



Driving Me Insane

Rae Monet

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Dedication

To all the racing fans out there who love HOT romance. Here you go.

Prologue

E-mail: March 27, 2004

From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to me today about the new Warren Pro Speed gasket. We're going to give it a try, your explanation of the schematics was perfect. And on a personal note, thanks for helping me with that problem on my brother's Cuda 400 big block and the leaking valve cover.

I'll be in town soon. Please let me know if you'll be available on April 15th. Seems like we've been talking via e-mail or on the phone forever and never met. I'd like to put a face with the voice.

*Warmly,
Rick*

* * * *

E-mail: March 28, 2004

From: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

To: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

Rick, make sure you tell him to lightly snug the bolts down with a speed handle, using the torque pattern from the inside out (i.e. like head bolts). Tell him not to over torque. The valve cover will bend or break before anything gets too tight, so no more than 15 ft/lbs. You might also tell him to use a Mopar aluminum cover, instead of the stock. Much more durable, it's worth the extra money.

I'm at a trade conference on the 15th. I'll try to catch you the next time you're in town. I would also enjoy meeting you. Yes, it would be nice to put a face with the voice.

Until we next speak, have a great day.

*Sincerely,
Angela*

* * * *

E-mail: August 10, 2005

From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela, thanks for your time to discuss the S9507 ignition component. Sounds like that puppy is really going to help us with our problem. Very kewl about your brother. I wish him good luck on his first Grand National race. I remember well the same feelings your brother is currently having, the nervousness before your first race. Of course, that stress never really goes away, but you eventually learn to push it aside to perform. Tell him to keep a cool head and everything will go smooth.

I have a sponsor event on August 20th at the Detroit Mall. I wondered if you would be interested in stopping by and perhaps going to dinner with me after the event. I'll understand if you're busy and I know this is short notice. I just thought I'd ask.

*Take care,
Rick*

* * * *

E-mail: August 11, 2005
From: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com
To: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

Rick, I'm glad that part is going to work for the team. My brother idolizes you, so he will be thrilled with your well wishes and advice.

The week of August 20th, I have the annual Warren teambuilding event in Fontana, at the Abby Resort complete with the All Star Olympics and sand volleyball. I'm so sorry I'll miss your event, but I'm sure you'll be a huge hit, you're very charismatic and the kids are going to love you.

*Sincerely,
Angela.*

* * * *

E-mail: August 12, 2005
From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com
To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela, how frustrating we can't seem to be in the same place at the same time. I was really looking forward to meeting you. All Star Olympics and sand volleyball, huh? Sounds like more play than work, LOL. You'll have to give me an update when you return. Charismatic, huh, I bet you say that to all the boys ;). I'll let you know the next time I'm in town. Maybe we can get together then.

*Warmly,
Rick*

* * * *

E-mail: September 5, 2005
From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com
To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela, thanks for the recommendation of the L23 Series parallel switch. I think it's what we need to control that starter motor glitch.

From what you told me, sounds like you had a great time at your teambuilding event and congrats to your brother for winning his first race. Sometimes I yearn for the simple track life again, when I could race for fun, not a living. Of course, then I climb into the seat of my stockcar and all the wishing for normal life melts away with the flip of the ignition switch and the roar of the engine.

Yes, the mall was crazy, but I loved to see the kids. They're great. Our Detroit sponsors have planned another event, this one a little more formal and I'm thinking you'd look really great in Black Velvet. It's the third week in February, a kick-off event for the start of the new race season. I was wondering if you could join me? You can't tell me you have something planned. I'm asking with plenty of notice this time ;).

* * * *

E-mail: September 6, 2005
From: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com
To: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

Rick, great, I thought that switch was just what you needed. I saw the news coverage of the mall event. You were really in your element with the children and handsome as ever. I could see how happy you were making those kids. And yes, despite the fact I now have sand in everything I own from the volleyball competition, I do have to say I enjoyed the teambuilding. I love my co-workers, they're a great group.

My brother was thrilled about the win. That's so funny you talk about wishing you had the simple track life back whereas, my brother can't think of anything but finally being able to race cars for a living.

I know you're going to find this hard to believe, but every year, the third week of February, my family holds our annual reunion in Kentucky. Yes, I know, that doesn't sound as exciting as your event, but I'm committed to going. My family would kill me if I weren't there. I'm so sorry. Besides, I don't own any Black Velvet. I know, I know, that in itself should be a crime.

*Sincerely,
Angela*

* * * *

E-mail: November 4, 2005
From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com
To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela, ughh, this sucks. Seems like the fates are conspiring against us. Perhaps one day, we'll get the best of them. I always believed if something is meant to be, it will happen. Meanwhile, I'm still going to continue to throw out options for us to meet. That is, if it's okay with you, or maybe you'd like me to stop asking? If that's the case, let me know, tell me if I'm coming at you too fast and I'll tap on the brakes. P.S. Black Velvet is so easy to get, about as easy as I am, if you'd say the word.

*Warmly,
Rick*

* * * *

E-mail: November 6, 2005
From: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com
To: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

Rick, keeping our options open is always a good thing. Yes, I think you're right about fate. You're a great person and no you're not coming on too fast. Of course, first and foremost, I'm here to assist your team with any technical question you have. But the job aside, of course, I would really enjoy meeting you some day. Let's continue trying for it and keep our fingers crossed for a win. (Hope that didn't sound too corny, I was trying to be witty.) As far as having you, well ... I know I'd have to fight through hordes of beautiful women to get to you and I've never really been very good at that. P.S. Black

Velvet ... well I have always wanted to own a dress with that kind of material ;).

*Sincerely,
Angela*

Chapter One

“What’s happening out there, Rick? You got smoke blowing from your rear,” his crew chief screamed into his headset.

“I don’t know. She shut down. There’s no power, nothing,” Rick Monroe yelled. He was losing places quick, almost as if the engine had fallen out of his Chevrolet Monte Carlo. His RPMs were dropping faster than he could count.

He gritted his teeth. Bristol Motor Speedway wasn’t the place to stop dead in the middle of the track. If he didn’t get her fired up, he would get taken out from behind. They were packed on the track tighter than whiskey bottles in a bootlegger’s trunk. When one car went out, they all followed.

“You’re leaving a liquid trail, something’s leaking,” his spotter said.

“Damn.” Smelling the smoke, Rick checked his mirrors, then headed down toward the infield, what little of it there was.

“You’ve got a wreck behind you.”

Not surprised by his spotter’s news, he frowned. If he was leaking fluid, everyone behind him was feeling the pain.

“Please tell me Ryan and Jimmy are clear.” He prayed out loud his racing buddies weren’t in the thick of this mess.

“Yeah, this time they were ahead of you.”

“Thank God for that.”

Feeling his back end break free, he jerked the wheel. The fluid was leaking onto his tires, and at one hundred miles per hour, oily tires could mean the end of him.

“Man, I’m loose. Christ.” The rear end shifted, he held onto the steering wheel, his only connection to life or death. The car spun, and he worked to keep some control over the direction he traveled and who he hit.

Another car crashed into him from behind. He hissed in a breath. Smoke billowing around his car blinded him. He didn’t know which end of the white tunnel was the best to come out on. He fought to keep calm even though every nerve in his body quaked.

“If you keep your line of travel, you should be okay, buddy. Hang on.”

Rick followed his spotter’s instruction. His spotter was Rick’s eyes right now. Way up in the grandstands of the race, he was keeping Rick out of trouble.

“Thanks dude.” Rick breathed a sigh of relief when his stock car stopped spinning and the smoke settled. As far as he could tell he only damaged one side panel. His heart hammered as the smell of oil and fuel overwhelmed him. Fire could be fast to follow, so he pulled off his five-point safety harness and worked on getting himself out of the car. Losing it wouldn’t help him now. He needed a clear head. He unsnapped his wheel, threw it aside, and climbed out of the metal prison he had voluntarily placed himself in.

The safety crew rushed to his car and helped drag him out. He hit the ground, and with their assistance, he walked from his car into the concrete infield on his own two legs. Always a good day when you walked away from a wreck, he thought, trying to calm his rapid breathing. His heart was pounding a painful rhythm in his chest and he felt like his head was going to burst after being tossed around like a salad.

He glanced down the raceway and grimaced at the five cars skewed unmoving on the

track. This little problem with his car had wiped out five other drivers. He hated to know he was the cause of knocking them out of the race. Tow trucks zipped down the track, in a hurry to clean up and get the race going again.

Rick ripped off his helmet and sucked in rancid air tinged with the stench of smoke and rubber. He ran an unsteady hand through his hair. That was a close one. Looking back at his car, he saw how near the wall was to his smoking car. Another twenty feet and he might have finished his ride and maybe himself.

He made his way to his pit and his crew. His crew chief, Sam Cross, was climbing down from his metal perch on pit row. Sam pulled off his headset.

"Sam, I want to know what caused this, no expense spared." He wasn't messing around on this one. He didn't care what his sponsors said about his behavior. He needed to find out what had gone wrong.

"You got it, Rick, don't worry." Sam clapped him on the shoulder. "You okay?"

Rick nodded as he mopped sweat from his forehead. He handed his helmet to one of his pit crewmembers.

"Yeah, I'm okay, just pissed. I took out near a half dozen guys out there and now I have a DNF, did not finish. I need every one of these races to keep my point standings up. I'm not happy."

"I know. I'll find out what happened, let you know right away. We're hauling the car back to the shop in Florida as we speak."

"Good, thanks. I'm heading to my rig." Rick nodded and took a deep breath. Adrenaline still pulsed through him. He needed to make his way to his trailer and try to unwind before he killed someone. Adrenaline buildup could make him sick if he didn't release it somehow. Usually he played poker with his fellow drivers and friends, Ryan and Jimmy, but they had to finish the race as soon as the crews mopped up his mess.

Rick scowled, more worried than angry. He was on thin ice with his sponsors this year, already further behind in the standings than they wanted him to be, and the blown engine just cost them a lot of money. How he did in the weekend races was critical to his sponsors. He was going to have to work it out. Might be good to go on a run.

Known for his calm demeanor, his engine wasn't the only thing that had blown—his temper was well on its way.

* * * *

"It was the oil pump, blew your engine within a minute. There was no way you could have known unless you were looking directly at the pressure gage when the pump failed." Sam grabbed the towel off the counter in Rick's trailer and threw it.

Rick caught the towel and ran it over his neck and face. He had just gotten back from a three-mile run in the blistering heat.

"That's a surprise, considering all the oil and smoke left behind me." His sarcasm wasn't lost on Sam, who frowned as Rick continued. "What happened to it?" He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and downed half of it before Sam answered. His run in the Bristol heat had sucked the sweat out of his body.

"We're not sure. Warren manufactures it. We notified them. We're running a spectral analysis back at the shop, checking the pan, the pin, and all the possibilities. After we're finished, we'll send the old one back to Warren. They'll also analyze it. We've got another engine for tomorrow. You'll be set. It's been dyno tested, good to go."

We'll make sure you're ready to race."

Rick pictured the huge compact computerized treadmill called a dynamometer, designed to gauge an engine's horsepower output and the amount of horsepower a car transmitted to the track surface, or 'put on the ground'. If something were going to go wrong with that engine, it likely would have happened during dyno testing.

"The last engine was dyno tested too, and look what happened."

Sam's facial expression dropped to one of worry.

Rick's anger bubbled to the surface. He prided himself on his reputation, as an even-keeled person, structured and organized, not ruled by his emotions. But the faulty fuel pump could have cost a life today, and he felt as emotional as a soap opera star.

"This better not happen again."

"We're working overtime to determine the cause of what occurred today and the role the oil pump played in the wreck. Warren's on it too."

"Okay." Rick downed the remaining water. "Threaten to pull the contract with Warren if they don't take this seriously."

Sam opened his mouth to protest. Rick knew what he was thinking. Warren had been a trusted supplier to his team for as long as Rick had been driving.

"Do it, Sam. This is important. You know where my sponsors stand. We might all be without a job tomorrow if I can't maintain my position in this series after today's mishap."

Rick threw the water bottle into the sink with more force than needed. It bounced back out and hit the floor. He left it.

"I understand. I'll call them. I'll be clear on our position. Calm down, Buddy. This isn't like you."

"I know." Rick sat down before he passed out. Probably wasn't the best idea to take that run. Driving was his life. He didn't want to do anything to jeopardize his team or his car. It was hard enough to acquire a sponsor, let alone keep them. His career was a delicate balance and situations like this made him itchy.

"Race over?"

"Yeah."

"How did Ryan and Jimmy do?"

"Top ten, both of them. Decent finishes."

Rick was jealous, but happy for his buddies. The three of them had a love-hate relationship. The gloves came off when it came to racing. After the race, the friendship kicked back in.

"Who are they sending from Warren?" Through the last six years, Rick had spoken to several people at the company. When he had a yen for discussions on a new part they were testing, he always ended up talking to Angela. She had the sexiest voice...

Thinking of her, he sighed. He'd flirted with her at least a dozen times, striking out. Although she focused on the mechanics of their discussion, he always heard the smile in her voice.

"Not sure. I spoke to the owner, Joseph Warren. He's a character."

"Yeah." Rick laughed and shook his head. The man was Italian through and through. Joe flew key team members up on the off-season, wining and dining them at the best Italian restaurant Detroit had to offer. "I'm sure he's upset by this."

"No kidding, I wouldn't want to be in the quality department right now. I kind of

gave him a dressing down.”

Rick rubbed the back of his neck. He hoped Angela wasn't going to get her ass chewed.

“They better send the best.”

“He assured me they would.” Sam must sense Rick's impatience and uneasiness.

“I'll see you in the morning.”

“I'll be there.” Rick gave his wolf smile.

