CARLY ROBYN

DRIVE ME crazy



DRIVE ME *crazy*

Carly Robyn writes contemporary romances with heart, heat and humor. When she's not writing or reading, you can find her spending time with her family, scrolling through TikTok, exploring Chicago's restaurant scene with friends, watching a Grand Prix, taking a million pictures of her dogs or binge-watching anything true crime-related while drinking a Diet Coke.

Follow her on social media for updates: @carlyrobynauthor.

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For my mom.
You're the reason I love stories and the reason I believed in myself enough to write this one.

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AUTHOR'S CONTENT NOTE

This book is written in a light and humorous style but does touch on subjects that might not be suitable for everyone. Mentions of anxiety, panic attacks (one on-page), explicit language, sexual assault (past, off-page), self-medicating with alcohol and drugs, references to absentee parents, and death of a parent (past, off-page) are present in the novel. It is a slow-burn, open-door romance that portrays sexual content and is meant for readers 18+. Please take note!

The focus of this work is on the fictional characters and events within the Formula 1 racing world, and deviations from the current Grand Prix schedule and tracks are intentional for storytelling purposes.

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PLAYLIST

Late Night Talking | Harry Styles
Take a Chance on Me | ABBA
Kiss Me More | Doja Cat ft. SZA
Foreign Land | Emily James
Swim | Chase Atlantic
Feel Again | OneRepublic
I Don't Care | Ed Sheeran & Justin Bieber
King of My Heart | Taylor Swift
We Are the Champions | Queen
No Control | One Direction
I Like Me Better | Lauv
Thinkin Bout You | Frank Ocean
Burnin' Up | Jonas Brothers
Lasting Lover | Sigala, James Arthur
Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You) | Kelly Clarkson

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ONE
ELLA

IT'S SO cold out that my nips could be classified as weapons of mass destruction. I walk down the sidewalk, shivering against the biting chill as a light layer of snow dusts against my shoulders. My winter jacket is a lot better at making me look like an extra-fluffy marshmallow than keeping me warm.

Buildings stretch toward the night sky and cast eerie shadows onto the cars careening down the street at a break-neck speed. When I first moved to the city—hell, even a few months ago—the sight of the skyscrapers and classic yellow taxis brought a smile to my face. Now they serve as mocking reminders that the concrete jungle thoroughly whooped my ass. And not in the kinky spanking kind of way. More in a that-hurt-so-badly-I'm-never-sitting-again way.

I would've been more than happy to ghost everyone in Manhattan, but Poppy insisted on a proper send-off. It's the only reason I'm dragging my ass to her place in twenty-degree weather. When I finally arrive, I'm so focused on thawing my frozen fingers that I walk straight into a Hot Wheels piñata.

Oh my God.

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Poppy's entire Midtown apartment has turned into a race

car enthusiast's wet dream. Signs reading "Yield to Party" and "Race in Progress" cover the walls, and checkered flags hang from the ceiling. The only thing indicating this isn't a four-year-old's birthday party is the excessive amount of alcohol in the kitchen.

I spy my best friend through the red, black, and white balloons floating around aimlessly. My mouth falls open, but no words come out. She's propping up a life-size, custom cut-out of Formula 1 legend Blake Hollis with his arm draped over some unknown woman. A woman who just so happens to have my face photoshopped over hers. *Lord help me.*

Blake looks gorgeous as per usual, but nothing ruins a pretty face more than a bad attitude. It's no wonder his team wants to have a biography written and released in less than a year. He needs as much good PR as he can get after last year's train wreck of a season.

I'm studying the display, contemplating how I'd look if I were supermodel tall with boobs faker than Monopoly money instead of five-foot-two with run-of-the-mill B-cups, when Poppy pulls me in for an organ-crushing hug.

"Ella! What do you think?" She twirls in a circle, arms above her head. "Perfect, right?"

"It's perfectly on theme," I agree, taking another bewildered look around. It's over-the-top, but then I wouldn't expect anything less. Poppy has the impressive ability to hyper-focus on a project to the point where it surpasses even the highest of expectations. It's annoying as hell when her projects happen to be my love life and floundering career, but I'll admit her apartment looks good. I wouldn't mind turning Blake's cardboard body into some type of dart board, though.

