

VENUS PRESS



The Winner's Circle



Rae Monet

Rae Monet

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

NASCAR Heat Series

BY

RAE MONET

Venus Press LLC

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Copyright © 2006 by Rae Monet

ISBN: 1-59836-118-X

Cover Art © 2006 by Rae Monet

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form without permission, except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

For information, you can find us on the web at
www.VenusPress.com

Rae Monet

Dedication:

I want to dedicate The Winner's Circle to the fans in my Yahoo group who have always supported my writing efforts, picked me up when I was low, and celebrated with me when I was successful! This one for you guys!!!

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Prologue

"This is the one I want." Margaret Kingsdale carelessly tossed a yellow multi-part folder in front of her son, Albert.

Albert had a sense of *deja vu*. He had been through this little exercise before, less than twelve months earlier.

He reached forward and picked up the folder. Her actions might not have been as dramatic as last time, but her words were certainly just as strong. If he didn't make this work, *he* was screwed. This time the woman was a brunette, not a blonde, and she was just as beautiful as Cass, their last driver. *Striking* was the word he would use. He would never have thought that the petite luscious woman, this tiny *Angelina Jolie* look-alike in the photograph, was a racecar driver. She should be gracing the cover of *Vogue* instead, and that's exactly what his mother wanted.

Albert sighed at his mother's choice. Of the four women the scout had given them, this one's profile made him wince; she wasn't ready for what they had in store for her.

"Shawn Lewin is not the greatest of drivers, Mother. The scout said that she's probably not ready for the top circuit yet, she needs a few more years of experience. However, you gave him specific criteria to find beauty, not skill, and that's what he's given us."

Margaret extracted a cigarette from her jewel-studded, 24-carat gold case. She lit the cigarette drawing on it like she was sucking all the life out of it.

"I don't give a damn what the scout says about her driving," she drawled. "Yes, I wanted a beautiful woman. For Christ Sakes, we have a business to run here, Albert, and we've sunk a massive amount of money into this NASCAR campaign. I'm not losing it. Do you understand me, *AL*-bert?" She articulated the letters of his name, raising her voice on each syllable.

Rae Monet

Albert cringed. *Lovely Cosmetics* was the largest grossing, leading producer in the cosmetics industry. Over the last year they had been losing market share to their arch competitor, *Narella Cosmetics*, with their innovative advertising campaign, *Women at Work*.

Women all over the world were connecting with the idea they could do anything and still remain feminine. It had earned *Narella* five percent of the cosmetics market share in fourteen months and it was still climbing. Five percent was a devastating blow to *Lovely Cosmetics*.

Albert saw the simmering anger in his mother, Margaret Kingsdale, who he considered one of the most shrewd, influential female business figures of the century. The business meant more to her than he or his father ever did. He wouldn't put it past her to commit murder to get their company back into the number one spot.

Twelve months ago his mother had the brilliant idea to sponsor a team for the first female stockcar driver to break into the male-dominated Nextel Cup Racing Series. The campaign was targeted at the over-forty percent female fans of the NASCAR circuit. His mother calculated they would gain back their lost market share and more.

It might have worked, he thought, except the driver they had chosen, Cass Jamison, had run off and gotten pregnant from her crew chief, Justin Steed. Now they were desperate to fill her spot. *Lovely* had already sunk millions into the campaign.

"Okay, Mother, I'll get right on it," Albert said.

"Good." Finishing her first cigarette, his mother crushed it out and reached for another.

"Where's she from?" she asked between sucks.

As the smoke wafted toward Albert, he tried not to gag on the overwhelming smell.

"She's what people in the South would call a Yankee, a Massachusetts gal," he squeaked out as he tried to hold his breath.

"Excellent. Make it happen." She stopped talking while she took another life-sucking breath from her second cigarette. "And, Albert, you realize what will happen to you if this plan yet again fails?" Her eyes narrowed, her lips puckering to blow out a cloud of white billowing smoke, waiting he was sure, to kill him if he answered incorrectly.

"Yes, Mother."

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

She leaned back with her usual wicked smile plastered on her face. "Oh, and Albert?"

Rising to leave, he stopped. Wary of her tone, he didn't move. He sensed she could smell his fear and she always silently celebrated producing it in him.

"Yes, Mother?"

"I do love you, you know this, don't you?" She casually puffed on her cigarette.

"Yes, Mother...I mean, no, Mother, I yes, yes of course I do, Mother." Albert quickly exited her office while he exhaled another breath he had been holding. He wanted to get out of there before she ate him.

No question about it, the goddess of luck wasn't looking down at Jimmy Normin tonight. The fickle lady.

"You can't fold," Rick Monroe complained to him.

Stuffed into RV loungers, Rick and Ryan Collins crowded around the small table in Jim's trailer. Jim Normin's mouth quirked in humor as he wondered what the racing public would think if they heard two of NASCAR's best drivers whining at him over a card game.

"I damn well can! I certainly know when I'm beat and I can read Ryan's face like a book." Jim threw his cards on the table and challenged Rick with his glare.

"Christ, Normin." Rick tossed down his cards and cursed him.

"Oh, yeah, come to mamma," Ryan said.

Jim internally simmered as Ryan grunted his satisfaction. Puffing on the cigar clenched between his white teeth, Ryan gave him a shit-eating grin and scooped the chips into the huge stack already next to him.

"Bastard," Jim complained. Although he was joking, he hated to lose. Even at cards.

"I was bluffing," Ryan flipped over his cards.

Rick groaned with him. Worse than losing was being wrong.

"You only had one ace?" Jim picked up the cards and shuffled for the next hand. He dealt them fast, the way he liked to do everything. Unless he was with a woman.

"Yeah," Rick admitted as he picked up each single card as it was dealt and hugged the hand close to his chest.

Rae Monet

Jim swallowed a laugh. Rick was like a kid hoarding candy, as if he wanted to see what was in Rick's hand. He rolled his eyes.

In comparison, Ryan was as relaxed as a lazy tiger. He leaned back as far as the chaise would let him, eased his cigar into his mouth, giving it a leisurely puff, and spread his hand out. His cards rested comfortably in his fingers, as if he'd played the game all his life.

Jim shook his head. Rick and Ryan were sometimes his enemies, always his best friends, and so different in personalities that it amused him.

They were in between races. After finishing the Saturday Busch race, the three of them were waiting for the Sunday Nextel Cup Series race. Looking at his friends, Jim knew their goal was to ease the stress that came the night before a particularly competitive race. Bristol was a tough track, a bump and grind half mile of anguish, commonly called "The world's fastest half mile".

Tomorrow, they would turn in their friendship for the possibility of winning, a fact Jim accepted. The other two were his fiercest competitors, each needing to win to maintain their sponsorship and keep the money coming in so they had the privilege and thrill of racing for a living. He was happy to have this down time with them; a time set aside so they could just be friends.

"I hear *Lovely Cosmetics* is bringing in a new driver to qualify next week before Darlington. Another woman," Rick said casually, but the corners of his lips lifted in a sly smile. Jim realized Rick thought he was making a joke.

Inside Jim tensed. Those few words, "Woman on the Track".... The guys didn't know how badly the phrase affected him and why. Externally, he groaned and tried to play it casual. Internally, he was replaying that earlier day on the track, the death of his teenage girlfriend, remembering the terror. He tried to shake it off, used the years that had passed to calm himself. He didn't like it, and he didn't like *Lovely Cosmetics* or the way they did business. They played dirty pool.

"Darn woman drivers. If I never see another Magenta car with lips on it, it's too soon for me. You betting or what?" he grumbled at Rick.

"I'll bet." Rick slid two chips into the middle of the table.

"Hey, I think NASCAR should be an equal opportunity employer," Ryan puffed on his cigar.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"You just want an easy lay," Jim said, trying to act normal as he waited for Ryan to make a bet. He knew that comment would get Ryan, and their normal banter would return. The guys wouldn't even notice what emotions Rick's single comment had raised in him.

Ryan plucked his cigar out of his mouth and pursed his lips. "Got a problem with that?" He popped it back in and tossed two chips into the pot. "I'm in."

Jim shook his head. "More power to ya. I don't want any of that action. Just like having a woman on the track is definitely a no-no in my book. Where's she from?"

"Yeah, no doubt." Rick squeezed his cards together a little tighter. "She's from Massachusetts."

"Oh great, a Yankee. I didn't even know they had racecar drivers there." Jim spread out his cards and smiled. "The only place I think a woman should be on the track is on her back, late in the evening, maybe showing her the asphalt at sunset, when no one's around." Both Jim's companions laughed and nodded. He was hoping he just sounded sexist, but if they knew his problem, they would have never brought up the subject.

Jim was happy when they settled back and started to play in earnest. He tried to forget about the new driver and just play cards. With the window open, he could hear the soft sound of the crickets serenading them. It was another hot, sultry southern night and he simply enjoyed the evening air. No matter what southern state they were in, the same sounds assaulted the late night. The smell washed over him. It was pure earth; dirt and oil mixed together, an odor unique only to the racetrack.

"All right, boys, show 'em." Jim spread his hand on the table and used his poker cliché. "Read 'em and weep."

"Man." Ryan tossed his cards face up. "Beats me."

"Me, too." Rick laid his hand down and finally spread out his cards.

Jim laughed and pulled the pot toward him. Winning was always sweet, no matter what kind.

"I think I'll call it a night, y'all. Got a race tomorrow, need my beaut-a-sleep." Ryan's accent seeped out as he slid out of the chair. He really was the good old Southern boy his sponsors were selling to the public. Born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Ryan even opened doors for strangers.

Rae Monet

Jim was a South Carolina boy himself. Seemed like southern roots were part of NASCAR DNA.

“Yeah, I’m out.” Rick followed Ryan out of the RV.

“Night, y’all,” Jim called to their backs. “See ya on the track.” He stored the cards, yawned and made his way to the back. Stretching out on the bed, he tried to shut down his brain. He needed to be fresh tomorrow. One last thought floated through his mind: another woman on the track and with the added variable of a sponsor and owner like *Lovely Cosmetics*...

He was in trouble.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Chapter One

"Dang, I was hoping I'd never have to see that car again." Jimmy Normin shifted his helmet from his right hand to his left as he approached his car. He glanced down the start-up line at the Magenta Dodge Charger marked *Lovely Cosmetics*.

Surrounding him was a circle of grandstands and a heck of a lot of people, near ninety thousand. *Too Tough to Tame* was what everyone called Darlington Raceway, but *The Lady in Black* was how he always thought of her because the drivers painted the white walls around the track black with skid marks before the end of every race. Darlington, the first NASCAR Super speedway, was a tough track to beat.

Jimmy snapped out of his musing to pay attention to his fellow driver, Ryan Collins.

"No crap, but that Yankee qualified," Ryan said, walking next to him.

"Yeah, so I heard."

"Have you seen her yet, our little Miss She-awn Lewwwwin?"

Jim chose to ignore the expression on Ryan's face. Soon they'd receive the "Start your engines!" command, and he needed to concentrate on the race ahead.

Darlington's quarter mile oval with the easy sloping curves was one of his favorites. Taking the straight-aways at nearly one hundred twenty-six miles per hour made him feel like he and the car were flying without wings.

"Nah, I was approved to miss the drivers' meeting, haven't had the pleasure. She even has a guy's name, can't imagine her face."

Ryan whistled under his breath.

"Hmm, that good or that bad?"

"I'm not telling. I'll leave it as a surprise. Keep off my ass out there. I don't want an accident today. I have a hot date tonight."

"I promise to drive like my grandmother." Jim's grandmother had more speeding tickets than the team owner had stockcars.

Rae Monet

“Okay, see ya out there,” Ryan grinned before adding, “In my rearview.”

“Sure, kid,” Jim laughed.

The heat and humidity of the day pressed down on him as he slid into the car and fitted his helmet and HANS device. The seat hugged him like a glove. As he hooked into his five-point safety harness, he imagined it was similar to being in the cockpit of an F-16 fighter jet, only tighter. The car surrounded him and he enjoyed the feel of it. There was nothing like sitting in front of the power of a Dodge hemi engine to give you comfort. Well, maybe one thing, but Jim hadn’t had much time for sex lately. He had a mind to head into town tonight.

Forty-five minutes later, Jim was happy to flip the switch on his ignition and fire it up. The second that the familiar muted roar of his car penetrated his consciousness he relaxed, and prepared to enjoy the day. Getting himself all worked up right before the race got him nowhere. After racing professionally for eight years, he’d learned to master his stress, so he got ready to sit back and run a good, clean race. He felt good, relaxed. He couldn’t imagine anything upsetting the internal balance he prided himself on.

Jim clutched the steering wheel as he took yet another hit to the rear. He fought with the track to make sure he didn’t spin off his line. Shifting his eyes to the rear view mirror and then back, he swore when he saw a Magenta flash.

“Dang it.”

Damn if the new *Lovely* driver hadn’t been bumping and grinding him for two hours. When this race was over, they were going to have a reckoning the likes of which she had never seen. Rage seeped into his usual calm.

As he rounded the corner, she bumped him again and he felt his car break loose, his back wheels slipping. He struggled to pull it together. The g-forces coming off the curve made him grit his teeth. He wasn’t moving over for her, screw that. He shifted, took his foot off the gas, and dropped down toward the infield leaving her blocked so she couldn’t move past him.

He grinned as she went high, but didn’t have enough room to get past with the number ten car on his right. She dropped back behind him. *Yeah*, he thought. *You can stay there all day as far as I’m concerned, and let me know when you’re ready to play with the big boys.*

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Hopefully, he would be making her question whether she really wanted to be on the track with the guys.

Shawn growled when the car in front of her blocked her yet again. She was having a hard time sticking to his tail.

Man, oh man.

She thought she was ready for this, tangoing with the boys, but now she wasn't sure. She was so thrilled when *Lovely Cosmetics* approached her to drive the NASCAR circuit for them, that she didn't even think twice about accepting...until now.

Her heart was beating ninety miles an hour, sweat trickling down her forehead one drop at a time, making her nose itch. *It's so frigging hot*, she thought, as her body took on the g-forces coming off the corner and she absorbed the extreme vibration of the of the steering wheel. Everything in her hurt, her head pounded in pain like a never-ending migraine headache. She was losing her concentration, trying to glue herself to another driver, hoping by drafting she could gain some ground and help her maintain her line. She was aware she was probably breaking some unwritten rule; she just wasn't sure how everything was supposed to play out when the go flag waved.