Thinking about it, Rick breathed easier. The Saturday races helped keep him fresh, plus racing at any level was good practice, good money and gave him valuable track time. Now Sunday was serious business, running in the stock car race. His expensive bread, butter, and high-grade steak rested with that category.

The door closed behind Sam, and Rick strode toward the shower. Warren damn well better fly over their number one mechanic or they were going to hear from one pissed off driver.

Chapter Two

Angela adjusted the microscope while she studied the oil pump. No matter how long she stared and from what angle, she couldn't find a flaw. It appeared normal. Of course, she was missing pieces of the puzzle. Parts of the pump were gone, so she couldn't reconstruct the entire story. She had tested the same model, out of the same manufacturing series, with every analytical tool available. Now she needed to see the car.

She pressed her lips together in a firm line. Nothing beat her. Ever. She was the best Mechanical Engineer and Quality Control Inspector Warren had ever had, that was her job. Why couldn't she figure out what was going on?

She slipped off her safety glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She'd been at it since Saturday afternoon when she was notified of the engine seizure in Rick Monroe's car, nearly twenty-four hours ago and on the phone with his Chief Mechanic constantly ever since. Maybe she needed sleep.

Easing off the chair, Angela slipped her lab coat onto the peg by the door. She grabbed her purse and headed to her car. It was an unusually warm day in Detroit, maybe eighty-two degrees. The fifty-percent humidity pressed down on her. She could feel the ends of her hair begin to spindle, and she tucked the long mop of curls behind her ear.

Her baby brother always teased her about her hair, saying he would be Moe if she would be Curly. The corners of her mouth rose in humor, thinking about her incredible family, Italian from their heads to their toes, despite their last name. She made a face, but guessed she didn't blame her grandfather for anglicizing his last name when he started Warren manufacturing. Their specialty was auto parts, providing parts for the best of the best, even the top cars. Although hiding their Italian roots was unnecessary now, the Warren name stood for quality.

And she resolved not to let the name down.

Her cellular phone rang, taking her out of her musing. She dug it out of her purse.

"Hello." She pushed her key into her car door, while trying to balance the phone.

"Angelina, it's your father."

Angela about dropped her phone. She wanted to snap to attention and salute. Her father, the owner and President of Warren Manufacturing, was her boss. She rubbed the back of her neck, feeling the tension from the constant need to prove herself to him.

"What's up, Dad?"

"Angelina, there's been another accident at the track today, during the stock car race." The urgency in her father's voice made her forget the need for sleep. "They believe the oil pump failed, took out the engine again. I need you to get out there and investigate what's happening."

"Oh my God." She raised her hand to her pounding heart. Realizing one of their parts might have caused an accident, hurting someone, was mind numbing. She watched weekend racing every chance she got, which wasn't much, and those crashes left her quaking for hours.

"Was anybody injured?"

"No, luckily. The driver was Rick Monroe. His crew chief called me personally. He was furious. I need you to catch up with his team. They're heading to Daytona next week.

They have everything they can from the wreck. Monroe's car was totaled and they've hauled it to the team shop in Florida. Pack up your equipment, I'm flying you out tonight on the company jet."

Angela dropped her keys on the ground, her heart dropping too. Rick Monroe? She had a special place in her heart for Rick and his team. Although she spoke to many racecar drivers, he was the one who always flirted, who made her otherwise technical day ... well, not so routine.

"Okay, Padre, no problem. I won't let you down!"

"I know you won't, Figlia." His answer was firm and sure. Since he rarely called her daughter or spoke Italian, she understood how serious the situation was.

Her shoulders firmed. She had to find out what was happening with this part. Turning around, she headed back to the lab. She had some gear to pack up.

Chapter Three

Rick breathed in the ocean air then grimaced and placed a hand on his ribs, feeling the coarse binding beneath his palm and fingertips. Reminding himself not to take deep breaths, he tried to ignore the pain. Bruised ribs, the doc had told him, adding Rick was lucky he hadn't broken one.

Damn. He shook his head as he looked at the undulating ocean waves and relaxed on the deck of his Daytona Beach house. That last crash at Bristol had cost him.

He reminded himself the safety harness had saved his life, even if just about everything in his body hurt. According to the doc, he'd gotten off easy after flipping a car at one hundred miles per hour.

Good thing he healed fast. It was Monday, and he had to get back on the stick by qualifications on Thursday. He shrugged. If he was still in pain, it wouldn't be the first time he lied to the doc in order to be certified fit to drive. His daddy used to say, no rest for the wicked. Rick tacked on his own additional words—*and no rest for race car drivers*.

"Here ya go." Ryan strode out from the house and handed him a bottle of water.

"Thanks man." He twisted the cap open and gulped the chilled water down. Florida in July was a nice ninety-one degrees with a cooling wind coming off the water. The sound of the ocean waves eased him. Shirtless and wearing his bathing suit, he tilted back in his chair beneath the shade of the covered deck and contemplated taking a dip in that pristine water only found on the Florida coast.

"No problem." Ryan eased down on the lounge next to Rick. "Jimmy and I owe you for letting us stay here the week. Get away from the dirt and noise when we're not at the track." He gestured at the brown sand on the private beach in front of them. "Nice place your team rents for you."

Rick shrugged. Another reason for getting back on the track in time for the next race. No sponsor, no beach house to call home in-between races.

"So how you feeling?"

"I've been better." Rick leaned back on the lounge and closed his eyes.

"You about took me out in that last race."

Cracking one eye open, Rick stared at his friend.

"I'm aware of that. Sam told Warren they better send their best or the contract with them is over. I'll use other parts." He shut his eyes again.

"Wow! Really? Doesn't sound like you, giving an ultimatum like that, to Warren even. How'd they take that?" The twang in Ryan's voice made Rick smile. He, Ryan and Jimmy all came from the Deep South: Ryan, North Carolina; Jimmy, South Carolina; then there was him, a Virginian through and through.

"They agreed, no problem. Their man came in last night. I'm heading to the track in about twenty. I can be aggressive when I want, give me a break. I do race cars for a living, ya know?"

"Okay, so you say. Warren, isn't that where the girl you've been mooning over for three years works? If it were me, I'd just fly out there and take care of business. You need to push things along, dude."

“Don’t you have something to do? Not that your insightful personality analysis or your advice on how I should manage my love life doesn’t hold my attention.”

“You sure you should be up and around? I say take it real easy today.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t break two oil pumps last weekend and flip end over end the second time. I want some answers.”

“I hear ya. I want this solved too. One for y’all, like the musketeers, ya know.” Ryan got up from the chaise.

“I know.” Rick sat up, took another gulp of water, winced, and eased back down.

“You look like hell.” Ryan nodded at the bruises on Rick’s chest above and below the wrapping. The five-point safety harness had done more than just about break a rib or two; it left him with a crisscross of reddish purple on his chest.

“Hmmm, thanks.” He glanced down and shook his head. Ryan was right. He looked like he had been acting as a human punching bag.

“I’m going to meet Jimmy and Shawn. We’re taking a ride down the coast, stay a couple nights.” Ryan chuckled, getting up from the lounge. “Ever since Jimmy put that two-carat ring on Shawn’s tiny finger, he’s been thoroughly whipped.”

Laughing would hurt, so Rick grinned instead. “Yeah, but whipped in a good way. Shawn’s a great gal.” He lifted his hand and made a shooing motion. “Okay, catch ya later.”

“Let me know how it goes with Warren,” Ryan said, hopping to the beach to walk around the house instead of going back inside.

“You got it,” Rick said. He had a mind to take a nap before a dip, he thought as he let his water bottle fall onto the deck. Maybe Ryan was right, maybe he needed to take today off.

* * * *

Angela rubbed her eyes. Even though she’d caught a few winks on the plane and was as refreshed as she could be, she was still beat. The garage for Rick Monroe’s team was typical, dark, full of mechanics in coveralls, several cars in various stages of re-build. The smell of oil was the perfume of this day and probably every day.

“Here you go.” Sam pointed at the mangled car and the engine sitting on the stand next to the car.

Angela tried not to let her mouth drop. “And Rick is okay?” Her father had said no one was hurt in the crash, but after seeing the car she needed reassurance. It was crushed on all sides, rolled.

“Rick was beat up a bit, but he’ll be fine.”

Angela dumped her duffel bag and unzipped it. Although she only knew Rick from their phone conversations and e-mails, the thought of him being injured, even slightly, made her stomach clench.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She felt pleased her voice didn’t show her agitation. She sounded as cool as an icicle. “My equipment is in the van. Can someone bring it in? I want to get started right away.”

“Sure thing, Ms. Warren. No other mechanic is joining you?”

She compressed her lips at his question, knowing what he meant. Most men didn’t think a woman could do this job. She got the same attitude at the plant. One of the reasons she was always working so hard to prove herself. It was annoying, to say the

least.

“How much time do I have with this car?” She pulled on her coveralls, then tied her hair into a knot.

He shrugged his shoulders, as if he realized she wasn’t going to answer his question. “This car is only used at the small track, like Bristol. We’ll pick one of the other cars at Daytona. I’d like you to find the problem before we get back on the track Thursday. Rick isn’t thrilled about using the same brand oil pump we did the other day. We’ve dyno tested the engine. We’ve tested both the engines from the wrecks, examined everything, and can’t find a problem.”

People milled around the garage doing various tasks, even though it was Sunday night. Time didn’t matter when the race was on the line.

“Great, thanks. I’ll take it from here.” She grabbed her work light. “I’d like to interview your Chief Mechanic later, maybe some of the technicians.”

“Sounds good. We’re here for you anytime, just give me a call.” He gave her his cellular number.

Angela programmed the number into her phone.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll have someone get your gear. You can use any tools you need, the garage is full service.” He swept his hand around the room, then shook his head, as if he doubted her ability.

Watching as he strode away, Angela made a face. She’d gotten his attitude before. He didn’t think a woman could be the best mechanic, but she was born to work on cars, enthralled since she was a toddler visiting her daddy at the Warren factory.

She still remembered the thrill she felt when she started working at the company, twenty-four and fresh out of college with her master’s degree. For three years she’d been making her way up the ranks of the company. This was her area of expertise, and she planned to examine the engines until she figured out what had gone wrong.

Focused on the problem, she slid the creeper onto the floor and flipped onto her back with her work light in her hand. She wheeled the device under the car. Time to get to work. If she didn’t find out what was wrong, her family’s business would be ruined.

Chapter Four

Rick slid out of his rental car and headed for the garage. Sam had told him the representative from Warren had been at it since Sunday night. No sleep, no breaks. Sam's voice sounded weird, and when Rick questioned him, he mumbled, "I've never seen the likes," then was called off the phone by one of his mechanics.

Rick shrugged off Sam's unease. Sam was always talking to himself. Who knew what he was trying to say?

Despite his relaxed morning at the beach, Rick couldn't resist coming to the garage. He needed to see if the Warren mechanic had made any progress on the oil pump situation. After what happened in his last race, Rick was apprehensive about driving Daytona Thursday with a Warren part, and nerves had no place on the track.

He entered the darkened interior of the garage or what the crew jokingly called "the bat cave." His gaze zeroed in on his wrecked Monte Carlo and the set of booted feet sticking out from beneath it. He squatted and tilted his head so he could project his voice under the car.

"How's it going in there?"

A definite feminine screech and a thunk greeted him. Surprised, he grabbed one of the booted feet and pulled the creeper from under the car. He sucked in a breath, gazing at one of the most striking women he had ever seen. Dark in an exotic Italian way, she possessed a classically shaped face, huge brown eyes, and pouty red lips. Wisps of black hair curled around her face, screaming to come out of a bun-like confinement. She was rubbing a grease spot onto her forehead, adding more grime to the area.

He reached forward and pulled her hand away from her face. "Hey there, beautiful. Sorry to scare ya. I was trying to find the representative from Warren, but I'll take you anytime."

"I'm not for the having. I am the Warren representative you're looking for. And you're Rick Monroe, I recognize you."

He reached forward to wipe the grease off her forehead. She drew back.

"You just have some grease..." He stopped talking when she froze, her expression wary. He licked his thumb and reached forward to take the grime spot off her forehead.

Silky.

That was the first adjective that struck him. Her skin was baby soft. He paused for a second, surprised.

So she was the Warren representative. Struck speechless, his stomach clenched. They said they were sending the best, but he wasn't sure he could set his entire career in the hands of a woman. Doubts swirled around in his brain as he worked on getting the grease off her face.

When he couldn't get the grease spot with his fingers, he grabbed the back of his old, ragged, T-shirt. Clenching his teeth against a spasm of pain, he pulled the T-shirt off faster than she could protest and dabbed the spot.

The expression on her face made him think of a rabbit standing statue-still, hoping the dog won't see it. Less than two feet from her face, he breathed in her scent, an underlying floral smell, like rhododendron in the heat of the summer.

“How are you?” she asked. He continued to rub the dirt off her face.

He stood and raised his arm out to help her up. She clasped her hand on his arm, her grip strong. When she was on her feet, he felt surprise at how small she was. She was more than a head shorter than him, and he was five-ten. Although a petite package, he saw in her eyes and the way she stood with her chin up, she was full of spunk.

“I’m doing okay. You know me, do I know you?” He stuck his hand out in greeting.

She started to shake, then pulled her hand back. “My hand...” She looked at her dirty palm, then his, now oil streaked.

He chuckled.

“I’m sorry.” She reached into the pocket of her working coveralls and found a clean rag. After rubbing the oil off her hands, she passed him the cloth.

“I’m Angela Warren,” she said. “We’ve talked and e-mailed on many occasions. Looks like we finally beat fate.” Her eyes dropped to the ace bandage around his ribs. “I’m so sorry.”

The sincerity in her voice warmed him. She was stirring him, his little mechanic. Angela Warren. A wish had come true; he’d wanted to meet her in person since their first phone conversation. Now he made the connection, the voice, that low, sensual cadence. He should have recognized her right away. He could feel his body responding to her.