Jack bounces over from where he's sitting on the couch. He looks like he just walked off the cover of a billionaire romance novel with his perpetual smirk. He greets me with a one-armed

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hug before turning to Poppy. "Can I be done blowing up balloons?"

"I thought you loved blowing." Batting her piercing blue eyes, she flutters her lashes innocently. "That's why I gave you that job in the first place."

"Ha." He rolls his eyes, a teasing quirk at the corners of his mouth. "I do. I just prefer it be muscular blonds with daddy issues instead of balloons."

The conversation snowballs into Jack's latest dating mistake on a long list of many. He'll probably be Poppy's new project once I'm gone. I swallow the lump in my throat, trying not to focus on how much I'm going to miss them.

As if she can sense the chink in my armor, Poppy sighs dramatically and says, "It's not too late to back out and look for another job in New York."

I'm not sure how many times we can have this conversation before my head implodes. Two more times tops. Maybe. I throw my arm around her shoulders and gently shake her.

"It's definitely too late for that. I'm going," I confirm. A cold thrill goes up and down my spine. "And it's a phenomenal opportunity."

When I reached out to my mentor, George Phillips, for advice after leaving PlayMedia, I'd been expecting some career guidance. Instead, he offered me a job to be his feet-on-the-ground co-author for Blake's authorized biography. I haven't done much writing since my podcast, *Coffee with Champions*, blew up and I'm excited to get back to my roots. After what happened, the thought of podcasting, or even being in a recording room, makes my body flood with panic. I don't want to be constantly reminded of that. But writing? That's a safe space. It doesn't hurt that I'll be halfway around the world, either.

"Fine," she huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "But

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then you have to promise me you'll find out how many *Sports Illustrated* models Blake's slept with."

I hit a balloon floating by at her and she quickly swats it away from her raven black hair to avoid any static aftermath. Poppy's not big on sports, but she's big on celebrity gossip, and Blake's one of the athletes whose prowess has earned him international notoriety and prestige.

"Those aren't the questions he's going to want to answer, Pop," I tell her. Blake's extremely private. There's also a slight chance I'm already on his bad side after comparing his partying last year to Paris Hilton circa 2006. I don't think asking the McAllister driver his body count is going to earn me any brownie points.

"You're no fun." She sticks out her lower lip. "At least confirm the rumors that he has a huge dick."

"I'd like to know that one, too," Jack agrees with an aggressive head nod. "Honestly, if you could make a comparison chart of every driver's dick size, I feel like that would be really beneficial to us all."

Resting my face in my hands, I let out a groan. "Can I please have a drink before either one of you says *dick* again?"

A wicked grin spreads across Poppy's lips as she leads me into the kitchen. She's created a menu of drinks and snacks with Formula-One-themed names. I take a small sip of my McAllister Martini, cringing as the strong taste burns my throat. This isn't a martini; it's a hangover in a glass.

"I hate him," Poppy announces to no one in particular. "It's *his* fault you're leaving."

She says it so casually that it takes me a moment to realize who she's talking about. Connor Brixton. She refuses to call him by his name. I wish she wouldn't refer to him at all. *Adios, au revoir, and arrivederci, motherfucker.*

"I left PlayMedia of my own accord," I remind her. Digging my fingernails into my palms, I shrug my shoulders. I

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didn't have much of a choice, but at the end of the day, I quit; they didn't make me leave. "Can we not talk about this?"

"Ella, c'mon. You left—"

"Poppy," Jack warns, cutting her off. "We're supposed to be having fun and clearly Ella doesn't want to discuss it."

I shoot him a grateful look, but he and Poppy are staring each other down like parents in a bitter custody battle. Now would be a great time to snack on some Pit Stop Popcorn or Crash Test Chips, but they're on the other side of the counter.

"You're right. Sorry," Poppy acquiesces after a minute. She focuses her attention back on me. "Do you think Blake's listened to your podcast?"

My shoulders tense, but I don't bother reminding her that it's no longer my podcast. "I'm assuming he's looked me up. It's not hard to put two and two together."