She had attended practice, known as happy hour, but it wasn't the same as the actual race. Everyone was nice there, but here...here they wanted to eat her for breakfast. Her first NASCAR race and Shawn was determined to make it work. She jerked the wheel when she bumped the driver in front of her again.

Crap.

She hadn't wanted to touch him; only follow close enough to take advantage of the draft. Her car wasn't the top of the line on the track, she realized. If she could just get a little edge....She eased closer, determined to make this work.

Suddenly, she made contact, her wheel jolted and she watched in horror when the driver in front of her began to swerve all over the track and he spun, smoke billowing from his screaming back wheels. Oh God, she had spun him out.

She yanked her wheel and went high to avoid a collision, her car screeching in protest. Panting, she tried to control her breathing and fear.

"Shawn, what are you doing out there?" her crew chief's voice growled over the radio.

"Making a huge mess, I guess."

Rae Monet

“Girl, you need to calm down.” He was telling her something she already knew...the difficulty was following his order.

“I know, I know.” She decreased her speed and eased her way around the second corner.

“Pit,” he said. “You created a caution. You just spun out Jimmy Normin.”

“Super,” she cringed. *Greatttt*. Jimmy Normin was one of NASCAR’s premier drivers. She was in for a severe ass chewing.

Jim couldn’t remember ever being so angry. Shawn Lewin had been pushing his buttons for three hours, and he was spoiling for a fight. He ripped off his gloves and threw his helmet back into his car. Letting one of his pit crew help unsnap the steering wheel, he used both arms to pull himself out. Confronting her seemed like a damn good idea. The spinout she caused twenty laps short of the checkered flag had set him back into tenth place and cost him a lot of points.

He charged down the pits until he reached her car. He crossed his arms and waited, grimacing at the paint job of the rig in front of him. Hot magenta with bright red lips plastered all over, and her sponsor’s name, *Lovely Cosmetics* written in white cursive on the lips. God, it was an atrocity.

She was taking her sweet little time. He couldn’t quite see her, a sports reporter was shoving a microphone in her face, and she hadn’t left the car. She had finished third, a much more respectable position than his tenth place.

He let the reporter finish and was relieved when the man wandered off. He wasn’t fighting with another driver in front of the press. Especially with a woman driver.

Uncrossing his arms, he walked around the car in time to catch her pushing herself out. She slid one leg, then the next, making a graceful hop onto the ground. First thing that struck him was how little she was, next...how incredibly beautiful. *God*, she looked like a pixie fairy with a rack worth a double take. Jet-black hair formed a halo around her face. Iridescent green eyes gazed into his. She had luscious lips, with the top as plump as the bottom, the sort that always formed a pout. Her magenta fire suit was unzipped at the top, and he glimpsed her cleavage size. Very impressive. He’d never seen such a curvy display in a jumpsuit before.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

He couldn't catch his breath. He felt like she had just slammed his chest with a sledgehammer. He half expected her to sprout wings and fly like an angel. His own body part began to rise, one that didn't have much room for movement.

Nice.

"Miss Lewin, Miss Lewin. May we have a moment of your time?" Another team of sports reporters ran up, shoving a microphone in her face.

She smiled. Good God, with a smile like that she could sell flight lessons to Superman. He was close enough to smell her. Peach blossoms in bloom came to mind, reminding him of home.

Everything about her seemed sensual to Jim. His breath whooshed out and he took a step back.

"Sure, no problem," she said.

Oh yeah, she even had a sexy voice, sort of soft and low, the kind he might hear on a late night radio show dedicated to love. Made him think of sipping an expensive red wine, a fireplace, her buck-naked on the fur, and lots of hot sex. *Oh man.*

Acting casual, he reached down and adjusted himself to hide the obvious. As she talked, she leaned into her car, pulled out one of her sponsor's baseball caps and plopped it on her head.

Jim hung back hoping not to be noticed. He should have realized the action was futile. He was one of the circuit top drivers.

"Mr. Normin, how do you feel about racing with a woman?"

Shit.

"Ahhh--" For the first time in his life with a reporter, he was speechless. He tried to recover, but that damn woman was standing there, her hands resting on her hips, eyeing him. It was disconcerting.

Before he could comment, Ryan strolled by, winked at Shawn, and kept going. On the chase, the reporters abandoned Jim and the *Lovely* driver. Jim saw an array of colors: green, red, the whole spectrum. *What the heck is going on with this?* If he didn't know any better, he'd say he had just experienced a twinge of old-fashioned southern jealousy, the kind that puts you close to shooting your best friend.

Jim puffed out a strained breath and focused his attention to Miss Shawn Lewin who was laughing at Ryan.

She leaned against her car, turning her attention back to him.

Rae Monet

“Yes, how do you feel, Mr. Jimmy Normin, about driving with a woman? I’d love to know the answer to that one.” She crossed her arms and grinned, her eyes twinkling.

He straightened his spine. Darn if he was going to let her get the best of him.

“Miss Lewin, mind if we have a little chat away from prying ears?”

She inclined her head, lifted her hip off her car, and began walking toward the trailers. He followed behind, liking very much what he saw. Her hips swayed, an arc of movement with each step. *Holy hell*, it was sexy. He imagined running his hands over those hips, but there would be no racing suit covering her when he did. And taking her from behind would be a thrill with an ass like that.

They were smack dab in the middle of the series, but he didn’t for a moment think it was the South Carolina sun making him sweat. He wiped the wetness from his forehead and tried to stop imagining her naked, but it was like telling his heart not to beat.

He didn’t talk, just followed like a drone, his feet marching to the rhythmic chittering of the cicadas until she turned toward her rig and opened the door, inviting him inside. She waved her hand, indicating he should sit. He eased down into the small RV easy chair, dwarfing it. He had his chairs made extra large in his trailer; this tiny woman didn’t need the same consideration. She perched on the edge of the couch across from him.

“May I start what I expect to be a wonderful lecture with an introduction? Shawn Lewin. How do you do?” She held out her hand.

He was amazed such a petite thing could control a stock car. He reached forward and enclosed the elfin fingers in his. So tiny, that protective flame he had toward women, the one he always strained to control, blazed in him. How could she drive cars for a living? She was going to break apart in her first crash. The way she drove, that sure as hell wouldn’t be long.

His mouth grim, he drew his thoughts back to his purpose.

“Jimmy Normin.” Without any further prelims he started in, irritated at himself for reacting so strongly to her and letting her stir the protective control he tried so hard to keep under wraps. He was a grown man who thought with his brain, not a teenage boy who thought with his cock. “You better stay off my ass out there, or we’re going to have it out and it won’t be pretty.”

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Her forehead furrowed, he could see anger brewing in her gaze. If she had been a cartoon character, he was sure steam would roll from her ears about now.

She stood, moving around the trailer as if she was dismissing him, throwing her hat into the chair.

"If you want me off your ass, Mr. Normin, then you better get out of my way."

She unzipped her uniform as if he wasn't there, slipped it down her arms and tugged off her fire undershirt. He watched, stunned as little bits of flesh were revealed the higher she drew the shirt up and off. He saw she wore what looked like a thin bathing suit top underneath and he swallowed his disappointment, then he thanked God there wasn't much to that little piece of cloth.

He was also thankful she didn't seem to have a bit of modesty.

"Is this conversation over? Because I'm in need of a shower and a good nap." She sat on the couch and continued to take off her racing suit, her fire drawers, pulling them down her legs.

Oh, and what gorgeous legs they were, Jim thought, muscular yet soft looking. He loved to run his hands over women's legs, so different than his, all smooth and silky. That's what hers looked like, silk. He could see her breasts through the thin white bra contraption, her peaked nipples surrounded by huge, brown areolas.

She was either cold, which he doubted considering it was nearly a hundred degrees outside, or she was as aroused as he was. He licked his lips. When he had her spread out beneath him, tasting those nipples would be the first appetizer on the menu.

Whoa, where did that come from? When did I decide she would be under me?

"Mr. Normin, I asked if this conversation was over."

"Jim."

"What?" Her confused expression made him smile.

"You can call me Jim, Jimmy, whatever takes your fancy."

"What takes my fancy, Jim, is if you would hit the road." She threw her racing uniform into the chair next to him, leaving her clad in her small sports bra and a pair of skimpy, hip-hugging shorts. Didn't leave much to the imagination, lots of nice velvety skin.

He could feel the sweat dripping down his neck as he tried to control the heat taking over his body. Without asking, he unzipped his own uniform and peeled down the

Rae Monet

top, leaving it dangling at his waist. The heat of the garment getting to be too much, he eased off his fire shirt and hung it around his neck.

“Don’t stop undressing on my account, Shawn.” He leaned as far back as the chair would let him, steepled his fingers under his chin and ogled her.

She rolled her eyes, stood and grabbed his arm, as if her puny efforts were going to dislodge him from her lounger. He smiled, not moving an inch. Neither was she; he liked that about her.

“I think we were discussing how you needed to stay off my bumper. Next time I spin out because of you, I’m going to have a piece of your ass in return,” he said.

“You want a piece of my ass, Jim, you go right ahead and try. Make my day.” Her nostrils flared, her face flushed, her mouth tightened in rage.

God, he had never seen such a beautiful sight.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you, when you play with fire, you get burned.”

She leaned in closer, her hands falling to the armrests of the chair as she crowded in on him, in what he guessed was her feeble attempt at intimidation. She placed his hand on her ass.

He smelled her, peach again, and a mixture of sweat and sensuality that spread a fire over his entire body. Her sweet smell reminded him of the comfort of home, his fifty-acre plantation near Atlanta, with a coonhound named Blue and a housemaid who made the best cornbread, southern-fried chicken, and warm cobbler with plump, juicy, tastiest Georgia peaches he had ever had. The smell darn near drove him to take her lips, right then, a little taste. He could do it, *who would know?*

Her eyes were the most incredible light green. He watched her pupils dilate until only a thin strip of green showed. She was spinning him up. Want was taking over his brain.

He fantasized about what it would be like to remove all her clothes, pin her up against that couch, and take her heat into his mouth, drinking as much as he wanted from her, at leisure, lapping his tongue over her, taking in her taste. He wanted to hear her moan in pleasure, curious to know what would get her off. He felt like a high school kid on his first date, ready to cream in his jeans from thinking about having sex.

“Do you want to play, Shawn Lewin?” he asked gutturally. “Just say the words.”

She sucked in a quick breath. His heart pounded so hard at her nearness he wondered if she could hear it. He felt the corresponding throbbing of his pulse all the

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

way to his temples. He was so close. He could kiss her right now with minimum effort and no regret.

"There's my ass, Jimmy, feel free to take a chunk out of it," she said between gritted teeth.

Oh she's challenging me. Ah, he loved a good challenge. Wouldn't take her long to figure that out about him.

"Don't offer yourself up unless you're prepared to back it up with more."

"Oh, I'm prepared."

He wasn't sure when her anger turned, but when he squeezed her ass, taking her up on her offer, he saw a flare in her gaze, a spark he hadn't expected. He recognized when fury changed to desire and he was seeing the signs, loud and clear. He raised a single brow in doubt at her words, which seemed to enrage her more.

"Now you've got me, are you satisfied?"

"Oh, I'm far from satisfied." Done playing with words, he buried his fingers into her thick dark head of hair and tugged her in for a real kiss.

She fell forward with a little squeal. Her mouth dropped open, and he took advantage. Angling her head just right, he delved in and gave her a full-on, open-mouth kiss, his tongue invading her mouth, his other hand clasping her ass to hold her place.

She struggled, making little "mummmm" noises. He knew just when he had her. Her hands came up, at first to push, then they clutched to his shoulders, her movements went from forced to relaxed, her lips softened under his, and she shimmed into his lap. Her hand traveled up and massaged his neck, her tongue dancing with his.

Holy shit, she was so hot. He hunted her tongue, and then groaned when it ran from him. He went on the chase, loving the feeling of winning when he caught it and she moaned. He clutched her tighter, never wanting to let go.

They had a sensual battle going, his heart racing. She tasted as sweet as she smelled. He could feel himself sink deep, his body responding with a need so hard it matched his rising cock. Only because he had to breathe did he release her lips, nibbling to keep the connection. She was panting and his breath was sucking as deep as hers.

"That's better," he said against her lips, "but I'm not completely satisfied. Need to move into the bedroom for that."

Rae Monet

He pulled away an inch and tilted his head in contemplation. Her face was flushed, her lips wet and reddened from his kisses, her hair still clutched in his fingers. "Or here is fine."

Her huff of outrage made it clear what she thought of his suggestion. In an instant, she turned from hot to cold, crawling off his lap and pointing toward the door. She acted as if she hadn't just stuck her tongue in his mouth. He was seeing her regret, like buyer's remorse after purchasing an expensive car. Shoot, he thought, he was at the start of something very, very magnificent there.

"Get out, Normin."

He unfolded himself from the chair and stood. As much as he wanted to go into the back with her, a southern gentleman knew what the word *no* meant even if not explicitly said.

She gave him one final, annoyed expression then turned her back on him. She peeled her sports bra off and threw it, then strolled to the back of the trailer. He caught the scrap of material as he watched her sashay away.

"Get out," she said over her shoulder.

He dropped the bra and stepped toward the door, still glancing at her. She had the most beautiful slope to her back, the elegant lines tapering to her waist and...He paused, noticing a tattoo on her left shoulder. He couldn't make out what it was since she was walking away, but after sampling her, there was one thing he was sure of; he would see it, up close. And soon.

"Stay out of my way." He stepped out of her trailer, shaking his head at her parting remark.

He couldn't help but grin. He liked her sass.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Chapter Two

Was she insane, Shawn asked herself as she showered off the heat of the track. To let a fellow driver put his hands on her like that, his mouth. *Ohh*, she groaned. What the hell was she doing? How was she going to earn respect this way? He was probably going to run back and tell all the other drivers he had about gotten into Shawn Lewin's shorts--the first time he met her.

Jimmy Normin. In the flesh, he was something, so masculine with his rugged good looks and hard body. When he had slipped off his fire shirt in the confines of her small RV chair, she almost lost it. God, he was ripped, veined muscles bulging and his dark hair messed up from his helmet. That body, combined with those sexy, Kentucky bourbon brown eyes, and a face to die for... She turned off the water, stepped out and toweled dry.

She couldn't resist him. He turned her on. Then, when he made her angry and she decided to move in and intimidate him, use a little of her sexual power as a woman...

Well, that had backfired.

She should have known better. She'd never been good at using her femininity as a weapon. She swore at herself. *Is this how I want to get ahead in the circuit? Throwing myself at the men?* If she couldn't compete on the track, she shouldn't be there. She was disgusted with herself and her actions.