Suddenly, the garage was getting hot. He tucked the end of his shirt into his shorts and let it hang over the front. Jesus, he hadn’t had to hide a hard-on since he was a horny teenager. Ryan’s little speech came back to haunt him; time for him to take action with Angela Warren. Now was his chance.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you after three years of phone conversations and e-mails. Nice to put a face with the voice. And such an attractive face it is.”

Her lips tilted as if she was on the edge of a smile. “Likewise, it’s my pleasure, I mean—not the attractive part, not that I don’t think...” She stopped, biting her pouty lower lip.

He grinned. On the phone, no matter how much he tried to rattle her, she always toed the serious line. In person, she was adorable, and so easy to embarrass. If she only knew how much he wanted to say it was way more his pleasure than hers.

“What did you discover?” He figured talking shop would take his mind off his urge to attack the zipper of her jumpsuit and touch the curves he glimpsed underneath.

“I’m uh...” Her voice trailed off and she pivoted toward the car. He moved to stand next to her.

“I can’t seem to identify...” She stopped and rubbed her temple, trailing a grease line down her face.

He noticed how tired she looked, her shoulders drooping in a way he guessed wasn’t normal, her voice dispirited. He nodded his sympathy. The car was so mangled he understood her frustration. Although she could examine the engine, he doubted she would identify anything more than his crew had. He had spent hours underneath the car and on the engines himself.

“May I examine the car and engine you’re going to use Saturday?” she asked. “Does it have our oil pump on it?”

“Right now it does. If you don’t find the problem it won’t be on Thursday. I’m not getting into another car with a Warren part until I’m sure.”

She appeared resigned instead of angry, staring at the car he’d crashed in Bristol. He

stepped in front of her to block her view and made eye contact with her. She had incredible light bedroom-brown eyes. The color stood out against her olive skin. *Extraordinary.*

As if lost in some complicated world of her own creation, she continued to look straight ahead. He narrowed his eyes, determined to get her to focus on him. He didn't usually move in so fast, but with this woman, he was going to make an exception. His plans for her didn't include any mechanics except the ones they would use in the bedroom.

"Tell you what. Let me take you to dinner, step away from this for a few hours. Then I'll come back with you and we'll go over the speed car together."

She rubbed her cheek instead of answering. He lifted his shirt. As if she realized he was there, she acknowledged him with her stare. He cupped her chin. Sparks charged through him, and he saw a flare light up her eyes. Her reaction surprised him as much as his own. She was turning him on, he thought, rubbing the oil off her temple while attempting to control his libido.

"Angela, I'm taking you away from here for a couple of hours. Sometimes it's good to step away. I'll come back with you and we'll work on it together. Okay?"

She nodded as he stroked the side of her face with his shirt. A flush spread over her cheeks. He stopped. His gaze met hers. Her pupils dilated and she sucked in a quick breath. On her neck, he saw her pulse throb.

Good. She felt the heat between them too.

"Okay?" He dropped his hand.

"Umm, yeah, okay." She reached up to rub her face again. He caught her hand in the act.

"Angela."

Her eyes widened and her hand tightened in his.

"If you keep rubbing grease on yourself, we'll be standing here all day going through this same ritual."

"Oh, yeah, right. I'm sorry." She raised grease stained hands in the air. "Do you have somewhere I can wash up?" Then she smiled, her face lighting up.

He felt another jolt. She had dimples, cute little indentations on the side of her cheeks, while a mole above her right lip made her expression sexy as hell—or heaven, he thought. Her face held character; he liked the way her smile brought it all together.

Watching her, he realized he was speechless. Man oh man, did he have it bad. He mentally slapped himself.

"Um, yeah, I have somewhere you can wash up. Come on." He released her hand with regret. He enjoyed the warmth her touch gave him.

"Let me just clean up a few tools. You're right, it's a good idea to step away for a couple hours."

"There's a bathroom over there." He pointed to the corner of the garage. "Meet me out front. Okay?"

He held his breath, hoping she wasn't onto him. He was taking her away for a couple hours and it wasn't for the reason he gave. He wanted to get to know her better, see if he could drive the heat he was experiencing a little further, take Ryan's advice. His motivation was purely selfish.

"Sure, sounds good. I could eat." She was mumbling almost as if he wasn't even

there and shaking her head as she methodically placed each tool into a pre-set location. Watching her, he knew she was never going to figure out what he was up to. She was too focused on what she was doing.

He grinned. He was going to shake up her orderly world.

Chapter Five

Angela shook her head as she replaced each tool where it belonged. The exercise calmed her, reminded her everything had its place. Order was good. Safe. Let's face it, she thought, she was flustered. Rick Monroe made her heart do flip-flops, the way it used to in high school when she saw a cute boy in the hallway.

A shiver snaked through her. Rick was even more attractive in person than on TV. Blond highlights glowed in his disheveled dark brown hair, and his bright blue eyes drew her gaze right to them. He looked like he'd just woke up from an afternoon snooze. And his body, good God, when he had pulled off his shirt to clean her face, the only word she could think of was *ripped*.

Every muscle was defined, his arms veined with strength. She wanted to run her hands over his chest muscles, just to see if they were real. She had heard race car drivers were in good shape; of course, with what they endured they needed to be physically powerful, and he was no exception. And God had been extra good to Rick, gifting him a face she could never forget.

So handsome, so sexy. And then he had touched her, just a grazing of his finger against her cheek. She felt it all the way down to her toes, her heart pounding a tempo in her chest so hard it rattled her teeth.

Her tools in place, she found the bathroom in the back and washed the grime off her hands. She unzipped her coveralls, taking herself down to shorts and tank top. After pulling off her boots, she slipped into a pair of flip-flops.

She was dirty, hot, and frustrated. She'd been working on the car and two engines straight through since last night, another twenty-four hours without sleep when Mr. Sexy interrupted her.

He was right, she needed to step back and think about what she'd learned, which wasn't a heck of a lot. The Bristol car was so bent up she was having a hard time finding where the faulty oil pump had blown its brains.

Grabbing her backpack, she headed out of the garage and took a deep breath. Rick was leaning against a shiny black Chevrolet Monte Carlo, his muscled legs and arms crossed in front of him. Night was falling on Florida. The sun sinking behind the clouds, the evening cooling down about ten degrees, making the night air bearable. She glanced up at the clouds tinted shades of pink by the departing sun. *Nice*.

"Hey there," he said, opening the passenger door.

"Thanks." A burst of energy surged through her and she strode toward him. He raised a brow. "Thanks for pulling me away. Sometimes..."

He nodded as she folded into the car. Leaning in, he grabbed the seatbelt and fastened it for her. She resisted an impulse to purr. She loved men from the South; they were gentlemanly in a rugged way. And his accent was wonderful, as smooth as ice cream, dipping down in all the right places. She loved it on the phone and in person his voice was even sweeter. God, he smelled good, she thought as he straightened, still close enough for her to breathe in the spice scent emanating from his skin. It pulled her toward him in a nonprofessional way.

Oh boy, I need to get focused and quit daydreaming about this guy. I have a job to

do here.

"Yeah, I know. You don't need to explain. It's like balancing the checkbook, sometimes you just need to let it go for a while then come back to it."

She smiled. Of course he understood. Drivers weren't stupid about their cars; they understood the workings of their vehicles. He shut her door and circled around to the driver's side. A moment later, they cruised out of the garage area.

Laying her head against the rest, she turned and watched him. He drove with confidence, the muscles of his arms flexing with his movements. He was still bare-chested, the cloth of the ace bandage running below his pectoral muscles.

She understood the accident wasn't her fault, but when she saw that bandage in the garage and the bruises covering his chest, she had to fight the urge to send a trail of kisses over every one of his hurts. She rubbed her temple. She was tired, that was it; her fatigue was dulling her common sense.

The notion was crazy, but from the first moment she laid eyes on him, it was as if she had been hit with a red-hot poker direct into her heart, a cupid's arrow sort of sensation. It wasn't just his adventure-star looks. She saw an aura about him that made her weak in the knees. Considering she was here to do one job and one job only, she told herself these feelings were senseless and frustrating. An image flashed in her mind: Rick Monroe, naked and spread-eagled on a bed. She tried to snap the picture off and concentrate on what he was saying. What was wrong with her? She was never like this. She was focused on her job, it was important to her to be successful, to show her family she could make it in their business.

"So here you are, Angela, and you're a Warren. I never made the connection. How did you get interested in your dad's business?" He took a tricky curve at a speed they shouldn't be going.

Her breath drew in. She admired his skills, here and on the track. He was one of the premiere stockcar drivers, and for a good reason. They were rolling down what appeared to be a coastal road, the beach to her right. The sun was set now, the full moon lighting up the sand.

"When I was born, I think." She glanced at the water, enthralled by the beauty of the moon lighting the horizon with its white intensity. She imagined sitting on the beach with a huge glass of red wine and watching that moon come up after the sun went down.

Paradise.

"I've got the perfect place in mind for a little R and R."

She laughed. "You sure you're not a mind reader?"

"Ah, well, with the lover's moon out tonight, it doesn't take a mind reader to figure out how you might choose to enjoy your evening."

The way he drawled '*lover's moon*' made her shiver. "I'm not here for pleasure. I'm here to work." She tried to sound firm, and winced at the defensive note she heard in her voice.

"Relax, I wasn't making any type of accusation." He gave her a quick look and a sexy smile.

"Sorry, I'm tired I guess." Her eyes drifted back to the ocean.

"It's okay. Takes a lot to offend me." He took the next right then pulled up to a private road blocked by a tall iron gate. After he punched in a code, the gates slid open, and he drove up the driveway to a many-windowed one-story cedar bungalow, lush

foliage blanketing the property.

With the car stopped, he jumped out and came around to open her door, offering her his hand. She grabbed it. He tugged but didn't move back, and she fell into his arms. As she bumped against him, she felt the heat of his body. He reached around her and closed her door.

"Sorry." She tried to pull away but didn't have anywhere to go except against the car.

He laughed and stepped back, her hand still clasped in his.

"My fault," he said. "Come on." He drew her along behind him as he led her into the house.

"Where are we?" She frowned. He said he was taking her out to eat. Where was the restaurant?

"Where we are, Angela Warren, is a place to unwind for a couple hours without fans pestering me for autographs every five minutes during dinner. This is my house. My sponsor rents it for me. They've stocked me with food, so don't think I'll let you starve."

"Oh." Angela wanted to hit her hand upside her forehead. Of course they couldn't go to a public place. He was famous. What was she thinking? "Right, I'm sorry."

"That's a bad habit you're getting into, apologizing to me," he said, guiding her through the house to the back porch and onto a covered wood deck. Curling his hands around her shoulders, he pressed her down into a comfortable lounge chair in front of a tiled Redwood table.

She looked around. Tall palms and exotic plants lined the sides of the deck. A fine water mist drifted down from the covered top, coating the rich foliage and her exposed skin, a warm but comfortable temperature. The sculpted plants ended at the front of the deck, leaving an opening for the brown sand and a perfect view of the rising moon over the ocean's horizon.

"Amazing."

"Yes, it is."

She glanced at him. He wasn't looking at the horizon; he was staring straight at her. Heat flushed her cheeks. In his company, she felt like a schoolgirl instead of an expert mechanic.

"I'll be right back. Relax for a few and enjoy." He broke eye contact and headed back into the house through the sliding doors.

As soon as the doors slid closed, Angela's lack of sleep hit her like a falling meteor. She slumped back in the lounge and watched the scene laid out before her. In its splendor, it looked unreal, like a picture on a postcard. The gray weathered deck matched the graying of impending nightfall, highlighted with the moon's shadow. A cool breeze came from the ocean. She could see hundreds of lights blinking across the way. Tons of hotels, she guessed, feeling as if she had stepped onto the set of a movie.

Like the snake in the Garden of Eden, work slithered into her thoughts, her mind running through scenarios as to why Rick Monroe's car sprang two oil pumps. She assimilated the data she had already accumulated. Okay, it was a different car, made smaller for the tight track. Maybe that was the problem. She rubbed her head. Couldn't be. It was the same car they used last year, same brand oil pump. What had been changed? She needed to talk to the Chief Mechanic again, see if he made any frame changes since last year.

As she pondered, Rick milled around, starting the grill, setting the patio table, wine glasses, napkins. He moved in and out of the house a couple of times.

“Doesn’t seem like you’re relaxing very much.” Rick dropped a bowl of fruit salad onto the table, some dinner rolls and an uncorked bottle of wine. He poured two full glasses and sat down across the table from her. After serving up two bowls of salad, he leaned back and stared at her.

“Okay, Angela. Let’s drink a little wine, have a little food, talk about inconsequential stuff, watch the moon, let your mind wander and relax. I’ll grill us a couple marinated steaks, we’ll eat a little more. Then you can hit me with everything running through your head. Dump it all, see if it will help turn the cogs. How’s that sound?”

She sighed in relief and sipped the red wine. Incredible. She dug into her salad, delving into a nice orange ball of cantaloupe. *Ummm*. He smiled and speared a ball of cantaloupe too. She shuddered. He had an uncanny ability to read her. He was right, she needed to shut it down and give her brain a break.

“Sounds good, Rick, sounds really good.” She smiled at him.

He winked and took another drink of his wine. “So tell me, Ms. Detroit, about your home, your family, your life, your work, but most importantly, your boyfriends.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “Seems like we’ve had this conversation before.” He asked the same questions over the phone, sometimes in e-mail and now it was in person. *Inconsequential stuff, huh?* He was already digging deep, flirting with her, and she didn’t mind. She never did with him, even when he was just a voice over the phone and an image on her TV screen.

