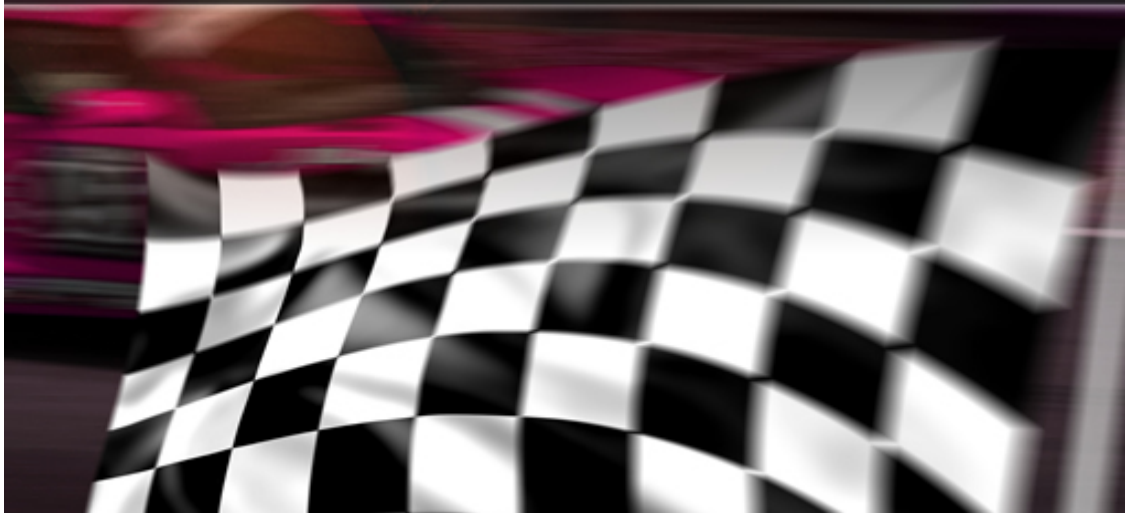




Secret Sacrifices

Jannifer Hoffman



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By

Jannifer Hoffman

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Dedicated to

Lyle Christie (the love of my life)

Patsy Goettle (my fantastic sister)

Dennis and Myrtle Quaschnick

(my terrific brother and his wife)

In memory of

Pat (Quasy) (Patsy's twin)

Stephen in this novel, his lust for life

and all the skydiving tales

are actual, and came from Pat

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Chapter One

Keeping a wary eye on her rear view mirror, Jamie eased off on the accelerator, hoping the flashing red lights would pass her by. The merciless patrol car stuck to her bumper like a pain-in-the butt hemorrhoid, and when the siren howled she muttered a curse and pulled over. Jamie's fingers did an impatient tap dance on the steering wheel as the officer got out of his car and ambled toward her, his no-nonsense expression anything but cozy. When she pushed the lever to slide her window open, the sweet scent of fresh mown hay awakened her senses. At any other time she'd have paused to take pleasure in the earthy country smell.

"Good afternoon, ma'am, I'm Officer Gentry." His voice wasn't too cozy either as he eyed her bright pink BMW like a pretty bug that needed squashing. "Do you know how fast you were going, young lady?"

"Yeah. A hundred and ten—just give me my ticket and let me be on my way."

Officer Gentry's bushy brows rose. "Would you remove your sunglasses, please."

She glared up at his reflective glasses. "I will if you will."

His brows went up another notch. "Fair enough." He took off his glasses, and tucked them into his breast pocket.

His compliance surprised her, but didn't lighten her sour mood. She took off her Stussys and flipped them onto the padded dash.

The officer leaned down to allow his gaze to sweep the inside of her car, from the suitcase in the back seat, to the plastic covered medieval costume hanging over the far window, to the crutches and oversized purse laying on the seat beside her.

With a quick glance at her bandaged left knee, he straightened back up. "Actually, you were only going ninety-five."

"Whatever. The sooner you write my ticket, the sooner you'll be rid of me."

He gave her a curious frown. "Lady, if you have an ax to grind, the Wisconsin Interstate

is not the place to do it.”

Jamie looked away and stared through the windshield into the low hanging August sun. At the most it had forty-five minutes of life remaining, and she was already two hours late. This stop was just another bad card in the miserable deck of her life.

“May I see your license please?”

Jamie reached into her purse, dug out her license and handed it to him.

Officer Gentry grunted, took a few steps toward his patrol car, stopped, and came back. For an uncomfortable moment he studied her face and short-cropped, blond curls. Then he looked straight into her amber eyes.

“You’re Jamie LeCorre, the NASCAR driver.”

“And I suppose you’re a dedicated fan,” Jamie shot back.

Gentry glanced at her bandaged knee. “As a matter of fact I am. I happen to be one of the few people who think you got a bum rap being blamed for that pileup in Indianapolis. I’ve watched you drive for the last eighteen months—you’ve placed in the top ten in all but thirteen races. No way you’d make a mistake like that in the last lap. I, for one, believe you would have won that race.”

Jamie looked up at Gentry with an appreciative shrug. She was impressed he knew her statistics. “Thanks for the vote, but as you said, you’re in the minority. Unless I can prove it wasn’t my fault, the association will expect an apology.” Jamie stared back into the sun. Her hands gripped the steering wheel, her jaw clenching. “They’re not going to get it.”

Gentry grinned. “Good for you. Hang tough. Tell those good old boys to stuff it.”

That forced a laugh from Jamie. “I guess I could use a few more fans like you. Sorry for coming off like such a smart ass.”

Gentry handed back her license. “No problem. It sounds to me like you’re into a little male-bashing right now, and maybe you’re entitled, but try to keep your aggressions on the speedways and off the freeways. Trust me—Wisconsin is not the state you want to be caught speeding in.”

Jamie tucked her license away, giving him a genuine smile. “Thanks for the warning. I guess I’d better hold it down for another sixty miles until I get to the Minnesota border.”

Gentry’s grin broadened into a belly laugh. “Heck no, don’t be giving them any money. Where you headed anyway?”

“Sunset Bay, a small town in rural Minnesota. I’m singing in a wedding for my college roommate. The ceremony is tomorrow, and I was supposed to be there for a five o’clock rehearsal.”

Gentry glanced at his watch. “It’s past seven. I’d say you’re going to be a little late. Pretty tough to make up that kind of time by speeding.”

“That’s not why I was—” She really didn’t want to admit that she was speeding because she was bitter at the world. “I called her earlier, and I already have my costume, so I didn’t need to be there.”

“Costume? Sounds like an interesting wedding.”

Jamie laughed. “Very interesting. All of the wedding party and most of the guests will be wearing Renaissance attire. Nicole, the bride, is a costume designer.”

Gentry whistled through his teeth. “Sounds like men in tights. Her future hubby must be one brave man.”

“I haven’t met him yet, but according to her, he’s a regular knight in shining armor so he should feel right at home in tights.”

Laughing heartily, Gentry gave her a two-finger salute. “You take care now, and keep your wings tucked in.” For a brief moment he gave her a hesitant look. “Sorry about your brother,” he said. “I was one of T-Roy’s fans too.”

For three miles, Jamie managed to concentrate on the rolling green hills dotted with dairy cows, and avoid thinking about T-Roy. A year and a half and the memories still hurt. T-Roy had been the light of her existence, her beacon. One slip, one mistake, and his life was snuffed out forever.

She was left with an abrasive father who’d virtually ignored her from the time she was dumped on his doorstep after her mother’s death.

It wasn’t Jamie’s fault Katherine deserted Buster LeCorre and four-year-old T-Roy, without telling Buster she was pregnant. At five years old, Jamie not only had to deal with her mother’s death, but with a father who flew into a rage anytime Katherine’s name was mentioned.

Jamie recalled vividly the day Buster came home with the results of the paternity tests he had done on both her and T-Roy. They must have proven she was his daughter because, though he swore so loud the windows rattled, he kept her with him. Unfortunately, all his love and dreams were reserved for T-Roy, leaving Jamie to feel like excess baggage. If T-Roy had not

taken her under his wing, loving her and caring for her, protecting her from her father's lack of sensitivity, she didn't know how she would have survived.

They grew up in the NASCAR pits where their father graduated to crew chief. It was a dream come true for Buster LeCorre when T-Roy joined the racing crew. Those dreams were shattered when Thomas Leroy LeCorre was killed on a qualifying run at Bristol after four years on the track. He had never won a race.

Jamie was suddenly, against her father's wishes, shoved into a car and told to race, while her brother lay dying in the hospital. Up to that point Buster LeCorre had ignored her while she secured a license, driving under T-Roy's tutelage in the Busch races. Since she went in as a substitute driver, she had to start in the twenty-sixth position. She surprised herself by finishing eighth. At the end of the four-hour race, T-Roy was dead, the crew chief detested her, and their sponsor threatened to drop them if Jamie didn't continue to drive.

Pink Mink International, the sponsor, published notorious men's magazines, sold risqué outfits for women, and were reportedly involved in a number of other illicit activities that kept them regular visitors in court. They insisted on supplying her with a BMW in the Pink Mink signature color, along with a full line of outrageous clothing and magnetic decals to display on her car. Jamie flatly refused to be seen in public wearing anything they made, and the decals found a permanent home in her trunk.

* * * *

Saturday morning dawned to a cloudless perfect-wedding-day sky. Any guests who weren't staying at the bride's home were put up in a local motel three miles away. There were only twelve units, and the groom's brother and cousin shared one of them.

When the phone rang between the queen-sized beds, Virgil Douglas answered it. "Yeah, hello."

"Hi, sweetie, it's Cynthia."

"Sorry, this isn't *sweetie*, it's Virgil."

"Oh—well, you sure do sound a lot like your cousin. Is Quinton there?"

"Just a minute." Virgil yelled toward the bathroom, "Quint, Cindy's on the phone."

Quint Douglas appeared in the bathroom doorway, stripped to the waist, shaving cream half covering his face. He'd heard his ex-girlfriend's grating voice all the way across the room.

"What the hell does she want?"

Grinning, Virgil put the phone back to his ear obviously intending to ask just that. Quint was there in an instant, snatching the phone out of Virgil's hand. He took a deep breath before putting the receiver to his ear.

"This is Quint. What's on your mind?"

He didn't have to ask how she found him in a rural Minnesota town. Cynthia had an IQ that was off the charts, and more connections than the New York City subway system. As a talk show host, she made three times the money he did, had the personality of a pit bull, and was possessive as hell.

"Sounds like you have a little attitude problem," she said.

"If you called to check on my attitude it hasn't changed since the last time I talked to you."

"What is your problem, Quinton? We were doing just fine. I don't see why you didn't want me to come to your cousin's wedding, and I don't understand why you want to break off a good thing."

Quint grunted. *A good thing for you, not for me.* He was nothing more to the infamous Cynthia Harman than a dog on a leash—a short leash. "I thought we settled all this before I left New York."

"You can't just dump me. Nobody dumps *Cynthia Harman*."

"Well I guess that makes me nobody." Quint dropped the receiver in its cradle with a satisfactory thunk. He turned hostile blue eyes on his grinning cousin. "The next woman I date is going to be blond, stupid, and docile with a face that's not recognized all over the frigging country. If I forget, remind me, will you?"

Virgil gave an unsympathetic bark of laughter. "I can just hear Harman's next topic to air, *Foolish Men Who Dump Powerful Women*."

Quint snorted. "It wouldn't surprise me at all. Where does she find those goons anyway?"

"You mean foolish men who dump powerful women?"

In spite of his anger, a grin kicked up on Quint's face. "You met her first. Why didn't you keep her?"

"She was a client. Lawyers don't date their clients. Besides, she goes for wide-shouldered, blue-eyed, athletic types. Plus, I'm five years older than you, and five years wiser."

"Maybe I'll quit going to the gym," Quint mumbled, heading back to the bathroom. He

glanced at the 15th century leather smock and tights they'd be wearing for the wedding that afternoon. "We can all be glad she didn't come along. She'd have a field day gathering information for her next show, *Men Who Wear Tights*."

"To be honest, I'd rather wear these getups than a monkey suit. Look on it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience." Virgil sighed. "Our brother is one lucky man to find a woman like Nicole."

Quint stepped out of the bathroom, drying his face. "I'll second that, but you seem to forget, I'm just a cousin."

Virgil laughed. "You've been a member of the family for—let's see, I was ten when you came to live with us—you've been around twenty-eight years. You're grandfathered in."

"Sounds like lawyer mumble-jumble to me," Quint said, chuckling. He pulled a New York Yankees T-shirt over his head and sat on the bed to slip into his sneakers. "How about we hunt up some breakfast. I saw a Ma-and-Pa café across the street."

Before Virgil could answer, the phone rang again.

Quint swore. "Tell her I'm not here. I'll wait outside for you." Shoving his T-shirt into his jeans, he stepped into the early morning August sunlight before his cousin could object.

His eyes fell on a brilliant pink BMW with Illinois plates parked in front of the unit next door. The thing stuck out like a flamingo in a chicken yard. It had a flat front tire on the passenger side and the trunk was open. A curvy blond displayed a delightful view of her jean clad tush while she ran her hands around the tire. It was the nicest tush he'd seen in a long while. What did she think she was doing? Trying to caress it to life? She looked like a damsel in extreme distress to him. After Cynthia, a blonde bimbo looked pretty good.

"You're not going to get that thing changed by feeling it up," he said, thinking he wouldn't mind at all being felt up by her.

She straightened up to a full five-feet-four inches and turned to face him. Her trim little cropped knit shirt matched the color of her car and hugged her softly curving breasts, leaving a slim waist, including belly button, exposed. Her jean cut-offs were short to the point of being sinful. She had a sensually pouty mouth and hostile amber eyes.

"Who the hell asked you?"

So much for the damsel-in-distress theory. An ill-concealed grin played on his lips. "Just thought you might need a man's help about now."

"Shove it."

Quint leaned back against his own car, folded his arms over his chest, and settled back to watch her. “I seriously doubt you’ll find an AAA service within fifty miles... but suit yourself.”

She ignored him.

He didn’t notice her bandaged knee until she grabbed a crutch leaning against the car and used it to hobble to the trunk. A small pang of guilt shot through him—a pitifully small pang. He could have been a little more tactful when he’d offered to help, but damned if he’d make another offer just to give her the opportunity to shoot him down again.

She pulled a small jack out of the trunk and positioned it under the car with amazing nonchalant ease. Next, she lifted the dummy tire out, rolled it over and let it drop beside the jack. He waited for her to ask for help, but she seemed determined to manage on her own. Too stubborn to be sensible, he decided. No skin off his back. With a car and body like that she probably had a sugar daddy lurking about somewhere. He didn’t know they even made cars that color, much less in a BMW. It had to be a special order.

She was loosening the lug nuts when Virgil stepped out of the motel. Virgil looked from the girl to Quint with a curious frown. Quint thought about warning him, but decided instead to stand back and watch the fun.

“Would you like some help with that?” Virgil asked.

“I’d appreciate it,” she said in a sweet voice, handing him the tire tool.

She limped to the trunk and brought out a rag to wipe her hands. By the time she came back, Virgil had lifted the spare into place. Nursing his bruised vanity, Quint watched. When she glanced up at him with penetrating amber eyes, he expected her gaze to be antagonistic or smug, but it was neither. In fact if he didn’t know better, he could have sworn it was sensual. He shook that thought off in a hurry. Obviously his imagination worked overtime.

Virgil interrupted his thoughts. “Put that in the trunk for me, would you, Quint.” Virgil nodded toward the flat as he lowered the jack.

Her wide gaze darted from Virgil to Quint as though just realizing they were together. Quint’s first instinct was to refuse Virgil’s request, but that seemed a bit juvenile. He bent down, picked up the tire, and carried it to the trunk. She looked like she wanted to object but there was little she could do short of wrestling the tire out of his hands. She skipped ahead of him on one foot to re-arrange things in the trunk. Quint got a glimpse of two large Pink Mink decals before she was able to cover them.

What the devil was a Chicago Pink Mink doing in small-town Minnesota?

She waited for Virgil to put the jack in the trunk, slammed it shut and got in her car, mumbling a curt “thank you” over her shoulder.

Quint and Virgil stood on the curb watching her drive away.

“Did you recognize her?” Virgil asked.

Quint stared at his cousin. “No. Should I have?”

“She was the Pink Mink centerfold about a year ago.”

“Hot damn!” Quint said. “I’ve heard that magazine is nothing more than a front for high class hookers. No wonder she can afford a fifty-thousand-dollar car. I wouldn’t mind seeing that body nude.”

“She wasn’t nude. If I remember right, she was wearing some kind of a racing get-up and was sprawled across the top of a race car.”

“That’s odd. Centerfolds are always nude. What did the article say about her?”

Virgil chuckled. “Those pictures come with articles?”

Chapter Two

Jamie pulled up in front of Nicole's Victorian mansion. She loved this house with the lake out back and the picturesque setting. Weekends spent here with Nicole were Jamie's only exposure to a normal family life, where parents love each other and their children. Though she and Nicole talked by phone regularly, it had been five years since Jamie visited Sunset Lake. Far too long.

When Nicole asked Jamie to sing at the wedding she'd been delighted. All she asked was that Nicole not mention Jamie's racing career to anyone, and to use her mother's maiden name in the program. She was in no frame of mind to field opinions about the Indianapolis Brickyard 500 pileup. What Officer Gentry said was true; he was one of the few who believed she was not to blame. With the focus on Nicole and Hunter in this small community, she hoped no one would recognize her. She would just try to keep a low profile.

Fortunately those two guys at the motel hadn't recognized her, though she feared the macho every-woman-is-a-helpless-ditz one saw her decals in the trunk. She hoped to piss him off enough to make him leave when she accepted help from the second guy. Just her luck, they were together. No matter, she'd be gone tomorrow never to see either one of them again. Too bad his personality didn't match those mesmerizing blue eyes.

It annoyed her that he was the first man she'd actually been attracted to since breaking it off with Clay Riker five months earlier. Clay seemed fine until she'd started racing. Their relationship turned ugly in a hurry after that.

Looking back on it, she realized it was her father and Clay's father, Kent Riker, pushing them together. Kent was Clay's crew chief, the two older men grew up together and were both dedicated to their work. Everyone believed she and Clay had a storybook romance going. Jamie believed her father was looking for a son to replace T-Roy, and she never was quite sure about Kent. He was friendly toward her in the beginning but sometime during the relationship she started to get the feeling she fell a bit short of his expectations.

She never was excited about Clay, and now she believed he was a traitor, and a liar.

He was directly behind her in the Indianapolis race. Before she went into a slide and all hell broke loose, she remembered the tiny red light blinking on his dash where his personal recorder was mounted, yet afterwards when she asked to view his tape he said he hadn't had the recorder on.

Then there was Ray Bentler, owner and president of Pink Mink International. Somehow the multimillionaire had the idea that he owned her as well as the rights to the car. Bentler fell into the standard tall, dark, and handsome profile, but Jamie had her own classification for him—high on himself, black-hearted, and lecherous womanizer. She posed for his degrading centerfold, but she drew the line on being seen anywhere off the track with him. Tabloids would declare open season on her if they even suspected she was involved with the owner of her car. Fortunately, Bentler needed her too much to try to force her over that line.

Jamie sighed. If nothing else, the incident with the stranger at the motel proved her feminine libido was still alive. She was beginning to wonder about that. Maybe she'd have time to share the encounter with Nicole. They would both have a good laugh over it.

As it turned out, the house was empty except for Berta, the housekeeper. It seemed everyone was at the park, setting up for the huge reception. She'd be of no help there with her bum leg, so Jamie decided to go instead to the church and compare notes with the organist since she missed the evening rehearsal.

At the church she found a flurry of activity, with men working in the yard setting up speakers and chairs, women rushing about with their arms loaded with flowers, and children darting in and around everyone.

Jamie knew Nicole had few relatives, and all of Hunter's family was from New York. Obviously the entire community was invited. No big surprise there, but also not good news for Jamie.

Inside, she discovered the programs had already been delivered. Searching for her name, she scanned the list of participants, relieved to see her mother's maiden name on the program as she'd requested. Jamie Devon was the name she'd used until she went to live with her father.

By the time Jamie finished at the church it was nearly one o'clock, and the wedding was at four. She had just enough time to pick up her tire, grab a quick lunch, and head back to her room to shower and dress.

* * * *

Quint and Virgil exchanged knowing looks when they saw the BMW once again parked in its spot when they got back to the motel. The original wheel and tire had replaced the dummy wheel. It seems the woman was capable of solving her own problems.

Virgil snickered. "Looks like your friend is back."

"What do you mean, *my friend*? You're the one who changed her tire."

"I saw how she looked at you—*sweetie*. There was passion in those hot, golden eyes if ever I saw it."

Quint snorted. "Yeah, like I don't have enough trouble with Cynthia on my ass. All I need is a Pink Mink hooker. Besides fair is fair, you gave Cynthia to me, I'll give you the Pink Mink dame."

Virgil pulled in beside the BMW, chuckling. "Well, let's see if she's still here when we get back tonight. Maybe we can get a two-for-one."

Quint fixed an uncertain glare on his cousin. Somehow the thought of Virgil in bed with the sexy hooker rubbed his jealousy bone the wrong way. He would much rather have the hooker rubbing it the right way. Damn, what was he thinking? "We better get dressed," he said. "I don't know about you, but I've never put tights on." He hoped the tops of those outfits were long enough to conceal the crotch.

* * * *

When Jamie returned to the church at three fifteen the guests had already begun to arrive. She was amazed at the wide variety of clothing she saw, from formal wear and medieval garb to some that resembled Halloween leftovers. Everyone vied for the best seats outside the church where they knew the bridal party would be arriving in horse drawn-carriages. It took a special invitation to be allowed inside the small church.

When Jamie tried to enter the back door the helmeted guard snapped his heels together, eyeing her crutches suspiciously. The big boob acted like he was guarding Buckingham Palace for Pete's sake.

"I'm the singer," she told him blandly when he asked for her special pass.

"Could you sing a few notes to prove that?"

Before Jamie could open her mouth to tell him where to go, the rotund sentinel let loose with a belly laugh.

“I’m just kidding. You must be Jamie Devon. I’m Chris Climb, one of Billy’s friends. You know, Climb, as in up the hill?” He laughed at his own joke, as his eyes roamed the full length of her mint green chiffon gown; stopping briefly on the gold filigree girdle hugging her softly rounded hips. From there, his gaze traveled to her low square neckline, and back to her face. He gave a low whistle. “Damn, I wish I’d lived back in those days. Say, you look familiar. Have we met?”

“Not likely, I’m from out of town.”

“Need any help getting up them steps?”

Jamie gave him a grudging smile. “No thanks, I can manage. You best stay at your post.”

“Well maybe I’ll catch up with you later at the reception. I could buy you a drink or something.”

Jamie mumbled something under her breath and hobbled past him. She mastered the four steps inside, made her way to the back of the church and up the ten steps to the loft where the organ and piano stood.

Sarah, the organist, already in place, gave Jamie a smile and a wave, and within minutes sweet, flowing music filled the church.

Jamie was grateful her lofty perch placed her above and behind everybody. Only the wedding party could see her when they turned to face the congregation. Few curious eyes would be on her during her two songs.

Nicole allowed Jamie to pick the songs. She’d chosen one of her own songs, *My Secret Love*, for the unity candle lighting. When the bride and groom presented flowers to Hunter’s parents and Nicole’s grandmother, she would sing Bette Midler’s, *The Rose*.

She was barely seated when a smiling young, black woman trotted up the steps carrying a wreath of miniature white roses. Streamers the color of Jamie’s dress trailed down the back.

She introduced herself as Carol Wilson, the local hair stylist and beauty consultant. She was there to do Jamie’s hair.

Working with long, fire-engine-red nails, Carol pulled a comb from her apron, and used it skillfully to arrange the wreath on Jamie’s head.

Carol wove Jamie’s short blond curls through the wreath of flowers, leaving long streamers of ribbon to flow down the back. The woman produced a small make-up kit and asked Jamie’s permission to apply some Renaissance touches to her face.

Finished, Carol handed Jamie a large round mirror and waited for approval. Jamie, a no-fuss lipstick-only, kind of person, stared in wonder at her bright cheeks and kohl enhanced eyes.

“You are truly a miracle worker,” Jamie told the beaming hairdresser.

When Carol left, Jamie positioned herself at the railing to watch the proceedings below. People filled the back rows first, and within twenty minutes the church was full to capacity. Everyone waited for the music to change, signaling the start of the wedding. Flowing silk, intricate headdresses, and men in leather and tights were everywhere. Even the ushers looked like they came straight out of Sherwood Forest. It was like being cast in a scene from another time.

The music paused a moment before beginning the processional tune. First to come in were the groomsman and bridesmaid. From her position in the loft Jamie saw them from behind and identified them with the aid of the wedding party handout. Leading the procession was Quinton Doulgas, Hunter’s cousin, and Amanda, a friend of Nicole’s. A soft murmur rose from the guests, certainly a reaction to the wedding party attire.

Jamie knew the costumes, including her own, were Nicole Anderson originals. Quinton wore an ocean blue shirt with big, swashbuckler sleeves, a brown leather tunic that reached halfway to his knees, snug-fitting tights, and leather boots. A silver metal girdle draped his narrow waist down past his hips. Next came Virgil Douglas, Hunter’s brother, with a woman named Carman on his arm. Virgil’s outfit was identical to Quinton’s except the shirt was dandelion yellow. The women wore floral tiaras; their dresses matched the color of the men’s shirts.

Shanna and Kyle followed next. Six-year-old Shanna looked like an adorable pixie in green silk, and four-year-old Kyle was a miniature groomsman. Jamie knew Shanna and Kyle were Nicole’s deceased sister’s children.

Jamie suddenly regretted not having arrived earlier. If she had been on time last night she would have met everyone in the party, including the children Nicole spoke of so fondly. Nicole had invited Jamie to stay at the house, but she felt out of place amid so much family. Now she was sorry she hadn’t accepted the invitation.

At least she could meet them all later at the reception.

At the start of the wedding march, the crowd rose to face the back of the church.

Nicole verily floated down the aisle on Hunter’s arm. Their obvious love for one another

brought a lump to Jamie's throat. Her dear friend looked like an angel in white flowing chiffon with gold trim and a gold filigree girdle. She was so beautiful.

Hunter walked, and looked, like a prince, his costume similar to those of his brother and cousin except for the white shirt and the gold metal girdle. The entire scene could have cast in a medieval movie.

When the wedding party turned to face the bride and groom, Jamie got a jolt that nearly threw her out of her chair. The two groomsmen, Hunter's brother and cousin, were the two men who helped her with her flat tire! She felt the blood drain from her face in one instant, and a rush of heat wrapping around her neck and face in the next.

Paralyzed, she held her breath until they all turned to face the altar when she let it out in a whoosh of relief. She was grateful not to have been in the middle of a song, when she first recognized them. She took a deep breath, thankful to have time to prepare herself.

It took several more deep breaths to remind herself that she was being foolish. She hadn't done anything to be ashamed of. *He* had been the rude one. She quickly glanced at the program to put a name to the face—Quinton—and Virgil. She tried to remember their brief conversation but her mind wasn't working. What she did remember was Virgil asking *Quint* to put the tire in the trunk.

Twenty minutes into the ceremony Nicole and Hunter prepared to light the unity candle and it was time for Jamie's first song. She stood at the edge of the balcony, breathing deeply. It wasn't singing in a crowd that had her shaking. It was knowing that Quinton Douglas' arresting blue eyes would zero in on her the second she opened her mouth.

Sarah had moved to the piano and Jamie waited for her to go through the opening notes. With her eyes carefully focused on the stained glass windows behind the altar, Jamie began singing *My Secret Love* with the words altered to tell Nicole and Hunter's story.

When her clear strong voice filled the church, heads swiveled to see where the sound came from. Only the bridal party had a direct view.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Virgil nudge Quinton's elbow.

When the song finished, the piano ceased playing, and a hush fell over the guests.

Jamie dropped her gaze to Nicole, anxious to see her dearest friend's reaction to the words. Nicole's smile said it all. Their eyes met and in those few seconds all the sweet memories they'd shared as college friends brought them together as though time had stood still. It was the

only time in her young life Jamie had gotten out from under her father's control. If it hadn't been for T-Roy's insistence, she'd never have gone back home.

Jamie wished she had a cold compress to cool her face. Though she had managed not to look down at him, she could feel the heat of his gaze. It was now safe to stare at the back of his head and wonder about his thoughts. Certainly he had to be as surprised as she was. Was there any way she could avoid seeing him again? She seriously doubted it. She could only hope he was annoyed enough with her that he would do the avoiding.

She didn't understand her reaction to Quinton Douglas. Why wasn't she attracted to Virgil instead? He was the nice one, and better looking by far. Virgil had distinguished, GQ, good looks while Quint belonged on the cover of an outdoor magazine with a fishing rod in his hand.

Jamie gave herself a swift talking to. What did it matter? Her lifestyle didn't allow for a man not involved in racing. Her father had made the mistake of marrying a woman who couldn't accept his work. Not that Jamie was that much in love with racing. It was just all she knew—and the only possible way to get Buster LeCorre's attention.

The speaking of the vows drew Jamie from her thoughts. Nicole and Hunter were promising themselves to each other for life. Minutes later they were husband and wife. Then Hunter pulled Nicole into his arms and they shared a kiss that sent tingles racing from Jamie's garlanded head down to her silk-slipped toes. The other guests must have had a similar reaction because, when he finally released his bride, a resounding cheer rang out.

Jamie stood up. It was time for her second song.

Sarah hit the monotone key starting *The Rose*. As before, Jamie trained her eyes on a constant that wouldn't get her in trouble. This time it was Nicole's grandmother's peculiar, but interesting, hat.

It worked—until the last lines, when her eyes were suddenly and unwittingly drawn to the one person she had hoped to avoid. His blue gaze locked on her with hot intensity. When the song ended Jamie tore her eyes away and collapsed into her chair. Heat seared through her like a merciless flame. She was quite certain the flush in her face had nothing to do with embarrassment.

When the organist played the recessional march the church cleared with amazing speed. Jamie felt numb. *Now what?*

Nicole would expect Jamie to come out the front door to go through the receiving line. It would be horribly rude not to. Besides, why should she allow a silly encounter with Hunter's cousin to rule her actions and emotions? The thought was ridiculous. She was Jamie LeCorre, NASCAR driver, competing successfully in one of the most dangerous, male-dominated, professions in the country. She routinely faced racing with steadfast nerve. She would not allow this man, this particular man, to intimidate her.

Jamie grabbed her crutches and made her way down the stairs. The last of the people were filing out by the time she hobbled to the front door. Nicole was waiting for her.

The women embraced in a tearful reunion. Nicole thanked Jamie for the songs before turning to introduce her to Hunter.

"Hunter, this is my dearest, oldest friend, Jamie, Jamie meet my wonderful husband, Hunter."

Hunter bowed at the waist, took Jamie's hand, and pressed it to his lips. "Lady Jamie, you are as lovely as your voice. Thank you for sharing it with us on this special day."

Jamie, not one to giggle, did just that. Then she sank into a deep curtsy, as deep as her crutches would allow. When she tried to straighten back up she would have toppled over if not for swift hands catching her from behind.

Someone announced that the horse-drawn, liveried carriages were ready to take the wedding party to the park reception.

Nicole looked over Jamie's shoulder. "Quint, Amanda wants to ride with her husband, so why don't you bring Jamie with you?" Nicole smiled at Jamie. "We'll see you at the park."

Hunter gave his wife a squeeze and grinned at Jamie. "By the way," he said indicating the man beside him. "This is my brother Virgil. That's my cousin Quint behind you. And don't worry about riding with Quint, he's as harmless as a puppy dog."

Jamie suddenly realized the *puppy dog's* arms were supporting her. He reached around her, pulled her crutches out from under her, and handed them to Virgil.

"Here, Cuz, you bring these."

Before Jamie could object, she was lifted off her feet and Quint was striding toward the carriage with her in his arms.

"I can walk fine with my crutches," she quipped.

"No, you can't. Virg has them."

She didn't even bother squirming. He had a firm grip on her, as though he expected her to try to leap out of his arms. "Has anyone told you recently you're an obnoxious, domineering male?"

He lifted her into the waiting carriage, grinning up at her. "Male...yes. Obnoxious and domineering...no...not recently anyway." He turned to Virg. "Take those crutches with you. I'll be safer that way." To Jamie he said, "Scoot your little rump over, I'm coming aboard."

Jamie wiggled over as far as she could in the narrow seat, and still his hip pressed into hers when he settled back to get comfortable. He put an arm across the back of the seat and began to study her as though she were an abstract painting he was trying to understand.

No one noticed a lone photographer with a telescopic lens standing at the edge of the crowd. Benny Gomez searched in his pockets for the wedding program, trying to put names to the faces he didn't already know. His boss would expect names—with dirt smeared on them.

Chapter Three

The carriage lurched forward, and Quint still hadn't said anything. He just watched her, scrutinizing her. She was beginning to think he either recognized her or somebody had told him who she was. Well, he could damn well speak up.

He didn't.

She wasn't going to let him get to her.

It didn't work.

Gritting her teeth, she finally snapped, "What?"

"You sing real nice."

It was the last thing she expected him to say, and it took the spark out of her anger. All she could do was mumble a deflated, "Thank you."

"What happened to your knee?" he asked.

Confident of his reaction, she told the truth. "A five-car pileup on the Indianapolis Speedway."

Quint threw his head back and laughed. "All right, I deserved that, none of my business. How long do you need to use the crutches? Is that a safe question? If not, fine, I'm comfortable just sitting here and staring at you."

When she didn't answer, his gaze slid down, taking in her costume. The low-scooped neckline didn't escape his perusal. "You look fantastic in that particular shade of green. What is it? Mint? It goes well with your honey-colored hair, and you have the perfect figure for that Lady Marion look. Is that silk?"

When he reached over to touch the fabric, Jamie slapped his hand away. She had a feeling he wouldn't stop with the compliments until she answered his original question. His tact was both obnoxious and amusing, and she was having a hard time keeping a straight face. "One more week," she replied. "As long as I behave and stay off the leg until then."

"And then you're back to work?"

Jamie suspected he was fishing for information. The Mountain Dew 500 at Darlington was the following Sunday. She intended to race in it. "I'll be back to work next week," she said. "Beautiful wedding, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was. Hunter is a lucky man."

"Nicole is a lucky woman."

Quint smiled. "I guess we can agree on that." The wedding seemed to be a safe topic, so they settled into conversation about Nicole's talents as a seamstress and costume designer.

Neither one of them realized the carriage had stopped until Virgil appeared beside it with her crutches.

"Any problems?" he asked.

"Nothing we need a lawyer for," Quint said hopping out of the carriage. He turned to help Jamie down.

Jamie accepted Quint's help because it was the only sensible thing to do. The carriage was quite high, and it would have been difficult to master with her bandaged leg. Quint put his large hands on her waist, leaving her no choice but to put her own hands on his shoulders. He lifted her down with a smooth easy swing. Jamie had half expected him to slide her down along his body the way she'd seen it done in romantic western movies. Fortunately, he set her on the ground without resorting to such dramatics.

Virgil handed over her crutches with a quizzical frown.

She thanked him, slipped the crutches under her arms, and made her way toward the buffet table—alone. She didn't understand the scowl on Virgil's face but she was certain she hadn't imagined it.

When Quint started to follow Jamie, Virgil's hand clamped firmly on his cousin's shoulder. "As I recall, just this morning, you asked me to stop you next time you set out to give Cynthia a new topic to air."

Quint shrugged. "You're too late. *'Men Who Fall for Hookers'* is already in production."

"Jeez... We should have gone to breakfast and let her change her own tire."

"Yeah. Let's go find a beer."

For three hours Quint managed to avoid Jamie. She made it easy for him. She headed the other way each time he even thought about approaching her. She sat down to eat with Nicole's brother Billy and his wife Corinne. Then she spent the next hour with the two kids and Nicole.

When the dancing started, Jamie found a small corner at the end of the makeshift bar, sat on a stool, and ordered a Bloody Mary. She was staring at the glass and doing a lot more playing with the celery stick than drinking. The stool adjacent to her was empty.

Quint sat down beside her. “You expect to make that drink disappear by stirring it?”

When Jamie looked at him in the pale light she noticed that the color of his shirt, or blouse as Nicole would call it, matched the blue in his eyes. He had discarded the ascot and opened two top buttons to reveal a hint of crisp rust-colored hair. She noted that it was a darker shade than the sun touched sandy color on his head. Giving him a weak smile she said, “I’m not much of a drinker. I just like the Tabasco tang. Beautiful night for an outdoor reception, isn’t it?”

Before Quint could answer, Virgil materialized. “Hey Quint, I’m going for a drive with some of the guys. You wanna ride along?”

Quint shook his head. “No, thanks, go ahead without me.”

Virgil gave Jamie a sullen once over before handing his car keys to Quint. “Okay, you’re on your own. You can bring the car back to the motel.”

Frowning, Jamie watched Virgil leave. “Your cousin doesn’t think much of me, does he?”

“Don’t mind Virg. He thinks he’s protecting me.”

Jamie’s head shot up in surprise. “From me?”

Quint stared at her for a moment and shrugged. “No, from myself. I just got out of a bad relationship.”

“It must have been real bad if you need a guard dog.”

“I grew up with Virgil and Hunter. We tend to look out for each other.”

“Nicole mentioned another brother.”

“That would be Stephen—he’s nine years younger than Hunter. Stephen went slumming through Europe for the summer with some friends. I believe he had a skydiving competition in France this weekend.”

Jamie paused with her drink halfway to her mouth. “He sky dives?”

“Yeah, he’s the daredevil in the family. I’m the wimp. I can’t even imagine jumping out of a plane and freefalling toward the ground at 80 miles an hour. He rides a Harley too. Jeez, I get goose bumps in a car when I go over seventy on the highway. Speed in any form just isn’t my thing.”

For a moment she stared at him in surprise. His rugged facial features, along with the look-at-me-I-work-out abs and shoulders, gave him an extreme macho look. Freely admitting to a weakness seemed contrary to what she knew about men. It made her curious. “Tell me about yourself, Quint. How is it you grew up with your cousins?”

“I’d rather talk about you,” he said. “Do you have any family?”

Jamie suddenly had an overwhelming desire to stir the life out of her celery stick. She wondered how long it would take for him get around to questioning her again. It would be easy to just tell him everything. If he didn’t like it, he could walk away. After all, she had nothing to be ashamed of, and a lot to be proud of. If he were a racing buff he’d have recognized her by now. Since he hadn’t, he wouldn’t even know about Indianapolis, but if he thought skydiving was a daredevil venture—

“Can I get you something?” It was the bartender. “It’s on the house.”

Quint nodded. “Yeah, a beer. Any kind. You want another one?” he asked Jamie.

She shook her head.

A moment later, the bartender set a foaming mug in front of Quint. He dropped a bill in the tip jar then slurped the foam off the top. After taking a deep thirsty swallow, he set the mug down and faced her.

“So, where were we?”

“Hunter mentioned something about the two of you working together.”

Quint nodded. “We own a business called S.A.F.E—Seek and Find Enterprise. Now that Hunter’s married, he’ll be opening an office here in Minnesota. I’ll handle the one in New York. A good share of what we do is through the Internet so it can be done anywhere.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“Hunter’s specialty is genealogy research. Mine is more into private investigation. If someone wants to find their roots, Hunter handles it; if their dog ran away, it’s my baby.”

Jamie was thoughtful for a moment. She was thinking about the Indianapolis tape she was sure Clay had in his possession. “In other words, if a person needed to find something, you could do it.”

Quint took a swallow of beer, laughing. “As long as it isn’t a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.”

“What if it was slightly illegal?”

“How illegal?”

“Slightly.”

“Define slightly.”

Jamie shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, I—I was just speculating. I didn’t mean—”

“You don’t lie very well, Jamie. What were you getting at?”

Jamie brought her Bloody Mary to her mouth, took a long, slow swallow, and took her time sucking the taste from her upper lip.

Quint watched her actions with testosterone generated interest—and waited.

“How good are you at picking locks?” she asked.

“House or bank vault?”

“House. It’s really nothing that ominous.”

“Is there a security system?”

Jamie hesitated. “I’m sorry, I think I’d better go.”

When she reached for her crutches, Quint’s hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist.

“Don’t go. Whatever it is, if I decide not to help you, you can trust me to keep this between us.”

Unnerved by the heated feeling his touch gave her, Jamie quickly tugged her hand free of his grip. “All right,” she said softly. “I need a video tape.”

“Is there a security system?” he asked again.

“Yes, but I can disarm it.” She could have added that she knew the code because Clay had the intelligence of a stump and didn’t know how to change it.

Quint gave her a sideways look. “What’s on the tape?”

“That’s not important.”

“Whose house?”

“A...friend... Ex-friend.”

“Apparently it’s someone you know quite well if you can disarm the security system. Why don’t you just use your fricking key?”

The hostility in his voice caught her off guard. Her eyes narrowed. “This was a bad idea. Let’s just forget it.”

Quint gritted his teeth. “Look,” he said, “let’s clear up a few things. I know who you are and what you do. So I have a good idea what’s on that tape.” He drained his beer in one angry

gulp. “I don’t even know why I’m still sitting here. Call me crazy. Call me a sucker for beautiful women. And you are beautiful, you know.”

Jamie didn’t know what to say. “How did you find out?”

“Virgil recognized you.”

“When?”

“This morning when he changed your tire.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“It was quite obvious you didn’t want anyone to know.”

She instinctively looked around her. “That’s true but...you didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

He gave her a long cold stare. “Just because I act like an idiot doesn’t mean I am one. You’re Nicole’s friend. Hunter is like a brother to me. His parents raised me.”

“If it bothers you that much, why are you sitting here?”

“Because I *am* a fucking idiot, that’s why.”

Before Jamie could even begin to comprehend his anger, Chris Climb appeared on the other side of her with a rolled up magazine in one hand and a marker in the other.

“I finally remembered where I saw you before,” he said sporting a crafty grin. Then he lowered his voice. “You’re Jamie LeCorre. You cut your hair, and hey, I realize you’re not using your real name because you don’t want anyone to know. Under the circumstances, with that thing in Indianapolis, I can understand...but I’m one of your biggest fans. If I can get your autograph on this picture, I swear, I won’t breathe a word to anyone.”

Jamie rubbed a hand over her brow. She knew it was going too well to be true. “I’d appreciate that,” she said with a weary sigh. She took his marker, signed the centerfold picture he laid out in front of her, and waved him off.

When she turned back to Quint, his chair was empty. She blinked rapidly and swallowed at the lump rising in the back of her throat. She’d had a lot of reactions to her NASCAR career, but fury was a new one.

She wasn’t a professional mud-wrestler, for God’s sake.

It shouldn’t bother her, but it did. She’d been attracted to him from the start, when he’d folded his arms over his chest and watched her try to change her tire balancing on one foot. He was rude and arrogant, but he awakened feminine instincts in her that no other man ever had, including Clay.

If she didn't stop thinking about him she was going to start shedding pitiable female tears. Tears weren't allowed in her life. A woman couldn't compete in a man's world and be respected if she got emotional every time she lost a race or her crew chief yelled at her for not staying clear of the wall. The only way to survive was to yell back if you believed you were right, and take your licks and keep on going if you were wrong.

Hobbling the three blocks to the church where her car was parked, gave Jamie time to get control of her emotions and condemn Quinton Douglas to a hot seat in hell.

At ten-thirty Jamie eased her BMW into its parking spot in front of her room. She was shocked to see Quint standing in the doorway to her room with his shoulder propped against the frame. A brown paper package was cradled in the bend of his arm.

He had changed into jeans and a button-down short-sleeved shirt, and the top two buttons were open with the shirttails hung loose over his jeans as though he'd dressed hastily.

For a moment Jamie couldn't think. She just sat and stared while he waited, not moving. It became apparent he had no intention of going anywhere soon. She had let him get to her once already today. It wasn't going to happen again.

Grabbing only one crutch, because she felt less helpless that way, she stepped out of the car and slammed the door. She dug in her small clutch purse for the motel key and approached him intending to inform him of his appointment in hell.

Quint must have noticed the fire in her eyes because he spoke quickly before she could. That's when she noticed it was a bottle of wine resting in his arm.

"Before you tell me to take a flying leap, please just listen. So there's no misunderstanding, I'll tell you right off I'm leaving to go back to New York on an early flight tomorrow morning."

"What—"

"No, please hear me out. I'm attracted to you, and I enjoy your company. If you feel the same way about me, and I got the impression you did, we could have a good time together. I'd really like to spend the night with you." He saw the shock on her face and continued quickly before she could start screaming at him. "I'm sorry if that sounds a bit forward, but as you probably know by now I'm not big on tact. I don't care who you are or what you do. I like you, Jamie. I like the woman I see you as here tonight. I was attracted to you from the moment I saw you this morning when I first walked out of my motel room." He paused, took a deep breath, and

went on. “All I’m offering is me for a few hours, no hidden agenda, no questions, no strings. You have my word you can ask me to leave at any time, and I will. So either put your key in the door and open it or tell me to go to hell. I’ll respect your decision either way.”

Jamie stared at him in utter disbelief. He was politely—*politely*—inviting her to have a one-night stand. By all rights she should be insulted beyond reason, even if she *was* attracted to him. If she hesitated at all it was because she was speechless. He waited calmly, impassively watching her face. She was vaguely aware of a clean soap smell and something else, something very male. His look was anything but sinister, and yet, she had the sensation she was staring up at a vulture waiting to zero in for the kill.

She opened her mouth to tell him to go directly and straight to hell—do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars—when, from out of nowhere, she was struck by the words in Bette Midler’s song. *It was the heart afraid of breaking that never took a chance.*

They were both consenting adults, after all. And everything else in her life seemed to be in the toilet right now. What did she have to lose? The worst that might happen was she’d create a bad memory; she could just stuff that in with all the others. Best case, she would have a pleasant memory to carry home with her. Besides, if he got weird on her she could always scream; his guard dog was right next door.

She reached past him, slipped her key in the lock and opened the door.

Chapter Four

Inside the room, Jamie abandoned her crutch, switched on the small desk lamp, and turned to face her guest. She didn't know what the ground rules were for one night stands but there were a couple of things she needed to get out in the open.

"Before this goes any further... What about my...career?" she asked.

"What career?"

Right answer.

"And Virgil?"

"Let him get his own wine."

Jamie clasped her shaking hands together, smiled, and looked at the bottle of wine. "Did you remember to bring a—"

"—condom," he finished for her. "Right here." He gave her a lopsided grin and padded the left pocket of his jeans.

Jamie's eyes widened. "Actually, I was going to say corkscrew."

His grin turned into a chuckle. "No problem, I have that too." He reached into his right pocket and produced a corkscrew.

She shook her head, laughing. "I'll get the glasses," she said limping toward the bathroom.

Quint called after her. "See, we're having fun already."

Jamie came back with two plastic-covered glasses. Even without wine she was feeling lighthearted and reckless. It was a good feeling.

Quint uncorked the wine while she unwrapped the glasses. Then she held them while he poured.

"Anything else you have in those jeans that I should know about?" she asked.

He set the wine bottle down, took his glass from her, and gave her an impish heart-stopping grin. "Yeah, it's about six inches long and two inches wide."

“Oh, you are really bad,” she said, with a choked laugh.

“I’m talking about the receipt for the wine and the corkscrew.”

The snort that came out of her was anything but dignified.

Quint saluted her with his glass. “Gotcha.”

She touched her glass to his. “All right, I’ll give you that one.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a beautiful laugh?”

She took a sip of wine. It was red and rich, and warmed her instantly. “No, why would they? Beauty describes a tangible thing. You can’t see laughter.”

“Oh, but you can.” Quint set his half-empty glass down on the nightstand. “Here, I’ll show you.” He took a step toward her and put his hands on her face. With his thumbs he traced along the corners of her mouth. “See, right here. When this part lifts, I can see your laughter.”

Jamie suddenly had a hard time breathing. His face was so close to hers she could feel his heat. He continued to move his fingers, explaining about her smile, saying words she couldn’t hear over the tremulous beating of her heart. She didn’t even realize she’d put one hand on his forearm to balance herself.

“Shouldn’t you be getting off that leg?” he asked, finally saying something she could comprehend as answerable.

“Yes.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She straightened up as though coming out of a spell. “I mean, yes,” she said more forcefully. “I—I’d like to go to the bathroom to—to get out of this costume. If—if I could.”

He searched her face for a scant moment, then bent down and placed a feather-light kiss on her lips. “Do you need any help?”

“No!” She flushed, realizing she’d practically shouted. “No, I can manage,” she said in a softer voice.” She waved her hand toward the room. “You can...ah...make yourself comfortable...or something. I won’t be long.”

Jamie made it into the bathroom, leaned on the sink, and wondered if it was time to start screaming. She hardly recognized the flushed face staring back at her in the mirror. When she fingered her mouth where he’d touched her, her hand shook. She was trembling all over.

She was hardly a virgin, but she’d dated Clay for a year before she’d had sex with him. She’d never been attracted to Clay or any other man the way she was to Quint. She needed more wine. Looking around for her glass, she discovered it in her hand.

She quickly drained it, gasping as it burned down her throat. She opened the bathroom door, limped over to the wine bottle, refilled the glass, and went back into the bathroom. She knew Quint was sitting on the king-size bed watching her but she didn't chance a look at him.

Quint watched her in stunned silence. The woman was full of surprises. For all her brash talk he'd expected her to be a little less—tense? Certainly she couldn't be shy?

Frankly, he was shocked she'd let him in the door. He would have laid twenty to one odds against it. Yet, here he was. She was in the bathroom trying to get drunk enough to have sex with him.

At least she hadn't given him the I've-never-done-this-before routine. That would probably have annoyed him enough to think about leaving. Hell, who was he kidding? It all boiled down to one thing. He was thirty-two years old and he wanted Jamie Devon more than he'd ever wanted a woman in his life. He was shocked by the intensity of his feelings. He wouldn't be human if he didn't desire her, but it was more than desire. He enjoyed being with her, and he liked her feisty take-it-or-leave-it attitude; it was refreshing and intriguing at the same time. And after tonight he'd never see her again.

Quint took off his shoes, refilled his wineglass, and waited for her to come out of the bathroom. When she finally did, he got his next surprise. Relieved of the garland, her hair surrounded her cleanly scrubbed face in wispy natural curls, and she wore a threadbare, thigh-length, Mickey Mouse T-shirt.

She must have seen the shock on his face because she stopped halfway across the room and stumbled over herself apologizing.

"Sorry, this is all I brought. I didn't expect to be...entertaining."

Entertaining. Now that was an interesting choice of words. What really got his attention, though, was the way her perky little nipples made ruptures in Mickey's faded ears. He tore his eyes away from the ears, smiled, and said the fourth thing that came to his mind.

"You look like you're in pain. You'd better get off that leg." He patted the bed beside him. "C'mon. I promise not to bite, but you're lucky I'm not a cat."

A cute little grin appeared on her face as she shuffled toward the bed. "Go ahead, make fun of my sexiest nightshirt. I've had this since I was twelve years old. Actually, it was much sexier when it was new."

Quint laughed. He pulled her onto his lap before she could sit on the bed. He put one arm around her shoulders, his other hand settled on her hip. “Twelve, huh. What a coincidence; that’s how old I was when I made love to my first mousketeer.”

“Liar.”

He pulled her close and nuzzled her hair. “All right, so I was thirteen.” She smelled like roses. Roses and woman.

She pressed her hair into his face, rubbing like a kitten, turning slowly until her lips were in his neck. “You smell nice,” she whispered.

Her voice was soft and breathy, just the sound of it turned him to Jell-o. Extremely firm Jell-o. It didn’t even matter what she said. He turned, taking her with him, rolling her over until she was on her back and he was partially on top of her. She gasped and tensed.

“Am I going too fast for you?” he asked.

“Yes! No! You just surprised me.”

“You want me to warn you next time before I make a move?”

“Yes—I mean no.”

Her eyes were closed so tight they were pinched.

He chuckled. “You seem to be a little unsure about that. Why don’t you tell me what the next move should be?”