"I'm sure he knows it was all in good fun," Jack reassures me.

I didn't say anything untrue or outrageous about Blake on my show, but I did poke some fun at his messy performance last year. My podcast was listed under sports and comedy for a reason. How could I *not* make a joke about him driving into more panties than wins? I'm praying George is right and Blake won't care that I made a few subjectively funny remarks about him.

"Pop, should we give El her present?" Jack changes the subject. "Before people arrive?"

He sips his drink, a Jump Start Gin and Juice, with a glint of mischief in his eyes. Poppy disappears, arriving back momentarily with a gift bag covered in race cars. No shocker there. It's filled with a variety of fun tchotchkes, but it's the last few items that really surprise me.

"Condoms." I blink rapidly. "You got me condoms."

I take a closer look and see the phrase *Save Fuel, Ride a Driver*

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embossed on the foil wrappers. My drink sputters out of my mouth, nearly hitting Poppy's chest.

"So?" Jack asks, staring at me with undisguised amusement. "What do you think?"

"That you two are certifiable." I hold the roll out in front of me. The ones in red foil are apparently cherry flavored. *Yum.* "I don't think I'll be using these, but I appreciate it."

Formula 1 drivers are infamously known as fuckboys. *No, thank you*. I'm twenty-seven years old. If I still felt like playing mind games and faking orgasms, I could walk into any bar within a five-block radius of my apartment. I want to be swept off my feet, not swept under a rug after a one-night stand.

"One final thing," Poppy says, pulling a lipstick out from the bottom of the bag. "Open it!"

I'm praying it's not a bright red color because regardless of what she says, it just doesn't work with my complexion. My eyes widen as I twist the bottom of the tube. I was way off base considering it's a goddamn knife.

Poppy claps her hands together. "Now you're protected from STDs *and* attackers!"

"Condoms to screw men"—I laugh, twisting the tube so I don't accidentally stab myself—"and a lipstick knife if they try to screw with me."

Jack chuckles with a wink. "London's not going to know what hit 'em."

"Neither will Belgium," Poppy adds. "Or Australia. Or Japan. Or any of the other places you're traveling to."

I clink my red plastic cup against hers in agreement. Twenty-one cities in fifty-two weeks. If that kind of time and distance can't help me move on from what happened, I'm not sure what will.

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TWO
BLAKE

MY ANGER MANIFESTS itself in one of two ways. I either lose my temper and yell at people or stay so quiet that they're uncomfortably on edge. Right now, it's the latter. I can see the silence wrapping around Keith and George like a scratchy blanket. I'd feel bad, but I'm certain if I talk, one of them will leave this meeting with a black eye.

"Keith tells me you're not happy with my co-author," George finally says, sipping his cappuccino calmly. "What are your concerns, mate?"

"This has to be some sort of a joke, right?" The sharpness of my voice leaves no room for questions. "You didn't seriously hire her."

My anger doesn't seem to shake George. Instead, he seems rather amused. He takes another sip of his coffee, his cool gaze meeting my fiery one. I want to take the mug out of his hand and break it into a million fucking pieces.

"Need I remind you of George's contract?" my manager interjects. "He can employ whomever he pleases to help him given the tight deadline."

"I've read the damn thing," I argue. "Well, my lawyer has,

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but semantics. "My team has to approve anyone he hires *at least* two months in advance."

"Ella was vetted and approved back in December, Blake," Keith confirms. "You just refused to have a conversation regarding the book until now."

"She questioned my abilities as a driver and then said it's no wonder my head's not in the game on the track since I'm too busy getting head off the track," I snap. "Did you think I'd be happy about that? What experience does she have besides a stupid podcast? How is she even remotely qualified to write a biography? Do we even know if she's literate? This is bloody ridiculous. I'm not spending the season with her, so you need to find someone else."

"Nope," Keith says, shaking his head at me. "Don't try to sabotage this. We wouldn't even be having this conversation if it weren't for your manic desire to kill your career."

"I didn't ruin my career." I narrow my eyes at him. I'm aware I wasn't on my best behavior last year, on or off the track. "I'm still signed with McAllister and all my sponsors. Plus, even bad press is good press, right?"