“The Warren’s are embedded deep into the fabric of Detroit. My Grandfather, who emigrated from Italy with his family as a small boy, started Warren Manufacturing. He worked himself from a poor immigrant to the president of one of the most successful auto parts manufacturing plants in the state. And the story tells itself from there. My father and my three brothers all work in the business.”

He nodded while he ate, paying attention to her story.

“I started three years ago, after I finished college, in the Quality Department. I’m the Lead Technician now and hope to be the Director by next year. Hmm, what else...”

She paused to finish her salad and sip more wine. They ate for a couple moments in a comfortable silence, with the crash of the ocean in the background, along with the tinkle of a wind chime. Both sounds soothed her.

Her salad plate empty, she answered his questions in quick succession. “Life is busy with work, my family is big and Italian, and I’m way too focused on my job to have a boyfriend right now. How’s that?”

He chuckled and topped off her wine. Getting up, he went over to the closed grill and opened the top, placing some steaks on it. She heard the sizzle as the meat made contact with the fire. She had felt that same way earlier when he had tugged her body into his.

He closed the lid and pivoted to face her. “I was hoping for a little more than a fifteen-minute outline.” He wandered to the end of the deck and stepped onto the sand.

Her breath caught as she watched him. The setting was intimate—the locked gates, just the two of them, him cooking dinner for her. Yet she felt at ease with him, as if she had known him all her life. Three years of verbal teasing and e-mails made him easy to talk to. He had put on a loose fitting flowered shirt, something she imagined a local might wear. His cargo shorts, with an array of pockets, rode low on his hips, and his feet were

bare. He looked comfortable and very seductive. Even with her fatigue pressing down on her, she felt attracted to him against her will.

She was here for business, not play, she reminded herself. As soon as she found the problem, she'd be gone.

He stood in silence as he slipped his hands in his pockets and watched the white caps of the waves. She grabbed his wine glass and joined him. Handing him the glass, she faced the horizon.

The full moon cast a white shadow on the water. Trying to forget about cars, Angela wandered a few feet toward the water and sank down onto the sand. The brown grains were still warm and gritty. She kicked off her thongs and plunged her feet into it. The wine was making its way through her veins, warming her. Or was it the man standing a few feet back, lost in his own silent reflection?

She heard him moving, returning to the deck and lighting a couple citronella candles—she could tell by the smell, to keep the insects away. The grill clanged as he did something with it, then his footsteps padded on the deck toward her. He sat down and anchored his near empty wine glass in the sand. The crash of the waves serenaded them.

She glanced around. Except for them, the private beach was deserted. They were alone.

"Dinner's ready and waiting when you are." Neither one of them moved toward the deck.

Angela set her empty glass next to his and made eye contact with him. His right knee was raised and turned toward her. She leaned back onto her elbows, at ease in a sleepy, nice way. The setting was perfect for a honeymooning couple. Rick moved closer, until they touched shoulders. She could feel the connection between them.

She tried to tell herself once again why she shouldn't get involved with Rick, but the voice was weakening—and so was her will power.

"Been a long time since I've sat back and enjoyed the moment," she murmured as Rick reached up to stroke her hair. His hand moved to the back of her head, and he released the knot holding the mass back from her face. It tumbled, a curly mess around her shoulders and down her back.

"Thought it might be like that," he said.

She glanced at him. His expression told her a story. Even in the moonlight, she could see the flame of arousal in his eyes.

"This humidity will make it spindle into a rat's nest." He ran his hands through her scalp, massaging it. She groaned in ecstasy. It felt so good to be touched by him. She tried to remember how long ago since she had indulged in a man's attention. *Too long.*

"It's beautiful. You're beautiful," he said as his face inched closer to hers.

Oh, man, he's going to kiss me, she thought as his lips touched hers. She should say no, but her brain zapped the idea. Supple and wet, he started small, a nibble, a small peck, another. She reached up and buried her hand in his hair, trying to anchor herself back to reality.

It didn't help. His soft hair slid through her fingers, and she clutched the back of his head.

"Bad idea," she said between nibbles.

"Shhh." His answer vibrated against her lips. This kiss was longer, hotter, his urgency increasing. He opened his mouth, and his tongue urged hers to open.

She did, hit by a lust so powerful it took her breath away. Her heart skipped then raced, beating ninety miles an hour. His tongue tangled with hers, their kiss turned scorching. He grabbed her closer, tilting her head so he could take more of her mouth.

She was in heaven, his mouth mating with hers. She never wanted to come up for air. He released her lips, his mouth trailing down her jaw to the curve of her neck. He sucked, and she arched in pleasure. Heat pooled lower.

“Ahhhh, Rick, Rick,” she said. “Stop.”

Her one word arrested his movements. He lifted his lips, panting against her neck. While her chest heaved, she gulped in a breath.

“Dinner.”

“Uh huh.” He smiled and stood. He offered his hand, she accepted. They strolled back to the patio to finish dinner. Suddenly, she was ravenous ... as if all her appetites had sprung to life.

Chapter Six

“Thank you, thank you. You’re my hero.” Angela sank back onto the blanket and accepted the refilled wine glass he offered.

Rick brushed some sand off his hand and glanced toward the sea. The soft dunes of the beach next to them were covered with sea oats. The long spindles swayed with the evening breeze. A lover’s moon lounged carelessly on the horizon.

He congratulated himself. He had set up a perfect plan for seduction. A large blanket, him shirtless, he had removed his ace bandage, a bucket of wine anchored in the sand, and strawberries gleaming in a bowl next to him.

“The food was delicious, that steak was perfect,” she purred. He celebrated in silence. Oh yeah, he could tell she was feeling no pain.

“Try this,” he said as he lifted a strawberry and waved it in front of her face.

“Ummmm.” She leaned in and took a bite. Strawberry juice dripped down her chin. She laughed and reached up to wipe her face.

He smiled. She was so gorgeous and sexy. With her hair curling wildly around her face, she looked relaxed and happy. A different appearance from the focused mechanic he had pushed into the deck chair not two hours earlier. He had loosened her up with great wine, good food, a couple hours of friendly conversation and, the finale, dessert beneath a moon that wouldn’t quit. Even the weather was cooperating, warm but not unforgivable. He finished off the strawberry and reached for another.

“That’s so incredibly good.”

“Fresh,” he said as he aligned the berry with her mouth.

She opened her lips and with her tongue, she guided the fruit into her mouth. He got hard just feeding her, heat flaming through his body. He couldn’t wait any longer to make his move.

Dropping the remaining strawberry, he inched forward and took her mouth with his. Her hand came up to tangle in his hair. He’d thought she would protest, but whatever she was going to say died with the mating of their tongues. She tasted like strawberries, smelled like flowers, and arched under him like his best wet dream. He changed the angle, moved in and tasted.

God, he wanted her.

She emitted a little mew that about made him want to take her right then. He ran his hands along her side. Spanning her ribs with his fingers, he traveled up until he covered some of the most impressive set of breasts he had ever had the pleasure of handling.

“Rick...” She broke off from his kiss the minute his fingers landed on her nipples, but he didn’t let up. His mouth strayed down to her chin, then her neck. He licked, kissed, and sucked his way to her shoulder.

“Uh huh?”

“I thought we were going back to the garage.” She moaned when he edged her tank top up, his fingers itching to make contact with her hot skin.

“We will.” *Later. Much, much later.* His hands pushed their way to flesh. *Soft*, she was so soft. He licked the juice off her chin and re-took her mouth. He loved the way she tasted, his favorite dessert all wrapped up in one sexy, warm-blooded package.

She broke off the kiss and he went for the jugular, licking then sucking. He could feel her heart pounding against the hands playing with her breasts. He had managed to push the entire shirt up and he was rubbing, stroking, pinching. Sweet Jesus, this woman was made just for him.

"When?" She arched her neck and her head dropped back as she exhaled an audible sigh. His lips curved into a smile. She didn't sound like she wanted to return to the garage right now.

"Soon." He continued to shove at her top, until it caught on her neck. His tone became a demand. "Take this off."

"If I take that off, we won't be going back to the garage any time soon." She lifted her head. His lips were poised at her breast. He made eye contact with her. Her eyes were half-mast; she was giving him a sensual, dreamy gaze.

"I hope to God not."

"But people..."

He cut off her protest. "Private beach, no people, just you and me, two consenting adults."

She stared at him a moment. He held his breath until she reached up and slipped off her top. As she did, her expression changed. Gone was the tentative girl who wanted only to work; taking her place was a fiery woman with an expression of pure determination. He could see she wanted this as much as him.

"Thank you." He closed his mouth over her nipple, laved, and licked. Her breath caught and her hands buried in his hair as she clutched his head to her cleavage.

"Oh God." She bowed into his body. He enjoyed her clear pleasure. Taking his time, he gave equal attention to each breast until she panted his name.

He lifted his head and took in the entire package. God, she was something. The light of the moon gilded her golden skin. Her lips were well kissed, wet, and trembling. He saw the glow of desire in her half lidded eyes, and his entire body throbbed with need.

Suddenly, he couldn't go slow. His control had eroded with the touch of his lips to her skin. Now all he wanted to do was take.

He went back to tasting her, her belly, her hipbone, while his hands stripped off her shorts. They slipped off easily, along with her underwear. Now he had her where he wanted, naked, spread out before him like a feast.

He wanted to taste her.

He lifted her legs over his shoulders and proceeded to do just that. She tasted good. He licked, sucked, nibbled. Using teeth and tongue, he worked on taking her up to the first level.

She gasped, her head falling back against the blanket. Leaning down, he ran his hands under her ass and brought her closer and teased, sampled. He wanted everything she had to give. She was going to come; he could feel her tightening against him, pushing her mound into his mouth.

Good, he wanted her mindless, thinking of nothing but him, his body, his cock buried deep inside of her. She cried out and climaxed. He worked her until the last spasm died. Then he released her legs, letting them slide down his arms.

He reached for his shorts. She watched him. He smiled, unbuttoned and unzipped until there wasn't much left to the imagination.

"Are you ready for me, Angela?" He wanted her consent and some

acknowledgement he wasn't the only seducer on this patch of sand.

"Yes." She reached forward and helped him remove his shorts and underwear.

His cock dipped forward as if it had springs in it. He reached into the pocket of his shorts and drew out a condom, holding it between his fingers.

"Would you?"

She smiled and pulled it from his hand. Ripping it open, she rolled it on him. He gritted his teeth and tried to hold onto his control. When she had him fully fitted, she ran her hand up and down, pumping him, making him harder than he'd thought he could get. He overlapped her hands with his and stopped her. She looked at him.

"Keep that up, this show will be over in a matter of seconds."

"Seconds would not be good."

He leaned forward and plunged his hands into her hair. It was like wavy silk, so incredible. He tilted her back against the blanket and followed her down. His mouth mated with hers, his kiss almost feral. He was desperate now, desperate to have her.

"Wrap your legs around me." He ran his hands down her sides and back up to her breasts. Kneading her, arousing her, he slid into her. She sucked in air, he gave up breathing and only felt.

He edged into her inch by inch until he was fully seated. Then, he buried his face into her neck, took in her smell, enjoyed the first moment in her body. It was heaven. She caressed his ass, and he reveled in her touch.

"So good, Rick." She sighed out his name. Against his chest, he felt her heart trip in excitement.

"Yes." He took charge and began moving inside of her, his lips nibbling on hers.

Such pleasure.

"Rick," she cried out as she climbed close to her release, her muscles tightening on his cock. He married their palms as they moved together in unison. Their bodies gleamed with sweat; the breath he was holding puffed out and fanned her neck. She leaned forward and licked his throat, tasting him, and he felt his balls draw up in arousal. She clutched at his hands. He stayed with her, until she was so close, a whisper away from her climax, small wordless cries coming out of her mouth.

"Come with me, Angela." His voice was rough with need, yet he held back. He wanted them to come together.

"Yes." She bowed against him, her body clenching, her heat milking him. His hips strained against hers, his back arching him closer. He could feel the veins in his neck pumping in unison to his pounding heart as he emptied himself in one final, hard thrust.

They both collapsed. She released his hands and ran her fingers up his chest, and slid them into his hair. Cupping the back of his neck, she brought his lips to hers. She took them like he wanted to take her, completely. Lifting her head, she panted against his cheek.

"Wow." She smiled. He adored the cute tilt of her mouth. She was such a serious woman, her smile was a gift.

"Wow, was right. You ready?" He hardened inside of her. He couldn't believe she could arouse him so soon, but she did.

She arched an eyebrow. "Ready?"

With a tilt of his hips he started to move again, showing her what he meant. She moaned and moved with him. He ground his teeth in need.

“Oh, ready...” She released the sentence on the tail of a whimper. His heart sped, tapping against his chest. He wanted to dance like this with her all night. She ran her hands down his body and cupped his ass as he plunged into her. He liked having her hands on him. Heck, he *loved* it.

“Yeah, ready...” Sweat dripped down his cheek and onto her collarbone. He grinned as he slid in. Then he flipped around and pulled her on top of him.

She laughed. “That was quite a move.” He grinned and squeezed her ass. “I’ve got the moves, babe, both on and off the track.”

She smiled and leaned forward to kiss him. The feel of her body covering his was nearly his undoing. She was perfect. He reached up and fingered her nipples, taking pleasure in the flare in her eyes. Her skin was a beautiful shade of nutmeg, a testimony to her Italian heritage. He ran his hand along the softness of her waist. He’d been thinking about having her like this from the minute he laid eyes on her. He was glad Ryan’s teasing had pushed him to pursue her.

“And modest.” She rotated her hips. He growled as she raised herself off him, then slid back down. He wasn’t going to last long. The position was so right.

She moaned and closed her eyes when she rotated her hips, and he gasped.

“Ahhh huh.” That was his only response, as she got serious about riding him. He couldn’t think with anything but his cock anymore. She kissed his jaw, his cheek, then latched onto his lips. He groaned into her mouth, her aggressive lovemaking turned him inside out. Didn’t take long for both of them to fall. A rotation of her hips, he thrust his hips off the blanket and they flew.