“How should I know? You’re the one who’s been doing this since you were twelve.”

Quint released her and rolled onto his back. When his body started to shake, she opened her eyes and sat up abruptly to see what was wrong. He had an arm slung over his face and he was—laughing!

She stifled her own laughter and tried to be serious. “Will you stop that? You’re giving me a complex.”

“I’m giving *you* a complex.” He lifted his arm to look up at her and made a fruitless attempt to match her demeanor. “I just didn’t expect this to be so hard.”

“What’s so hard about it?”

He reached out, grabbed her hand, and pressed it to his bulging crotch. “This.”

Jamie drew in a sharp breath of air and snapped her hand away, but not before she’d felt his hard heat pulsing in the palm of her hand. “Oh, now that was rude.”

His arm was back to covering his eyes and his body was shaking again. “Okay,” he said,

“you’re the expert. You make the next move.”

She knew he was teasing her, but it also sounded like a challenge. Her fingers ached to feel the matt of hair above—and below—that top button on his shirt. She had passed cars going a hundred and eighty miles an hour, six inches from a solid wall, and she was too timid to touch a man’s chest.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she reached up and opened the top button. His laughter ceased immediately, and he brought his arm down to watch her face as she continued with the buttons until his chest was bared.

He sucked in his breath when she splayed her hands over him just below his throat. She moved slowly downward, enjoying the feel of his hair tickling her palms. His skin radiated heat into her fingertips. When her hands touched the firm nubs of his nipples, his chest rose and fell rapidly, but he made no move to stop her. Encouraged and excited by his reaction, she continued down over his taut rib muscles, and flat belly. She stopped when she reached the top of his jeans. Now she could either quit the race or go for the pole position. If she hadn’t been breathing so heavily she might have laughed at her choice of words.

She knew he was watching her but she carefully avoided looking up at him when she undid the button on his jeans. It was time to make the pass. She fixed her eyes above his waist and went for the zipper. All she found was another button. She didn’t know how many buttons there were, but before she touched the third one a yellow flag came up.

She lifted her head and saw in his eyes something she’d never seen in another human being. It was an intense, hungry, aching need, and she understood it because she felt it too. It touched the core of her womanhood, a secret internal place never touched before.

“Kiss me,” he whispered in a raspy voice that was neither a demand nor a plea.

She moved slowly, trancelike, upward until her mouth was level with his. That’s when his arms wrapped around her, and he took control. He rolled her to her back and fitted his mouth over hers, kissing her like he’d been waiting years instead of hours to drink of her honey. Her arms went around his neck; her fingers dug into his muscular shoulders, and into his hair. She made soft purring sounds that came from deep within her. His hand moved to her hip, bared by her earlier movements. From there he searched out the pliable mound of her breasts. She didn’t have large breasts, but they were softly contoured and fit his hand so perfectly. Her nipples

budded instantly to his touch. He teased her lips with his tongue until she opened to him. When she did he assaulted her mouth with his tongue delving in and out, using quick teasing strokes.

Her purrs became louder, more desperate. He drew back and pulled her nightshirt over her head, stood up and quickly stripped off his shirt. His pants followed. When his thumbs slipped into the top of his underwear, her heart rate accelerated. All she had to do was close her eyes and not watch but that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Quint stopped, dumbfounded. She had wide-eyed panic on her face. The sight of him undressing clearly disturbed her, either that or she was a terrific actress. He couldn't imagine someone with her background playing the cat and mouse games most women played. Rather than try to analyze her motives, he reached down and switched off the lamp. The lights from outside kept the room from total darkness but it was dark enough so Quint couldn't see her face clearly. He finished undressing, slipped his condom in place and went back to take up where they'd left off.

When he took her in his arms, he could feel her body shaking. He gathered her close whispering, soft soothing words in her ear.

"It's all right sweetheart... I'm not going to rush you... If I go too fast stop me. You are so beautiful." Though it confused him, the fact that she was nervous made him feel strangely good. At least for a little while he could imagine that maybe in some way he was different than all the other men she'd known.

He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her slim throat. He captured the lips he knew would tempt him forever in his dreams. He knew the moment she relaxed and started responding to him again. Her arms slipped around his neck, fingers digging into his hair. She began to make those soft, sexy moaning sounds again.

When his mouth clamped over her breast her moan turned into a gasping cry. She arched her body against him, holding his head firm when he tried to pull away.

"No... Don't stop. You make me feel so...tingly." She spoke between gasps in a husky, sultry voice.

This time she didn't stiffen when his hand moved slowly downward to her feminine core. A shudder convulsed through her entire body when he cupped her soft triangle with his hand, rubbing her slowly, gently. When his finger slipped inside her sleek heat, she gasped wildly and

bucked against his hand. He cushioned her frantic sounds with his kiss and continued to stimulate her, giving her pleasure that seemed to surprise her. He waited until she gave her sweet cry of release before he spread her thighs and positioned himself between them.

He spoke to her in a ragged whisper. "Open up for me sweetheart. I need you. I need to be inside you." She offered no resistance as she accepted him into her moist, shimmering heat. She closed around him like a tight hot glove. When he started to move, she arched up against him, hungrily drawing him deeper, crying out his name.

She spoke in breathy little whispers, urging him on with each thrust. "Oh, Quint, it feels so good... so wonderful... yes... oh... yes..."

Having a woman talk to him while he made love to her was something new to Quint. It sent him into deep sexual oblivion. For him the world consisted of only himself and the wild sensuous creature squirming beneath him. She made a sweet shattered sound, pulsed around him, and melted in his arms.

He gave several final thrusts. "Here it is, love. I'm coming." With a feral, wolf-like howl, he found his own release. He clenched, shuddered violently and collapsed on top of her. Another shudder raged through his body as he lay gasping for breath. Visions of a black widow spider killing her mate after lovemaking flashed through his head. Now he understood what killed the unsuspecting male.

When he was finally able to catch his breath he said the dumbest thing that came to his mind. "God, that would have made a beautiful baby."

Then he realized she was breathing almost as heavily as he was. He rose up on his elbows to give her some air and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed and she had the soft, enchanting smile of a cherub on her beautiful face, like Snow White awakening from a long sleep.

He pressed his lower body against her. "Did you fall asleep on me, honey?"

Her smile broadened. "That was incredibly—boring."

Quint chuckled. He rolled to his side taking her with him, not ready to sever their connection. "Yeah, incredibly." He cradled her in his arms, pulled the end of the spread over them, and buried his face in her sweet-smelling hair. He allowed himself only one thought before he fell asleep. Unfortunately it wasn't a comforting one. All day long he'd imagined burying himself inside her. He had waited outside her door hoping to accomplish that goal and get her out

of his system. Yet, even as he dozed off, his body was responding to her soft supple body. He wondered if he had brought enough condoms.

“Twins,” she said sleepily. “That was incredible enough to make twins.”

“You better get some rest, woman. In a few minutes we’re going to work on triplets.”

* * * *

The phone on the nightstand startled Jamie out of the first sound sleep she’d had in days. Before she answered it she noticed two things—it was four o’clock in the morning and Quint was no longer lying beside her. Neither one put her in a good frame of mind.

She snapped the phone up, put it to her ear and remained silent.

“Jamie?”

Hearing her father’s voice didn’t help any. He never called just to say hello.

“Yeah, what’s so important you need to call me at four a.m., Buster.”

“It’s five.”

“Maybe in Tennessee... in Minnesota it’s four.”

“Jamie, I—”

For one insane heart stopping moment she thought he was going to say he missed her.

“Ray called. He wants you in Bristol tonight.”

That brought her to a rigid sitting position. “I have doctor’s orders—”

“No, not to race,” he said quickly. “Although we sure could use you. I imagine you know that in three races Markus hasn’t finished better than eighteenth. Christ, at Watkins Glen he came in twenty-ninth. You took second at Sears Point—in *the same car*. The road courses are your specialty.”

He wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t know, and he also wasn’t telling her why he’d called. Even his choice of words annoyed her, *we could use you*—not, *we need you*—we could *use* you. He wasn’t trying to compliment her; he was stalling. “There’s nothing I can do about it until next week. What does Bentler want?”

“He’d like you to make an appearance, in a little short outfit, to keep the fans interested.”

A thousand red dots flashed before Jamie’s eyes, along with an image of a sponsor calling a top male driver to ask him to pose in a Speedo while he was injured, to keep the fans interested. Then she imagined Ray Bentler’s genitals going around and around in an industrial-size blender.

She had to take several deep breaths before she could even answer. “You can inform mink-man Bentler that I’m not one of his performing poodles, and if he thinks he can find someone else to stick four million bucks a year in his jock strap, he’s welcome to start looking!”

She smashed the phone back in its cradle, drawing deep gulps of air and staring wildly at the far wall.

She turned to see Quint Douglas step out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a wristwatch and a frown.

Chapter Five

Quint had made a promise to her, and to himself, that he wouldn't discuss her work. He thought about pretending he hadn't heard her conversation, but—four million dollars? He wasn't that good of an actor. Since he'd only heard her side of the phone call he had to piece it together. He didn't know who Buster was but you'd have to live on another planet not to recognize the name Bentler.

Ray Bentler was none other than the infamous owner of Pink Mink International. His title as president was really a front; he was nothing more than a glorified pimp. Bentler was in court more often than Larry Flint, but the man had good legal counsel because he'd never had a conviction.

And Jamie was involved with him up to her lovely little neck.

But Quint had made a promise.

Her hair was sleep tousled, her perfectly round breasts heaving, her lips still swollen from their night of lovemaking. She was looking at him with whiskey-colored eyes that could have set fire to dust. His most erotic fantasy was staring him straight in the eye.

"Trouble?" he asked.

She took several long seconds to answer, and when she did, her tone was only slightly strained. "Nothing I need a lawyer for." Her smile wasn't exactly beaming, but it was a smile.

He had planned to be gone by the time she woke up. It seemed best that way. Since he'd already told her he was leaving on an early morning flight, she would have expected it. He hated sad goodbyes. The way he saw it there was only one thing to do.

He walked to the bed, put his mouth over those pouty lips, and pressed her back into the sheets.

* * * *

The first pink lights of dawn were filtering through the pine trees when Quint got in the car beside his cousin. Virgil had already put the suitcases in the car and left their costumes at the

front desk. Wordlessly, he handed Quint a large paper cup filled with steaming black coffee from the Up-North Café across the street.

Quint muttered appreciative thanks.

There was no need for Virgil to question where Quint had spent the night, since he had left a note on top of his packed suitcase.

The two-hour drive from Sunset Lake to the Lindbergh International Airport in Minneapolis was scenic, with nature's spread of tall pines, an occasional deer feeding at the side of the road, and silent for the first half-hour.

"Are you going to have another Cynthia on your hands?" Virg asked finally. His tone was one of concern rather than sarcasm.

Quint glanced at his cousin, thought for a second, then grunted. "No, I took care of it. Miss Jamie Devon, or whatever-her-real-name-is, won't be calling me unless it's to read me the riot act."

Virgil's brow rose. "That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, that bad," Quint said. "I can almost guarantee she'll never be wanting to see me again." What he really wanted to say was *it was that good*. He wasn't proud of the way he'd left her, but he wasn't about to have a Pink Mink prostitute stalking him, even if he'd just spent the most unforgettable night of his life with her. He had to keep reminding himself that her shy act was just that, an act. Damn, but she could be on stage.

"Are you going to need an attorney?" Virgil asked, attempting to lighten the mood.

Quint managed a short laugh. "Only if she's an undercover cop."

* * * *

On the thirty-fifth floor of a New York office building, Benny Gomez fidgeted in his chair while his boss paced the plush office.

"So, who the hell is she?"

Benny squirmed. "Jamie Devon, but I couldn't find anything on her. I even took a chance asking around. Not one person I talked to knew anything about her except that she sings like an angel. Looks like one too."

Benny received a brittle stare and a sarcastic put down.

"You ass. You should have stayed and followed her."

"That's not what you said on the phone last night. You said—"

“I know what I said. I told you to get me some dirt on her and get back here pronto.”

Benny shrugged. “Not every person has dirt.”

“Everybody has dirt somewhere in their past. Even sweet little choir girls.”

“I never saw no choir girl driving a bright pink Beemer.”

Finely arched brows above calculating eyes turned in his direction. “Bright pink, like fuchsia?” When Benny nodded she barked, “Get on the net and find out who owns one. I’ve never even seen a fuchsia BMW.”

“Huh, never thought of that.”

“That’s why you make thirty thousand a year while I make five hundred thousand.”

Benny wanted to glare at her and tell her to go to hell, but he needed his thirty thousand a year to stay out of jail. Plus he wasn’t stupid. If she knew how to ferret out information on the web she’d be doing it herself.

He got up to leave, stopping at the door. “Oh, by the way, he spent the night with her.” He closed the door behind him with a satisfied smile on his face.

* * * *

Jamie woke to bright sunlight streaming in the window, and the glowing effects of exquisite lovemaking lingering in her body. She didn’t have to look to know Quint was gone. She wasn’t a teenager, and she had gone into this thing with her eyes wide open. The most she had hoped for was to be left with a pleasant memory. Turns out it wasn’t a pleasant memory, it was a fantastic, unforgettable one. And she would never see Quint Douglas again.

Jamie rolled over in the bed, touching the pillow that had cradled his head. His familiar scent awakened her female senses like none she’d ever remembered. By all rights she should have felt cheap, used—yet there was nothing cheap about the way she felt. Choking back a lump in her throat, she had an overwhelming desire to go home, to go back to the life she knew, and forget last night had ever happened.

She dragged herself from the bed and into the shower. There she allowed the steaming water to wash away the tangible remains of the most incredible night of her life. If only she could open her heart and let the water take away the part of him that lingered there too.

She was packing her suitcase when she noticed the empty wine bottle on the desk. Something was rolled up and sticking out of the neck. A note? Her heart gave a peculiar leap. With shaking fingers she pulled the piece of paper from the bottle and unrolled it.

Thanks for a great time.

Quint

A hundred-dollar bill that had been wrapped inside floated to the floor. Jamie frowned down at the bill at her feet. Numbly, she bent down, picked it up, and stared at it. It took all of five seconds for its meaning to clear the fog out of her brain.

She picked up the wine bottle and heaved it toward the far wall, swearing a string of obscenities that would have made a bartender blush.

The bottle shattered, showering the carpet with hundreds of green shards. Still swearing and calling herself all kinds of a fool, she crammed her clothes into her suitcase, snapped it shut, threw a twenty-dollar bill on the desk to cover the cleanup, and stormed out of the room. She took only enough time to return her costume to the front desk before she got in her car and sprayed gravel all the way to the pavement. Her hands squeezed down on the steering wheel wishing it were Quint's throat. Or another part of his more vulnerable male anatomy.

Speed and anger sustained her until she reached the Wisconsin border. She eased her foot off the accelerator, not caring to chance another meeting with Officer Gentry. If he thought she was into male bashing before...

Of course, she kept reminding herself that not every man was like Quint Douglas, but at the moment she just couldn't seem to name one who wasn't an ass in some way or another.

No sooner had she slowed to the legal speed limit, when she passed a patrol car lurking beneath an overpass. The patrol car sped out to catch up with her.

Jamie groaned, wondering what she had done wrong now. The car didn't flash its lights but it followed her for a couple of miles before pulling up beside her. It was indeed Gentry.

When he caught her eye he gave her a friendly grin and a thumbs up before taking the next exit. Gentry's simple action brought a smile to her lips and lightened her mood. Life didn't end because she had one night of fantastic sex with a man who turned out to be a jerk.

She needed to get her mind off Quint and start channeling her energy toward the Mountain Dew 500 at Darlington. She would stop in Chicago, at her house above the bluffs on the west shore of Lake Michigan, view some Darlington Speedway tapes. She'd call the maintenance crew to let them know she was back, and drive down to the shop to check on the car she'd be driving. Her father would be back in Chicago by tomorrow morning.

Jamie glanced at the clock. The Bristol race would be starting in a few minutes. She

turned the radio on, tuned in to the preliminaries, and then settled back to listen to four hours of commentary.

* * * *

By Wednesday noon, Marla, Quint's secretary, threatened to quit when Quint growled at her for the third time in as many hours.

"Lordy, Quint. What happened to you at Hunter's wedding? Ever since you got back you've been snapping at everybody. And why aren't you returning Virgil's calls? The man's grilling me like a Third World mafia boss."

"Quint grunted. "So what does he want?"

Marla pulled a long metal nail file from her drawer and started to work on a cracked nail. "Mostly, he wants to know what kind of mood you're in."

"What did you tell him?"

"Yesterday, I said, same as Monday, and today I said same as yesterday."

"And what did you tell him Monday?" Quint asked, passing her an exasperated frown.

Marla blew on her nail before she glanced up, chuckling. "I told him you were acting like an ornery bear that came out of hibernation to find all the females taken."

Quint shook his head. "Thanks a lot. No wonder he keeps calling."

"He keeps calling because you won't call him back. Now what the hell happened to get your tail all twisted in a knot?"

Before Quint could comment, the phone rang.

"If that's Virgil," Quint said, "I'll talk to him."

Marla picked up the phone. "Seek and Find, may I help you?"

A husky-throated female voice barked, "Is Quinton there? I really need to speak to him. Now!"

"One minute, please." Marla pressed the hold button, looking sympathetically up at her boss. "It's the Harman dame again." She glanced at her notepad. "That makes the second time today and the sixth time this week. I made the mistake Monday of telling her you were back in town. Can I tell her you got your finger ringed in Minnesota or something equally shocking?"

"Yeah, if you want to be the victim of her next show. Put her over to my phone, I'll get rid of her."

Quint's phone was on one of the other two desks in the compact but orderly office. Two

walls were lined with matching beige file cabinets, and the center held a large round glass top worktable. The remaining space was taken up with the desks: Marla's by the front door, Quint's facing hers, and Hunter's vacated desk directly behind Quint. Having a private phone conversation was next to impossible, and usually not necessary.

"I think I have some business in the lady's room. Good luck, and be careful, that woman is nasty." Marla clicked the call to Quint's phone, stood up tugging her short skirt in place and left the room.

Quint gave her an appreciative nod and picked up the receiver. "Cynthia, what can I do for you?"

"You know damn well what you can do for me, honey. Why are you avoiding me? That ditzzy receptionist said you were back two days ago. Why haven't you called?"

Quint bit back what he wanted to say. "What's the point? It's over, Cynthia."

"Are you seeing someone else?"

Quint really wished he was seeing someone else. He wished he was seeing a sexy little hooker named Jamie. He could hardly call one night of great sex seeing someone, and he wasn't about to share that memorable experience with a viper like Cynthia.

"No, I'm not seeing anyone else, but that has nothing to do with our relationship. It's over. Don't call me again."

She spoke quickly, before he could hang up. "What about the singer?"

Quint gritted his teeth. He wasn't even going to ask how or what she knew about Jamie. He had no intention of getting into a conversation that might yield fuel for an evil mind.

"I think I've made myself clear on that subject, so I have only one thing left to say—goodbye."

Quint hung up just as Marla came back in the room followed by Virgil.

Virgil took one look at his cousin, and said, "Come on kid. I'm buying lunch. And I won't take no for an answer."

"Good timing," Quint said. "Let's go. And Marla, if she calls back, tell her I'm on an extended trip to the moon."

Marla grinned. "That would be my pleasure, boss."

They walked around the corner to a small neighborhood restaurant. After placing their orders, Quint leaned back in his chair and gave Virgil an expectant look.

“Now what is so all-fired important that you’re willing to spring for lunch?”

Virgil grinned. “I need an agenda to invite you to lunch?”

“You didn’t exactly invite me. What’s on your mind?”

“Mom.”

Quint straightened in his chair. “Is something wrong with her?”

“Yeah, she’s all concerned because you turned down the invitation to her annual Labor Day barbeque.”

“That’s what this is about?”

“Yes and no.” Virgil leaned forward and gave his cousin a direct look. “Hunter is on his honeymoon, Corinne is eight months pregnant and can’t travel. Only Stephen and I will be there. You know how she is about gathering all her chicks to the nest at the same time.”

Quint shrugged. “I’m not exactly one of her chicks.”

“The hell you aren’t. Whether you acknowledge it or not, you became a member of this family the day your parents and our sister, Diana, died in that crash.”

Just talking about that scene gave Quint chills. Twenty-six years had passed but the sound and smell of grinding metal and burning rubber still visited him regularly in his dreams. If not for his older brother, Grant, both he and Hunter would have died. He mentally shook the thought away and brought his attention back to his cousin.

“...losing Diana just about put Mom over the edge. If she hadn’t had you to nurse back to health who knows what would have happened to her. I think she still blames herself for sending Hunter and Diana away that day.”

“You know as well as I do they were coming to stay while she was in the hospital having Stephen. Besides, you guys often came up to stay at the farm in the summer. It wasn’t her fault some drunken kids happened to be on the road that particular night.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Virgil said. He shifted in his chair, hesitating. “Look, I’m not here trying to guilt you into coming to her party. I’m here because I care about you, we all do. I’ve known you since you were born. As far as I’m concerned you’ve been my brother since you were a scrawny little five-year-old—”

“I wasn’t scrawny.”

Virgil laughed. “You had the skinniest little chicken legs I ever saw.”

Before Quint could think of an appropriate comeback, the waitress arrived with their

food. She set their sandwiches in front of them, calling Quint by name and giving Virgil a friendly smile.

“Anything else you need, Hon?”

Virgil glanced at her nametag, giving her wink. “Nothing for now. Thanks, Margie.”

“Enjoy your lunch,” she said, widening her smile.

When she left, Quint chuckled. “Careful, Virg, she’s the owner’s daughter—jailbait.”

Virgil grinned. “Do I look stupid?”

“I refuse to answer that on the grounds that it might incriminate me.”

“Good answer,” Virgil said taking a bite of his tuna melt. He chewed and swallowed as he regarded Quint somberly. “When Hunter is asking me what’s wrong with you, and Mom wants to know if you’re dreadfully ill, I figure it’s time to look you up.”

Quint grunted. “If I remember right, you’re the one who needs watching out for after your last fiasco. If it hadn’t been for Hunter running interference, you’d be married to a bigamist.”

“That’s old news,” Virgil said dismissively. “What about you? Have you heard from her?”

“Yeah, she called six times this week already—”

“I don’t care about Cynthia.”

Quint chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “Does that mean you do care about Jamie Devon?”

“Hell, if it were a toss-up between her and Cynthia, I’d volunteer to be your best man, but they aren’t the only two women on the planet.”

Quint scooped three spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee, took a sip and grimaced. “Yeah, that’s what I keep telling myself. I don’t need to worry about her, though. As I mentioned before, I took care of it. She wouldn’t call me if I was the last man on earth.”

Virgil watched Quint closely with wry amusement. “If I didn’t know you’ve been drinking your coffee straight since you were sixteen, and Marla hadn’t called me to rescue her, I wouldn’t be worried.”

“Jesus, I have a host of caretakers.”

Virgil laughed. “You might say that. Have you thought about calling her?”

“I haven’t thought about anything else for four days.”

“Damn, that’s what I was afraid of.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. I know I could check her out, find out where she lives, but even if I did, I burned my bridges. I’ll just have to get over her.” The truth was he wanted to see her again. He wanted to see her in her Mickey Mouse nightshirt, looking sweet and innocent.

Virgil gave him a long, hard look. “She couldn’t have been all that bad if you’re this hung up on her.”

“She wasn’t bad. In fact, she was damn nice. Another fact—if I thought for one minute she wouldn’t slam the phone in my ear, I would call her and beg on hands and knees for her forgiveness.”

The teenage waitress came back to lay the check on the table, smiled and left. Virgil picked up the bill and gave his cousin a last imploring look. “I have to be in court in a half hour. I’ll see you at Mom and Dad’s on Monday? Stephen has a video of his latest skydiving feat. Apparently his team broke some kind of a world record.”

“I’ll be there. Thanks Virg. I’ll call Delta to let her know I’m coming.”

“Good, that will make her day. She has a video of the wedding, and she’s busting at the seams to show it to you.”

Chapter Six

Jamie stared out her living room window at the expansive blue mass of water that was Lake Michigan. Most days you couldn't tell where the water ended and the horizon began. It was an awesome feeling.

Usually she loved looking at the water and walking along the bluffs behind her house. It always gave her a sense of power to watch the waves crash against the rocks on a windy day, to smell the dampness as the water sprayed toward her. Today though, when she needed a high, the lake was eerily calm.

Up until the wedding, her life had been a wild hectic ride, chaotic but oddly predictable. The only thing that concerned her was placing in the next race, going for the win. It was all about strategy, skill, highly focused guts, and an enormous amount of luck.

She had to be in Darlington for qualifying on Saturday. It was already Thursday. Doctor Shaffer said she was physically ready. She should be packing her bags instead of staring at the water, thinking about Quint Douglas. It was just a night of sex. Nothing more. Just sex. He'd made that clear before she turned the key in the door.

She had two days to get Quint off her mind and start concentrating on the things that were meaningful in her life. Winning. Gaining points. Going for the ultimate Nextell Cup. Before the Indianapolis race she'd been in eleventh place. No woman had ever placed in the top fifty. Only a handful of men made it to the top ten. Missing three races had dropped her standing to fifteenth; however, she was only thirty points behind. To get back in contention, she had to get out in front and stay there. She had to win.

That meant not allowing Clay Riker to intimidate her. She needed to avoid him on the track. The best way to do that was to qualify ahead of him and stay ahead of him in the race. She didn't understand it, but the man had some kind of vendetta against her; she believed he would deliberately take her out if he thought she had a chance at first place. At least her father had recognized him for what he was and stopped defending him.

Her father. Now that issue was a separate mountain to climb. The good thing about Buster was, even if he didn't love her, she could trust him. He wouldn't do anything to put a driver in jeopardy. That's what she was to him, a driver, his livelihood. As well as that of the twenty-eight crew members, all depending on her. Not to mention a multitude of sponsors and of course, the ever-present owner of her car, Ray Bentler.

* * * *

By Saturday, Jamie was mentally ready. The morning dawned with only a few scattered clouds, none of them threatening rain. Her Grand Prix passed inspection with only minor adjustments. The test runs were good; the car performed with satisfying results. It was impossible not to get caught up in the excitement at the track, and it was still two full days before the race.

Since Jamie drew seventeenth out of thirty-four drivers who would qualify for racing position, it gave her time to watch how well half of the cars were performing. It took from twenty minutes to a half-hour per car, so she wouldn't be running until early afternoon. Clay was qualifying fourteenth, only three cars ahead of her.

She sat on top of the semi trailer with some of the crew members to watch the proceedings. A monitor was set up so they could track the results. Just before Clay drove, Buster joined them.

"How's the knee?" he asked Jamie, taking a seat beside her.

Her father was a man of few words, and Jamie knew better than to hope his question was personal. It was all business to him. She flexed her lycra clad leg to demonstrate its agility. "Ready to go."

"Still bandaged?"

"Yeah, the doc suggested I keep it secured for another week."

"Good idea."

When Clay Riker started his run, Buster leaned over to her, keeping his voice low. "Watch out for that son of a bitch," he said. "Clay's been spouting his mouth off, trying to stir up trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" she asked.

"Trying to convince some of the other guys that women have no place in NASCAR."

"That's preposterous! Are people listening to him?"

Buster snorted. “There’s always a few extremists willing to listen when a man spouts out of his ass. Fortunately, the majority of the guys respect you as a competent competitor.” Buster gave her a rare smile. “Hell, they don’t have any choice. You have guts. Every team has good cars. Only twenty percent of this business is car performance, the rest is skill and guts with a little bit of luck thrown in. You can develop skill, but guts is in here.” Buster tapped his chest. “You’re born with it.”

He looked away from her to watch the monitor displaying Clay’s performance, and almost as though speaking to himself, he said, “That was T-Roy’s downfall. He had plenty of skill; he just never had the guts to go with it. Shit, Clay clocked out at 184. That puts him in eighth position. Going to be tough to beat, Jamie girl.”

Jamie stared at her father in disbelief. Had he just paid her a compliment, at the expense of T-Roy? And he had never called her Jamie girl before. Was that affection?

Buster looked back at her. “Anyway, as I was saying, watch yourself, off the track as well as on. I’m wondering if we should get you a bodyguard.”

Jamie’s brow shot up. “Has he made threats?”

Buster shrugged. “More like statements. Like ‘over his dead body would a woman win a NASCAR race’.”

“That works for me,” Jamie said through gritted teeth.

Buster burst out laughing. “That’s what I mean about you, girl. You’ve got guts.” He put a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “You better get ready. You’re up pretty soon. I suppose I don’t have to tell you to watch the last two turns; they’ve shortened them because of that damned mud hole they call a pond.”

Jamie smiled. “Yeah, I know, but thanks anyway.”

“And don’t kill yourself trying to beat Clay’s time; you can whip his ass on the track. Now there’s a man with too much guts and not enough skill. That’s a dangerous combination.”

Jamie got up to leave, nodding. Her father was right. Clay didn’t have the brains to see a flood coming, but he also wasn’t afraid to stand in the water while it rose up to his ears.

Once she climbed into her car and strapped in, Jamie pulled on her helmet and focused on one thing—driving. Her father chuckled her on the shoulder as they pushed her off. She depressed the accelerator just far enough to prevent spinning out, gathered her speed and held it to the floor. She took each turn with grueling determination, holding the corners with maximum

speed, allowing the tires to do their job.

When it was over, she pulled into the pit amid a volley of cheers. She clocked in at 185.2 mph. Unless someone following outran her, she'd start in fourth position.

By the time the qualifying rounds were over, Jamie had maintained fourth, while Clay slipped to tenth.

* * * *

In New York, it drizzled all day Sunday on Labor Day weekend until late into the night. Fortunately, it cleared up Monday morning just in time for the holiday party plans to go on as scheduled. The expansive Douglas backyard was set up with tables and grills awaiting the afternoon barbeque. Several neighbors and friends gathered outside. Inside, in the den, Stephen was excitedly displaying his skydiving trophy and setting up the video for Quint and Virgil to watch. Stephen had spent the entire summer in Europe, and they all had a lot of catching up to do.

The male family members had always enjoyed a special camaraderie, with Virgil being the more serious one, Quint unruffled and laid back, and Stephen exuding a zest for life that was demonstrated by stories of one adventure after the other. Missing was Hunter's quirky sense of humor.

At twenty-six, Stephen showed no signs of settling down. He liked his wild gad-about-the-world life, and he made just enough money selling photos and stories to magazines to maintain it.

Virgil caught Quint's eyes a couple of times, satisfied that his cousin seemed to be enjoying himself. It was impossible not to get caught up in Stephen's energy.

Stephen was in the middle of a tale about hot air ballooning in northern France when Delta Douglas rushed into the room waving a video.

"You boys have got to watch this. It came on Saturday so Dad and I have already seen it. Nicole wanted to make sure you saw this, Stephen, since you missed the wedding." She handed the tape to her youngest son. "Oh, and Quint, there is the most darling shot of you carrying that cute little singer. Stephen, wait until you hear her sing, she has a voice like an angel. I need to get back to my guests. We'll eat in a couple of hours."

Quint and Virgil exchanged a look, while Stephen eyed them both suspiciously. "What's this about you carrying the singer, Quint?"

Quint sent Virgil a warning glance and shrugged. “Don’t get all excited, Stephie. She had a bum knee. I was just helping her out.”

Stephen popped the tape in the VCR and pushed the play button. “I have to see this. If it’s good enough we could invite your friend Cynthia over to watch.”

Quint swore.

Virgil laughed. “Watch it little brother. Unless you want to get roasted with the hot dogs you best not bring up the ‘C’ name again.”

Stephen chuckled at Quint’s expense, and settled back to watch the wedding.

“Those costumes are awesome!” Stephen said. “You two look lovely in tights.”

When Jamie began singing, Quint became dead still. She was too far away from the camera to see her face, but her strong voice came across loud and clear. Quint’s heart started a thumping dance in his chest, and he could feel the heat rise to his face. To make matters worse, he knew Virgil was watching him. The camera panned the wedding guests during the song, and Stephen was too caught up watching to pay attention to what was going on in the room, until the scene outside the church played.

Quint had no idea his carrying Jamie to the carriage was being immortalized on video. Stephen let out a hoot and just as suddenly his laughter died.

“Oh my god,” he breathed. “That’s Jamie LeCorre.”

Quint and Virgil exchanged a quick look. Virgil’s eyebrows were raised, and Quint was aware of a sinking sensation. “You recognize her?” he asked.

“Hell, yes,” Stephen said. “No doubt about it. She cut her hair, but that’s Jamie. She caused that pileup in Indianapolis last month.” He turned to Quint. “I hope you got her autograph?”

Quint stared at Stephen, unable to speak. Something Jamie had said about a five-car pileup tugged at his memory. “What pileup?” He managed to ask.

“NASCAR, you dope. She’s a driver. She was eleventh in line for the Nextell Cup before that wreck put her out of commission.”

When Stephen saw the shock on Quint’s face he laughed. “You mean you didn’t know? You had one of the most famous women in the country in your arms, and you didn’t even know it.”

Virgil spoke up quickly. “We don’t watch NASCAR. Besides she was going under the

name of Jamie Devon.” He gave Quint an apologetic shrug. “I thought she was a Pink Mink centerfold.”

“She was,” Stephen said “Pink Mink Enterprise owns and sponsors her car. She posed with her car, number thirteen. She had her clothes on. Didn’t you read the article? It explained how she took over when her brother T-Roy was killed qualifying at Bristol about eighteen months ago. She placed eighth in her first race. Their father, Buster LeCorre, was the crew chief. As far as I know, he still is. Quint, are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

Virgil shook his head. “Sorry, Quint, this is all my fault. I was the one who told you who she was.”

“It’s not your fault,” Quint muttered. “You don’t follow NASCAR any more than I do. Besides, I saw the decals in her trunk.”

Stephen looked from Virgil to Quint. “Am I missing something here?”

“Yeah,” Virgil muttered. “Welcome to the Douglas family sideshow. Quint’s president this week.”

Stephen grimaced. “I hope you didn’t mention that magazine to her. I’ve heard she goes to extremes to disassociate herself from Ray Bentler, he’s such a reprobate. She won’t even be seen in public with him off the track.”

Quint leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Staring at the floor, he shook his head, remembering the hundred-dollar bill he’d left her, imagining her reaction. It would have been bad enough if she’d really been a hooker, but now...

“Lord, if I could just see her again,” he whispered. “Try to explain.”

Stephen smiled. “Well, my friend, you’re in luck. The Labor Day Mountain Dew 500 is today.” He glanced at his watch. “The race is about half over; it’s usually on channel seventeen.” He walked up to the television, ejected the video, and flipped stations until a scene of cars racing around a track came on. “Man, you guys have to start getting out more. I can’t believe you didn’t know who Jamie LeCorre was. That’s her, in the flamingo-colored car, number thirteen. Hells, bells, looks like she’s running third.”

Quint stared at the screen forgetting to breathe, until something moved beside him; it was Virgil taking a seat on the sofa to get a better view.

“Christ, how fast are they going?” Virgil asked.

“The Darlington track is about a mile and a third long. They can probably get about a

hundred and eighty on the straightaway, but the last two turns are dangerous, and they come up mighty quick at that speed.”

Quint leaned forward, staring at the car Stephen pointed out, trying to determine if it was really Jamie. All he could see was a pink helmet. “Are you sure it’s her?” he asked.

“Damn right it is,” Stephen said quickly. “The substitute driver, Markus Lasco, would be somewhere in the south pasture.” He punched the remote to turn up the volume.

The announcer’s commentary filled the room.

“...after five yellow flags in the first hour, this last hour has been relatively uneventful. Grady is still in the lead, followed closely by Dunn. Those two have been trading places for most of the day. Jamie LeCorre is hanging tight behind them holding tenaciously onto third for the last fifteen laps. Clay Riker has come up behind her on the straightaway but she leaves him in the dust on the corners. That is one lady who knows how to hang onto a curve. Riker has made no secret of the fact that he doesn’t believe women belong in NASCAR. Could be he’s a little jealous.” Raucous laughter filled the speaker. *“She’s bested him in the last ten races she’s run. Too bad she missed three. I don’t suppose he’s forgotten that she practically left him standing at the altar a few months back either. Whoa, looks like a fender bender on the third turn. One! Two! Three! Four cars, all trying to climb the wall. The yellow flag is out for the first time this hour...”*

The camera switched to a pile of spinning cars, one spewing smoke, two others jammed together by twisted metal. The fourth car gyrated backwards out of control until it came to a jarring stop against the concrete wall. A line of cars slowed down to weave their way through the debris.

Quint nearly leaped off the sofa. “Jesus, is Jamie in that mess?”

“No,” Stephen said quickly. “It was the four cars behind Riker. The others all have to hold their positions now until the yellow flag is lifted. I can’t believe you’ve never seen a NASCAR race.”

“I’ve watched parts of these races with the guys, but that was before I was involved,” Quint said, without taking his eyes off the screen where the crash was replaying. “It looks like the green car tried to overtake the yellow one. He wiped out himself and the yellow car as well as the two behind him. All he did was tap him and all hell broke loose.”

“Doesn’t take much at that speed.” Stephen explained. “And what do you mean you’re involved? You were only gone two days.”

Quint glanced at Virgil before he answered. “Well, I sort of got to know her at the reception and we helped her change a flat.”

Stephen snorted. “Get real. She could change a tire in five minutes or less.”

“She was on crutches,” Virgil supplied.

“Oh... Yeah... That’s right,” Stephen said. “She got hurt in that Indianapolis crash. I didn’t see it, but they’re saying she caused it. I do know she refused to accept responsibility.”

When the yellow flag lifted and the race resumed, Quint went back to sitting on the edge of his seat. “What do you know about that driver, Riker? The announcer said she left him at the altar.”

“I think she ditched him earlier this year. It must have been bad because rumor has it she’s sworn off men.” Stephen shrugged. “I don’t know, she’s in a man’s world, maybe she’s lesbian. That would be a shame—”

“She’s not a lesbian,” Quint snapped.

Stephen grinned. “I thought that might get a reaction from you. Just how well did you get to know the untouchable Jamie LeCorre?”

Quint was saved from answering when Hank Douglas walked in the room to announce the food was ready. He was met with protests from three sides.

“You know your mother. When she says the food’s ready, the food’s ready. Besides, that race will still be on when you’re done eating.”

“Tell her the wedding singer is a NASCAR driver,” Virgil said.

His father glanced at the television where twenty-six cars were speeding noisily around an oval track. “No kidding. This I have to see.” He squeezed in beside his son on the sofa. “Which one is she?”

Chapter Seven

Jamie skidded into the pit for what she hoped was her last stop. Her shoulders ached from nearly three hours of fighting the steering wheel. Countless times she had attempted advancing to the lead position with no success. Just leading for one lap would help her gain some of the Nextell Cup points she'd lost during her injury. She'd held second for five laps but lost it to Dunn on the last turn. He needed the lead as desperately as she did.

Trying to keep an eye on Clay was putting an additional strain on her. She didn't trust him. Buster had repeated his warning to avoid Clay more than once during the last few hours, and Charlie Jones, the back stretch spotter, reinforced it. He had the feeling Riker was more interested in stopping her than winning the race.

Buster handed her a water flask while the crew went to work on the tires and fuel.

"Hang in there, kid," Buster said. "Just thirty laps to go. Nothing wrong with coming in third."

* * * *

In the Douglas backyard, a television had been moved into the gazebo, and NASCAR had gained ten new fans. Stephen, the only veteran in the group, fielded questions to keep the others up on what was happening.

Quint's knuckles ached from gripping the edge of his seat. "Don't they get tired?" he asked, suddenly aware of his own exhaustion.

"They operate on the high adrenaline rush that comes with participating in dangerous sports. It takes a special breed to put up with that kind of tension," Stephen answered. "This is also one of the worst tracks. It's old with a lot of rough surface. The body takes a major beating at Darlington."

Virgil shook his head. "How can a woman do it? Does she have a special car?"

Stephen snorted. "Are you kidding? She probably works out just like the men do to maintain upper body strength."

“I thought that was from using the crutches,” Quint said, flexing his strained fingers. He took a handful of peanuts from a bowl Delta passed around.

Stephen shook his head, popping a peanut in his mouth. “She only used them for two or three weeks after the Indianapolis wreck.” He gave Quint a sideways grin. “You got to feel up her arms then, huh?”

Delta gave Stephen a playful slap on the shoulder. “Will you stop that? He only carried her to the carriage, for goodness sake.”

Virgil and Quint exchanged a quick look that caught Stephen’s eye. He grinned and made a discerning sound deep in his throat. The NASCAR commentator’s animated voice drew his attention back to the race.

“...Grady is in some kind of trouble. There’s black smoke billowing from the front of his car. I can’t tell if it’s a tire or the engine. Now Dunn is going into a slide. It looks like Grady lost control and clipped Dunn’s fender.

“LeCorre was back just far enough to squeeze past without piling into them. Riker was so close behind her that they kissed bumpers, but there doesn’t appear to be any damage to either car. Looks like we have a yellow flag, folks, and when it lifts Jamie LeCorre will be the first female driver in NASCAR history to take a lead position. How unfortunate for Mitch Grady. He’s been leading most of this race. Just goes to prove it ain’t over until it’s over. And it’s still not over. Will Jamie LeCorre make history by winning this race? Who’s going to stop her? Clay Riker hasn’t been able to overtake her in 300 laps. I don’t know how he’ll manage to do it in twenty.

“Whoa—something is going on in the Riker pit. Kent Riker appears to be irate. I sure would like to know what he’s all worked up about. He’s screaming into the headphone speaker to Clay. You think he’d be celebrating instead of yelling. His son was just handed a sure spot in second place.

“Well, it looks like Grady and Dunn are okay but their cars both had to be pushed off the track. We have the green flag, and Jamie LeCorre is indeed leading this race. Riker is literally on her bumper, and he appears determined to pass her...

As he went down the list of drivers, calling out their order of standing in the race, the camera switched briefly to a private party, focusing in on a tall affluent man in a dark gray Armani suit. He was surrounded by a group of strikingly beautiful women dressed in a variety of

sporty outfits. They displayed the Pink Mink trademark of pink fur, low cleavage, leave-nothing-to-the-imagination style. They were on their feet cheering, screaming, hugging, and high-fiving. The announcer identified the man as Ray Bentler and his Pink Minks.

“... with three laps to go LeCorre is still in the lead, and Riker has made five attempts to pass. The last two were downright foolhardy. The man is just not willing to settle for second place. Or is it that he’s not willing to admit a female is out-driving him...

“... one lap to go here at Darling International Speedway’s Labor Day Mountain Dew 500. Jamie Lecorre had been leading this race for the last twenty laps, and it looks like... what the... what is Riker doing? He’s not letting up on the third curve. He can’t pass on a 25-degree curve going that speed, that’s suicide. He’s squeezing her into the wall and she has nowhere to go... I don’t believe it... she’s backing off... letting him pass... but he can’t control it.

A stunned audience watched in awe as Clay Riker’s car hit the wall in front of number thirteen. His car went into a spin. Jamie, unable to avoid contact with Riker, took a direct hit to the front of her car and another on the side when she scraped the wall. She went into a slide. Bentler’s private party came to their feet screaming. Riker’s car flew end over end, coming to rest on its top.

The crowd watched in awe as Jamie managed to bring her car under control and veer around the wreckage. She pressed the accelerator to the floor, forcing as much power as possible out of the damaged vehicle. Four cars passed under the checkered flag. She was the fifth. Flames burst from beneath her hood as she pulled to the inside ring after crossing the finish line. A volley of troops descended on her car with fire extinguishers. Her steering wheel was yanked out and she was pulled from car number thirteen and handed over to a medical attendant.

A fight broke out in the pits between the Riker and LeCorre crews. It was hard to tell who was swinging fists and who was trying to prevent an all out melee.

Clay Riker managed to crawl out of his overturned car and get to his feet to a combination of cheers and boos from the grandstand. Buster LeCorre was swearing and raising a threatening fist at the younger man. It was only the restraints of two of his crew members that kept him from charging onto the oil-splattered track and enhancing Clay Riker’s apparent minor injuries.

The Douglas party watched in shock as the replay showed the eventful crash over and over.

Quint shoved himself out of his chair, his face a mask of fury. “That son-of-a-bitch deliberately tried to take her out. She would have won.”

Stephen looked equally angry. “That’s the way I see it. That bastard saw he couldn’t pass her, so rather than settle for second, he took himself out and tried to take her with him.”

Virgil laughed shakily. “Well, I’d say the joke’s on him. She still took fifth.”

“She could have had first.” Quint said. “They said she’s never won.”

Stephen grunted. “Believe me, she’s not the only driver who’s never taken first place. More than half the guys in that race have never done better than tenth. Her brother raced for four years and never won a Nextell Cup race.”

“Why do they keep racing if they don’t win?” Delta asked.

“Heck, Ma,” Stephen said. “She made more money taking fifth than I’ve made all year.”

“Did it look like she was hurt?” Quint asked.

“I didn’t see any blood,” Stephen said, grabbing a cold hot dog off a plate on the table. He looked at it with distaste then shoved half of it in his mouth. “Those cars are pretty well padded. Look what Riker walked away from.”

“If I ever get my hands on him,” Quint said, adding a muttered curse, “he won’t fare so easily.”

Virgil nodded. “I had the feeling Buster LeCorre felt the same way.”

“I’ve got to call Hunter,” Quint said starting to leave. “Maybe he can ask Nicole where she lives.”

The entire group turned to stare at him. Only Delta spoke. “Hunter and Nicole are on their honeymoon in the Bahamas.”

“He must have his cell phone with him.”

Delta’s fine carrot-colored brows arched. “If knowing where she lives is so important that you would disturb Hunter on his honeymoon, why don’t you just ask me instead?”

Quint stopped to stare at the woman he thought of as his mother. “You know where Jamie lives?”

Delta smiled. “Of course. I had a long chat with her at the reception. I’m surprised

she didn't tell you since you obviously spent a lot of time with her. Now if you'll explain why you want to know, I'll be glad to tell you."

Quint glanced at Virgil before he spoke. "I have some apologizing to do."

"I knew it," Stephen chimed. "What did you do to her anyway, kick her crutches out from under her or step on her toes at the dance?"

"Back off, little brother," Virgil said. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

After bestowing a warning look on both her sons, Delta turned to Quint with a smile. "She lives in a townhouse on the west shore of Lake Michigan. I don't know the name of the town, but it's a suburb of Chicago. The development is called Sunrise on the Bluffs. It's not actually on a bluff, but she said she gets a spectacular view of the sun coming up over the lake."

Quint's eyes widened. "How did you find all that out?"

Delta shrugged. "I just asked her where she lived. She seemed extremely proud of her little home. She has a sunroom with lots of plants and she feeds the hummingbirds in her backyard. She'd like a dog but said she's gone too much to care for it properly, so she goes running with an elderly neighbor's English sheepdog."

"Jeez," Stephen cut in, laughing. "I can see why Quint and Hunter have jobs getting information. They got their tactics from you. I'm surprised you didn't get the name of the dog."

Delta lifted her nose with a smirk. "That would be Liebers. I think it means *lover* in German or something like that." She turned back to Quint. "You spent more time with her than I did. What in the world did you talk about anyway?"

Quint exchanged a swift look with Virgil. "Me," he replied. "We talked about me."

"You can probably get her phone number on the Internet," Virgil said.

"I don't need the phone number. I need her address, and knowing her real name is going to make getting it a lot easier." Quint bent down and gave Delta a swift kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Mom. You're a sweetheart. I'll call you when I get back from Chicago."

Stephen received a sharp jab in the ribs when he opened his mouth to say something to Quint's departing back.

Chapter Eight

Jamie had plenty of time to think on the three-hour flight back to Chicago. Rarely did she travel with the crew anymore. It was just too exhausting, and gave her little or no time alone. Not that she actually had another life to get back to, but she did enjoy her townhouse and the panoramic view of energetic Lake Michigan. She replayed the race over and over in her mind and could not come up with a reason why Clay would deliberately take out his own car to keep her from winning. She knew he didn't like her racing. That was the number one argument in their relationship; he had wanted her to quit driving.

The association had given Clay the benefit of a doubt. They believed he just wanted to win so badly he was taking foolish chances. After all, hadn't she caused a pileup in Indianapolis that had eliminated Clay and four others? Their logic rankled, but after Buster's repeated warnings and Charlie's comments, she had to admit it did not look accidental.

Buster had been furious; she couldn't tell if he was angry with her for not getting first or reacting to Riker's attempt to eliminate her. He even swore at his long time friend, Kent Riker, as though it had been Kent's fault Clay had driven like an obsessed moron.

Buster had seen it coming before she did. He had instructed her to back off and let Riker pass. Fortunately, that was one time she'd listened to him.

She put a hand to her throbbing forehead, wincing when she touched the bandage the medic had put on a cut above her eye. Her head had hit hard when she slammed into Clay. At the time she hadn't even been aware that it was bleeding inside her helmet.

She laid her head back and tried to sleep, but tired as she was, sleep eluded her. Instead, an unsolicited image of Quint Douglas stepping out of the bathroom in his birthday suit flashed through her brain.

They had made love five times that night. Each experience was monumental. It wasn't just great sex; it was spectacular. She guessed one of the reasons she'd been able to let herself go was the fact that she knew she'd never see him again. She'd been prepared to deal

with that.

Anger and something equivalent to betrayal flared through her in turbulent waves. Why did he have to go and spoil it all by leaving money? The note, *Thanks for a good time, Quint*, was simple and acceptable. After all, she'd had a good time too, and she hadn't expected him to make phony declarations of love or anything like that, but leaving money turned a beautiful thing into something humiliating and shoddy.

She rang for the stewardess and ordered a glass of wine. Maybe it would help her sleep, help her forget that hundred dollar bill, help her forget magnetic azure blue eyes.

It was midnight by the time her plane landed at O'Hare. She picked up her car and headed home. The throb in her head had eased, but the situation with Clay Riker still rankled, and she had not managed to get Quint off her mind. She was frustrated, angry, annoyed, and she could think of at least ten other words that described her feelings—none of them complimentary to men.

She parked her car in the garage, and trudged into the house trying to decide between a quick shower and a long hot soak in the tub. Her thoughts were interrupted by a red glow from the kitchen counter. Her answering machine. She had five messages. The first was a hang up. She checked the number, it was local but she didn't recognize it. The next two were from Grady and Dunn. Both expressed their irritation with Clay. At least, she thought sardonically, there was some hope for the male species of the world. The fourth call was from her elderly neighbor, Charlotte, saying she had seen the race and asked if Jamie was okay. The fifth was another hang-up. She checked the number. It was the same as the first, and had come in only a half hour ago. Obviously, somebody wanted to talk to her in person.

She was too tired to care who it was and not in the mood to field any questions, so she turned off her phone, deciding on a long hot shower. Afterwards, she carried a glass of orange juice out to her back deck where she could stare out at the water. Somehow the dark brooding lake reflected her restless mood and did nothing to calm her. She drained her glass, and went to bed.

The next morning she rose early and did a half hour routine in her cracker box gym. The little room off her screen porch was actually designed to be a tool shed, but she liked the idea of having a view of the lake while she exercised, so she'd had large square windows installed facing the lake. There was just enough room for her scaled down weight lifting

machine, a Stairmaster, and treadmill so she could jog inside during inclement weather.

Her workout finished, she donned old running shorts and a baggy sweat top, and walked next door to pick up Liebers. Taking care not to wake Charlotte, who never got up before the sun, Jamie released the exuberant sheepdog from his kennel, and took off to test her leg on a short run along the wind-swept trail that lead down to the beach and paralleled the west shoreline for several miles.

She loved predawn when the only sounds were morning birdcalls, and a few diehard fishermen motoring out to their favorite holes, ever hoping to land a fish big enough to brag about. The commercial rigs had long since left the docks.

