almost.

I didn't expect the same anger from Sarah. "He's such a freaking idiot. Like, logically, no one should pick Leone over Cavalli. Cavalli is an infinitely better team." She rubs my shoulders, too empathetic. "He's only thinking with his ego. They always do. It isn't your fault, and you couldn't have changed his mind, I promise. Nobody blames you for how this went down, or needing space from him."

Tears sting my eyes. Neither of them says they told me so.

They don't have to.

Around the time they go to another meeting I'm not invited to, my phone starts buzzing with texts from Arthur. I glance at the first sentences.

Where are you?

Did you leave Monza?

Talk to me.

At least tell me you're okay.

I turn my phone to Do Not Disturb when, an hour later, I get an email that Black & Graywood has been fired.

The subject line is definitive. Heavy. Lilah Graywood: Contract Termination. I lay on the floor while I read Max and I's official severance letter. It's generic, from a nondescript Ignition address. Nothing about Arthur or Holmes. Just a block of legal-department text that explains, given that Max and I were both fired, Ignition has through the end of the month to hire another team to wrap up the documentary unless I'd like to buy the film rights off them.

That's right. Arthur was going to handle the legal side of the documentary. Without him to help me do this...

There's really no movie.

It hurts to breathe.

A file folder sits at the bottom of the email. I click into the attachment against my

better judgment. For your review, if you choose to purchase the footage back , the email said. The files must've been grabbed from my cloud, since everything is still organized exactly the way I left it, stored on Ignition's server so they wouldn't get suspicious. I click into the folder labeled June , find the British Grand Prix subfolder, and click.

Arthur on the podium lights up the screen, beaming and laughing and holding his trophy. Listening to his national anthem. Talking with journalists. My ridiculous heart pounds at the sight of him, failing to register that he's only one inch tall and absolutely not real.

The reporter's voice drifts from my phone. "But how did you feel out there today? What was it like to be back on the track?"

On-screen, Arthur is looking at the journalist. But when he's not, he's looking at me. Not the camera, me. "I'm looking forward to the rest of this season and next year."

I remember this moment. I remember holding my breath. Next, the journalist is going to ask him how he can be this hopeful about his chances. Only—that isn't exactly what happens.

From behind the camera, I laugh.

On-screen, Arthur's smile dips, that funny expression I hadn't been able to read at that time. His eyes find me as he leans forward, almost like he wants to come closer—closer to me and the laughter—then he settles back, smiles, and answers the question. "There's still time."

No. He hadn't meant...

I flip through the other clips from June. July. August. Interviews, B-roll, shots of

Arthur while he was on live television, when I thought he'd never notice me. Except he does. There are flashes, when he looks at the camera with utter concentration and a little half smile. The B-roll footage that should've been moving stock images of him looking cool and contemplative break the fourth wall—he's always glancing over at the camera, my camera. Me. I'm everywhere. When Arthur isn't searching me out, there's my voice or a hand, me laughing in the background, me talking to Delaney or Cameron. And as the weeks fly by, the emotion in Arthur's once-guarded face crystallizes, growing and shaping into gentle eyes and a barely hidden smile, the most unmistakable story that's ever been written...

We had pulled it off. We had ruined Ignition's documentary.

I'd filmed Arthur falling in love with me.

Hysterical laughter fizzes up my throat. They can't use the footage now, any of this, because he had loved me, me, and I hadn't even realized it. And now it's too late, he's picked what he loves more, and I'm alone, and this is so horrible and absurd and catch-22 that I can't stop laughing. If I stop, I might sob, and if I start crying, it's over. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I ask my phone screen. "You idiot."

When I'm all out of laughter, I wipe my sticky bangs from my forehead, barely catching my breath. Maybe I should go into extreme debt to buy this footage. I could keep it as proof that I really had caught this man's eye for one summer around the world.

One summer.

And August is almost over.

The thought makes me want to burrow under my blanket pile until the hotel concierge kicks me out.

But I can't. So I pick my phone back up, open the contact list, and do the next best thing. "Lilah, honey, hi," Mom says when she picks up, and yeah—she's been waiting for me. I calculate the time difference between an Italian noon and a Kentucky morning, and wince.

"Sorry for calling so early. Are you with Dad?"

"He's right here. Do you need him?"

"No. Just..." A sharp pain needles beneath my ribs, the first indication that the emotions I've been putting off are about to eat me alive.

"It's okay," Mom says gently. "What's going on?"

There's so much I haven't told her that I don't know where to begin. So I start from the very top of the list. "Max and I broke up."

"Oh, Lilah."

Her sadness punctures me, just like I knew it would. How my name soars out of her mouth. "It's okay. He didn't... want to be with me anymore."

It's such a stupid, childish way to summarize a breakup, complete with cheating, international travel, and competitive motorsports. Still, I can picture Mom's loving frown in my mind's eye when she tuts disapprovingly. "He's always been a fool."

"Mom."