He had a right to be mad. She had dogged him on the asphalt until she literally pushed him off the track. Her inexperience could have caused wreck and she regretted it, but was she going to tell him that? *No way*. She had to tough it out...show them all she could compete. She just needed more practice, more track time; that was it. She could work it out. One thing was for sure; she needed to stay clear of Jimmy Normin.

She'd known she was gone as soon as she got close to him. His smell hit her and her gaze dropped to his lips. He had such full lips, they looked so soft and, well, then he

Rae Monet

grabbed her for that kiss. Took her about one second to open under his assault. *He must think I'm a slut.*

She threw the towel on the floor and fell onto the bed, rubbing away the headache forming behind her eyes. She needed to set this right, but she was so humiliated at her reaction to him, she didn't want to talk to him ever again. She chuckled and punched her pillow, amused at her childish reaction. Geesh, she was acting like she was still in high school.

As she drifted off, the masculine angles of Jimmy Normin's face came into her mind. She fell asleep with a smile.

"Man, I love Richmond International Raceway, those nice fourteen-degree banked turns, easy on the g-forces, know what I mean?" Ryan sucked on a swizzle stick as he picked up his bourbon.

"Yeah, I know," Rick said.

Jim didn't pay much mind to their conversation, the Bluegrass music blaring with its speedy twang and hip banjos. The music shifted to slow and sultry, the guitarist took it down notch to a soft purr of the blues. Jim was watching the dance floor, eyeing one woman in particular pressing her curvy body against some guy. He didn't know who the man was, but he and the woman were getting mighty close. Way too near for Jim's comfort level.

Rick, Ryan and he had finished the Richmond race and were out on the town for the night before they headed to Lowe's Motor speedway in North Carolina. After the tense race, Jim felt a need to unwind and have a drink. This particular bar was the talk of the town, and by the familiar faces Jim spotted in the crowd, almost everyone in the NASCAR racing community had decided to hit it before heading out.

"Did you hear me, Jimmy? I said you got an eye for Shawn, but she's not the least bit interested, is she?"

Jim finally keyed into Ryan's question. "Huh?" He flicked his gaze to his two friends, away from the shapely woman racer on the dance floor. He needed to bring his near boiling temperature down and focus on his buddies.

"I said she's not the least bit interested. Shot me down, what about you?" Ryan pointed to Rick.

"Nah, didn't try, not my thing. I'm bad with the chicks."

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Oh." Jim ran a hand over his shadowed jaw.

"Shot about every other man I can think of. I think you can write her off. She's focused, buddy, on her driving, not on her competitors. Except to wipe the track with them." Ryan and Rick laughed.

"Whatever." Jim took a gulp of his Southern Comfort. He was well on his way to becoming drunk and still steaming. Shawn had again dogged his six in the race until she near ran him off the track.

"What's with you and that woman?" Ryan asked. "If someone comes a'knocking, it's customary to get out of their way. No one else has an issue."

Jim grimaced. He knew Ryan was referring to the way he never let Shawn pass him. She always worked her way to a certain point, and then he'd block her. He was hoping he would persuade her to quit that way, make her doubt her ability and get off the track. Then he could relax. Every day he fought his base instinct against having her drive with him. Flashes of his inability to protect her kicked him in the gut. Just like he hadn't been able to save his girlfriend from harm over thirteen years ago.

"Just doesn't sit right, having a woman beating me," he said, hoping he sounded normal.

Rick laughed. "Well, you better get over it, or you two are going to wipe each other out of this series."

"What the hell do you guys know?" Jim tossed back his drink and rose from his chair. "See ya later." He barely made eye contact with them as he honed in on his target.

He had a problem to reel in. Namely one scorned woman who hadn't spoken to him in a week. The whole thing didn't sit well with him. Every time he tried to talk to her, she'd go rushing in the other direction. He wanted to ask her out, get to know her, but couldn't pin her down long enough to do that. He was a little ill at ease because of the way he'd treated her, like a hound dog in heat. Not so embarrassed, though, that he let her get past him on the track.

Tonight she looked incredible in a floor-length black dress with enough of a V to give him a teasing glance at what was underneath. Her black hair was piled on top of her head, little wisps curling down onto her face. What he wanted was to taste her again, one little sip and he was nearly addicted. He had a mission and he wasn't stopping this time

Rae Monet

Shawn swayed to the slow blues in her companion's arms, trying to forget Jimmy Normin sitting twenty feet away, and failing to keep from glancing at him. He looked fantastic, butt-hugging black slacks, a button-down shirt giving her a sample of his chest hair, short sleeves that allowed her to see his bulging arms. His hair was tamed tonight. A little longer than was normal for a good old southern boy, it curled up at the collar of his shirt.

She was avoiding him. She knew it was juvenile, but she was mortified. She didn't want to have the word *EASY* stamped on her forehead. Being close to him was dangerous for her reputation and her morals.

"Mind if I cut in?" Oh god, the man she had been avoiding for a solid week stood in front of her, in all his glorious flesh.

"Sure, man. Thanks, Shawn." Her companion brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. Then he stepped aside and Jim moved in, folding her into his arms. The song went sultry and he pulled her in close, swaying.

"Hey, there. Nice to see you in person instead of my rearview mirror for a change."

She stiffened at his implication, but was glad he brought it up. She was royally pissed at the way he kept blocking her, and maybe a little hurt he hadn't cut her one little break on the track, despite their mind-numbing kiss. This just affirmed her earlier musing...she was right...she sucked at the womanpower game. Maybe, if she kept remembering how angry she was, she wouldn't melt into him like butter on popcorn.

"I've made it around better men than you, Normin," she snapped as he drew her hand to his chest and placed it on his heart. She was surprised to feel the hammering under her fingers.

"Simmer down, woman. I came over to apologize." He tugged her closer and rested his cheek against hers.

He smelled so good, like aged bourbon and pure man. He rubbed the scruff of his five o'clock shadow against her cheek. She enjoyed the contrast, liked touching him. She spread her fingers on his chest, his hand resting on top of hers.

"Apologize for blocking me on the track?" she asked, as her body moved with his. They had a natural rhythm together. It made her wonder what they would be like in bed.

She stifled a groan. Great, there she went again.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"No, I came to apologize for taking advantage of you. Now that you're in my arms again...I'm changing my mind," he whispered in her ear. His hand slid to the small of her back as he eased her closer.

"Come to dinner with me." He caressed her spine.

"Ahh, well," she almost said no. It would be the smart thing to do.

"Come on, Shawn, it won't hurt for us to get to know each other. Maybe you can bribe me into letting you by. Kidding, I'm kidding."

She leaned back to see if he was serious. One minute he was apologizing, the next he was being crass, sexist, and well, kind of cute.

"You're such a man," she snorted and tried not to smile. His fingers tightened on hers, he stroked her wrist with his thumb. Being in his arms was wildly arousing. The simple stroke of a finger against hers weakened her, she was ready to puddle in the middle of the dance floor.

"Want me to show you how much?"

She shook her head, chuckling. "The things you say."

He laughed. He had an incredible voice, deep and sexy as sin; he *was* sin--in the flesh. When he smiled, all teeth and charm, a real southern boy smile, she melted.

"Okay, take me to dinner." *It's not being stupid*, she told herself, *it's taking a risk*. After all, that's what she did best. "No promises on the bribe, though."

"Ahhh," he dropped his head and made a little moan, exaggerated and so disturbing to her mental calm.

The sound stirred her. She wanted to see him do that in bed. *Oh boy*.

He released her and pulled her hand into his arms, leading her off the dance floor.

"Come on, there's nice place next door. Candles, wine, and expensive food. All the tools are there for me."

He was so bold. She loved it.

"All the tools huh?"

"Well, everything but this..." He directed her into a dark nook, backed her against the wall, and kissed her. Not a simple kiss, a melting of tongues and lips that sent her pulse skyrocketing. She clutched his shoulders and hung on for the ride, giving and taking. This man, he was addictive.

"Mmm," she breathed into his retreating lips, wanting to follow and sink into him so deep she'd never see the light of day. She licked her lips, tasting bourbon and him.

Rae Monet

She let her hands caress his shoulders, his chest, slipping down to settle onto his erection. She felt him through his pants. He was hard and...*oh, man, he is big.*

“That is a powerful tool you have there.”

His hands covered hers. He tugged her fingers off him.

“Keep that up and dinner won’t be the only thing on the menu.”

She nodded and tucked her hands behind her back. The move opened the front of her dress more, giving him a view of her cleavage. His gaze dropped to the front of her dress, which formed a vee to her waist.

“God, I’d love to taste those, take my time at it.” He ran his finger down the opening, barely touching the inside of her breast.

She panted, her nipples peaking. She was getting wet, right there in the middle of the bar, picturing what his words were telling her.

“I’d like to love you, Sweet Thing, slow and gentle, all night long,” he said as he moved to kiss her again.

She met his lips, their kiss hot, steamy. He outlined her lips with his tongue, then delved into her mouth. This wasn’t sweet and slow like he claimed; this was fast and fire, like he drove.

“Dinner,” she panted against his lips. Where was she going with this? Dinner with him would likely lead to sex. *Okay, but sex is just sex, right? Sure. I can handle this, can’t I?* Probably not the best idea she’d had, but at this point she was a little past caring, a lot heated up and falling hard. Her connection with him so sensual it made her lose her common sense.

“Right, dinner.” He pulled back, caught her hand and led her to the restaurant. He never let go of her for more than a few seconds. His arm wrapped around her shoulders or his hand held hers as they waited for their table.

They talked, Jimmy leaning down so he could hear her. He was so tall, so much bigger than her. He wasn’t huge, maybe a solid six feet, but she was short, small, and he dwarfed her. She loved it. He made her feel feminine. In this sport, a man’s world, not a heck of a lot made her feel like a woman. She had been struggling against the prejudice toward women on the stock car circuit and her own doubts for so long, sometimes she felt like she had become manly to compete. It was nice to let go for the evening and just be a girl. Even if she knew it was wrong to feel this way with a fellow driver, a man she

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

drove against every week, she was enjoying herself. What would it hurt to let a little loose, use her God given gifts?

Their conversation was easy as they talked about their families. Shawn discovered he had a sizable plantation outside Atlanta with dogs and horses and a wonderful couple who took care of it for him. She had given up her rented apartment in Massachusetts when *Lovely* asked her to drive for them. She was an only child, parents back in Massachusetts. She stored her belongings with them, no reason to keep a place.

Up till the day he kissed her in her trailer, she'd followed his career from afar, read all of the interviews about him. It was nice to get to know the real man, though. She could feel herself falling for him bit by bit. He seemed perfect. Yet he blocked her on the track like he had a mission against women. She couldn't figure him out.

"You must miss it, home?"

"Yeah, I miss it." He placed his hand on the small of her back as the hostess led them to their seat.

"Brothers and sisters?" She sat in the chair he held for her. He slid it in, and then took the seat next to her. He looked relaxed.

"Sure, two, but way older. Growing up, it was mainly just little old me. Think I might have been an unplanned accident."

"Bet you were a handful."

He snorted as he laid the napkin in his lap. "Being born in South Carolina demanded I be raised the perfect southern gentleman.

"Oh, sure, meaning you were probably a terror with a million girlfriends."

He seemed to stiffen, then he laughed and captured her hand in his. She tucked his hand under her chin and winked at him.

"Yeah, I was. Let's talk about you, though." He squeezed her hand, running his pinky along hers. It seemed like he was changing the subject, but she let it go. His touch distracted her.

The fire she felt earlier warmed her again. Her gaze locked with his. Her desire was mirrored in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to move right onto the next course. Her.

The waiter arrived, spoiling the moment. Jim ordered for both of them. He didn't ask, he assumed. She shook her head, leaned back, and prepared to bring up the subject she knew was going to annoy him.

Rae Monet

“What if you ordered something I didn’t want?”

He picked up his wine glass, sipped, and set it back down.

“Then I guess you won’t be happy with the meal.”

“What is it with you and women?”

“What is it with you and men?”

“I don’t have a problem with men.” She sat back and sipped her wine. He had chosen an excellent vintage. She was impressed. “So Jim, why do you not want me on the track with you, but you seem perfectly willing to have me in your bed?”

She saw a flash of anger in his face before he masked it.

“Is it so hard to believe I was raised the old way? Where I come from, a man took care of his woman, provided for her, pleased her, and protected her. Is that so hard to believe?”

“Not hard to believe, but terribly old-fashioned.”

He shrugged. “Fine, call me old-fashioned,” he said. He dipped his finger into the wine and scooted forward to run his wine-dipped fingertip along her bottom lip.

She could feel the liquid wetting her mouth and snaked her tongue out to keep it from dripping. He shook his head and she drew her tongue back into her mouth.

“There’s nothing better for a man than to discover what pleasures his woman. If you aren’t happy with the meal I just ordered for you, I’ll keep ordering until you are. Don’t tell me, finding out by doing makes it so much better for me when I get it right.” Leaning over the table, he lowered his head and kissed her, his tongue lapping the wine he had just placed there.

She tried to catch her breath and lost the battle, sighing into his mouth. Her heart jumped, skipped and pounded. She was getting in deep with him. She recognized the intimacy of the moment and her reaction to his closeness was telling. He was ruling her emotions.

Still, she felt like there was something missing, something he wasn’t telling her. So, he came from The South, so he was raised to take care of his woman. But somehow his story didn’t quite seem to fit with his actions on the track. And he should get a gold medal for distracting her from all logic, because, at the moment, she didn’t care to work through all the puzzle pieces in her mind.

“Did the wine please you?” he said against her lips.

“Oh yes, very much.” Her voice so low she felt the need to clear her throat.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

He grinned, winked and settled back into his chair.
“Good. I think you’ll enjoy the meal.”

Chapter Three

The meal was incredible, the man the epitome of southern charm, alluring and relaxed. The restaurant was romantic, soft blues piped in at just the right level, candles and low lighting perfecting the evening for Shawn. She sat enthralled by Jim's sexy drawl that could only come from The Deep South. He wore it well. With every sip of red wine he took, his accent intensified. He teased her, calling her a Yankee. They laughed about it.

She was getting to know him. Although his views were old-fashioned, she was beginning to understand where he came from.

"What did your father do for a living?"

"He was a laborer at the town textile mill, worked his fingers to the bone for our family. I was raised poor, but well loved. Despite the fact we struggled for money, my Mom was great. My father said Mom made working long hours at the mill worth coming home to."