Angela draped herself over his body. His thumping heart slowed. He ran his hands up and down her back. He could get used to this, he thought, her body over his, touching her at leisure. It was the strangest feeling. Like he wasn’t in control of his life anymore. He didn’t care about the track right now.

Her breathing evened as she snuggled her chin under his. He shifted her body next to his, then he flipped the side of the blanket over them and cuddled her close. He wasn’t a snuggler, but with this woman, he was making an exception. He buried his hand into her wild hair and held her against his chest. She yawned.

“That probably wasn’t the best idea.”

He laughed. She swatted his shoulder. He captured her hand and kissed her palm.

“Shut up.” He kissed her cheek. He could feel her smiling against his face.

“Yeah, guess it’s too late for regrets.” She kissed his jaw, then slid toward his lips. He took what she gave, a long, sleepy kiss. He opened his mouth and offered more. She accepted, her tongue mating with his. His heart kicked back into gear, speeding up. He broke the kiss, panting, and laid his forehead against hers.

“Get a couple hours sleep.” He wrapped his arms around her and tangled their legs. He wanted her again—God, this woman made him insatiable—but she needed rest. Besides, he was content to hold her for a couple hours.

“Kay.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Need to go to the garage.”

He laughed. She was talking in her sleep now.

“We’ll go in a couple hours, shut it down for a few.”

His assurance seemed to calm her. She sank deeper into sleep, her breath puffing in

and out against his neck.

“Thanks,” was her last remark. He smiled.

“No, thank you.” If she knew he had planned this entire seduction before she got into his car, he would be in deep shit.

He let the pleasure of having her for the night wash over him. He knew her. He’d been talking and e-mailing to her for three years. Despite what she said, she was going to be furious when the wine and sultry night wore off and she realized she had fallen into his trap. Until then, she was his. He let his hand stray down to her ass and stroked. *So smooth.*

He closed his eyes and joined her in sleep.

Chapter Seven

Angela yawned, stretched, and froze. The heat of another person's body alongside hers stopped her dead. She popped open her eyes.

Holy crap.

She hadn't just slept with Rick Monroe, had she? *Oh great.* He was going to think she was some sort of groupie. She scrambled out of his arms, searching for her clothes. She plucked them out of the sand, hopping on one foot as she tried to pull on her shorts.

"That was a rude awakening, but watching you makes it all worth it."

She glanced at Rick. He flipped the blanket off his hard body.

Oh man. She was getting hot again just staring at him. Every inch of his body was sculpted and firm. His erection was thick and full against his stomach. Despite her sensual fog from the evening, she remembered every single place she had touched and every spot he had kissed on her.

"Um, here put these on." She threw his shorts at him. He caught them. He had a wide grin on his mouth, like the cat that had just eaten the proverbial canary.

"Come here." He threw his shorts aside and stood. The sun hadn't come up yet. The moon was still shining bright, mixed with the colors of the coming dawn. As he approached her, naked and proud of it, she pointed her finger at him.

"You stay right where you are."

He ignored her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Come on." He tried to kiss her. She squirmed, attempting to get out of his grip. His arms tightened. His lips landed on her cheek, his hard body pressed to hers.

She remembered the soft spot on his chin she enjoyed kissing. Man, he was strong and sexy and... She stopped her thoughts. If she didn't do something drastic, she'd end up back on that blanket, flat on her ass, begging him to take her.

"Rick," she said, "This is crazy. I've got to get back to work. Please, let me go."

His arms opened. She was free. She grabbed her shirt and pulled it on.

"Oookay." His teasing manner ceased. He grabbed his shorts off the sand. After slipping them on, he tucked his erection into his pants.

She tried not to watch, tried not to get excited, but she was. She wanted to rip those shorts back off and take him in her mouth, make him arch with pleasure until he came all over her.

Great.

She was supposed to be here representing her company and fixing a critical problem that could have killed him. Instead she was rolling around on the sand like a college kid. Guilt ate a hole in her gut.

"Could you take me back to the garage?" she asked as she snatched her panties and bra off the sand and tucked them into her pocket.

"No problem." He picked up the blanket and shook it out.

She trembled. It was obvious he was confused by her reaction. She had been as much a part of this fiasco as he was. She'd enjoyed him—twice. Then she'd slept in his arms for hours. She glanced around the beach, hoping their interlude hadn't been watched. There was no one around, not even another house could be seen. The team had assured

Rick's privacy.

Oh my God, what the hell am I doing here?

She trailed Rick onto the deck, where he dumped the blanket onto the chair. Her face flamed in embarrassment.

"Can we at least take a shower?" He turned and faced her. The carefree man who had lounged naked on the beach was gone. This was the warrior, the man who drove dangerous cars for a living. It was almost like he was ready to fight.

"Sure. Yell when the shower's free." She crossed her arms and stared him down. His eyes walked up her body and back down.

"We could share. It's not like you have anything I haven't seen. Haven't kissed, haven't licked and sucked." He took a step closer.

She shook her head, holding her ground. She could feel a flush cover her entire body. His words brought back flashes of his lovemaking. He was right; he had explored her. And she'd returned the favor. She was humiliated for giving in so easily. She dropped her gaze in embarrassment.

"I don't usually do this, you know, sleep with someone on the first date... I... you must think..." She rubbed her hand over her eyes.

Before she could look back he had her in his arms and was kissing her so forcefully all she could do was gasp and hold onto his shoulders. He released her lips; his mouth poised a mere breath from her own. She could smell him, spicy man. She took in the scent, tried not to let it affect her, but she was already longing for him. Felt so good to be in his arms, to have his mouth on hers, to see the desire blazing in his eyes.

"Angela, stop, please, I would never think about you that way. Stop regretting this. I'll get you back to the shop, okay. We'll work on the problem together ... figure it out. Let..." He kissed her again. This time slow and gentle.

Much to her own dismay, she kissed him back. She shouldn't ... but she did. Resisting him was harder than resisting chocolate. Her hands crawled up his shoulders and landed in his hair. Holding on as if she never wanted to let him go, she pressed her body to his. She couldn't help her reaction; he made her want in the worse way.

He pulled back, the expression on his face intense.

"I'll let you know when the shower is ready." He released her and stepped into the house.

She gaped at his departing back. What the hell just happened? She sank into the deck chair next to her before her legs collapsed from the shock of his kiss.

What was she going to do? She was in lust with Rick Monroe—wildly and madly—when she should be focused on working.

Running her fingers through her hair, she attempted to bring order to the tangled mess. The routine action calmed her. She needed to pull herself together. Now. Resting her head against the chair, she closed her eyes.

She pictured Rick Monroe sprawled out naked on the beach blanket. She snapped her eyes open and spied the blanket. She huffed in frustration at herself, at her libido, at the situation. Shaking her head, she shut her eyes again. *Focus, focus*, she chanted to herself.

She was here for one purpose and one purpose only, to find out what had caused the malfunction of her company's oil pump. Her father was relying on her; the company was relying on her. To lose the race contract would be devastating to their business, a business built from the sweat and simple labor of her forefathers. She couldn't let them

down. She couldn't let herself down.

She leaned her head into her hands and tried not to groan. Instead of inspecting the engine of the wrecked vehicle, she was here rolling around on the beach with Rick Monroe. She'd been utterly and willingly seduced by a sexy racecar driver, yummy wine and great food. This entire incident was as much her fault as his. She had stepped right into Rick's arms, then never left.

And what a night it had been, she reflected. Being with him, well, she didn't have anything to compare with it. She had never enjoyed herself more than when she was making love with Rick Monroe. There was something about him, his spicy smell, the hard planes of his chest, the arousing noise he made when he came. Despite her regret, she wouldn't trade those minutes or the pleasure of having him buried deep inside her for anything.

Rick Monroe had claimed her last night and ruined her for any other man. But she couldn't let him know and she couldn't let this continue. He was an expert at the art of seduction, while she was an amateur. If she expected more than a few nights of hot sex, her brain had a bigger malfunction than the oil pump.

Besides, she had a job to do, and damned if she wasn't determined to get it done.

Chapter Eight

Rick drove down the highway, contemplating the heated night that had just passed. Angela sat next to him. Neither of them had uttered a word since her quiet thank you to him for opening her car door. He had promised to take her back to the garage, and that's what he was doing.

It was only five in the morning, Tuesday sneaking up on him. The seductive night, which he'd planned to turn into a lazy morning, was gone with the impending sunrise teasing the horizon. He'd hoped she would soften after her shower, but she seemed even more determined to keep distance between them.

Pulling into the garage parking lot, he shut off the car, then dropped his gaze to her. Her hand was poised at the door like she was ready to jump out and run for her life.

"Could we take a minute here and talk?"

"Hm?" She wrapped her finger around the doorknob.

"Are we going to even talk to each other today? Wouldn't it be easier if we could communicate?"

"Of course we can talk." His sarcasm not lost to her.

He growled and exited the car. Before he could come around and open her door for her, she hopped out of the car and strode toward the garage. He shook his head. If she thought she was going to make him feel guilty for one of the most incredible evenings of his life, she was mistaken. She was closer to driving him insane right now than anything else.

Insane enough to do something he shouldn't.

Catching her off guard, he grabbed her arm and whirled her around. She screeched and landed smack dab into the middle of his chest. He caged her in his arms.

"I don't regret one minute of last night."

Her mouth opened to form an O, and he dove in, taking advantage of her shock. He slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue melting against hers for an open-mouthed move that would have rivaled any romance writer's version of a hot kiss. She moaned, wiggled, then he felt her arms climb up his shoulders and slide into his hair.

Ecstasy flamed through him. The passion was still there, simmering beneath the surface. He ended the kiss and pulled back.

"Just thought you would want to know that." He released her and walked toward the garage, leaving her standing in his wake.

He smiled. She wasn't as oblivious to him as she wanted him to believe.

* * * *

"No. No. No." Angela's frustrated shout followed by a clank made Rick slide his creeper out from under the car in the stall across from Angela's. She was working on the engine from his wrecked Bristol car, clunking her wrench against the block. Her hair was tethered in a ponytail that looked ready to escape the holder, loose strands curling around her face. She was wearing her work coveralls, the name of her company embroidered on the front pocket.

She was so beautiful. He sat up and just stared at her. She was focused on that engine and had been for four hours. The shop was coming to life, his crew leaking in. They all had different tasks to get ready for qualifying Thursday. Rick was working on the car he would be driving on Thursday, checking and rechecking every hose, every connection, everything he could, trying to find the malfunction. He was coming up empty.

Angela began to disassemble the oil pump, yet again. She was talking to parts like they were alive.

"Okay, baby, come to Mama." Her voice was low and gritty as she disconnected the braided line that fed the oil pump.

"Yeah, okay, come on, handsome, come out of there for me."

Holy crap, just watching her talk dirty to an engine was making him hard. He wanted to unzip her coveralls and lick those pert breasts. He could picture himself doing it real slow and thorough. He'd pay attention to each nipple, pulling them into his mouth, adding just enough suction to make her cry and arch, maybe to the point of pain, but not quite. Then he'd work his way down, delve his tongue into her heat and lick her into a climax. Rick grabbed the rag from his waist and dabbed his sweating forehead.

Angela pulled out the hose, carrying it like it was a breakable vase to the table where her microscope was set up. There she began a process of dissecting it. Still chattering on, her voice was drowned out with the sound of the hand-held grinder she was using on the oil line. He wondered what had her so stirred up.

"See, you can't hide from me," she said as she fiddled with the microscope.

Then she pulled back

"Oh yeah baby, look at what we have here." Elation rang in her words. She was incredible.

"What is it?" He levied himself off the floor, strode over to her, and peeked over her shoulder. He couldn't make heads or tails out of what the heck she was doing.

"It's a problem. A big problem I might be able to solve. Where do you keep these lines?"

He nodded toward the supply cabinet in the corner where one hundred feet of oil line was housed. "Over there, they buy it by the roll."

"And I bet theses lines are all from that same lot; the same defective lot." She fiddled with the microscope some more.

"Have them pull the pump and lines off the car you're going to use Thursday."

"You want me to pull the entire pump and hoses out?"

She nodded, and he gave a hand signal to his Chief Mechanic.

"Sam, pull the pump and the lines going to it out of Thursday's car, will ya?"

Sam nodded and signaled to a couple other guys. They headed to the car.

Meanwhile, his little mechanic, taking her handheld wheel grinder headed for the hoses. Sparks flew as she cut a piece off the roll provided by the manufacturer. Taking the hose in her hand, she walked back toward him, past and to the workbench as if he wasn't even there.

She ratcheted the end of the hose to the vice and fiddled with it to get what he guessed she considered the perfect position. Then, she dropped a pair of safety glasses over her eyes and fired up the grinder again as she cut a line down the middle of the hose like she was slicing a piece of cake. Her actions practiced and sure, she worked with the efficiency of a true-blooded mechanic.

He felt a new respect for her. At first, he wasn't sure about a female mechanic. He had never known one, never had one working with him, and he had his career resting on her small shoulders. Since he first saw her, doubts of her expertise had floated around in his mind.

Ignoring him, she donned leather gloves and hauled the heated line back to her bench, where she dissected it.

"Damn. Damn. Damn. So close." She swore and hit her hand on the bench.

"What?"

She ignored him again and kept working. Sam showed up with the pump and a bunch of steel braided hoses hanging from it.

She accepted the pump as if it was her favorite Christmas gift. Then she hauled the entire thing over to the bench and put it through the same procedure she had the other hose. She started to remove each line, cut each in almost half, lengthwise, then hauled it back to her workbench and played with it. She worked back and forth between her microscope and some other funky piece of equipment, until she had the hoses dissected. Her expression tense, she placed one of them under the microscope.