"No, pumpkin. I mean that. I was happy you both found what you did when you did in each other, but he never could keep up with you. Who could? You're my little alien. You deserve someone who'll never hold you back."

Hearing her nickname for me makes the lump in my throat heavier. “Thanks, Mom. You aren’t mad?”

“Why would I be mad?”

I blink away tears, rubbing a finger beneath each eye and wishing it was someone else’s hand doing it for me. “I don’t even know anymore. It sounds stupid when I say it out loud. I just thought it would make you regret... you know, adopting me. I am an alien. Don’t you wish you’d gotten some basic daughter?”

I don’t mean it as an insult. Basic is exactly what I’ve always wanted to be. As someone preternaturally quirky, with niche and intense passions and a medically diagnosed brain, I’ve had people apologize to me for their Sex and the City rewatches and brewery trivia nights. As if I think they’re boring, when really all I want is to fit into life the way they do. I want so desperately to be happy—thoughtlessly and simply. I want to scream with other women about a mutual interest and talk about what I love without worrying that I’m accidentally hinting a moral superiority that doesn’t exist. From my vantage point, basic is beautiful. It means being a part of the crowd, a part of something .

Standing out, being nefariously and subtly different, is like having a splinter buried in your finger that you can’t see without a flashlight. It’s exhausting. I want to be like other girls. I want to be a human at all.

“Lilah, pumpkin, I will never regret making you our official daughter,” Mom says with enough tenderness to last me forever. “There were days when you were younger, I had less-than-kind thoughts about your birth family. But you? I’ve never not wanted you. I can’t imagine anyone feeling otherwise.”

“She emailed me. My birth mom.” Saying that makes me sick. “But I didn’t... I didn’t reply. I used to look for her, Mom. I waited. And now she’s right there, and I

can't. I don't want to."

"You don't have to."

"But I always do," I reply, tipping over into tears. "I always face the truth. I look at what hurts me. I'm—I used to be—a documentarian, and that was the one thing I had going for me. I could take the pain."

"Ah, there's where you're wrong, young grasshopper." I hear her soft smile. "Life doesn't need to be painful to make it meaningful. Do you remember what we told you on your adoption day?"

"Kind of," I croak.

"Your grandma always said the name Graywood meant a dead tree. Something that had stopped growing. But I don't see it that way," Mom says. "Gray trees grow despite the pain, not because of it, out in the cold, covered in moss. And you, my dear, will always be a Graywood. You're a good documentarian—and a damn good person—because you still keep your eyes open when other people would've shut them for good."

Her words trigger the memories. Mom and Dad had painted my bedroom dark gray before I'd moved in, and decorated it with glow-in-the-dark stars and filled bookcases and astrology posters. They'd advocated to our small-town teachers to learn more about ADHD and got me extra time on tests and big projects. They'd helped me get into college, editing my application essays about why my grades had slumped for a few years. Even when I hated myself the most, they'd picked me. They'd let me be—no, chose me to be—a Graywood.

I tilt my head to stop my tears from falling. Is she right? What if I'm the one keeping me away from life on Earth, trapping myself without air? "But... but there's this guy,

the one from the stories online,” I whisper. “And he loves me. I know he loves me. But we’re different, and he doesn’t see it. He’s really, really rich, and his family hates me—”

“Well, fuck them, then.”

“No, it’s...”

“No nothing,” Mom says with that Appalachian resolve I’ve missed. Chapter closed. “Because you know what? So what if you’re different? To hell with these rich folks, and screw this Arthur boy if he misses his chance with you because he’s too busy talking to some race-car team. You don’t exist to fit into his life. This is your life, too, Lilah Graywood. This is your one shot at this exact life. Go live it.”

When we get off the phone, I pull my locket out from under my shirt and slip my fingernail between the hinged heart-shaped sides. It opens, yesterday’s pill falling into my palm. I pocket it and look at the cut-out disposable-camera picture of me tucked into the silver heart frame. In the picture I’m still six years old, chubby and smiling and laughing, round cheeks and awful bangs.

Photographed by my birth mom.

It all comes back when I look at this photo. Her patchouli perfume oil. The clink of her press-on nails, thick with satiny nail polish. Our house, and how it vacillated between sardine-stuffed with life, new boyfriends and loud cousins and spinning vinyl records, to silence. To nothing.

But this girl, smiling in the photo? She’s laughing. She’s okay.

She had been loved enough to be photographed.

I hadn't only recorded Arthur falling for me. Every video I'd taken of him had been my love letter back, my battle against the ticking second hand to keep him frozen and safe with me. I'd loved him with glass between us, so clear that I don't know if he'd seen it until it started to shatter.

My birth mom had loved me, too, once. Probably more than I'd ever know. But she'd loved me with her own glass walls. She hadn't wanted the real me, couldn't cope with who I became, only found me now that I looked good on the outside.