Shawn smiled. She realized his views were taught from the comfort of a loving family and she respected him for that. She didn't have to agree with him, but admitted it was refreshing to hear about how a man wanted to care for his woman.

She sat at ease, full of the most incredible baked creamy crab imperial, rosemary potatoes, fried okra, and chocolate pecan pie she had ever tasted. He was right; the meal had pleased her. Now, she was ready to take him up to her room and have him for dessert. She went into this dinner with open eyes, realizing the evening would likely end in bed with him.

As she took her last sip of the after-dinner mint tea, she drew her jeweled purse into her lap. He watched her with hooded eyes. She started to pull out her key and proposition him. The clasp open, her hand stopped before dipping inside. Instead of taking the lead, she decided to let Jimmy dictate the evening. Clearly, he liked to be in

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

control, and she was enjoying following. Off the track, anyway. Why not let him do what he did best?

But giving him a little hint wouldn't hurt. She slipped sideways in her chair and crossed her legs, letting the slit up her thigh gape open. His eyes strayed to the display. She saw his nostrils flare and arousal light up his expression.

"What else do you have for me, Mr. Normin, that you think will please me?"

"Oh, Babe, the evening's just started." He raised his hand and signaled to the waiter. Settling the bill, he offered her his arm. She placed her fingers on the crook of his elbow.

"I'm assuming you have a room here?"

"Got one last night, great place for an after dinner drink." He led her through the lobby, past the loud bar to the elevators. As they approached, the doors opened and two women walked out, laughing and talking. Jim followed Shawn into the empty elevator. He turned her to face him, propelling her body into his as he punched his floor.

He stared into her eyes. "You look beautiful tonight."

She dissolved against him. Besides being gorgeous and sexy, he was romantic, too. His drawl and charm were potent weapons of seduction; in addition, he enticed her with good food, good wine and wonderful company. She was lost. Ever since she started on the circuit, she'd been turning down passes. Now the only thing she wanted to turn down was Jim Normin's sheets.

He leaned down and aligned their mouths, his lips came down and devoured hers. She hoped the elevator was so slow that they'd never have to stop. He turned her against the wall for leverage and feasted. When he finally lifted his head, he was panting. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

"I have some dessert in my room I think will please you."

"I'm all for pleasing me."

The elevator button dinged. He joined her hand with his and drew her out of the elevator and down the hall. She felt as if she had fallen into a sensual haze. She was following him like a happy puppy on a leash, obeying every command of its master.

Jim unlocked his suite door and pulled her inside.

As soon as the door closed, he hauled her against him and thoroughly kissed her. She lost herself to his mouth and the sensations he was creating in her. Blinding sexual arousal tingled down her body. This was better than her most exciting race.

Rae Monet

“I’m going to teach you everything you need to know about pleasure tonight,” he said, claiming her.

She shivered. This primitive display should annoy her, but she was thrilled.

She lifted her hands to his shirt and began to undo the buttons, moving slowly, her eyes teasing him.

His hands covered hers, trying to speed up the unbuttoning. Their fingers tangled and it took even longer to open his shirt down the front.

Shawn took a deep breath as she placed her palms inside his shirt. With deliberate, calculated movements, she skimmed her hands up his pecs and pushed his shirt off his shoulders.

“Ahh, nice,” she said.

He was perfect, his chest large and well muscled, not one spare inch of flesh. Dark hair curled on his tanned skin around the nipples, ran down his chest and flat abdomen in a narrowing vee, disappearing at the waistband of his pants.

Shawn put her mouth to his heart, placing light kisses over his warm skin. He tugged her dress off in one motion, leaving her clad in thigh high stockings, three-inch high-heeled shoes, and nothing else. No sexy underwear; no underwear at all.

He grinned. “Oh, yeah.” His rough hands ran up and down her naked body.

The more she touched him, the more she wanted. Heat radiated from her aroused breasts and slid lower.

“Do you have protection?” She ran small biting kisses down his chest.

He chased her, sucking on her neck as she kissed him. Delving his hands into her hair, he sent pins flying. He wasn’t slowing for anything, and neither was she. She couldn’t get him naked fast enough. She wanted to see him, all of him. She panted, her heart trying to keep up with her heated body. He felt so good, everywhere, his hands and lips on her. It was so right.

“Yes...condom...somewhere.” His voice against her skin came out as a husky murmur. He reached into his pocket. Holding a packet in his fingers, he brought it out.

He was talking like a caveman. She could see he was at the edge of his control. Jim Normin was known on the circuit for his calm under pressure. How incredible that she could reduce him to this.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

She never dreamed she'd have this kind of power over a man. The knowledge thrilled her. She bit and sucked, then traveled down his chest wall to his concave abdomen, only to be stopped by the waistband of his pants.

Raising her head, she glanced up at him. He was calling the race tonight. She wanted his permission. He looked warm; a flush reddened his cheeks. His breath puffed out of his mouth like a marathon runner's.

"Yes," he said, "touch me."

She reached for his belt. Her movements efficient, she unzipped his pants and eased them down his legs. He was breathing heavily, sweat breaking out on his body while he watched her undress him.

She pulled off his pants and tossed them on the floor. Next she placed her hand on the front of his briefs where his penis was bulging, straining. She rotated her hand up and down, smiling in satisfaction when he groaned. Only then did she ease down his briefs, freeing his cock. From a smattering of curly hair, he sprang heavy and hard into her hand.

She touched him with the tip of her index finger and he pulsed against her. It was like touching the finest quality velvet. He was huge, bigger than any man she'd had. She paused and a shiver of anticipation ran through her. She took pleasure in the wait, the game, and his reactions. She played with him, fingering and stroking. He growled, his reactions enhancing hers. Unable to delay any longer, she tugged off his briefs.

Bending, she reached down to remove his socks, her hands trailing over each calf. He was pure muscle, one hundred percent man, hard under her fingers. She loved his body, his smell--all male; she liked everything about him. He remained standing, allowing her to take the lead, watching what she did next.

When she dropped to her knees, his hands fell to her head. She held his hardness in her hands and caressed it for a moment. She wanted to touch his warm skin, to smell his musky scent, to hear his gasping breaths.

"Everything about you pleases me," she said.

Leaning forward, she took his huge erection fully into her mouth. She wrapped her tongue around him, moving up and down, her hands cupping his sack.

"Shawn, Babe."

Enjoying his taste, his feel, she didn't respond.

Rae Monet

“Shawn!” This time her name was a strangled rumble. He grabbed her head to pull her up, then lifted her into his arms.

“It’s my turn.”

He was incredible, a bundle of sex wrapped up in a fantastic package. She wrapped her arms around his neck and slid her hands up into his dark hair, fingering the wild softness, playing with the curled length. She rubbed her chin against his. She felt like a pleased pussycat ready to lap up the cream. As he carried her, she kicked off her shoes.

He lowered her to the bed and slipped his hand onto her bare skin. Massaging, guiding, he rolled her onto her back. He kissed her, small wet nibbles to her ribcage, traveling up further yet to settle on her breast. Using his tongue and teeth, he worshipped, tasted and nibbled her into a staggering state of desire. She couldn’t catch her breath. It was almost too much at once.

“Ahh,” she moaned, arching forward into his mouth. He suckled hard, moving on to her other breast.

“Does that please you, Shawn?”

When she cried out, he groaned. She felt his erection pressing against her leg, his hips rotating into her.

“Yeeesss,” she panted as she watched him play. It was erotic to see how he laved her.

He kissed his way down, hitting every sensitive spot. Her body was telling her it wanted him to finish her.

He rolled each thigh high off her leg, baring her to him. Then he leaned back and encased himself in the condom, seating it deep onto his curved erection.

Watching him touch himself was incredibly sensual, making her hotter, juicier, and ready. He was comfortable with his body, confident. He fully settled between her legs, his cock hard and ready. He moved against her clit, probing her with his hardness, stimulating, testing her wetness.

“Jim, please.” Her legs wrapped around his ass, her hands followed as she grabbed him.

He pressed against her entrance. His lips mingled with hers. In one movement, he drove powerfully into her.

“Yes, Jim,” she moaned out his name on a cry.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Oh, yeah," he mimicked her as he thrust in further. Bending his knees, he pulled her closer. With her legs wrapped tightly around him, the position settled his erection even deeper into her body, impaling her, filling her. Intimate, full and vulnerable, she was his. It felt incredible to be claimed by him. No messing around, he'd known what he wanted from the beginning, that was clear. She craved to be his equal on the track, but here she was happy being taken by him.

"Ahh, Jim, yes, good."

He smiled at her reaction. He reached down with one hand and entered his finger in her vagina alongside his cock, riding it back and forth, in and out, playing with her clit. He hadn't even started to move inside her yet. His fingers added more friction to his cock. She arched into him.

"Umm, ahh." His finger drove deeper and faster, bringing her to a sweet, piercing orgasm. She pulsed around him, her hands clasping his muscled arms.

"So beautiful," he said, kissing her jaw, running his tongue down her neck.

She fell back, spent. He laughed, his finger coming out.

"We're not done yet, Babe." He thrust forward, sliding in and out.

Her body moved with his, hips propelling with his rhythm. He drove into her over and over, faster and faster. She started climbing with him. The wave of pleasure returned.

She groaned with the extraordinary feeling of him buried deep inside her. She felt so close to him, more than body part to body part, but soul-to-soul. He stopped to lean in for a deep kiss. Wrapping his hands under her ass, panting, he slid deep into her, again and again.

"Come for me, I want to watch you." His slick wet body strained against hers, hard and fast, pushing in and out, bringing her to the edge of that cliff.

She wrapped her arms around him and urged him on. She smelled him, his body: man, sweat and sex. She breathed it in, the scent more arousing than the most expensive cologne. Running her hands down his back, she enjoyed the feel of him, the freedom of touching him.

He was holding back. She knew he was waiting for her to join him. He continued to drive in, his mouth and tongue dancing with hers. The delicious pressure built inside her and she tightened around him. Then the flame overtook her. Her body bowed and she cried out as she reached for the stars in another mind-blowing orgasm.

Rae Monet

“Ahhh, yesss, Jim. Yes!”

He joined her, spilling himself. She sighed, holding onto his back. Christ, she had never had two orgasms. Never.

His forehead rested against hers, his eyes closed. She heard him trying to catch his breath, felt his heart hammering against her breast. He got up for a minute and went into the bathroom, then returned. He rolled to the side, bringing her with him. Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her close. A nice place to be, she thought.

Their wet bodies began to cool. Shawn reached down to pull the spare blanket over them. He held her tight. His legs tangled with hers and he tucked her head under his chin.

She smiled against his chin. *Multi-orgasmic, what the hell.* She'd read about it...never knew it was possible. Always thought it was one of those urban myths. How wonderful.

He sighed and his breaths became even as he fell into a light sleep. She leaned back to look at him, admiring the hard planes, the firm jaw. Drawing her hand down the side of his face, she felt the five o'clock shadow roughening his cheeks. She touched a dimple on his chin she hadn't noticed before. So alluring.

She liked him. Even though she had been drawn to him from when they first met, she realized it wasn't the only reason she'd offered herself to Jim. It was the man himself, his charisma.

He claimed pleasing her was his top priority. Nice to be at the top of the things-to-do list for a change. Satisfying to feel like a desirable woman, instead of fighting for every little inch she gained in her man's world.

He moaned when her hand strayed down his side and over his hip to rest on his ass. She massaged it and his arms tightened around her to pull her closer. She kissed his chest, resting her head beneath his chin to join him in sleep.

Shawn was having the most erotic dream. Jim, her lover, was kissing her all over, his tongue lapping her body. He tasted her breasts, running his tongue around her areolas, and sucking in her nipples. She smiled and moaned his name in response.

“Jim.”

“Come alive for me, Babe, time for me to please you again.”

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

His voice woke her. Opening her eyes, she realized her vision was not a dream-- it was reality.

"Ah, Shawn, you enjoying yourself?" He laved each breast, nibbled down her body, his teeth and tongue touching every sensitive area she owned and some she didn't know she had.

After kissing the inside of her thighs, he settled between her legs. He pushed apart her nether lips, licked, and then sucked on her clit. She moaned and moved her head from side to side, calling out his name.

"Jim, Jim, Jim!"

"Umm."

Arching, she cried out as he shifted his hands under her rear and brought her up to his mouth. He ate her like she was his last meal, with his mouth, tongue and teeth. Her hips thrust naturally to the motion of his mouth. Her legs spread further apart. Bracing her feet, she pushed her wet clit into his mouth. She would take as much as he gave. Nothing was moving her from this spot. Having this man between her legs was so erotic, she was climbing, going up, up, up.

Her heart tripped. She saw stars as she flew, soaring higher and higher, feeling as if she would never land. Then she settled and started to come down, her body melting into the mattress.

Not giving her a reprieve, he flipped her on her stomach and pulled her to her knees. She heard the rustle of a wrapper just before he entered her from behind.

"Jim, oh, god." She arched, throwing her head back as his hands came up to cover her breasts. Pinching her nipples, he prolonged her ecstasy. He plunged in long, fluid, unbroken motions, deeper with each thrust, rubbing against her G spot.

She was floating again, wave after wave of passion buoying her up, pulsing through her body. But this time it wasn't a dream and this man was taking her there. Her body began to throb, her vaginal walls convulsing around his cock. She cried out in pleasure, in relief as he thrust two more times and joined her. His mouth came to rest on her neck, his arms wrapping around her ribs, pulling her up against his body. He sat up, then laid down, spooning with her. His cock pulsed inside of her.

As she fell asleep, he was still inside her.

Rae Monet

When Shawn woke, a light hue from the early morning sun tinted the room. Not wanting to disturb Jim, she eased out of the bed and pulled on his hotel robe. Holding the fabric to her nose, she inhaled the scent. She smelled him, musky and sexy as hell.

Realizing she needed to get going, she mentally shook herself and hunted for her clothes. Jim remained asleep. He looked peaceful, almost childlike. An unknown force drew her to his side. Leaning over his sleeping form, she studied his handsome face.

She stroked his hair. He was sprawled on his stomach, his face turned toward her. The blanket had eased down to his waist. He had a spectacular body. She stroked down his muscular back to his butt. She sighed. He was beyond anything she could have fantasized about.

A blush warmed her body. She ran her hand up his back and stroked his face. He sighed and his arm rose and locked on the back of her head. He opened his sleepy eyes and tugged her into him for a single kiss, which soon deepened into more. She allowed him to continue.

She pulled back. "I have to go."