By the time she got back, the September sun had crested the horizon, radiating a pink-fingered glow rippling over the lake. This particular morning the sun was the only thing that separated the blue-gray lake from the blue-gray sky. Several sailboats, their colorful sails hanging limp, were desperately waiting for even the slightest breeze to carry them on their way. She paused behind her townhouse to watch the landscape give birth to the day. It was a spectacle that never ceased to captivate her. Beside her, Liebers pulled at his leash with a low growl.

“Jamie?”

She whirled around to face Quint Douglas. Her emotions flip-flopped. Her heart raced for the span of two beats before she exploded with fury.

“What are you doing here?”

“I—”

“That wasn’t a question because I don’t care why you’re here. You have exactly four seconds to get off my property before I activate the alarm.”

Dragging a reluctant English sheepdog behind her, she headed for the back of the house to do exactly that.

Quint followed. “Jamie, wait, please. I want to explain, to apologize.”

“Not interested,” she snapped over her back. The only reason the alarm hadn’t already sounded was because she was towing a sixty-five pound ball of hairy weight that had dug its feet in.

Quint seized the opportunity to stall her. He hunched down and called out to the dog. “Liebers, come.”

Liebers came, wagging his traitorous tail, dragging Jamie with him. She didn't take time to speculate on how Quint could possibly know the name of her neighbor's dog. She dropped the leash, ran for the house, and leaped on the deck intending to trip the emergency switch that was guaranteed to have a resident security guard there within two minutes.

Quint stood up, stepping aside to avoid the oversized mop romping toward him and blurted out, "I'll help you get the tape you were looking for."

Jamie paused with her hand on the back door alarm button. Without turning around, she battled with her emotions. She was breathing more heavily than she had on her two-mile run. She knew his mention of the tape was a ploy to get her attention, and she hated admitting, even for a split second, it worked.

She turned to face him cautiously suspicious. "How did you find me?"

Quint struggled with the overzealous dog. "You forget, I make my living finding people."

Jamie dropped her hand but stayed within arm's length of the alarm. "Why did you find me? Or did my fee for sex tax your budget so you decided to fly all the way to Chicago to find work?"

"I can explain that."

"While you're at it, you can explain why I was only worth a hundred dollars. Seems to me it should have been five hundred."

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was a stupid, insensitive thing to do."

"No argument from me on that front. And you can add cruel, mean, heartless, thoughtless, and totally unnecessary."

"I saw the decals in your trunk. I thought you were a hooker."

The pit-bull gleam in Jamie's amber eyes told Quint it was the wrong thing to say. She walked slowly to the edge of the deck where she could look down at him. Her mouth formed a thin line. "So...if I had been a hooker, your actions would have been justified?"

Quint squirmed. He didn't like squirming, but he wasn't ready to give up on her. It was confession time. "Please believe me, that money had nothing to do with who you are or who I thought you were. I was reacting to other things in my life."

She didn't say anything. She just glared at him with narrowed eyes as though trying to decide if he was last week's garbage or green scum from the back of the refrigerator. Her lovely

pouty mouth was set in a hard thin line. Even when angry she had the most sinfully kissable mouth he'd ever seen, and noticing the bandage on her forehead, he wanted to kiss that spot too.

He managed to calm Liebers down by rubbing her ears. The dog sagged against Quint's leg, groaning with pleasure. He was about to ask if he could sit down and talk to her, explain about Cynthia, when he heard the sound of a car in the driveway in front of the house. He was just close enough to see the security sign on the car door before it opened, and a thick-muscled, armed guard stepped out.

With a hand poised over his weapon the brawny guard walked cautiously toward Quint. He stopped a few feet away and glanced up at Jamie.

"You okay?" he asked. "Charlotte called. She said you had an intruder."

"I'm fine, Joe."

"You know this man?" Joe asked.

Jamie folded her arms over her chest. "I thought I did, but I was mistaken. It doesn't matter though, because he was just leaving."

Quint wasn't interested in wrestling with a man wearing a .44 Magnum on his hip; particularly when he seemed to be looking for an excuse to aim it at someone. Quint also had the feeling Joe had more than a business interest in Jamie.

"Yeah," Quint murmured. "I was just leaving." He pulled a card and a pen from his shirt pocket and jotted something down. Then he handed the leash to Joe. "Think you can manage to hang onto Charlotte's dog for a moment?"

Quint walked to the deck, laid the card on the railing, then turned and walked away without a backward glance.

Liebers, attempting to follow Quint, nearly jerked the husky guard off his feet.

Jamie watched with mixed emotions as Quint disappeared around to the front of the house. She was still furious with him, but part of her wanted to call him back. When she heard his car leave the driveway, she picked up the card he'd left and shoved it in her pocket, stepped off the deck to rescue Liebers from Joe—or more accurately—rescue Joe from an over-anxious Liebers. She mumbled a curt thank you and left before he could start a conversation that was sure to end with him asking her for a date. The man's interest in protecting her bordered on the obnoxious.

After taking Liebers back to his kennel, Jamie returned to her own house to call Charlotte and assure her that everything was fine.

She resisted the urge to pull Quint's note from her pocket, but curiosity won out. It was a business card advertising Seek and Find Enterprise. On the back he had written the phone number to a nearby motel, and a note saying: "I'll wait twenty-four hours. If you don't call, I'll leave you alone. You should have won yesterday."

Jamie's heart quickened. Twenty-four hours. She was certain he would leave if she made no move to stop him. If he left she may not have another opportunity to get her hands on that tape. Could she overlook his crude actions long enough to let him help her break into Clay's house?

But first things first—her plants had gone five days without water and her hummingbird feeder was empty.

Three hours later Jamie's doorbell rang. She answered it to find a delivery boy from Windy City Florist. He had a long box on his arm. She signed for the flowers, took them inside, and removed the wrapper. It contained five long-stemmed bright pink roses. She didn't have to look at the card to know they came from Ray Bentler. He sent roses after every race, five roses for taking fifth place. Ironically, the better she placed the fewer flowers she got.

An hour later the same delivery boy handed her another parcel of flowers. It was a special order and someone had paid a bundle to have it delivered ASAP.

The card simply said: "I'm sorry. It was a mistake. Please let me explain."

She opened the package to find five red roses. She knew immediately the significance—they'd made love five times that night. They weren't long-stemmed but they were exceptionally beautiful. Jamie loved the fragrance of red roses. She pressed her face into them and inhaled the earthy fragrance.

* * * *

Quint paced the length of the up-scale motel room for the hundredth time. The patio door led to a crystal clear pool surrounded by a lush garden. A slight breeze carried the scent of honeysuckle through the open window, along with the playful sound of children splashing in the pool. A couple of times he'd stepped outside but never strayed far from the phone. Other than stopping to order the flowers, he'd come straight back to his room to wait. His laptop sat open on the desk where he'd managed to connect it to the Internet intending to do some work while he

waited, but he never got further than pushing the power button on.

All he could think about was Jamie LeCorre. How he'd like to get to know her better as well as make love to her again. He knew every inch of her body, but he had no idea what went on in her mind. He understood now why she'd refused to talk about herself. If she would only give him another chance.

He glanced at his watch. It was five o'clock. He had hoped she'd call by this time so he could invite her to dinner. He'd ordered a ham sandwich and a bowl of soup from the restaurant for lunch, but he'd been too antsy to eat. Now he was hungry and that made him irritable. She was being unreasonable by not giving him a chance to explain his relationship with Cynthia.

Maybe if he got angry enough he could fly back to New York in the morning and forget about her. Maybe Jamie LeCorre, NASCAR driver, had the personality of an armadillo and was nothing like the sweet girl who wore a sexy-as-hell faded Mickey Mouse T-shirt to bed. Hell, maybe he was going to be a cowboy when he grew up and ride off into the sunset.

Shit! He'd had enough of waiting. He was going out to get something to eat. If she called now, she could damn well call back later. He had the doorknob in his hand when the phone rang.

He let it ring twice while he sucked in a couple of deep breaths.

"Hello. Quint speaking."

"Quinton, darling, what on earth are you doing in Chicago?"

The sound of Cynthia Harman's voice grated on his already taut nerves. He had no patience for her, and he was already suspicious that she was having him followed. That rankled him even further.

"I'm not interested in chit-chat, Cynthia. What do you want?"

"Why do you keep avoiding me, Quinton?"

Quint squeezed the phone with a strangling grip. "It's over, Cynthia. Do us both a favor and let it go." Without giving her a chance to reply, he slammed the phone into its cradle with an earsplitting smash.

He sank down on the edge of the bed, pinching the bridge of his nose, reminding himself that murder was not a solution. He'd have to talk to Virgil about filing harassment charges. His empty stomach growled.

The phone rang again.

He considered not answering it, but that would be allowing her to control his actions.

Cursed woman.

He yanked up the phone wondering if voodoo dolls worked. “Yeah!”

For a moment there was silence on the line.

“Quint? Is that you?”

It was the voice he’d been waiting all day to hear.

“Jamie. Thank God it’s you.”

“Are you okay? You sound a little peculiar.”

Quint managed a short laugh. “Good word. I’m in a peculiar mood, and I get a bit growly when I haven’t eaten all day. Let me buy you dinner.”

There was a short silence followed by a sigh. “Okay, just dinner, nothing else, and I choose the restaurant.”

“Deal. I’ll pick you up. How soon can you be ready?”

“I’ll pick you up. You’re at the Baylight Motel?”

“Room seventeen. You can drive right up to it.”

“I’ll be parked outside your room in thirty minutes. I guess you know my car.”

“Yeah, I know your car. What should I wear?”

“Casual, very casual.”

Quint hung up the phone, breathing a sweet sigh of relief. He didn’t care if they ate at the most expensive establishment in town or at the golden arches. She was giving him another chance. That’s all that mattered. He just had time for a quick shower.

Jamie slipped on a jean skirt long enough to cover her knees with a six-inch ruffle. Her short-sleeved periwinkle sweater was the same color she remembered Quint’s eyes to be. It had taken her most of the afternoon to convince herself to contact him. Even now, she wasn’t sure why she’d called, except that she did want to see him again.

Before she left, she threw a duffle bag into her back seat. It contained a black sweat suit, two flashlights, and a supply of surgical gloves.

As she pulled into the parking lot of the Baylight motel at exactly five-thirty, she gripped the steering wheel to keep her hands from shaking. Quint stood outside his room leaning against the doorframe, waiting for her. He wore tan khakis slacks and a rib-hugging rust print pullover. His rugged facial features softened into a slow smile when he spotted her. She wasn’t prepared

for the effect that smile had on her, and she began to think that calling him was the biggest mistake of her life.

She stayed in the car while he walked around to the passenger side, opened the door, and glanced inside. His eyes took in her appearance with obvious appreciation. “You want me to drive?”

“No, I’d guess I know the city better than you do. Besides, it’s not far.”

Quint folded his lanky frame into the car and closed the door. “Thanks for coming,” he said.

She put the car in reverse and started backing out. “I was hungry,” she said.

Jamie saw his gaze settle on her duffle bag in the back seat.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she snapped. “It’s not an overnight bag.”

Quint cocked his head at her, frowning. “I’m getting the feeling you don’t trust me.”

Jamie didn’t answer.

Quint took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Jamie, we made love five times that night. Did I force or mislead you in any way?”

“We didn’t make love, we had sex.”

“Whatever. Did I force you?”

Jamie put on her left blinker and turned south on Skokie Highway. She breathed deeply, flexing her fingers to relax the strangling grip she had on the steering wheel. “No.”

“Did I mislead you?”

“No.”

“Did I hurt you in any way?”

She turned her attention from the road to look at him. A thick lump rose in her throat. She swallowed it down. “Yes—when you paid me.”

Silence hung between them. Jamie’s eyes swiveled back to the road, but she could feel Quint watching her. It took several moments before he spoke, and when he did he murmured as much to himself as to her. “I imagine that’s what changed it from making love to sex.”

Jamie shot him an arrow-piercing glare. “You get a gold star for that astute observation.” She merged onto the Edens Expressway, exited again after only a short distance and turned toward the lake past the Skokie lagoon.

“You’re not going to let me off easy on this, are you?” he asked finally.

He sounded so pathetically contrite; the hint of a smile tickled her lips. Still, she answered with a flat, “No.”

He studied her for another long moment with his fingers tapping slowly on his knee. “Am I wrong, or are you enjoying this?”

She maneuvered her BMW into the crowded parking lot of Jimbo’s Crab Shack. “I hope you like seafood and country western music.”

Quint gave her a slanted smile. “I love seafood of any kind. And my mom was born and raised in Tennessee, just outside of Nashville. I don’t remember a whole lot about her but I distinctly recall her singing along with Patsy Cline on the radio. I guess it was enough to influence me.” He looked around at all the cars as they got out of the BMW. “Do we need a reservation here?”

“Probably not.”

They walked side by side to the front door. Quint reached out and opened it for her putting his hand on the small of her back to guide her through. When he touched her, even through a layer of clothes, an electric jolt spiraled up her spine. It did disturbing things to her heart rate and she shivered in spite of the heat.

A young man of about twenty-five wearing a red and white striped shirt rushed past the people waiting in line. He had a stack of menus under one arm. “Jamie, love. I was afraid you wouldn’t come. Jimbo was at Darlington yesterday. He said you had a head wound.” He glanced at the inch-square, flesh-colored bandage barely showing under her curly bangs. “How bad are you hurt?” His eyes shifted to the hem of her skirt. “And the leg? How is the leg?”

Jamie greeted him with a smile. “Thanks for asking, Andy. My leg is as good as new, and I just got a slight scratch on my forehead. Nothing to be concerned about.”

Andy frowned, giving Quint a head-to-foot appraisal. “Jamie, love, everything about you concerns me.”

Jamie shook her head laughing. “Andy, this is Quint Douglas. No need to be concerned about him. He’s just a business associate.”

Andy’s face lit up. “Very good. Follow me. I have a table for you by the window.”

Jamie followed him toward the back of the room to one of several alcoves containing private booths. She didn’t have to look back to know Quint was behind her, and she didn’t have to see his face to sense his irritation.

Andy seated them, explained the specials, and left with a promise to return as soon as they were ready to order.

One glance at Quint told Jamie he was more than just a little irritated.

“Business associate? What the hell was that about?”

Jamie shrugged. “Well, after all, you did pay me.”

Quint leaned toward her keeping his heated voice low. “Dammit, you’re not going let that go, are you?”

“Certainly not. I’m having too much fun.”

Quint took a deep breath, and then another. His jaw tightened. “Woman, I haven’t done this much groveling in my life. It’s just that... I know there is something between us, and I don’t just mean sexual. I feel it, and I think you do, too. Before I start I want you to know how much I appreciate you giving me another chance, but I can’t grovel any more. I’m going to make an attempt to explain about that money, and from there the ball will be in your court. You can accept my explanation or you can tell me to take a flying leap off a tall building. I know what it’s like to be dogged by a possessive-compulsive ex-lover. I promise I won’t do that to you. Now—”

Jamie held up her hand. “Wait, please, let’s order first. I think you need to eat because if you get any growlier I’m going to stop having fun.”

Quint gritted his teeth. “I’m not growly!”

Jamie looked up at him with raised brows. “Really?”

Quint stared at her for a long moment then he closed the menu in front of him and set it aside. “I’ll have the crab leg all-you-can-eat special.”

“That’s just what I wanted. Are you having soup or salad with that?”

“Salad!”

“What kind of dressing?”

“Ranch!”

“French fries or tator bunnies.”

“Tator bunnies!”

“You don’t even know what they are.”

“I don’t care. I want them.”

Jamie smiled and waved at Andy, who dashed straight to their table with pad in hand.

“Shall I order for us?” Jamie asked Quint.

“Please do.”

She turned back to Andy. “We’d both like the house crab special and you know how I like my salad and potatoes. Quint would like the salad with ranch dressing.”

Andy wrote quickly, and looked at Quint. “And what kind of potatoes would you like sir?”

“Tator bunnies,” Quint said.

Andy stared at him. “Excuse me.”

“Tator bunnies,” Quint repeated.

Jamie winked at Andy. “It’s a New York thing. Just bring him the hush puppies.”

When Andy left Quint fastened a narrow glare on her. “I’m having a difficult time remembering exactly what it was I liked about you.”

“I think,” Jamie said, “it was because you thought I was a hook—”

“Don’t even go there,” Quint snapped. “Because if you believe that, we’re not even in the same solar system, much less the same planet. I’ve never paid for sex in my life or even thought about it, for that matter. And that includes you. I wasn’t paying for sex. I left the money because I wanted to piss you off.”

Jamie stared at him in wide-eyed surprise. “Well you certainly accomplished that, but for God’s sake, why? Did you think I was going to be so hot after you I wouldn’t leave you alone?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

Jamie nearly choked on a laughing snort. “You have a severe case of ego inflation, my friend.”

“It has nothing to do with ego. I’m a little gun shy when it comes to women. Do you recall asking about Virgil playing guard dog for me? I told you I’d just gotten out of a nasty relationship.”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s the one who recognized you as the Pink Mink centerfold.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank him,” Jamie said, dryly.

“I saw the decals in your trunk so I didn’t need a lot of convincing. And he was only doing what I asked him to do. I told him if I ever try to get involved with another high-profile woman to stop me.”

“So why didn’t you listen to him?”

Quint gave her a slow disarming smile. “Good question. The real ironic part comes when you consider that being a female NASCAR driver puts you miles above being one of Bentler’s minks in the high profile department.”

“And knowing this you flew all the way to Chicago to see me? Why?”

“Because *she* wears five hundred dollar imported silk nightgowns, and you wore a Mickey Mouse T-shirt old enough to belong to your grandmother.”

Jamie digested that solemnly while Andy set their salads on the table. When he left she picked up her fork and started stirring the dressing into the lettuce.

“So who is this woman with the diamond studded PJs?” Jamie asked. “And what unforgivable female thing did she do to you?”

Quint popped a cherry tomato in his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

“Cynthia Harman.”

Jamie’s fork halted halfway to her mouth. “The talk show barracuda?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“That woman is evil; she preys on human misery. Pink Mink hookers are saints compared to her. How could you think I was that kind of woman?”

“I didn’t think you were like her. I just wanted to avoid another complicated situation.”

“Lord, what did she do that was so awful? Handcuff you to a bed and wheel you out on her show naked?”

Quint gave her an odd look and laughed out loud. “Now I remember what I like about you. You make me laugh. It’s not what she did; it’s what she’s still doing. She refuses to accept the fact that we’re finished. She calls my office five times a day. I swear she’s having me followed because she already called my motel here in Chicago. That morning I met you, when you were feeling up your flat tire, I had just hung up the phone on her. That’s when I asked Virg to bean me over the head if I ever tried to date another woman with a face recognized all over the country. The phone started ringing again and I stomped out of the room telling him to inform her that I’d left.” Quint smiled. “And the first thing I saw was your cute little tush. I know I acted like a jackass but I was still riding on Harman-induced adrenalin.”

“I guess that explains a lot.”

Quint gave her an expectant look. “Does that mean you forgive me and we can pick up where we left off?”

Jamie sighed. She looked away from him for a moment before turning back to face those startling blue eyes. “It means I can forgive you, but as for picking up where we left off—when I opened that motel door we had an agreement. It would be one night. You go back to your life, I go back to mine. As far as I’m concerned that’s where we left off. My lifestyle doesn’t leave space for a man. Not because I don’t have time but because men can’t handle it. They either try to get me to quit racing or they get stars in their eyes because of the limelight and the purse I bring in.”

“Why is it so hard to believe a man could accept you just the way you are and for who you are as a person?”

Jamie went back to her salad. “Because that’s fantasy thinking. It hasn’t happened and it won’t. It’s been a long time since I’ve expected a knight in shining armor to rescue me from my father’s house. I decided when I was thirteen that I would make my own path in the world and not wait for some impossible miracle to clear the way for me. All I knew was racing. The fact that it was male dominated made the path almost insurmountable. You have no idea what it’s like for a woman to compete in a man’s world.”

Quint set his empty salad bowl aside. “You’re right; I don’t. I do know we had something special together. I don’t want to throw it away without giving it a chance.” He reached over and squeezed the tip of her little finger. “I don’t need your money, Jamie. If I was a fortune hunter, I could have stayed with Cynthia. Granted she’s more into sour lemons than limelight but she’s looking for a boy toy and she’s willing to give him anything he wants. She only wants one thing in return, and that is his manhood.”

“Sounds like a generous offer. Maybe you should take it.”

Quint gave her a level look. “I’m going to assume you’re joking, but just in case you aren’t, I want her in my life about as much as you want Ray Bentler in yours.”

Jamie laughed. “You certainly know how to make a point.”

Andy arrived with a heaping plate of crab legs. He set it in the center of their table, along with tools to crack the shells, two kinds of sauces, and a bowl of melted butter. He handed each of them a plate of hush puppies. “Anything else I can get for you?” he asked.

“This looks good to me,” Jamie said.

“Me too,” Quint said, eyeing the crab legs with hungry lust.

They were both eating succulent chunks of crab when Andy returned with a bottle of

Merlot and two glasses. "Compliments of Jimbo," he said.

"Where is Jimbo tonight?" Jamie asked. "I didn't notice him behind the counter."

"He's not here, but he just called. He asked how you were and instructed me to bring you the wine."

"Thank him for me, will you, Andy?"

When Andy left, Quint looked at Jamie with twinkling blue eyes. "Come here often, do you?"

Jamie licked butter off her fingers and smiled. "Only every Monday night. Actually it was Clay Riker who introduced me to this place. Jim Bodean lives a couple of houses down from Clay."

"Clay? The bastard who tried to put you into the wall yesterday?"

Jamie nodded. "That's him. I guess I didn't get around to telling you that I used to be engaged to Clay."

Quint remembered Stephen telling him that Jamie had dumped Riker. "What happened?" he asked.

"Among other things, he wanted me to quit racing,"

"Why? Because you're a better driver than he is?"

Jamie grinned. "You're pretty sharp for a New Yorker, but actually there was more to it than that. Right from the beginning something just didn't feel comfortable when I was with Clay. More often than not he would cancel dates, and too often it was just to sit home alone and watch videos. Sometimes I think his father was pushing him into the relationship."

"Clay's father?"

"Yeah, Kent Riker and my father grew up together. They lived across the street from each other when they were in grade school. It was a lifelong dream for them that we get together. The odd thing is, Clay and I were good friends until we started dating. It was all down hill from there. Apparently I never pushed his buttons."

"Did he push yours?"

Jamie avoided his gaze, taking an extra long time chewing her crab. "No. I never enjoyed going to bed with him. Then when he called me a cold fish, I threw his key and his ring in his face and walked out."

"He called *you* a cold fish!" Quint said in disbelief. "That's absurd." Quint leaned

forward and lowered his voice. “We made love five times in one night; that was besting my previous record by four.”

Jamie stopped chewing to stare at him. She could feel heat rising to her face. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Quint reached over and ran his fingers along her rosy cheeks. “No, honey, I’m not.”

Then he surprised her by picking up her hand and licking butter off her finger. She sucked in her breath as raw heat slashed through her before she could jerk her hand back.

Quint’s gaze became intent. “I love the way you blush and the way you react to my touch.”

“If we don’t get on a different subject, I’m not going to be able to finish eating.”

Quint laughed throatily. “I won’t be able to stand up and walk out of here without the whole place knowing I want to lick you all over.”

Jamie forced herself to meet his eyes in spite of the tingling rush of heat his words evoked in her. They jogged her memory all too well—and her anger. “That’s not going to happen any time soon, Quint. Before I even think about going to bed with you again, we’re going to get to know each other first.”

“That wouldn’t be my choice,” Quint said refilling his wineglass before reaching across the table to refill hers. “But I’ll honor it if it’s yours.” He extended his glass toward her. “Here’s to getting to know each other.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she smiled and clinked her glass against his.

“Where should we start?” he asked.

“We could take turns asking questions.”

“Sounds like a good idea. You can go first.”

“All right, how did you know Charlotte’s dog’s name?”

Quint laughed. “You told Delta.”

Jamie grimaced. “So now I also know how you found out where I live.”

“Yes. I didn’t run an investigation on you if that’s what you were thinking.”

“How did you find out who I really was?”

“My cousin Stephen recognized you from the wedding video. He couldn’t believe I had you in my arms and didn’t get your autograph.” Quint grinned. “Of course, he had no idea how long I actually had you in my arms.”

Jamie sent him a narrow look. "Let's try to keep this off of sex. Go ahead ask me a question now."

"What's in that black bag in your back seat?"

Jamie chewed her lower lip for a moment. "Black sweats, flashlights, and latex gloves."

Quint's brow shot up.

Jamie shrugged. "You said you'd help me get the tape I wanted."

"And you came prepared?"

"It has to be tonight."

Quint gave her a suspicious look. "Maybe you better tell me about this tape and what federal vault it's in."

"Well it's not exactly in a vault. It's at Clay's house. When I hurt my knee in Indianapolis they said I caused the crash by swerving in the thick of the race with four other cars within a few feet of me. I know I didn't. Something must have hit my car to throw me off. None of the replays show it. Clay was directly behind me, but he told me his personal recorder wasn't on. I know it was because I saw the red light flashing just seconds before the crash. Clay's a video nut; he runs his own camera in his car on the driver's side."

"How can you find it, even if it exists?"

"He's not the smartest guy in the world but he's organized to the point of being anal. He has an entire room devoted to his tapes, and they're all chronologically sorted. I can find it in a minute."

"What does he do with these tapes?"

"He watches them, over and over. He believes that by studying the other drivers, like football players watch games, he can outwit them."

Quint drained the last of his wine. "Viewing this tape is important to you?"

"More than you could know. I was blamed for that crash in Indianapolis. The only reason Clay got by with his shenanigans yesterday was because they excused it as retaliation."

"Jesus, tough business you're in. I watched that race. I just about jumped through the screen. How bad were you hurt?"

Jamie shrugged. "Just a scratch. I've had worse."

"If I had any objection to your racing it would be because I fear for your life. I guess I'm not the daredevil type because I can't understand anyone wanting to drive at break-neck speed,

hugging a cement wall, while entrusting your life to a dozen or more other people as crazy as you.”

Jamie laughed. “I guess calling us crazy isn’t out of line. The cars are well built though; you’d be amazed at all the safety features they have and all the precautions taken.”

“Yeah, that’s what Stephen says about skydiving.”

“There you go.”

“I do want you to understand that even if it scares the hell out of me, I’d never suggest to you or anyone else to give up something they feel strongly about.” He reached out and touched the bandage on her forehead. “You want me to kiss it and make it all better?”

“You can make it all better by helping me get that tape.”

“All right. What’s your plan?”

“It has to be tonight. Clay will be back tomorrow. My father called this afternoon, and apparently Kent Riker was furious when Clay didn’t win. He took off in a huff and nobody knew where he was, so when the crew left, Clay stayed behind to look for him.”

“Nice relationship they have.”

Jamie sighed. “Yeah, well, it’s not a whole lot different than the one I have with my father. My mother deserted him and my brother when she was pregnant with me. He didn’t even know I existed until she died when I was five and I was dumped on his doorstep. If it hadn’t been for T-Roy...” She shrugged.

“He’s not only your father, he’s your crew chief. He has to be proud of the way you’re driving.”

“He hated it when I took over after T-Roy died. I’m sure the only reason he tolerates my driving is because Ray Bentler threatened to drop his sponsorship if I quit. Truthfully, I think Dad’s relaxed a bit since I first started. Sometimes I even think he cares, but he does an excellent job of hiding it. I have a hard time even calling him Dad. At the track I just call him Buster like everybody else does.”

“How far from here does Riker live?”

“Glenview, it’s not far at all. You’ll need some dark clothes though, and we should probably take your car. Mine is too recognizable.”

“No shit,” Quint said, dropping some bills on the table. “Do you have a tape we can use to replace the one we take so he won’t miss it right away?”

“Good idea. I didn’t think of that. We can pick up a blank one at a drugstore on the way back to your place to change. I know what brand he uses, and I can even duplicate the label. He won’t know it’s been replaced unless he tries to play it. Do you have some dark clothes you can wear?”

* * * *

An hour later they cruised past Clay Riker’s sprawling rambler. It was set in a secluded neighborhood. All the houses had expansive lots with elaborately landscaped yards. Except for Riker’s house where the front yard was void of anything but grass. Grass that was so perfectly thick and green it looked like it had been hand culled. There were no shrubs, no flowers, no ornamental rocks or bricks of any kind. Jamie explained that her former fiancé had a neatness fetish. He couldn’t tolerate clutter, and he considered flowers and shrubs a messy disruption to the smooth planes of his lawn.

The house was dark except for the outside security lights bordering the walk. Quint drove around to the back of the block, pulling his rental car to a stop where there were no streetlights. From there they could approach the back of the house on foot.

The back yard had no resemblance to the front whatsoever. Beneath the craggy oaks and leafy maple trees, that had probably been there half a century before the house was built, grew wild shaggy underbrush.

Jamie lead the way in the dark to a small path trampled smooth by kids on bikes who used it as a shortcut to school. She quietly explained that Clay tried to discourage them by not clearing the brush and blocking their trails with logs.

“The kids are persistent,” she said. “They simply make another path. As much as he disliked kids, he disliked fences more, so he continues to battle the kids with blockages. Somehow the kids know as long as they don’t litter or mess with his front yard, he wouldn’t fence them out.”

“What a guy.” Quint whispered as he followed Jamie through the trees. “I wish I could do this without your help.”

“I wouldn’t let you. We’re only taking one little tape. How bad can that be?”

“You don’t want to know,” he murmured. “He doesn’t have a dog, does he?”

“No, just a stuck-up Siamese cat named Scooter.”

“Does anyone look after the cat when Riker’s out of town?”

“Yes, Jimbo does, but if he were here the lights would be on. You can’t see it in the dark, but the back door is right there.”

She indicated with her flashlight where she was pointing. Quint quickly placed his hand over hers.

“Don’t put your light on until we’re closer, and only if we need it.”

“I’ll have to use it to see the number pad on the security alarm,” she said. Her heart started working overtime as she led the way up three steps to the door.

“Why doesn’t he have security lights back here?”

“He doesn’t want to give the kids the advantage of lights.”

Quint snorted softly. “This guy sounds like a number one wacko.”

She raised her flashlight, intending to shine it on the security panel. Quint stopped her.

“Wait. It looks like the door is ajar.” He gave the door a nudge with his foot. It moved.

“Oh, my God,” Jamie whispered. “Why is the door unlocked and open when no lights are on inside?”

Quint leaned close to her. “At least we aren’t breaking and entering, just entering.”

“Is that good?” she asked.

“That’s *very* good. He doesn’t have a gun in the house, does he?”

Jamie swallowed the lump crowding her throat. “Not that I’m aware of.”

When she pressed her body against his, he gave her a light squeeze. “Be real quiet.” He reached out and pushed the door open, listening carefully for any sound from inside as he eased himself through the door, with Jamie pasted to his side like skin. He aimed his flashlight straight ahead and switched it on.

Jamie gave a startled gasp muffled by Quint’s shoulder.

The house looked like a cyclone had passed through. Furniture was overturned. Papers cluttered the floor. Lampshades and pictures were either askew or smashed. Books and knickknacks were tossed about like discarded playthings. They were literally surrounded by chaos. It made the silence eerie.

Quint swore under his breath. “This place has been burglarized or vandalized—or both,” he whispered. “We better give this plan a rest.”

Somewhere in the darkness the sound of shattering glass brought a squeaky gasp from Jamie. Quint swung his beam of light toward the sound. A pair of red glowing eyes stared back

at him.

“It’s Scooter,” Jamie said, releasing her breath in a shaky huff. “The tape room is over here.”

She left Quint’s side, leaped over a fallen bookcase, and made for the room before he could stop her or warn her that the burglars could still be in the house. When she switched her light on Quint snuffed his. He had no choice but to follow her. He couldn’t call out to her without making more noise than seemed prudent.

The tape room was in no better shape than the sitting room. There were tapes and equipment scattered everywhere. Jamie was on her knees beaming light on a section of tapes that was still intact. The possibility of the tape she wanted being in that one undisturbed area was inconceivable.

He dropped down beside her. “Forget it, Jamie. We have to get out of here right now!”

He heard the sound of either a door closing or a window dropping shut, he couldn’t tell which, and at this moment he didn’t care. The next thing he heard was a siren in the distance. He grabbed Jamie by the waist, lifted her up, and carried her out the back door. She squirmed, but thankfully didn’t protest until they were outside.

“Put me down, you big ape. I can walk.”

The siren closing in screamed in their ears. Quint set her down, grabbed her hand, and started dragging her through the trees in the direction of his car. When they reached the car he glanced back at the house, to see the glow of flashing red lights in front of it. He opened his car door to stuff Jamie into the passenger seat when a bright light flashed out of the darkness from across the street.

“What was that?” Jamie said, looking in the direction where she’d seen the light. There was another glaring flash and then a car tore off into the darkness.

Quint finished shoving Jamie in the car and slammed the door. He raced around to the driver’s side thankful he left the car unlocked with the keys in the ignition. The second the engine was running he jerked the car in gear and pressed his foot down on the gas just hard enough to keep the tires from squealing and alerting the cops that someone was making a getaway.

Jamie managed to pull herself upright in the seat. “What was that light?”

Quint had the car ahead of him in sight. “A high-powered flash camera!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I,” Quint said. “But we’re going to find out. Buckle your seatbelt and hang on!” He rammed the gas pedal to the floor, giving thanks that his choice of rental car had been a Trans Am.

“Do you want me to drive?” she asked, breathlessly.

Quint took his eyes from the road just long enough to see if she was hysterical. She wasn’t. She was holding on to the armrest with one hand, the other hand was braced on the dash with the replacement tape she’d carried into the house still clutched in her gloved fingers, she was dead serious.

“Christ, woman, this isn’t an international speedway and this car will barely do a hundred.”

“But—”

“Just keep your eyes on that car ahead of us and try to get a license plate number.”

She didn’t argue with him, instead, she peered through the windshield keeping her eyes trained on the fleeing car.

The car made a right turn on two wheels into an alley. Quint made the turn with equal speed.

“It’s a Mercury Marquis,” Jamie yelled over the sound of the engine.

Quint couldn’t even begin to speculate how she knew that from such a long distance, but he didn’t doubt her. The car emerged from the alley, made a sharp right on smoking tires, and turned left, ignoring a traffic light that was on full red.

“Quint, slow down,” Jamie shouted. “He turned in front of the Glenview police station.”

Quint hit the brakes.

Just as he reached the corner, a red and white squad car peeled out in front of him, after the Marquis. Quint dogged the patrol car at a pace that was slow enough to keep from attracting attention, yet fast enough to keep it in sight. It took the patrol car only a few blocks to pull the Marquis over. By the time Quint and Jamie drove past, a man was spread eagled over the trunk.

“Get the license number,” Quint said to Jamie. “Try to see if you recognize him.”

“His legs are in the way. Drive slow; I’ll try to read the front plate.” She craned her neck to see the numbers. “793 884, Illinois plates.” She repeated the numbers until they had them committed to memory.

“Did you recognize him?”

“No, I couldn’t get a look at his face.”

They were at the end of the block when she said, “Wait, stop here. Maybe they’ll haul him in and leave his camera in the car.”

Quint nodded. “It’s a long shot but worth a try. Let’s give them a little more time though.” He turned the corner, drove slowly around the next couple of blocks, making his way back toward the Marquis. The patrol car was still there along with two others. He retraced the route around the block three more times, keeping a respectable distance until the patrol cars left. Sure enough, the Marquis stayed put.

Quint drove past the abandoned Marquis and stopped just ahead of it. “You stay in the car,” he said. “Jamie!” She had already jumped out the door.

“You stay behind the wheel, I’ll look.”

Quint swore but he stayed in the car. It didn’t make sense for them both to be caught sneaking around a parked car five blocks from a police station. He peeled off the sweaty latex gloves she’d insisted he wear, and watched her through the rear view mirror. First she tried all the doors. They were locked. Then she went around to the front passenger side of the car. He couldn’t see exactly what she was doing but she was fiddling with the window; he only hoped she wasn’t breaking it. Seconds later she had the door open and was inside.

A tow truck turned the corner three blocks away and was heading directly toward them. Quint was about to warn her when she charged out of the Marquis and dashed toward him with something in her hand. She shoved it in the deep pocket of her sweatshirt as she dove into the car.

“Okay. Drive. The camera wasn’t there but I found something else.”

“What?”

“Car rental papers, I think.”

“How did you get in the car?”

She grinned. “They left the window open just enough for me to get my arm in. Let’s get out of here.”

Quint saw no reason to argue. Ten minutes later they were parked in front of his motel. Quint switched off the engine, laid his head back on the seat, and released a breath of air drawn all the way from his toes. “God, what a night!” He looked over at Jamie, who appeared as ragged

as he felt. She pulled off her latex gloves and the black felt hat she'd used to hide her blond hair and collapsed against the seat. She was sitting there, not moving, not talking. Just breathing deeply.

"I'm sorry about the tape," he said wearily. "We tried."

Jamie managed a weak smile. She picked up the tape she'd dropped on the floor between them and held it up. "Mission accomplished," she said.

Quint stared at her in disbelief. "You mean that isn't the replacement tape?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I got lucky." Her brows suddenly drew together in a thoughtful frown. "Do you think the guy in the car was the same person who trashed the house?"

"I don't know, but we have the license number. Let's go find out who he is."

Quint got out of the car and came around to her side. She opened the door, and he bent down and reached for her hand to help her out. "I'm sorry I was so rough when I shoved you in the car back there. I didn't have time to explain what I was going to do. I hope I didn't hurt you."

She shook her head, and took his hand, clutching the tape in her other hand. Once out of the car she sagged against him and allowed him to walk beside her with his arm around her waist. "I feel a little wobbly," she said. "Like I just drank a gallon of cheap wine."

"That's adrenaline," Quint said, guiding her up the two steps to his room. "I feel it too."

"I guess I'm no stranger to an adrenaline rush, but somehow this is different. If you feel it too, why am I leaning on you?"

Quint stuck his key in the lock, turned it and opened the door. "Because I'm bigger and stronger, and I'm a man," Quint said, closing the door behind them. "Or are you going to argue about that?"

"I just thought—"

Before she could finish Quint turned her in his arms, tilted her head up and pressed his mouth down on her lips. He had expected her to struggle. Instead she surprised him by slipping her arms around his neck and molding her body to his. Her small teasing tongue darted in and out of his mouth. When he broke the contact they were both breathless.

"Lordy, woman, you make me forget common sense, reason and good intentions." He reached behind him and flipped the light switch that was jabbing him in the back. The lamps by the bed cut the darkness with instant pale light. "I know you said you wanted us to get to know each other before we hit the sheets again, and I told you I'd respect that but—"

“Then why did you kiss me?” Jamie asked, not moving.

“Because I wanted to find out what stubborn tasted like.”

Jamie gave a soft, throaty laugh. “So how did it taste?”

“Like more. And if you don’t quit rubbing up against me we’re both going to end up on that bed over there naked, and to hell with good intentions. Just tell me that’s what you want too, and we’ll forget about getting to know each other’s favorite colors and toothpaste habits first.”

“That’s not the kind of getting-to-know each other I had in mind. I want to know you internally.”

Quint reached behind her, cupped her buttocks and pulled her against the rigid length of his erection. “We already know each other internally.”

Quint heard the small gasp she made and felt the instant response of her body. She was ready for him but her stubborn determination won over. She pushed away from him, her cheeks flaming, her beautiful mouth laughing.

“I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s not working.”

“Liar.”

The color on Jamie’s face deepened. She reached into her pocket; pulled out the crumpled papers she’d found in the Marquis, and thrust them into his hands. “Here, put your busy little one-track brain on these while I use the bathroom.”

Quint laughed at her stiff back as she escaped through the only other door in the room. He called after her. “I also know about the birthmark on your left lower cheek. The one that looks like a Tyrannosaurus with its tail chopped off.”

The door snapped shut behind her.

Jamie stared at herself in the mirror. Her face looked like it had been near a fire. She wanted to be angry at Quint but it wasn’t working; everything he said was true and they both knew it. She did want to go to bed with him. If he had just taken her to the bed and started taking her clothes off, she wouldn’t have protested one iota. It was almost as though he knew exactly what he was doing when he gave her an easy out by baiting her.

Behind her in the mirror she saw the skirt and sweater she’d left there when she changed earlier. Since she wasn’t ready to go out and face Quint yet, she stripped off her running suit and jumped in the shower.

As the warm water poured over her she thought about the man in the Marquis. If he wasn't the person who trashed Clay's house, he must have been following her or Quint. She was used to people approaching her in public places, but this was the first time someone had followed her in the dark, and with a camera, no less.

Fifteen minutes later, Jamie stepped out to find Quint with his back to her clicking away on his laptop. She hadn't found a hair dryer so her curls were hanging in damp ringlets around her head.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, next to the desk where he was working. "Find anything?" she asked.

He paused from his typing to turn and look at her, noting her wet hair and change of clothes. "Damn, you look good. That's what I need, a cold shower."

She started to say she hadn't taken a cold shower when she remembered that cold showers were some kind of a man thing, so she let it drop. "Were the papers I found for a car rental?"

Quint turned back to his computer grunting. "Not exactly. One paper was an application for a car rental but it was just a blank copy. The other paper was from a local pawnshop for an expensive digital camera. They gave me two things to work with. One, his name on the camera purchase, if it isn't fake, and two, the rental agency he used for the car."

"What name did he give?"

"Benny Gomez." Quint gave her a sideways look. "Recognize the name?"

Jamie shook her head. "No, you think it could be a fake?"

Quint shrugged. "I don't know about Chicago but pawn shops in New York aren't particular who they sell merchandise to if the buyer is waving cash in his hand."

"Was there an address for Benny Gomez?"

"No." Quint reached for the paper and handed it to her. "Here, take a look, see if I missed anything. Right now I'm running the license plate number. At least when you rent a car you have to show a driver's license with an address, and a credit card."

"I thought only the police could do that sort of thing?"

Quint gave her a slanted grin. "Did I mention that I worked in the criminal records department of local precinct 209 in New York City for three years before I hung my shingle with Hunter?"

Jamie quirked an eyebrow at him. “No, I don’t believe you did.”

“All part of getting to know each other,” he said.

Jamie watched his agile fingers speed over the keys. When the screen filled with numbers, he either selected one and watched the screen fill again, or typed new numbers to get a different screen. She blew out a loud sigh and began studying the pawnshop receipt.

“Gomez’s hand writing is bad enough to belong to a doctor.” She continued examining the document, frowning. “This pawnshop is just up the street. Is it possible this guy was following you instead of me?”

“That thought already crossed my mind. Wait, I think I have something here.” His eyes observed the screen as it filled in. “Hot damn, Jamie, the bastard is from New York. He *was* following me.”

“He’s probably working for Cynthia Harman,” Jamie said.

Quint turned to look at her in wide-eyed wonder. “You’re pretty sharp for a race driving jockette.”

Jamie’s smile widened into full-blown laughter. “I’ve been called a lot of things but *jockette* is a new one. I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment or an insult.”

Quint bent over and gave her a quick kiss on the mouth. “It’s a compliment. Now, let’s see if Benny Gomez has a record. That might tell us how long he’ll be in jail. I’d sure like to be there when he gets out to get my hands on that camera.”

Jamie chewed on her lower lip, frowning thoughtfully. “I don’t think there was anything behind us but trees and the side of your car when that flash went off. Do you suppose those pictures could do us some damage putting us near the scene of Clay’s place when it was broken into?”

Quint was back to scrolling through screens. “The ironic thing is, Gomez had to have followed us there. He is the only person who would know we were only gone from our car a few minutes, not even close to the kind of time it would take to ransack a house. And we only saw two rooms. Chances are the rest of the house didn’t look any better.”

“Good Lord, Quint. Who would do something like that? Burglars don’t normally bother throwing furniture around, do they?”

“Which police department did you work for? Or did you take a course in burglary 101?”

Jamie laughed. “No, it was common sense 101. Flipping furniture makes noise, and not

too many people hide valuables under their sofa. Besides that, you'd just make a mess to stumble over in the dark."

"You're making a good case. So who despises Clay Riker enough to vandalize his house like that?"

"Off hand, I can only think of one person."

"Who, would that be," Quint asked.

"Me."

Quint snorted. "How could anyone believe a sweet little thing like you would break into somebody's house?"

Jamie gave him her narrowest look. "You have a built in sarcastic streak, don't you?"

"Yeah, and it gets worse. I'm charging you a hundred dollars for my work tonight."

"Take it out in trade."

Quint opened his mouth, shook his head and turned back to his screen. "I'm not touching that one, honey."

Jamie grinned. "You really are a lot smarter than I gave you credit for. I was just going to give you my agent's number. He said he'd do anything for me."

"The next thing you're going to tell me is that Ray Bentler is your agent."

Jamie's grin broadened to show two rows of even white teeth. "Isn't this getting to know each other fun?"

Quint tried to hide his smile. "Yeah, fun."

His smile faded as his screen quit flipping and stopped on a page of data. "Looks like our pal, Benny Gomez, did time for petty larceny. He's out on parole. I'll lay you ten-to-one odds he didn't get a permission slip to visit Chicago. There goes any chance we had of getting our hands on that camera. Unless..."

He glanced at his watch calculating the time difference between Chicago and New York. "I wonder how Virgil would feel about a midnight phone call."

Chapter Nine

Virgil answered the phone on the fourth ring.

“Yeah, you got VD here.”

“You really need to work on your phone manners, Virg. What if this was your mother calling.”

Virgil laughed. “Our mother goes to bed at ten. How’s Chicago, little cuz?”

“You’ll be happy to know I finally need a lawyer.”

“Jesus, you kidnapped her, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I’d let you talk to her but she’s tied to the bed so it’s hard for her to hold the phone.”

Virgil chuckled. “I’ll bet it’s hard for her. So tell me what’s so all fired important you’re keeping me from a late night John Wayne western. He was just about to shoot it out with the bad guys too.”

“Virg, you’ve seen those old reruns so often you know them verbatim. No wonder you’re crabby in the morning. Which is exactly why I’m calling now instead of waiting until ten tomorrow morning after you’ve had your third cup of coffee.”

“Smart boy. What’s up? Besides your testosterone.”

“There’s a guy in jail here who broke New York parole. His name is Benny Gomez. He had a camera with him that is no longer in his car. I imagine either the police confiscated it or Gomez kept it with him. How can I get my hands on that camera, or the card in it?”

“Sounds like that camera has Cynthia Harman written all over it.”

“That’s my guess. I suspected she had me followed when she called me here at the motel. You were the only person who knew where I was.”

“Are you that concerned about what’s on the pictures?”

Quint hesitated only a moment. “Yeah, but I’ll have to pay you so we can keep this confidential.”

“Consider me paid. What kind of trouble are you in?”

“Jamie needed a tape from Clay Riker’s house. So we went there intending to borrow it. We found the place trashed, and when we got back to our car, here’s this dude waiting for us. He snapped a couple of pictures. Before I could catch him, the police nabbed him.”

“You said Clay Riker—that would be the NASCAR driver?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Jesus Christ, Quint. There’s been breaking news for the last hour on that story.”

“Breaking news for an insignificant house tossing?”

“Insignificant my ass; they found a dead body in there.”

Quint swore under his breath. Jamie was sitting at full alert, staring at him.

“Who was it?” Quint asked.

“Unidentified, but they did say it wasn’t Riker. The guy was a white male, approximately thirty years old, allegedly bludgeoned to death with a poker. That’s all the info they’ve released. I’m not even going to ask if you had anything to do with that because I know better. Did you go into the house?”

“Unfortunately, yes. The back door was already open.”

“How long were you in there, and did you see anybody or anything?”

“We were only inside a couple of minutes. The house was already trashed, and I heard a door or window slam. We hightailed it when we heard the sirens. The only person we saw was the guy with the camera after we got out.”

“A convicted parole breaker. That could be good news or bad news, depending on how you look at it. He could witness that you were only in there a couple of minutes, not long enough to do the kind of mayhem they talked about on television, but on the other hand, he could also witness that you were there. If you heard the sirens, the alarm was probably already tripped before you went in. My guess is it wasn’t tripped on the break-in but often there’s another trip planted inside. Did you leave any fingerprints?”

“No, we both wore latex gloves.”

Virgil grunted, mumbling something about premeditated criminal thinking. “Would they have any reason to question Jamie?”

Quint took a deep breath. “She was engaged to Riker, but broke it off a few months ago.”

“Wonderful.”

“What about Benny Gomez?”

“How close to Riker’s place did they catch him?”

“Two or three miles, I’d guess.”

“Well, they may or may not connect him to it. If he hears anything about a break-in, he’ll likely clam up. He didn’t actually see you go in the house, did he?”

“I doubt it. We parked a ways away. And he was waiting there in his car. Hell of a mess, huh?”

“Yeah. I hope she’s worth it.”

Quint glanced at Jamie, who was trying to follow the one-sided conversation. “Definitely.”

“Then just sit tight. Don’t either one of you talk to anyone without me present unless Ms. LeCorre has another lawyer she wants to represent her. I’ll run a rap sheet on Gomez in the morning.”

“Thanks, Virg.”

“Don’t mention it, Quint. That’s what family is all about. You might get lucky; they’ll apprehend the perpetrators quickly and make it an open-and-shut case.”

“Yeah, maybe they left a calling card.”

When Quint hung up the phone Jamie rounded on him.

“You didn’t tell me you heard a door slam while we were in there. That means the burglar was still inside the house.”

“It’s worse than that, honey. They found a dead body inside.”

Jamie’s breath caught in her throat. “Clay?” she asked after a moment.

“No, it wasn’t Riker. The only description they gave was ‘an unidentified white male, approximately thirty years old’. Let’s see if we can catch a news flash.”

He grabbed the remote and pushed the power button. He didn’t have to go channel surfing to find a newscast; it was being covered on every local station. Reporters were broadcasting live in front of Riker’s house, capitalizing on the continuous flashing red lights behind them. They were repeating the same information Virgil had heard in New York. Apparently they didn’t have anything else to share. Quint flipped channels twice with the same results. Either they didn’t know any more or the police weren’t releasing what they did know.

Jamie was staring numbly at the screen. “Maybe there were two burglars and they got

into a fight and one killed the other,” she said, without conviction.

After fifteen minutes of watching the same thing over and over, and watching Jamie turn more ashen by the minute, Quint turned the television off. He moved to sit beside her on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

“I don’t think we’re going to learn any more until the police make a statement tomorrow. It’s almost midnight. Why don’t you lie down and rest?”

“Here?”

“Would that be so terrible? You can have the bed. I’ll bunk on the sofa. I’m not going to leap on top of you in the middle of the night, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Jamie gave him a forced smile. “Oh, darn, and I was so looking forward to that.”

Quint gave her shoulders a squeeze. “You’re made of some plucky stuff, little girl. I can see why you are respected on that racetrack. You refuse to show any sign of being a member of the weaker sex.”

Jamie’s head shot up. “That thing about men being the stronger sex is highly overstated. Granted, they’re physically stronger, but it’s common knowledge women can handle crises better than men.”

Quint laughed. “I can’t see this conversation going anywhere I want to be, so let’s call a truce on this subject for the time being.”

“I want to go home. I don’t see a VCR here, and after all the trouble we’ve gone through, I want to see that tape.”

“All right, I’ll drive you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jamie said wearily. “To be honest, I really don’t have a burning desire to be alone tonight. If you feel the same way, you can follow me home. It’s up to you.”

“I’ll follow you home.”

Jamie smiled. “Good. We can work out the sleeping arrangements when we get there. I have a spare room.”

Chuckling, Quint headed for the bathroom to retrieve his shaving kit. “On a separate floor, I imagine,” he said over his shoulder, not waiting for an answer. He came back in the bedroom to shut down and pack up his laptop. He tucked her tape into the side pocket of his case and slung it over his shoulder.

“Do me a favor,” he said, as they walked out the door. “Don’t break any laws on the way. I’ve had about as much excitement as I can stand for one night.”

“Ditto.”

* * * *

“What the fuck do you mean, you’re in jail?”

Benny Gomez glanced at the officer sitting at a desk less than five feet away. “I got picked up for speeding.”

“Gomez, you’re about the dumbest fuck I ever met. I don’t know why I even bother with you.”