"Bad press? Blake, you partied so much you don't remember throwing hotel furniture into a pool. The paparazzi caught you screwing a chick, who may have been a call girl might I add, in the back seat of a limo. That's not bad press, that's just fucking *bad*." Keith's thin lips purse into a straight line, brows furrowing together. He always does this when he's exasperated, and it looks like two angry caterpillars moving across his face. "You may still have your contracts in place, but don't pretend like they didn't warn you to clean up your act this season or you're out. You don't think Thompson would jump at the chance to take your spot?"

"Listen, Blake," George cuts in before I can respond. "No one's out to get you. We're doing this biography to remind the world and your team why you're the best and why they're lucky

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to have you racing and representing them. You know if I didn't have other commitments, I'd be the one spending the season with you, but I'd need help regardless. We're doing everything from A to Z in twelve months. It's all hands on deck, and that includes Ella."

I've known George since my early days of karting. He's one of the only journalists I actually like. He's respectful and doesn't ask ignorant questions just to get a rise out of me. We've grown close over the years and rather than write about what a mess I was last year, he showed up at my house uninvited to see what he could do to help. If I didn't trust George, and if it wasn't him working on this project, there's no way this book would be happening.

"She said Formula 1 must've required me to get a special license to behave so idiotically," I remind them.

Keith looks down at his Rolex. It was my apology gift after last year. "Are you done with your temper tantrum?"

I clench my jaw and nod, wanting to know why the bloody hell they hired her more than I want to yell.

"She's qualified, Blake," George says. "And she's good. Really good. Ella's the type of person you want helping us."

He pulls out a folder and slides it across the table. I warily open it to find Ella's résumé inside. Taking it out, I lean back in my chair and start reading. Ella Gold. From Chicago, lives in New York City. Well, lives until she follows me around like a damn mosquito. Graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in Journalism and then went on to get her master's. Interned at the *Big Ten Network* and *The New Yorker*. Worked as a sportswriter and podcast host at PlayMedia, a digital sport, entertainment, and media brand, until late last year.

George even printed out some of her work for me to look at. He clearly came prepared. *Wanker.* Her interview with Olympian swimmer Lilly King is annoyingly fantastic. Her story on Rafael Nadal losing to Novak Djokovic in the 2021

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French Open Semifinal is even more annoyingly fantastic. And her article on my Monaco Grand Prix win from a few years back is just obnoxiously fucking fantastic. Objectively and subjectively. *Shit, shit, shit.*

"Why her?" The articles sit in front of me, each one of them read. "There's a long list of other experienced journalists and writers who haven't talked shit about me."

Keith stares at me like I'm crazy. Fine. The list isn't *that* long; it's rather short.

"You trust me, right? That's why we decided to work together on this?" George tilts his head, daring me to disagree. "So then trust me when I say she's the right person for the job."

I take a deep breath to control my frustration. "How do you even know her?"

"She studied abroad for a semester when I was guest lecturing. She was in my class—Advanced Issues in 21st-Century Sports and Media. We've kept in touch, and I knew she'd be perfect for this."

"She said I treated the Baku circuit like a game of Mario Kart last year."

"She's not wrong." He lets out a long, low chuckle. "You drove like a maniac."

I flip him the bird. He's right and I hate being wrong.

"Give her a chance, Blake. She's a brilliant writer and one of the only people I think can put up with your smart ass for an entire season." He gives me a pointed look.

I push my thumbs into my temples, trying to relieve the tension headache this conversation's giving me. "I don't like this. Not one bit." I hate how whiney I sound. Like my nephew when I tell him it's bedtime, but he's not finished playing with his action figures.

"Yeah, well, I don't like having to clean up your mess." Keith shrugs. "Get over it."

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An incoming call from my sister interrupts my manager's next rant. She's the one person I'll drop everything for and they both know this. I excuse myself from the room to take the call.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't my favorite sister," I answer.

"If it isn't my favorite brother." Neither of us has much competition considering we're each other's only family, but the familiar greeting makes me smile. "So…the season's starting soon."

"Really?" Sarcasm drips from my voice. "I would've never guessed. Great reminder, Ashley."