His brows lowered as he frowned. His hand tightened in her hair. He swept her in again for another deep kiss as he tumbled her into the bed. He pushed the robe off her shoulders and rolled her under him. Grabbing a packet off the nightstand, he ripped it open and slid on a condom. Pulling her legs around his ass, he thrust home.

She groaned, sighing in satisfaction. Yes, this man had a place inside her, deep inside her.

"You're not leaving. Not quite yet." He kissed her, close-mouthed, then outlined her tongue with his kiss. He opened his mouth and plundered hers.

She knew she should be sore. No man had ever loved her so often in such a short time. And he was so big and she felt so tight. But her body stretched to hold him, and he filled her perfectly.

Jim moved his body, thrusting in unison to his tongue. In reply, her hips met his as she rode his wave, loving the feel of him in her.

"God, Shawn, god," he said, his breath puffing against her forehead. His movements quickened, his hands reaching out to join with hers. He squeezed her hands, his eyes met hers, until the pleasure took them both so high the sensations overcame her. Her heart thundered, trying to keep up with her arousal, her climb.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Shawn arched to meet his final drive in an explosion so intense she thought she would burst. "Yessss."

Jim rested on top of her, his body heavy, his gasping breaths fanning her cheeks, his heartbeat drumming against hers. When his breaths quieted and his heartbeat slowed, he lifted his head and caressed her cheek with his thumb. His hand lingered on her face, then ran down her neck to her shoulder.

He held her like that, lying on top of her as if making sure she couldn't break out of his hold, until he fell asleep again. This time it was a deep sleep.

Shawn wiggled out from beneath him, rolled off the bed, dressed and gave him a lingering kiss goodbye without waking him.

Rae Monet

Chapter Four

Shawn was struggling with Talladega. Lately, every time she climbed into her Magenta stock car her gut would clench, she started sweating and thought her head was going to explode.

She was scared to death.

She'd wanted so long to make this work, to be like Cass Jamison and climb all the way to the top, but she was questioning herself. Did she really need to do this?

She remembered when life was simple on the small tracks of Massachusetts. Now it was complicated and she wasn't happy. *Lovely* wasn't giving her any breaks. Every time she turned around they were threatening to sack her. She wanted to drive, wanted to feel the thrill of the track. Now that she was actually out here doing it, she realized the grass wasn't any greener on the other side.

She moved toward the light blue of Jim's car. He was her lifeline, her anchor. She usually looked for his car and stuck to him like glue. Seemed like he was the only one getting her through the race. He didn't even know it and she wasn't about to tell him. She felt the jerk of the wheel. Something was wrong.

She dropped a couple positions. Cars were crowded in all around her. She swore. The wheel jerked again. She could feel the back end of her car breaking loose.

"I've got a problem. Something with the wheel, like something rubbing on it."

"Okay, just keep it steady. We'll change it on the next pit. You should be able to drive with it. Keep it calm out there, Shawn."

Her crew chief's warning irritated her. Easy for him to say keep it calm--he was sitting on the sidelines, not in the middle of NASCAR hell.

She jerked when she was bumped from behind. She needed to get back or get out of the way, that's what the other driver was telling her with his bump and run. She eased back another spot. Her hands vibrated on the wheel. It seemed like the shaking ran down

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

her entire body. She lost sight of the blue of Jim's car. Something in her gut clenched and she felt boxed in and out of control. She was losing it.

Talladega Super Speedway had him by the balls. Although, at this point, he was less concerned about the cars around him, than the woman somewhere behind him.

"Where's Shawn?"

"Don't worry about the chick, man," John, his spotter, said. "You're running four across, you need to watch both sides of you."

"I know how I'm running. Where's Shawn?"

She was usually bump-drafting him by now, much to his irritation. However, today, he had yet to see that Magenta flash in his rear view.

"She's having some problems with her car."

Deciding he had enough of playing with the cars next to him, he glanced left and right, then surged forward, going into the curve near one hundred sixty five miles per hour, he passed them both.

"What kind of problems?" He gritted his teeth as he tried to maintain his line coming off the curve.

"Stand by. Let me check."

Jim slammed down on the accelerator, the car jumping forward, way too close to the wall. How could he concentrate when he was worried about that damned woman? Now he remembered why he had a solid reason for not wanting a woman racing with him. He couldn't fight his protective instincts toward Shawn. Especially after the night they'd had.

"Something's rubbing her tire," John said. "They're trying to work it out. She's dropped back, fifth up from the last position."

"Dang." Jim realized how hard it would be for her to continue under conditions like that.

I should be thinking about nobody's problems but my own.

Thirteen days, he counted, since she left him in the hotel without so much as a "later, thanks for the good fuck." He was more than irked. Thinking about it, his death grip on the steering wheel became even tighter. She'd taken him on one night of incredible sex and now she was done with him.

Rae Monet

Screw that. I need to get in the game here and quit thinking about her. I'm in the middle of a race.

Every time he tried to talk to her, she was busy doing this and rushing off to that. He was having flashbacks to the first week of their relationship. Didn't take a consultation with Dr. Phil to figure out she was trying to ditch him.

Man, he didn't understand women. What did he need to do? He was sure the evening had been a roaring success. It had been for him, and if her cries of pleasure were any indication, it had been for her too.

A hit from behind made him grimace. He wasn't paying attention and that was a problem. He was sitting here, driving at one hundred eighty miles per hour wondering why a girl was trying to dump him.

I'm in trouble.

"You can't do anything about her, Jimmy," John said. "You need to stay the course and hold your line, you're getting hit from all sides. Watch what you're doing."

"I think I know how to drive by now."

"Fine. So do it."

He had been a bear the last week; he was the first to admit it. Shawn Lewin giving him the cold shoulder hadn't helped. His buddies had women problems of their own, so he wallowed alone in his misery. His crew knew how antsy he was.

"Caution out, there's a wreck behind you. Someone into the wall, multiple cars involved. Oh...looks like we have a fire. Watch it as you come around. They're directing the remaining field to pit now."

"Who's out?"

He took his foot off the accelerator and geared down. It wasn't unusual for him to ask who was involved, but now he had the added stress of his woman to worry about besides his two best friends.

"Rick and Ryan are clear," John said.

"And?"

"Stand by."

As he made his way around the track, Jim tried to slow the pounding of his heart and stay calm. *God, this sucks.* She was affecting him in a way he never expected. If anything happened to her, he didn't know what he would do. He felt his teenage years and the accident come crashing back. He needed to pull it together.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Shawn's in there, Jimmy, right in the thick of it. She blew a tire, that's what started the accident. She went into the wall."

"Dang."

"Just stay clear, NASCAR wants you all to pit. I repeat, *pit*. The rescue crews are on their way."

"I don't think so."

At John's screaming response, Jim turned off his radio. He was going to get in trouble big time from NASCAR, but he didn't care. He needed to see if Shawn was okay.

Coming around the last curve he saw the wreckage of a half dozen cars surrounding Shawn, flames licking at the underside of the Magenta car. Jim hit the brakes, his car screeching to a halt.

He unhooked and scrambled out of his car faster than he had ever done, running toward her car. "Shawn!" he shouted, "Shawn!"

He saw her struggle. Her gloved hand grabbed the protective netting. He slid into the side of her car and ripped at the netting. Getting it off for her, he reached down, unhooked her steering wheel and tossed it aside.

Smoke billowed up to his face. Flames licked at his legs. He ignored them, let his protective clothing do its job. He felt his heart hammering inside his chest, but his hands were steady.

"Hang on." He hauled her out and away from the car, away from the fire. He swept her into his arms and carried her a safe distance. While the fire team swarmed around the cars, he laid her on the grass of the infield. He could hear the ambulance rushing over.

"You okay?" He helped get her helmet off. White as a last lap flag, she groaned and held her elbow.

"Yeah, I'm good."

He picked up her arm, doubting everything was okay. Her eyes looked hazy and she shivered, she was in shock. He slid a sideways glance at her car. It was totaled, the front buckled into the driver's area. She was lucky she hadn't snapped her neck.

"Hurt?" He slid his hand over her arm.

"Just bruised."

Rae Monet

“Excuse me.” The paramedic knelt next to Shawn. “We’re going to have to take you to the hospital, ma’am. Just a precaution.”

She swore.

Jim took her hand in his, squeezing her fingers. “It’s fine, go. I’ll come with.”

“You absolutely will not. You’ve got to get back into your car, right now, before they fine you.” She nodded toward his car.

He glanced over his shoulder. Several NASCAR officials were swarming around his parked vehicle. She was right. If he didn’t get into the pits, they would take a lap off his total, maybe more.

“Jim, go.”

He looked at her. He didn’t want to go. For the first time in his life he didn’t want to get back into his car.

“Jim, this is what I do and this is what you do.” The haze had cleared from her eyes. She spoke as if she cared what happened to him. “Go. I’ll see you later. Go win the race for me.”

She gave him a sweet smile. He shook his head, angry at their predicament and still annoyed because she’d blown him off after a night of fantastic sex.

“I’ll be up as soon as I’m finished.”

She released his hand and let the paramedic help her off the ground.

“Okay, sure.” She limped off, the paramedic’s hand wrapped around her waist.

Shit, shit, shit. He jogged back to his car, thinking fast.

“Uh, yeah, I thought maybe I saw some debris, then saw she was having troubles getting out.” He shrugged and tried to appear innocent.

“Okay, Normin.” An official pointed to his car. “You need to get back out there. This is against the rules.”

“Yep, I’m on it.” He grinned and pulled himself into his car, hooked in his Com and got his helmet, finally locking in his neck brace and safety harness. Flipping his ignition, he headed to the pits.

Man, this situation sucks.

He and Shawn were going to have a talk. He couldn’t concentrate anymore. Today was insane, thinking about her when he was supposed to be driving. And he shouldn’t have gotten out of his car like that. He was lucky those NASCAR officials had cut him a break. He cruised into the pit. Yeah, they were definitely going to talk.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Chapter Five

"Mrs. Kingsdale, I need some more track time." Shawn adjusted the phone on her shoulder and rubbed her forehead. With her arm in a sling, she was trying to hold all her pills with her other hand, juggling the entire mess. Wasn't working too well. The phone fell off her ear, she grabbed it, dropping her bag of pills. She jammed the phone back up to her face.

"Miss Lewin, that is impossible. Track time is money and I have already exhausted all the money I'm going to give on this little venture."

Shawn could hear her sucking in smoke from her cigarette as she exaggerated the word "venture".

"Mrs. Kingsdale, see the thing is...I'm struggling a bit out there, if I could just--"

"Ms. Lewin, you don't seem to be listening to me."

Shawn grimaced. It had taken her a lot of nerve to make this call. She didn't want her owner to think she was weak, but that wreck had sent her spinning, in more ways than one. Her inexperience was showing on the track. She should have been able to handle a little bit of rubbing on her tire, no issue, happened all the time to drivers. Instead she had spun out and caused a half-dozen other cars to go with her. And hitting that wall, holy hell, she had never been so scared in her life. She thought her number was up right then, that she was going to end up a statistic. Not a very good feeling. She needed more practice. She was sure she could get the hang of things if she could just get more track time.

"I think maybe you damaged your hearing in that last wreck, which cost me an entire car re-build, mind you. I am not happy with this, not happy at all, that could be near fifty to one hundred thousand dollars, Ms. Lewin. I told you, you will receive no more track time! There are two options for you."

Shawn held her breath as she heard Ms. Kingsdale take a long drag off her cigarette.

Rae Monet

“You can either finish the contract we have tied you to and show your pretty face at every opportunity, or I will fire you. How’s that for choices, Ms. Lewin?”

The way she drawled out Shawn’s name gave her the creeps. She had goose bumps running up and down her arms. Ultimately, she knew Mrs. K was correct. She had hired Shawn, contracted with her, to drive this car for *Lovely* to the best of her ability. But Shawn was beginning to wonder *what* exactly *Lovely* had hired her for.

“Have I made myself clear?”

Shawn adjusted the sling on her arm and clenched her teeth at the headache sitting behind the back of her eyeballs. “Sure, Mrs. Kingsdale. I understand.”

“Wonderful, darling. And don’t forget that autograph session we have set for you on Thursday.” Her voice took on a happy lilting quality Shawn didn’t trust. Deep down, Mrs. Kingsdale was ready to brain her, and she knew it.

Suddenly, the threatening headache hit her, full on. *Lovely* had her so busy, even if she wanted to get more track time it was near impossible. They booked her at every mall, every party, and every sponsor dinner and event they could find for her.

She was exhausted.

“I won’t forget, Mrs. Kingsdale. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, darling.”

Shawn hung up the phone as a picture of *Cruella de Ville* came into her mind. Mrs. Kingsdale--although she ended their phone conversation as if they were best of friends--was furious. Shawn was beginning to see what lurked beneath the woman’s professional demeanor and it wasn’t concern about her driver; that was for sure.

Shawn walked toward the nurse’s station. She needed to get a ride back to the track. Right now, being in Jim’s arms sounded real good, even though she knew he was probably angry at her tailgating and she was burning at his constant blocking. What a conflict of emotions she was having. First, she wanted to slap him and then jump into bed with him. Man, she had this need to feel alive after the wreck, and she wanted him to be the one to show her how pleasurable life could be.

She needed to get her head on straight.

Jim barely waited for Shawn’s “Come in” before he stepped into her small mobile world. Her arm in a sling, she was watching her tiny TV and munching on potato chips.

“Hey there.” He sat on the couch next to her.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Hey there yourself," she said as she tossed the bag of chips into the sink.

"I was going to get you at the hospital but they said you were back already. I thought it was supposed to be okay?" He pointed to her arm.

"It was until they x-rayed it. Fractured the elbow, hairline, nothing they can do about it. Hurt like a bitch at first, but they gave me a shot, feels good now. It won't keep me from driving. It'll be good for next week."

"Ahhh." He rubbed a hand over his face. He was tired and emotionally strung out. The relief he'd felt when he discovered she wasn't seriously hurt had made him want to pass out.

"Didn't want to hear that, did you?" She unraveled the sling and tossed it aside.

"What?" He went on the defensive. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Normin," she leaned back and pinned him with an accusing glare, "you don't want me on the track with you. No matter how I get taken out."

"What the--" He jumped up. He felt better standing. She had no idea how frightened he had been today. He tried to stay calm so he wouldn't blast her with his anger, but he was having a hard time keeping his cool.

"When I saw you today, caught in that car, do you know how it made me feel?"