Because finding people to jump through your asshole are in short supply, you miserable bitch. “I have those pictures you wanted.”

“What kind of pictures. What’s on them?”

“Look, Miss Harman, I’m sitting here in the Glenview police station. I had to break parole to come to Chicago.”

A loud irritated sigh erupted like a geyser through the phone. “Let me talk to the officer in charge.”

Benny handed the phone over to Sergeant Mitch Thompson. “It’s my boss. She wants to talk to you.”

Gomez sat impatiently but quietly listening. The sergeant did little more than nod and grunt, “uh huh.” Finally he handed the phone back to Benny and started shuffling some papers around on his desk.

“Yeah, it’s Benny.”

“He said you’re an insignificant little piss ant and not worth the cost of a phone call to New York. They’re going to let you go, but rest assured, you’re paying for your own damn speeding ticket. Next time rent a fucking Escort. Get those pictures e-mailed to me by tomorrow, and they better be good or your ass is—”

Benny hung up the phone before she could finish. He didn’t have any pictures that were worth shit. So he found the two of them on a dark back street doing what? Nothing. Nothing worth shit. He had to get pictures by tomorrow. Even if he had to create them on the computer.

* * * *

Quint followed directly behind Jamie as she turned north on the Edens Expressway. He

was still contemplating the fact that she'd asked him to go home with her. The woman never ceased to amaze him. Of one thing he was certain, she wasn't afraid to go home alone. That left only one other explanation. She wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her, even if it wasn't in a sexual way. Maybe getting to know each other wasn't such a bad idea. It might be easier if he hadn't already sampled every inch of her beautiful naked body.

As Quint merged on to the Skokie Highway behind Jamie, a car swerved around him going at least ninety miles an hour. He didn't see the driver but he got a glimpse of a late model gold Cadillac. Swearing, he cursed young rich kids determined to break their foolish necks trying to find out how fast daddy's big car would go. It passed Quint, swerved suddenly, and slammed full force into the passenger side of Jamie's BMW.

Quint watched, stunned, as Jamie's car plowed into the soft earth shoulder between the divided highways. She was being drawn into the sharp ditch and ultimately the oncoming traffic in the opposite lane. Somehow, in spite of the steep embankment, she kept her car under control and brought it back up on the road, going faster than she'd left it. The Cadillac stuck with her, bent on sideswiping her a second time. When he swerved at her again, she struck back with violent force. The two cars collided, crunching metal, once, twice, holding a deadly war of speed and power.

Quint kept up his foot on the accelerator, tailgating the Cadillac, talking himself out of jamming on the gas and rear-ending it and possibly making things worse for Jamie. He glanced at his speedometer, tasting bile in his throat while visions of another time, another car, flashed through his brain, bringing with it the sound of metal on metal and the smell of fire and death.

Both the BMW and the Cadillac were going in excess of seventy miles an hour, playing highway bumper cars. Jamie, obviously more skilled at their deadly game, rammed the Cadillac into the other lane where they were coming up quickly on another car. Clearly the Cadillac had the choice of backing off or slamming into the rear of the car ahead of it. It opted to back off, swaying erratically toward a missed exit. Ultimately it made the turn on two wheels, tearing up clumps of earth as it plunged and bounced through the ditch dividing the exit ramp from the highway.

Quint thought about going after the fleeing car but his first concern was making sure Jamie was okay.

Jamie's BMW, dragged to the side of the road by a front tire spewing putrid burnt-rubber

smoke over the hood, braked to a grating stop on the shoulder of the road. Quint skidded to a sliding halt within spitting distance of her rear bumper. He jammed his gearshift into park and vaulted from the car. She was stepping out of her own car when he reached her. He pulled her to her feet, anxiously examining her for wounds.

“My God, Jamie. Are you hurt?” he asked, looking for signs of blood or injury.

Shaking her head, she threw her arms around him. “No. I’m okay, just hold me,” she said, her voice a croaking whisper, her body trembling.

Quint held her. His arms were so tight around her he feared he was hurting her. It was the first time he’d seen her this way. He’d seen her go through worse on the racetrack, but somehow, this was different.

Then he realized his own hands were shaking. If she hadn’t managed to keep her car under control and get back on the road she would have slammed into the oncoming traffic in the other lane. A less experienced driver wouldn’t have had a chance. Even though she was trembling now, when that car hit her she had gone on automatic defensive driving.

Quint rubbed his hands over her back. “It’s okay, honey, it’s over.” He kissed the top of her head. Her soft body felt so damn good in his arms.

“Did you see who it was?” she asked, her face pressed in the curve of his arm. There was a small hiccup in her voice, suggesting she might have been on the verge of tears.

Quint smoothed his hand over her soft curls, brushing them back from her face. His arm tightened around her back. “No, the car went past me doing at least ninety. I thought it was teenagers out for a joyride.”

“That was no teenager,” she said bluntly.

“I’ll agree with that. I guess you didn’t see his face either?”

She shook her head, brining it up to look at him. “It all happened too fast. I’m sure of one thing, though. It was no accident.”

Her amber eyes sparkled like moist gold dust but she wasn’t crying. His throat tightened. It didn’t take Sherlock Holmes to see that someone had deliberately tried to kill her.

“I don’t suppose you were able to get the license number,” she said, without much conviction.

“Hell, I was close enough behind him to smell burning rubber and see the logo on the back of his cap. I really wanted to ram into the crazy maniac but I was afraid I’d just make

matters worse for you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t; you might have sent all three of us into a slide. Road cars aren’t equipped to handle slides the way race cars are.”

Quint managed a strained smile as he slipped his hands up to cup the sides of her face. “Sweetheart, I don’t think they’re made to play freeway bumper cars either. You didn’t get out of that mess by dumb luck; you’re one hell of a driver.”

He bent down and brushed her lips with a soft kiss. “And yes, by the way, I did get the license number.”

Before she could reply, two cars from the Lake Forest police department, complete with flashing lights and wailing sirens, appeared. The cars did a sandwich job, one close behind Quint’s car, and one in front of Jamie’s.

“I wondered how long it would take them to get here.” Quint mumbled as four officers approached them, two from each direction. He wanted to tell them they were a little late, instead, he whispered to Jamie. “Do we give them the information and let them handle it?”

“That would be my choice. They can get on it right away, maybe catch that lunatic.”

“My thoughts exactly. Whatever you say, but don’t mention Clay you-know-who’s name.”

“Do I look stupid?”

“No, just a little rattled.”

As it turned out the officer in charge recognized Jamie. He introduced himself as Sergeant Dickerson, took their statements, and had them on their way within half an hour. Another driver, who had witnessed the altercation, called it in on his cell phone. He’d given a detailed account of what had happened. Jamie’s story, confirmed by Quint, corroborated exactly.

The police called a tow truck for Jamie’s car and offered to give her a ride home.

“I’ll take her,” Quint said succinctly. His arm had remained possessively around her waist throughout the questioning. If the police wondered who he was or why he was following her, they didn’t ask.

It was only a mile to the Sunrise-on-the-Bluffs turnoff. Jamie was never so glad to be home. The rush of adrenaline gripping her system confused her. She had been in scrapes far worse. In her career, she had hit the wall at least twenty times, totaled two cars, and seriously

damaged at least ten more, but she'd never experienced raw fear the way she had tonight.

She realized her door was open and Quint was waiting for her to get out with his laptop case slung over his shoulder. She took the hand he offered, gripping it tighter than she'd intended to. Once inside, she locked the front door and turned to face him.

"I know what I said about separate rooms, Quint, but..."

"I wasn't planning to let you out of my sight tonight. I promise, I'll just hold you, nothing more."

Jamie smiled sheepishly. "I feel like such a baby, expecting that of you."

Quint cupped her chin with his hand and tipped her head up. "Please, don't think of it that way. Allow me just this once to take care of you. I get the feeling it's been a long time since someone has done that for you."

One year, six months, and twenty-two days. "Thank you," she said. "I do feel a little beat up. I'm going to a soak in a hot tub, if you don't mind. If you'd like a drink or something to eat you can help yourself. There's wine in the refrigerator and liquor behind the bar in the sitting room."

She didn't need to point the way because the house was one airy cavernous room. Three marble pillars spanning two stories supported the roof and an open loft. A white wrought iron staircase spiraled around the center pillar leading the way to the main bedroom loft. The entire length of it looked down on the sitting room, and was separated only by a metal railing with an oriental floral design. Four skylights supplied light for the house.

Jamie trudged up the staircase, aware that Quint watched her. She stopped midway and looked back at him, meeting his gaze.

"Give me a few minutes," she said. "Maybe you could bring me a glass of white wine."

He nodded without taking his eyes off her face.

When she turned and started back up the stairs Quint blew out a sigh of either relief or regret, he wasn't sure which. He would have had no trouble following her, undressing her, and doing all the things he'd spent the last week thinking about. She was unquestionably ready to forget about getting to know each other, but tomorrow she might regret it and blame him for taking advantage of her in a weakened state. God knows it was the first one he'd seen in her. She looked so sweet, so vulnerable, so damned sexy.

He was a jerk for even thinking about capitalizing on that.

He had to get his mind off her body before he abandoned his good intentions and indulged in his bad ones.

A cheery breakfast nook with daisy cushions was nestled in a corner overlooking Lake Michigan. The window well was alive with greenery. He couldn't name any of the leafy plants but counted at least ten different varieties. He set his laptop on the table, grabbed an apple from the counter and strolled into the sitting room. The sofa and chairs were all in coordinating prints with blooming red roses and rose buds on black fabric; they looked so real he thought he could smell them. He realized the fragrance came from two vases on a polished black side table. One held five pink roses, one five red roses. He recognized the five he'd sent but wondered about the long-stemmed pink ones. There was no card attached.

He headed for the bar along one wall. The black surface of the bar gleamed like midnight on a still lake. A massive fern covered a third of it. He found a bottle of brandy and a snifter in a glass cabinet, poured two fingers, replaced the bottle and headed back to the kitchen. A smile twitched his lips when he noticed an open door across the room leading to the spare bedroom. There was also a door to a sunroom that looked out over the lake.

Swirling his brandy, Quint wandered into the sunroom. Two large wicker chairs covered with red and yellow floral cushions were tucked under tall broad-leafed plants. Potted flowering vines hung from the open cedar beams while other colorful pots filled every available corner. Every plant was lush and green, obviously well tended. It was like walking into a Caribbean hideaway. That's when he remembered Delta Douglas telling him about how much Jamie loved plants. He imagined Jamie curled up in one of the chairs reading a book or staring out over the lake. The thought stepped up the pace of his heartbeat. Sighing, he took one last deep breath of the earthy scent and left the room.

He went back to the kitchen, set his drink down, and hooked up his computer to her telephone line. In a matter of minutes he was scanning numbers, looking for the owner of a gold Cadillac with Illinois plates.

While he worked he thought about the cap he'd seen with the logo on it. All he could make out was a dark color, possibly green with yellow or gold entwining circles—three or four of them. It reminded him of the Olympics emblem. There were probably a million caps like it.

It may not be important but he'd forgotten to tell Jamie or the police about the cap. He

would mention it to Jamie tomorrow. Maybe it would mean something to her.

Forty-five minutes later a familiar name popped up in front of him.

For several heart pumping moments, Quint stared at the screen, disbelievingly. Then he wondered how he would tell Jamie that the car that ran her off the road was registered to one Raymond Bentler.

Chapter Ten

It was a strange dream. She dreamed that she was sleeping, wrapped in a giant cocoon. She snuggled deeper into the safety and warmth of it, nuzzling her face against a thick furry wall.

When she opened her eyes, her lashes fluttered butterfly-soft against a matt of crisp fur pressed to her face. She realized it wasn't the first time she'd awakened with her body intimately entwined this exact same way. Quint's arm rested possessively, but lax, over her shoulder, his muscular thigh pressed intimately between her legs, riding high enough to make her blush if she thought he was doing it consciously.

His chest rose deeply and slowly. She could feel the movement of his breath in her hair. His warmth transferred a disturbing heat to her body.

Without moving the rest of her body, Jamie tilted her head up enough to view the skylight. There was a pale pinkish, gray sky overhead. It was about six-thirty; the time she normally got up to exercise and run. She was amazed that she had slept peacefully through the night. The last thing she remembered was putting her nightshirt on and crawling into bed. Quint must have joined her sometime later, quietly, so as not to disturb her.

For a few delicious moments she remained motionless, basking in his warmth, savoring his musky male smell, enjoying the muscular firmness of his body. She couldn't tell if he was wearing anything below the waist. Her imagination said he was nude. Every inch of her skin started to tingle where it touched him. If she continued lying next to him, in a few scant seconds, she'd start rubbing her body all over him.

Holding her breath, she eased herself from the tangle of his limbs. He reached out to her in his sleep as though seeking her warmth, but didn't awaken. She quickly pulled the covers over his bare shoulders. Not until she was clear of the bed did she allow herself to fully breathe. She noticed the glass of pink Chablis on her nightstand beside the phone, and was thankful he couldn't see her face—it was surely the same color as the wine. He was in her bed by her own invitation. Why hadn't he awakened her?

She hurriedly dressed in her jogging suit and had her foot on the first step when the phone rang. She raced to answer it but was too late. Quint's eyes opened as he shoved the covers away, staring at her as though trying to orient himself. She grabbed the phone before it could ring again, willing him to go back to sleep. That was wishful thinking. His gaze focused on her before she had the phone to her ear.

She tore her eyes away from him, but not before she got a glimpse of blue boxer shorts.

"Hello," she said into the receiver.

Buster LeCorre's voice barked back at her. "Jamie, where the hell have you been? I tried to reach you until midnight. Then your line was busy the rest of the night. What on earth kept you on the phone that long?"

Jamie knew he didn't really care if she was on the phone, or with whom. He was just irritated because he couldn't reach her when he wanted to. "What do you want, Buster?"

"Why can't you call me Dad when we're not at the track?"

The question caught Jamie off guard. She bit back the answer she wanted to give him. "All right, *Dad*, what do you want?"

"I imagine you know about the mess over at Riker's place?"

"Yes, I—"

"Just tell me you had nothing to do with that shit! I know you're pissed at him for whatever went on between the two of you, and he's been an ass on the track but that's no reason for you to—"

Red splotches flared like blinding firebombs in front of her eyes. "Jiminy Christmas, Buster, give me some credit. You actually think I would go into his house and tear it apart just because—"

"Somebody was killed in there."

Jamie dropped to the edge of the bed. "And you think I did it?"

"Hell, how do I know? Where were you last night?"

Buster shouted so loud, Quint was able to hear his words. When Jamie didn't answer, Quint pried the phone from her shaking fingers.

"She was with me—all night," he snapped into the phone.

"Who the hell are you?" Buster asked.

“Somebody that knows your daughter better than you do, apparently.”

Except for his heavy breathing Buster was quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was considerably calmer. “All night, including the evening?” he asked.

Quint noted that Buster was more concerned about his daughter’s whereabouts during the break-in than he was about the fact that she’d spent the night with someone he didn’t know. It wasn’t Quint’s place to set the man’s priorities straight or to remind him of a father’s trust in his offspring.

“Yes, we went out to eat. She never left my sight all night.”

“Thank God. Now who the hell are you?”

Quint held the phone aside. He touched Jamie’s arm. When she turned to look at him, unshed tears filled her eyes.

“He wants to know who I am,” Quint said softly. “What do you want me to tell him?”

“I don’t care,” she said, her voice breaking. “Tell him I picked you up in a bar—whatever. I’m going jogging. I’ll be back in a half hour.”

Quint watched her until the top of her head disappeared down the stairs. Then he realized Buster LeCorre was still talking on the phone. Reluctantly, Quint put the receiver back to his ear.

“...can’t understand why the phone was busy all night, if you were there.”

“The phone was busy because I was connected to the Internet,” Quint said.

An irritated grumble came over the line. “I’m going to ask one more time. Who the hell are you?”

Quint resisted the urge to hang up on him. After all, he was Jamie’s father and if he wanted to have a relationship with her, he had to say something. “A friend. I’m a friend.”

“All right, so don’t tell me your name. Just answer one question—are you involved in NASCAR? Are you a driver, by chance?”

“That’s two questions. The answer to both of them is no.”

Buster released a short huff of air. “Thank goodness. She needs to find friends off the track. I keep trying to tell her that, but she never listens to me. Has her own mind, stubborn as hell like her mother, and determined as hell, like me. What a goddamn combination. That’s what makes her such a good driver...and that’s what’s going to get her killed one of these days. I keep telling her, she doesn’t have to win. Hell, just placing in the top five makes her one of the best drivers in the country and keeps Bentler more than happy.”

Quint's spine straightened. "So Bentler is happy with her performance?" he asked.

"Hell, yes. Naturally he wants a win, we all do, but not at the expense of her life. She's aggressive and that's what it takes, but she—hell, I wish she'd get her win because maybe then she'd give it up."

Quint thought he'd heard wrong. "You don't like her racing?" he asked.

"Shit no, I already lost T-Roy to the tracks. I don't want to lose her too."

"Have you told her that?"

"Fuck, you don't tell her anything. I can't even have a normal conversation with her and she's all over my ass. If she quits, it's going to have to be her decision. And I'll give you a word of advice, if you're her friend don't even suggest it or you'll be her ex-friend quicker'n a thirteen-second pit stop."

"I'll remember that," Quint replied, pulling the phone with him over to the window. Below, he could see Jamie leaving for her run with Leibers in tow. The sun hadn't risen yet but the sky was lightening up, making visibility good except for a steamy fog hanging over the lake. Down the beach a ways he saw at least one other person out for early morning exercise.

If she hadn't stuck him with Buster LeCorre, Quint would have run with her. He guessed she probably knew that.

"You still with me, boy?" Buster asked.

"Yeah, I'm here. And you can call me Quint." He wasn't exactly sure what did it but sometime during their conversation Buster had gained an inkling of Quint's respect.

"Well, okay, Quint. Can you put Jamie back on the line?"

"She left to go running."

"See, that's what I mean about her. Dammit. Well, maybe you can tell her. The boys want her to stop down at the shop today. They're putting the finishing touches on her car for the Monte Carlo 400 this weekend and they have some questions for her."

"I can tell her that."

"Oh, yeah, and in case she hasn't heard—that guy they found dead at Clay's place was Jim Bodean. She knows him. He ran that crab shack she always goes to. Thank God, she has an alibi."

Quint digested that bit of information while he showered. So it was Jimbo. The fellow who called the restaurant and had a bottle of wine sent to their table. Jamie was in for yet another

jolt when she heard that unhappy tidbit. He already wondered how she would respond to the news that Ray Bentler owned the car that ran her off the road.

He finished shaving, put the same clothes on he'd worn the night before, and was coming down the stairs when Jamie walked in the back door.

One look at his face and she stopped short. "Sorry for dumping Buster on you," she said. "Was he his usual prick of a self?"

Quint approached her, smiling. He held out his arms. "I don't know about you, but I could use a friendly hug."

Jamie returned his smile. "That bad, huh." She went to him, more than happy to accommodate his request.

Quint gave her a brotherly kiss on the cheek. "No, it wasn't bad at all. I found myself kind of liking the man."

Jamie pulled away from his embrace. "He gave you the I-lost-one-kid-to-racing-I-don't-want-to-lose-another-one routine didn't he?"

Quint laughed. "As a matter of fact, yes."

"He only uses that on his non-racing victims. No one else would fall for it."

"Come to think of it, the first things he asked me was if I was involved in racing."

She gave him a look that had, *sucker*, written all over it. Stepping around him, she gave him a teasing swat on the rear, and escaped toward the spiral staircase. "I'm going to take a quick shower. I'll make breakfast when I'm done."

"If you don't mind me rattling around your kitchen, I can fix something."

She was already halfway up the stairs. "Rattle away. Surprise me. I'll eat anything but tater bunnies. I get their furry little tails caught in my teeth."

Quint's gaze followed her. "I hope you realize I'm going to get even with you for that one."

She vanished to the far end of the loft, but her silky laughter drifted down to him. He couldn't remember a time when he'd enjoyed a woman's laughter more. He couldn't remember a woman who made his body leap to attention just by looking at him. Cynthia was sensuality personified. She lived it and worked it, always to her advantage. When it came to sex she was greedy and selfish. Jamie's sexual appeal was fresh and natural. How could he ever have thought her to be a hooker?

There was time enough later to tell her about Jimbo. Let her have a few precious stress free minutes. She deserved it after last night.

While he hunted for supplies in the kitchen, Quint thought about Buster. The man had sounded so sincere. Either he was an excellent actor or Jamie was wrong about him. Quint hoped the latter was true. Even without parents of his own he knew the value of family. Being raised in Hank and Delta's home gave him three brothers and a sister. Virgil, Hunter, Stephen, and Corrine were closer to him than his biological family.

He rarely saw his brother, Grant, or his sister, Myra, and her husband, Patrick. They all lived in upstate New York. Myra was fifteen years older than Quint, he hardly remembered her living at home. She called regularly and never forgot his birthday or Christmas. More than once she'd begged him to come visit. Myra and Patrick had two teenage sons that Quint had only seen a couple of times. He knew it wasn't fair to them. Maybe he would drive up and see them when he got home. He wondered if he might talk Jamie into going with him.

Corrine and Billy's baby was due in about six weeks, which meant Delta was finally getting her wish for grandchildren. Especially with Hunter and Nicole adopting Shanna and Kyle. Plus, the way those two lovebirds were hot for each other; it wouldn't be too surprising if they came back from their honeymoon pregnant.

Quint cracked eggs into a bowl, smiling to himself. He hadn't thought much about having kids of his own, but right now the idea seemed like a good one.

Watching Jamie bounce down the steps a few minutes later reinforced that thought. She wore a pair of snug jeans and a loose fitting pink silk blouse. Her head was a crowning glory of perky blond curls. She said she'd cut her hair before going to the wedding, hoping it would help keep her incognito. He hadn't seen it long, but he liked her look just the way it was now. He liked it a lot.

She came up close behind him, peering around his shoulder. The top of her head brushed his chin. She smelled of roses, toothpaste, and woman. His testosterone kicked into overdrive.

She made a hungry, purring sound. "Mmmm, smells delicious. I'm starving."

So am I, sweetheart, but not for scrambled eggs. "It's nothing special but it should do the trick. Grab a seat and I'll dish it up."

Jamie slid into the daisy-cushioned booth where he already had glasses of grapefruit juice, silverware, and napkins set out. "Maybe we should switch the TV on and see if they

identified that body in Clay's house yet."

Quint spooned scrambled eggs on two plates, topped them off with parsley and toast. He set one plate in front of her and one across from her. He sat down hoping he could prolong telling her until they'd finished eating. "Why don't we wait until we've eaten," he said.

Her hand stopped midway to reaching for her juice glass. "What haven't you told me?" she demanded, staring at him.

Quint grabbed his fork and stabbed his eggs. This woman picked up signals better than a lighthouse beacon. "It was Jim Bodean," he said softly, watching her expression go from carefree to crestfallen in the space of two seconds. Tears sprung up in her eyes just as quickly.

"Oh, my God. I was so afraid of that," she whispered, putting a hand over her mouth.

Quint couldn't hide his surprise. "You suspected it was Jimbo?"

Jamie nodded, blinking rapidly. "He spent a lot of time at Clay's house, even before Clay and I broke up. I didn't think about it too seriously because I couldn't imagine anybody wanting to harm Jimbo." She stopped talking for a moment, going on in a quiet voice. "I just don't understand it. Who could do that? He was the sweetest, kindest, most sensitive person I ever met. If only he—"

Jamie lifted her eyes to look at Quint. She dropped her gaze, drained her juice glass, and started scooping eggs in her mouth.

Quint stared at her, waiting for her to go on. She had suddenly found a ravenous appetite for eggs.

"If only he—what, Jamie? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," she said, through a mouthful of toast.

"Did you date Jimbo? Is that what you were going to say? That you had a thing going with Clay's best friend? What are you hiding?"

Jamie swallowed, looked at Quint, and held up her glass. "May I have some more juice, please?"

The doorbell rang.

When she jumped up to answer it, Quint grabbed her arm. "In case that's the police, Virgil suggested we don't answer any questions without a lawyer present. He'll represent both of us if we need him."

"You think they might be here to ask where I was last night?"

“Very possibly. It’s no secret you gave Clay Riker the boot. The commentator even mentioned it during the race Sunday.”

“All right, I understand,” she said, walking toward the door. “I’ll have to remember to thank Matt Hurley for bringing my personal life up during a race. He should know better than to tee off a driver he may want to interview someday.”

Quint sympathized with the announcer as he followed Jamie into the foyer. He hung back, staying out of sight where he could still listen.

She opened the door to the same officer who had offered her a ride home after her BMW had to be towed.

“Sergeant Dickerson?” Jamie asked, addressing him by name. “I hope your being here means you caught the idiot who ran me off the road.”

Dickerson removed his hat. “No ma’am, we didn’t get him, but we did find the car, and we know who it belongs to. Unfortunately, it was reported stolen yesterday afternoon. We’re having it dusted for prints, but unless the driver has a record all we can do is put them on file. Just thought you’d want to know, and I also wanted to see how you were doing.”

Jamie sighed. “I’m fine, just a few bruises. No more than I get every Sunday at the track. Thanks for asking.”

Dickerson expanded his chest, smiling. “No problem, Ms. LeCorre. I hope you’re feeling better today. Give me a call if you remember anything.”

Jamie nodded and closed the door. She looked at Quint and shrugged. “So much for that.”

Quint grunted. “He failed to give you one vital bit of information.”

“And what would that be?”

“The car belonged to Ray Bentler.”

Jamie stared at him as though he had lost his mind. “How could you possibly know that?” Suddenly she threw up her hands. “Oh, I forgot, you’re the master sleuth. Just exactly how long have you been hiding this vital bit of information?”

“Since last night, after you went to bed.”

“You could have woken me up!”

Quint gave her an intense look. “If I had gotten you up, we wouldn’t have been talking about Ray Bentler.”

Jamie opened her mouth but couldn’t think of a safe comeback. “How long have you

known about Jimbo?”

“Your father told me.”

“Oh, yeah, your close personal friend, Buster LeCorre!” She brushed past him, stomped to the kitchen and started clearing dishes.

Quint followed her. “Why do you hate your father anyway?”

She dropped the dishes in the sink with a loud clatter and turned on the tap. “I don’t hate him; he hates me.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you. I’m just trying to understand. I always believed a father’s love was unconditional.”

Jamie gripped the edge of the sink and turned to look at him with narrowed eyes. “Maybe in your fairy-tale home. In mine, Buster LeCorre used up all his love on T-Roy. I was just two months shy of my fifth birthday when the authorities came and took me from my mother’s home. I never went to a funeral. I don’t even know how she died; they wouldn’t tell me. They just whisked me off to Chicago and literally dumped me on Buster’s doorstep. Up until that moment he didn’t even know I existed. To say he was unhappy to see me is putting it mildly. I don’t know what I’d have done if T-Roy hadn’t been there. He was only ten years old himself but he took me under his wing like I was a brand new puppy. The first thing Buster did was drag both of us off to a clinic hoping to prove I wasn’t his. He wasn’t one bit pleased with the results.

“I literally grew up on the racetrack. From the age of thirteen I started cooking for the crew, hoping that would make Buster notice me. It didn’t. I never got so much as a thank you from him. He constantly reminded me that I looked just like my mother. My mother was beautiful, but from him it was hardly a compliment, since he repeatedly reminded both T-Roy and I how he felt about her. On my birthdays the crew would get together and buy me a cake and have a party. He’d stand on the sidelines, watching, brooding. I used to pretend he really wanted to join in but was embarrassed by all the gushing the crew did over me.”

Jamie stared out the window at the lake. As the memories washed over her, she continued in a subdued voice. “The worst insult came when I graduated from high school. When T-Roy graduated he got a red Corvette convertible. It wasn’t new but it was the prettiest thing I ever saw. You know what I got? He gave T-Roy fifty bucks to get me a used guitar. I suspect T-Roy might even have done it on his own pretending it was from *Daddy*.

“*Daddy* didn’t know I was alive until I started racing. And he fought that tooth and nail

until Ray Bentler threatened to drop him as a sponsor. I'll give him credit for one thing—he may be a rotten father but he's an A-one crew chief. When I'm out there on the track and he's talking into my headphones, he treats me exactly like he did T-Roy. It's the only time I can relate to him.”

Jamie stared at the eggs and uneaten toast swimming in the dishwater. “I hope you were done eating,” she said in a choked voice.

Quint put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. “Come here, you nut, I think it's your turn for a hug.”

Breathing deeply, Jamie pressed her face into his firm chest, slipping her arms around his back. He held her, rubbing her back, smoothing her hair, and crooning rhythmic sounds of comfort.

He rubbed his cheek on the silky smoothness of her hair, breathing in her scent. “Jamie?”

“Yeah?”

“When you were a little girl, did you dream about being a race car driver?”

“No.” There was a subtle hitch in her voice. “I wanted to run my own flower shop, grow plants, and sell floral arrangements. Silly, isn't it?”

Quint smiled over the top of her head. “No, not silly, just practical. Most girls want to be ballerinas or fairy princesses. I only have to look around your house to see how much you care about growing things. Why did you start racing?”

“T-Roy wanted me to. He trained me and coached me. I tagged along behind him everywhere he went. I would have done anything for him. It was fun while he was alive. We did it together.”

“Is it still fun?”

Jamie pushed herself away from him and brushed a hand over her eyes. “It's a job whether I like it or not, I'm good at it. People depend on me. The crew, the guys in the shop, the sponsors.” She looked up at him with a half smile on her face. “Is this a new ploy to get me to quit?”

Quint grimaced playfully. “Dang, you caught me. Have I told you that you are one sharp lady?” His brows rose suddenly. “Oh, I almost forgot. Buster asked me to tell you the boys at the shop wanted you to stop by; they have questions.”

Jamie sighed. “I'm usually there by this time after a race. I guess I better go see about

renting a car until mine is fixed.”

“No problem,” Quint said smiling. “I’ll drive you. I’d like to see your shop, if you don’t mind.”

Jamie managed a smile. “Well, that will put the boys into a tizzy. I can’t wait.”

“I need to call Virgil before we go—see if he found anything on Benny Gomez. He’s probably tried me at the motel by now. I doubt he would call here.”

“Let him call,” Jamie said. “I can think of a couple of things I’d like to discuss with him.”

“Be nice,” Quint said, picking up the phone and dialing. “We may need a lawyer.”

“That’s not going to spare him from a tongue lashing for his part in labeling me a hooker.”

Quint smirked as he left her phone number on Virgil’s answering machine. “There, that ought to get his attention. And when he calls you can have at him.”

Chapter Eleven

“Fifteen. You have up to fifteen cars in the making at the same time?”

“Turn left at the next light,” Jamie said. “Of course. Did you think we run the same car every week?”

When Quint didn’t answer Jamie looked over at him and laughed. “You really aren’t NASCAR savvy, are you?”

Quint grinned, taking pleasure in her laughter. “I reckon not. Maybe you could give me a little education before we get there so I don’t look like a complete idiot.”

“I’ll try, but your best defense might be to do more listening than talking, because we’re almost there. Take the Y to the right.”

“Point taken. Now educate me, quickly.”

“Okay. I’ll just touch on some of the basics. First off, there are three kinds of tracks: short track, long track, and road track. Each track needs a different type of car. On short tracks, like Bristol, you can’t get much speed, so the concentration is on the turns. On the long tracks, like Charlotte and Daytona, speed plays the biggest part, but the cars have built in restrictor plates to keep them from going too fast.”

“That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Speed kills. Make a right just after the stop sign. It’s at the end of that road, so hush up and listen. You can ask questions later. Cars for both short and long tracks have tires built for curves going one direction. Road tracks, like Sears Point, are longer and have a number of sharp S curves. Those take the most skill because you need to adjust to the constant changes.”

“I’ll bet those are the tracks you are best on.”

Jamie smiled. “Pull up right over there beside the Camry.” When Quint stopped the car, she turned to him as she opened her door. “Be prepared for a little ribbing. These guys can be merciless, and I’ve never come here with an escort before.”

“Never?”

“Never. As a competitor, Clay wasn’t allowed in our shop. There is an element of secrecy here. Just don’t let it get out that all our cars are pink.”

“Same color as tater bunnies, right?”

Jamie caught Quint’s eye over the roof of the car. She winked. “You got it, honey.”

All activity stopped when Jamie walked into the shop, followed by Quint. She gave Quint’s first name, nothing more, as she went down the line making introductions and explaining each man’s area of expertise. “Ted and his son Chad do the fabricating; they hang the bodies to fit the frames. Tim Andrews and Jason Kelp build the engines. Hal Waller is the suspension expert...”

As she introduced each of the twelve men working in various areas of the shop, they all—except Markus, who was ensconced behind a computer—greeted Quint with cordial nods or handshakes. Markus managed a thin smile that came nowhere near his eyes and returned immediately to punching keys.

“Friendly chap,” Quint whispered when they were out of hearing range.

“Markus is the substitute driver. He had my job for three weeks while I was out with my injured knee. He wasn’t too happy about giving it up. He wasn’t doing so well so I guess Buster reamed him a new rectum, but what’s surprising about that.”

Quint chose not to comment.

Tim called Jamie back to the car he was working on. Quint followed, curious and captivated at the same time. He wondered how many spectators actually knew what went on behind the scenes, that the cars were literally built from scratch, including the engines. As Jamie had said, more than a dozen cars were either being worked on or were waiting in stations in different stages of completion. He had a number of questions but Jamie was already engaged in a discussion with Tim about engine tune-ups and spark plugs. Not wanting to interfere, he walked over to watch the body men press sheet metal.

Ted, the senior member of the team, stood up, stretching his back. He had a weathered face from too much sun, and a gravelly voice from too many smoke breaks. His kind eyes settled with obvious affection on Jamie. “I’ve known that little girl since she was just a munchkin,” he told Quint. “Most of the guys have been here at least ten years, some longer. We tend to be a little protective of her.” He gave Quint a skeptical once-over. “Have you known her long?”

“A while,” Quint replied, remembering Jamie’s advice about talking less and listening

more.

Ted wiped his hands on a grease rag. “What was your last name again?”

Quint knew that Jamie hadn’t given his last name. He didn’t know why, but saw no reason to hide it. “Douglas, Quint Douglas.”

Ted rolled the name over his tongue. “Quint Douglas? Hmm. Can’t say I recognize the name but it sure seems like I’ve seen you somewhere before. Are you involved in racing? With another crew maybe?”

Quint shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

Chad popped his head up from beneath a metal panel. “Yeah, I had that same feeling. Like I know you, but can’t recall from where.” Chad had a cropped haircut straight out of *Grease*, and looked as though he had only recently graduated from peach fuzz to full time shaving.

Jamie had warned Quint about taking a ribbing, and he started to get the feeling he was being set up. She was still talking to Tim, this time from inside the car where she was pumping the brake pedal. Quint turned back to his two antagonists. “This is my first trip to Chicago, so I doubt that I’ve met either one of you before.”

Hal was listening and watching from a bench stool in the next stall. He stood up to lean over the short wall that separated his department from the fabricators. What Hal lacked in height he made up for in don’t-mess-with-me shoulders, and biceps wide enough to tattoo the Constitution on. Quint made a mental note not to challenge the man in an arm wrestling contest.

“I just figured it out,” Hal said, nodding toward Quint. “He was in the picture with Jamie on that dumb show we watched the other night.”

Ted’s brows drew together as he studied Quint’s face. “Hells fire, you’re right.”

“Yeah, it’s him,” Chad agreed.

Quint stared from one to the other of the three men; all had apprehensive eyes trained on him. If this was a set up, it was a good one. Curious, he decided to let them play it out. “What show and what picture?”

Hal answered. “That sleazy Harman dame’s show. She had a picture of Jamie being carried out of a church.”

“Yeah,” Chad chimed in. “She always ends her show with compromising pictures of celebrities. Then she puts her own nasty little captions on them. People have tried to sue her, but

the pictures are always legitimate. And the captions aren't necessarily factual, they're just suggestive."

Quint's heart started doing double-time. He knew all about Cynthia's damaging pictures. Harman's *Suffer the Consequences*—compliments of Cynthia's personal paparazzi.

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "What did the caption say?"

Markus came up behind Hal chuckling. "It went something like, *Wedding singer, Jamie LeCorre, carried from church. Was she too drunk to walk? Is that why she used a fake name? Should this woman be allowed to jeopardize men's lives on NASCAR speedways?*"

Ted fixed Markus with a piercing glare. "You memorized that quite well for a person with a single digit IQ." He turned back to Quint. "Those of us who know Jamie didn't put much weight on that caption. Since you were obviously there, Quint, maybe you could shed some light. In case this comes up again."

Quint was struck by Ted's sincerity. "No big mystery," he said. "She was on crutches and on the verge of falling. I caught her, lifted her up, and carried her to the horse-drawn carriage. The carriage was quite high, and she would have had a difficult time climbing into it with a bum leg. That's all, nothing earth shattering."

"Lucky for her you were there," Markus said, sarcastically.

"Markus, you're a first class asshole," Hal retorted. "But you probably already know that."

Markus's face turned a bristling shade of red. "Fuck you, Waller!" He whirled around, tossed a one-finger salute over his shoulder, and stomped back to his desk.

Ted grinned. "I have a hunch, Hal, that *asshole* is the only first place he's going to get any time soon."

"He could get lucky and drive past a thirty-three-car pileup," Chad drawled.

They were all laughing when Jamie appeared at Quint's side. "Ted, are you telling that lame joke about the Canary Islands again?"

"Would we be laughing?" Hal quipped.

Jamie smiled. "I hate to break up your party, but I'm ready to go. I have a route to map out."

"You gonna tell her?" Ted asked Quint.

"Tell me what?" Jamie demanded.

* * * *

“That woman is starting to annoy me big time,” Jamie said after Quint had filled her in about Harman’s *Suffer the Consequences* photo. “I’ve never watched her show long enough to see the ending.”

“Yeah, well, that’s always her big finale.”

“I suppose she stays within the confines of the law.”

When Jamie didn’t get a response she glanced at Quint. He was staring out the window through narrowed eyes. Leaving him to his thoughts, Jamie tried to think of a way to get back at the vicious Ms. Harman. There must be something she could do to beat Harman at her own game. Jamie was not, after all, without recourse. She had access to the media at the snap of a finger. Normally she refused interviews but...

“Where did Markus work before he was hired by your team?” Quint asked, drawing Jamie from her plotting.

Jamie made a snorting sound. “He wasn’t exactly hired. He’s one of Bentler’s illegitimate sons.”

Quint muttered something under his breath, looking out at the passing landscape. He shook his head. “So, Markus Bentler—”

“Not Bentler. His name is Lasco. Bentler has a wife.”

“Jesus. Okay, so Markus Lasco would be more than happy to see you incapacitated.”

A deep furrow creased Jamie’s brow. “Are you thinking what I’m suddenly thinking?”

“Who would have better access to Bentler’s car?”

“I can’t believe Markus would be that desperate. I never considered him a threat.”

“Could his father be a party to it?”

Jamie gave him a wide-eyed stare. “No, not possible. Bentler’s a bottom line man. Money talks. I make him more money in one race than Markus could all year. Besides, if he had a burning desire to let his son drive, he could run a backup car. A lot of drivers have one.”

Quint frowned. “What’s a backup car?”

“It’s when one owner has two cars in the same race. One more or less assists the other one, blocking or drafting. Whatever it takes to help the lead driver.”

Quint made a turn into a Perkins restaurant. “I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. My breakfast was cut a little short this morning. You okay with Perkins?”

“Sounds like a winner to me,” Jamie said. She gave Quint a contrite look as she got out of the car. “Sorry about breakfast. They really were splendid eggs. I finished mine.”

Quint laughed. “That’s because you stuffed them in your mouth to avoid answering questions.” He opened the door for her and guided her in with his hand on the small of her back. “What were we talking about anyway?”

“They have great food here.”

Quint gave her a quizzical frown. He obviously knew she was avoiding the subject of Jimbo, but he let it drop and waited until the waitress had taken their order to get back to their original discussion.

“If I understand this backup car business, it seems to me the lesser driver would be making the way for the more experienced one instead of the other way around.”

“You’re a fast learner,” Jamie said reaching for a packet of strawberry jam nestled in a holder. She opened it up, scooped the contents out with a spoon, and popped it in her mouth.

Quint stared at her disbelievingly as she made succulent sounds, licking her lips. “What are you doing? You’re supposed to put that on toast.”

“Says who?” she asked, opening a second packet.

“I don’t know. It’s just how it’s done.”

“Where is it written that jam can only be eaten on toast?”

“In the book of etiquette, I’m sure.”

“Actually, the book of etiquette says jam can be eaten as dessert and that’s what I’m doing, having dessert.”

“You eat dessert at the end of your meal.”

“Says who?”

Quint put his head in his hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. His shoulders shook with helpless laughter. “Okay, I give up. I’ll just have to learn not to question anything weird you do from now on.”

Jamie smiled. “Good. That was the object of this little test.”

He brought his head up to stare at her. “You’ve never done that before in your life, have you?”

Her smile turned into a perky grin. “No.”

“Just how many packages of jam would you have eaten to make this point?”

“Sorry, this getting-to-know-each other session is over.”

“Well, I can tell you what I learned from it. Beware anytime I take you into a public place, especially restaurants.”

He wasn’t sure what had done it but Jamie’s face lit up like a sky-filled Fourth-of-July fireworks, and her eyes crinkled mischievously.

Quint chuckled. “Okay, what did I say to send you off on the funny train.”

“That’s just what T-Roy used to say.”

“I guess I should feel sorry for T-Roy.”

“Don’t, he was worse than I am. He liked to embarrass the waitresses. One time he brought a tiny goldfish to a diner. He slipped it into his water glass and told the server the water tasted odd. She picked up the glass and started back to the kitchen with it. All of a sudden she screamed and dropped the glass. It shattered all over the floor. The manager came running and started yelling at her, threatening to fire her. T-Roy was laughing so hard, I was afraid he was going to let her fry, so I stepped in and explained what happened. I accused T-Roy of being an insensitive clod and told him if he didn’t apologize to her I’d never go out to eat with him again.”

“So did he apologize?”

Jamie laughed. “Yeah, and then he hit her up for a date. He could be so damn charming when he wanted to be, the girl actually went out with him.”

Forty minutes later they were getting into the car when Jamie stopped and slapped her forehead. “God, I forgot all about the tape. All that trouble we went through, and I haven’t even watched it yet.”

“You do realize that you can’t use anything you find on that tape without explaining where you got it?”

Jamie looked at him and swore under her breath. “I didn’t think about that. I hate it when you say something I can’t argue with.” She yanked the door open and got in.

Quint slipped behind the wheel. “I’ll need to stop at my motel. I could use a change of clothes.”

“We also better stop at the body shop and see how long it will be until they get my car fixed.”

Quint nodded. “Just show me the way. Until it’s ready, I don’t mind at all being your

chauffeur.”

She gave him a dubious glance as he pulled out on the highway. “I have to leave for Richmond Friday night. Saturday is qualifying day.”

“Yeah, I was getting the drift of that in the shop this morning.” He looked over at her, hesitating a moment. “How would you feel if I came to your race? Would it make you uncomfortable?”

Jamie laughed. “Not at all, but it might be boring for you.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Again she laughed. “No, unless you really enjoy racing, watching cars speed around a track, especially a short track. Richmond is only three-quarters of a mile. After three or four hours, it can get to be a little tedious for the spectators.”

“Why, especially, a short track?”

“Because the turns are so close together you’re on the brake nearly as much as you’re on the accelerator. On the other hand, there’s usually more excitement in the crash department.”

“You call crashing excitement?”

“No, but the fans do. You think they come just to watch us go around and around the track? They want to see action.”

“Christ. It sounds like a bloody gladiators competition. I wonder if I can watch you doing that.”

She gave him an impish grin. “You get used to it. I’ll get you a pass to come down by the pits; that way you’ll get up close and friendly with the smell of hot oil and burning rubber.”

“What about Saturday?”

Jamie shrugged. “If you want to. I’ll only be driving long enough to test the car and then to qualify for ranking.”

“Ranking?”

“That determines your starting position. It involves going around the track on your own as fast as you can. Qualifying can be brutal with a short track. It’s difficult to pass on a track under a mile long. If you’re placed further back than tenth it’s almost impossible to advance enough to take the lead. The car with the best time gets the pole position, and so on down the line.”

“Does anybody ever get killed qualifying?”

Jamie stared out the window. She was silent for an uncomfortably long time. Finally she took a deep breath and answered without taking her eyes from the road. "Yeah, T-Roy did."

Chapter Twelve

When they got back to Jamie's townhouse there was a message from Virgil. Jamie went to the living room to plug her tape in, while Quint called his cousin.

Virgil picked up on the second ring.

"Yeah, Virg here."

"Hey, Cuz. How're they hanging?"

"Loose. My night was relatively calm compared to yours. How are you holding up, buddy? And I don't mean sexually."

"I've had an interesting day. Plus, my night didn't end after I talked with you last night. And I'm not talking about sex either. Somebody tried to run Jamie off the road on her way home."

"Deliberately?"

"No doubt about it."

"Shit. Was she hurt?"

"No, just a little bruised, but only because she is one hell of a driver."

"Did you catch the bastard?"

"No. The police are working on it."

"Any chance it was the same person who tossed Riker's house?"

Quint grunted. "At this point anything's possible. The car belonged to Ray Bentler, but he had reported it stolen."

"Speaking of the boys in blue, have they shown up to question Jamie yet?"

"No, but she can handle herself with them. Besides, half the city here thinks she walks on water."

"Yeah, it's the other half we have to worry about."

"What did you find out about Gomez?"

"He's nothing more than a petty bad ass—several arrests, only one conviction, all

burglary charges, nothing involving weapons. He did a couple of years in the pen and he's been out on probation about nine months. In my opinion, he's not going to fess up to being anywhere near Riker's house, so I don't think you have to worry about him fingering you or anybody else. He only spent about an hour in jail last night because your good friend Ms. Harman got him released. Said he was working for her."

"No news there," Quint said. "Turns out he must have been at Hunter's wedding. She aired a photo of me carrying Jamie to the carriage. Had a nasty caption under it. You know her routine?"

Virgil snorted. "Yeah, I was dumb enough to represent her in one of her *Suffer the Consequences* trials. Too bad I'm so good at what I do."

Quint laughed. "I'm going to go to Virginia to watch Jamie race at Richmond Speedway this weekend. I don't suppose you've heard from Marla—"

"Hell, that goofy wench has been calling me every hour. With Hunter in the Bahamas and you out of town she seems to think I can answer her questions. She has a couple of deadlines to meet. I'd say you better give her a call, pronto."

"I guess I've been neglecting her."

"Jeez. It's only been two days. You know, Stephen is itching to take his plane up. It wouldn't take much to talk him into flying us down Sunday to meet you."

Quint chuckled. "I think you better have some words with Ms. LeCorre first. She holds you partially responsible for the hooker misunderstanding."

"Shee-it. Serve me up a heaping portion of humble pie and put her on the phone. I might as well get it over with."

"Okay. You have my sympathy." Quint held the phone aside and called into the other room where Jamie was on her knees in front of the TV fast-forwarding her tape. "Virg would like a word with you, Jamie."

Nodding, she clicked off the fast forward, allowing the tape to continue running at regular speed while she got up and came to the phone. "What does he want?" she asked.

Quint winked. "He's hungry for crow. Don't let him off too easy."

"No problem," she said, putting the phone to her ear.

"This is Jamie."

"Hello, Jamie, Virgil here."

“Virgil who?”

While Jamie was on the phone Quint walked into the living room to watch the tape. He sat down on an ottoman that was half the size of a normal sofa. The race had five laps to go.

When he'd first sat down Quint saw the race from a sky camera, complete with commentator. The next segment came from the right side of a car, including road, gear, engine noises, and deafening sound. It was Clay Riker's car, he guessed. When the scene switched back to the sky cam recapping what had happened from the field camera, he recognized Jamie's magenta Monte Carlo directly in front of the camera. All the cars appeared to be no more than three or four feet apart and going well over a hundred miles an hour. According to the sky cam, there were six cars in total, clustered together, speeding around the track so tightly woven they might have been attached to each other.

A commentator's voice, at high pitch, explained the possibilities of the outcome. Tomas Dunn's car was in the lead, and Jamie was attempting a pass when her car made an erratic swerve and chaos erupted. Her car tagged Dunn on her right side and ricocheted into the car on her left. From the viewpoint of Riker's camera, cars were skidding in all directions. Riker suddenly went airborne. There was a heart-stopping metal-crunching roar. It looked and sounded like the car had been lifted into the eye of a level-five tornado and thrust into total darkness.

Quint hadn't realized he was holding his breath until he was forced to gasp for air. A recap from the sky cam did show Jamie's car had indeed swerved for no apparent reason. She clipped Dunn's car, sending him into a spin. Her own car swiveled to a reverse position taking Mitch Grady, in the car on the left, with her. Clay plowed into Jamie's car, which rolled over with Clay's car ending up on top of it. Both cars clamped together spun recklessly for at least a hundred feet before coming to a crashing halt against the wall. Talon Davis, who had been drafting closely behind Dunn, slammed into Riker's rear sending him even farther on top of Jamie's exposed underbelly.

Splattered oil, gas, and metal debris cluttered the track. Smoke billowed from either Jamie's car or Riker's—it was impossible to tell which. Flames shot from Dunn's car where he teetered against the wall, about twenty feet farther up the track. It was like a scene from a trumped-up action movie.

But this was no movie. In his wildest dreams, Quint couldn't imagine even one of the drivers stepping out of their cars under his or her own power.

Jamie was in her car at the bottom of the pile, upside down, beneath smoke so thick it looked like a burning oil well. Quint felt light-headed. He glanced up at her still talking on the phone, reassuring himself she was actually there in the next room, instead of lying dead in the scene he was watching.

Making no attempt to conceal his excitement, the commentator struggled to describe the carnage. A red flag waved, bringing the remaining cars on the track to a standstill. The camera switched for a second from the track to the bleachers where fans were on their feet, some with elated faces, many with wide-eyed fear. Quint guessed one group was diehard fans, and the other friends and family members of the drivers.

Back on the field, fire trucks, rescue crews, and team members rushed to the cars in trouble. Three of the drivers, miraculously, Quint thought, climbed out of their cars unhurt. A rescue team pulled out Clay Riker. He walked away heavily supported by a team member.

Moments later rescuers pulled Jamie from her car and lifted her onto a stretcher. She appeared to be in pain but conscious. Team members kept Buster LeCorre from interfering in the rescue operation. His features were red and distorted, his face damp and streaked with dirt.

A yellow car, the sixth in the cluster, had managed to avoid the accident and went on to win the race under the caution flag.

Soon after, the camera switched to driver interviews where the winner, Sammy Jackson, was asked about the crash he had so narrowly avoided.

“Hey,” said Sammy, grinning from Victory Lane, “She did all right by me. I got my first win. That lady can polish parts in my bed anytime.”

Tomas Dunn shrugged. “Hell, I’m disappointed....but that’s racing. Jamie’s an excellent driver. She was setting up to overtake me, and truthfully, she might have done it. I just hope she’s okay.”

Mitch Grady massaged a sore shoulder. “Shit happens. I’ve been pounded a lot worse. Jamie holds her own. How’s she doing?”

The camera moved to Talon Davis, swearing and kicking at his car. At fifty-three Davis had senior driver status. Too many cigarettes and late night parties gave his face a weather-beaten look. He snarled at Matt Hurley. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. Women have no place in this business. She was passing too close. Any driver with a brain knows the risk of picking up side wind.”

Matt Hurley came to her defense. “According to the replay she wasn’t close enough to catch side wind.”

“Hell, you say.” Davis snapped. “How many races have you driven? Anyway, if it wasn’t that, she obviously effed up on something else.”

Hurley goaded him. “And, of course, male drivers never eff up. Wasn’t it just four weeks ago at Daytona that you rear-ended Sammy Jackson, putting him into the wall? If you never screw up, you must have done that intentionally.”