She sighs through the phone, making her annoyance clear. "Don't be a jerk."

I can't help but chuckle at my niece's small voice shouting in the background that *jerk* is a bad word. A *very* bad word according to Millie.

"Sorry. I'm just tired and pissy about the biography."

"I'm excited about it," she says. "It'll let people get to know the real Blake instead of the A-R-S-E you make yourself out to be."

"Yeah, maybe." I don't bother mentioning that my problem with the biography is that I don't want people to get to know the real me.

"How do you feel?" she asks. "And don't say fine because that's what you said last year and then you got penalized after purposefully causing a crash, Blake."

It wasn't on purpose; I was just trying to sneak past Harry Thompson and it backfired. Horrendously. "We're not getting into this again, Ash."

She doesn't push me any further, no doubt to avoid World War III. I've been a ticking time bomb this past year, known to blow up at the slightest comment. God knows she got hit with enough shrapnel. It turns out mixing antidepressants and loads of alcohol isn't a great idea. Who knew?

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"Did Finn and Millie get my postcard?" I ask, my voice softening. My niece and nephew love getting snail mail and I try to send some as often as possible, even when we're in the same city. The last one I sent had their favorite cartoon pig eating a macaron in front of Big Ben.

"Yep! They just sent you back a hand-drawn card. It's very…unique."

I snort at the descriptor. Unique is a nice way to describe their artistic abilities. Finn's triangles will put his future Geometry teacher into cardiac arrest, and Millie exclusively uses orange because she "feels bad it has to share a name with fruit." My sister's an interior decorator, but her penchant for color-coordination and clean lines hasn't manifested in her children.

"Finn tried to draw you two juggling at the circus, but it looks more like"—she cuts herself off with a laugh—"you know what? I'm not going to ruin the surprise. You'll know exactly what I mean when you see it."

"I'll be on the lookout for it," I tell her with a small grin. "I have to get back to my meeting, but I'll come over for dinner soon, okay? Tell everyone I say hello."

"Dinner sounds lovely," she replies. "Be safe, okay?"

I mumble goodbye before sinking against the wall. If it could just swallow me and spit me out into the depths of hell, that'd be greatly appreciated. This season is make it or break it, and right now I can't afford to break down. If I've learned anything from last season, it's that I need to do a better job keeping my emotions in check and off the track.

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THREE
ELLA

THE FEW WEEKS after my goodbye party fly by. The flight to London does not. Probably because I spent all six hours panicking. I managed to calm down and remind myself why I was doing this by the time the wheels touched down. The glass of champagne—*okay, or three*—probably helped.

George lives in the suburbs outside of the city but has a two-bedroom "flat" in Shoreditch—a trendy and posh London neighborhood according to Poppy—where I'm living in between races. I only spend two days in London before flying to Bahrain for the first race weekend. I'm still adjusting to the time change, so the absolute last thing I want to do when I land is work out. Yet here I am, lugging my overweight suitcase down a never-ending hallway. I seriously have no idea where my room is; this hotel is a labyrinth. No Midwestern corn maze could've prepared me for this.

"Mom." I sigh as I turn down another hallway. I think I've already walked past these rooms. "Please don't friend request Blake. I haven't even met him yet. And I'm pretty sure the Facebook account you sent me is fake. Do you know how many people probably pretend to be him?"

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"He doesn't have to accept!" she protests. "I just want him to know you have a caring mother looking out for you, so he better watch himself."

"Yeah, Mom, because you come off super intimidating on Facebook."

She posts inspirational quotes and reshares feel-good videos from the news. Nothing about her Facebook page screams "I'll kick your ass." My dad, on the other hand? Maybe. But my mom? Try again. The only thing she's likely to scare is trick-or-treaters if she's wearing a mask.

"Aha!" I stop in front of 4033. "Finally found the room."

"Be sure to check under the bed and behind the curtains to make sure the room's secure."

"Of course." I've seen way too much *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* to not check for creepy men hiding in my hotel room. "I'll call you later, okay? Love you!"

"Love you more, honey."