She shook her head. He could see tears forming in her eyes. She was a strong woman; reducing her to tears wasn't what he wanted. He knelt down in front of her.

"I don't think I've ever been that scared in my entire life."

She dropped her chin, silent, as if she was a small child who had been scolded.

"Babe...." Watching a tear roll down her cheek broke his heart.

"That was my biggest wreck, I think," she said as she rubbed her eyes.

He knew the feeling well, the first really big one. Pure unadulterated fear when he heard the crunch and the car started spinning. Then all he could see was smoke. At that point, he hung on for the ride and wondered where he'd end up, if anywhere. Even the fluffy clouds of heaven.

He sat back down and slid her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her. She clutched him and dropped her head to his chest.

It felt good to hold her, like coming home. He set his chin on top of her head and closed his eyes, the relief she was alive and well, washing over him. He loved the way she was determined and aggressive, but so often fragile. That's what got to him. She was

Rae Monet

human with flaws, no matter how hard she fought. And she could be killed at any moment on the track. Her precious life, gone in an instant.

"It's terrifying, isn't it? Wrecking that way," he said as he rubbed her back. She sniffled, her tears soaking into his shirt.

"I've crashed before," she said, pulling back. "Can't say that I've ever hit the wall at that speed. It all seemed like a blur, all those cars around me, like I couldn't breathe." She wiped her face.

"Moves in slow motion, doesn't it?"

She lifted her head off his chest, her gaze meeting his. He thumbed the remaining tears from her face.

"Have you talked to your owner, maybe if you could get in a little more track time, maybe...."

"They said no way."

His heart clenched then dropped in disappointment. He hated *Lovely*. He had a suspicion they weren't looking at Shawn's skill level when they hired her, but he didn't want to say anything. His worry elevated with his distrust of her owner. God, what a dangerous position this situation placed Shawn in, giving him more reasons to see terror at the edge of his vision when she was driving. He might need to voice his concerns but not now. He had her calm. He didn't want to fight with her.

"Maybe I could help, maybe...."

"Shh." She placed her finger on his mouth, caressing his cheek, her fingers walking over his face until she buried her hand into his hair. He leaned over and kissed her. It was meant to comfort, but as soon as his lips touched hers, he became desperate.

Her mouth opened under his, her hand tightening on his head. He loved the way she responded to him, like kindling. His body burned in response to her closeness. He didn't think he would ever get enough of her to be fully satisfied.

"Make love to me," she said when he released her lips.

He lifted her into his arms and bumped his way to the back of the trailer.

"Could they have given you a smaller ride?" He maneuvered her to the bedroom and followed her down onto the bed.

She laughed. "I don't think they expected me to entertain anyone along the lines of six feet in here, and built like a tank."

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

As she talked, she removed his shirt. In return, he was busy getting her naked. He worked around her hands until they were both stripped bare. He mapped her body with his hands, enjoying her feel. She was soft like silk, making him grunt in appreciation.

That's when he saw them. Bruises everywhere. They came from a particularly nasty wreck. Sometimes he'd get them in places he never imagined.

"Oh God, Shawn." He kissed each bruise, working his way to the flat plane of her stomach. Changing direction, he ran his tongue upward along her ribs. Her taste drove him wild; he couldn't get enough. In the last week, every time he thought about that night, tasting her, burying himself inside her over and over, he would almost come in his pants.

He caressed her nipple with his mouth and tongue, licking, nibbling. Taking the peak into his mouth, he sucked. She arched and moaned. God, he loved to have her this way, under him, squirming and moaning in pleasure. It turned him on.

He wanted to slip into her right now, but he held back. The anticipation was a part of foreplay. For her pleasure he would make it last until she screamed at him to take her. He turned his attention to her second breast, making it his. He ran his tongue around the aureole, teasing the aroused nipple, plucking it with his teeth.

Her hands touched him everywhere she could reach, his back, his hair, his shoulders. She lined his ear with her finger. He shivered in arousal.

He traveled down. Wanting to taste her, he crouched between her knees. He spread her legs and lifted them over his shoulders. His head lowered, he licked her heat.

"Ahh." She thrust herself into his mouth, her thighs tightening around his head. He plunged his tongue in and out of her, following the movement of her hips. When he sucked her clit, her rhythm grew more frantic and he sucked faster, keeping up with her pumping pelvis.

She was heating up. He felt the fire radiating from her body. An attractive rosy flush colored her skin. Little whimpers came from her mouth. She was getting close to the edge.

So was he.

Dropping her legs, he climbed up her body.

"Babe, hold on, I want you to come with me inside you."

Rae Monet

She reached over and grabbed a condom from her dresser and handed it to him. He slipped it on. Cupping her ass, he thrust into her. She arched, her breath caught. A long moan came from her mouth and her heat clamped down on his erection.

He hoped her orgasm was the first of many.

“Beautiful,” he said as he began to move, a rhythm as old as the universe, taking what he needed with each thrust of his cock.

God, she was incredible, so tight, the friction taking him up fast. Tingles started at the base of his spine and sped up, teasing him with promise of what was coming.

He was falling fast, his hips speeding, his thrusts growing more aggressive. He wanted to go slow, but he couldn’t see it happening. Not now. Loving this woman became his focus, his sole reason for existence.

She ran her hands down his back, over his buttocks. He kissed her, deep, thrusting his tongue in unison to his hips.

“Come again for me.” He concentrated, tried to hold back. He wanted to see her come, watch the ecstasy in her eyes, hear her soft cries, feel her convulsions.

His body tightened, his heart pounding. Her heat constricted around him. Her breath hitched, and he held his. Then she arched and moaned. He sighed and let himself go, coming long and hard.

“Yess.” Dropping his head back, he made a final surge forward and flew with her.

He crashed down on top of her. They held onto each other. He took deep breaths, willing his heart to slow. Sated, he relaxed and touched his forehead to hers.

“Hey, sexy,” he grinned, making her smile. He rolled, bringing her on top of him.

She kissed him, their lips and tongues melding. He buried his fingers into her hair and held on. He felt his cock hardening inside her, his body telling him it wasn’t finished.

He skimmed his hands down her chest. Cupping her breasts, he massaged, teased, then pulled her forward so he could taste.

Man, he loved those brown peaks. He could live here, under this woman, on top of her, in her. He didn’t care, as long as he had a piece of her. She made him happy.

“Your arm okay, Babe?”

“Can’t feel a thing,” she laughed when he ran his hands down her ribs to her side.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"I love to see you smile." He slid his hands under her ass and rocked her forward, causing a moan. Oh, yeah, that was the sound he wanted, he thought, as his cock surged to life.

"Up for round two?" He drove his hips up.

"Ah, yeah." Her face flushed a subtle shade of pink. He breathed in her scent, a garden of peaches.

He made his decision, telling her, "I have a mind to keep you in bed all night. Okay with that?" He rolled her under him again and sunk home.

"Oh, yeah."

"I'm glad we're in agreement, for once. Especially on this matter."

"Me too." She nibbled his neck.

He sucked in a breath, his arousal almost driving him to take her hard and fast. But he wasn't going to let his passion end this too soon. This time he was taking it slow. No matter how much she begged, he wouldn't hurry.

"Hang on, Babe, we're going for a long, slow ride, made just for your enjoyment."

The insistent knocking woke her. She yawned, cuddled up to the warm heater next to her and stretched into Jim like a cat waking from a long nap in the sun. He ran his hand down her hip and she groaned in protest. He'd kept her up most the night; she wasn't sure she was ready for round four.

"Think someone's knocking," Jim mumbled.

"Humm?" She snuggled deeper into his arms, rubbing her chin on his muscular chest. She didn't want to get up. Unfortunately, reality wouldn't quit making noises.

"The door. Someone's knocking. I'd get it, but I'm not sure if you want our relationship broadcasted over the NASCAR community within the next ten minutes.

"Ugh, what time is it?" She yawned and opened her eyes. The warm brown gaze of her lover came into focus.

"Um, morning," she said as she kissed him on the chin, then let her lips stray up over his cheek and settle on his mouth.

He did that little moan thing she loved and met her mouth with enthusiasm. His arms settled on her ass and pulled her into him. God, she loved the passionate way he kissed, all his pent up energy raring to go, just like he drove.

Rae Monet

Flattening her hands on his chest, she explored. He was all muscle, sprinkles of hair, rough in some places, soft in the others. She moved up over his shoulders, delving her hands into his hair. It was wild, all over the place. He looked like an *Easy Rider Magazine* model waking from his noontime nap. He couldn't even look bad in the morning, she thought.

The tapping continued. She sighed and released Jim's lips with regret.

"It's still early, and that god damn better be important," he said, his voice husky. "I have plans for you."

Taking a long slow breath, she tried to calm her pounding heart. It was amazing how fast he spun her into arousal. A simple look, one drawled phrase, and she was ready to go anywhere he promised to take her. The word pleasure didn't even begin to describe their evening of lovemaking.

"Hold that thought," she said as she unwound herself from his arms and grabbed her robe, pulling it on.

"It will hold, don't worry."

Shawn scooped up their discarded clothes and dropped them on the chair before making her way to the door. When she pushed it open, Jim's crew chief, Frank Riggs, stood outside. He was frowning, slapping a white envelope against his hand. She tucked her hair behind her ear and wondered what was wrong.

"Hey, Frank what's up?" She felt the floor of the RV shift as Jim moved in the bedroom. She stepped back and motioned for Frank to come in. She didn't want to announce her relationship with Jim to everyone outside the trailer park. Even though almost everyone had already packed, there were still a lot of eyes to see Jim in her trailer, ears to hear about it, and mouths to tell.

"Jim here?" Frank voice was sharp.

"Um."

Jim came out of the bedroom, shirtless, only his pants on and not even buttoned all the way up. He was commando. He looked well sexed, his expression sated and relaxed. She wanted to take him back into the bedroom and have her wicked way with him again.

"Hey, Frank." Linking their fingers, he stood next to her.

Shawn was happy he didn't hide their relationship. Not like it was a huge deal, but still... She ran her hand down his arm in a silent thank you.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Frank thrust the envelope out. Jim released her hand and grabbed it.

"Don't bother opening it, buddy. It's a letter from NASCAR, an explanation of a ten thousand dollar fine for not getting off the track during that caution yesterday. This is a courtesy copy. The original went to the owner."

Jim's brow furrowed as he opened the letter and scanned the contents.

"Well, crap," he said.

She read over his shoulder. Sure enough, it was a standard letter addressing the facts surrounding the issuance of the fine. Words like "rules" and "dangerous" stood out.

She sank down on the couch, stunned.

"Primary sponsor and the owner wants a word with you. I booked you a flight to New York tonight. You'll meet with them in New York and then catch up with us in Vegas. When you're ready, I have a car waiting. You might want to pack a few things."

"Oh, come on!" Jim threw the letter on the table.

"This is serious." Frank's down turned mouth and solemn expression spoke volumes.

"It's not like it was a big deal."

"Jimmy, they had you pit for a reason. NASCAR makes the rules. If you don't follow them, you get punished. That's the way it is. This is their game. If drivers don't follow the rules, in their words, 'people get hurt'."

"Great." Jim sat on the couch next to Shawn. She dropped her hand to his knee and squeezed. He overlapped her hand with his, capturing it. He turned her hand over so they touched palm-to-palm and stared at their intertwined fingers. "She was having trouble getting out of her car."

"Doesn't matter, Jimmy. They have people standing by for that sort of thing. In their mind, you're a hindrance out there, not a help."

Jim leaned back, set his head against the wall and closed his eyes. "I'll be over in a bit. Start packing."

Shawn released his hand and moved to the tiny kitchen to start coffee. She needed to keep her hands busy and let the two men talk. As soon as the coffee was perking, she grabbed the ace bandage off the counter and wrapped her elbow.

The doctor had said it was going to be sore. He'd suggested a soft immobilizer for a couple of days, but she wasn't having anything to do with that. She pulled the

Rae Monet

wrappable ice pack from her freezer and set it around the outside of the ace bandage, then wrapped the Velcro® attached strap around her arm to keep it in place.

“Jimmy, you need to--” Frank glanced her way and didn’t finish his thought.

“I’ll see you Wednesday in Vegas.” Jim’s tone was final. Frank nodded and left.

Shawn sat down at the kitchen table as the implications of what was happening hit her. She lifted the letter and read the entire warning. *Man*. She ran an unsteady hand through her hair. *What the hell was he thinking?*

He sat down on the couch and watched her.

“Jim, don’t hurt your career over mine. I’m...” She stopped at the closed look on his face.

“I make my own decisions,” he said, his usual mellow voice gruff, “and I’m willing to accept my bad medicine.”

She shook her head; regret washing over her. She didn’t know what she would do if there was fallout from this situation for him with his sponsors. He had been trying to help her, keep her from injury.

From the very beginning, she realized he had concerns about her on the track with him. At first, she’d blown them off. She’d dealt with that type of male prejudice all of her racing career. She’d been convinced that small-minded males perpetuated the good old boys network at NASCAR. Now doubts snaked into her mind.

When women in the military were first allowed in combat, she knew a lot of people argued it would affect the men. That they would have a hard time watching women fight, get injured...or die.

She always thought the arguments were crap, just another way to keep women down, but now her certainty was starting to dissolve. She was concerned Jim had an innate protective instinct, or something else she didn’t know about.

A shiver went through her. She should have seen it coming. He was her lover, they had gotten as close as two people could get. Heck, she needed to be honest with herself. She was half in love with him already. It killed her to see him hurt. The first time they made love they formed a connection. She had thought it was just sex, but it was more. He was pure guts; all wrapped up in one sexy package and so easy to love. His Southern charm, that need he had to watch over her and please her. He made her feel so cared for.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Hey." He knelt in front of her.

She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him.

"Shawn, why do you race cars for a living?"

The question shocked Shawn. She frowned, thinking about her answer.

"Because I love it."

"Right. The thrill of the ride, the power of winning, the seductive growl of your car. You love it all."

"Yes."

"And you're good at it," he said.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"If you weren't a racecar driver, what would you be?" He ran his finger down her face, caressing her.

"I don't know."

"So racing is what you love, you do it well, and you want to do it."

She nodded, even knowing she'd been plagued with doubts.

"Babe, I race for the same reasons, and I've been doing this circuit a lot longer than you. Let me handle my problems, okay? Don't ever say you're sorry for the decisions I make."

He kissed her. Trailing his lips down her jaw, he stroked her skin with his tongue and mouth. He pushed her robe off her shoulders and kissed the sensitive spot where her shoulder and neck met. He unwound her ace bandage and set aside the ice pack.