Davis’ eyes narrowed above beet colored cheeks. He swore under his breath and stomped away from the camera.

The camera panned to the Riker pit. Clay turned his back on the camera, refusing to be interviewed. When the microphone was pushed in front of Kent Riker, the sound had to be switched off. It didn’t take a master lip reader to recognize his foul words.

Hurley approached Buster LeCorre.

“Get out of my face.” Buster growled, refusing to look in the camera.

The tape finished just as Jamie came into the living room and sat down on the ottoman beside Quint. She still had the remote in her hand and flicked it to rewind.

“Did you see the crash?” she asked.

Quint nodded, shaking his head. “Yeah, I saw the whole thing. I can’t believe you survived that.”

“Did you see anything that might have caused me to swerve?”

Quint took a deep breath, still trying to calm his nerves. “No. It looked like you just lost control.”

Jamie gave him a tentative smile. “I know you don’t know a lot about racing, so thanks for not giving me any patronizing bullcrap.”

“One of the guys they interviewed thought you were too close to Dunn and picked up a side wind or something.”

Jamie made a sound of disgust. “That was probably Davis. He bad-mouths me after every race whether I’m involved in a crash or not. I’d say he’s getting a little crotchety in his old age, but according to the other guys he’s always been that way. I’m just his prime scapegoat.”

After rewinding the tape, she pushed play and leaned forward to watch the crash scene. When the scene finished she hit the rewind again and went to the part just before her car went

into a slide, and watched it again. She did it four times before she came shrieking to her feet.

“There, I saw something.” She replayed it again, putting her finger on the screen where a dark spot appeared for a nanosecond.

Quint leaned forward, squinting at the screen. “What was it?”

“A part—either from Dunn’s car or debris left on the track earlier and kicked up by forced air.” It took her several tries before she got the screen on pause in time to catch it. It was scarcely more than a tiny blur.

“Darn,” she swore. “I wish I could see a close-up of that.”

“Stephen could bring it to the full size of the screen,” Quint said. “He has some high-tech equipment he uses to watch skydiving maneuvers.”

Jamie turned to Quint. “Halleluiah. Do you think I could get him to bring it along this weekend?”

“You’re planning to see Stephen this weekend?”

Jamie grinned. “Stephen and Virgil are flying down in Stephen’s plane for the race on Sunday. I told them I’d have tickets waiting. They can keep you company.”

Quint gave Jamie an incredulous stare. “I had to grovel on my knees and Virgil gets tickets. You were only on the phone for a few minutes. How did he manage to charm you in that amount of time?”

“First of all,” Jamie said, “he pointed out the fact that I was dressed more like a hooker than a NASCAR driver. I hadn’t packed a lot of clothes so I put that outfit on to change my tire so I wouldn’t get anything else dirty. And second, I did pose for the centerfold, plus I had the decals in my trunk. All in all, it was a reasonable assumption.”

“That’s all it took. I tried to explain those same things. So why did you let Virgil off the hook so easily?”

“Virgil didn’t have to dig his way out from under a hundred dollar bill.”

Quint sucked in a breath of air through his teeth. “Ouch. I hate it when you’re so logical.”

Clasping her hands in her lap and drawing her shoulders forward, Jamie grinned up at him.

Quint’s gaze settled on her mouth. “Have I mentioned that you have the most kissable mouth I’ve ever seen, or tasted?” He cupped a hand under her chin, leaned down and touched her lips with a kiss that barely made contact.

Her response was instant. She pressed against him, slipping an arm around his neck. A hungry groan rumbled from deep in Quint's chest as he took her into his arms. His hand moved up and down her slim back, pulling her closer as his mouth took possession of the lips that had been haunting his dreams since the first time he'd seen them. Her quick tongue darted teasingly in and out of his mouth, touching him in a sensual mating dance. Along with it came soft purring sounds from the back of her throat.

Quint answered her with a hunger exceeding anything he had ever known. He wanted her, every inch of her, naked in his arms. One corner of his mind was telling him to lighten up; he was moving too fast. He might scare her off again. It was a small corner, easily ignored.

Quint was one step away from carrying her to the big sofa—it was closer than the bed upstairs—when a sound interrupted the direction of his thoughts.

"The doorbell is ringing," Jamie whispered against his probing mouth.

Quint groaned. "Do we have to answer it?"

"It might be something important."

Quint released her. "I can't imagine it being more important than this."

The musical chime rang again.

Quint looked down at her. "You look like you've just been kissed, long and hard. Anyone at that door will know what we've been up to."

Jamie lifted a hand to her swollen lips. "Can you answer the door while I run upstairs?"

"Go ahead. I'll be okay as long as they don't look lower than my belt."

As the doorbell rang a third time, Jamie hurried toward the stairs. "Are all men so easily aroused, or is it just you?"

"No honey, it's not me, it's you," Quint grumbled as he headed for the door. He combed a hand through his hair, as though that would hide the fact that he had an uncomfortable ache in his crotch.

Two men stood on the front stoop. Both wore dark gray suits. The taller and younger of the two had his arm outstretched toward the doorbell. His unsmiling face had a chiseled-in-smooth-metal look. He straightened up, adjusting his flawlessly knotted tie. The older man was at least a head shorter. His shirt strained to cover a protruding belly, and his face softened into a smile as he extended a hand, introducing himself.

"Good afternoon. I'm Detective Ralph Sampson. This is my partner, Harry Prince." He

waved a careless thumb toward his immaculate companion who displayed a shiny badge nestled in a leather case.

“We’re from the Glenview Police Department, Homicide Division,” Harry Prince said in a no-nonsense tone.

Quint reached past the official-looking badge and shook Sampson’s hand. “I’m Quint Douglas,” he offered.

“Is Jamie LeCorre here?” Prince asked, glancing over Quint’s shoulder.

Quint ignored him and directed his question to the older man. “What is this about?”

Prince answered. “We’re investigating James Bodean’s murder.”

Detective Sampson gave his partner a look of exasperation. “Just some routine questions,” he replied.

Quint was about to tell them she wouldn’t be answering any questions without a lawyer present when Jamie appeared at his side.

Her eyes lit up as she extended a hand to Detective Sampson. “Ralph, how are you?”

Sampson took her hand, his grin displaying tobacco-stained teeth. “Just fine, Jamie. Sorry to bother you. I know you were an acquaintance of both Clay and Jimbo so I was hoping you could help us out. We have a lot of loose ends rattling around. If we ask anything you’re uncomfortable answering you can ask to have a lawyer present, but I don’t expect you’ll need to.” He glanced at Quint. “Or is Mr. Douglas your legal counsel?”

Jamie laughed. “No, he’s...a friend. His cousin is my attorney. Come on in.” As she led the way to the kitchen, she spoke quietly to Quint. “Did I mention Virgil was representing me free of charge?”

“No, you missed that condition of his absolution?” Quint whispered.

Jamie motioned Detective Sampson to a seat at the counter while she put water in the coffee pot. “How are your boys? Still playing soccer?”

Sampson accepted the stool while Harry Prince remained standing. Prince took a notepad and pen from his vest pocket and started to ask a question when Sampson interrupted.

“They graduated this spring. That’s the problem with twins, everything happens at once. I’m having a heck of a time talking them into college. Ever since you gave them a ride in your race car they think the world revolves around NASCAR.”

Detective Prince cleared his throat. “Ms. LeCorre, could you tell us where you were last

night between six and nine.”

“She was with me,” Quint answered for her. “All evening.”

Jamie flipped the switch on the coffee pot. “That’s right. In fact, we were at Jimbo’s Crab Shack for dinner. Jimbo called while we were there and had a bottle of wine sent to our table. You can confirm that with our waiter, Andy Paltier.”

“We already talked to Andy,” Prince said.

Quint gave Prince a hard look. “Then why did you ask?”

“He said you left the restaurant by seven fifteen. Where did you go after that?”

Jamie turned to Ralph Sampson. “Am I a suspect?” she asked.

Sampson glared at his partner. “Of course not. We just have to go through the steps. If you’d rather wait until your lawyer is present—”

“That won’t be necessary,” she said. “After the Crab Shack we went to Quint’s motel room. He owns an investigating business and he did some research on his laptop.”

Quint cut in. “As I said before, we were together the whole evening. If you check with the Skokie Police Department they’ll verify that someone tried to run Jamie off the road on the way to her house later. Or did you already know that too?” he asked Prince.

Prince glanced sharply at his partner. “Ah...no... We didn’t know that. I’ll check it out.”

“What time was Jimbo killed?” Jamie asked.

Sampson answered. “Somewhere between seven-thirty and eight-thirty, near as we can tell at this point. We might be able to pin it down closer in a couple of days. The police answered an alarm at eight thirty-five. He was dead when they arrived.”

Jamie locked eyes with Quint for a split second. It was about eight-thirty when they got to Clay’s house. The noise Quint had heard was very likely the killer leaving. She took a deep breath and busied herself setting out mugs and pouring coffee. Her hands shook as she poured.

Sampson read her anxiety as grief. “I’m sorry, Jamie. I know he was a close friend of yours. Can you think of anyone who might have wanted him dead?”

Jamie set a cup of black coffee in front of him. She shook her head. “No, everybody loved Jimbo. As far as I know he didn’t have an enemy in the world. Was it possibly...an accident?”

“I doubt it,” Sampson replied. “It doesn’t look like a routine burglary, though, either. The house is a wreck but so far Clay Riker couldn’t find anything missing. There is the possibility

that someone mistook him for Riker. Do you know of anyone who might have wanted Riker out of the way?"

Jamie gave a short laugh. "I can think of a dozen people, including myself, but it's professional, not personal. You don't kill someone for being an ass on the speedway. NASCAR would run out of drivers."

Chuckling, Sampson wrapped his hands around the steaming coffee cup. "You definitely have a point there, Jamie."

Prince ignored the coffee she set in front of him. "What time did you have the altercation on the highway?" he asked.

"Around midnight."

"So, what did you do in the motel room between eight and midnight?"

"Don't answer that, Jamie," Quint snapped. "It's none of their business."

Sampson grinned at Quint and stood up. "He's right, Harry. It's none of our business. Besides, we don't need to know. It's enough that you were together. That means you're both accounted for. Let's go. Thanks for the coffee, Jamie. Please call me if you think of anything that might help."

Jamie waited until the door closed behind them. "What if Clay discovers the tape is missing?"

Quint put his arms around her. "There must have been five hundred tapes scattered around that room. Do you seriously think he'll go through every tape in his collection to find out if one is missing? Even if he does, you replaced it. He'd have to play it. Even then he'd just know it was blank. How could he possibly pin that on you...unless you use the information on it? And we've already discussed that. You can't use that tape until Jimbo's killer is caught and convicted."

"What about Gomez?"

"Gomez already spent time in prison for petty burglary. He's not about to admit being anywhere near Clay's place."

Jamie nodded. "I guess you're right. Besides, we didn't kill Jimbo. I am starting to wonder if the person who tried to run me off the road saw me at Clay's and was afraid I could identify him."

"That makes sense because I'm certain he knew where you live and was waiting for you."

Your car is easy to spot. When you passed the entrance ramp he sped right past me and zeroed in on you like a hawk. I'd guess by now he knows you didn't see him or you would already have pointed the finger at him."

"I guess," Jamie murmured, not too convincingly.

Quint smiled down at her. "I have a built-in alarm that tells me when it's time to eat. Right now it's screaming, so how about we go out and grab a bite?"

"I'd rather fix something here. I'm not in the mood to go out and face people. Is spaghetti okay?"

Quint bent down and kissed the tip of her nose. "Terrific. I'll make a couple of calls, and then I'll help you. I need to call Stephen to see if he can bring his equipment with him, and I have to call my office; with Hunter gone, things are falling apart. If I want a business to go back to I'd better tend to it. Marla probably left the office by now, but I can call her at home."

Chapter Thirteen

Quint stared out of the tiny scuffed window of a DC-10 at the diminishing city of Chicago. He tried to concentrate on the urgent projects waiting for him back in New York, but finally gave it up. Nothing could dislodge the memory of Jamie kissing him at the door when he left. He would see her in a couple of days in Richmond, but right now that seemed light years away. She was under his skin, in his blood. He couldn't stop thinking about her, couldn't stop wanting her. Maybe it was best they were having this short separation. It was inevitable. Had he stayed any longer, they would have ended up in bed together. While that was no problem for him, he knew she was battling with her conscience, probably trying to make up for a one-night stand that was as remote from her character as the earth from the moon.

Marla had been in a panic when he'd called her. She was on the verge of calling Hunter back from his honeymoon. As much as Quint wanted to stay with Jamie, he couldn't let that happen.

He had been concerned about leaving Jamie alone after that freeway incident. Whether it was meant to scare her or kill her, it was a threat to be taken seriously. Even though she assured him she had a state-of-the-art security system in her home, as well as the complex guard on duty, he still worried about her.

She also said she had an enormous amount of work of her own to do. Apparently, before every race, drivers studied the upcoming track and outlined a strategy. They had to know the degree of every turn, the length of the straight-aways, the location of the pits, and a dozen other things he couldn't remember. Racing was certainly more than getting in your car and driving. It reminded him of when he had played college football and had to study plays before the games. He suspected that even with everything she'd told him, his knowledge of racing was still at a kindergarten level.

He wasn't sure how he would handle watching her live on the track. As much as he wanted to be with her, he wasn't looking forward to seeing her risk her life in 3,400 pounds of

metal speeding around a three-quarter mile track. He knew she meant to reassure him when she'd said they rarely went faster than a hundred and twenty at Richmond—the turns came up too quickly.

Just thinking about it made his stomach queasy.

* * * *

It was after two in the morning, and Jamie couldn't sleep. Quint would have landed safely in New York by now, and was probably on his way home. She didn't want to admit to herself how much she missed him, but if she was going to be honest about it, she missed him before his taillights disappeared in the darkness at the end of her driveway. She had to get him off her mind; she had a race coming up. There was a lot of preparation to do. She had to go back to the shop at least once, and by Friday afternoon she'd be in Richmond.

Her plane was three hours late getting into Richmond. The crew was already there and waiting for her by the time Jamie arrived at the international speedway. She drove a few practice laps to test how the car handled on the track. Unfortunately, it needed minor steering and carburetor adjustments that took a couple of hours to fix.

By the time Jamie got to her hotel suite she was beat and ready for a long soak in the tub. Kicking off her shoes, she headed straight for the big corner Jacuzzi in the bathroom and started the water running. She went back to the main sitting area, grabbed a soda from the mini bar and collapsed into a chair to wait for the tub to fill.

A sharp knock on the door caused her heart to do an instant flip-flop. Maybe it was Quint? He knew where she was staying. Due to his neglected workload, he'd been vague about the exact time he would arrive in Richmond. She got up and hurried to answer the door.

She stared, momentarily speechless, at her surprise visitor.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Jamie, but I needed to talk to you privately."

"Ralph. What are you doing in Richmond?"

Detective Sampson shrugged. "Investigating Bodean's death. He was at the Labor Day race last weekend, and since he watched it from Riker's pit I need to interview the crew members along with some other people who saw him. The best way to talk to everyone was to fly down here."

Jamie gripped the doorknob. "You have more questions for me?"

Sampson averted her eyes, fidgeting with the hat in his hands. “Yeah, plus I have some information. I’m not sure if it’s connected to Bodean. I was hoping you could help.”

“I don’t understand.”

Simpson glanced down the corridor. “I’d rather not talk about this standing out in the hall. Can I come in? Leave the door open if you like.”

A leaden weight settled in her chest as she stepped back, gesturing the detective inside. As he’d suggested, she left the door ajar. “Would you like something to drink?” she offered.

“No, no thanks. I hear water running,” he said.

“That’s my bath. It’s a big Jacuzzi tub. Besides, how long can this take?”

Sampson cleared his throat. He looked around the room. “Are you alone?”

Jamie’s back straightened. She crossed her arms over her chest and faced him with narrow eyes. “What’s this about, Ralph?”

“Maybe you should sit down.”

“I don’t need to sit down.”

Sampson pulled a square of nicotine gum from his coat pocket, unwrapped it, and folded it into his mouth. He took a moment to chew before he spoke. “We found three sets of fingerprints on the steering wheel of the car that ran you off the road.”

Jamie’s heart kicked up. “Whose?”

“Ray Bentler and his son Markus. Bentler loaned the car to Markus the day before.”

“What about the third set?” Jamie asked.

“We don’t know. What we do know is the prints match those from another crime scene.”

“Jim Bodean’s?” Jamie asked, incredulously.

“No, not Bodean. Something that happened twenty-three years ago.”

“How can something that happened that long ago be connected with me? I was just a child.”

“I know. I’m not sure how to tell you, Jamie. I can’t think of a way to make this easier for you. The person who drove Bentler’s car that night was the same person suspected of murdering your mother.”

Jamie felt the blood drain from her face. She heard the water running in the bathroom, the pulse pounding in her head. In the space of what must have been only a few moments her mind went over the entire police scene after her mother’s death. Nowhere in the fog of her memory

was the word murder used.

She was only vaguely aware that someone was knocking on the door until Sampson opened it and let Quint into the room.

Quint took one look at her, put his hands on her upper arms and gave her a light shake. “Jamie? Honey? Are you okay?”

She looked up, focusing her eyes on Quint. “My mother was murdered?”

Quint pulled Jamie into his arms, looking over her head at Detective Sampson. “What is she talking about?”

Sampson’s sympathetic gaze turned to Quint. “We found evidence suggesting that the person who ran Jamie off the road Tuesday night was the same person suspected in her mother’s death.”

“Jesus.” Quint held Jamie back so he could look in her ashen face. “You told me you didn’t know how your mother died.”

“I didn’t. They wouldn’t tell me. At least now I know why they were so closed mouthed about it.” Jamie glanced at the bathroom. “I need to turn the water off in the tub before we have a flood. Excuse me a minute.”

Jamie stopped the flow of water into the nearly full bathtub. She took a minute to get her breathing under control before returning to the sitting room in time to hear Quint rounding on Sampson.

“Was it really necessary to spring this on her the day before she has to qualify on that God awful track?”

Sampson’s chest expanded from a deeply drawn breath of air. “I’m afraid it was. You see, Katherine Devon was killed right here in Richmond, after a race. She had a boyfriend at the time who was the only suspect. Unfortunately, he had an alibi. I need to question Jamie, find out if she remembers anything.”

“Question me about what?” Jamie asked. “Something that happened when I was five years old?”

“We don’t have much to go on,” Sampson said, apologetically. “I know it’s a long shot, but... Can you tell me anything about your mother’s life or the men she was seeing?”

Jamie shook her head. “I couldn’t even be sure if I’d be telling you things I actually remember or things I’ve imagined or heard since then.”

Sampson gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll take that into account. Do you remember her boyfriend?"

Jamie nodded. "Yes...Wally. He was tall and thin, very nice looking, and he was always polite to me. They never took me with them when they went out. I stayed with a sitter."

"Were there any other men in her life?"

"None that I know of."

Sampson pulled a notebook and pen from his vest pocket. He jotted something down, "Do you recall the last day you saw her? Where she went?"

Jamie swallowed, blinking rapidly at the moisture pooling in her eyes. "Yes, she went with Wally to the race. They came home, he left, and then she left a few minutes later. I never saw her again." She managed a smile for Quint. "Don't worry about me qualifying tomorrow. It may sound odd but stress actually enhances my driving."

Quint squeezed her shoulders, kissing the top of her head. "That shouldn't surprise me, but I'll worry anyway, if you don't mind."

"How was my mother killed?" she asked Sampson.

Sampson flipped his notebook shut and tucked it back in his pocket. He glanced briefly at Quint. "I'm glad you're here with her, Mr. Douglas." His gaze settled on Jamie again. "Her car slammed into a bridge overpass. It's not clear if she was killed on impact or if she was dead before the car hit."

"How can you be sure she was murdered then?" Jamie asked.

"There was a large socket wrench laying on the floorboards by the accelerator. There appeared to be no good reason for it to be there. They suspected it was the wedge that held the accelerator to the floor. A smeared print was found on the wrench—like someone had tried to wipe it off—and another on the steering wheel."

"Were they identified?" Quint asked.

"No, but they match those on the steering wheel of the car that pushed Jamie off the road. That won't necessarily prove the same person killed Katherine, but at least we'd have a good suspect. I think we could prove that he was the driver who hit Jamie on the freeway."

"Christ. Why would someone try to kill Jamie after all these years?"

"That's why we believe someone in NASCAR is involved. Plus the wrench that was found was the type used in those days to tighten lug nuts on the cars. That, at least, narrows the

age-factor on the search for your mother's killer. Just for your information, Jamie, your father was cleared. He spent the evening with the rest of the crew celebrating. Their team took a first place that day." Sampson reached up to scratch the back of his head. "And maybe it's just a coincidence that Jim Bodean was killed a few hours before somebody tried to ram your car into the next county. It just seems mighty suspicious. I haven't found a way to tie the two together though."

Jamie's eyes flicked to meet Quint's stare for just a fraction of a second.

Sampson caught the exchange. "Is there something you two aren't telling me?" he asked.

"No," they said simultaneously.

Simpson grunted. "Okay, but if you change your mind, I'll be staying at the Sleep Easy Hotel a few blocks away. It's not quite as fancy as this place but I'm on a tight budget. Unfortunately, they couldn't afford to send my partner with me." He chuckled. "Downright shame, ain't it?" He handed Jamie a card. "Here's the number for the hotel. I'm in room 208. Call me if you think of anything. From back when you were a child, to Bodean's death, or anything in between. Even if you think it might be insignificant. I'd appreciate it if you kept the fingerprint information to yourselves. It might muddy the waters."

Sampson gave them an informal salute and left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Jamie sank into a chair and looked up at Quint. "Do you think we should tell him about being at Clay's house that night?"

Quint pulled up a footstool and sat down in front of her with his legs spread on either side of her. He placed his hands on her knees. "My answer would be, not just yet. Let's see if they can come up with a connection first. Maybe I should call Virg and ask his advice. I'd also like Virg to get the files on your mother's death. Maybe we can figure something out on our own. Did you live here in Richmond when she died, or were you visiting?"

Jamie shrugged. "We must have lived here because I was at home that night, not in a hotel room."

Quint leaned toward her and placed a kiss on her forehead. "It sounded like you were ready to hop in the tub when Sampson got here. Why don't you go do that before it gets cold while I call Virg. If you use lots of bubbles I'll bring you a glass of wine."

Jamie smiled. "That's the best offer I've had all day, but why the bubbles?"

“So I’ll be less tempted to jump in with you.”

“It’s a big tub.”

“Are you baiting me?”

“Maybe.”

Quint grinned. “I read somewhere that taking a bath together is a great way to get to know each other.”

“Do you do all your reading on bathroom walls?”

“Just the interesting stuff,” Quint said, laughing.

When Jamie smiled, Quint cupped her chin in his hand. “Whatever you’re thinking, keep that thought. We’ll get through all this nasty stuff, and then your life will be back to normal.” Quint slapped a hand on his forehead. “God, for a moment there I forgot that *normal* for you is doing a rerun of Custer’s Last Stand once a week.”

Still smiling, Jamie wriggled past him and out of her chair. “Next time you do wall reading look up the part where Indians never have sex the night before they go into battle. It’s bad luck.”

“Great,” Quint said. “You get me all excited inviting me into your tub, and then you tell me it’s just to take a bath.” He grinned as the bathroom door closed behind her delectable backside. He loved it when she acted saucy.

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed Virg’s number. On the fourth ring his cousin answered.

“Yeah! You got Virg here.”

“Well, it took you long enough. I was just about to hang up.”

Virg laughed. “I was busy. You think you’re the only one with a sex life?”

“I could have sworn I heard a toilet flush in the background.”

“Yeah, kinky, huh?”

“Sounds like you got your Viagra and laxatives mixed up again.”

“Ah, little cuz, you know me too well. Actually, I just drove Mom and Dad to the airport. They’re flying to Minnesota to be with Corinne. She went into premature labor.”

“Is she okay?” Quint asked.

“I think so, but the doc put her on bed rest, so... you know how mothers are.”

“Yeah, it’s a good feeling to have somebody around who cares as much as she does. Not

everybody has that.”

“You talking about Ms. LeCorre by any chance? What kind of trouble are you two into now?”

“Well—”

“Go ahead spit it out.”

“Considering you’re Jamie’s lifetime lawyer, we need to get some police records. It turns out her mother, Katherine Devon, was killed twenty-three years ago. They matched the fingerprints from her murder scene with those on the steering wheel of the car that tried to run Jamie off the road, but they can’t identify the person. Can you, acting as Jamie’s legal council, get a copy of the police report?”

“Should be able to. Do you have a date and location where the investigation took place?”

“Right here in Richmond. Buster’s team had a win that day, so it shouldn’t be too hard to pin down a date. Jamie could help with that.”

“Let me check my schedule,” Virg said. A moment later he was back on. “I don’t have to be in court until Wednesday next week. I could stay over Sunday night and check it out on Monday. I’ll see you at the track before the race on Sunday.”

“Thanks, Virg, you’re a sweetheart.”

“Christ, I hope we have separate rooms when I get there.”

Quint disconnected the phone, laughing. He glanced once at the bathroom door, then punched in the auto dial for Virg’s sister, Corinne.

Jamie lit three aromatic candles, switched off the lights, climbed into the big tub, and sank down up to her chin in the frothy bubbles. Instead of relaxing she reflected on the information delivered by Ralph Sampson. Her time in a Jacuzzi was one of her greatest pleasures, but the visit from him had put a serious damper on her enjoyment.

The knowledge that her mother was deliberately killed was more devastating to her than she wanted to admit. The memory of her mother was vague, but the fear and loneliness and sense of abandonment after she died were a raw wound that Jamie thought had healed.

Something else nagged at her, something that happened that night so long ago. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but somehow she believed it was important. The only person she knew who really hated her mother was Buster. Ralph said he’d been with the crew all night, but

nobody knew better than she did how a tight crew stuck together. Would they have lied for him? They all knew how Katherine deserted him and T-Roy.

She laid her head back and tried to think, to remember.

She must have dozed off because a knock on the door startled her.

She quickly surveyed the volume of soap bubbles around her. "Come in," she called.

Quint managed to open the door holding, two glasses and a bottle of her favorite Chardonnay.

Her eyes widened. "I don't remember that being here."

"It wasn't. I brought it with me. I'm not surprised you didn't notice. You were in a bit of a daze when I walked in on you and Sampson. He delivered quite a blow, didn't he?"

She blew out a puff of air, causing the bubbles around her to stir. "Now I know how those cartoon characters feel when they get flattened by a steam roller."

"Considering the day you have planned tomorrow and again Sunday, I hope you bounce back as easily."

She watched him fill the glasses he'd set on the edge of the tub. "I'm conditioned to be a quick bounce-backer."

"I don't think bounce-backer is a word," Quint said handing her a glass, smiling. "You mind if I sit a while?" he asked, perching himself on the tub surround.

Jamie took a sip of wine and made a rapturous sound of pleasure. She looked up at him, her eyes drooping lazily. "You have too many clothes on."

Quint's smile vanished. "Jamie, if I come in there, it's not going to be to take a bath."

She didn't say anything but she kept her eyes on his face and moved to one corner to make room for him.

Quint hesitated. He wanted to join her more than he wanted to breathe, but he'd had a battle with himself ever since he'd watched that tape of her crash in the Indianapolis race. He honestly didn't know if he could stand by and watch her going around that track every week. He had resolved not to touch her again until he was sure.

But the challenge in her eyes played havoc with his resolve.

He drained his wine and refilled the glass. Then a shocking thought hit him. Had their roles reversed? Was he trying to get drunk enough to make love to her? Who was he kidding? No

amount of wine would make him drunk enough to do something he didn't want to do, and he wanted to make love to Jamie.

He set his glass down and took off his sport coat. One by one he undid the buttons on his shirt. He watched her eyes. Just one flinch would give him the incentive he needed to stop.

She didn't move.

Her eyes didn't falter as he tugged the shirt from his waistband, shrugged it off his shoulders, and tossed it on a nearby chair. He started to unbutton his trousers but stopped. "Are you going to watch?" he asked, his voice husky.

That daredevil twinkle in her eyes was all the answer he needed, but she didn't let it go at that.

"Are you shy?" she asked.

"No, but you do have me at a disadvantage."

Jamie reached behind her and snuffed one of the candles. "How's that?"

Her movement caused the remaining two candles to flicker, playing a shadow dance on the white walls and over the powerful muscles on Quint's bared upper body. His chest covered with a mat of curling hair, glowed golden in the pale light. The stark hunger in his cobalt blue eyes had nothing to do with food.

Jamie's bravado diminished when Quint dropped his pants. Had she actually expected him to back down? The light was not so dim that she couldn't make out every detail of his lithe body right down to the form-hugging briefs he wore—so tight fitting they clearly showed the bulge of his desire. When he hooked his thumbs in the elastic band of his briefs, she made a small squeak.

It was small but he heard it.

He hesitated, looking down to her. "You want me to stop?" His throaty voice was amazingly controlled, and sincere.

Jamie shook her head. "No," she whispered, "don't stop." Her bravery went only so far. She breathed deeply of the musky candle scent and closed her eyes, hoping the light was muted enough so he wouldn't notice. Seconds later she heard him step into the tub and felt the water rise over her shoulders when he eased himself into it.

"You can open your eyes now," he said.

Her eyes flew open when she heard the amusement in his voice. "I was just trying to spare you embarrassment," she said.

The lines around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Gee, thanks. There are some things a man can't hide. Well, actually there is a place I could hide it but... Turn around and let me wash your back before I talk myself into a corner."

Laughing, Jamie tossed him a soapy sponge and swiveled to expose her back to him. "Do all men revert to eighth grade mentality when they get...aroused?"

"Honey, I'm way beyond aroused. And talking about it only makes it...harder."

He slid the sponge over her shoulders and down her back beneath the water. She arched her spine, laid her head back, and moaned. Quint dropped the sponge and drew her back against his chest. His hands moved around her body to cup her breasts. She could feel the evidence of his desire pressed against her back.

Her breath came in short gasps as he caressed her, stroked her.

"Quint?" she whispered. "I—"

He nibbled on her ear lobe while his hands continued to explore her curves beneath the water. "What is it you want, sweetheart? Tell me what you want."

She turned enough to look at him. "I want you inside me, Quint. Make love to me."

Quint made an audible sound that was almost like pain. He pulled her onto his lap, hugged her close and buried his face in her hair. "God, Jamie, I want you so much, need you..." His voice choked.

Jamie turned the rest of the way until she was on her knees, straddling his legs. She put her hands on the sides of his face and lifted his head to look at her. "I feel exactly the same way. I have this ache, this emptiness inside me."

"Kiss me. I'll take care of it." He pulled her head down until their lips touched. The contact was electric. Her arms wrapped around his neck clinging, pulling him closer. He slipped his hands under her knees buckling them, settling her down on top of him. She let out a muffled cry of pleasure as he entered her, stretching her. She threw her head back and pressed down on him until his full length was buried inside her.

When she started gyrating he pushed up at her groaning. He put his hands firmly on her hips. "Honey, you have to slow down. I'm not using any protection."

"It's okay," Jamie whispered. She didn't want to stop. She'd dreamed of this moment

since the morning he walked out of her motel room after Nicole and Hunter's wedding.

Her breath came in short withering gasps. She fought against Quint's arms as they encircled her waist trying to restrain her. Then she made a soft protest when he lifted her off of him.

"Come on little mermaid, let's move to the bed," he murmured." He stood up with her in his arms, stepped out of the tub, and headed for the adjoining bedroom.

She clasped her arms around his neck. "Aren't we going to dry off?" she asked.

"No. Takes too long."

She was laughing when he laid her on the bed.

"I'll be right back," he said trying to dislodge her arms.

She held tight. "You're not going anywhere."

"What about protection?"

"I said it's okay. Don't leave me."

Quint didn't need any further encouraging. He eased onto the bed, braced himself up on his elbows and stared down at her, brushing the damp curls off her face. "Have I told you how much I need you."

Jamie reached up and pulled his hand to her lips. "You're the first person who's ever said that to me." She lifted her face for his kiss.

His lips moved from her face to her neck and lower to suck the budding tip of a breast into his mouth. Jamie buried her fingers in his hair, biting her lip to keep from screaming out. His mouth made a hungry trail down her belly. When he attempted to go lower, her grasp on his hair tightened.

"No. Don't."

Quint halted his quest and looked up at her. "You're beautiful all over, love. I want to kiss every inch of your body."

"I don't think—"

"Just lay back, relax. I promise you'll enjoy it."

Jamie's laugh was shaky. "Relax? I'm about as relaxed as a forest fire. I'm burning up. What are you doing to me?"

In answer his sucking mouth sought out her most erogenous zone. Wild sensations snaked through her body like streaks of white lightning. She was beyond breathing, beyond

conscious thought. She cried out as release took her in pulsing waves. It zapped the strength from her, leaving her weak and throbbing.

She could feel his movement on the bed as he came to lay beside her. “Nobody has ever done anything like that to me,” she whispered when she could find her voice. She absently stoked his shoulder, using first her fingertips and then her nails.

“I’m glad I could be the first,” he said in her ear. Then he was kissing her again, hungrily. She could taste the musk of her own passion on his lips, but he hadn’t finished with her yet. While she was still pulsating, he entered her and started moving inside her. He brought her to the top of the mountain again. He spoke to her in crooning whispers, silencing her moans with urgent kisses.

“Come with me, babe. Soar with me. Let it go, sweetheart.”

When he finally sagged against her they were both breathless. He rolled over to his side bringing her with him. She curled up in the shelter of his arm and slept.

Quint pulled a cover over both of them. He stared at the wall where the moonlight cast narrow strips of light through the partially open blinds. Colors from a flashing neon sign across the street danced intermittently over the moonlit strips. If he concentrated on the colors he wouldn’t have to think.

Red for the roses he’d sent her, one for each time they’d made love that first night. Gold for the color of her eyes. Green for the plants she loved. Red for blood spilled on a racetrack. Gold for the Cadillac trying to run her off the road. Green for the color of the cap the driver wore. A cap with a logo of gold circles. He’d never seen the logo before, but if he ever saw it again he’d recognize it.

* * * *

Jamie woke to the sound of a phone screaming in her ear. When she tried to reach for it, Quint’s arm tightened around her.

“Don’t answer it,” he said sleepily. “Let’s just stay in bed all day.”

She kissed him on his stubbled cheek. “Easy for you to say. If I don’t show up at that track today we’ll be having a lot of company.” She eased away from him, glancing at the clock, groaning when she saw it was eight thirty. She reached for the phone, knowing it would be Buster wondering where she was.

She put the phone to her ear. “Yeah, what is it?”

“Jamie,” Buster’s voice boomed from the receiver. “Where the hell are you? Are you okay?”

Quint reached over and cupped one of her breasts in his hand.

Jamie smiled. “I’m fine—if I’m not there just start without me.”

“What!”

“I’m joking. I’ll be there.”

There was silence on the line for a moment. “Oh, jeez don’t do that to me. You want to put me into cardiac arrest?” Buster paused again. “I have some information you’re not going to like.”

“You’re putting Lasco in to run my car?”

“Now I know you’re joking. You’re starting to worry me. You never joke.”

Quint’s hand moved to her belly.

“Well, maybe I’m just in a good mood,” she said, grabbing Quint’s hand before it could roam further.

Buster gave a cynical snort of laughter. “Well, hold that thought, because you drew first run. You have to make your qualifying round in two hours.”

Jamie swore under her breath. “Is the car ready?”

“It’ll be ready. You just get your little butt over here. We need to talk. There’s a detective snooping around asking questions about Jimbo’s death.”

“I’ll be there shortly.”

She hung up the phone and sagged back on her pillow.

“Problem?” Quint asked.

“You might say that. I got a bad draw. I have to qualify at ten-thirty.”

Quint rolled over on his back, mumbling some choice words she didn’t care to decipher.

“What can I do to help?” he offered.

“You can order room service while I shower. Just get a toasted English muffin and two soft-boiled eggs for me. Order whatever you want for yourself. Tell them to put a rush on it.”

“Does that mean I can’t shower with you?”

Jamie headed for the bathroom, giving him an impish wink. “I’ll take a rain check on that. And, on the way to the track, you better fill me in on what Virgil had to say. Buster said

there's a detective there asking questions.”

“Sampson.”

“Who else?” She called from the bathroom. “Which reminds me, I have some questions of my own for my loving father.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jamie took a few minutes to get Quint settled in with the crew before she had to report in with NASCAR officials for her qualifying run. It was fortunate for her that she worked well under stress, because being the first driver up was the ultimate pressure. Forty-two drivers would follow after her, all trying to beat her numbers.

She climbed into her car, assisted by the crew, and strapped in. Beyond the wall she got a last glimpse of Quint's anxious face. She hoped he wasn't thinking about that Indian-going-into-battle thing. She never got a chance to tell him it was an ongoing joke among the drivers. It was the last personal thought she allowed herself.

She made an initial run around the track to get the feel of the car, before calling in the okay. The green flag snapped, starting her clock.

Quint climbed up on the trailer to watch and stay out of the way. He got a friendly greeting from Tim and Hal who were sitting in front of a television monitor that had been set up. Buster was down below wearing headphones and watching the central monitors with the rest of the crew.

Quint had no idea how fast she was going or how fast she needed to go. He'd heard enough to understand that the first driver set the pace for those following.

Buster said running early had only one advantage as far as he was concerned. It was the coolest part of the day. This had more importance, however, in the heat of the summer than in mid September.

Quint's heart rate slammed into overdrive as he watched her take the first turn. It looked like she went into the curve playing a game of chicken with the wall. If it came to blows between a mound of concrete and a speeding hunk of metal there was no doubt who would come out the winner. A map work of scars adorned the wall like graffiti trophies to prove that point.

Tim watched her closely, calling her moves, giving her encouragement even though she

couldn't hear a word he said.

"Go in low, Jamie-girl, hold it steady, three-quarter throttle, you got it. Yes. Okay, squeeze the gas, unwind the steering, push the outer wall. Cut the gas, pressure on the brake... Not too fast... Keep it off the wall, Sweetheart. Great, now pop her into third and get your RPMs up and power down that straightaway. Shift! Shift! Goddammit... You'll blow the engine! Jesus, Jamie, you scare the crap out of me when you test the engine that way. Grab the turn, hang on. Okay, babe, mash it down. You're home free."

Tim collapsed in a chair, breathing heavily.

Hal nearly choked on his laughter. "Tim, you act like you gave vaginal birth to that engine."

"I did," Tim groused. "Well, not the vaginal part."

"Trust her, she knows what she's doing," Hal said.

"How did she do?" Quint asked.

"We'll know in a minute," Hal answered. "Looked real good. I wouldn't be surprised if she did one twenty. That's one hundred and twenty miles an hour," he explained to Quint. "Their position is established by the highest average speed."

"She did better than one-twenty," Tim said. "I'll bet you a six pack."

"No bet," Hal said grinning. "But if she did better, I'll buy a whole case and help you drink it."

"Deal!"

A cheer went up from the crew on the ground. They were slapping each other on the back as Jamie's car pulled into the pit.

"One twenty-three!" Buster yelled.

When Jamie pulled into the pit, the crew helped her out of the car, congratulating her with bear hugs. Buster wasn't in on the hugging but his craggy face glowed like a Halloween jack-o-lantern.

Quint was surprised see Marcus Lasco in the midst of the revelers. "I thought Lasco didn't like Jamie," he said to Hal.

Hal spit a wad of chaw over the side of the trailer. "Shit, he likes her, all right. The guy's got a hard on for her so bad he can't get his britches on some days, but she won't give him the time of day. Man, was he pissed when you walked in the shop with her."

Quint frowned. "I thought he just wanted her job."

Tim chuckled. "He'd like both her and her job, but even he's smart enough to know he doesn't have a chance at either one."

Hal threw a husky arm around Quint's shoulders. "Lasco's only chance at her job is if somebody up and marries her and gets her pregnant. He should be loving you up like his favorite puppy."

Tim grunted. "Knock it off, Hal. You're getting out of line."

Hal threw his massive arms in the air. "What did I say?"

Tim grinned at Quint. "I hope Jamie warned you about taking a little ribbing. Most of us have known that girl since she was chin high to an eighteen-wheeler tire. A lot of the younger fellows grew up with her, not only our crew but a good share of the others too. I know only two people who were happy when she started taking up with Clay Riker."

Quint watched her from his lofty perch. She had managed to shake the crew and was coming toward the trailer. "I suppose that would be Jamie and Clay," Quint said rather glumly.

"Hell no," Tim snorted. "That would be Buster LeCorre and Kent Riker, Clay's father. They pushed those two together from the time they were teenagers. The day they broke up we all went out and got drunk to celebrate."

Jamie climbed up on the van. She was smiling. "I see you guys are all chummy up here."

Tim rounded on her. "What the hell you trying to do to my engine, woman?" He was unsuccessful at concealing his grin as he gave her a hug. "Congratulations, girl. I have a hunch there'll be some cars waltzing with the wall trying to beat your time."

"God, I hope not," she said.

Hal came up behind her to give her shoulders a squeeze. "Great run, kid. How's the car handling?"

She smiled. "Thanks Hal. Car's perfect. One lap down, five hundred and thirty-three to go."

Quint was staring at her with wide eyes. "Over five hundred laps?"

Hal burst out laughing. He slapped Quint on the back. "Take it easy, son. It's only a four hundred mile race. Some are five and six hundred. Come on, Tim, we better give that speed wagon a once over."

Quint gave Jamie a shaky smile. "He's kidding, right?"

Jamie laughed. “No, I’m afraid this time he isn’t. This race is called the Chevy Monte Carlo 400. Next week is the New Hampshire 300, after that the Talladega 500. You had better sit down, Quint, you don’t look so good.”

Quint opened his arms to her. “Don’t worry about me. Just get over here for your hug. I seem to be the last one in line to congratulate you.”

She stepped into his waiting embrace. “I was saving the best for last. Besides, I wanted to be alone with you.”

“Alone? We’re on top of a semi trailer in the middle of a three-quarter mile international speedway. Hundreds of people are able to see us.”

She lifted her face to smile at him. “I don’t care. Kiss me so they have something to talk about.”

“You are a delightful minx.” Quint pressed his mouth down hungrily on her lips.

Their kiss continued even as the roar of the second car started its qualifying run. A few minutes later, the cheers went up from the Pink Mink pit below.

Jamie broke from Quint to see what the commotion was about and found thirty pairs of eyes staring up at them.

“Don’t you guys have anything to do down there?” she yelled.

Somebody yelled back. “Yeah, we’re doing it.”

Jamie smiled up at Quint. “I guess we better save this for later when we’re really alone. By the way,” she whispered, “last night was fantastic.”

Quint slipped his arms around her waist. “You must be reading my mind,” he said. “I do need to ask you something though. I didn’t use any protection—exactly what did you mean when you said it was okay?”

“I had a Depo shot. It’s a pregnancy prevention—”

“I know what it is. I also know it takes a while to be effective.”

“Yeah. Come on, let’s sit down and watch the other racers.” She pulled a chair up in front of the monitor and started to sit down.

Quint followed her. “Just when did you have this shot, Jamie?”

“Two days after I got back from the wedding. Davis finished his run. How’d he do?” she called down to the crew.

Buster answered her. “One nineteen. No threat there.”

Quint didn't say anything. He was staring at her with a disbelieving look on his face. "You care to explain that?" he asked finally.

"Well, that puts Davis in second place until—"

"Jamie."

Jamie lifted her shoulders in an innocent shrug. "Well, I enjoyed my time with you so much, I thought I might try a few more one-night stands."

Quint snorted. "And rabbits lay colored eggs."

"They don't?"

"You knew I was coming, didn't you?"

Jamie turned her eyes back to the screen where the third driver was starting his run. "Not exactly...but...one little corner of my mind was hoping. It was a very small corner, mind you." Her gaze narrowed playfully as it swiveled to meet his.

"How could you possibly want to see me again after the shitty way I treated you? And if you did want to see me, why the cold reception?"

"I wanted to see you...until I actually saw you... Then I was angry again."

"Truthfully, I was surprised you gave in."

"I might not have if Nicole..."

Quint waited for her to go on but her attention was focused back on the screen. His mouth formed a thin line. "You may as well finish what you were going to say, because we're not leaving the top of this truck until you do."

"It's not a truck. It's a trailer."

"Whatever. Tell me about Nicole. You asked her about me, didn't you?"

Jamie shrugged. "All right. Yes, I asked her what kind of a person you were."

"And what did she tell you?"

"She said you were a wolf and I should stay away from you."

Quint folded his arms over his chest and narrowed his gaze on her.

Jamie laughed. "Okay, she said you were like a brother to Hunter and were a vital part of their family. The rest was girl-talk."

"Girl-talk?"

"Yeah. Girl-talk."

"I'm getting a picture of teenagers sitting on the phone and giggling over boys."

Jamie gave him a wide grin.

Another volley of cheers came from below. Somebody bellowed out, “one twenty one, another one down.”

Jamie gave them a smiling thumbs-up before turning back to Quint. “Any more questions?”

“Just one. When exactly did you have this little chat with Nicole?”

“At the wedding reception. I’m a little surprised you didn’t corner Hunter and question him about me.”

Quint grunted. “How do you know I didn’t?”

Jamie stared at him with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. “Because you wouldn’t have been waiting outside my room that night with a bottle of wine if you’d known I was a NASCAR driver.”

“Your brain works as fast as your car, doesn’t it?”

“Its just logic.”

“Well, Ms. Logic, I guess it will surprise you to hear I did talk to Hunter.”

Her eyes widened. “What, exactly, did he tell you?”

Quint chuckled. “Said he was sworn to secrecy, though he did mention something about you traveling with a fast crowd.”

The roar of the next car taking off on the track muffled Jamie’s laughter. Quint pulled a chair up and sat down beside her. He couldn’t think of any place he’d rather be.

* * * *

By the end of the day, three cars had hit the wall. One driver left by ambulance; the second scrambled to prepare a substitute car. The third was Clay Riker, who still managed to finish in the tenth position in spite of a scraped fender.

Only one driver had beat Jamie’s time. Tomas Dunn would start in the pole position with Jamie beside him on the outside.

All day Friday, and again Saturday, Detective Ralph Sampson walked like a shadowy thorn among the workers and drivers, asking questions, taking notes, concentrating discreetly on anyone who appeared over the age of forty-two. In Buster’s pit alone, that was nearly a fifth of the twenty-nine crew members. Besides Buster there was Tim, Hal, the cook, the gasman, and Charlie, the spotter.

Riker's entire crew was anything but cooperative. It seemed nobody recalled Jimbo being at the race the week before. Both Clay Riker and his father told the detective, in no uncertain terms, he was interfering with their work. Among the rest of the men, unspoken hostility thickened the air. Sampson got the feeling that somebody had instructed them to clam up.

Chapter Fifteen

Sunday morning dark clouds drifted in from the west. With no rain in the forecast the race was expected to start at one o'clock as scheduled. Jamie left for the track early while Quint waited at the hotel for Virgil and Stephen to arrive. They expected to land by ten-thirty.

Normally Jamie's thoughts would have been filled with the upcoming race, not because it was necessary, but because racing had been the only thing in her life.

Now there was Quint. Quint ordering in pizza Friday night so they could be alone, Quint staying by her side all day Saturday, stepping into the background when she was needed by a member of the crew, and Quint making love to her. If they couldn't manage to be alone, he watched her from a distance, teasing her with seductive looks any time he happened lock eyes with her.

Jamie smiled to herself. She thoroughly enjoyed his company. It was more than the lovemaking. Quint made her laugh. She hadn't had true laughter in her life since T-Roy.

She worried about the grim lines of his mouth when she'd slipped into her pink racing suit that morning. He stared at the many logos covering her back, shoulders, and arms like they were dangerous aliens intent on destroying her. When he kissed her goodbye a half hour later, his smile didn't reach his eyes. It was all too clear that she needed to keep a check on her feelings until she was certain he could handle her career. She only hoped it wasn't already too late.

Later that morning Buster joined her on top of the van. He pulled a chair up beside her and sat down.

"How you feeling about the race today?" he asked.

Jamie gave him a curious look. His behavior was totally out of character.

"Same as always," she said. "I'm going to win."

Buster patted her shoulder, chuckling. "That's my girl."

His choice of words didn't usually bother her, but she just wasn't in a mood to let it pass. "Since when, *Daddy*, have I been your girl?"

He gave her a long hard look before he answered. "You got something in your craw, girl? Spit it out."

Jamie turned to face him so she could watch his eyes. "How did my mother die?"

Buster's ruddy face deepened in color. "You know I don't talk about her. She was a bi—"

"She was my mother!" Jamie snapped, gritting her teeth.

"I know that, but there's things about her you don't know."

"What things?"

Buster's jaw clenched. "Things best left unsaid."

"Did you know she was murdered?"

Buster's bushy brows rose. "Where did you hear that?"

Jamie drew a deep breath. "It doesn't matter. I just want you to tell me what happened."

"Well, Christ, I didn't do it if that's what you're thinking."

"Then who did?"

"Hell if I know. Probably one of her goddamn boyfriends."

When Jamie didn't answer Buster's face softened. "Look, Jamie, I know you and I didn't get off on the right foot. Part of that was probably because you loved your mother so much."

"She was all I had."

"I know that, but I didn't even know she was pregnant when she took off. When I found out about you I naturally believed you weren't mine. Her behavior before she left wasn't exactly saintly."

"And when you found out I was yours?"

"Hell, I was bitter. I was worse than bitter. I was fucking pissed, at her, at the world, at you for being part of her. Like I said, there's things you don't know. Things you don't need to know."

"Maybe knowing would help me understand."

"Maybe you'd understand more than you need to. Or want to. Like I told you, some things are best left unsaid. I know I haven't been much of a father to you, but—"

"That's an understatement, if ever I heard one."

A slow grin eased Buster's rigid mouth. "You're a feisty one. I always liked that about you."

Jamie stared at him incredulously. "I didn't think there was anything about me you

liked.”

Buster grunted. “That just goes to show you don’t know everything. Now, we shouldn’t be having this conversation two hours before you race.”

“Don’t worry. When I drive, I focus on driving, nothing else.”

“There, you see. That’s another thing I like about you.”

The shadow of a smile crossed Jamie’s face. Her smile broadened when she glanced down and saw Quint walking across the track flanked by his two cousins.

Buster followed the direction of her eyes. “Looks like your young man is coming. Damn, I like that boy.” He stood up, arching his back. “You be careful out there today. Riker’s entire crew seems to be in a foul mood. Good thing he’s starting well behind you. Unless he gets a miraculous break, you won’t have to put up with the likes of him in this race.”

Buster climbed down from the trailer and greeted Quint with a handshake and a wink. He spared a few moments for Quint to introduce his cousins then headed off to check on the readiness of the video and audio equipment.

Jamie followed Buster down. As she approached Quint and his cousins, she thought Quint looked more relaxed. Either he had managed to mask his anxiety or having his cousins with him helped. Either way, she was glad he would have their company during the race.

The next thing she noticed was how handsome Virgil was. How had that slipped her notice at the wedding? Stephen was a younger, leaner—to the point of being too thin—version of his older brother. Both had midnight black hair and were taller than Quint by two inches, though Quint stood nearly six feet tall. Quint didn’t have the dark good looks of the Douglas brothers, but he had broader shoulders and a more muscular frame. She preferred Quint’s rugged features.

Virgil wore a sheepish grin on his perfectly chiseled face. He extended his hand in a peace offering. “Thanks for letting us come, Jamie.”

Jamie took his hand and smiled, her eyes twinkling. “I forgot just how much you actually look like a lawyer.”

Virgil laughed heartily. “I’m not going to touch that. Instead, I want to introduce you to my brother, Stephen. Stephen, meet Jamie LeCorre.”

When Jamie reached for his hand, Stephen grasped it gently and pressed the tips of her fingers to his lips. “Miss LeCorre, I am your slave. These two clowns can be glad I wasn’t at that wedding. I would have recognized you in an instant. I haven’t forgotten your face since you sang

the National Anthem at the Super Bowl last winter. Will you marry me?"