That's the difference between her and me—I broke the glass. I only want the real Arthur. I learned from what happened with Max, stood my ground, and told the truth. Now any chance of making this film is over, and Arthur and I aren't documentarian and muse anymore. We're just... a man and a woman who met in a very unique way. I can't control his narrative anymore, if I ever could.

Whatever happens next is his decision. And he has to live his life, too.

I close the locket, drop it beneath my shirt, and look around. There's half an hour left in my friends' meeting. My stuff is packed already. I could get a flight right now and go home.

Or... I could do the one thing my birth mom never did.

I can be the person who stands up for me.

That night, sandwiched between Delaney and Sarah, I send three emails.

The first goes to Max.

I don't know if you remember when we first met. I thought you were the coolest person I'd ever seen in real life—how you walked into class and made those two guys

by you crack up. But that was always the problem: I saw you as a whole person, and you only saw me as a girl. Lesser. Stupid. Teachable. Controllable.

I used to put you on a pedestal so I could keep myself down. But you went along with it every time. I never listened to “the right” music. I never knew “the best” TV shows. I was always a little wrong. I think that’s why you picked me, too. I was already insecure about having ADHD and being from my hometown, and you could enjoy feeling superior to someone who you weren’t threatened by. I’m sure when you read this, you’ll roll your eyes and find an excuse to write it off, too, because that’s what you do. You’re too cool to be real. Too chill to be earnest.

You said I never let anything go, but you haven’t grown in the six years I’ve known you.

I don’t want to work with you again. I don’t want to be an “ad agency with style.” After today, you aren’t going to hear from me. You’re going to wonder, though. One day, in twenty years, I’m going to cross your mind, and it’ll click that you lost the best friend you ever had because you viewed women as below you.

And when you reach out to me, I won’t reply.

The second email is for Arthur.

I’m coming to Bob’s wedding. If you would like to talk there, then we can.

After that, I write a reply to my birth mom.

It’s long, rambling. At some point, all sentence fragments. I describe how I’ve felt haunted by her refusal to acknowledge me, how I grew up silent because she’d taught me that was safest. How her behavior had conditioned me to seek out a partner like Max, who corralled me and controlled me. Put me in second place.

And then, when I'm happy with it, the truth gleaming in black text on a harsh white background, I delete each word, one after the other, until the page is blank and I'm free.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Champagne?”

I hold up my glass of sparkling apple juice. “Learned my lesson last time.”

Delaney shrugs one pastel blue shoulder. “Smart,” she says, finishing her flute. “As the last man standing, I’ll take one for the team.”

“Cameron is also still employed.”

“Was he ever standing?”

When the three of us were choosing when to attend the wedding of Ignition’s owner—after Sarah revealed that she’d been placed on temporary leave by Holmes for “marketing negligence”—we’d unanimously decided to skip the vows. It seemed too awkward to sit through syrupy sweet nothings and timed dove releases if we were planning on attending Bob’s big day at the Royal Villa simply out of spite. “I read the Habsburgs built this place,” I whisper to Sarah.

“That’s nice,” she whispers back. “Who are the Habsburgs?”

I keep my palace history lesson short. I don’t know who Bob talked into marrying him, but when we spot the happy couple in front of the black-tie crowd, lifting twin bottles of Veuve Clicquot as horses bow behind them, I have to muffle a laugh. True to his Texas roots, Bob has paired his glossy black tuxedo with white cowboy boots and a Stetson hat on top of his beaming head.

“Ridiculous,” Delaney grumbles as we pass by a long harvest table draped in white silk and not one, not ten, but thirteen wedding cakes.

“You don’t like cake?” Sarah asks.

“I don’t like thirteen cakes.”

“There have to be, like, two thousand people here. Thirteen isn’t enough.”

“Remind me again why I’m here?”

“You like me, unfortunately,” I say. “And you wanted to help us make a point, since Sarah and I wouldn’t have made it past the guards up front.”

A smile threatens Delaney’s mouth. “Oh, right. I’m the employed friend.”

To no one’s surprise, the inside of the neoclassical palace isn’t less ridiculous. Small spotlights are nestled in the villa’s lush golden interior, highlighting the swirling gilded wallpaper and illuminating the various chandeliers, candles, drink glasses, rows of cutlery framing each porcelain plate. As we get closer to the many tables, I square my shoulders and clench my hands at my sides so I don’t tug at my brand-new floor-length black dress. This is me being brave, facing my fears, and standing tall under the judgmental glances from the Formula 1 elite, living my one life. I smile as Delaney and Sarah introduce me to an endless assortment of people—F1 staff from every country, sculpture artists, chemists, a billionaire’s wife who moonlights as a girls-in-STEM activist, an actor who’s convinced that he knows me from a childhood gig. “I swear I’ve seen you somewhere else,” he says.

“It’s the glasses.”

“Are you a DJ?” a professional horse trainer asks me. “You look like a DJ.”

“No, but thank you.”

“I know you!” squeals a champagne heiress. Not that one. “I saw you on Reddit!”

“That you did.”