"Okay?" he asked.

"No, not okay. I don't want this to be an issue for you," Shawn said.

Ignoring her objection, he murmured, "Hang on."

She clutched at his shoulders and he heaved her up. Holding her with one arm, he tugged off her robe, sitting her naked on the couch, settling himself in between her spread legs.

"That first day we met," he said, "remember I told you to watch your ass?"

"I recall. God, you were so sexy, dwarfed in that little chair, dictating to me how I should drive." She chuckled.

"I'll tell you what I remember." He leaned forward and began another assault, running his lips down her chest. Stopping at her breast he sucked. She moaned and arched, a heavy ache growing inside her body.

Rae Monet

He released her breast. "I remember thinking how bad I wanted to lay you out on this couch and eat you for dinner." His lips traveled down her body, kissing her stomach.

Using his hands, he separated her legs further and tipped her body up. Then he dropped down and did just that, feasted on her.

"Jim, ah." His tongue thrust and sucked, then he applied himself to her clit. She was going up, reaching, wanting.

Dropping her head back, she closed her eyes, her breath ragged. She was close, so close, the pleasure threatening to consume her.

Her body tightened and she cried out as she exploded, a million stars bursting behind her eyes. As one, the stars blinked out and she went boneless.

"God, I love to watch you come." He rose, aligned their lips and took. Sharing the taste of her juices, he kissed her, deep, passionately. She ran her hands down his chest, over his ribs and around to his jeans.

"Get rid of these." She was pleading and she didn't care.

He swept his pants off. Grabbing a condom from his wallet, he slipped it on. Not wasting any motions, he bent his legs, slipped his hands under her ass, and brought her body up to his. He entered her in one motion, driving deep. Their positions enabled him to go deeper than he had ever been.

She sighed, happy to be filled up by this man, joined together, two halves making one whole.

"Look at me." His voice was gruff in half demand, half rumble. "I love you this way," he said, kissing her again.

She clutched his shoulders, holding on for the ride as he began to move, sliding in and out. The pleasure built; she was going to come again. Making love with this man, she felt claimed. It was a primitive feminine emotion she could never capture in her professional life.

She followed his lips with her own, tasted him, felt the softness of his skin under her hands. He was so big, yet so gentle. He made her believe she was wanted.

"Am I pleasing you, Babe?"

"You please me every second you're with me." She tried to sound normal but her voice came out as a throaty moan.

As if her declaration aroused him more, he thrust faster, his breath panting out. She watched as he dropped his head back, his jaw clenching. He appeared to be fighting

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

a battle. Sweat dripped down his face, his neck and chest. He was reaching for control and losing it. The knowledge she did this to him made her feel powerful.

He groaned, tensed and roared. She held on and let him spill. He dropped his head into the crook of her shoulder. She caressed his hard ass.

“Did I please you?” she asked with a teasing resonance in her voice.

“Babe, you always please me. Consider me your personal slave.”

“Oh, ho, ho. I like the sound of that. Will you let me tie you to the bed then?”

He smiled and lifted her into his arms. “I will let you do anything you want to me.”

“Ohh, that sounds promising.” She imagined tying him to the bed and having her way with him. That mental picture erased all concerns from her mind except finding some silk bindings.

“Sure does.” He carried her down the hall back to the bedroom.

She collected her thoughts, banning the sexy image of him spread-eagle on her bed, determined not to let him distract her from their original discussion.

“We’ll talk more about this,” she said.

“Uh, huh. Later,” he murmured as he laid her on the bed.

Chapter Six

Jim grabbed his bag from the overhead bin. The last turbulent flight to Vegas left him in a bitter mood. The consolation prize to a bad flight and an even worse meeting with his owner was Shawn picking him up at the airport.

Man, he missed her. Missed sleeping next to her, missed her smile, most of all he craved touching her. He was like a crack addict needing a fix. He wasn't sure when hot sex had turned into love, he just knew it had.

While he waited for the other passengers to move so he could get off the plane, he reflected back to his conversation with his owner. *"One more fine, one more incident like the one the other day and you can consider yourself dropped. The business is competitive, there are a million drivers waiting to take your place."*

He'd been with their team for only two years. Although he finished strong, he had never brought them any grandiose title, like winning the Daytona 500 or the Nextel Cup, so he was on shaky ground. He was humbled after that meeting and feeling low, and he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to comply. With Shawn on the racetrack with him, he was struggling.

He made his way to the luggage area, where he was meeting Shawn. He saw her first. She was wearing a tight red shirt with the words *Racing Girl* plastered above her breasts and a pair of black jeans hugging her figure. Her hair was down, nicely mussed, dark and shiny, her green eyes were alive with interest as she searched the incoming passengers.

When she spied him, her face lit up, and she smiled. She was so beautiful. It knocked him out to think how lucky he was to have her in his life. He had fallen hard, and it felt good.

Squealing, she launched into his arms. He hugged her hard, her breasts pressed against his chest. She grabbed him as if she never wanted to let go. A calm settled over him. Shawn was holding him and all was well.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"Babe, I missed you," he said against her hair as he squeezed her tight.

"Missed you, too." She ran her hands down his back. As always, her touch sent a thrill through him.

"How'd it go?"

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and walked with her outside to her rental car. "Let's talk about it later. Right now..." He leaned over and kissed her. Taking her lips he deepened the kiss until he realized where they were. "Got a room?"

"Yes," she grinned.

"Let's go." He pulled her toward the car.

After the last hour of lovemaking, every inch of Shawn's body glowed. She held Jim's hand as they listened to the soft background music of the jazz band. She loved the hotel's tucked away bars, directly in the casino. This one was designed for lovers to have quiet conversations in a romantic setting.

About twenty feet away was an entire casino floor, including the intoxicating clank of coins, wall-to-wall people, and Las Vegas glitz at it's finest. She shook her head when she heard a group of people laugh, followed by a loud scream. Wrapped in their cozy corner, the roar of winning patrons didn't disturb them, the well-placed bar was set up to oversee but not intrude.

"Only in Las Vegas could you get such a variety of activities in one place," she said. "So what happened in your meeting?"

Jim squeezed her hand and smiled. "Ready to race Sunday?" He played with her fingers.

She lifted a single brow. "You're trying to change the subject."

He released her hand and huffed as he fell back into the black leather lounge. He looked good enough to eat, tan cargo pants, black cotton shirt with the sleeves pushed up to display his muscular forearms. His hair was still damp from their shower, curling around the edges of his neck. She couldn't keep her eyes off him. He attracted her in the most elemental way.

He had been gone for two days and she'd missed him after two hours. Her attachment had grown so strong.

Leaning forward, she captured his hand, drawing him up from the depths of the chair. She ran her finger down his cheek to the side of his neck where she circled the

Rae Monet

hickey she had given him earlier that evening. His nostrils flared, his eyes took on that now-familiar sensual burn. She cupped his cheek.

“What did your owner say? Tell me the truth.” She’d questioned him several times without a straight answer. Her lips pressed together and her gaze drilled into his, giving him the message she wasn’t letting him keep her out of the loop.

He sighed and rubbed his cheek against her palm. “They’re not happy with me.”

She dropped her hand and scooted closer to him. She trailed her fingers over his forehead.

“How unhappy?” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. She needed to be close to him, no matter how, where, or why--she just did. She kissed the corner of his mouth. He responded by burying his hand in her hair, stroking her scalp with his fingers.

“Very unhappy.”

“Will they pull their sponsorship?” She traveled to the top of his mouth, nibbling. She took a slow breath and sucked in his unique smell. Clean, masculine, all man. It made her want.

“Not yet.” With his palm, he tilted her head. The new position brought her lips closer to his.

“But?” she asked, kissing the other corner of his lips.

A sheen of moisture covered his temple. He was so hot, like a furnace. Every time she came close to him she, blazed with sexual arousal.

“But...I must be a good boy.”

She lined his bottom lip with the tip of her tongue, wetting it. He opened his mouth and she stopped teasing and took what she wanted, a deep, open-mouthed kiss.

His hand tightened on her head as he kissed her back, his tongue dancing with hers. They stayed that way, loving each other with tongues and lips.

She pulled back and looked at him. His eyes were hooded with desire, his hand fisted in her hair, his breathing heavy.

“I distract you, don’t I?” she asked.

He winked. “You bet. And don’t ever stop.”

She slapped his chest. “Don’t play the wise guy. I distract you on the track.”

His entire demeanor changed. He released her, shifted back against the chair and steepled his fingers under his chin, his expression closed.

“Don’t even think of ending this relationship with a lie.”

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

She could see his anger, signs of his hotheaded racer image coming to the surface-the tension in his jaw, his brows contracting. He swallowed, a muscle twitching in his cheek. She watched as he tried to control himself.

He raised both his hands in the universal sign of surrender. "What do you want me to say here, Shawn?"

"I want you to tell me why you defied NASCAR rules to pull me out of my car."

"I..."

"Jim, there was an entire team of rescue workers standing by to help me."

He shook his head, dropped it to look at his hands, which he positioned between his legs. He mumbled something under his breath so low she couldn't hear him. She straightened and pinned him with her stare.

"Jim?" Her voice raised a pitch.

His head snapped up and his eyes met hers.

"It wasn't good enough for me. Shawn, it...I can't. There's something in my past that makes it very hard for me...I can't explain. I...it will never be good enough for me." His voice elevated to match hers, his gaze clear and unwavering.

Her heart sank to her feet. Somehow, down inside her gut, she'd known this. Something deep was going on in him. A secret he hadn't shared. She could almost slap herself for being so stupid. When she sat inside the burning car, she understood he had stopped his car for her, and her heart had clenched in fear for him.

A winner needed to focus. For him, she had become a liability. Whatever made him so protective as far as she was concerned could cost him his career.

The right thing to do would be to dump him immediately. To make him hate her. She tilted her head and contemplated the idea for about two seconds before she discarded it. She didn't get to be *Lovely's* driver by giving up at the first roadblock. She couldn't let him go without a fight. There had to be another way. She needed to find out what was going on in his head.

She drew his hands into hers, joining their palms and watching how they fit. So different, yet they had this common passion for racing and each other that made everything else seem unimportant.

"I'm in love with you." She kept the statement simple, no mess, no fuss, and no flowery words. She wanted him to understand, without any preamble, what was in her heart. She didn't expect him to return the statement, didn't even want to think about that,

Rae Monet

she just wanted him to know. She needed him to share everything with her so that they could fight his demons together.

Raising her gaze, she watched his reaction.

The side of his mouth angled up, a faint tick that spread into a full grin.

“Hot damn!” he laughed and shook his head.

“Tell me what’s going on? Why my being out there is so difficult for you?”

His smile died. He rubbed their palms together. His quiet spoke volumes. Spreading his fingers, he shook his head.

He wasn’t ready and she wasn’t going to push. He would tell her when he could. She realized if she pushed too hard, she could lose him. Something she didn’t want to happen.

“Sometime maybe you could talk to me about it?” She stroked his fingers.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Wanting to break the tense moment and change the subject, she drew him to his feet. “Come on, Tiger. Let’s go have some fun.”

“Oh, yeah.” He trailed behind her, seeming content to follow her and have the subject drop for now.

“You know,” she said, “besides that one time I mopped the track with you, I think this is the only time you’ve been behind me.”

He stopped and tugged her close, wrapping his arms around her from behind and pressing his body against hers. She could feel his erection in the small of her back.

“I don’t think that’s quite accurate.” He slipped his hands down to her hips, stroking each hipbone with a single finger.

“I’ve been behind you, Shawn. I just don’t remember having any clothes on at the time. That’s how I got a nice, long look at that tattoo, remember?”

Shawn moaned as she recalled that particular arousing lovemaking session.

“I’m always one up on you, Lewin, aren’t I?” His fingers inching lower.

People crowded around them. Music blared, machines screamed. The drinks flowed easy and free, stale smoke wafting in the air. No one paid any attention to the affectionate couple in the middle of the casino floor.

“Now back to my original question,” he said. “You ready to race Sunday?”

She laughed and leaned her head against his chest. “I’m ready, Normin.”

“Let’s go upstairs and I’ll show you who’s in charge of this race team.”

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

She shivered in anticipation.

Rae Monet

Chapter Seven

“Jim, you need to relax.” His crew chief’s voice was low and smooth, and Jim knew he was trying to keep him on an even keel.

He told himself he couldn’t get unraveled. One of the characteristics of a top NASCAR contender was the ability to tune out mentally, and he was a top competitor. He was apprehensive that Shawn was behind him wrecking again and he couldn’t protect her.

“Yeah, okay.”

Frank was right. He needed to calm himself. He was keeping an eye on her the best he could, and his spotter was updating him. Every once in a while he’d see a flash of Magenta and relax.

For three hours he’d been sweating and laboring his way through the longest race of his life. It had to be one of the most painful, worrying about Shawn while trying to concentrate on keeping his line. Ten laps to go and he wasn’t doing well.

“You’re dropping places.”

Frank was right again, he was dropping back, lap after lap.

“Jim, Shawn’s okay, doing good, no worries. She’s coming right up behind you.”

“Thanks.” He sucked in a breath and tried to concentrate. He could see her now, drafting off him. He was trying to watch front and back, and dang, he didn’t have the third eye in the back of his head.

Heck.

In an unprecedented move, he made a quick decision and steered low, an indicator she should pass. She pulled alongside him. He kept his eyes front, but he could sense her there, taking advantage of the opportunity he gave her. Then she was in front of him.

He took his place behind her, drafting. He relaxed. Having her in front was better for his concentration. He could see everything going on, he could even block if someone

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

tried to bump her. He should have done this a lot sooner. Then, when the time came, he could get around and go for the win. Yeah, he felt good about his plan.

"Sponsors aren't going to be too happy you gave up your position," Frank said.

"Screw them, I didn't give it up. I'll make my move without her riding me, threatening to send me spinning." He continued to move up the line behind Shawn. He needed to gain back his place. If he fell too far behind, he could never make his run.

"Tell her crew chief I'll cover her. She needs to move up."

"What? Jim, she's not even your teammate?" Frank's voice rose, as if he couldn't believe what Jim was saying.

"Do it, Frank!" Jim yelled. "That wasn't a request. I know what I'm doing."

"Fine."

Jim ignored the resentment he heard in Frank's one-word reply. His crew chief wasn't as important as making sure Shawn was safe and keeping his sanity.

He waited, keeping his line. He blocked as Shawn made up the ground he had lost.

"Her crew chief says she got the message loud and clear, and she seems pissed."