Jamie glanced at Quint laughing. "If he's been drinking, keep him off the trailer."

"You sang at the Supper Bowl?" Quint asked.

Jamie lifted her shoulders dismissively. "It was no big deal."

"Jeez," Virgil spat out. "We watched that game together. I remember every play in detail. How could we have missed you singing?"

"No big deal," Quint mumbled, mimicking her. "Just the biggest sporting event of the year."

"May I ride with you in your car today? I could help you steer or whatever," Stephen said.

Tim walked up to them, chuckling. "Another one of your adoring fans, Jamie? She gets this all the time," he said to Quint.

Jamie rolled her eyes. "Tim Andrews, here, is the engine builder. Tim, meet Virgil and Stephen Douglas, Quint's cousins from New York." She gestured to the Douglas brothers respectively. "And would you have Sergio throw a couple of extra burgers on for them? If he needs any help cooking, Stephen has graciously volunteered."

Tim threw an arm around Stephen's neck. "Come on my friend. We never turn down help. Let me show you around."

Stephen made no attempt to hide his exuberance. "Hey, I'm your man, Tim. Tell me, is it true you bring two extra engines along?"

Virgil shook his head as he watched them walk away. "My little brother makes life interesting. There's never a dull moment when you're around Stephen."

Tim stopped and turned back to Jamie. "Hey, I almost forgot. Bentler wanted to talk to you. He's in his trailer with his mink entourage. I think he wants to make sure you're wearing your skimpy under your suit."

Jamie rewarded him with a piercing glare. "Thanks for nothing, Tim." She knew he was only half joking. Every week Bentler sent a new Pink Mink designer outfit to her house requesting that she wear it under her racing suit. Every week she ignored him. The outfit she'd worn to change her tire before the wedding was one of them.

Jamie turned to find both Quint and Virgil staring at her. Laughing, she explained about Bentler's obnoxious fantasy. She suggested the two of them find a seat up on the van and wait

for her. Bentler's prerace pep talks usually only took a few minutes.

Jamie found Bentler perched on the edge of his desk. The only other furniture in the small travel trailer was a long table set up with snacks and drinks, and several folding chairs. Five leggy young models dressed in Pink Mink mini skirts were crowded inside, some hovering, some seated. Ralph Sampson sat at the edge of the table sipping on a can of Seven Up. He acknowledged her with a nod.

When Jamie entered the trailer, Bentler motioned the girls to leave them alone. They obeyed silently. Their exotic eyes, as they filed out, fixed on Jamie with a combination of awe and envy.

Bentler smiled at Jamie, his darkly tanned face showing an even row of perfect white teeth. "Jamie, love, have a seat. I believe you already know Detective Sampson."

A long time ago, Jamie gave up chastising Bentler for using pet names on her. When she first started driving for him she'd made it clear that their relationship was strictly business, and as long as he complied, she allowed him some leeway with his little feminist innuendos. He respected her driving, and that's what mattered to her.

She sat down, nodding to Sampson. "Hello, Ralph."

The detective bobbed his bushy eyebrows and smiled. "Hi, how are you doing? Ready for the race?"

Jamie sensed he was cautioning her not to mention the fingerprints. She gave him a nod so slight it barely moved her head.

Bentler answered for her. "Hey, this kid was born ready. I'm lucky to have her in my corner. I have full confidence that when the timing is right, she'll take Pink Mink Inc. to Victory Lane."

"When the timing's right," she repeated. When she started to get to her feet, Bentler stopped her.

"That isn't why I asked you to come here," he said. "I wanted to tell you I'm aware of that little incident with my Cadillac on the freeway in Chicago. Just for the record, I had already reported that car stolen. If they manage to catch that SOB, I'll do everything in my power to help put him behind bars and keep him there. I don't take kindly to anyone messing with my property, and more importantly, my star driver."

Jamie could tell by the flare in his dark eyes that he was dead serious. "Thanks, Ray," she

said. "I appreciate that."

Bentler picked a Graycliff out of a jar on his desk. "That goes for off the track as well as on," he said biting the end off the cigar. When he started searching for a match Ralph Sampson came to his feet to supply one. Bentler thanked him, and focused back on Jamie. "I had a little talk with Kent Riker. I told him if he ever sics his kid on you again he's going to get wrapped in pink shit from his foul mouth to his asshole. One and the same, as far as I'm concerned."

Jamie stared at him in surprise. A frown drew her mouth into a grim line. "Tell me Ray, would you have done that if I were a male driver?"

"Hell yes. He's not just messing with you, he's messing with my car."

Jamie gave him a measured sideways glare but there was humor in her eyes. "You're such a liar, Ray."

Bentler laughed. "Darling, you drive as well as any man out there, and that's no bull, but you're—softer. Now that's a compliment so don't get yourself all up in arms. Now get out there and give 'em hell."

"I'll walk with you," Sampson said, opening the door for her.

Jamie stood up but didn't turn to leave. "Ray, can I ask you something?"

Bentler put the flame to his cigar and sucked heavily on the end. "Sure, babe, shoot."

"Did you know my mother?"

Bentler choked on his smoke. He didn't answer until he could draw a free breath of air. "Sure, I knew her. Why?"

"Tell me about her. What was she like?"

"Why don't you ask your father?"

Jamie grunted indelicately. "We both know what he thought of her. I'd like to hear the truth from somebody who didn't hate her. At least I'm assuming you didn't hate her."

"Well, of course I didn't hate her," Bentler said quickly. "She was a striking woman. She had a face and body men, or women for that matter, would kill for. You resemble her very much, except she was taller."

"Do you know anything about her life after she divorced Buster?"

"Some."

"Well, do you know who she dated? I have the feeling it was someone involved in racing. Buster won't talk about her. He just says, there's things I don't need to know."

“Christ sake, Jamie, you have to race in an hour. This isn’t the time, and your father’s right. Leave it alone.”

Jamie folded her arms across her chest. “Let me worry about the race. All I’m asking for is some straight answers. Who was she seeing? What is Buster hiding from me?”

Ray Bentler hesitated. He stared at his cigar with distaste, snubbed it out in a crystal ashtray, and drew a long, deep breath. “It would be a lot easier to tell you who she wasn’t seeing.”

Blood hammered in Jamie’s ears while unshed tears threatened to close her throat. All her life she’d believed her mother was a good person, and Buster was the bad guy. It made it so much easier to blame him for being the thorn in her life. She suddenly realized that that was precisely what she’d done, blamed him.

She swallowed at the growing lump in her throat and gave Bentler a tentative smile. “Thank you,” she said. “That’s not quite the answer I was hoping for but I have no reason to doubt you.” She drew in a laborious breath, releasing it with a long heavy sigh. “I’d better go now—I have a date with car number thirteen.”

On the way back to her pit Sampson commended her. “Thanks for asking the questions I couldn’t without tipping my hand.”

“I didn’t find out anything,” Jamie retorted, “except that my mother was a tramp.”

“Don’t go tampering with your memories. They are what you believed them to be. It doesn’t change what you felt for her or how she treated you.”

Jamie sighed. “No, I guess not.”

When they reached the pit, Sampson squeezed her upper arm. “Good luck out there, and take care.” He gave her a two-finger salute and left.

Forty-five minutes later she climbed into her car and strapped in. Quint had hugged her fiercely before she left him on the trailer with Virgil and Stephen. For a fleeting second, she thought Buster was going to hug her too. Instead, he gave his usual warning about staying clear of the wall and put his headphones on. The next time she would talk to him would be from the track.

She maneuvered her car into the second position beside Dunn’s green number forty-seven. He acknowledged her with a victory sign. Jamie laughed and returned the sign.

The Chevy Monte Carlo 400 began with the roar of forty-two engines, each sporting two

hundred and eighty horsepower. The fans were on their feet, adding to the deafening sound. The commentators bellowed into microphones trying to be heard over the melee.

On the fifth lap, Jamie gained just enough speed to ease in front of Dunn to take the lead.

Eight laps later Buster informed her that the spotter, Charlie, reported a pileup and the yellow flag was up. When the caution flag lifted a few minutes later, Buster told Jamie that three cars were taken out of the race. That brought Riker from tenth position to seventh.

Jamie managed to hold the lead for fifteen laps, until Dunn edged past her on turn three. She'd given him too wide a berth and when she came into the curve a little too fast, she had to brake to avoid the wall just when he was getting his RPMs up. She cursed her luck and closed in behind him, drafting within inches of his bumper. Talon Davis was doing likewise behind her. The three cars held their positions for the next eight laps.

When lap forty brought out another caution flag, Buster called her into the pit.

Buster spoke from behind the barrier wall through her headphones. "Davis didn't stop. He needs the lead to gain Nextell Cup points and he probably knows that's the only way he'll get it. He'll have to stop in the next ten or fifteen laps or risk a blown tire. So, don't bust your balls trying to pass him."

Jamie barely had time to smile at his choice of words. Dunn roared out of his pit after only fifteen seconds, and Jamie was right on his tail, taking the third position behind Dunn and Davis. Riker pulled up to sixth.

After twelve laps with no flag, Davis was forced to pit, just as Buster had predicted. Jamie moved back into second.

Quint observed Stephen with utter disbelief. His young cousin came to his feet repeatedly, shouting or swearing at one driver or another. His actions were so comical Quint actually started to relax.

"Hot damn, that lady can drive." Stephen cried, when she passed Dunn and took the lead for the second time that day. He groaned loudly when she lost it back to Dunn six laps later. "No. No. Damn. You gotta hang onto that lead, baby. Then you'll have nothing to worry about. Let them pile up behind you."

Quint saw the wisdom in that. The lead car was unaffected by everyone else's daredevil attempts at passing each other. "How fast are they going?" he asked, wondering why he wanted

to know.

Stephen sat back down and pulled a pack of Dentine out of his pocket. “It’s such a short track, they can’t get much speed. Hell, they need to brake as often as accelerate. Takes a lot of skill to keep the brakes from burning out.”

Tim, who was watching with them and being as verbal as Stephen, said, “They can probably get to a hundred and fifty on the back stretch, but the front has a nasty bow to it. It’s shaped like a big D. Between curve four and one is where skill comes into play and the men are separated from the boys.”

Virgil chuckled. “Or in this case, the girl from the boys.”

“When she’s out there,” Tim said, laughing, “she’s one of the guys.”

“I’ll agree with that,” Virgil said. “From what I can see none of them have any advantage over her in strength or skill.”

After nearly an hour of no excitement, Stephen suddenly came to his feet as the tenacious snake of speeding cars rounded turn one for the three hundredth time, and the seventh car in line, hit the wall. It careened back onto the track and was pummeled by three other cars. Four more slammed into the flying debris before they all came to rest after scattering parts across the track like chewed-up bits of color crayons.

This time Quint came to his feet too. His eyes searched frantically for Pink Mink’s number thirteen. She had come to a stop behind Dunn, and he realized all traffic had come to a halt, acknowledging the red flag.

His heart slammed into his ribcage like an out-of-control bongo drum. His throat felt like he’d swallowed dust. He’d seen the same type of carnage before on Jamie’s Indianapolis tape. Even though Jamie wasn’t in the midst of this one, the sight and sound, and smell of death, brought haunting memories slamming to the surface. He tried to stop them. He couldn’t. “Jesus,” he whispered. “How many do you think were killed?”

“Can’t see. Too much smoke,” Stephen said. “I wonder what caused it. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“That’s what happens when you go so many laps with nothing eventful going on,” Tim said.

Quint realized he had actually taken his eyes off the track too. He suddenly understood what Jamie meant about people coming to see action on the track.

“The bad news is Riker escaped,” Tim said. “He’s parked three cars behind Jamie. Watch the screen, they’re replaying the crash.”

They all stared wordlessly at the monitor while the grisly scene played over and over.

“It was Davis,” Tim said finally. “He came into the turn too fast and couldn’t hold it. What a mess. The fans are getting their money’s worth today.”

“Bunch of fucking gladiators,” Quint mumbled under his breath.

Both Stephen and Tim laughed. Virgil just shook his head.

From down below they could hear Buster giving Jamie a play by play. Tim commented that drivers hated the red flag. It broke the momentum.

Quint grunted something inaudible. He thought they should have been glad for the brief rest. They had been driving for over two hours, alternatively braking and accelerating at high speeds with only fifteen to sixteen-second pit stops. He couldn’t even imagine the tension on the body as well as the mind. Then he watched in disbelief as one by one all the drivers climbed out of their cars and walked away. No one even so much as limped. One of the drivers tried to take a swing at Davis but was held back by his teammates. The commentator had a heyday with that. He clearly had no love for Talon Davis.

It took ten minutes for a scurrying cleanup crew to clear up the track and restart the race.

A short while later, with only fifteen laps to go Riker moved up to third, a quarter lap behind Jamie and Dunn. The consensus was he didn’t have a prayer of catching them.

Three laps later, Jamie jammed into third gear—seriously abusing the engine—and out-accelerated Dunn to slide past him on the inside.

A hundred and fifty thousand fans came to their feet in one vaulting roar when she reclaimed the lead.

Jamie knew better than to start thinking about Victory Lane. Dunn, a tenacious driver, wouldn’t make any foolish mistakes. He had the skills and car capable of overtaking her at any given moment.

Two laps from the finish, the crowd was on its feet as Jamie continued to hold the lead. One of the cars ahead of her was in the process of sliding to the outside to allow her to pass when its damaged left rear fender spun loose of the car and slammed into Jamie’s grill. It violently jarred her car, giving her both a physical and mental shock. She managed to keep it on the

straightaway without going into a slide, but the piece imbedded in her radiator made it difficult to steer. She gripped the wheel and jammed her foot on the gas, trying to keep Dunn at bay.

Dunn came up beside her with half a lap to go. Her engine rattled like an out-of-control jackhammer and black smoke spewed out from under the hood, seriously impairing her visibility. Helplessly, she watched Dunn overtake her as Riker closed the gap from the rear.

Buster ordered her, in no uncertain terms, to pull over.

She kept her foot on the accelerator, ignoring Buster, ignoring the flames that licked over the hood, squeezing every last ounce of horsepower she could out of the damaged engine.

Dunn took the checkered flag just as her engine blew. She watched Riker come up fast behind her. She just had time to brace herself before his car, instead of passing her, slammed into her rear bumper, pushing her over the finish line ahead of him.

Jamie got a quick glimpse of the checkered flag at her side before she turned to the inside and brought her car to a skidding stop. Flames shot through the floorboards, a grimy haze of soot showered the windshield. She jerked at the window net that prevented her escape when hands from the outside released it and pulled her out. Those hands belonged to Clay Riker.

In the seconds that followed, a fire truck sprayed chemicals on the car, and Buster, along with the other crew members and a medic, arrived on the scene.

Buster was irate. "Goddamn it, Jamie, a win isn't worth killing yourself. I told you to pull over and bail out. Don't you know when to give up?"

"I'm fine," she yelled back at him. "Relax, you'll give yourself a coronary."

"It's not me giving myself a coronary, it's you."

The entire Pink Mink crew stared in awe as Buster threw his arms around his daughter and gave her a bone-crushing hug that literally took her breath away.

Chapter Sixteen

Jamie was tired. Her face and clothes were plastered with soot, her hair a helmet-tangled disaster. The last thing she wanted was an interview, but she knew the fans would be waiting to hear from her, so when Matt Hurley pressed a microphone in her face she tried to keep from scowling at him.

“How do you feel about the race today?” he asked.

“Better than last week.”

He looked surprised. “Really? You seem to be having a major streak of bad luck. How do you feel about that? Is somebody out to get you?”

Inwardly Jamie bristled, but she refused to feed the gossip media. She shrugged. “Some days you have good luck. Some days you have bad luck. It’s all part of the game.”

“You have to be disappointed you didn’t win!” he persisted.

At that Jamie laughed. “Show me a driver who isn’t disappointed when he loses, and I’ll show you a driver who will never win.”

There was a second of silence before Hurley chuckled. “I’ll hand you one thing, Ms. LeCorre, you know how to wriggle your way around a question. Maybe you should run for a political office.”

“No, thanks. I couldn’t handle the stress.”

Hurley snorted. “Right. What about Clay Riker? This is the second week in a row he seemed to have deliberately targeted you. Any comments about that?”

For a moment Jamie stared blankly into the camera. She wasn’t ready to share her feelings about Clay’s actions on that last lap. She wasn’t even sure she fully understood them.

She flashed him a diabolical grin. “No.”

Hurley sighed. “Well, Jamie LeCorre, you ran a terrific race today. You have a respectable standing in the Nextell Cup challenge, and you’re an inspiration to women all over the world. You—”

“Are you buttering me up for something?”

The reporter grinned. “Those things are all true, but yes, I was. I just don’t want you to walk away with a one-finger salute when I ask my next question.”

Jamie sliced Matt Hurley a warning look.

Hurley pressed on. “I just thought you’d like a chance to publicly explain the picture Cynthia Harman aired on her show the other night. Were you really too drunk to walk?”

“That question doesn’t deserve an answer,” she said. “But as long as you brought this subject up, I would like to suggest to Ms. Harman that she stick to photographing black cats and warty toads because that’s more up her alley.”

Hoots and raucous laughter came from the crew behind them.

Jamie was more than happy to oblige when Quint offered to drive her car back to the hotel. Virgil and Stephen followed in their rented SUV. She had reserved a room for them adjoining hers since Stephen would be setting up his video equipment there.

Right now she had two things on her mind, a hot shower and food, in that order. Virgil had offered to take all of them out to a nice restaurant but she’d declined. Instead, they decided on a pizza place a block from the hotel, after Jamie had a chance to clean up.

An hour later, when they were seated and had placed their order, the subject of Clay Riker came up. The men decided it was bad enough she’d had the misfortune of not winning because of a fluke accident, but to have Riker slam into the back of her was inexcusable.

“I say we string him up cowboy style,” Virgil said. “It’s no less than he deserves.”

“I’ll supply the rope,” Quint muttered.

Stephen held up his hand, frowning. “Just a minute. I smell something fishy about that whole ordeal. It didn’t make sense. Why didn’t he try to pass instead of ramming her?”

The waitress set a pitcher of beer on their table. Quint lined up four glasses and started pouring. “Don’t you remember last week? He was far more interested in bringing Jamie down than winning. The man should be put out of his misery.”

“Then why did he help her out of the car?” Stephen asked.

Virgil passed a beer to Jamie, who was being unusually quiet while they discussed Riker’s dismemberment. “Because he was the first one there.”

“The only reason he was the first one there,” Quint snapped, “was because he was on her

bumper—literally.”

“Professional courtesy?” Stephen asked, directing his question to Jamie.

“Professional courtesy, my ass,” Virgil carped. “He was the one who put her there in the first place.”

“Stephen’s right,” Jamie said finally. “And so are you,” she said to Virgil. “He *was* the one who put me there, but do any of you realize where he put me?”

All three men looked at her as though she might have bumped her head a bit too hard in the crash.

“He pushed me over the finish line.”

“You would have gone over anyway,” Quint argued.

“Probably not,” she said. “My engine blew. I had zero power when he hit me.”

For the span of several heartbeats they stared at her. It was Stephen who found his voice first.

“Do you think he knew that?”

“I don’t know,” Jamie said. “It all happened so fast, I don’t think anybody knew I’d lost power. If they had, they certainly would have made a big deal about it, especially the media. If anybody knew, it would have been Clay. He was the closest.”

“Did he say anything when he helped you out of the car?” Virgil asked.

“Yeah, he said he owed me one.”

Stephen swore under his breath. “What the hell does that mean?”

“That’s just it,” Jamie said. “I don’t know.”

“I think I’m getting the picture here,” Quint said. “You don’t want to acknowledge anything until you know if he intended to cause you grief or help you.”

“Exactly. I’d appreciate it if the three of you would keep quiet on this until I can decide what to do about it.”

Quint nodded.

Virgil said, “No problem.”

Stephen grumbled. “Shit, a scoop like this and I’m sworn to secrecy.”

Virgil grabbed him by the back of the neck. “You better say nice things, little brother, if you want Jamie to sign those six copies of her centerfold you brought with you.”

Jamie’s eyes widened. Then she laughed.

It was just what they needed to lighten the mood as the waitress brought their pizza out to their table. Stephen ordered another pitcher of beer, saying that as long as Virgil was paying he might as well get drunk.

By the time Stephen had two more beers he was entertaining them with adventures of skydiving. He told about his summer in Europe living on a shoestring budget, sleeping in a tent with a female friend who, much to his chagrin, insisted their relationship remain platonic.

He told about parachuting off the great cliffs in the south of France, and a skydiving competition in Switzerland where he and a hundred and forty-three other divers won a first-place formation trophy.

At a meet in Wisconsin he jumped on a cloudy day, and he and a friend ended up in a National Guard complex. It took four hours to convince the troops he and his partner weren't enemy spies.

Virgil said only a certified idiot would jump out of an airplane if he didn't have to.

Quint agreed, vowing that Stephen was loonier sober than he was drunk.

Jamie laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes. She forgot all about the race, being cheated out of first place, and having Clay Riker push her into second when she likely would not even have finished.

The camaraderie between Quint and his cousins was something that she'd always imagined families were like, something she'd only had on a very small scale with T-Roy.

The one and only time she'd ever been drunk was with her brother and his friends. It was her seventeenth birthday. They took her to a seedy little bar on Chicago's south side. The back room had an illegal bookie operation going on. T-Roy told her if she didn't drink the guard on duty would know she wasn't of age and he'd throw her out and she'd have to wait for them in the car. The car was parked in a rat-infested alley so dark you needed a flashlight to find it.

She drank whatever they put in front of her, and had fun doing it. Clay Riker was with them; she remembered him telling T-Roy to quit forcing her to drink.

The next thing she knew, she woke up at home, in the bathtub, dressed only in underwear because she'd heaved all over her clothes. She was so thirsty she tried to lap water from the tub. T-Roy was tending to her, supporting her head, telling her it was okay, she would live, unfortunately.

In the other room Buster was carrying on, swearing so loud the shingles rattled. T-Roy

laughed it off. “Don’t mind him. He just doesn’t think women can handle liquor. I guess you showed him.” T-Roy was right, of course. After all, Buster always rattled the shingles about one thing or another. As far as he was concerned, Jamie couldn’t do anything right. She had managed a weak laugh before she threw up again.

* * * *

Stephen and Virgil’s room, as large as the one Quint shared with Jamie, had plenty of space in the sitting area for Stephen to set up his video equipment. Jamie waited anxiously while he popped her tape in and fast-forwarded to the Indianapolis crash scene.

“There,” she burst out when he passed the section where she went into the slide. “Back up and slow it down.”

“I watched this live,” Stephen said tapping keys on his laptop to reverse the action. “It was spectacular.”

Quint gave his cousin a scathing look as he watched the horrific scene play backwards in slow motion. He was seated on the sofa with his arm across the back behind Jamie’s shoulders. When Stephen came to the right spot, Jamie edged forward in her seat, straining to watch the screen for the exact moment when the object had flown through the air.

“Stop.” she said. “Did you see it?”

Stephen shook his head. “I didn’t see anything. I’ll go back over it again.” He backed it up, clicked forward again going one frame at a time, holding each frame a few seconds until a small dark object appeared between Jamie’s car and Tomas Dunn’s car. He was beside her, about a half car length ahead.

“There it is,” Quint said squinting his eyes.

“Can you zero in on it, bring it closer?” Virgil asked.

“You bet,” Stephen said punching some keys.

A rectangular outline appeared on the screen surrounding the object. Stephen punched keys until the rectangle filled the screen. The blown up image was blurred but showed an unmistakable outline.

“It looks like a screwdriver,” Jamie said. “Somebody must have dropped it on the track during the cleanup of the previous crash.”

“Or it could have been left under Dunn’s hood after the last pit stop,” Stephen said. “It must have punctured your tire and caused a blowout. Either way it proves you didn’t go into a

slide for no reason.”

Jamie expelled a long breath. “During the cleanup it was likely overlooked and picked up along with all the other debris. My tires only had thirty laps on them so they probably didn’t even examine them for a blowout. Plus they were badly charred by the fire.”

Stephen grinned. “Whatever. You can take this tape to the association and let those big heads know you’re innocent. I’ll make a print out of the blowup and another of the overall shot.”

Jamie glanced from Quint to Virgil.

“She can’t use it,” Virgil said. “And you can’t tell anyone about it.”

Stephen looked at Jamie, thinking Virgil has lost his marbles. “Why the hell not?”

When Jamie started to answer Virgil interrupted her. “Just trust me on it. There are circumstances—”

“Let me guess,” Stephen snorted. “You’re pulling a lawyer confidentiality trick on me. What’s going on?” He directed the question at Quint as though he might enlighten him.

Quint shrugged. “Virg is right. You need to keep this quiet for now.”

Stephen looked at each one of them in turn. “You guys suck. You’re all just going to leave me hanging on this aren’t you?”

“Sorry,” Jamie said, sympathetically. “It’s best that way. We can’t explain until...later.”

Stephen contemplated that for a moment. Then he chuckled. He looked from Jamie to Quint. “You did something illegal, didn’t you? Where did you get this tape? And why hasn’t the association already looked at it?”

Virgil laughed. “Stop trying to be a private dick, and get those centerfolds for Jamie to sign before she changes her mind.”

Stephen turned back to his computer mumbling something under his breath. He tapped on the key that would make a printout of the screwdriver, brought the screen back to the distance shot and punched it again. Seconds later, two printed sheets came out of the printer. He glanced at them before handing the sheets to Jamie.

Jamie stared at the close-up of the screwdriver for a moment. “Well,” she said. “It didn’t come out of Dunn’s pit. Their tools have a green band around them, just like ours are identified with a pink band. This one is clearly red and white—it comes from the rescue team.”

She gave Stephen one of her sweetest smiles. “Thank you, Stephen. You really know what you’re doing. I thought they could only do this kind of thing in the movies. I’m indebted to

you.”

Stephen grinned. “I’ll get my centerfolds. I actually brought sixteen. I have a lot of friends.”

“Wonders never cease,” Virgil muttered.

Chapter Seventeen

Virgil and Jamie walked up the steps of the Richmond police department at nine o'clock the next morning. The aging building, constructed of rust-red brick bore a plaque beside the swinging glass doors dating it back to 1898. Inside, a matronly receptionist directed them to the homicide records department.

A feeling of dread gripped Jamie as they rode the elevator to the third floor. While Virgil had warned her they might not discover anything new, she still had the feeling she was taking a step back into another time, a time before Buster, before T-Roy, before racing. Jamie's memories of her early childhood were dim, but one thing was vivid. She was extremely happy living with her mother.

A young woman approached them from behind a cluttered counter, stacked with disorderly files, two neglected plants and computer monitor. Virgil gave her a dazzling smile. Even though he had assured Jamie they were well within their rights requesting information on her mother, his smile was reminiscent of an old 007 movie where Sean Connery always got what he wanted by charming a beautiful woman.

"Can I help you?" The clerk asked, returning Virgil's smile, ignoring Jamie completely.

"I hope so, Candy," Virgil said, glancing at her nametag. "My client here is looking for some information on her mother."

Candy gave Jamie a dismissive look and turned back to Virgil. "What is it exactly that you're looking for?"

"Anything you can tell us."

"Are you with the police department?" she asked.

"No, I'm Ms. LeCorre's attorney."

Candy's smile brightened at that news. "Do you have some ID, some credentials?"

When Virgil handed her the papers, she pulled out a keyboard drawer from beneath the counter. "Do you have a case number?"

“No, just a name and date.” He gave her the information and her fingers quickly moved over the keys. She stared for a moment at the screen then looked up at him frowning. “This case is still open.”

Virgil was silent while she punched more keys. “This is real interesting,” she said. “A twenty-three year old murder, never solved. Now you’re the second person here today wanting to see this file.” Candy shrugged. “You just want to look or do you need copies of anything?”

“Copies. Of everything,” Virgil said.

“It’ll cost you thirty cents a page.”

“Fine,” Virgil said, reaching for his wallet.

“You best wait to pay until I find it. It’s a pretty old file, and not in our computer system. You may as well have a seat. It could take me a while.”

Jamie sighed impatiently. “Well, if somebody else just requested it, and since you’ve only been open an hour, it’s probably real handy.”

Candy gave Jamie a scathing look but she reached for the shortest stack of folders on the counter and started flipping through them. It was the third one down. With another look at Virgil, she gave a heavy sigh. “This thing is an inch thick. It’s going to take me some time. Why don’t you have a seat?” She gave Jamie a smug look and walked with the folder to a copy machine behind the counter.

Jamie shook her head. “Do all women fall at your feet like that?”

Virgil grinned. “Only the blondes.”

“I’m blonde,” Jamie said quickly.

Virgil raised an eyebrow at her. “Does that answer your question?”

Jamie threw her head back and laughed.

“Quint’s a lucky man to have you in his corner,” Virgil said, smiling. “Let’s have a seat. I have a couple of questions for you.” He motioned her to the small sitting area where five threadbare padded chairs lined the far wall.

“I suppose Ralph Sampson was the other person looking at those files,” Jamie said as she sat down.

“That was my guess,” Virgil agreed. “I’m also guessing he’ll be around to see you as soon as he takes a look at it.”

“You said you wanted to ask me something?”

“Yeah. Did the authorities question you the night your mother died?”

“Yes, but I don’t remember exactly what I told them. There were several of them. They all seemed to be so big and wore intimidating uniforms and badges. I was really scared. I kept asking for my mother but they wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“God. That must have been a nightmare for you.”

“It was, and it didn’t stop there. They took me to the police station and handed me over to some lady with stringy gray hair. I had to sleep at her house in a dark room by myself. To put it mildly, I wasn’t very happy and I let her know about it.”

Virgil chuckled. “I’ll bet you were feisty, even back then.”

“It got worse the next day when she told me everything would be okay because I was going to live with my father.” Jamie hissed through her teeth. “I didn’t even know I had a father. I started screaming all the bad words I knew at her, demanding to see my mother. I’m sure I carried that attitude with me, since my father wasn’t any happier to see me than I was to see him.”

Virgil swore softly. “Christ. Quint told me some about your father.”

“He can be a hard man, but I suppose I didn’t help matters any. Neither did the fact that he made it clear that he despised my mother.”

“You’re forgetting that he was supposed to be the adult.”

“Yeah...well...”

Jamie didn’t say any more as she watched a couple walk by. The man held a toddler in his arms while the little boy smothered his father with kisses. The mother leaned against him, touching the child, laughing.

Virgil interrupted her thoughts. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to look at that file before you see it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to find out what you told them, and then question you. I’d rather pick your brain before it’s biased by what you read.”

Jamie shrugged. “I don’t know what good it will do since I’m sure I already told them everything I knew, but I’ll go along with that. As long as I can see the file afterwards.”

“Good enough,” Virgil said. “I wonder what’s going on over there?” He nodded toward Candy at the copy machine. Two men had approached her. The men were talking to her while

looking and gesturing at Virgil and Jamie.

“They’re probably warning her about smooth talking lawyers.”

Virgil gave her his charismatic lawyer’s grin.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “Why is it that you aren’t married?”

Virgil leaned back and stretched his long legs out in front of him, his eyes on the three chatty individuals at the copy machine. They appeared to be arguing, but Candy continued to copy while she talked.

“I almost was,” he said. “In fact, I would have been if Quint and Hunter hadn’t run a check on my lovely bride-to-be.”

Jamie stared up at him. “What did they find that was so terrible?”

Virgil shook his head, sighing. “It seems she already had a husband and two kids in New Mexico. Not only that, but when she left him, she wiped out their savings and sold his valuable coin collection.”

Jamie made a soft, indrawn, whistling sound. “That must have been devastating. How did you handle it?”

“Like a man, of course,” Virgil chuckled. “I stayed drunk for three months.”

When Jamie laughed Virgil smiled at her. “You have a pleasant laugh, musical, like you sing.” He glanced back at Candy. She was getting near the bottom of the file. “If I forget to mention it, Jamie, thanks for letting Quint into your life. I’ve never seen him happier. If anyone deserves a little happiness in life, it’s Quint. I don’t know what he did to you, but according to him it was pretty bad.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t either. I can tell you I was pretty miffed that he didn’t try to see me until after he found out I was a NASCAR driver.”

Virgil chuckled. “He didn’t change his mind about coming to see you because he learned you were a NASCAR driver. He was like a man possessed that whole week. The only reason he didn’t try to contact you was because he believed you wouldn’t have anything to do with him.”

“Your family does so much watching out for each other. I’m surprised you didn’t run a check on me.”

Virgil snickered. “It was a little difficult since Jamie Devon didn’t exist.” At Jamie’s

raised brows he quickly added, “But in case you’re wondering, Quint didn’t know I was trying to investigate you. It was just that he was acting so besotted, I wanted to be prepared if he decided to act on—how should I say—his male instincts.”

“You men seem to be ruled by your male instincts.”

“You’re right on target there,” Virgil said laughing. “But I’m guessing it was the right move for Quint, in this case.”

Jamie was thoughtfully quiet for a few moments before she commented. “I’m not so sure,” she said softly.

Virgil lifted dark brows in silent query.

“Quint has a problem with my racing,” she explained. “I’ve had any number of male responses to my profession, but never fear. I’m not convinced he can deal with it.”

“He’s probably afraid for you because he cares.”

“That means the more he cares the more it will disturb him. There’s no question, it’s a dangerous business. Most men I know thrive on fast cars and action sports.”

Virgil scratched the back of his neck. “Are you aware that Quint’s parents were killed in a car crash?”

Jamie drew a quick breath. “My God. I didn’t know. Both of them?”

Virgil nodded. “Yes, along with my sister Diana. Quint, his brother Grant, and Hunter were in the car too. Hunter and Grant weren’t hurt but Quint had several broken bones. He was pretty banged up. I can’t even tell you how many surgeries he had to have. He was just a little tyke, only five years old. That’s when he came to live with us. Mom nursed him back to health.”

“Losing a child must have been awful for your parents.”

“It was awful for all of us. Somehow Quint filled a void with Diana gone. For a long time he was afraid to get in a car. I thought you should know, since he rarely talks about it.”

Jamie blinked rapidly at a rush of tears. She’d seen Quint’s scars, at least the physical ones. She sympathized with the entire Hunter family.

Understanding Quint’s fear didn’t help any. Instead, it reinforced her trepidation that he may not overcome it. If their relationship became serious it could come down to her quitting NASCAR or him leaving her. Racing was all she knew, and if she left racing it had to be her decision alone. She wouldn’t be coerced by a man, any man, even one she loved, but she already knew Quint would leave before he’d ask her to stop driving.

“It appears Quint and I have something in common,” she said. “Our lives both changed when we were five years old.”

When Candy motioned them to the counter she handed Virgil the file, told him he owed twelve dollars and thirty-five cents, and turned adoring eyes on Jamie. “My co-workers would like your autograph, Ms. LeCorre.”

Virgil handed Candy a twenty while Jamie signed her name on five scraps of paper, including one for Candy.

“So much for my male charm,” Virgil mumbled on the way out.

Chapter Eighteen

Jamie waited impatiently with Stephen while Virgil and Quint sat at the small table in her hotel suite and studied Katherine Devon's file. They conferred in hushed tones while making notes as they read through the thick stack of papers. Quint sat with his back to her so Jamie carefully watched Virgil's face. It remained expressionless throughout and when he finally closed the folder and looked up, his face was still expressionless.

He motioned to the chair across the table from him. "Why don't you have a seat, Jamie?"

She got up and walked across the room.

Virgil gave her a reassuring smile. "Relax, you're not on trial."

"Why do I feel like I am?" she said, as she sat down.

"Why don't you start by telling us everything you remember about the night your mother died."

Jamie braced herself with a deep sigh. "She went out with a man, to the car races. Funny, now that I think of it, she hated racing. Penny, my regular babysitter, stayed with me. Anyway when they came home, it was dark outside, but not late enough for me to be in bed. They talked. He left, then she left too. I never saw her again."

"Did the babysitter stay with you?" Virgil asked.

Jamie shrugged. "I suppose so. Mom never left me alone for more than a few minutes."

"Did you know the man she was with? His name?"

Jamie thought for a moment. "She called him Wally. He was real nice to me. Once he brought me a coloring book about zoo animals. He rarely stayed for any length of time so I didn't get to know him very well, and when they left I never went with them."

"Where there any other men in her life?"

Jamie gritted her teeth. "Ralph Sampson asked me that. Like I told him, I don't know of anybody else."

“Do you remember a phone call she received before she left the second time?”

“No.”

“A call that made your mother very upset?”

Jamie swallowed at the dryness in her throat. “No.”

“Do you know Penny’s last name?”

“No.”

“Where she lived?”

Jamie’s heart did an odd double beat. She looked at Virgil but she didn’t see him. “Someone else asked me that,” she whispered. “The officer who came to tell me that my mother wouldn’t be coming home.”

“You told him you didn’t know where Penny lived?” Virgil asked.

“Yes, but I was angry with him...and scared. I thought they were going to get Penny back to stay with me, and I just wanted my mother. I kept asking for her but the officer just ignored my pleas and continued badgering me with questions.”

“But you knew, didn’t you? You knew where Penny lived.”

“Yes.”

“Do you still know?”

Jamie nodded. “I think so. It wasn’t very far away. She lived in a pretty white house with a front porch and lots of flowers. She used to take me home with her sometimes when mother was gone for a long time. She said not to tell Mama...it was a secret.” Jamie frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t understand why the police asked me about Penny. Why didn’t they just question her?”

“Because,” Virgil said, tapping his pencil on his note pad as though agitated, “Penny wasn’t there. You were home alone.”

Jamie’s heart thudded rapidly. “My mother wouldn’t have left me alone.”

Up to this point Quint had sat quietly, listening, allowing Virgil to ask the questions. He moved his chair closer to Jamie and put an arm around her shoulders. “If the babysitter wasn’t there, how did they know about the phone call?” he asked.

Virgil looked at Jamie. “How did they know about the phone call, Jamie?”

Jamie felt her throat squeezing shut. She closed her eyes, wanting to stop the painful memories of that long-ago night. She took several deep breaths, slowly, one after the other.

“Because I told them,” she said tightly.

“Do you recall anything she said?” Virgil asked.

Jamie shook her head. “I think Penny took me to my room when my mother started yelling into the phone.” She shrugged. “Problem is, I’m not sure if I’m guessing or actually remembering.”

Quint glanced at Virgil. “I think we’ve covered everything.”

Virgil nodded. He reached across the table and patted Jamie’s clenched hands. “I’m sorry if this feels like an interrogation, but we needed to jog your memory.”

“I hope I never have to go on a witness stand in front of you. You’re good.”

Virgil laughed. “That’s what all the women say. How about we go for a drive and see if we can find Penny’s house, if it’s still there. It’s the only thing I can see that the police neglected to do. They did a search for a sitter but I can’t see any notes that suggest they ever located her. Probably nobody they talked to knew who she was. Or maybe they believed you were actually alone the whole time. Your old address is in the file and I have a city map in the car. Are you going to be all right going there?”

Jamie nodded. “Of course. I want to find out what happened.”

“God, I love a good mystery,” Stephen said, jumping off the sofa. “You read the map,” he said to his brother. “I’ll drive.”

* * * *

Stephen stopped the SUV in front of an emergency health clinic. Three-forty-two East Chestnut was printed in bold letters on the glass front door.

Virgil looked from the clinic to his notes and back to his map. “Damn, this is definitely the correct address and the right street.”

“They must have torn the apartment building down to build a clinic,” Jamie said from the back seat. She looked up and down the block at the rundown houses clustered close together, many with unkempt yards, most in need of repair. With the exception of the clinic and a modern duplex across the street, the entire development appeared to be at least sixty years old. “I don’t remember this being such an impoverished neighborhood.”

“Kids rarely see things the way they really are,” Quint said. “If you were happy here, you weren’t poor. How old was Penny?”

“I suppose about fourteen or fifteen,” Jamie said. “That would make her around thirty-

eight.”

“It’s doubtful that she’d still live here,” Stephen offered.

“Start circling the blocks,” Virgil said. “We’re looking for a white house with a porch.”

Silence filled the vehicle while Stephen drove. He drove around the clinic block, then widened the search to the outlying blocks using the clinic as a starting point each time they turned in a new direction. Forty-five minutes later they were parked back in front of the clinic.

“Maybe it was torn down,” Jamie said. “It was such a pretty little house,” she added sadly.

“Do you think we covered enough area?” Virgil asked.

Jamie nodded. “I’m positive it wasn’t more than two blocks and we walked thorough an alley between the houses.”

“Which direction did you walk when you came out of your apartment?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“Let’s trade places,” Virgil said to Jamie. “You sit in the front. We’ll go around again. Look for landmarks...a fence, a big tree, a house you might have passed while walking. Remember trees get bigger and houses get older. Other than that, few things change in these neighborhoods.”

Jamie got out and took Virgil’s seat beside Stephen.

“Let’s go the opposite direction this time.” Stephen suggested. He made a u-turn and started circling again.

“Maybe we should watch for houses that are newer,” Quint said. “In case Penny’s was torn down. If we don’t find it this time around we’ll go back to the clinic and ask questions. Penny isn’t a real common name. It’s a long shot but it might work.”

Jamie leaned forward in the seat, watching intently for anything that might trigger her memory.

“Stop here.” She pointed to a brown bungalow. It was hardly new, but not nearly as old as the surrounding houses. “See the mailbox?” she said excitedly. “It has a rusty iron rooster on top of it. I’ve seen that rooster before. I think Penny’s mailbox had one just like it.”

“The house isn’t white and it doesn’t have a porch, but it’s worth a try,” Stephen said, pulling up in front of the bungalow.

When Jamie opened her car door, Quint reached over the back of the seat to touch her

arm. "You want me to go with you?" he asked.

Jamie nodded. "Yes, but just you. We don't want to intimidate anyone."

Virgil and Stephen watched from the car as an older woman with a hunched back and thick glasses answered the door. She wore a floral cotton housedress, her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun. They talked for a few minutes, the woman smiled, went back into the house and returned a moment later with a pen and paper. She handed both to Jamie. Jamie jotted something on the paper and gave it back to her. The woman waved as they turned and headed back to the car.

Jamie was smiling.

Quint was shaking his head.

"Well?" Stephen asked impatiently as she got in beside him. "Did she give you an address?"

Quint answered from the backseat. "She wanted Jamie's autograph."

"That old lady watches NASCAR?" Stephen quipped.

"The Richmond track has been open since 1946," Jamie said, as though that explained it.

"Unbelievable," Virgil said to Quint. "A decrepit, half-blind old woman recognizes Jamie. You and I stood right in front of her, helped her change a flat tire, and didn't have a clue."

"Well you did recognize her from the centerfold," Quint said grinning.

Virgil groaned. "Don't even bring that up."

"So are we back to square one?" Stephen asked.

"No," Jamie said laughing. "That decrepit half-blind old woman was Penny's mother. Penny is a nurse at the new clinic. She lives right across the street from it."

"Christ, we drove past it thirty-five times," Virgil said, "you were certainly right about one thing, this place is less than two blocks from where your apartment was. Did they build a new house?"

"The old one burned down about fifteen years ago," Jamie said, as Stephen drove the short distance back to the clinic. He stopped in front of the same duplex she had noticed earlier as being newer.

"Maybe I should go in alone," Jamie said, hesitating.

“It’s your call,” Quint said, “but I’d like to see one of us with you to take notes and help remember details. That’s providing she’ll talk to you since she didn’t choose to come forward to talk to the police.”

As Jamie got out of the car a woman came out of the clinic and started across the street, heading directly for the duplex. She wore a stained white uniform and walked with her head down, trudging as though she were tired. She was a pretty girl, taller than Jamie, slightly built; she appeared to be in her mid thirties.

When she walked past the car, Jamie called her name. “Penny?”

Penny stopped and looked up with tired eyes. “Yes?”

Jamie smiled, genuinely happy to see this woman linked to her past.

“You probably don’t remember me,” she said. “I used to live in the apartments across the street. You were my babysitter.”

Penny’s face brightened. “My God, you’re Jamie Devon, aren’t you?”

Jamie nodded.

When Penny realized there were three men with Jamie her smile faded. “Are they police officers?”

“No, no, they’re friends. They were helping me look for you.”

“Oh... I’m so glad you found me. I’ve often wondered what happened to you. Come inside and we’ll talk. Invite your friends. I work so many hours I rarely take time for company.”

As the Douglas men stepped out of the car, and Jamie introduced them, Penny’s face lit up. “My goodness, you have handsome friends. Come around to the back. We can sit on the patio. I have some real lemonade made just this morning.”

She led them around the side of the two-story duplex, which was lined with red and purple bougainvillea that climbed trellises to the upper windows. On the other side of the walkway, along the fence, mammoth red, white, and yellow roses gave off a pungent pleasantly powerful scent. Morning glories and impatiens surrounded the latticed flagstone patio. The patio itself was forested with hanging greenery and floral fragrances. Multicolored geraniums, white gardenias, and assorted herbs filled overflowing pots placed at random around the fence.

Penny beamed when Jamie commented on the landscaping, explaining that she shared a love of growing things.

Their host settled them around a big glass-top table, excused herself and promised to be

back shortly with refreshments. As she went inside, they heard her phone ringing.

“I hope she’ll stay friendly when she realizes why we’re here,” Virgil said quietly. “Maybe we should lead up to it. Draw her out a little bit first.”

“Just give her one of your charming smiles,” Jamie said.

“Won’t work. She’s a brunette.”

Jamie laughed when Quint raised an eyebrow at his cousin.

Ten minutes later Penny came hurrying out with a tray full of drinks. “Sorry that took so long,” she said apologetically. “That was my mother calling.” Penny set the tray down and looked at Jamie, a delighted grin fixed on her face. “She told me you’re Jamie LeCorre, the NASCAR driver. I had no idea you were the same Jamie I used to sit for. Your last name used to be Devon. Did you marry?” she asked, pouring lemonade from a blue plastic pitcher into tall blue glasses. She set a glass in front of each guest, took one for herself and sat down next to Jamie.

Jamie explained about changing to her father’s name. Then she asked about Penny’s work at the clinic. It seemed that Penny was instrumental in getting the clinic built. It catered to the needs of the people in the neighborhood who couldn’t afford healthcare. There was one doctor on staff while several other doctors volunteered their services. Penny had even arranged for specialists to come in periodically.

As Penny talked with pride about the clinic, Jamie made a mental note to have her accountant make a generous donation.

Penny suddenly became quiet, and looked at Jamie with sad, tired eyes. “You came here to ask me about the night your mother died, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Jamie said softly. “I was hoping you could fill in some blanks for me.”

Penny averted her eyes. “Please keep in mind I was barely thirteen years old myself.”

Jamie’s eyes widened in surprise. “You were just a child!”

Penny smiled. “I had three younger brothers. I was very responsible when it came to taking care of kids.”

“Can you tell me about that day?” Jamie asked.

Penny took a deep breath. “Your mother called me early in the morning to come and stay with you. She said it would only be until about five o’clock; she was going to the race and it would be over by four. When she got home at five-thirty, she said she wanted to go out to dinner

and asked if I'd stay another couple of hours. She ordered a pizza for us before she left.

"She didn't get home again until almost nine. The phone rang while she was in the process of paying me, so she motioned for me to wait. It was embarrassing because she was yelling at whoever was on the other end of the line. I took you into your room, but she was being so loud we could still hear her. When she hung up, she came into the room and said she had to go out again, and asked if I could stay longer. I told her I had school the next day, so she said if she was longer than an hour, I could just sleep with you and go home the next morning. She promised to get me up in time for school and pay me by the hour for the whole night." Penny smiled. "It seemed like a good deal to me because babysitting was my only spending money."

Jamie glanced at Virgil as though to say, *I told you my mother wouldn't have left me home alone*. He nodded and touched his lips with his index finger, motioning her not to interrupt Penny's story. He had his yellow pad out and was rapidly taking notes. She noticed that Quint was writing too, on a smaller pad.

"I put you to bed shortly after she left, then I sat down to watch television. I must have fallen asleep because I woke up around midnight. That's when I realized I hadn't called my mom to tell her I'd probably be staying overnight. When I tried to call the line was busy—later I found out one of the boys had accidentally left the phone off the hook. I knew I could run home and be back in fifteen minutes, so I checked on you, you were sound asleep, and then I ran as fast as I could, to tell my mom not to worry. It took me longer than I intended because I couldn't get my key to work at my house, and I had to wake my brother, who always slept with his window open, to let me in. In all, it was closer to half an hour until I got back."

Penny paused, took a deep breath, blinking rapidly at the moisture pooling in her eyes. Her voice was barely above a whisper when she started up again.

"There were police cars everywhere. I had been running, so I was out of breath, and at the sight of the flashing lights I was close to hyperventilating. I thought something had happened to you and I was really scared."

She gave Jamie a sad, soulful look. "I managed to peek though the curtains and saw you talking to a police officer, so I knew you were okay. That's when I did the thing I'll regret for the rest of my life. I turned around and ran home."

Tears slipped down Penny's face when she added. "I went back the next day after school but there was yellow police tape on the door. I didn't know your mother had died until two days

later, and I had no idea what happened to you. I lived in fear for months that the police would come and arrest me. To this day I get panicky when I see a police car.” Penny pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Jamie put her arms around the softly sobbing woman. “There’s nothing to forgive. I didn’t even know you were gone. Your being there wouldn’t have changed anything.”

After a few minutes Penny managed to dry her eyes and give Jamie a tentative smile. “Thank you Jamie, you’re so kind to say that.”

“It’s true. I have a feeling some good came out of it all.”

“What do you mean?” Penny asked.

“The clinic,” Jamie said. “I don’t think it’s was a coincidence you lobbied to build a health facility to help underprivileged people on the very site where our apartment was.”

Penny stifled a sniffle, nodding.

“And all your flowers,” Jamie continued. “You knew how much I loved flowers, even as a little girl. You used to take me home and let me pick daisies in your mother’s garden to give to my mom.”

Penny nodded. “All the flowers you see are for you. I prayed you’d come back and forgive me. You’ve answered my prayers today, Jamie.”

Virgil cleared his throat. “Penny, do you think you’d be up to answering a few questions?”

“Of course,” she said, “I’ll tell you anything I can.”

Jamie moved back into her seat. “I’m trying to clear up my memory of my mother. You’re the only one I know who can help me. Virgil here is my lawyer, and I promise that nothing you say will get you in any kind of trouble.” She gave Virgil a direct look. “Am I right?”

“Certainly,” Virgil said quickly to reassure her. “I’m just here helping Jamie get some facts straight.”

“All right,” Penny said, absently fingering her blue lemonade glass. “It’s the least I can do. What would you like to know?”

“First of all,” Virgil asked, “do you know who Katherine left with that day?”

“You mean the first time or the second time?”

Virgil exchanged a look with Jamie.

“Both,” he said.

“Well, first she went to the race with a man she called Dexter, after that she went out to dinner with Wally.”

By now they all knew Wally’s name was in the file as Walter Price, but there was no mention of a Dexter.

“Do you know Dexter’s last name?” Virgil asked.

“No. Dexter may even have been his last name for all I know. And come to think of it, I’m not even sure if I’m pronouncing it correctly. She never actually introduced any of her boyfriends to me.”

“There were others?” Quint asked.

Penny glanced sympathetically at Jamie. “A few. I knew because of phone conversations she had, but the only ones I ever actually saw were Dexter and Wally. Oh, and a guy who picked her up at the curb once. I only saw him because I followed Jamie to the window where she went to wave goodbye to her mother.”

“Can you describe the man at the curb?” Virgil asked.

“He was about her age, medium height, and had sort of a barrel chest, dark hair. One thing was odd though. He got out of the car and came around to the passenger side to open the door for her. I thought he was being chivalrous, until he shoved her because she wasn’t getting in fast enough.”

“When was that?” Jamie and Quint asked at the same time.

Penny shrugged. “Oh, maybe four months before she died. My parents went out to the Speedway that day because there was a NASCAR race. Back in the old days, before it got so popular, it didn’t cost as much, so they could afford to go. They only have two races a year here.”

“Did he take her to the race?” Jamie asked.