I hang up the phone and use the card reader to enter the room. Holy hell. The suite is sleek, modern, and bigger than my NYC apartment by an embarrassing amount of square feet. And I had a decent-sized place, by Manhattan standards anyway. I feel like I'm on an episode of *International House Hunters.* Except instead of having a two-million-dollar budget as a button collector, I have no budget as a biographer! But don't worry. I'm willing to make that work in order to stay in this probably very expensive room in Bahrain.

Even though I'd flown first class, my muscles still ache from inactivity and I practically sprint into the shower. The high pressure of the hot water kneads the tension out of my shoulders, and I leave the bathroom in a euphoric state. I curl up in the king-sized bed, eat a room service dinner, and pass out wondering if the hotel sells sell full-sized bottles of their lavender lotion in the gift shop.

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I WAKE up with a pit the size of a watermelon in my stomach. Today's the day I meet Blake.

I can do this.

I hope.

I'm too nervous to eat, but I head to the breakfast buffet at the hotel to make myself a to-go coffee. With my caffeine boost—and the detailed instructions Blake's manager Keith emailed me—it's easy to find the conference room we're all meeting in. Of course, when I walk in, Keith is nowhere to be found. The only person there is Blake. And I'm not sure if it's the jet lag speaking, but holy hell this man is drop-dead gorgeous.

Taking a calming breath, I paste a friendly smile on my face and say, "Hi, I'm Ella." I stick out my hand in introduction. Blake stares at it for a few seconds before quickly shaking it. I'm praying he doesn't notice how clammy my hands are.

His chocolate-brown eyes roam over me as if he's undressing me in his mind. The eye contact is aggressively brazen but somehow doesn't cross the line of being creepy. Someone needs to turn on the AC immediately because I'm starting to sweat. Photos don't do him justice. His unruly dark brown hair makes it seem like he woke up from a nap right before the meeting and let me tell you, bedhead looks good on him.

"Coffee," he grunts. *Well, at least he said something.*

Blake reaches out and grabs the Styrofoam cup from my hand. *Excuse moi?* Before I can tell him I didn't bring him coffee and he just hijacked mine, he takes a large sip. His face says it all and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Serves him right.

"That's mine," I state plainly.

"I thought you brought me coffee."

"Why would you think that?" I'm not his assistant. We've never even met. How am I supposed to know how he likes his coffee?

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"As a peace offering," he explains with a shrug. "Since you said you're not sure how my helmet fits considering my ego makes my head twelve sizes too big."

He doesn't bother hiding the cold contempt in his eyes. Oh boy. There goes my secret hope that he hadn't heard that episode of *Coffee with Champions*. This is going to be *fun, fun, fun*.

"Your head looks pretty normal-sized today," I comment coolly.

"You ragging on me to millions of people probably deflated it a bit."

That's a bit of an overestimation. My podcast may have hit number five on Spotify's podcast charts at one point, but millions? C'mon. I'm no Joe Rogan…or Connor Brixton.

"I also talked about the amount of raw talent you have," I remind him.

"That's not anything I haven't heard before. I know how talented I am."

I take back what I said about his head looking normal-sized. It's inflating right in front of my eyes.

"You insulted my driving," he fumes, his chiseled jaw tensing. "And me."

"I discussed you in one episode of a podcast that's no longer a thing. I apologize if I hurt your feelings, but I wouldn't have accepted this job if I didn't think you were remarkably talented."

"You shouldn't have accepted the job." He narrows his eyes. "Not sure why you did."

Jeez. Make a few critical comments about a guy and he acts like you've mortally wounded him.

"No offense, Blake, but grow a pair and get over it. I know for a fact there are women who've said way worse things about you. I read the tabloids."

I swear one corner of his mouth twitches, but it's gone just as quickly as it appears. Blake's publicist Marion walks in

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wearing the exact shade of red lipstick I was praying Poppy didn't get me. Her shirt's wrinkled and smudges of residual mascara sit under her eyes. I don't blame her. I know she's been working overtime to help Blake's image. The fact that she secured a book deal so quickly is astonishing. I can only imagine how overwhelmed she feels by it all.

"Nice to meet you in person, Ella!" The crow's feet at her eyes fold as she smiles. "I'm glad to see you two are already getting acquainted with one another."