Once we’ve made it to an open table by the dance floor, Delaney goes to find water and Sarah leaves for cake. Alone, I slide a hand up my forearm, surveying the warmly lit, richly perfumed room. Okay. I’m here. With all the rich, powerful people, for one more night. I should... go dance. Or, maybe, stuff as many vegan appetizers as I can in my tiny sequined bag? I bite my lip, the old shame trickling in. I’d told Arthur that I was going to come but hadn’t told him when. I’d just hoped we’d miraculously bump into each other, finale style.

Which feels overwhelmingly immature now that I’m here, waiting to be bumped into.

A hand brushes the back of my arm, and I turn, my heart already in my throat. But it isn’t Arthur. Dressed in head-to-toe glitter is an older, statuesque British woman with the sharpest eyeliner I’ve ever seen. “Lilah Graywood?” She tilts her head, slicked-back bun not moving an inch. “I’m Miriam, the director of marketing here at F1. Do you have a moment?”

Many, in fact. The word that leaves my mouth is, “Um.”

She arches a gray brow. “Is that a yes?”

My brain kicks back into gear, and I nod to the glitter-F1 lady. Once she’s seated next to me, Miriam crosses her legs—revealing an impressively high slit up one side of her silver dress—and smiles. “You’re a hard woman to track down.”

“I am?”

“I’ve been emailing you all week.”

“Oh.” The hamster wheel in my head spins, then stops. “I’m sorry. Ignition probably deleted my work email.”

The edges of Miriam’s impeccably lipsticked smile turn up. “About that. I’ve been following your project with Ignition, and I was wondering when you were going to make that documentary of yours.”

I laugh, then clap my hand over my mouth. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. It’s just, um, I... I can’t make the movie. I don’t have the rights to the files. Among other things.” Namely, I fell in love with the subject matter. Also that.

Miriam blinks. “But you do. I cleared the paperwork yesterday.”

I’m not following. Paperwork to love Arthur? “Ah-ha,” she says, lightly banging a posh fist against her very smooth palm. “My email must’ve gotten lost in your deleted inbox. Lilah, you do own the rights to the film footage. Or rather, they were purchased in your name.”

I’m... confused. There isn’t anyone here that would want me to have those files. “What do you mean?”

“Arthur Bianco purchased the rights for you,” Miriam answers.

At that, my brain does the same thing it always does: spits out every bad ending like I’m a doomsday algorithm. “No. He bought the footage? Arthur—Arthur wants me to make a documentary?”

“That is the implication I received, yes,” Miriam says tactfully. “He also noted something about IP theft? I didn’t quite understand that part. Here.” She pulls her

phone from her clutch. “Do you have a functional inbox? I’ll redirect his note your way—network admin perks.”

I nod, wait, and whatever else I was going to say vanishes.

Lilah,

I’m sorry.

For many things. Wasting time. Not telling you sooner that I wanted you so badly that I was pacing hotel hallways at night, thinking about knocking your glasses off with my mouth. For lumping you in with bad journalists and past relationships. For hiding the panic attacks—because you’re right, that’s what they are, and I can get help.

But most of all, I’m sorry for trying to make you, the most honest person I’ve ever met, go along with my lies. I’m sorry that it took me this long to see that, despite what my family taught me, a true man would listen to you.

I was a child when I first drove. My parents and I were out at a restaurant, and a woman had a reaction to her food. Allergies, maybe. But my parents were gone, waiters, too. The keys were on the table. I did what anyone would do and drove her to the hospital. She lived. That’s when I discovered that driving is freedom, but it’s taking care of people, too. When I’m out there on the track, I’m driving for people. They’re in the car with me. When you win, you don’t just do it for yourself.

I’d forgotten that until I met you.

I was wrong when I said you make movies because you want to be invisible. You do this for other people, too. You record the world because you love the world. And I will not be the person who comes into your life and changes that by forcing you to

close those big eyes of yours. And I can't say you can rely on me and not show it.

So, I've paid for the documentary footage. For you. My lawyers are in the process of transferring the film rights to your name. You should be receiving an email with the new file links and notes shortly. I'm not sure if you've reviewed the footage yet, but—hell, sweetheart. Put a camera in your hands and you've made a movie.

Make the documentary you want to make. About Leone, or Holmes, or me. Rip me up. Find some good shots of birds. Do whatever you want with it. Your work is yours now, like it always should have been.

Also yours,

Arthur

P.S. My lawyers have been busy reviewing our options with Holmes, but they've found a moment to draft what's perhaps a strongly worded email to Max regarding his IP theft of the name "Black where his heart beats. "Belgium, Hungary, Monaco, England. You give me air."

My throat tightens as Arthur searches my face, looking for the wrong turn he doesn't see coming, a fear I've felt a thousand times. Waiting for someone to leave, loving without being loved back.

This time, there's no wrong turn. There's just his Adam's apple bobbing as his jaw sets, and his glassy eyes sweeping mine, and all the love Arthur has in his heart reflected back to him from me. I get to be the person who loves him back.