"That's it." She lifted her head from the scope.

"Not to sound like I'm repeating myself, but what?"

She nodded toward the scope. "Take a look."

Lining himself up, he peeked inside the optical of the microscope. "I see hairline cracks."

"Exactly, hairline fractures inside the line, in the neoprene to be exact." She inclined her head toward Sam, who waited for a peek. Rick stepped away from the microscope, and Sam leaned forward and peered through to scope.

"Yep." He stuck a toothpick in his mouth.

"Right, it's cracks, but it's not a natural fracture, it's defective. The combination of a faulty line and the heat of the engine and track were too much. If I had to guess, I'd say these oil lines are all from the same spool." She pointed toward the corner, where the large roll was situated. "That's your problem, gentlemen."

She crossed her arms and leaned back against the bench. "The pressure of the track heat, combined with a faulty neoprene inside the braided steel hose caused your pump failure. It blocked your oil flow. It's the only thing that could have caused the oil pump to blow. It failed because it wasn't getting oil. I'm sure of it."

Sam studied her with skepticism. Rick joined him. It seemed like too many factors to repeat themselves, over and over.

"The other engines we had were already tested, ma'am," Sam said as he glanced into the scope again.

"Right, but you didn't add the extreme track heat, or the longer hours. I mean, guys," she strode to the Bristol car and pointed to the undercarriage. "The heat coming off the tires and the track under this car are enormous. Way more than you could simulate with the dyno tester. With those faulty lines, with even one of those braided steel hoses having the neoprene cracked inside, long term..."

She shook her head and grabbed the dissected hoses off the bench. "Look, every one of these hoses I cut in half had fractures in the neoprene. It might be fine if you're working with a healthy hose, but add that track heat, the pressure of the oil flowing through and backing up in the line. It's too much. I'm telling you, it's too much."

“On the surface, when you look at one of those lines...” She held up one of the oil lines. “When you look at these under the microscope right now, everything looks normal, but as soon as you dissect them, open them up, the neoprene is cracked. Normally, you wouldn’t in a million years look for this, but I knew when I couldn’t find an issue with the pump... I just knew there was another problem. All those elements combined, which you had with both those cars, you get a blown pump.

“How long have you been using this batch of hoses?” She pointed to the roll.

“We ran out, so we had to re-order.” Sam leaned against the workbench. He looked relaxed but Rick could see his mind working.

“When?”

Sam shrugged. “Not sure.”

“If that’s the case, why hasn’t it happened all year?” Doubt laced in his tone. He hated to be the naysayer, but this all just sounded so unbelievable.

“Because it’s likely you just got that shipment of hoses in and just started using them. Go ahead, check.”

Sam took the toothpick out of his mouth and went to pull the parts log. “Yep, got a shipment of that new roll of hose before Bristol.” He shook his head. “You might have something there, li’l lady.”

“Dyno test it again, this time add the element of external heat. Do it with the original setup. Then do one with a different manufactured oil line.”

Sam glanced at Rick as if he was seeking approval. Rick nodded. Sam walked off.

“Do you doubt me, Mr. Monroe?”

“Angela.” He held out his hands. “What do you want me to say? My entire career rests with these cars.”

She went back to her workbench and began to put her tools away.

He followed her. “Do you understand what I’m saying?” He pulled her around to face him.

“What I understand, Mr. Monroe, is you don’t trust me. You don’t trust my abilities.” Her voice rose with each syllable.

“It’s not that. You don’t understand the pressure I’m under...”

“What is it, Rick? Is it because I’m a woman?”

Her expression told him she was no longer listening to him. She went back to storing her tools.

When he didn’t answer, she turned on him.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You don’t think I know what I’m talking about because I’m a woman.”

“Come on. Give me a break.” He moved forward to take her arm. She jerked back from his hand.

“No, I think I get it. I’m good enough to screw as a woman, just not good enough to fix your car.”

He cringed and did a sweep of his co-workers. All activity had ceased and was now centered on them.

“Can we take this outside?” He gripped her arm to steer her out the door.

For the second time, she shook off his hand. “No, we can’t take this anywhere. But you can take yourself away from me until I’m done cleaning up.”

“This is my team’s garage.”

“Sure is, and I’m sure you can find a place to occupy farther away from me.”

“You’re taking everything I’m saying and twisting it around.” He didn’t know where this conversation had gone so wrong. Maybe his doubts were showing on his face.

“Rick, I’ve known you for three years, talked to you on the phone and e-mailed you. I think I’m taking your words exactly the way they were meant to be taken.”

Rick rubbed his forehead. Maybe she was right, maybe the extreme pressure he was feeling combined with the accident had knocked him senseless. He had known her for three years. He had near fallen in love with the Angela in Quality that he talked to almost every week, and now that he had been with her, intimately, he realized how close he had been to tumbling.

Close? Right, he was over the cliff.

“Angela.” He wanted to apologize. He wanted to take her into his arms and show her how good it had been between them. But now wasn’t the time. He had a car to prepare for Thursday, a race to run. He didn’t need any distractions and Angela was one huge distraction.

“Rick, we need you over here,” Sam yelled from the car.

Rick waved at him. He had to go join the team.

“Just go. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” Her shoulders fell. The fight seemed to leak out of her.

He dropped his head, taking an extreme interest in his shoes as he tried to get back some control of the situation. God, he hated to leave things so bad with her.

“Go. Listen, it’s okay. It was a mistake anyway, the whole thing was a mistake.” She went back to replacing her tools.

He looked at his crew. They were all watching him. With a final glance at Angela, he let out a sigh and headed toward the guys. Although he wasn’t done with her, he had to meet his obligation to the team right now.

But Angela Warren hadn’t heard the last from him.

Chapter Nine

Angela tossed her final wrench into her toolbox harder than she needed to. The clang of metal hitting metal reverberated through the shop. Pissed didn't even begin to describe how she was feeling. She was a fireball of emotions just waiting to explode—at one man: Rick Monroe.

How dare he question her?

He could do a lot of things to her, even wine and dine her into a seductive, fantasy evening of rolling around on the beach. But question her ability as a mechanic? *No way.*

She refused to tolerate that behavior. She had done her job. She had diagnosed the problem. She had gotten an inkling of it the previous day. When she saw that there was nothing wrong with the oil pump, a twinge in the back of her brain told her it wasn't lined up. She even suspected something wasn't right back in the lab when she studied the damaged pump. There had been nothing wrong with it; the arrest on the flow of oil had stopped the pump, killing it. But they hadn't sent all the lines. It wasn't until she arrived here yesterday that all the puzzle pieces fell into place.

She ran it through her mind in the steps that made sense; the pump broke, sure, because the oil ceased. The oil ceased because the oil line fractured from the inside and blocked the flow. The neoprene inside the braided steel oil line was structurally faulty and once the pressure of the heat of the track was solidified, *bam*, that was it. That was all that faulty oil line needed.

It all made sense. Just took her a bit to get there. She was going to hang around for a while, make sure her theory was correct. Despite her anger at Rick, she didn't want anything to happen in Sunday's race.

To the oil pump ... or Rick.

She needed to take a breath and calm down. Intending to take a walk and cool off, she cleaned up what she could, then went out the front of the shop. She peeled down the top of her coveralls as she trekked down the road, the heat and humidity pressing down on her. Digging her cellular phone out of her pocket, she dialed her father.

"Joseph Warren." Her father's brisk tone calmed her.

"Padre, are you busy?"

"Angelina, I'm never too busy for you." His voice softened.

She slowed her walk and smiled into the phone. Her father never failed to make her feel loved.

"I think I found the problem out here."

"I never had any doubt in you, Figlia." He didn't even question her on what was wrong. His confidence made her straighten her spine and hold her chin high. Her worry released.

"I'll be back in a few days. I'm sticking around until they finish happy hour on Friday, and probably the Saturday race, as well. That should confirm my suspicions."

"Fine. Should I let your mother know you won't be over for dinner on Sunday?"

Angela pushed back a rush of sadness. She hated to miss the weekly dinner. It was a tradition for the family to converge on her parents' home every Sunday afternoon, her brothers and sisters, with their spouses and children. Her father made homemade noodles

and sausage and they drank wine, visited, and ate all day and all night. Thank God she had a high metabolism, or she might be a very Rubenesque Italian girl by now

“Don’t count me out yet. I might fly back after Saturday’s race.”

“Okay. Call if you need anything.”

“I will, Dad. Thanks.” Angela hung up the phone and stared out over the Florida landscape. Small beads of moisture rolled down her face and neck. It was like a wet furnace outside. Despite her calming conversation with her father, fury still simmered inside her and she felt as if she was boiling from the inside out.

She sucked in a few soothing breaths and puffed them back out. Her anger under control, she turned and headed back to the shop to help Rick’s team.

* * * *

Hot, tired, and grumpy, Angela leaned against the racecar and knocked a stray curly hair off her cheek. Rick stood next to her, his arms crossed, his expression closed. They hadn’t talked for hours. The garage lights flicked on, the automatic timer kicking in. Dusk was beginning to set.

“Think that’s it.” Sam slid from under the car, dusted himself off, and lifted up from the creeper seat. “We’ve rigged her up with the new hoses from the different manufacturer. She passed the muster so far, even with the added element of external heat.”

Angela nodded. She imagined Rick on his knees, begging her forgiveness for doubting her.

Right. That isn’t going to happen.

Confirming her last thought Rick clapped his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Let’s call it a night. We’ll take her out to the track tomorrow and she what she’s got.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t blow last time, during happy hour practice, or quals.” Both of them glanced at Angela.

“It’s not the same practicing,” she said, hearing the tension in her voice. “It’s only a single car. The track isn’t as heated as it is with multiple cars, and practice didn’t give those lines enough time to heat up to where they needed to blow. I had to take them up to two hundred degrees before they burst internally. That’s more than the engine heat generates. Takes a while to get that hot. You blew both those other pumps in the last thirty laps of the race. I know I’m right about this.” She crossed her arms and stared them down. *Idiots.*

“Okay, if I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t be willing to take you at your word. It’s my life on the line here,” Rick pointed out, the frustration in his voice evident.

“Thank you.” *Finally.* He didn’t get down on his knees, but this would do. A yawn pulled at her mouth, and she stifled it. She was so tired. Soon, her knees would give out and she’d slide down the car she was leaning against.

“Alright guys, let’s hit it, get the hell out of here and go home,” Sam’s order echoed throughout the shop. In less than five minutes, the crew paraded out the door.

“Later, see ya tomorrow, Rick.” Sam punched the electric roller door and headed out the garage exit.

“Okay, see ya.” As the noise of the electronic door settled, leaving the shop silent, Rick turned to Angela.

Feeling his gaze, she leaned over to pick up her small tool chest. His hand fell onto

her arm.

"I'll get that for you." He nudged her hand out of the way and reached for her tool chest.

"I can do it." She bent down. They bumped heads.

"Owww." She stood and raised her hand to the injury on her head. At the same time, Rick slapped his hand to his damaged forehead.

"Christ." He dropped her tools on the floor and took a step forward. Caging her against the car with his arms, he looked like a dragon ready to breathe fire down on the unsuspecting villagers, nostrils flaring, blue eyes blazing in anger. "You are so damn stubborn, woman."

She bristled in anger.

"Am not."

"And argumentative."

"What?" She brought her hands up to his chest and shoved, indicating she wanted him to move.

"And..." he snaked his arms behind her and pressed his body to hers, "very beautiful." He leaned in and latched onto her neck.

"Ahhhh." Her heart thumped in excitement. Hot, tired, hungry, whatever, when Rick was this close her body recognized his and her brain disconnected, leaving her anger in the dust.

He moved his mouth and sucked on her neck. Her head fell back, the pleasure was almost painful. How they must look, the two of them plastered against Rick's stock car in the throes of passion. She wondered what he was feeling. The threat that one of his crew could walk back in at any minute added the element of danger to their actions. She would be mortified if they were caught like this.

"Rick." She felt a flush creep up her cheeks.

Rick fingered the flush, letting his hand trail down to where her coveralls zipped. She wanted him to draw down her zipper and see how far her flush spread, wanted to taste the salt of his skin with her tongue, wanted to walk her lips over every inch of his skin and make him beg for more. His fingers nimble, he leaned an inch away from her and shed his shirt, dropping it to the ground.

Uh O.

"Yeah, babe."

She caressed his rough cheek, feeling the stubble and the strong bones. She loved touching him, the contrast of his hardness against her softness. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment with all her five senses.

"You're impossible." Her eyes opened, the better to see him.

His eyes met hers, a flame burning in his dark pupils. He stroked her neck, then trailed his fingers down her chest. At his touch, her heart beat out a fast, pounding rhythm.

"Impossible good, or impossible bad?"

Focusing on his touch, she didn't want to acknowledge what he was saying; she just wanted him buried deep inside her.

Pressing himself between her legs, he closed the last inch between them, pushed her back against the car, and took her lips. This time it wasn't a gentle kiss. He kissed her as if he wanted her to know he was claiming her. No questions.

She was stuck now. The thought made her shiver with eagerness.

He buried his hands into her hair and tugged her against his chest. She loved the feel of him against her. His muscles melted into her curves. His scent reminded her of the beach and making love in the soft sand.

God, I'll never get enough of him.

He opened his mouth and took. Their tongues mingled and stroked. The more she gave, the more he demanded. His body hardened, his cock telling her what he needed. He thrust forward, surging against her heat, giving her a sample of what their lovemaking would be like. She could feel herself responding; feel the rush of liquid and heat between her legs. Sweet Mary, she was wet for him.

His hand tightened on the back of her head. He made grunting noises that drove her crazy. It was the sound of his pleasure, a rumble followed by a groan. He drew her hand to his chest, over his heart. She felt the rapid thump-thump-thump, and knew her heart was hammering as wild.