The open defiance of Blake's glower tells a different story. He'd rather get acquainted with the casket he hopes to put me in. I should've added something stronger than almond milk to my coffee. Maybe Jameson?

Keith waltzes in moments later looking like a very handsome Daniel Craig during his James Bond era—rugged and weathered, but in an extremely sexy way. He's got the whole salt-and-pepper look going on even though he's in his late thirties. I wouldn't be surprised if Blake kickstarted his grays. If that starts happening to me, Blake can pay my salon bills.

Marion video conferences George in before starting a "team" meeting. I nod along as she talks, taking notes on my computer. It's not anything new. Even though George hired me, I still had to meet with both Marion and Keith before being *officially* brought on board. The life of Blake Hollis is nothing to joke about, after all.

Blake doesn't say much except a few mumbled "hmphs" and "sure, yeahs." It's impossible not to stare at him. I wonder if he's ever broken his nose. There's a slightly crooked curve in the middle. He catches me looking at him and shoots me a wink. *Who fucking winks at someone?* Especially after our conversation, if you can even call it that.

It disarms me, turning my cheeks the color of Marion's lipstick. I fight back the urge to blurt out that I was only staring because I'm concerned that if he keeps scowling, he's going to

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need Botox by the time he turns thirty next year. I avoid looking in his general direction for the rest of the meeting, especially because I can feel his eyes fixed on me.

MCALLISTER'S TEAM is huge with just over two hundred people. That's not even including those based out of their headquarters in London. This means I have a lot of names to learn and a lot of people to meet. I throw on a McAllister shirt courtesy of Keith, slip on my cute new necklace—which is actually a lanyard I have to wear in order to get access into the paddock—and am on my way. Day two, here we go!

The air is electric as everyone gets ready for the first race of the tour. I've never seen anything like it before. Engineers, mechanics, drivers, media—anyone and everyone seems to be here. They buzz around, never stopping in one place for too long. I quickly realize this is not the time to interrupt people to introduce myself. The team's too focused on making sure Blake and McAllister have a successful Grand Prix.

I'm wandering around aimlessly when a girl in a McAllister shirt that matches my own blazes a path straight toward me. Before I know what's happening, she's pulling me into a hug. *Um, hello to you too, strange woman.*

"Ella! It's so nice to meet you! I was worried I wasn't going to be able to introduce myself before the race. I've been running around like a bloody chicken with its head cut off. I'm glad I found you, though. There are so many people, but it was easy to spot you since there aren't too many women around here. Not sure if you noticed that or not. You've worked in sports before, so you're probably used to the testosterone overload. How's your first day here? Or have you been here for a few days? I can't remember."

She's talking so quickly it's hard to keep up. She could've just asked me to join her pyramid scheme and I would've

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dumbly nodded. Her dark blond hair blurs as she suddenly steps a few feet away, stopping a pair of guys walking past us. *What is happening?* Blondie poses the two guys for a photo, snapping pictures of them on her camera. I take a moment to study her. She looks like she should be in front of the camera instead of behind it with her heart-shaped face, high cheekbones, and perfectly pouty lips.

"Sorry about that!" She bounces back over to me. Her British accent is unbelievably posh. "They've been impossible to find, so I had to get a photo while I could. I'm Josie Bancroft, by the way. I do content creation and brand management for McAllister."

I stick out my hand for her to shake. "I'm Ella Gold, but you seem to know that already."

"Everybody knows who you are, babes." She shoots me a dazzling smile. As if proving her point, a few mechanics walk past us, waving at Josie and giving me a knowing head nod. "You're the writer-slash-journalist-slash-saint working with Blake this season. The one who said someone should take the stick out of his ass and hit him over the head with it."

Yep, that's me.

Josie takes over as my handler/fairy godmother and makes all the necessary introductions. I've known her for all of an hour and I can already tell she's a force to be reckoned with.

She walks me through the team's motorhome in the afternoon. Formula 1 motorhomes are million-dollar structures that get built, broken down, and rebuilt at every single race. It's the team's base for race weekends and is an equally productive and entertaining environment. There are rooms for meetings, a cafeteria, multiple bars, a barista. Plus, each driver has their own hospitality suite. It's a five-star hotel condensed into two floors and a rooftop.