Lucky me.

I already know his next question. "And are you sure that you really..."

“Love you? Yes.” I cup his face, not caring who sees us touch or what they’ll think. Our friends, the team, all these rich people and their opinions. “I love your mind. I love your optimism. I love... I love how you don’t let anything go.” Tears line my eyelashes, making it hard to speak. “That future you see in me... I see mine in you. I think I can only see it with you.” Like a camera, I think. To work, cameras need light. But I need him more than that—more human than that. And that’s why I ask, “Can I kiss you?”

A surprised breath leaves his mouth, and he looks around again. “We have company.”

I look, too. The wedding photographer has a camera pointed our way. She has curly bangs, glasses, that blush we camerapeople get when we’re at the right place at the right time.

My heart pounds. “I’m ready,” I say. “Are you?”

There’s a piece of me that knows this isn’t our last conversation about what happened, by far. That tiny, steadfast sliver of logic is outweighed by his smile, though. Arthur grins.

“Born,” he answers.

Being a main character is going to be an adjustment. Letting go of creative control and letting life happen—that’s hard. But it’s only Arthur and me in this last breath of summer when he kisses me. There aren’t people watching. No music, no cameras. It’s just us. Forget us here, I’d tell the watch ticking away at my wrist if time had ears and would listen to someone as small as me. Go on, we’re okay being left behind.

Time does me one better, though. It keeps going and going, giving me the only other option I’d take.

Every next second with him.

“Want to get out of here?” I say once we’ve broken our mildly scandalous kiss. “It is a school night.”

“Since I’m not driving tomorrow, I was thinking we could stay,” Arthur says, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I know of a few rooms. Private ones. Where no one could see us.”

I catch his hand with mine. “Thought you liked being watched?”

“Rude.” A heady cocktail of want and affection darkens his eyes, and he clicks his tongue. “And to think, you seem so nice from the outside.”

“Arthur.”

“So... calm?”

“Hmm.”

“So honest.”

“Very true, good boy. Best boy.”

He laughs, and then his arm is around me, and I have just enough time to text Delaney and Sarah an explanation before he’s leading me down a darker, less populated hallway, off from the wedding party. “Rumor says there’s a way to get on the roof, too,” Arthur says against my cheek, nose barely close enough to graze my skin, a whisper of a non-touch. “But only the brave of heart and sound of mind can find it. Like Excalibur, for exhibitionist debauchery.”

Briefly, I debate the repercussions of getting kicked out of a multimillionaire's wedding. Seems pretty inconsequential at the moment. So I trail my hand up his sleeve, pull him down to my level, and try to say everything I feel by pressing a tiny, breathless kiss to his flushed cheek. "Let's see if we have what it takes."

"Was hoping you'd say that," he hums. With only one tug, he has me pressed into his chest in this empty palace hallway, his mouth a warm promise on mine.

And this time, I let myself believe in him. On the night-swept roof, back at the hotel, in the crisp white sheets scattered with his bow tie and my dress and one thousand kisses, I believe every promise Arthur makes. I believe that it's real when he drags me onto his lap and says it's where I belong, here, on him, in any country, anywhere, his wife whenever I want to be. And I want it. This. How Arthur winds our fingers together when he pushes me to my perfect breaking point, a reminder that he's right there, too. How he kisses me like I'm the one who smells like champagne, tastes like breathing, and feels like home.

I believe in Arthur, in me, in us.

And when he says he loves me, I say those three words right back to him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Crowds are queued up outside the Monza circuit's security gate as Sarah, Delaney, and I navigate to the Paddock Club's staff entrance. Delaney swipes us in just as someone recognizes me—so Sarah grabs my hand and yanks me through the doorway into the dark interior. There's a flight of dimly lit stairs up to a side kitchen, and as we silently walk by the lit-up doorway, I hear chefs already grumbling about the clientele's menu. Grouse served over parmesan risotto, chicken Milanese, something with a pheasant; the scent of meat and wine is thick in the air. Only the best for these very important people.

Then we're out on the dazzling sunlit balcony of the Paddock Club. The breeze dances with the musical buzz of refined chatter and anachronistic techno, and I scan the well-dressed crowd for our target. White blouses. Linen pants. So many watches.

There he is.

For a moment, I have to remind myself to keep standing as my anxiety rears its ugly head again. This is a downright crazy plan. Bonkers. Maybe not entirely legal.

Then I glance at my friends. Sarah on my right, Delaney on my left, and a switch flips inside me. I'm far from alone this morning. Whatever happens next, we'll figure it out.

Together, the three of us walk over to Holmes Bianco.

He's seated next to Bob at a slim white cocktail table on the far corner of the patio,

dressed in his typical race-weekend Ignition polo and slacks—perfectly inconspicuous. When Holmes spots me, his gaze returns to his glass of whiskey, then snaps back up and widens.

I smile. “Hi, mind if we join you?”