“No, he came after the race was over. My parents were already home when she called me to sit.”

“How often did you sit for Jamie?” Stephen asked, chiming in for the first time.

Penny answered Stephen but she smiled at Jamie. “A lot. In two years I made all my spending money and saved enough for my first year of nursing school.”

“My God,” Jamie said, shocked. “You started when you were only eleven?”

“Yes, and you were three,” she said smiling at Jamie. “I just had brothers at home and

they were so rowdy. You were so much more fun, and cuter too. In fact, I bought a camera with some of my money. I have a lot of pictures of you, you and your mom. Would you like to see them?"

"I would love to see them," Jamie said. "I have no pictures at all of my mother and none of me while I lived with her." Jamie looked at Virgil. "Do we have any more questions for Penny?"

"Just one," Virgil said. "What can you tell us about the phone conversation Katherine had before she left the last time. You said she was angry."

"Oh, she was mad all right. She was practically screaming into the phone. I felt sorry for whoever was at the other end."

"Do you remember anything specific she said?" Quint asked.

Penny looked at Jamie and then back to Quint. "I remember distinctly. She was extremely rude." A pink flush tinted her cheeks. "My parents never used that kind of language."

"We're all adults," Quint said. "It may be important. Go ahead, tell it exactly like you remember it."

"She said: *You SOB! Go ahead, tell him. He'll only kill me but he'll string you up by the balls and hang you out to dry, so don't even bother threatening me with that shit anymore. I'm through jumping every time you snap your fat fucking fingers.* That's when I took Jamie into her room to try to calm her down."

Haunting memories shivered up and down Jamie's spine. She wasn't certain if she was actually remembering, or reacting to Penny's words.

Chapter Nineteen

In the back seat of the SUV, Jamie's hands shook as she went through more than a dozen pictures Penny had given her. Most were of Jamie between the ages of three and five, some of Jamie with a very young Penny, but the most precious was the single photo of Jamie on her mother's lap. She had no other pictures of her mother. If there were any, they'd either been lost or Buster had destroyed them.

Her mother had honey blond hair and full lips brought to life by fire engine red lipstick. She wore a sundress as blue as a summer sky, and smiled into the camera with amber eyes much like Jamie's. Jamie wished she could remember the photo being taken.

Sentimental emotion swelled in her throat, and she blinked rapidly at the tears welling in her eyes. "She was so beautiful."

Quint reached across her shoulders and gave a light squeeze. "Very beautiful. I can't believe how much you look like her."

Jamie held up a photo of herself, sitting in a bed of yellow daisies. "I remember when this was taken," she said softly. "I loved their flower garden."

She glanced toward the front seat where Virgil had his head bent forward reading his notes. She knew he wanted to talk about Penny and what they had learned there, but Jamie wasn't ready. Penny's last statement still disturbed her. That and the memory of her father's hands, his fingers too short and thick to work adeptly with wrenches. If her mother had been talking to Buster that night, there was a good chance he'd known about Jamie all along.

Stephen interrupted her thoughts.

"Am I the only one who's noticed that it's after two and we haven't had lunch? We could stop, find a big table, and try to sort some of this stuff out. Any objections?"

"I'm game," Quint said. "You all know what I get like when I don't eat."

Virgil laughed. "That comes from having older brothers." He turned to look at Jamie. "He was always afraid he wouldn't get his share."

“I never did understand that,” Stephen said. “Take a look at his arms and shoulders. Quint could wrestle a grizzly for dinner and probably win. How come he got all the muscle genes in the Douglas family?”

Virgil snorted. “Speak for yourself, half-pint. You’re the only scrawny one.”

“Hell, I’m just lean,” Stephen said. “And women like my body.” He slowed down and pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant that looked large enough to have a private dining area.

“Weren’t you the one telling us about spending three months in Europe with a woman who wouldn’t...”

The three men continued to chide each other as they got out of the car and entered Richmond’s Best Eatery. Overtly demonstrating his masculinity, Stephen flirted with the young hostess, who showed them to a corner table in a private alcove. She responded to Stephen with a pretty smile and an eye on Virgil.

Their good-natured teasing relaxed Jamie, and by the time they were seated she was laughing with them.

Virgil waited until they had placed their orders before he laid his notes out on the table. “Do you recall any of this happening?” he asked Jamie.

Jamie shook her head. “At this point, I couldn’t be sure. It seems like I do, but I question anything I didn’t remember before Penny talked.”

Virgil paused while the waitress set water glasses around the table. When she left he went on. “Katherine talked to one man—I guess we can safely assume it was a man—about another man. The person she was talking to was holding something over her head.”

“She told him to quit threatening her, and she was through jumping every time he snapped his fingers. It didn’t sound like he was blackmailing her,” Quint said. “More like he was demanding something else from her.”

“Sexual favors?” Stephen supplied, with a question.

Quint gave Jamie a sympathetic look. “Possibly.”

“Another thing,” Virgil said, “I don’t believe whoever she was talking about actually killed her.”

Jamie’s head shot up. “Why?”

“Because,” Virgil explained, “I’ve tried enough crimes of passion to know that stringing someone up by the balls implies the action of a jealous husband or boyfriend. I also don’t think

she believed that person would actually kill her. She said it too flippantly. Her main warning was to the man on the other end of the line. For a man, being strung up by the gonads and hung out to dry is a threat to be taken seriously.”

“Okay,” Quint said. “So the man on the phone, with the fat fingers, knew something that would really piss off the fellow they were talking about.”

“Fat-fingers had sex with Katherine while she was seeing this other guy,” Stephen suggested.

Jamie winced at the mention of *fat fingers*.

“Too simple,” Virgil said. “Katherine was known to be promiscuous.” He gave Jamie’s hand a squeeze. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know any other way to say it.”

He wasn’t saying anything Jamie didn’t already know. She nodded and told him to go on.

“Anyway,” Virgil continued, “finding out she had sex with another man wouldn’t be an earth shattering revelation to anybody. It had to be something more.” He looked around the table. “We’re brain storming here, so feel free to jump in with any ideas.”

“It might be earth-shattering if it concerned a baby,” Stephen said.

Quint glanced at Jamie. “Buster had tests run on Jamie when she came to live with him.”

“What about T-Roy?” Virgil asked.

Jamie’s back straightened. “Mother was married to Buster when she had T-Roy. Besides, Buster was so irritated when I was dumped on him that he had test run on both of us.”

“Well, that shoots the hell out of that idea,” Stephen said.

“You think you could get a copy of those tests?” Virgil asked Quint.

“You don’t know my father!” Jamie interrupted adamantly. “He hated my mother. He would have gladly thrown either one of us to the wolves if we weren’t his.”

“Probably,” Quint said. “If he’s truly the man you think he is.”

Jamie shot Quint an incredulous glare. “Are you implying he’s not?”

Quint took a deep breath. “What I’m saying is, we should talk to him. Do you think we should share any of what we found with Sampson?” He asked Virgil.

Virgil slathered ketchup on his hamburger. “We promised Penny nothing would come of her talking to us. If we tell Sampson, he’s going to want to question her. Then there’s that car running Jamie off the road. With the matching fingerprints the two are connected. For Penny’s sake, it’s better if nobody else knows about her for the time being.”

Jamie choked on the pickle she was chewing. “You think Penny could be in danger?”

Virgil shook his head. “I don’t know but something happened to bring your mother’s death to light after all these years.”

“The only thing I can come up with,” Quint said, “is Jimbo’s murder. I can’t even begin to imagine how that could be tied in.”

“Unfortunately,” Virgil said, “I have to be in court on Wednesday. I need tomorrow to finish preparing my case. Stephen has to fly us back to New York first thing in the morning. I’ll do what I can from there, but you two will be on your own down here. Just be sure you let me know before you try to do anything...illegal.”

Jamie didn’t like the idea of Virgil leaving, but then, with the exception of Quint being in her life, she didn’t like much of anything that had happened in the last couple of weeks.

“Everyone associated with NASCAR will be going home today, tomorrow at the latest,” she said.

Virgil poured ketchup over his french-fries. “Yeah, I know. I think we all agree NASCAR people are involved. One thing we haven’t covered. The police questioned Walter Price and we have a copy of his statement. What about this Dexter fellow? Did that name ring any bells for you Jamie?”

Jamie chewed thoughtfully for a moment. Finally she swallowed, shaking her head. “Something is familiar about the name, but I can’t pin it down. I’ve been trying ever since Penny mentioned it. Dexter is an odd name, but it seems like it isn’t exactly right. I’ll probably wake up in the middle of the night remembering what it is.”

“If you do, write it down or tell Quint immediately.” Virgil grinned. “Wake him up if you have to, it could be important. Also, talk to Sampson. He won’t be going away so you won’t be able to avoid him. Don’t lie to him, but skirt around his questions if you can. Try responding with questions of your own. If he pressures you, you can always refuse to talk without a lawyer present. Let me know if he gives you any information we don’t already have.”

When the waitress brought their check, she hesitated, smiling at Jamie. “Ms. LeCorre, I wonder if I could have your autograph—for my son. Tyler’s only seven, but he and his father live and breathe NASCAR.”

“I’d be happy to,” Jamie said. “My fans are a big part of what keeps me driving. Do any of you have your ticket stub from yesterday?” she asked, looking at her tablemates.

“Sorry, I’m keeping mine,” Stephen said.

Shaking his head and laughing Virgil pulled his ticket out of his wallet and handed it to Jamie. “You can have mine,” he said. “My brother here will leave a generous tip to apologize for his selfishness.”

Suppressing a chuckle, Jamie signed the ticket stub, addressing it to Tyler, and handed it to the waitress. “Tell Tyler hello for me.”

“Thank you so much, I can promise you he’ll be a fan for life after this. Are you going to be on that show too?”

Jamie’s brow creased into a frown. She had an uneasy feeling in her gut. “What show?”

“That outrageous Harman show. My husband said Clay Riker was going to be on tonight. Harman moved her entire crew to Richmond so she could air from here just for one night.”

* * * *

When they got back to the hotel, Detective Ralph Sampson was waiting in the lobby. He got to his feet quickly, hurrying to intercept them at the elevator.

“Jamie,” he called. “I’d like a word with you. To compare notes if you have time.”

“Of course,” Jamie replied, keeping her tone light. “What did you find?”

Sampson eyed Stephen and Virgil warily. “I’d rather not have an audience when we talk,” he said.

“We’ll see you upstairs,” Quint said, to his cousins. No way was he going to leave Jamie alone with Sampson. He was determined to stay, even if Virgil was officially her lawyer. Sampson had spoken to Jamie in front of Quint twice before. He had no reason to believe he wouldn’t do so again. Besides, Sampson knew Jamie personally. He might be less likely to confide in her if he knew her attorney was present.

As soon as the elevator door closed behind Virgil and Stephen, Quint extended his hand to the detective. “Good to see you again,” he said.

Sampson shook his hand and acknowledged the greeting. “How about we step over there and sit a while.” He gestured to a private group of plush chairs surrounding a small glass-top coffee table.

Before he sat down, Sampson took a handful of hard candy from a cut glass bowl on the table. He put one in his mouth and stuck the rest in his coat pocket.

“Keeps me from trying to smoke,” he explained. “So, did you folks turn up anything

interesting today?”

“Our day was probably mild compared to yours,” Jamie said. “I didn’t hear from you last night. How did it go at the track yesterday?”

Sampson bit down on his candy and grunted. “First of all, I was surprised to learn that almost a third of the men were at least forty years old. I had hoped to narrow the field by a lot more than that. I pretty much got the runaround from all of them, including those in your pit. The whole group is as tight as a nest of rattlesnakes. They feud like alley cats amongst themselves, but let an outsider in and they all suddenly become bosom buddies or developed a bad case of memory loss. It didn’t take me long to give up the idea of trying to lift fifty pairs of fingerprints. Especially without tipping my hand to the fact that I was investigating more than Bodean’s murder.”

“You didn’t come up with anything?” Quint asked.

Sampson scratched his beard-stubbed face. “Oh, sure I did. I know that the guy you called Wally was Walter Price. He died about five years ago, had a heart attack. That pretty much dead-ended the file on your mother, Jamie. Unless you’ve remembered something you haven’t told me.”

Jamie exchanged a look with Quint before answering. “I’m still working at remembering,” she said. “Quint and I will stay here through tomorrow and see if we can uncover anything.”

“Good enough. Call me if you do. I’ll be heading back to Chicago in the morning. Maybe if I catch some of those fellows away from the track they might be more willing to talk. One thing I did learn is that those crews change hands more often than I change underwear. Any chance you could get me a list of both Buster’s crew and Riker’s from twenty-three years ago?”

“I’m sure I can,” Jamie said. “I guess I’d be interested in seeing those names myself. I don’t think they were crew chiefs back then, but I can get you the roster of whatever teams they were on.”

“Alrighty then,” Sampson said pushing to his feet. “I’ll mosey on back to my hotel. Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful, but I’ll keep plugging away. Maybe forensics came up with something on Bodean.”

Jamie stood up too. “What did Buster have to say?” she asked.

A small corner on Sampson’s mouth lifted. “Now that’s the interesting part. He was

almost too willing to talk. Seemed not only out of character, but not in keeping with the NASCAR *protocol*, if you get my drift.”

Jamie got his drift all too well. Sampson’s evasiveness made her think Buster might have unwittingly said something to implicate her. “What did he say?” she asked again.

“Well, among other things, he said he had Jimbo to thank for you not getting hitched to Riker.”

Jamie’s heart made a sudden leap, blood pounded crazily in her temples. Quint’s steady hand on her back reminded her that Sampson was still talking. She forced herself to concentrate on what he was saying.

“And since you already told me how fond you were of Bodean, I assumed he helped talk you out of a bad marriage.”

Sampson was watching her closely, a curious frown creasing his brow. “Or maybe not,” he added slowly.

“No, no, your assumption is correct. Jimbo did convince me not to marry Clay. You just surprised me because I didn’t know my father knew about Jimbo.”

Quint remained silent as they rode up the elevator to the third floor. Jamie didn’t have to make eye contact with him to know his perusal never left her face. She could feel it like tangible heat. She didn’t know if he was angry, but she sensed he was.

When they entered her room, he closed the door more than a little firmly behind him. The sound startled her into looking at him. He stood braced against the door, his arms folded over his chest. She got the impression he wasn’t moving from that position until she said something. She said the only thing she could say.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what exactly?”

“For what I can’t tell you.”

“Christ!” Quint threw his hands up in the air, bringing them down with an exasperated sigh, and shoved them in the rear pockets of his jeans. He walked to a window and stared down at the courtyard with his back to her. “What is so damned secretive about Jimbo? He’s dead. I know you didn’t kill him. I was with you. If he was your lover, I don’t give a damn. It won’t make any difference in what you and I have.”

“What do you and I have?” she asked, softly.

Quint whirled to face her. "You're changing the subject."

"No, I'm not. You brought it up."

"Was Jim Bodean your lover?"

"No."

"Did he talk you out of marrying Riker?"

Jamie wanted to walk away, but Quint's piercing gaze held her. She found it impossible to lie to him. "Not exactly," she whispered.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means, not exactly."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Jamie shook her head. "I can't. I gave my word."

"Jamie, the man is dead. He won't care."

"I didn't give it to Jimbo."

Quint stared at her. His breathing labored, but he felt his anger slowly slipping away. Still, he wasn't ready to let it go. If he guessed what Jimbo's secret was, she would either admit it or he would see it in her eyes.

She gave her word to somebody. If not Jimbo, then who? Riker? She gave her word to Riker not to tell something about Jimbo? Hell. Could it be something that got Jimbo killed? If Jamie knew this secret, could that same killer want to silence her too, by trying to run her off the road, that same night?

"I need to use the bathroom," Jamie said.

Quint watched her leave the room, but he kept his mind on Riker and Jimbo and Jamie.

Jimbo was somehow instrumental in Jamie not marrying Riker.

Jimbo at Riker's house, taking care of a cat.

Jimbo going all the way to Darlington the day before he was killed. Was he that great of a fan? Or was he going there to specifically watch someone race?

Jamie? Doubtful. They were friends, but Jimbo wasn't anywhere near her pit.

He was in Clay Riker's corner.

His *best friend*, Clay Riker.

Jamie leaned against the closed bathroom door trying to stem the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, caused by an unstoppable onslaught of memories. Her relationship with Clay had been friendly at best. They made love occasionally but there never was any passion in it. She'd suspected what they had was lacking something, but she lacked any prior experiences to realize what it was. Clay took her to eat at the Crab Shack regularly, and more often than not, Jimbo joined them. It seemed so natural. Jimbo was a good friend to both of them. She never suspected Clay and Jimbo's friendship was anything more than two men enjoying each other's company. It wasn't unusual in the circle they socialized with. The guys at the track hung out together before and after the races all the time, even the married ones.

Everything changed on Monday night after the Texas Motor Speedway race at Fort Worth. Clay and Jimbo were going out for a little camaraderie with the guys, so she went over to Clay's house to study a tape he had of the Talladega Super Speedway coming up the following weekend. Since she had no reason to believe Clay was home, she didn't bother calling. Scooter met her at the door, meowing like he hadn't been fed, so she followed him into the kitchen. While filling scooter's water bowl, she heard sounds coming from the bedroom. Deciding to investigate, she opened the bedroom door, and looked in on a scene that was forever burned in her memory. Clay and Jimbo were naked on the bed, locked in a lovers embrace. They didn't realize she was there until gut-wrenching reality brought a sharp cry from her throat, not because she loved Clay, she realized later, but because she felt so betrayed by both of them.

At least Jimbo had the decency to feel guilty, but Clay was furious. He called her names she couldn't hear over the pounding in her head, until he'd said he turned to Jimbo because she was a cold fish in bed. That brought her to her senses. She threw his key at him and ran. He caught her before she made it to the door.

Jimbo did most of the talking, stalling her until Clay managed to get himself under control. Between the two of them, they coerced her into swearing she'd never breathe a word to anyone. It didn't take much convincing because the last thing she wanted the world to know was how close she'd come to marrying a man who preferred other men to her. It was the ultimate betrayal.

Jamie took a deep breath. She couldn't hide in the bathroom forever. She had to go out and face Quint.

When Jamie stepped out the door, Quint was waiting for her.

“Jimbo was Clay’s lover, wasn’t he?” He watched her face go pale. “You caught them together and that’s how Jimbo convinced you not to marry Clay. It wasn’t Jimbo’s secret you were protecting. It was Clay’s. If word got out that Clay had a male lover, he would be crucified by the good old boys in NASCAR.”

She didn’t say anything. She just stood there looking sweet and vulnerable and innocent, tears swimming in her beautiful amber eyes.

Quint covered the space between them in three long strides. He put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. She started to quietly sob. He picked her up, carried her to the bed, and laid down with her. For a long time he just held her, rubbing a hand over her back, whispering soothing words of comfort.

“I’m sorry,” he said, when she finally stopped crying. He pulled a hanky from his back pocket and handed it to her.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said, sniffing. “I don’t ever cry.”

Quint kissed her damp cheek. “There’s nothing wrong with crying, honey. I’d make a bet you’re not the first race car driver to do it.”

She made a hiccupping laugh. “You’re such a nut,” she said. “A lovable nut.”

“You’re not upset with me? For figuring it out?”

”Of course not. It’s been a terrible strain on me not to be able to answer questions about my relationship with Clay.”

“Do you realize this opens up a whole new element in Jimbo’s murder case? It could have been a jealous lover.”

“We can’t tell anyone,” she said quickly. “As you said, Clay would be ruined.”

“My concern is for you. Somebody tried to run you off the road. It could have been the same person.”

“We don’t know that for sure. That had to do with my mother. We have no reason to believe the two are related.”

“Sampson seems to think they are, and so do I. It’s just too much of a coincidence. How many people knew about Clay’s sexual preference?”

“Nobody that I know of. He was very discreet and until five months ago he had me as a smoke screen. I can’t believe either one of them had other lovers. They were friends since high

school. I guess that's what threw me off guard."

"He used you. He doesn't deserve your loyalty."

"I know, but it was our fathers pushing us together. Clay never behaved like he wanted to get married. I always knew there was something wrong with our relationship, but we were such good friends, so I kept trying to fix it."

"Did your fathers know he was gay?"

"Absolutely not. Fearing his father would find out was Clay's worst nightmare. I think even more so than the other drivers."

Quint rolled over on his back and stared up at the ceiling. He ran a frustrated hand through his sandy hair. "If we can't tell anyone, we'll have to launch a full-scale investigation on our own. I guess you know we can trust Virgil." He looked over at her waiting for a response. When she nodded he went back to staring at the ceiling. "It would help if we could tell Sampson, but even if he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to keep Penny or Clay out of it. Let's start by getting the names of everyone in your pit and Riker's. You thought the person who ran you off the road might have been skilled enough to be a driver, so we'll go one step further. I want a list of all the drivers over forty."

"There's only three," Jamie said. "Talon Davis is the oldest, he's fifty-three. Mitch Grady is fifty-two, and there's Bernie Yates, who rarely places higher than twentieth. He's forty-seven."

"Talon Davis, he's the guy who likes badmouthing you, isn't he?"

"Yeah, there are a couple of others but most of them are closer to my age."

Quint grunted. "I'll bet none of them place very high." He got up on an elbow to look down at her. "They're just jealous, you know." He leaned over, intending to give her a quick kiss. "For now we'll focus on Grady and Davis. You can fill me in on what you know and I'll take it from there. I'd better get up and make some notes."

When she slipped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, he made a quick change in plans.

Hell, the notes could wait.

Chapter Twenty

At nine-thirty that evening Jamie sat down with Quint and his cousins to face the thing she'd been dreading all afternoon. The *Cynthia Harman Show*.

Jamie couldn't imagine why Clay would agree to appear on the show. What if Cynthia had somehow found out about him and Jimbo? According to Quint, the woman had ferrets everywhere. Their jobs were to dig up dirt on anyone with a name recognized by the general public. The bigger the celebrity, the better her ratings. In this case Jamie already knew Harman had a special vendetta for Jamie LeCorre, female NASCAR driver, and Quinton Douglas, ex-lover.

Nothing good could possibly come of Clay laying himself open to Cynthia's evil tongue on live television. There was only one ray of hope. Quint assured Jamie the barracuda was extremely careful. She had been sued many times but never caught in an outright lie.

Virgil agreed. After all, he had defended her in a number of cases.

For that reminder, he received a hostile glare from Jamie. Stephen shushed them as the show came on, indeed announcing Clay Riker as the main guest.

The camera moved in on Cynthia Harman, smartly garbed in black silk slacks and a lemon yellow cashmere sweater. Her raven hair contrasted starkly with her alabaster complexion. She gave her hair an elegant toss as she turned to face the camera and her audience.

"Tonight we're visiting with a man who routinely puts his life on the line in the name of entertaining sports. Please welcome Clayton Riker, one of the leading NASCAR drivers in the nation."

The camera pulled back to include Riker, dressed in his signature royal blue racing suit, sitting in a chair next to Cynthia. She gave him a dazzling, red-lipstick smile.

"So, Clayton—"

"Please, call me Clay."

A barely noticeable twitch jerked Cynthia's right eye. "Very well, *Clay*," she said,

forcing it out as though it were a bad taste in her mouth. “Tell us what inspires a man to race around a track going two hundred miles an hour. Surely it can’t be just because it’s a legal way to speed.”

Clay smirked. “Do you do what you do just because it’s legal?”

Clay Riker had no idea he’d just broken one of her cardinal rules—never, *never* turn the conversation on the host.

Cynthia dark eyes narrowed slightly and her lips formed a thin smile.

Quint groaned.

Jamie stared. She hadn’t realized what a striking woman Cynthia was.

Cynthia quickly brightened her smile. “How did you get started in racing, Clay? I’m sure every little boy dreams about the glamour of being a racecar driver. Was that your dream?”

Clay laughed. “Not exactly. I wanted to live on a ranch and raise horses.”

“Then how did you get into racing stockcars?”

“The same way most people do. You grow up with it because your father or uncle or brother races. I was raised at the track.”

“Did your father race, Clay?”

Clay turned from Cynthia to look pointedly into the camera. “Yeah, but he never made it as far as NASCAR.”

“I believe he’s your crew chief, isn’t he?” Cynthia asked.

Clay nodded. “Yeah.”

“That seems to happen a lot. Isn’t Jamie LeCorre’s father, Buster, also her crew chief?”

Clay gave Cynthia a narrow look before he answered. “Yeah.”

Quint glanced at Jamie, swearing under his breath. “It took her less than four minutes to bring up your name.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Jamie muttered.

“I wonder if Riker knows what her real agenda is?” Virgil said to no one in particular. “Are you taping this?” he asked Stephen.

Stephen grinned. “You bet.”

“Did her father drive too?” Cynthia asked.

Clay shrugged. “For a short time, until he messed up his back and couldn’t take the vigorous jarring anymore. You’re in that car for up to four hours every race. It can be brutal.”

“So how can a woman do it?”

“Same as a man. You work out with weights. You get in your car, stay in, drive, and ignore all the aches until later. The mental stress is actually harder than the physical.”

“I’m surprised a woman can handle it.”

“Jamie isn’t the first woman to drive in NASCAR,” Clay snapped.

Cynthia smiled. “No, but—correct me if I’m wrong—isn’t she the first woman to cause a five-car pileup, taking four other major drivers out of the race in Indianapolis this summer?”

“She didn’t cause it.”

Cynthia made a soft harrumphing sound. “That’s not what the media said. You know something they don’t?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Her car veered when a screwdriver left on the track earlier punctured one of her tires. I have a tape to prove it.”

Jamie’s breath drew in sharply. “He knew. He’s publicly vindicating me. Why?”

Quint sent her a look that said he hoped Clay wasn’t planning to take his blank tape to the association.

Understanding perfectly, Jamie muttered a silent curse.

Cynthia dropped that subject and wasted no time going on to something else. “Isn’t Ms. LeCorre the first woman to place higher than fifteenth in the Nextell Cup Challenge? You’re what? Eighteenth? How does it feel to be bested by a woman?”

Clay snorted. “The same as it feels to have men ahead of me. By the way, Jamie’s running in tenth place, not fifteenth.”

Cynthia’s elegantly drawn brow’s arched.

“That look on her face,” Quint said quickly. “That means she just won a round.”

Cynthia turned to wink into the camera. “It sounds, Clay, like you’re still harboring some feelings for Jamie LeCorre. Didn’t she dump you practically at the altar?”

The look Clay sliced at Cynthia could have frozen stone. “When you asked me to be on your show, Ms Harman, I made it clear I wouldn’t answer any personal questions. I haven’t changed my mind.”

Cynthia managed to look surprised. “I just thought you might appreciate a chance to tell your side of the story, after the shabby way she treated you.”

Clay’s face showed no reaction to her statement. “Is there anything more you’d like to

know about racing?” he asked. “Or are we finished?”

Cynthia arched her back and her dark eyes narrowed so slightly most people wouldn't have noticed.

Quint noticed.

“She lost that round,” he said.

For the next half hour Cynthia went on to ask Clay questions related strictly to racing, getting down into the gritty details of what went on in the pits and in the cars during the race. She avoided the subject of female drivers and appeared genuinely interested in every word Clay spoke.

“Appears to me like she lost the whole battle,” Virgil said glancing at his watch. “Show's just about over.”

Jamie shook her head. “I don't believe she's going to let it drop. That woman is a viper. She works at getting her victim off guard before she strikes.”

Quint lifted Jamie's chin enough to place a kiss on her lips. “You are one smart cookie, honey. I think your worries are over as far as Clay is concerned. He seems to be handling himself pretty well up there.”

“I just hope she doesn't know about...the other thing.”

Stephen's head shot up. “What other thing?”

“Classified,” Virgil said.

“Oh, great,” Stephen grumbled. “You're pulling that lawyer confidentiality bit on me again. How am I supposed to help when you keep me in the dark about the important shit.”

Quint hushed them all. “She's coming to her infamous *Suffer the Consequences* finale.”

Cynthia's smile was brilliant as she turned to Clay. She pointed up to her left. “Watch the monitor up there and give me your take on these pictures.”

A frontal view of Jamie jogging flashed on the screen. The screen split to also show a rear view. Both were full body close-ups, and both showed Jamie running stark naked with an English Sheepdog in tow. The caption read: *Nextell Cup Challenger, Jamie LeCorre, goes for a run on the shore of Lake Michigan. What comes next—driving nude? Is that even allowed?*

In the sitting room of the hotel room, Jamie leaped to her feet.

“That witch! That unbelievable witch! This time she went too far.”

“Holy shit!” Stephen said. “Is that the ‘other thing’ you were talking about?”

Jamie sliced Stephen a heated glare. "That's not me."

"She must have found someone who looks an awful lot like you," Stephen said, staring at the television as the pictures continued to be held on the screen.

"I can see your townhouse in the background, and Liebers," Quint said. "How the hell?"

The screen flashed to Clay Riker's livid face. "That's not Jamie," he said through clenched teeth.

Cynthia Harman smiled an evil smile. "I guess you weren't aware that she jogs nude every morning. Apparently she thinks the entire coastline is her own private playground."

Clay fixed Cynthia with a feral glare. A thin smile softened his angry features. "I guess you weren't aware that she has a sizable birthmark that seems to have mysteriously disappeared from her body. Or whoever's body that is."

Cynthia's dark, exotic eyes widened, her red lips fell open to form a shocked O. Her gaze darted back and forth a moment before she charged to her feet and stormed off the stage. With the camera still rolling, the sound of her screaming voice shrilled in the background.

"Benny, you son of a bitch, you're a dead man! Switch that fucking camera off!"

When the screen switched to a commercial, Jamie collapsed back onto the sofa beside Quint, shock rendering her speechless.

"Was he just blowing smoke to antagonize her," Stephen asked, "or do you really have a birthmark?"

Quint slipped an arm around Jamie, patting a certain spot on the curve of her buttocks. "I can vouch for that. It's the cutest little Tyrannosaurus rex you ever saw."

Stephen's eyes light up. "Can I—"

"No you can't," Quint snapped.

Virgil's sudden laughter startled them all. "Cynthia had no clue those pictures were fake. Jamie, you're going to sue her for every nickel she has. I don't care if you need the money or not, hell, give it to charity, but we'll pinch her perfect little ass in a vice so tight it'll squeeze through a keyhole."

Chapter Twenty-One

The following morning Quint was up early. He spread his and Virgil's notes out on the table in front of him, attempting to combine the notes and fill in other details they'd missed. On a separate page he made a list of names he planned to investigate. At the top of the list was Buster LeCorre, followed by every person in his and Riker's crew over the age of forty. Jamie had provided him with that information the night before.

He'd already met most of those in the Pink Mink crew. In addition to Tim Andrews and Hal Waller, the list included Charlie Jones, the back stretch spotter, and Sergio Briggs, semi driver, heavy equipment handler, and some-time cook. And, of course, Ray Bentler.

Riker's team had only four, including Kent Riker. Quint didn't know any of them.

On another piece of paper he wrote the name *Dexter* and *man at curb*. He believed, even though it was a long shot, those two people were on the list of the ten crew members in question. Proving it was another matter. None of them had a name even close to Dexter.

Maybe I can find out if one of them knew a man named Dexter.

His first priority was identifying the man Katherine talked to on the phone and the man they were talking about.

One of them, Quint was convinced, was Katherine's murderer, and the man who ran Jamie off the road.

Below those two people, Quint wrote in bold letters, *Buster LeCorre*. Could he have been the man Penny saw talking to Katherine at the curb? Not likely. Buster didn't know where Katherine lived or that Jamie existed. Was he the man on the phone calling Katherine? Doubtful. If he'd had contact with Katherine he would probably have known he had a daughter.

Was Buster the man Katherine was talking about? Likely. If either Jamie or T-Roy turned out not to be Buster's offspring—very likely!

The question now was, should he save some time and work by confronting Buster directly? Buster had tests done, he'd know the results. Whether or not Quint could convince him

to share that information was another matter.

He looked up, smiling as Jamie walked in the door carrying a tray of coffee. As much as he appreciated the coffee, he appreciated the sight of her more. She wore a royal blue Chicago Cubs sweat suit that did nothing for her figure, but he had a delicious memory of every curve under her baggy clothes. Setting the tray on the table, she went to stand behind him. She put her arms around his neck and kissed the top of his head. His hair was still damp from the shower they'd taken together.

"Got it all figured out yet?" she asked, glancing at the orderly array of papers spread in front of him.

Welcoming the distraction, Quint pushed his chair back and pulled her onto his lap. He nuzzled his face in her soft hair, kissed her neck, and pulled back, sighing. "I don't have anything concrete. It's all speculation."

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

Quint's hand slipped under her sweatshirt to massage her back. "Are you convinced Buster didn't know about you before you came to live with him?"

"I'm positive," she said, filling two mugs with steaming black brew. "It's strange how I can't recall my mother's anger on the phone, but I clearly remember his. I know now it was directed at Katherine rather than me but at the time his harsh words hurt something awful. He might as well have thrown sharp knives at me."

"Do you remember anything specific he said?"

"Yeah, at least two dozen words I'd never heard before and don't care to repeat. He called my mother every horrible name imaginable. Then he said something like he wasn't going to be stuck with her brat, and I could go live in the streets for all he gave a damn."

"Good God, he must have seemed like a monster to you."

"He was a monster." Jamie said, bouncing to her feet. "I told him so too. I called him a big ugly liar and said that I'd rather live in a Dumpster than with him."

Quint grinned. "What did he do when you said that?"

"He stared at me for a long time. Then he did the strangest thing, he laughed. That scared me even more. I thought he was going to kill me. That's when I saw T-Roy for the first time. He came into the room wondering what all the commotion was about. Buster told him to take me and my junk to the spare bedroom."

Jamie smiled. "T-Roy was wonderful. He told me not to pay any attention to his father because he was always yelling about something. T-Roy was a gangly ten-year old, but to me he was a savior. He helped me put my things away and told me he would take care of me forever. The next day Buster hauled both of us to a clinic to get stuck with needles."

Quint shuddered when he took a sip of the strong coffee Jamie handed him. "Do you know if Buster is still in Richmond? I want to have a private chat with him before I go back to New York. I have a feeling he knows a lot more than he's telling."

Jamie shrugged. "I can't imagine he'd tell you anything helpful if my mother was involved."

"It's more than your mother involved here. It's you. Somebody tried to kill you. Until that person is apprehended, I won't feel right about leaving you alone. And I need to get back to New York tomorrow, Wednesday at the latest. Any chance I can talk you into coming with me?"

Jamie bent over and kissed him. "Thank you for asking, but I have to water my plants." She laughed when Quint raised a questioning eyebrow at her. "Actually I have to go down to the shop. Tim is testing a new engine I need for the Talladega race in a couple of weeks. It's one of the biggest and fastest tracks, two point six miles. I might have a chance at winning that one."

Quint drew a deep heavy breath of air. "You'll be in New Hampshire this weekend?"

Jamie nodded. "And in Talladega, Alabama, the following week. If you like, I could spend a couple of days with you in New York in between."

"I'd like that very much," Quint said, reaching across the table to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. "Now, what about Buster? Is he still here in Richmond?"

"I'll call his hotel and see if he's checked out."

Jamie dialed the number to the Remington Hotel two blocks away. She talked on the phone for a few minutes, hung up and turned back to Quint.

"They had a problem loading the semi so he's still there. He has a one o'clock flight to Chicago this afternoon. If you meet him in the lobby of his hotel in an hour he'll buy you breakfast."

* * * *

Exactly one hour later, Quint walked into the Remington hotel. Having Buster agree to talk to him was a stroke of luck. In spite of Jamie's perception of the man, Quint still had a hard time believing Buster was as bad as she thought. By the time breakfast was over he hoped to

verify that.

Buster was waiting in a corner booth in the hotel restaurant, a cup of heavily creamed coffee cradled in his hands. Another full steaming cup sat across from him for Quint.

They exchanged a cordial greeting, shook hands, and Quint took a seat. A plump middle-aged waitress appeared, left them both menus, and promised to be right back.

“I took a guess you wanted coffee. I’d recommend number three, the Farmers Special,” Buster said. “Has too much cholesterol but it’ll stick to your ribs.”

Quint glanced at the menu, set it aside and nodded. “Looks good to me. Thanks, I did want coffee.”

“I’m glad you had Jamie call me,” Buster said, “’cause I wanted to talk to you too.”

Quint looked at the older man in surprise. “What about?”

“Do you know who ran Jamie off the road?”

“I wish I did. I’m still working on it. In fact, that’s one of the reasons I’m here. I hoped you could help.”

Buster shrugged. “Hell, I don’t know. There are a few drivers who don’t like her being on the track, including Clay Riker, but I can’t believe any of them would take it as far as trying to run her down on a public highway.”

“I can tell you right now it wasn’t Riker,” Quint said. “It was someone older.”

“How did you come up with that idea?”

Quint hesitated. He had considered leveling with Buster, but not until he was comfortable that Buster was going to be honest with him “Before I answer that, I’d like to pick your brain on a few things. You can always tell me to go to hell, but keep in mind I’m looking out for Jamie.”

“Why would I tell you to go to hell?”

“Because it concerns your ex-wife.”

Buster’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand what she has to do with this.”

“Katherine’s death and Jamie’s incident on the freeway are related.”

Buster’s face turned a dark shade of red. “How the hell do you figure? If you’re getting around to blaming me for either one, you’re full of crap way up past your brain and into the roots of your hair follicles.”

“I’m not blaming you,” Quint said, quickly.

For a long moment Buster stared at Quint, his breathing and color slowly coming back to

normal. “You know something the police don’t know?”

“I’d rather not answer that...but you didn’t let me finish. This might be a long shot, but I also believe Jim Bodean’s death is related to the two.”

“Jesus Christ, either you’re one of those crystal ball gazers or you’re fucking crazy!”

A soft laugh rumbled up from Quint’s chest. “I can assure you I’m neither. What I am is an investigator by trade and I’m also someone who cares an awful lot about your daughter.”

While Buster was digesting that, the waitress appeared for their order. “We’ll both have a number three,” he snapped, “and bring a pot of coffee, none of that decaf crap.”

The waitress raised an eyebrow at him. “Dare I ask how you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

She looked at Quint. “You?”

“Same.”

“So what do you want from me?” Buster asked after she left.

“I have some questions. Some are personal, but they’re important, so I need honest answers. It would help if you didn’t question my motives at every turn.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Quint managed to hide a smile. Buster LeCorre was not an easy man, but maybe he was an honest one.

Quint took out a small 4x6 notebook. He called it his non-intimidator—a big yellow pad tended to make people wary. “According to Jamie, you didn’t know about her until she came to live with you?”

“Of course I didn’t know. I didn’t even know the wench was pregnant when she left. Why—?”

Quint held up his hand. “You have a plane to catch. Just a simple yes or no is all I need.”

“Screw my plane. There are other flights. But fine. The answer is no, I didn’t.”

“And you didn’t know where Katherine lived?”

“No, and I didn’t give a damn either.”

“I’ll be sure to make note of that on the off chance somebody doesn’t already know it.”

Buster chuckled. “Smart ass, ain’t you?”

Quint smirked. “Some things just come naturally. Did you have any contact at all with her between the time she left you and Jamie appeared on your doorstep?”

“No.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t hit you up for child support.”

“Hell, why would she? She left me to raise T-Roy, and just for fun, wiped out every one of my bank accounts.”

“How long were you married to Katherine before she left you?”

“About seven years, I guess, seven long years.”

“Was Katherine faithful to you?”

Buster threw his head back and laughed. “Katherine Devon was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen, and if she wanted to, she could treat a man like a million bucks, but I doubt she ever looked up the word ‘faithful’ in the dictionary.”

“Was T-Roy your son?”

Buster sobered quickly. “What kind of a fucking question is that?”

Quint was hoping Buster wouldn’t give him a simple yes or no answer. He really hated doing this to the man, but if he was going to get to the bottom of this whole mess it was necessary.

“When Jamie arrived at your house you took her and T-Roy in for paternity tests.”

“So?”

“So Jamie said you weren’t happy with the results. Was it because Jamie turned out to be your child but T-Roy wasn’t, or the other way around?”

Buster’s eye’s narrowed. “Maybe I was just pissed because I wanted to get rid of Jamie, and when I found out she belonged to me I couldn’t.”

“That’s what Jamie thinks.”

“So what’s the problem?”

The problem is that I think there’s more to it than that. I can get copies of those tests, but I’d rather you told me what the results were.”

“Why the hell do you need to fish around in that? Let it go.”

“Believe me, I wish I could. The night Katherine died, she got a phone call. The person she talked to was holding something over her head. I don’t think he was blackmailing her for money. I think it was emotional blackmail. Do you have any idea who she could have been talking to or what he might have been using to threaten her?”

“Shit. The woman was up close and personal with the devil himself. She screwed every

man she met in one form or another. Who do you think it was?” Buster asked.

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to find out. There’s a good chance he’s the man who killed Katherine and ran Jamie off the road.”

“I don’t see how the two are connected.”

“Trust me on that, they are.”

“Well, fuck.”

The waitress walked up with two heaping plates of food. She set one plate in front of each of them and asked if there was anything else they needed, before making a hasty departure.

Buster picked up his fork, looked down at his food, but didn’t start eating. “What if I told you there might be something useful in those tests? Could you leave it at that?”

“Yes.”

“Does Jamie have to know?”

“I can’t promise not to tell her, but I won’t if I can avoid it.”

“And you won’t go after the tests?”

“No.”

Buster put a forkful of food in his mouth. He didn’t say anymore.

He didn’t have to.

Quint had his answer. He picked up his fork and started to eat.

“Do you have more questions?” Buster asked, after a time.

“Do you have any hunches as to who Katherine might have been talking to on the phone that night?”

“If I knew, he’d be dead.”

Quint smiled. For all his gruffness, Buster had knowingly raised a child that wasn’t his. Whether it was Jamie or T-Roy, Buster was not the ogre Jamie believed him to be.

“One more thing,” Quint said. “Do you know a man named Dexter?”

Buster thought for a moment. “No, can’t say I do,” he said. He picked up the coffee pot and filled both of their cups. When he set it down he looked at Quint, a curious frown on his face. “Why?”

“It’s just a name that came up. May or may not be important.”

“Sure you don’t mean Decker?”

Quint paused with a forkful of food on the way to his mouth. He tried to keep the excitement from his voice. "Could be. You know somebody named Decker?"

"Decker Jones. He used his middle name when he was driving."

"He was a driver?" Quint asked.

"Yeah. A damn good one, but he quit after he hit the wall, causing an eight car pileup at Daytona in the opening race of the season."

When Buster didn't go on, Quint prompted him. "Sounds like it was a bad one."

"The worst I've ever seen, or been in."

"You were in it?" Quint asked, surprised.

Buster nodded slowly. "Yeah, I had only been driving a year. My car went end over end seven times. I wound up with a broken back. Fortunately it healed all right, but I couldn't race anymore. Kent Riker was driving that day too. His car started burning, and it took a while to douse the fire and pull him out. Back then we didn't have all the safety features we have now."

"How bad was he hurt?"

"Physically, just a few minor burns, but mentally he was washed up. Being trapped in a burning car can do that to a man."

"What about Decker Jones?"

"Amazingly, he wasn't hurt at all, not physically anyway, but he took it pretty hard. The four of us, Kent, Decker, Percy, and I grew up together. We all went into racing about the same time. It was a dream we had in high school."

"Percy?"

"Yeah, Percy Goodman. His car burned too, only they couldn't get him out in time."

"Jesus. So Decker was guilt ridden and quit racing."

"That pretty much sums it up."

Quint knew Buster to be fifty-seven. That put the rest of them at about the same age. "How long ago did this happen?"

"About eighteen months after I married Katherine. T-Roy was just a toddler."

Quint took a moment to digest that. "You said he used the name Decker Jones back then. Do you know where he is now?"

"Charles Decker Jones. Charlie is Jamie's back stretch spotter." Buster obviously noticed Quint's surprised look because he went on quickly, "Just in case you think Charlie is mixed up in

any of this, you should know that as far as I'm concerned, he's the most decent person I know. He'd lay his life down for Jamie, or for me for that matter."

Quint gave a simple nod. He decided not to comment. Obviously Buster didn't know that Charlie Decker Jones was keeping company with Katherine. Was he seeing her even before Buster divorced?

Quint spent the last few minutes of his time with Buster filling in the blank spots regarding the rest of the men on his list. Buster had been in the business a long time. He knew who had been drivers, who was married or divorced, and who had worked on the NASCAR circuit during the years in question. He finally closed his notebook and thanked Buster for his time.

Buster pushed his empty plate aside and refilled his coffee cup. "Now I have a question," he said. "Earlier you mentioned you thought Jimbo's death might be tied into all this other garbage. What makes you think that?"

Quint hesitated. He certainly couldn't tell Buster that he and Jamie had been in Clay's house that night and might have been spotted by the killer.

"Maybe because it all happened the same night."

"And maybe you're not telling me everything?"

Quint smiled. In spite of all his crude language, Buster was no fool. Quint wished he could come clean with the man, but it was too soon. There were too many dangling pieces.

"Ralph Sampson said you thought Jimbo had something to do with Jamie breaking up with Clay. Why do you think that?"

Buster concentrated on loading his coffee with cream. Quint thought for a moment he wasn't going to answer.

Finally Buster lifted his shoulders in a dismissive shrug. "I just do, that's all."

"Is it possible you know something about Clay and Jimbo that you aren't telling me?"

Again Buster shrugged. "It's possible."

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"No."

"Are you protecting someone?"

"In spite of what went on between Clay and Jamie, Clay's father, Kent, and I have been friends since grade school. I don't hold Kent responsible for his kid's erratic behavior."

“And you know something about Clay that would hurt his father?”

“You might say that.”

“Can you tell me who else knows this thing about Clay?”

“I doubt anybody does, except maybe Jamie. Anyway, I shouldn’t have spouted my mouth off to that detective. I was just irked at Clay for the way he’s been treating Jamie on the track and it’s irrelevant anyway so let’s just drop it.”

Quint didn’t see the need to press Buster. Obviously he’d seen Clay and Jimbo together somewhere. As long as nobody else knew, it was a dead end for the time being.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll let that one go but I do have another question on a more personal level. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Buster grinned. “That goes without saying. Go ahead, try me.”

“Why did you give T-Roy a Corvette for his graduation and Jamie a fifty-dollar guitar?”

Buster snorted. “I’m sure that’s exactly how she sees it.”

“Is there any reason she shouldn’t see it that way?”

“Yeah, but she wouldn’t have believed the truth anyway.”

“Maybe it’s time to start leveling with her.”

“That would hurt her more than getting a cheap guitar. She had stars in her eyes where T-Roy was concerned from the time she came to live with us.”

“Maybe because she didn’t have anybody else she thought cared about her.”

“Yeah, well, I kinda got off on the wrong foot with her. I was just so damn irritated with her mother.”

“So tell me about the guitar,” Quint said.

Buster took a bite from a piece of toast, chewed, and swallowed. “Jamie really liked music, and she could sing better than most of those country western singers you hear on the radio. I thought maybe if she had a guitar she would take up singing rather than racing. I gave T-Roy two thousand dollars to get her a good electric guitar. He spent the afternoon at the horse races. When I got home he had already given that cheap-assed guitar to her and told her it was from me. Telling her that T-Roy had blown her money on gambling would have hurt her worse than hating me. I’d just as soon she never know T-Roy wasn’t the hero she thought he was.”

“I think it’s more important for her to know that her father loves her.”

“Yeah, well, I do love her, but I’m not an educated man. Words don’t come easy for me,

especially when it comes to sentimental things. The last time I told a woman I loved her, she took me for a merry spin, then dumped me like yesterday's garbage. I know a daughter isn't the same as a cheating wife, but you might say I'm a little gun shy when it comes to mush words."

Quint smiled. "That's understandable."

Buster chuckled. "I suppose a good looking, well-read fellow like you spouts those words all the time."

Buster's statement hit Quint like a gut punch. He had a brother, a sister, and four cousins, not to mention an aunt and uncle who had taken him into their family and raised him like their own son. He loved them all dearly, but never once in his thirty-two years had he ever said the words *I love you*.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Early the next morning Quint saw Jamie off on a plane heading back to Chicago. Twenty minutes later he was on another plane to New York. He settled back in his seat, allowing himself a few minutes to remember how Jamie looked waving at him as she boarded. Her strained smile made her look sad and alone. He knew she wasn't happy with him for not revealing all the details of his visit with Buster. "*I have a right to know everything,*" she'd insisted. "*But I don't have the right to tell you any more,*" he'd pointed out. At first he'd tried to evade her inquiries, but she was too quick to read his face. He was keeping something from her, and she knew it.

Actually, he'd kept a lot from her. He hadn't mentioned the paternity tests because he'd promised Buster. He really wanted to tell her about T-Roy and the guitar but it wasn't his place. Buster needed to do that himself. He'd also left out any information Buster had shared about Katherine, like the fact that she'd left Buster practically bankrupt.

Jamie was as surprised as he'd been to learn about Charlie Jones, but she'd agreed to let Quint do the questioning. Charlie would be in New Hampshire by Friday with the rest of the crew, and Quint intended to question him on Saturday.

He had a lot of work to do in the meantime.

Setting aside thoughts of Jamie, Quint pulled out his notes and started to organize them. He needed to combine what he'd learned from Jamie with the information Buster had given him.

He started with Tim Andrews and Hal Waller. Neither one had ever been a driver. Tim had just celebrated his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Hal was twelve years into his second marriage, his first wife having died of leukemia. Both appeared to be happily settled with their mates. Likewise, Sergio Briggs had never been a driver, but unlike the other two, he'd never married. The fact that he didn't enter the NASCAR scene until eight years ago made him an unlikely suspect.

Quint put those three on his back-burner list. Charlie Jones moved to the top.

Charlie had been married at the time of his unfortunate crash but divorced shortly

thereafter, never to marry again. His ex-wife had since died. Buster swore by the man, but it wouldn't be the first time a friend betrayed a friend.

Also on that list was Talon Davis. Davis was in his third marriage. Apparently the first two divorced him after taking him to court for mental and physical abuse. Talking to his ex-wives was on Quint's list of things to do.

The other two drivers in the right age group, Mitch Grady and Bernie Yates, were low on the suspect list. Mitch was married to a woman nineteen years his junior, but he seemed to hold no animosity toward Jamie. Yates, on the other hand, openly despised Jamie, but since he tailed the pack he would gain nothing by eliminating one driver—even a female he disliked. Quint took him for having a harmless case of envy, and unless he could find a link connecting Yates to Katherine, Quint would not pursue the man.

Quint was convinced that Buster was not a suspect at all, but Ray Bentler, who did clear the fingerprint check, still warranted an investigation. Though Bentler had nothing to gain and everything to lose by eliminating Jamie from racing, he had the kind of money that could buy and pay for anything, including a hit man.

That left Kent Riker along with three men on his crew. Jamie had supplied Quint with the names and personal information on the crew members, and from everything he'd gathered, none of them had been involved in racing for more than twenty years. They were low priority.

Kent Riker, on the other hand, had been around as long as Buster. Even though Buster trusted him to the fullest, Quint intended to launch a full-scale investigation on the man.

He recapped what he already knew.

Kent divorced shortly after Katherine left Buster. Clay was six months younger than T-Roy and, like T-Roy, was raised solely by his father. Kent never remarried and, with the exception of his friendship with Buster, Clay seemed to be Kent's entire life. Kent and Buster had worked on the same crew at the time of Katherine's death, and they remained steadfast friends even after they became competitors on the track. The only thorn in their relationship happened when Jamie broke up with Clay. Kent's former wife, Betsy, was living somewhere in Minnesota, and Quint intended to have Hunter pay her a visit. Hunter and Nicole would be back from their honeymoon by the end of the week.

That reminded Quint that he hadn't called Hunter's sister, Corinne. The last he heard she was on bed rest because her baby was trying to make an entrance a month early, and Delta and

Hank had gone to be with her. He checked his watch; the plane was still an hour out of New York.

Using the phone embedded in the seat in front of him, Quint dialed the number in northern Minnesota.

Delta answered. "Hello, Hunter and Nicole Douglas residence."