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We're sitting on said rooftop, away from the noise and

crowds, when Josie asks how meeting Blake was. I fill her in on our conversation.

"He's every bit as charming as he is caustic," she says, not at all surprised by my recap. "You get used to it. He keeps his inner circle really tight, so it takes him a while to warm up, but once you get to know him, he's actually a decent guy."

"Is he as man-whorish as he seems?"

She starts singing Elvis's "Hound Dog," much to my amusement.

"He sleeps with more groupies than John Mayer," Josie says nonchalantly. "Taylor Swift could write nine albums from one night with Blake. I wouldn't know firsthand, but that's what I've heard."

It's official. Josie is my new favorite person.

"They're all like that, though," she adds. "Theo—he's Blake's driving partner—says the only things they need in life are points, podium wins, and pussy."

The water I've just taken a sip of comes spraying out of my mouth. I'm the last one to be offended by a dirty mouth, but yikes. I tell Josie she can easily get that trending on Twitter. #PointsPodiumPussy. *Go, team, go!*

"My boyfriend wants me to wear a chastity belt around these guys and I don't blame him." She winks at me. "I can tell we're going to get on quite well this season, Ella."

I already miss Poppy and Jack, so the idea of having a new partner in crime, especially one who's feisty, brings a smile to my face. I have a feeling I'm going to need someone like Josie to make it through this year unscathed.

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FOUR
BLAKE

THE MOMENT I arrive at the sponsor event, I feel it—the excitement pulsing through the air, the energy flowing through the room. Man, I love it. Everyone is hopeful about their chance at victory. With no points distributed and rivalries from the previous year ignored, we all focus on the current season rather than the last. I smile as I survey the room. After a disastrous season last year, I'm ready to be back. New season, new mindset. I'm going to protect the throne that's rightfully mine and add another World Championship to my roster. Fuck anyone who tries to take it from me.

The first event of the season is always overly extravagant. Limousines and expensive cars queue up outside the hotel as guests wearing expensive diamonds and luxury watches sip champagne inside the ballroom. It's the usual crowd of snobby, rich white men looking like penguins in their too-tight tuxedos. They're trying to relive their youth by living vicariously through us—which means giving us money. Not that I'm complaining. Their money allows me to drive the best car for the best team. It also buys absurdly large ice sculptures.

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"Hey, hotshot," Theo calls out from the bar. "Fancy a bevvy?"

I snake my way through waiters quietly sharing hors d'oeuvres and sidle up next to my driving partner. He's sipping a Cosmo with no shame, his navy-blue eyes dancing with mischief.

"If it isn't my favorite Formula 1 fuckboy." I slap him on the back in greeting. People find it odd that Theo and I are so close. Formula 1 is one of the only sports where your teammate also happens to be your biggest competitor. But the two of us have known each other since we were kids. He's one persistent motherfucker and wouldn't leave me alone until I agreed to be his friend. We've grown up racing together and rather than turn the competition into a bitter rivalry, we use it to push ourselves to become better drivers.

He rubs a hand over his beard-stubbled chin. "I prefer Formula 1 'fuckman' rather than 'fuckboy.'"

"I'll consider it once your balls drop," I tease.

Lucas, an AlphaVite driver, appears on Theo's other side. His usually shaggy dirty-blond hair is slicked back, the silver rings on his fingers glinting from the crystal chandelier dangling overhead. "Speaking of balls, how was your winter break, Theo?"

Theo had been spotted getting lovey-dovey with a famous model in Cannes, only to be seen making out with an up-and-coming movie star in Paris a few days later. An ugly social media war had started between the girls, rivaling an episode of reality TV. He found the entire situation amusing.

After the end of last season, I'd forced myself into hibernation, meaning I hadn't joined the off-season party circuit with my friends. I'd needed time to reset and refocus.

"Who cares about that when Blake still hasn't pointed out who George's lovely writer is," Theo says, eyeing the room.

He and Lucas both scan the crowd, pointing out a handful

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