Bob laughs incredulously to Holmes. “You know these little ladies?” When he stands to greet us, the sun hits the oversized eagle-shaped belt buckle cinching his tight button-down. He’s a soft man, corn-fed and smiley, probably in his late fifties.

Seeming to realize he better play Southern hospitality if he wants to stay in Bob’s good graces, Holmes stands to greet us, too. “Lilah, I didn’t think we’d see each other again,” he says tightly. “And in the Paddock Club. What a surprise.”

My pulse drums in my throat. “I was hoping I could take you up on your offer.”

Holmes cocks his head. “Which one?”

“Texas Hold’em.” I let my eyes fall, going for dejected youth. “This might be the last time I get to play you.”

Right on cue, Sarah squeezes in closer to my side and whispers to Holmes from behind a cupped hand, “Arthur and her had a big fight.”

“Oh! You.” Bob points at me, evidently none the wiser that I was at his wedding last night. To be fair, there were a lot of people. “You’re the girl dating my race-car driver, aren’t you? The little thing from Kentucky. I have to say, you’ve caused quite the commotion—and I’m sure you’ve gotten an earful, but I don’t care about all this human resources crap.” He laughs. “You all work for me?”

We nod.

Bob grins. “Well, aren’t I blessed? Come sit down.”

I sit next to Bob, Delaney taking his other side. Sarah flanks Holmes, just like we’d planned. “So, you know how to play poker?” Bob starts as he waves over a cocktail waitress and orders a round of early-morning champagne. The race is hours from now, though the Paddock Club is already hopping with the special guests allowed in before the rest of the ticket holders, actors and influencers and athletes.

I cross my arms, hoping I look shy. Controllable. “Sure do. My birth mom taught me. She was like you, Holmes. Always looking for another chance to win.”

The waitress sets five fizzling flutes on our table, then flits off, and once she’s gone I sigh out, “I haven’t played since I saw her. But I’d like to see if I can beat you, if you don’t mind.” I slip my hand into my jacket’s pocket and pull out the Bicycle deck I’d bought last night. “Brought my own. Funniest thing, too. I think these were the cards you had last time. And they’re common, for sure, but my birth mom worked at the factory that makes them.”

Holmes’s dark gaze sweeps down to the cards, then up to my face. My heart is pounding so loudly I barely hear the cars looping through the media’s hot laps. Although we have an excellent view of the track here in the Paddock Club, the television over Holmes’s shoulder is better. Subtitles run across the bottom of the screen, the announcers excitedly talking about the weather and track conditions and the best tires for a sunny day in Italy.

“I don’t have time for this. I have to be down at the pit wall,” Holmes scowls out, and it feels so good because I know . I was right to invade his space, walk onto his fancy balcony. He’s furious and curious, just like I knew he would be.

With a frown, I open the deck and set the cards on the low table. “Don’t you want to see if you can win against someone as smart as you?”

It's a cocky thing to say. Arthur-approved. But damn, does it work. The older man's face goes from cold intensity to wild surprise, and I have the pleasure of watching him get mad, really mad, before he hides it behind his I'm-so-intelligent smile.

"Oh my God, Lilah, you're so funny." Sarah giggles. "Poker is so confusing, I have no idea how to play. Can I be on your team, Uncle Holmes?"

"Yeah, Uncle Holmes. Didn't you say you wanted to play me today anyway? It's still my wedding weekend." Bob takes a long swig of champagne.

Holmes doesn't say anything for a long minute. "Fine. I'll deal."

Bob beams as Holmes snatches the deck and shuffles quickly. Then he's setting down the cards, two in front of Bob, me, and himself. He pulls a scrap of paper from his inside coat pocket and passes it to Sarah. "We'll write our bets here. As soon as it's written down, it's locked in."

"You like doing that, don't you?" I ask him. "Locking things down."

The first game is a wash. Holmes wins. The men make small talk as I run the numbers in my head. I folded two rounds in, so I'm only down a couple of hundred dollars. The next game is where things start to pick up, the first win going right to Holmes's head. He finishes his champagne and orders another round, despite nobody else close to being done with theirs.

I stare at my cards, thinking rapidly. Time to kick things up, or else Holmes might scamper away before I can catch him. I have two kings—diamonds and spades—so I may as well go for the jugular. "Hmm... I think I'll raise to two hundred thousand. It's no sixty million dollars, but it's a start."

Sarah almost snaps her golf pencil in half. "Two... hundred... thousand," she repeats,

scribbling, Bob's happy laugh drowning out the crowd.

"I love it!" He smirks at Holmes. "Come on, old friend. You gonna let her get away with that?"

A flicker of nervousness crosses Holmes's face. "Call."

"Smart move." My voice shakes, but I'm smiling from ear to ear. Because I know something that Holmes Bianco doesn't. I know that we sent Max's audio to Miriam, the FIA, and the Italian authorities this morning. I know that it never mattered who won these rounds of poker, or even out there on the track later, since I've only been winding Holmes up until I can get him to confess again, in higher definition. And I know, when I hear footsteps behind me, who's appeared to play the final hand against his uncle.