Another message to ignore. Jim stayed behind Shawn as she eased her way up, one car at a time, eating away one lap after another. Blood thrummed through him. Working with her, he was in the zone. Together they were strong.

Five laps later, she was in position to hone in on the leader. Now for the scariest part of the race, the last five laps, everyone bumping for space, going for the win. The competition was heating up and his stress level was at the breaking point. He needed to find his line or he would never be able to make a play for first.

Shawn tried to squeeze past another driver, taking a hit on her right. Jim snarled and moved up behind the other driver, bumping him in the rear as a warning then dropping back. The driver relented and moved, not before Jim had dropped back two cars. He was sure he'd get an earful after the race for that move.

He tried to follow Shawn up the line, but couldn't get close enough to her anymore to go for the win, he'd fallen back too many places.

Dang.

He hit his steering wheel. His plan had backfired.

Rae Monet

He could see Shawn fight her way to the top, car after car. He had to admit, despite the fact that he knew he could no longer take this race, he felt the thrill of the finish coming. Realizing she might win the race excited him.

As they came around the final white flag lap, he watched Shawn hug in next to the lead car and propel her toward the finish. He held his breath as the two cars battled back and forth, exchanging paint until they crossed and took the checkered flag, Shawn winning.

He gave a little whoop as he crossed the line in fifth and smiled as he made his way around to the pits. This was her moment, her first Cup win and he was happy to let her see her victory lap to the winner's circle.

He jerked the car into his spot, his crew surrounding him. He took his time getting out. He watched as Shawn did circles in the soft green grass of the infield, the fans roaring in the stands.

Frank tugged off his headset. "Glad you're enjoying her success. The Boss and sponsors are going to be pissed by that entire display. You gave her that win."

He turned to Frank. "I didn't give her anything, she earned it."

"If that works for you. I don't know if the bosses are going to see it the same way."

"Frank, I've worked my ass off for those guys for two years now. I'm the one putting my life on the line out here every week, not them. I've had solid finishes in the Cup both years. A third and second place isn't dog food. If they want to dump me because I let one little woman by me, then more power to them." He threw his helmet into his car and tugged off his gloves. He'd about had it.

"I'll see you next week," he said as he made his way toward the winner's circle. He stood on the outskirts, arms crossed, far enough away not to get noticed, but close enough he could watch and enjoy her success. Rick and Ryan walked up and stood next to him.

"Looked to me like you gave her that one," Ryan said.

"Doesn't matter how it looked, that's not what happened."

"I'm thinking you're going to get your ass in a sling for that, all the owner and sponsor trouble you've been having." Rick patted him on the shoulder.

Although he didn't set out on purpose to push her to win, he wasn't sad about it. He made a tactical error with that final block, thinking he could just slide in behind her,

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

be comfortable with her in front and able to protect her. Then he would make a last minute run at the win. Well, she was better than he thought. Once she passed him, he'd dropped a couple cars behind her, and she made it on her own.

"No doubt." He smiled as three reporters tried to shove microphones into her face. Someone in her crew dumped an entire barrel of liquid over her head. Despite tradition, he almost walked forward to pound the guy, but Ryan held him back with a strong hand on his arm.

"Don't do that, my friend."

Jim nodded, relaxing his muscles.

"Let's get in a healthy game of poker while the crews breaks down and packs it up," Rick said.

"Sounds good." Jim turned from the display and made his way to his trailer, Ryan and Rick in tow.

"You're not the only one with woman problems, you know," Rick said as they made their way to the driver RV section.

"Yeah," Ryan mimicked Rick.

Jim laughed. He couldn't wait to hear about this.

Walking toward the drivers' trailers, Shawn snapped shut her cellular phone after talking with *Lovely's* CEO and President. It was the same old conversation. She asked for more track time, Mrs. Kingsdale had refused. Shawn had made one of the most difficult decisions of her life, and she felt good about it. She wasn't ready for this; despite her win today, a victory propelled by Jim.

A trio of young women fans screamed and pointed at her. She smiled and waved. She let the accolades die down before she stomped to Jim's bus.

She was going to kill him. What the hell was he thinking? He had let her win. He might as well have gotten out of his car and physically pushed her across the finish line. His owner and sponsors were going to be furious.

This might be something he'd do with a teammate--if he had no chance at winning. Not with someone on an opposing team. Besides, she didn't need his help. If she wasn't good enough to get past him when he blocked her, she didn't need him to make a hole for her. That was one of the keys to her conversation with Mrs. Kingsdale.

Rae Monet

She didn't even knock. The smell of cigar smoke was the first thing that assaulted her senses. Jim, Rick and Ryan lounged around Jim's table, cards in hand. All three men glanced at her.

She crossed her arms and stared them down.

"Boys," she said. Then she directed her look to Jim.

"Hey, Shawn, we were just wrapping it up here." Ryan threw his cards into the middle of the table and shimmied past her.

Rick was right behind him. "Yeah, umm, we'll see y'all later."

They were gone before she could say good-bye. Jim gathered all the cards and placed them into one stack.

"Hey there, Babe. Congratulations." He tucked the cards into the holder and approached her.

"You totally let me win that race!" She felt like she was going to blow up.

He held up both of his hands. His mouth tightening, he shook his head and headed to the back of the rig. She could hear him unzipping his uniform and followed him.

"You let me by." She stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. "Then you blocked for me until I could push my way to the checkered."

As he peeled off the layers of his uniform, he made eye contact with her. He threw the suit in the corner, and then removed his remaining clothing. Naked, he lay down on the bed and tucked his arms under his head.

She ran her eyes the length of him, his erection proud and huge against his stomach. He was so goddamn sexy, lying there so arrogant. Even though she was angry with him for acting so stupid, he still turned her on.

She pivoted and walked away before she did something she would regret.

"Whoa, hold on. Wait, Shawn. Please, don't leave." He leapt up and caught her arm before she made it to the door. His grip firm, he dragged her back to the bed.

"Shawn, listen to me. That's not the way it happened. Not the way I meant it to be. Let me explain." He released her arm and sat back on the bed.

She turned toward him. She was so angry she saw red.

Oh, that was it. Her body worked before her brain, and she launched herself at him. When she landed on top of him, he grunted and caught her. Her intent was to pummel him dead, but he flipped over and had her under him before she could blink.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"I could kill you," she growled.

"God, I love that fire in you." He sucked on her neck.

In an instant, her anger turned to desire. She was so easy as far as he was concerned, weak. What happened to her determination to make a stand? It died a quick death with his naked body pressed against hers. Desire was her enemy. That's why she was leaving in the first place, she couldn't resist him and she knew the outcome of their argument. She had already taken her own action to solve the situation.

"This isn't going to solve anything," she said, her voice husky.

He replied by unzipping her uniform and peeling off her shirt, then bra, leaving her breasts exposed. He started with a gentle lick, then moved in with his mouth and sucked, tweaking her nipple with his tongue.

"Oh yeah, it will," he said, "hopefully it will shut you up for a least an hour."

She emitted a sound, she wasn't even sure where it came from, somewhere between a fierce snarl and a moan. His hands were as busy as his mouth, working her clothes off of her, one article at a time, until she was naked under him.

"Jim." She put her hands on his shoulders, ready to push him away. She needed to put some sort of reason back into the situation. She was hot, tired...and aroused.

He kissed her cheek. "Babe, you won because you had the skill to take it to the finish. Okay, okay, maybe I let you get by, just so I could keep an eye on you. It was your chance, your time, and you took it. I'm so proud of you."

His little speech shut her up. She never thought she would hear him say that. She blinked back tears. Despite what he was saying, she knew she wouldn't have won today without him.

He stroked her cheek, his body blanketing hers. This was it. This was what life was all about. Not winning--him.

"Shawn," He kissed her jaw and traveled to her lips. He hovered there, just above her mouth, so close. "I love you so much."

He closed in the last couple millimeters to her lips and claimed her with a kiss so passionate that she was afraid the tears pressing behind her eyes would fall.

Oh God, just what she had been waiting for, hearing him say he loved her. She slid her hands into his hair and held onto his head as he ravished her mouth. He let her up for air.

"This isn't going to work," she said as she nibbled down his jaw.

Rae Monet

“It’s already working.” His voice rough, he traveled down her body, her neck, her shoulder, kissing her everywhere.

“No, I mean we’re not going to work together anymore.”

He stopped kissing and stared at her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I quit.”

He sat back on the bed and stared at her as if wondering what virus was screwing up her brain. She had known it was going to be a shock to him, but she refused to be out there on the track with him distracted the way he had been. He was sacrificing his career, and she wasn’t going to let him. His life--his happiness--was way too valuable to her. She would do something else, race somewhere else if she got the itch, but no more NASCAR.

“You quit what, Babe? You’re not making any sense.”

“I called *Lovely Cosmetics* before I came here and resigned as their driver.”

“You what?” He shook his head, his brow furrowing.

She nodded. “Jim, I quit. I’m going to take some time off.”

“But...”

“Now it’s time you tell me why you can’t have me out there racing with you?”

He sat back on the bed. His shocked expression didn’t budge her from her purpose.

He made eye contact with her. “Babe, I didn’t want things to end this way. This is my fault. I shouldn’t have given you a hard time. Racing is what you want to do with your life. It’s in your blood. What about your career?”

“You’re so cute when you’re feeling all guilty.” She smiled, tenderness warming her insides as she caressed his hard shoulder. “Don’t take the blame for my decision. I know what I’m giving up. The simple fact that you can block me, over and over, tells me a story. It tells me you’re better than me.”

“That wreck, where I wondered if I was going to live or die, solidified my decision. I’m not cut out for this life. I tried it, enjoyed my fifteen minutes of fame, but Jimmy, you were born to be a racecar driver. And there was no way I’m placing your life on the line for mine. No way.”

“Babe?”

“Don’t argue. This is the way it’s going to be.” She crossed her arms. “Okay, I’ve given, you’ve tried to change the subject. Tell me.”

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

He sighed, turned and sat on the edge of the bed, lowering his head into his hands. Shawn scooted closer and caressed his shoulder.

"When I was sixteen, I had a girlfriend, Jenny. God, she was so young and beautiful. We were serious; I really cared about her, despite our age. We had all these plans." He spoke into his hands, his shoulders drooped, and every word seemed torn out of him.

"It's hard to talk about this."

"I'm sorry." She rubbed his neck. "Go on."

"I was racing then, just local tracks. She was enthralled by it, always coming out to the track. She bugged me constantly about wanting to drive in the powder puff category they had for women. I told her no way, it was too dangerous..."

"What happened?" Shawn wrapped her arms around him. She almost didn't want to hear the answer.

"She entered without my knowledge, the straight drag category. She borrowed a car from a friend of mine. Right under my nose. I was racing stockcars, getting ready. I didn't even know she was racing. She was killed during that race, Shawn. She was going too fast and overshot the finish, crashing headfirst into a concrete barrier. It was my fault. I was supposed to protect her. She didn't have enough experience to race. She was my girl."

"I'm so sorry," Shawn said as she hugged him.

"It was so long ago. As I grew older, I developed an insane protective instinct toward woman I care about. Couldn't seem to help myself, made it hard to have a relationship. I was like one of those crazy jealous boyfriends you hear about."

She suffered with him.

"Took me a long time to work through things," he continued. "I had to undergo counseling, figure out what was going on inside my head and how it was linked to Jenny's death and the role I felt I played in it. When I get close to someone, it flares and with you out on the track with me.... I'm sorry, Shawn. Now, it's ruining your career. All I wanted to do today was let you by, watch you, make sure you were okay."

"Jim." She moved in front of him and knelt between his legs. She tilted his face up. The tears in his eyes crushed her.

"You didn't ruin anything," she said, hearing the huskiness in her voice. "Thank you for being honest with me. It explains a lot. I'm happy with my decision. Don't

Rae Monet

think this is your fault. I wasn't cutting it out there. You had to hit me alongside the head for me to figure it out. I need more practice in stockcars. It was too soon for me to move up. I feel fear when I'm driving, the first sign I'm not ready."

She wiped a single fallen tear from his cheek. "I'm happy. We'll work through this together. Okay?" Leaning forward, she whispered in his ear. "Make love to me."

He groaned and pulled her onto the bed, rolling her underneath him.

"Shawn." He eased into her.

He was so big, so good. She arched into him.

"God, I love you, Babe." He began to move. Lifting her hands above her head, he clasped their palms together. As he drove into her, he leaned over and sucked on her breasts, one at a time, worshipping her.

She tightened around him. He was sending her over the top, fast. His passion always enflamed hers. His eagerness made her impatient, and when he was hot, so was she. She loved that about him; his frantic need matched her own.

In a few more stokes, she was flying. He joined her, his head thrown back as he made one final drive into her. He roared as she moaned, collapsing on top of her. They lay like that while their thundering hearts slowed to normal. Only then did he lift his head.

"You're going to be very busy," he said.

She arched a brow. "How's that?"

"Marrying me and having my babies."

Her heart stopped, her palms began to sweat.

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"You could call it asking if it makes you feel better. I was sort of telling." His mouth quirked into a smile.

"Since you put it that way, so sweet, how can a girl refuse?" She laughed and rubbed her cheek against his.

"I'll always take care of you, Shawn. You'll never want for anything. I promise you'll never regret, not for one minute, joining your life to mine," he said, sincerity in his expression.

She melted. Now that she understood where his need to protect her came from, it didn't bother her. She thought it was sweet.

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

"I know, Jimmy. I'll be proud to be your wife and raise a family with you. Well, when the time is right. Let's take it one step at a time."

He let out a slow sigh, as if he was relieved.

"Were you worried I'd say no?" She was amazed he could be insecure over her.

"You don't know how much," he choked on a laugh.

"I love you," she said, running her hand down his back.

"I love you, too."

"Tell me you have a big shower."

He rolled his eyes, hauled her up from the bed and shoved her toward his shower.

"The biggest for the best."

"Thank God. Race you there." She stepped toward the door.

"Babe, you've already won this race, and the man behind the wheel."

She chuckled. "Okay, as long as you know who's driving this show!"

He slapped her ass as he followed her into the enclosure.

"I already know whose driving, Shawn, and I'm happy to give her control of the wheel."

He hauled her to him and kissed her, a deep meeting of mouths. She had wanted to be in the winner's circle, and in his arms she was the biggest winner of all.

Rae Monet

About the Author

Award-winning Author, Rae Monet writes sensual historical paranormal romance novels and contemporary. She loves to write strong female characters, lots of action, and hot romance.