He pulled back, panting against her lips. "Feel what you do to me, Angela, feel my heart pounding for you, how much I want you."

His words melted her heart. She stroked his chest, tentatively at first, then both hands dropped to his warm skin and she massaged.

So good. So perfect.

"God." He moved her hand down his chest to rest on the hardness of his cock. "Feel what you do to me."

She tensed. She knew where all this was heading. He nipped the corner of her mouth, a small kiss here ... there ... then traveled to her neck. The tension seeped from her muscles and she groaned. He must have sensed her surrender.

"Ahhhh." He smiled, sucking at the sensitive spot where her shoulder and neck met. She shifted under his hands, her hips jerking toward his, asking for more.

Using his teeth, he finished drawing down the zipper of her coveralls, then he tugged off her t-shirt. Her breasts just about jumped into his mouth. He licked them. Under his tongue, her nipples pearled in excitement.

Pulling her tighter to him, he slid his hands to the small of her back and tugged her up, arching her against his mouth, burying his face into her chest. He feasted, tonguing her nipples, sliding the tip his tongue around the areolas. She squirmed wanting, needing. He knew just how to get to her. Beads of sweat trickled down her neck.

"So hot." She bowed back.

"Yes, hot for you," he said. He pulled the zipper down another few inches, working her coveralls over her back until they slipped off, taking the rest of her clothes with them.

"I need you." He assaulted her with his lips and teeth, moving from her breasts to her stomach. Going down on his knees, he wrapped his arms around her legs and drove his mouth into her pussy. He licked her, tasting her, tonguing deep. He loved her heat with his tongue and lips.

She made mewling noises and collapsed against the car. He held onto her, working her until she was moaning for release.

"Do you need me, my Angela?" he asked between nips. He pulled her clit into his mouth and sucked.

"God, yes."

He gave her a final deep lick. Using his tongue to probe, he buried his face against

her folds. She was so close to climaxing, breaths away.

He leaned back, leaving her on the edge.

"Then say it." He caught her gaze, not letting her look away. "Tell me you're mine. Tell me what I need to hear."

"I'm yours, Rick, yours!" She'd say anything he wanted to keep him going.

He went back in. Using his tongue, he gave her what she asked for, holding onto her as she clenched her hand in his hair and flew.

"Ahhhhh." He kissed his way up her body, then settled on her lips. They kissed, long and hard. She grasped his shoulders as he ground his erection against her. She loved the feel of him in her arms, so big. Their differences aroused her. He felt huge, masculine, like the hunter claiming his mate. She was his.

"Do you want me inside you?" he asked, breaking the kiss, lowering his lips to her neck. She arched against him, her hands moving to cup his head. He slid against her and the contrast of the cold car at her back and his heated body at her front excited her.

"You know I do."

He drew back, grabbed a condom from his wallet, shed his pants, and suited up. Using the car as leverage, he cupped her ass and slid her up the smooth metal of the car, until his cock aligned with her. His expression was intense as he entered her, one inch at a time.

"Look at us. See how we fit."

He glanced down, and her gaze dropped with his as she watched them come together. Erotic, it was pure sensual sharing. He pulled all the way out then pushed back in, setting a lazy rhythm.

Her heart pounded all the way to her heat. She wanted him to feel everything she experienced. The cords of his neck stood out and his teeth gritted as if he strained to keep the pace slow. She lifted her legs and tightened them around his ass. He was big and she was tight, the friction and heat was too much.

"Ahhhhh."

"God. So good." His voice hoarse, his desire elevated her arousal. Pleasure pulsed through her. She was so hot, so close.

"Rick." Her hands tightened on his shoulders. He kissed her, an open-mouthed mating, lips sliding, his tongue thrusting in tandem to his hips. She tangled hers with his, wanting more, more, more.

Oh God, he was driving her so high she would reach the sky if she didn't explode first.

"Come for me," he said against her lips.

Her breath hitched. He pumped, and her entire body throbbed. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her short nails digging into his muscles. She cried out against his mouth and let her herself go. He came with her, pouring himself into her in one final thrust.

She went limp and buried her face in his neck, panting, trying to catch her breath as he lowered her legs to the floor.

"How do you do that to me?" Her body was sated and languorous, but her mind swirled with questions. How did this man knock her from anger to passion in an instant?

"Pure racecar driver magic."

Despite her qualms, she laughed. "Please tell me we didn't just do it against the hood of your stock car?"

He reached down and lifted her into his arms, one arm behind her back, and one beneath the backs of her knees. "I'll never look at that car the same again."

She shook her head. "Now what?"

Naked and seeming not to care, he carried her to the back of the shop.

"Now we take a shower and do that again and again."

He nodded for her to turn a doorknob. She reached down and tilted the door open. He held her with ease, not a glimpse of strain on his face.

"Convenient, we have an apartment back here," he said as he deposited her into a large shower stall. He reached out and grabbed several condoms from a drawer, spraying them on the floor in his rush. Then he disposed of the condom he was wearing.

His clumsiness made her smile, even as she wondered how many times he used the apartment with other women. She pushed away the thought. She'd never been the jealous type, and wasn't about to start now—even if the thought of Rick and another woman seared her heart.

They barely made it to the shower, before Rick had her back flush against the tile. He knelt between her legs. Steam floated around them and drops of water glistened on Rick's tanned skin. Angela put her hand over her heart. She'd never seen anything so beautiful as this man on his knees before her, loving her.

"Rick." He sipped from her, taking her up and up again, loving her heat with his mouth and tongue.

"Ahhh!" She climbed. The contrast of his mouth and hands on her body made her shift against the wet tiles. "Please." She was frantic with the need for relief.

He gave it to her, sucking her clit into his mouth. Arching, she screamed and went over the top.

She still shook with the aftereffects of the orgasm when he got to his feet and turned her against the tiles. With her back to him, he began touching her. His hands were everywhere, almost desperate. He kneaded, kissed, then bit her shoulder. She jerked, so aroused she couldn't think in sentences. He cupped her breasts, tweaking her nipples. She moaned his name. Her body was on fire for him.

"I can't get enough of you." His erection pressed into the curve of her back. Strong and proud, he rubbed against her and she couldn't take it anymore.

"Take me." She needed him so bad.

Running his hands up her arms, he raised them above her head, positioning her palms onto the tile. She heard the rustle of foil as he opened the condom wrapper. Seconds later he stretched her onto her toes, bent his knees and entered her from behind.

The position took him deep, so deep. She cried out. His lovemaking awakened something sleeping inside her, a passion that consumed her. A passion he reciprocated. She was almost happy she could reduce him to such primitive levels.

"Rick, God!"

"Yessss." He clutched her hands, moving, slipping in and out. His chest pressed against her back, his heart pounded, his breathing ragged.

It was so good. Together they were so good.

"Angela, come for me. Come again." He drew back and slipped in, over and over, the sensation building, her control slipping, near gone. She moaned.

"Yeah, moan for me, babe." He sucked on her neck, traveled along her shoulder, then using his tongue he dipped down and lined her ear. The feeling was incredible,

shattering her, and she came, hard.

"Yes!" He pumped in faster and faster then jerked against her. Reaching his own orgasm, he groaned, panting against her neck.

"Damn, that was..."

"Amazing."

"Beyond amazing."

Grabbing the soap, he turned her around and began washing her body. She returned the favor, their hands tangling as they tried to reach each other.

She laughed at their soapy battle. But her laughter fled when he picked her up, set her back against the tile and wrapped her legs around his ass.

"Are you always like this?" She was amazed by his stamina, he seemed ready to go again.

"Only with you," he said, claiming her lips, mating them.

Angela wrapped her arms around his shoulders and took what he offered.

"The water will get cold."

Reaching over, he shut off the spray.

"We'll let it warm up again, while we play."

Smiling, she caressed his shoulders and ran her lips down his jaw to his collarbone.

A small scar stretched across the skin.

"What's this from?" She stroked the scar with her tongue.

"Car wreck, two years ago." His response was casual as if it was no big deal.

She shook her head. "How's your chest?" The bruises had turned an ugly shade of black. She lowered her head and kissed one.

"It's healing fine, I hardly feel sore anymore. Thank god for that safety harness." He sucked in a breath when she tongued the area.

"Take me to bed, Rick. I want to worship you, every inch of you."

He moaned. With her legs wrapped around him, he stepped out of the shower.

Balancing her against him, he picked up a handful of condom packets off the counter.

"Got enough of those?" She laughed.

"Hey, never know." He headed for the bedroom.

Setting her on the bed, he followed her down. She pushed him onto his back and straddled him. Her wet hair fell around her shoulders and onto his stomach. She wanted to love him like he had never been loved, so he would never forget her.

"It's never been like this before." She kissed his chest, running her tongue around his nipple. He fisted a hand in her hair.

"I feel the same way."

Smiling, she kissed the corner of his mouth, rubbing her body against his. When she was alone, she'd let her doubts surface, but for now she chose to believe him.

He flipped her onto her back and attacked her mouth. Sucking in a breath, she tried to get her balance and failed.

"I've been out of sorts from the first minute I met you, Rick Monroe."

He chuckled while he nipped on her neck. Then he tongued her breast and her laugh turned into a moan.

"You've rocked my tidy, organized mechanic's world," she said.

Laughing, he smiled against her breast. God, she was ready to ride with him again.

"I'm about to rock your world again, babe."

“Yes!” She wrapped her legs around him. “I’m ready to go anywhere you want to take me.”

“Then hold on, because the ride’s going to be wild.”

A thought fled through her mind: What happens when the ride is over? Then he moved, and she ceased to think.

Chapter Ten

“How’s she holding up?”

Rick shifted as he came off the curve of the corner. “Feels good.” The roar of the engine was muffled through his helmet. He juggled for his place as the other cars crowded in on him. Compensating, he tried to take the inside line of the track.

“Take care of that right rear tire,” Sam said.

“Got it.”

“Yellow flag, Rick, got some debris off three. Stay high.” His spotter kept him covered as he zoomed down the backstretch.

“Got it, thanks.” He geared down and slowed his speed.

“They’re opening the pits. Bring it in. We’ll change all four.”

Rick steered toward the pits. Eighteen seconds later he rolled out, back onto the track. His pit crew could be the difference between coming out in a prime position or coming out last. It was all about the teamwork. To get the optimum grip on the track, he shifted back and forth, warming up his new tires.

As he waited for the race to start again he tried to stay focused, but it was tough coming off two days spent with Angela—most of the time in bed. Three days, if he counted most of Wednesday when he shocked his entire crew and locked everyone out of the garage, giving them all the day off.

God, it was near impossible not to think about that. He felt as if he should receive a gold medal for seducing her out of her anger Tuesday night. She had the temper of an Italian. Of course, this hot emotion was followed by an equally hot passion that she carried into everything she did, including making love.

They parted ways with an open-mouthed kiss and a sweet hug that left him wanting. She had gone back to the shop, testing his car, focused on what she did best. He chuckled to himself. Maybe the second thing she did best.

He’d returned to second thing he did best too—racing cars. He was swept into the rigors of qualifications, followed by happy hour practice on Friday and right into the main race Saturday. No time to try his power of seduction on Angela again.

Tonight, he thought. Tonight he’d make time.

She was always in the background, wrench in hand. So far, the car hadn’t shown any signs of a problem and for this he was grateful. He and Angela hadn’t argued about the car since he made her part of it, on her back. He tried not to smile, but didn’t succeed. He must look like an idiot, grinning in the middle of a serious race.

“Stay alert,” Sam said, reminding him he needed to get his head back into the race.

Daytona Super speedway was no place to slouch. This track was so fast he could take himself out with the wrong turn of his wheel. He didn’t want any mishaps. He was making a showing in this race, one of his first wins this year and he only had ten laps to go. He was running in third, the perfect position. Considering his last two bungled attempts, his sponsors would be ecstatic if he won—and unhappy if he didn’t. The pressure of racing was getting to him. Sometimes he wondered if all the sacrifices were worth it. When did he get a life?

“I’m alert.” Wouldn’t do for the guys to know his thoughts were drifting off the track

and into Angela Warren's pink thong. And what sexy underwear they had been before he had stripped them off and had his way with her. He chuckled.

"They're throwing the flag on the next lap. Get ready."

Rick cursed. He needed to get his head back on. He wondered if Angela would be there to see him take this race.

"All right, boys, let's make a run for the checkered," he said into his headset, then got back to the business of winning the race.

* * * *

Rick ducked as his crew popped yet another bottle of champagne and sprayed it all over. The winner's circle was where he was shooting for and that's where he was. He yowled, took a sip of the Gatorade someone handed him, and smiled for the camera. He couldn't believe he had done it, his first win of the season and it was just as sweet as he thought it was going to be. Well, sort of.

He glanced around as he tried to focus on what the sportscaster was asking him. It wasn't as great as he'd pictured. Something was missing.

"So, Rick, what's next for the team?"

Adjusting his sponsor's hat on his head, he went through the required spiel of thanks for every little sponsor plastered on his car and uniform. Then he acknowledged his crew and spewed some story about winning the next race, but his heart wasn't into the interview. Maybe the sportscaster realized it because he wrapped it up with a "congratulations," then moved to the next driver. Rick nodded, smiled, took handshakes, and made his way to Sam's side. The noise of the crowd and celebration was almost deafening.

"Where's Angela?" he asked Sam. Sam shook his head and held a hand to his ear. Rick bent closer and yelled louder, "Where's Angela?"

A sportscaster slapped a hand on Sam's shoulder and shoved a microphone in his face. Sam shrugged at Rick. Rick shook his head and strolled away. They would do this for hours, the post-race interviews, the acceptance of race winnings, and schmoozing with the car owner. Usually, he was into all the hoopla, but today everything seemed dim without Angela by his side.