"Hey!" Arthur swings onto the sofa beside me. He's wearing normal jeans, a normal white T-shirt, and that smile I knew would be there, lighting up the whole world. "Anyone in the lead yet?"

It's quiet. Holmes looks between all of us. Bob, Delaney, Sarah, Arthur, me. "What's going on? Arthur—where's your race suit?"

"Great question." Arthur loops his arm around my middle. "Story starts a long time ago, though. Back when I was a kid named after someone great, who got knocked out by his own family. And back when you were named after one of the smartest men who never existed." He tilts his head, his smile sharp. "Maybe that's how I figured it out so fast. I mean, it's ironic. You crash into me, make it look like a complete accident, and almost do me in? It's Arthurian as hell."

Arthur looks at me. "But who'd believe me over you? You'd taught me that I'm reckless, stupid, wild Arthur, and you're the wonderful, pragmatic Holmes Bianco.

So, I kept my thoughts a secret, and all the shit I had to deal with because of them... until her.” He squeezes me close, his nose skimming my cheek, tickling my skin. “She could’ve gone along with the same story everyone knew. She could’ve written me off, sold me for parts. But she didn’t. Because she’s the one thing you never could’ve expected, Uncle—she’s a good person. She never cared if I won or lost. She only wanted me to be happy.”

Bob turns to his old friend, shocked. “Is it true? Back then, here at Monza... did you really...?”

The mask Holmes has worn is gone. He’s a deep angry scarlet, and Sarah moves to squeeze in next to us on our sofa, cringing. “He’s lying. He doesn’t have any proof.” The man throws his cards face down on the table. “Arthur, think critically. It isn’t too late. Go downstairs. Get ready to drive. This is Monza—this is where it happened—and you can’t not drive today.”

“Why?” Arthur asks. “Just curious is all.”

“Because... you need to. I—I can still make you the best driver of your generation,” Holmes stammers. “You need this. If you would’ve been smart enough to learn the lessons I taught you, if you would’ve manned up and stared death in the face like a Bianco—”

“Actually, I think he’s super smart,” I interrupt. “And you still haven’t answered the question about why it’s so important for Arthur to go out there.”

“Shut up!” Holmes yells, and now the Paddock Club has fallen bizarrely silent as the millionaires and models watch the infamously calm Holmes Bianco scream at me. “So what if I did hit him? You’re what’s wrong with Formula 1. Things worked before your type joined. There was order, efficiency. You think you know what’s better for this sport than a man who’s lived it since he was born? You are nothing

here. You don't belong."

"No, that's not true. I don't think I'm what's wrong with F1." I don't know where I find this strength. This power. It doesn't come from Arthur, or my friends. It's deep inside of me, like it's been waiting for this moment, when I could play against Holmes, against my birth mom, against myself, and see that I always win when I stop playing. "You should check out what my company recorded you saying. You remember Max Black, right? Well, he's really into audio. He'd rigged microphones all around the Paddock Club before we'd met with you the other day. I didn't even think to look until Arthur bought me the film rights." It'd been right there beside our love story. Muffled, but there. "I guess it wasn't that smart to hire a documentary company this summer, huh?"

Holmes explodes. "You conniving, gold-digging—"

Really, there are enough mimosa-gulping witnesses around to watch his meltdown, I don't need to grab Delaney as security finally rushes over. I do anyway, Arthur shielding us as guards pin Holmes to the concrete floor.

"Did you get that?" I ask her breathlessly.

Delaney nods to the Panasonic camcorder stuffed in her bag. Old school. "Recorded everything."

"Lilah!"

The bellowing startles us apart. Twisting, I find Holmes staring up at me from the ground, one guard's boot squarely on his back. "The game. Show me the cards," he hisses. Red, angry. Desperate not to lose. "Please."

Slowly, I look at his crappy hand, left behind on the table. Then I think about my

own. Might've been a stroke of luck—another cosmic joke—but between the cards on the table and my own hand, I have all four kings.

Today could've been different. Arthur could've spent the morning preparing for another grueling race, shutting away his emotions, climbing into the car, instead of hatching this plan with our friends. And in that other reality, I would've tried to understand, since I'm only just learning myself what it's like to live without pain giving my life meaning.

Luckily, I don't have to find out how that sadder story goes.

Sidling up to Arthur, I wrap my arm around his waist and smile up at him. "What do you think? Should we show him?"

Arthur looks down at me, humming, pure sunlight in his eyes. "Don't think we have to. We already know who won here."

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:26 am

Epilogue One year later

Three seconds. Four. Five.

I watch the five red lights, refusing to blink.

They go black. The cars kick forward.

I lean forward in my chair, too, brace my elbows on my desk, and suck at the ginger candy Merlin gave me.

“Back in Monza!” Arthur sings over the radio. “How’s everyone feeling?”

“Focus, King,” Cameron orders. “This one’s yours to lose.”

Usually, the Cavalli garage is a finely tuned machine. There’s Cameron tuned in to the telemetry, ordering Arthur through the races. Merlin in the back, tracking his vitals. Sarah and Delaney, juggling his social media second by second. And me, Cavalli’s newest junior strategy analyst, doing what I do best: watching life through a screen.

Only here, I get to do it for my team.

But this race has us a bit stressed. It’s Arthur’s first Italian Grand Prix at Cavalli, and after my film about last summer catapulted him to bona fide racing legend, Leone has been nipping at our heels all weekend. Sadly, dear uncle Holmes isn’t here to see Arthur kick their asses. After getting charged by the FIA for conspiracy connected to

Arthur's accident—and getting suspended from Formula 1—the police began sniffing around. A wild month and some tax evasion evidence later, and F1's famously careful driver-turned-team-principal is currently sitting in a white-collar prison somewhere. Which is nice and all, but giving our documentary the perfect, most poetic ending was icing on the cake.

Also, the millions of dollars as payout from Holmes's estate, Ignition, and Leone. Money I've thoroughly enjoyed sending home to Kentucky.

"I saw that!" I hiss beneath my breath. We're only on lap fifteen, and Jean-fucking-Baudelaire just pushed Arthur off the track. My fingers fly as I tap my rewind key—back, back, cars flowing in reverse, sun shining backward. There. "Arthur was ahead at the apex," I tell Francesca, the senior analyst and my boss, who will go and tell her boss, who will tell his boss's boss, all the way up to Cavalli's team principal.

I watch the communication flow. People talking to people. Rules being monitored.

Pride swells in my chest as I swivel back to Arthur's screen. He's already gotten his position back. "Oh, we're so calling Jean out online," Sarah mutters at her phone, apparently watching the clip back for herself. "Should I share that clip of him from that Wunsch afterparty? Is that evil?"

"Chill." Delaney frowns. "We should wait to see what the stewards say."

"Heck no, you heard Lilah. She never gets these wrong."

"There was that time, in Monaco."

"We were freaking robbed! They got Arthur's and Rafael's cars confused!"

While I've been waiting on my next film inspiration to strike, so I can take Miriam up on her offer for more Formula 1 movies, I've enjoyed this. Us. Using my eyes to keep

Arthur—and our team—safe. Rolling up the sleeves of my number nine jacket and getting down into the camera work that keeps this sport going.

And when he wins, it feels extra good.

Today more than ever.

As Arthur pulls into the spot marked for the Italian Grand Prix winner, the garage pours into the pit lane to meet him and fans pour onto the track, a sea of Cavalli red, flags, streamers. An ambulance is parked next to the track, and the blue lights on top of it shine through the confetti, guiding me to the right fence. That was another string my film had pulled; after Arthur stepped forward and demanded better mental health support for drivers following traumatic accidents, there's now additional, optional cooldown time following each race for the athletes to recover before they're forced in front of fans, media, the world.

I see him in profile at first. The strong slant of his nose, his balaclava-tousled blond hair going every which way, his dimpled cheeks as Merlin frowns through taking his pulse. Above him, it's yellow and clouds, gray birds turning into black shadows against the sky. Around him, it's summer. It's warm. The whole world cheering as the sky turns gold again, like it always does. Even when it feels like it's going to be dark forever, the gold never goes away for long.

That's it, I realize. That's the magic of the golden hour. It reminds us that there's one moment in all the seconds of the day that's better than the ending, the in-between light that exists seemingly only for those bold enough to notice it. It's audacious. Cocky. It dares us to be something besides another second ticking on the clock, spiraling toward the world's end credits, waiting for the curtain to drop. It's a moment that's more than the sum of its parts, more beautiful for no reason at all.

And it always comes back.

My headset slips down my neck as I stick my hand through the gaps in the chain-link fence. “Arthur!” I yell, waving. This is our ritual: either he can wave me over to meet him by the ambulance, to relax with him and help him catch his breath. Or—

I’m not close enough to hear them over the roar of excited fans, but Arthur’s mouth moves as he pulls a startled-looking Merlin into a quick hug. And without the help of a zoom lens, I can’t really see his eyes as he spots my tiny, frantically waving hand. But Arthur points at me. He waves back just as wildly, then motions to the pit lane.

I turn and run.

There are stairs and a dark hall, people and photographers, and then the door swings open and the light spills in and I’m out in the pit lane with our team, our world, my husband. Arthur tosses his helmet right before I jump into his arms, and I want to kiss him. He’s messy and sweaty and I want to kiss him. So I do, and then he’s sweeping me off my feet, and I’m screaming with delight, and there’s the click-click-click-click-click of cameras and our friends calling for us and him, him, him.

“Hey, Graywood,” Arthur says. “Good race? Did your team win?”

“Obviously,” I reply, out of breath. “Did yours , Graywood?”

He laughs, all wind chime, all mine. “Obviously.”