He went from crewmember to crewmember asking where she went. He was met with a shrug and an "I don't know," from each one. One crewmember said he thought he saw her walk back toward the garage, but Rick couldn't leave just yet. He had sponsor obligations and several more interviews before he could look for her.

It took him two hours before he stood in the on-site team garage and realized she was gone. Her tools, her rental van, everything. One of the crew had seen her packing on the tail end of his win and hadn't seen her since. She had mentioned she would e-mail him from the airport.

What the hell? She couldn't even stick around to congratulate him. He clenched his hands, hurt by her easy dismissal. He'd thought they had something going on beyond the sex. He wasn't a commitment kind of guy, but taking his first look at Angela Warren, connecting with her in person after all these years of phone and e-mail conversations, had been incredible. Then having her...

He stopped his thoughts. *Screw that.* Winning wasn't giving him the high it normally did. He was missing a huge piece of the puzzle: Angela. There was no way he was going

to take the brush-off.

Scowling, he headed toward his trailer and his computer. He wanted to see just what type of e-mail Angela Warren had sent him.

"Hey, Rick, where you going?" Sam waved from the winner's circle. Rick nodded as he walked backward toward trailer row.

"Got to go take care of something. Take over here." He circled his finger to indicate the crowd, but Sam couldn't seem to hear him. Rick's scowl intensified. He knew he should stay, but he turned and marched away.

Stomping to his rig, he threw open the door and grabbed his laptop. Booting it up, he tapped his finger on the table, waiting.

"Come on," he said as it crept through the rigors of start up.

"There." He needed to get a faster computer, he thought, typing in his access and password to the internet connection and his e-mail. The wait for the download was painful. He scanned the various spam e-mails. He would love to hunt down every one of those stupid spam e-mailers. At last, an e-mail from Angela popped up. His heart pounding, he clicked it open.

E-mail

From: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

To: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

Rick,

A family matter at home needs my attention. Looks like everything went well today, congratulations on the win. I'm really pleased the Warren pump held its own and am happy you're safe and well. Anyway, had a great time. I'm sure I'll be talking to you. We have a new fuel pump I'll be working on with all our customers.

Until we next speak, take care.

Angela

What? What the heck was that? Just *Angela*, no *Love, Angela*. *Had a great time, until we next speak*? What was that? They had the most incredible sex of his life and she just *had a great time*. If he didn't know any better, he would say he'd been dumped, royally blown off.

Rick hit the reply button. He felt a slow burn inside him, and this time it wasn't passion, it was anger. *Fuel pump*, who cared about some stupid fuel pump? He started typing.

From: RickMonroe@rickmemail.com

To: Angela@warnmanufacturing.com

Angela.

I don't appreciate you leaving without talking to me. Screw your fuel pump...

Shaking his head at what he had written, Rick sat back and tried to get a handle on his fury. He erased what he had typed and deleted the e-mail. He wasn't going to do this, revert back to the way their relationship had been, cordial and completely on her terms. No way. It was time for him to take control back from his little mechanic. Time to take a quick trip to Detroit and as Ryan would say, 'take care business'.

Chapter Eleven

Angela tossed the pasta with a small amount of her mother's meat sauce.

"Pasta's ready, Mama," she said as her sister, Jerri, skirted by and grabbed the salad. Playing, Jerri bumped into her with her rump, they laughed. Then Jerri sailed out the swinging door into the dining room.

Angela's parents' kitchen wasn't small but with three girls cooking and her mother, it was getting crowded. Her two brothers and three brothers-in-law were busy keeping all five grandchildren of various ages out of the kitchen.

She sighed. Felt good to be home.

"Bring it out, dear." Hearing her mother's order, she lifted the huge bowl. Her other two sisters trailed behind her with various assortments of food—meatballs, garlic bread, a bottle of wine. This was their Sunday ritual, eat and enjoy being with the family. A day for fun and gratefulness, not business or doubts.

Angela needed this after her whirlwind sex fest with Rick Monroe. She felt raw and used. He had made a point to seduce her and she had fallen into his trap like a rabbit running straight into the mouth of the fox.

Okay, *who* was she kidding?

She had no right to be hurt. So he hadn't e-mailed her back. So what? He was a busy man, and her e-mail had been sort of terse. She hadn't wanted to sound like a mooning school kid, so she'd tried to be professional.

In his world she'd felt lost. Misplaced and worried, two emotions she wasn't comfortable with. In her world, she knew everything, no one questioned her abilities, and it was safe, she had a job to do, it was organized. Besides, he hadn't once talked about commitment or a relationship in the three days they had been together.

She snorted to herself. How could they talk? They'd been too busy making love.

No regrets.

Right, she had no regrets, just an aching heart, silly but true. She'd connected with him on every level. Not just physically, but emotionally too. She set her lips and reminded herself she'd gone into his arms willingly with her eyes wide open. She'd known what she was getting into. She hadn't expected anything from him. His life was racing—the fame, the money and the women. She was a simple mechanic. She would feel strange in the limelight surrounding him.

She placed the pasta on the table and sank down into her chair. She glanced around at her family. With the exception of her light-complected baby brother, olive-skinned, brown-eyed people surrounded the huge, carved table. Ten people talked at the same time, all of them gesturing with their hands. The kid's table was set up next to the adults, all the children laughing and playing. Ahhh nice, she thought as she grabbed her napkin.

The doorbell chimed. Angela noticed all the male eyes in the room turning to her. She furrowed her forehead in confusion. Everyone was here, who else was coming? Her father jumped up and rushed off.

"What's up?"

"Dad told us an unexpected guest was coming tonight," her oldest brother said.

"What? I didn't set the table for eleven?" She placed her napkin back on the table

and rose.

"I think you're going to need to sit down, Curly," her little brother said.

She sat down, tilted her head, and frowned at him. Just what *was* going on?

As she opened her mouth to ask, footsteps thudded in the hall. Something was familiar with the cadence... Her head swiveled, facing the dining room entry. Her father walked in first. Strutting right behind him was Rick Monroe.

"Rick." She jumped up, her chair sliding back, screeching against the wood floor.

"Angela, so nice of your father to invite me." His voice was level, but she could see the slow burn in his expression.

He was angry.

Others might not be able to see what was going on, but she knew this man, inside and out.

"Invite..." Her voice trailed off as she met her father's gaze.

He flushed and turned to Rick. "*Mange, mange*," he chanted the Italian word for eat, as if he was afraid Rick would disappear if his stomach remained empty. Her father grabbed the chair next to the China hutch and squeezed it in between her baby brother and oldest sister, right across the table from Angela.

Angela's mom hustled off and came back with a setting. Rick eased down into the chair, his eyes never leaving Angela's.

"I didn't know you would be in town." Angela tried to act normal as she passed the peas. She glared at her father. He held up his hands and winked at her. She tried not to growl.

She had been set up.

"Really, didn't you?" Rick accepted the meatballs, placing several on his plate then he passed the bowl on. Watching the byplay between Rick and Angela, her sister almost dropped the bowl.

"I think we have some unfinished business. You left so unexpectedly, things were, let's say ... left unsaid." He took a basket from Angela's brother, scooped some bread onto his plate, then passed it on.

"Oh, I, um." She swallowed and fingered her hair. "I sent you an e-mail from the airport."

"Hmm, yes, you did. I think you were missing something, though, something important."

She shifted in her seat. Glancing at her family, she rubbed her forehead. This wasn't the place to be getting into their personal business.

"Um, oh, okay." Oh God, she could feel her face blushing to the roots of her wavy hair. She accepted the salad and lifted some into her salad bowl.

He smiled and scooped some pasta from the bowl in the middle of the table, then thanked her mother when she passed him the spaghetti sauce.

"Yes, our date, you forgot to mention our date," he said as he poured sauce onto his pasta.

Her brow furrowed, she took a bite of her salad and tried not to choke.

"Right, date." She decided to humor him, hoping he wouldn't say anything that would embarrass her in front of her family. She smiled and nodded at the group. They all had clownish grins on their faces. In silence, she groaned. Her blasé act wasn't fooling anyone.

“And when you signed your e-mail, you forgot one small, little thing...” He sliced a meatball in half and downed it. Then he groaned and nodded at her father.

“Very good, Mr. Warren.”

Her father nodded back, seemingly enthralled by whatever Rick would say next.

“What was that?” She plopped some pasta on her plate and tried not to let her now growing anger show. How dare he come into her family’s house like this?

“You forgot ‘love,’ the word ‘love.’ See if I had written that e-mail to you I would have signed it, ‘Love Rick.’”

Her fork slipped from her fingers, clinking on her plate. Everyone went silent, a rarity for her family.

“What?” Tears formed in her eyes. What was he saying? She tried to maintain her calm, but he was breaking her apart. He shouldn’t play with her like this, not in front of her family.

He set down his fork and stared at her.

Before she made an idiot of herself, she slipped her chair back. “Excuse me.” She ran from the room. She rushed through the living room and out the front door, hearing the echo of her father’s voice calling to her.

Digging into her pants pockets, she fumbled with her car keys. She shoved the key into the lock, and Rick’s hand overlapped hers.

“Angela.” He curved his hands over her shoulders and turned her around. “Don’t do this.” He bracketed her against the car with his arms. She remembered being in this same position not forty-eight hours ago. The memory stirred her, aroused her. His smell made her want.

“Babe, don’t cry.” He fingered the tear rolling down her cheek. His touch was rough against her skin.

“Tell me what to do?” He ran his hands up and down her arms.

“Why are you here?” she asked, trembling, afraid of the answer. Why was he torturing her like this?

“I’m here to take back what is mine.” The intensity in his gaze made her shiver. “See, when you left, you took a part of me with you, a piece I can’t seem to get back with the thrill of the track.” He pulled her hand to his chest, right over his heart. She felt it beating ninety miles per hour.

“Rick.” She shook her head and dropped her gaze.

He lifted her chin with his finger. “What?”

“Our worlds are so different, I don’t know, you have obligations, pressure... We ... we don’t even know each other, there’s so many issues.”

He gave a pinched laugh and looked toward the sky. “Angela, I’ve known you for three years. I’ve wanted you for that long. Underneath the formal, friendly e-mail’s we exchanged there was a fire I knew was waiting for me. When we met, it all came together. I’m lost in you. Nothing else matters. We’ll work everything out.”

Her shoulders dropped and tears continued to flow, this time from happiness.

Still she hesitated. “But you can’t even trust me as a mechanic.”

His mouth tightened, and he dipped down his head to make eye contact with her.

“I’ve never known a female mechanic. Yes, I had doubts. I’m sorry, really sorry. I was under so much pressure to win, worried about losing my sponsors. The wrecks ... they jolted me. Can you forgive me for doubting you? Please.” His hand fell to his ribs.

Angela frowned. His sincerity ate at her resolve. She was so stubborn. What was the matter with her? Here this man was pouring out his heart and she was nagging him about doubting her mechanical skills. What was she really afraid of? That all this was a dream? That she wouldn't fit in to his world? Well, it wasn't and he was here, standing before her, telling her she belonged.

"Yes, of course." The words babbled out of her mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. This is your career, I've been such a jerk. You scare me Rick, this scares me." She pointed at him then at herself.

Rick breathed an audible sigh and buckled his arms around her. Pressing his body against hers, he hugged her close.

"Do you want to rewrite that e-mail to me?" he asked, his lips against her cheek.

She smiled and snuggled closer, rubbing her chin against the roughness of his face. She loved him; it was as simple as that.

"Okay, it would sound something like this:

Rick, I have Sunday dinner at my folks so I had to get back. The past three days have been the most incredible of my life. The sex was mind blowing and I never wanted to leave, but, despite my tough façade, I'm a very insecure person, working hard to prove myself in a man's world. I wasn't sure these few days meant as much to you as they did me, so I ran home, where I was safe. Always yours..."

She kissed him on the cheek and finished the e-mail, "*Love, Angela. Better?*"

"Better." He took her mouth then, a kiss so passionate she dissolved against him. In the background she heard catcalls, whooping noises, and clapping. She ended the kiss and peered over Rick's shoulder. She rolled her eyes at what she saw. Her entire family lined up on the porch, every person grinning.

Rick turned to see what was going on.

"Angelina!" Her father's booming voice had her jumping away from Rick. "Do you and your boyfriend have news to share with the rest of the family?"

"In a minute, Papa, go back inside." She shooed them with a front and back motion of her hand. More laughter came from the group as her parents shepherded the others back into the house.

Rick chuckled and caressed her face. "Do you want to know what my return e-mail would say?" His hand strayed down her neck to the vee of her shirt, where he stroked.

"Dear Angela, I understand about dinner with your folks. I wouldn't pass up an authentic Italian meal for anything. Never doubt the last three days meant just as much to me as they did you. Normally, I'm not impulsive, but you move something in me. I need you in my life. I'm looking forward to many more hot Florida nights with you. Don't worry about running, I know how to chase and am comfortable with winning. Watch for me, I'm coming to get you. All my Love, Rick."

Her heart flip-flopped. He tugged her off the car and against him, his hands falling down to caress her ass and pull her against his erection.

"You don't live with your parents, right?" His lips caressed her throat as he ran small kisses along her chin.

She laughed. "No, I have my own apartment."

"Good, mind if we go there after dinner?" He licked a particularly sensitive spot on her neck. She arched in pleasure.

"Oh, yes, I mean, no..." She gave an embarrassed laugh. "I don't mind."

“Okay, let’s go face your family first.” He stepped back and clasped her hand in his. “You damn near drove me insane, woman.” They walked up to the house.

“That makes two of us,” she said as she hugged his arm against her side. “What are we going to tell my family?”

“That the next time I’m in the winner’s circle, you’ll be standing at my side.”

The End

About the Author:

Rae Monet writes sensual romance novels for Liquid Silver Books. See her site at www.RaeMonet.com

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