Her voice brought a smile to Quint's face. "Hello, how is my favorite mother today?"

"I'm just fine, Quint. It's good to hear from you. Are you back in New York?"

"I will be in about an hour. I thought I'd check on Corinne. How is she doing?"

Delta sighed. "No change. The doctor said maybe another week or two. She's not looking forward to it. You know Corinne, she doesn't handle lazing around too well."

Quint laughed. "I guess I wouldn't care for that either, but I would look forward to having the baby."

"My, my—does that mean things are getting serious with you and Jamie? You've been spending a lot of time with her."

"Don't be planning any showers just yet. I'll keep you posted. Is it possible for me to talk to Corinne?"

"You bet. She's right here. Hold on."

Corinne's excited voice came on the line in a matter of seconds. "Quint, you big lug, where are you?"

"In the sky somewhere over West Virginia. How are you feeling, kiddo?"

"Totally bored. I have bedsores already, and the doc said I have to stay on my back until the baby's born. I hear you have been busy. Stephen talked my ear off telling me about Jamie LeCorre. According to him she walks on water."

"Stephen tends to get a little dramatic. She is pretty special, though."

"Did you know Hunter and Nicole are coming to watch her race this weekend?"

"No, I didn't, but I'll look forward to seeing both of them. What about the kids?"

"They'll be staying here. Mom and Dad are insisting on some Grandma and Grandpa time. If I wasn't laying here like an incapacitated blimp, I'd come too."

"Maybe another time. You take care of yourself. I'd like to talk to Delta again before I hang up."

"Sure thing."

A second later Delta was back on the line. “Hi, Quint. Before I forget, be sure to invite Jamie to our house for Thanksgiving.”

“I’ll do that,” Quint said. “I know she’d enjoy it. She hasn’t had much of a family life. Without you and Hank, I wouldn’t either.”

“You’re one of us, Quint, you always have been.”

“I know. Thanks for that. And just in case you don’t know—I love you, Delta. You’re the best mother a guy could have.”

There was a long silence. When Delta finally spoke her voice quavered. “Thank you, Quint,” she said. “I love you, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

At four o'clock Thursday afternoon, Jamie reached up with a trembling hand to sound the doorknocker on Clay's house. It had taken two days to gather up enough nerve to pay him a visit. For all she knew he would slam the door in her face, but she had to try. He might know something about Jimbo's death. Something he hadn't told the police. It was important that she talk to him. Plus, she hoped for a chance to slip his tape back into its spot before the association requested it. She'd already had numerous calls, not only about the screwdriver but the nude pictures as well. Mostly it was friends chiding her about the pictures. There were also a few hang up calls and some heavy breathers. Per Virgil's instructions, she documented everything. The more he could prove the disruption in her life, the better his case against Cynthia Harman would be.

One call was from Ray Bentler. He was ecstatic. Whether the photos were fake or not, he believed her fan ratio would double. Just what she needed, she thought morosely, perverted fans.

When Clay answered the door she was in for a shock. Reeking of yesterday's whiskey, he stared at her through haunted, watery eyes. She suspected he hadn't bathed or changed clothes in a couple of days; his gaunt belly looked like it hadn't had food in that amount of time either. A two-day beard shadow added to his haggard look.

This was a man who ate health foods religiously and ironed his underwear, for God's sake.

She stared at him, temporarily speechless.

"Hello Puddin'head. Welcome to hell."

He hadn't teased Jamie with that endearment since she was sixteen. "My God, Clay, what's happened to you?"

His laughter was weak and toneless. "I'm trying to drown myself in Jack Daniels, but it doesn't seem to be working. I think I'm still alive."

"Just barely, I'd say." She glanced past him trying to determine if he was alone, though

she doubted he'd allow anyone to see him in his present condition. "Do you mind if I come in?" she asked.

He moved aside, with the doorknob still gripped in his hand. "Why not?"

Jamie stepped past him and looked around the room. The mess from the break-in had been cleaned up, but a new accumulation of beer cans, empty bottles, and uneaten pizza left clutter everywhere.

She turned to stare at him. He looked like he was ready to collapse. "You better sit down before you fall down."

"Would you care?" he asked, dropping into a lounge.

Jamie sat across from him. "Of course, I care. What's going on here?"

"What do you think?" he replied.

"You're missing Jimbo. That's what I think."

He gave her a sad smile. "More than you could ever know."

"I do know, Clay. Before we messed up our relationship by dating we used to be best friends, you and T-Roy and I. I know you better than anybody. I should have known about Jimbo too, but you were both so good at hiding it."

"It seems we weren't good enough."

"You think Jimbo was killed because somebody found out he was gay? That's preposterous. This is the twenty-first century, for Pete's sake."

Clay's fists clenched, his eyes flashing with anger. "No, he was killed because he hung around with me."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why else would somebody bash in the head of a man who never harmed a soul in his life?"

"I don't know, Clay, but it wasn't your fault."

Clay shrugged but said nothing.

"Why did you go on that Harman show?" she asked.

"I agreed to appear because I wanted to make some waves. I wanted to see who would try to talk me out of it. Make somebody nervous. It didn't work. Then that irritating bitch started attacking you. I had no idea she was going to do that."

"Her entire show is based on causing trouble. You must have known that."

“But why trouble for you? What the hell does she have against you, anyway?”

Jamie didn't hesitate telling Clay the truth. He'd seen Quint with her at the track and had probably heard enough gossip to fill a stadium. Then there was the incident with the pictures at the church. “She was Quint's girlfriend. He dumped her just before we met. She's trying to get back at him through me.”

Clay ran a hand through his already mussed hair. “I'll be damned. That certainly explains a lot. Particularly why she called me in the first place. And those pictures she had of you—”

“At least they were fake. But what about you? Weren't you concerned that she knew about you being gay?”

“No, I guess I should have been.” Clay grinned. “As it turns out I didn't need to worry about it; she was far more intent in bashing you. When did you take up jogging in the nude?”

When Jamie rolled her eyes, Clay's laughter turned into a grimace of pain. He doubled over holding his stomach. “Man, I feel like crap.”

“Would you like me to fix something for you to eat?” she asked.

“For old times sake?” he asked.

She smiled. “You might say that. Why don't you take a shower, and I'll see what I can scare up in the refrigerator.”

When Jamie heard the shower running, she took the Indianapolis tape from her purse and hurried to Clay's den. Thankfully the blank tape she'd left the night Jimbo was killed was still there. She quickly exchanged them and tucked the blank one back in her purse.

Twenty minutes later Clay walked into the kitchen with damp hair, wearing a clean but wrinkled t-shirt and jeans. Although he hadn't taken time to shave, he looked considerably better.

“Smells good in here,” he said, taking a seat at the table.

“All I could find was bacon and eggs. Your bread is moldy and there are some unidentifiable green leftovers in the refrigerator. I'd recommend a trip to the grocery store. Being the health nut you are I'm surprised you even had bacon.”

“I didn't. It was Jimbo's.” When she gave him a commiserating look, he added quickly. “But I'll eat it, I can't believe how hungry I am all of a sudden.”

When she set the food in front of him, he looked up at her. “Why don't you sit down and tell me why you're here? I'd like to believe it's to offer condolences, but somehow it seems a

little late for that. What's on your mind, Jamie?"

Jamie sat down. "You're right, I am a little late for condolences. I'm sorry. I just didn't know how receptive you'd be. Especially after the stunt you pulled at Darlington."

"I tried to make up for that at Richmond."

"That's what you meant about owing me one? You pushed me over the finish line on purpose, didn't you!"

"I shouldn't have taken you out at Darlington. You would have had your first win."

"Why did you?"

For a moment Clay avoided looking at her, when he did there was deep sadness in his eyes. "I can only tell you, it wasn't my idea. That's not an excuse," he added quickly. "I'm an adult; I have my own mind. I just let myself be led around by the nose a little too much by somebody else. Then after Jimbo was killed... Let's just say I came to my senses. If I find out this person had anything to do with Jimbo's death he's going to find himself in water so hot he'll wish he'd never been born. Right now I'm keeping an eye on anyone who disliked Jimbo enough to even think about killing him."

Jamie stared at him, watching him eat, absorbing what he'd said. She didn't dislike Jimbo and she certainly didn't harbor any thoughts of killing him. Mentioning that to Clay seemed unnecessary, but who was telling Clay to take her out of the race at Richmond? It was obvious he didn't want to tell her.

"Do you have any idea who might have wanted to kill him?" she asked.

Clay licked bacon grease off his fingers, while reaching for a napkin in a straw holder on the table. "I have my suspicions."

"Did you tell the police?"

Clay scoffed. "Tell them what? That somebody found out I was gay and killed my lover? Or that one of the guys made a play for me, and decided to eliminate the competition? If word gets out that I prefer men to women, my racing career will be finished. You know that as well as I do."

Jamie nodded. "You're probably right. It's not fair. What about this person who hit on you, he must know."

"Yeah, he saw me and Jimbo in a bar after the Michigan race four weeks ago. Don't you even think about asking who it is because, even if I do trust you, I won't tell you. He's a switch

hitter, so he has a good cover. He won't be telling anyone, not without exposing himself. I've dated women for that same reason."

"Like me," Jamie said.

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I knew from the start it couldn't work, but you know how Dad kept pushing. That's no excuse, but I didn't mean to hurt you."

"This guy who hit on you? Is he on one of the teams?"

"More or less."

"How old is he?"

"What the hell difference does that make?"

Jamie hesitated a moment. "I just wondered. That's all."

Clay gave her a curious look. "Not that it's important but he's almost old enough to be my father. He's just out for fun and games. I'm not interested in him. I wasn't before Jimbo died and I'm sure as hell not now, but if I suspect he killed Jimbo, I'm going to get interested real quick."

By the angry twist of his lips Jamie had no doubt Clay was ready to take the law into his own hands. In his present state of mind, she knew it was useless to warn him against such tactics.

"What about the other person you mentioned? The one who didn't like the idea of me winning? You think he might have killed Jimbo for being involved with you?"

"I find it hard to believe. I'm speculating because I can't come up with any other motive. One thing is for sure, I'm going to be running my own race from here on in." He pushed his empty plate aside, lowered his head to his hands, and pressed shaking fingers to his temples. After a moment he lifted his head to look at her. "I'd appreciate it if you kept this conversation between us. If you go to the police, I'll deny every word."

"You should know by now you can trust me."

Clay smiled. "You're right, I'm sorry. When you mentioned how we lost a good friendship when we got involved, I felt that way too. I missed the good times we used to have. You and I and T-Roy...and Jimbo."

Jamie was relieved to know Clay felt the same way she did about their engagement. She sighed, wistfully. "I think missing T-Roy was one of the reasons I turned to you. I was so lonely after he died. All I had left was a father who hated me."

Clay looked at her with something akin to anger on his face. "Your father never hated

you, Jamie.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Yes, it is easy because I know better. You held T-Roy on a pedestal right up there with God. There was no way your father could compete with that. Somebody should have told you a long time ago that T-Roy wasn’t a saint.”

“He was to me,” Jamie insisted, adamantly.

“You saw only what you wanted to see.”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed. “Just exactly what are you trying to tell me?”

Clay took a deep long breath. “I suppose you don’t remember T-Roy taking you out and getting you drunk when you were still in high school? Or how cruel he was to waitresses. Or how he cheated at games. Even with his adoring little kid sister who thought he could do no wrong.”

Jamie tried not to listen. She didn’t want to hear anymore, but Clay wasn’t through with her.

“What about the time he let you take the rap for smashing Buster’s car?”

“I had to. Buster would have thrashed him!”

“Instead, Buster grounded you for three weeks. And that wasn’t the first, or only time you took the blame for you brother’s shenanigans.”

“So? It didn’t make any difference. Buster was always an ass to me.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe you deserved some of that?”

Jamie charged to her feet. “I suppose I deserved that lousy guitar for graduation when T-Roy got a Corvette?”

Clay stood up splaying his hands on the table. He leaned toward her, his face dark. “That’s about the fiftieth time you’ve told that story. It’s about time somebody told you the truth. You got that lousy guitar because T-Roy gambled away the two thousand dollars Buster gave him to buy your graduation gift.”

Jamie’s breath came in short gasps. She wanted to scream at Clay, call him a liar, and accuse him of being jealous of T-Roy, but the words froze in her throat. Instead, she sank into her chair and buried her face in shaking hands.

She felt she had been doused by ice water. Then it dawned on her that Quint probably knew about T-Roy, and that’s why he refused to tell her about his conversation with Buster. She

wanted to lash out at Buster for not being the person she lived her life believing he was, and she wanted to lash out at T-Roy for the same reason. So much wasted energy. Why hadn't somebody told her earlier? Of course, she already knew the answer to that.

A hand touched her shoulder. "Jamie, I'm sorry. I didn't want to be the one to tell you."

"How long have you known?" She whispered.

"Maybe you don't realize I practically grew up at your house. You think you had it bad, you should have spent some time around my father. He could have taught cruelty to the devil. Buster may have lacked parenting skills but my father lacked humanity skills." Clay gave her a sympathetic look. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I was with T-Roy at the horse races that day he spent your money. We got into a big fight because I called him a jerk. He just laughed it off and said you wouldn't care what kind of a guitar you got, since you didn't know how to play it anyway. We stopped at a pawnshop on the way home. He didn't have any money left so I gave him the fifty bucks to buy that old guitar."

Jamie sat up and wiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks. "Did Buster know?" She asked.

"That's the really sad part. Yeah, he knew, but you had such stars in your eyes for your brother that Buster let you think the worst of him to keep you from knowing the truth about T-Roy. Your father started off on the wrong foot with you, and because of T-Roy, he was never able to overcome it."

"How could I have been so blind?"

Clay smiled. "Don't blame yourself. T-Roy was a master con artist. That was part of his charm. We had great times together in our growing-up years. Don't misunderstand me. T-Roy had a lot of good qualities too. We remained friends even after he realized just how close Jimbo and I were. It never bothered him."

Jamie grabbed a napkin from the table and dried her eyes. "Are you going to New Hampshire tomorrow? We have to qualify."

Clay grinned. "You bet I am. I've been wallowing in self-pity for the last two days. I think you lifted me out of it. I've even made up my mind; I'm going to run my own race Sunday. I'm through taking instructions from other people."

"Can't you tell me who these people are?" she asked, in one last attempt to get names out of him.

“When the timing’s right, believe me, you’ll know.”

On the drive home, a shocking realization hit Jamie. Quint refused to tell her about the conversation he had with Buster regarding the paternity tests. If the tests had been favorable he would have told her. That meant there was a good chance that Buster wasn’t her father. If Buster wasn’t her father, the man who had killed her mother very likely was.

Horrible images were crowding in her mind. By the time she got home her head was pounding. She tried calling Quint, but his line was busy. She’d try again later but right now her mood called for a long, hot soak in the tub. She made her way up the winding staircase to her bedroom, acutely aware of the loneliness without Quint there. She’d been lonely before, but since Quint came into her life, it was sharper, more pronounced.

After starting the water running, she lit her aromatherapy candles, put a generous helping of bath salts under the rushing tap and stripped off her clothes.

She put a Reba McEntire tape in her old boom box, turned the volume way down, and set the phone near the tub so she wouldn’t have to get out to answer it if Quint called. Easing into the steamy sudsy water, she laid her head back, and willed her body to relax. She breathed deeply of the scented candles, listened to Reba, and concentrated on not thinking. She didn’t want to think. Not about T-Roy. Not about Katherine. And definitely, most definitely, not about Buster.

Minutes later the ringing phone startled her out of her stupor. She reached for the receiver, smiling, expecting to hear Quint’s voice.

It was Penny.

“Hi Jamie. Sorry to bother you but you did ask me to call if I remembered anything else.”

Jamie came to an abrupt sitting position. “Of course. You can call me anytime. What is it?”

“I remembered another name.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

It took Quint three hours, first on the Internet and then on the telephone, to track down Talon Davis' two ex-wives. The first one, Naomi Davis, lived in California. His second wife, Francine Dempsey, was remarried and using her husband's last name. She lived in Cleveland.

It was six o'clock Thursday evening by the time he dialed Naomi's number. He was about to hang up when she answered on the fifth ring.

"Hello." Her tone was curt and impatient.

"Hello, Ms. Davis?"

"Yeah, who is this?"

"Quint Douglas—"

"If you're selling something I'm not interested."

"This isn't a sales call. I'm doing some investigative work and I'd like to ask a few questions about your ex-husband."

"Which one?"

"Talon Davis."

"Oh yeah, what's the A-hole done now?"

"It sounds like you didn't part on friendly terms."

She snorted. "Now, that's an understatement. You might add that we weren't married on friendly terms either. I was just a kid out of high school, and he was a big deal NASCAR driver. I thought I had snagged a real prize when I married him. We were married only two weeks when I caught him cheating on me, with another man's wife no less. I was pissed as hell and damn hurt. You know how he apologized?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I got two black eyes. I had to wear dark glasses for a week. The next time he cheated, I had my arm in a sling for a month. It took me two years of abuse to wise up and get the hell out. I'll be glad to answer any questions you have."

You already answered most of them, Quint thought. "How long have you been divorced

from Davis?" he asked.

"More than twenty years. I don't exactly keep the date in my calendar so I can celebrate it, if you know what I mean."

"Any kids?"

"Not by me. He got some other trollop pregnant though. I'm not sure, but I think she had an abortion. At least he never mentioned a kid being born, and I wasn't aware that he paid any child support."

"When was that?"

"Before we were married. I think he got it tied off after she got pregnant. A little fact he forgot to mention before the wedding. Too bad they didn't cut it off."

When Quint hung up, he blew a stream of air out through his teeth. He grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and took a deep swallow before dialing Francine Dempsey's number.

A man answered.

"Hello, Dempsey residence."

Quint could hear children in the background. "Yes, may I speak to Francine?"

"Sure, just a minute." He held the phone aside and called, "Francie? It's for you, one of your clients, I think."

It took a few moments for her to respond. "Hello, sorry, I was helping Peter get his computer running. I don't even know why he's asking me, teenagers know a lot more about that stuff than us older folks do. So which house are you interested in?"

"You're a real estate agent?" Quint asked.

She was silent for a moment. "Who is this, please?"

"My name is Quint Douglas. I'm doing an investigation on Talon Davis. I was hoping you could answer some questions."

This time the silence was longer. "That part of my life is over," she said, finally.

"I understand that. I'll try to make it brief. If I get too personal just tell me, and I'll back off."

She gave a long sigh. "All right. What do you need to know?"

"How long were you married?"

"Five years, but we only lived together three of them. Three long years, the longest most horrible three years of my life."

“How would you describe your ex-husband?”

“He was a user and a woman hater. He was physically and mentally abusive. It took me two years of therapy to be able to say that.”

“Any children?”

“Thank God, no.”

“Did he have any children before you married him?”

“None that I’m aware of. It wouldn’t surprise me though. To my knowledge he didn’t pay any child support. I would certainly feel sorry for any child of his. He was an awful husband. I’m sure he would have made an even worse father.”

“I guess that’s all I need for now. Thanks for your time.”

“What’s this all about anyway?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, but I won’t be using your name if that’s a concern for you.”

“I’d appreciate that. I have a new life now, and it’s a very happy one.”

“Glad to hear that. Good luck to you. If I’m ever looking for a house in Cleveland I’ll look you up.”

Quint was left with the sound of her soft laughter as she said goodbye and hung up.

He took a swig of his beer, tabulating the information from Davis’s exes. One thing was certain; Talon Davis wasn’t winning any husband-of-the-year awards. Quint couldn’t imagine someone like him being Jamie’s father, or anyone’s father, for that matter. He reached for the phone, intending to call Hunter. The phone rang in his hand before he could dial.

It was Virgil.

“Hey Cuz, how’s the investigating going?”

Quint grunted. “I don’t need any more suspects if that’s why you’re calling.”

“Sounds like you have your hands full,” Virgil said. “But I have a question. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before, but I don’t remember seeing an autopsy report on Katherine Devon. Did we miss it or wasn’t it there?”

“I went through everything again on the flight back; I didn’t see it.”

“Why don’t you give your buddy, Ralph Sampson, a call and see if he got a copy of one. If he didn’t, ask him why.”

“Sure thing. I’ll call him in the morning.”

“Are you going up to New Hampshire for the race this weekend?”

“Yeah, not until Saturday morning though. I’m loaded with work here. Are you and Stephen coming?”

“Wish I could, but this court case is taking longer than I expected. Stephen has a skydiving meet in Wisconsin. Sounds like Hunter and Nicole will be there to keep you company. They got back this afternoon.”

“I was just about to call him.”

“Okay, catch you later. Let me know if Sampson has that autopsy report, and if he’ll let you see it.”

“Will do.”

Quint hung up and dialed Hunter’s number.

Shanna, Hunter’s seven-year-old daughter, answered the phone on the first ring.

“Hello, Douglas residence, this is Shanna Douglas speaking.”

“Hi Shanna, this is your Uncle Quint. It sounds like you enjoy using your new name.”

Shanna giggled. “It’s so fun. Me and Kyle officially belong to Hunter and Nicole now; we have a mom and a dad. Kyle’s name is Kyle Jonathon Douglas. I started first grade because I had a birthday and I’m seven, but Kyle’s only in preschool ’cause he won’t be five until October. Of course, we have a new grandpa and grandma too, and when Aunt Corinne and Uncle Billy have their baby, we’ll have a cousin.”

Quint was laughing when she finally stopped for a breath of air. “Do you suppose I could talk to your daddy?”

“I think that would be all right, but let me ask him in case he’s too busy. They’re still unpacking ’cause we were on a honeymoon in the Care’been. We had lots of fun snorkeling. Just a minute, please.”

Quint heard some more giggles before she handed the phone to Hunter.

“Hey, Quint, good to hear from you. Sounds like you were getting your ear talked off.”

Quint laughed. “That girl is a delight. You’re a lucky man.”

“Life is good. How are things on your end? I understand you’re finding a little luck yourself these days.”

“Yeah, just wait until I see you. I’m going to punch you for not telling me who Jamie really was.”

Hunter chuckled. “I had to take orders from my wife.”

“Well, at least you’ve finally learned your place.”

“I’m going to leave that one alone for now. How’s the business going?”

“I have a lot of catching up to do. Did Virgil fill you in on some of what’s happening here?”

“Yeah. Anything I can do to help?”

“Funny you should ask. I do need something from you. There’s a woman living in Duluth—far as I can tell that’s only about forty-five miles from your place. She’s Kent Riker’s ex-wife. Any chance you could drive up and question her? I have an address but if she has a phone it’s not in her name.”

Quint filled Hunter in on some background information and promised to see him Sunday at the race. Then Quint hung up and called his sister in upstate New York. It had been over a year since he’d talked to her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The New Hampshire International Speedway, built in 1990, accommodated 101,000 spectators. Small wonder, the September Sylvania 300 turned the peaceful town of Loudon into a bustling community. Their 1.058-mile oval track had twelve-degree banks with sharp turns that came up quickly.

Jamie didn't have to do her qualifying run on Friday until four o'clock. By that time twenty-five drivers had already completed their runs. Clay had bested Grady, Dunn, Davis, and Sammy Jackson, to take the lead.

At 131.2 mph, Jamie aced Clay out by a mere two seconds. She would start in the pole position for the first time in her racing career. Clay would be beside her on the outside.

When she pulled into her pit she was met with a wild volley of cheers.

A few minutes later Jamie, still in her racing suit, knocked on Ray Bentler's trailer door. She was let in by one of his Pink Minks. As usual, pink-feathered beauties in skin-tight leotards surrounded him. They were all watching a monitor on his desk showing a replay of her run.

Bentler looked up at her, smiling broadly. For some reason he looked older, his face more deeply lined, than Jamie remembered. He leaped to his feet and rounded his desk sweeping minks aside like feathers in the wind.

"Congratulations, kid, what a great run," he exclaimed grasping Jamie by the upper arms. "This could be your day. You've earned a win. You deserve it."

Jamie gave him a thin smile. "Don't start counting your chickens before the eggs are laid," she said. "There's a little matter of three hundred miles ahead of me before I can think about winning."

Bentler laughed. "Don't be such a pessimist." When he leaned back he got a good look at her face. His smile faded "You had a terrific run; why aren't you smiling?"

"Can I talk to you in private?"

"Certainly." He turned toward his minks, snapped his fingers and pointed to the door with

his thumb. All seven filed out, several of them extending Jamie congratulations on their way. When the door closed behind the last one, Bentler motioned Jamie to a chair. "Sit down and spill it, kid."

Jamie took the seat he offered, folded her arms over her chest and glared up at him, saying nothing, her lips thin with barely contained anger.

Bentler leaned on the edge of his desk and started to light a cigar. When he looked at her face his hand halted with the lighter in mid air. "What? You don't want me to smoke?"

"Did you start sleeping with my mother before or after she left Buster?"

His face registered the shock she'd expected.

"Where did you hear such a thing?"

Jamie was convinced that the name Penny had given her, Ray *Bender*, was in fact, *Bentler*. Ray Bentler was a man not easily intimidated. Still, she persisted.

"Just spare me the denials and answer the question."

"Why are you digging into this after so many years? I told you before to let it lie."

"If you expect me to run in the race Sunday, you had better answer, honestly."

Bentler's eyes widened. "Are you threatening me with not driving? You can't do that. We have a contract."

"I don't know...my knee injury has been acting up lately."

"Don't try pulling that shit with me, Jamie."

Jamie gritted her teeth. "Just answer the fucking question, Ray."

Bentler's jaw tightened. "All right," he said softly. "But remember, you asked for it. I met Katherine in a bar on Chicago's south side. I introduced her to Buster and the cronies he hung out with."

"Were you sleeping with her?"

"What the hell do you think?" He didn't wait for an answer. "She had dollar signs in her eyes. She wanted to marry a man with money. I had no intentions of being that man and told her so right from the start. I played it straight with her, but she was a beauty and she knew how to wiggle her perfect little ass in just the right way to get a man's attention."

Jamie winced but she kept silent, determined to hear it all.

"Do you want me to continue?" he asked.

"Why stop now, you're on a roll."

“She saw Buster as having a lot of potential. He was a tenacious driver and winning regularly. She flashed her tail in front of him until she convinced him they should get married. A few months after the wedding an accident put him out of the driver’s seat permanently. After that she lost interest in him. As a crewmember, he’d never make the kind of money and get the publicity she was craving. So she started trolling the field again.”

“Did you continue to sleep with her while she was married to Buster?”

“Goddamnit. Wise up, Jamie. She continued to sleep with *everybody* while she was married to your father.”

Jamie charged to her feet. “My father? How do I know he’s my father? How do I know you didn’t provide the sperm for me?”

Ray Bentler sighed, shaking his head. “Buster raised you. He loves you. He’s your father. Leave it be, Jamie.”

Jamie turned around and walked out. She would not allow Ray Bentler to see her tears. She looked around trying to find a spot to be alone, but the inner field was cluttered with semi trailers, cars, tents and equipment. She couldn’t see even one square yard that wasn’t taken.

With tears streaming down her face, she walked toward her pit, the place that had been her real home for most of her life. Activity in the pit stopped as the workers turned to stare at her. Jamie breaking down was not something they were accustomed to.

Buster was the first person she saw. She walked straight toward him, threw her arms around his waist and buried her face in the warmth of his soft down vest. When his arms folded around her, she began to sob loudly. Heedless of the crew watching her, she clung to the father she had denied for so many years and cried until there were no more tears left.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured into his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

Buster held her, rubbed her back, and kissed the top of her head. “I don’t know what just happened to you, honey, but there’s nothing for you to be sorry about.”

“Yes, there is,” she said through a sob-induced hiccup. “I’ve spent my whole life blaming you for everything bad that’s happened in my life. Now suddenly I realize you are the only good thing there was in it.”

“That’s not true. T-Roy—”

“Don’t even mention T-Roy. I loved my brother, but he wasn’t who I thought he was; you were the stable force in my life. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

“Let’s not forget that I’ve made my share of mistakes too.”

Jamie pulled back to look up at him, smiling a watery smile. “Well, who hasn’t?”

Buster pulled a grease-stained handkerchief out of his back pocket. He handed it to her, talking in a choked voice. “I don’t know what brought this all on, but I feel like I’ve been handed a gift. I’m not going to worry about it or question it. Jamie, there’s something I’ve been putting off telling you for some twenty-three years. I’ve just never been able to say it or seemed to have the right timing. No fancy words, just I love you, girl, plain and simple. And I have since that first day when you spouted off to me, defending your mother. You were the cutest little tyke I ever saw and you had my spunk. How could a father not love that?”

Jamie rubbed at her eyes with Buster’s handkerchief. It smelled of grease and oil. It was familiar and pleasant, and it was Buster. “I had your obstinate stubborn streak, is what I had.”

Buster chuckled. “What do you mean *had*?” He looked around them noticing that everyone else had left, probably to give the two of them privacy. “Jamie, it’s Friday night and we don’t have a lot to do tomorrow other than setting up and organizing the pit. How about you and I go out and celebrate your terrific run today. I’ll buy us a nice dinner tonight and we can catch up on some things that are long overdue.”

Jamie handed his handkerchief back, smiling. “I’d like that, and in case I forget to mention it, I love you too. It’s an odd feeling but I’m going to try to get used to it.”

“Is Quint here? He could come along.”

Jamie shook her head. “He had a lot of work to do so he’ll be flying up in the morning.”

They talked about a lot of things, about the upcoming race on Sunday, about her qualifying run that afternoon, and then about T-Roy.

Sometime during the meal, Jamie realized that the caring parent part of her father must always have been there, but as Clay had pointed out, she’d been too absorbed with T-Roy to see it.

Buster sliced a thin slab off of his inch thick, rare porterhouse steak. “You probably aren’t aware of this,” he said, “but I was planning on retiring in the next year or two.”

“You’re only fifty-seven,” Jamie said, surprised.

“I know, but that’s getting pretty old for this business. Kent and I are the only crew chiefs over fifty. This is a young man’s sport.”

“Is Kent planning on retiring too?”

Buster stabbed his fork into his steak. “I don’t know. He’s so insanely obsessed with Clay winning, and the way that kid is driving I can’t picture it happening anytime soon. I doubt Kent will give it up until his son pulls into Victory Lane.”

“I find it odd to hear you say that,” Jamie said. “I thought that’s how you felt about me.”

Buster’s lips twisted into a sad smile. “I knew that too, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it. You never believed a word I said.”

“You were so angry when I started racing, I was sure it was because you either thought I wasn’t good enough or that women didn’t belong in NASCAR, or both.”

Buster snorted. “I knew you were good enough. And when they shoved you in that car after his accident and made you race, damn right I was pissed. The last thing I wanted was to see you end up like T-Roy.”

“I don’t understand. How did you think I was good enough to drive?”

“You think I didn’t know you were driving? I had more than one fight with T-Roy over your racing.”

“You knew? You never saw me race.”

Buster laid his fork down, folded his hands in front of him and stared across the table at her. “In four years you ran exactly seventy two professional races. You won five of them. Ten times you took second. In all that time you had only six races you didn’t finish. You totaled three cars, which may or may not have been caused by driver error. Bentler wanted you to replace T-Roy a year before he died.”

Jamie stared at him in numb disbelief, opening her mouth, searching for words. He knew all her statistics in detail. How? She’d never seen him at one of her races, never talked to him about them. She’d assumed he either didn’t know or simply didn’t care. “You never came to any of my races,” she said finally.

“I attended every one of your races.”

“I didn’t see you there.”

“Because I was real proud of you, but I didn’t want to encourage you. If I hadn’t been at the hospital with T-Roy that day I would never have allowed them to put you in his car. Your being female or being good enough had nothing to do with it.”

“Did T-Roy know Bentler wanted me to replace him?”

Buster gave her a long, sad look. "Why do you think he was pushing himself so hard?"

Tears stung Jamie's eyes.

Buster reached over and put his big hand over her smaller one. "Don't read too much into that, honey. In spite of his shortcomings, T-Roy loved you and he was proud of you. It was no fault of yours that he couldn't compete with your record on the track."

Buster sighed. "Bentler's push to have you race was the main reason I wanted you to marry Clay. I hoped you'd like being married and start having babies, and forget about racing. Hell, I was even thinking of buying you a flower shop to get you interested in something else."

"You knew about my wanting a flower shop?"

Buster smiled. "Obviously, I know a lot more about you than you think I do. That day you moved out of my house and took your little forest with you was one of the saddest times of my life. I knew it was best for you because we didn't get along but you took all the color out of my life, and I don't mean the plants."

* * * *

When Quint called that night at nine o'clock she had a lot to tell him, the least of which was her conversation with Ray Bentler. He was pleased to learn she had spent the evening with her father. He told her about his conversations with Talon Davis' ex-wives, and he assured her Hunter and Nicole would be there for her race on Sunday.

Then he told her the best news of all. Instead of flying up Saturday morning as he'd originally planned, he was driving the two hundred and seventy miles to Loudon, New Hampshire and he was already on the way. He'd stopped to gas up and barring any problems he'd see her by midnight. With conflicting emotions he congratulated her on her run that day and disconnected his cell phone.

A few minutes later, Quint turned onto interstate eighty-seven heading north. He mulled over the information she'd given him about Ray Bentler. It was not so much surprising as disturbing. Though he couldn't think of any reason Bentler would want Jamie out of racing, Quint wasn't entirely ready to discount her sponsor as a suspect.

Tomorrow he would talk to Charles Decker Jones and anyone else he could pin down. He'd have liked to put Kent Riker on his list of people to see, but seriously doubted the man would give him the time of day, much less an interview. He hoped Hunter would get something from Riker's ex-wife that would be helpful.

Saturday morning he drove out to the track with Jamie. She left him on his own while she went to take care of business with her crew. Quint found Charlie by the back of the trailer where the grill was set up. He had a Styrofoam coffee mug in his hand.

Charlie, a small wiry, man, had a somber face etched with deep frown lines. With thinning white hair crowning his head, he looked easily ten years older than his high school buddies, Buster and Kent. When he saw Quint coming, he pulled a ragged, old green cap from his hip pocket and jammed it on his head. Quint thought it peculiar since crew members usually wore caps with the team's color. He shrugged it off, maybe the cap was handy and Charlie was embarrassed about his thinning hair.

Quint helped himself to a cup of coffee and introduced himself.

"Yeah, I've seen you around with Jamie," Charlie said.

Quint took a sip of his hot coffee. "I wonder if I could ask you a couple of questions?"

Charlie shrugged. "Sure, why not? From what I hear you're new to racing. I've been around here a long time, so I pretty much know everything. What's on your mind?"

"Katherine."

Charlie's face clearly showed surprise. "Katherine who?"

Quint was certain Charlie knew exactly who Quint was talking about. "Jamie's mother, Katherine Devon LeCorre. Just how well did you know her?"

Charlie stared into his empty cup for a moment then grunted. "What's to know? She was Buster's wife. We all hung out together. That's no big secret. Why are you asking?"

"I'd like you to tell me about the last time you saw her. When you picked her up and took her to the race, the same day she died."

A beet-red flush covered Charlie's face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, *Decker*. Maybe you'd like me to call Buster over and include him in this discussion. I'd rather we talk privately, but—"

"Why the devil are you digging into that after all these years?" Charlie demanded angrily.

"A lot of circumstances involving Katherine's death were never cleared up."

"What are you, some kind of a cop?"

"No. I'm—"

"Well I had nothing to do with her death if that's what you're getting at."

“Were you sleeping with her?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I’m afraid I’m making it my business. And you’ll make this a lot simpler for both of us if you just answer my questions.”

“Who told you I took her to the race that day?”

“That’s not important. I do know you picked her up before noon, took her to the race, and dropped her back at her apartment at five-thirty.”

Charlie whispered an expletive under his breath. He looked out at the track, stared up at the stands. He looked everywhere but at Quint.

Quint waited.

After a few moments Charlie heaved a deep sigh. “She called me that morning and asked me to pick her up. So I did. I dropped her off. She sat alone in the stands. I was working gasman that day. I drove her back home afterwards. End of story.”

“How often did she call you?” Quint asked.

“Periodically. She mostly wanted to know how T-Roy was doing, but that was the first time she called me to take her to the race.”

“Were you sleeping with her?”

“No. And that’s God’s truth. Buster was my best friend. I wouldn’t have done that to him.”

Quint believed him.

“Did she talk about seeing anyone else that day?”

“Yeah, she had a boyfriend, Walter something. She was going out to dinner with him.”

“Why didn’t she have Walter take her to the race? Why did she call you?”

“Probably because I could get her a front row seat where she could hobnob with the pretty boys who had wads of cash in their pockets.”

“You didn’t like her very much, did you?”

“Hell, no. She had the kind of looks men killed for but she was also a manipulating bitch. She played Buster for a fool. She knew how to get men to do what she wanted. I wasn’t immune to it, but I never slept with her, and I didn’t kill her.”

“Do you have any thoughts on who did kill her?”

Charlie hesitated a second too long before he barked an adamant, “No!”

“Did you know about Jamie back then?”

“Yeah, I knew Katherine had a little girl. It pained me not to tell Buster, but it was none of my business and it would have created a screaming war between Buster and Katherine.”

As they continued to talk, Quint did a quick recap in his mind. Apparently Katherine had spurned Charlie in favor of better-looking, wealthier men. He doubted if that alone would have been enough for Charlie to kill Katherine. Besides, Quint believed Charlie when he said he hadn't slept with her. That would rule out the possibility of him fathering a child with her. Buster had said Charlie would lay down his life for his friend, but would he kill for him?

Quint thanked Charlie for his time and went in search of Mitch Grady. From his notes, Quint knew that Grady was fifty-two years old, the oldest driver in the Nextell Cup race. He was ranked fourth in the cup challenge, had been married a little over twenty years, and had two teenage daughters. According to Jamie, Mitch was an all-around nice guy.

Quint found Mitch out in the stands talking to his spotter. He was well preserved for his age with broad shoulders, a narrow-waist, and had only a sprinkling of gray in his perfectly groomed hair.

When Quint introduced himself, Mitch greeted him with a friendly smile, a head-to-foot once over, and a firm handshake.

“You're Jamie's friend? I've been watching you from a distance. Glad we finally get a chance to meet. What can I do for you?”

“I'd like a few words with you,” he glanced at the spotter, “alone if I could.”

“Sure thing,” Mitch said. “We're finished here anyway.”

Mitch led Quint to an empty section of bleachers and sat down. He motioned Quint to sit beside him.

Mitch seemed to size Quint up for a moment before he asked, “What's on your mind, my friend?”

Quint had no clue if this man knew Katherine so he decided to use a subtle approach.

“Well, Jamie doesn't remember too much about her mother, so I'm trying to gather some information by talking to people who knew her.”

“What kind of information?”

“Anything you can tell me. Did you know her?”

Mitch's face remained impassive as he shrugged. “Sure I knew her, everybody did. She

was the kind of woman who demanded to be noticed.”

“Did you notice her?”

Mitch’s dark eyes narrowed slightly. “That doesn’t sound like anything Jamie needs to know. Why are you asking?”

“Just curious, I guess.”

Mitch laughed. “Okay, I’ll humor you, Quint. I would have had to be blind not to notice her. I was a kid compared to the other guys. She didn’t give me a first look, much less a second one. Not that I didn’t try. Katherine Devon and her dizzy shadow were looking for men with potential. They concentrated on Buster and his good buddy network. Kent, Charlie, and Percy had all gone to high school with Buster. I was just a wet-nosed kid trying to get into the racing business by being a tire-loading grunt man. That’s the bottom of the totem pole, in case you didn’t know.”

“No, didn’t know. I still have a lot to learn about NASCAR. Who was the dizzy shadow you’re talking about?”

“Bitsy something or other, I think. They were quite a pair. Between the two of them they had more curves than Lombard Street, but Katherine had brains, and Bitsy, or Ditzzy, as some of us called her, couldn’t tell up from down unless it was raining.”

Quint wondered why, with all the people he’d spoken to, no one ever mentioned a Bitsy. “Whatever happened to Bitsy?”

“Ask Kent Riker. He married the airhead when he couldn’t have Katherine.”

Quint tried to hide his surprise. “Riker wanted Katherine?”

Grady made an odd laughing noise in his throat. “Who didn’t? She was one hot chick.”

“I thought Riker’s ex-wife was Betsy.”

“Yeah, well, Betsy, Bitsy, Ditzzy, one and the same.”

A mechanic called from across track. Mitch was needed down in the pit to test his audio equipment. Mitch stood up and slapped Quint on the shoulder. “Well, I gotta go. Good luck talking to Riker. Let’s chat again sometime. Maybe go out for a beer.”

Quint watched him jog down the stands, he pulled out his note pad and started to write. He was still puzzled that nobody had mentioned Katherine having a pal. He wondered if Jamie even knew that Riker’s ex-wife had been Katherine’s best friend. He was also curious about who else knew Kent had settled for Betsy when he couldn’t have the woman he really wanted.

Mitch Grady confused Quint. He certainly appeared to be an okay guy, as Jamie said. He talked freely about his infatuation with Katherine. Had it gone any further than that? Even at fifty-two, Mitch had the sort of looks that drew women. Katherine might have given him a second look. Grady could have been telling the truth about having no involvement with her, but he was a smooth talker; he could also be hiding something. One thing came through loud and clear; back when he was a grunt, Mitch Grady was extremely jealous of Buster and his schoolmates.

Quint ran a frustrated hand through his hair. It seemed like for every page he turned in Katherine's life ten blank pages appeared. He went over his list of people to talk to. He'd already spoken briefly with Tim and Hal; neither one of them knew Jamie's mother. They both joined the team when Buster became crew chief the year before he got Jamie. Bernie Yates, the other driver in question, was out of the picture too. He had been home with his leg in a cast at the time Katherine was killed, and since Jamie had already talked to Bentler and Clay, it wasn't necessary to question either one of them. As far as Talon Davis was concerned, Quint had gathered all the information he needed for the time being.

That left Kent Riker. A conversation Quint was not looking forward to.

From his vantage point in the bleachers, Quint could see the Riker pit. Kent, a bear-sized man, was easy to spot. He had mammoth hands and wide shoulders. Not somebody Quint wanted to meet in a dark alley, particularly if the man was angry.

Quint glanced at his watch. It was twelve-thirty and he hadn't had lunch yet. He wasn't at his best when he was hungry.

There were only about ten crew members in the pit, and most of them didn't seem to be too busy. Second round qualifiers had finished for the day, and most of the remaining preparations were in the hands of the inspectors.

He had to figure out a way to get Riker alone. Quint got to his feet, thinking about food. He was winding his way down the bleachers when the Riker pit suddenly came to life. He stopped and watched as the guys in the pit collectively ambled off across the track toward him, probably going to lunch, he surmised. Kent Riker stayed behind.

It was the opportunity he'd been hoping for. Quint took the rest of the steps two at a time and made his way out onto the track. It was broad daylight, but walking across the four-lane track, he had the eerie feeling he was heading toward a dark alley.

Kent was even bigger close up than he appeared at a distance. He was standing at a makeshift bench working on a fist-sized object that looked like a carburetor. The short stub of a burning cigarette hung from his mouth. He was wearing royal blue grease-stained coveralls with the team's, Royal Auto Parts, emblem on the back.

Riker glanced up, saw Quint coming, and turned his attention back to his work. Bad sign.

Quint walked up and leaned against the chest-high bench.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Riker, I'm Quint Doug—"

"I know who you are. What do you want?" Riker searched in his toolbox, selected a small open-end wrench, and began tightening bolts on the carburetor in swift jerking motions.

"I was hoping to ask you a few questions."

"Questions about what?"

"Katherine Devon."

Riker shot Quint a murderous, but surprised look. He smashed his cigarette out on the scared bench and dropped it into a half empty grease can. "Why would I want to answer questions about her?"

"Courtesy?" Quint said

Quint thought Riker looked amused. "Do I look like a courteous sort to you?"

"Looks can be deceiving."

Riker snorted. He set the carburetor aside and dipped a rag in cleaning solution before he started wiping his tool. "Are you planning to marry that girl?"

This time it was Quint's brow that shot up. "I'm assuming you mean Jamie."

Riker ignored that as he continued to clean his wrenches. "It's time that girl got married and had a batch of kids."

"Why do you say that?" Quint asked.

"Women have no place in this business. It's a man's sport. It's dangerous."

"Isn't it just as dangerous for men?"

"If they don't know what they're doing, yes."

Quint knew better than to argue with a bigot, besides, Jamie and the dangers of racing wasn't the subject he wanted to be on. "So what can you tell me about Katherine?"

"She was Buster's wife."

"What about after she divorced Buster?"

“Then she was Buster’s ex-wife.”

This was going nowhere fast.

Quint was surprised that Riker was talking at all, but he also had the distinct feeling that the man wasn’t going to say anything.

Quint’s stomach growled. “At the time she left Buster, did you know she was pregnant?”

“Now how the hell would I know that, if Buster didn’t even know? What I want to know is are you planning to marry her?”

Quint suppressed the urge to grit his teeth, but he couldn’t ignore Riker’s question a second time and expect him to keep talking. “I don’t know yet. It’s a little early in the relationship.”

“Do you like the idea of her racing?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well, at least we agree on that.”

Quint took a deep, slow breath. Keeping his temper in check was difficult with no food in his belly. “I’d like to know a little more about her mother. Like what kind of a person she was.”

“Jamie is nothing like her mother, if that’s what you’re worried about. She’s a terrific kid. I wanted her to marry my son. You think I’d choose just anybody for a daughter-in-law? That should tell you something.”

Quint wasn’t aware the practice of fathers choosing their son’s wives was still done in this century. But it did tell him one thing; Kent Riker was not Jamie’s father. Thank the Lord for that. Just the thought made Quint irritable. “My guess is you like Jamie but you don’t like the idea that she can out-drive your son.”

Riker’s left eye twitched as he glowered at Quint. “Like you said, Mr. Douglas, you don’t know shit about racing. Take my advice, keep your nose out of things that don’t concern you.”

Riker slammed his toolbox shut with unnecessary force, turned his back on Quint, and stomped away.

* * * *

Sunday dawned a clear, cool fall day. By race time, the stands were packed to capacity.

Jamie was in good spirits as she left to get in her car. Aside from spending a marvelous night and day with Quint, her relationship with Buster was progressing better than she’d ever thought possible. She was becoming aware of a new side to him. That of a caring, concerned

parent.

The last thing he'd done on their Friday night *date* was warn her that one thing hadn't changed. "When you're driving, I'm not your father, I'm your crew chief, so don't get take it personal when I raise my voice, telling you what to do."

"Understood," Jamie said, adding, "as long as you understand that I won't always listen."

Now, as she strapped into her Monte Carlo, he patted her on the shoulder.

"Remember, kid, this track has low banks. The flat corners scuff off speed and rubber. Don't waste time, shift gears and get back on the straightaway quickly to save your tires." He smiled. "Good luck and watch yourself. Err to the safe side."

As she left the pit to take her place behind the pacer car, Jamie saw worry lines around his eyes. Had they always been there?

Two minutes later she jammed her foot on the accelerator and shifted into high gear. The roar of forty-two exhausts bellowing cleared her mind of all thought except gripping the steering wheel, gaining speed, and avoiding metal-on-metal contact with the car next to her.

Quint, watching from the van with Nicole and Hunter, felt his entire body tense up. The scream of the 770 horsepower engines, along with a hundred thousand cheering fans, tightened his muscles, doubled his heart rate, and constricted his breathing. The smell of fuel and oil, mixed with burning rubber, brought on a premonition of death. He jumped when a firm hand clamped on his shoulder.

It was Hunter.

"Quint. You look like you're about to pass out."

Quint forced himself to swallow. "I just get a little overwhelmed when they start."

Hunter pulled a chair up beside Quint and sat down. "You're not handling Jamie being out there too well, are you?"

Quint's gaze was fastened on the bright pink car leading the colorful speeding snake.

"No."

"I've been a little out of touch. How serious is this thing between you and Jamie?"

"Except for me turning into a pathetic wimp every time she straps herself into that damn car, very serious."

"Quint, I know better than anyone why you feel that way about her racing. Remember I

was in that car with you that day.”

“So, why am I the one screwed up?”

Hunter glanced back at his wife, and lowered his voice so she couldn’t hear him. “What do you think I’d be doing if Nicole was out there?”

Quint managed a smile. “I guess you’d be in as bad a shape as I am.”

“And I guess you, little cuz, are in love. Maybe you should walk around and ask the other drivers wives how they handle it?”

“I already know. Some of them can’t even come to the races, but I’m a man—”

“What the hell difference does that make?”

Quint shrugged. He watched Jamie fly by the start line for the tenth time. She was still leading with Clay drafting ten feet from her bumper. “So what do I do? Not come to the race? I’d be a bigger wreck if I couldn’t watch.”

“I guess you come, you watch, you pray, you cheer her on, hold her hand when she loses, celebrate when she wins. Just don’t let it ruin a good thing for you.”

Nicole walked up behind Hunter and tickled the back of his neck with her fingertips.

“I’m feeling a little left out here. What are you two talking about?”

Hunter chuckled and turned around to pull his wife down on his lap. “Man talk.”

Nicole laughed. “That would be either sports or sex.”

Quint grinned. He enjoyed watching the two of them interact. They were so perfectly suited. “In this case,” he said, “It’s both at the same time.”

“You really like Jamie, don’t you?” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t understand how you can handle her being out there driving.”

Quint exchanged a quick look with his cousin and they both burst out laughing. Their laughter did wonders for Quint’s tension.

On the twenty-fifth lap, Dunn overtook both Jamie and Clay.

Twenty minutes later, Grady eased ahead of her when she was slow coming out of the pit. By the end of the second hour Jamie had been in and out of the lead position five times. Grady and Jackson had collided when another driver hit the wall and all three were out of the race.

On the two hundred and fiftieth lap she was in third, running close behind Dunn with Clay in the lead for the first time in his career. Davis was following her holding tenaciously to

fourth.

She was coming into the fourth turn at full speed when she applied her brakes to ease up for the curve. She was halfway into the turn when the steering wheel suddenly came loose in her hands. She had a split second to yell into her headphones before she rammed Dunn in the rear right fender. Simultaneously, both cars went into a slide. Davis plowed unavoidably into her sending her car airborne over Dunn. Her Monte Carlo slammed with metal bending force into the wall before twisting end over end three times and coming to a grating halt on its side.

The commentator's excited voice described the scene as the crowd watched in stunned horror. "The red flag is out. I can't figure out what went wrong, but for whatever reason, Jamie LeCorre slammed straight into Tomas Dunn on the turn. Talon Davis hit her on the side and tossed her over Dunn's car. It looked like she flipped over several time before the wall stopped her. That car is one twisted hunk of steel. I don't know what happened out there but it seems like Jamie's string of bad luck continues. Let's hope she's okay. Here's the replay coming up."

A team of rescue workers and clean-up crew surged onto the field. A total of six cars had piled into the wreckage; spreading debris across the entire width of track.

On top of the Pink Mink trailer, Hunter and Hal Waller were restraining Quint. He struggled fruitlessly, demanding to be set free.

"You can't go out there," Hal shouted, throwing his weight on Quint's equally husky arm. "You have to wait here."

Quint finally quit struggling and nodded his understanding. His breath came in short gasps as he watched helplessly while an ambulance pull up beside Jamie's mangled car. Paramedics in white coveralls pulled a stretcher from the back. Both Dunn and Davis were out of their cars, surrounded by crew members. Dunn hurried around the wreckage toward Jamie's car.

A television commenter described the scene as it played over and over, periodically switching back live to await the news on Jamie LeCorre. Three men were working with pry bars attempting to extract her.

On top of the trailer the group collectively held their breaths as they watched her being lifted from the mangled vehicle. They all turned as one to the monitor where they could get a close-up view.

Her body was limp.

She was carefully loaded on the stretcher and taken to the ambulance. Buster climbed

into the ambulance as the doors slammed shut. It left the track, siren screaming.

“Okay,” Hal said. “Let’s go! We have to get across the track before they restart the race. The hospital is only a few minutes from here.”

Tim Andrews met them as they were coming down from the trailer.

“We’re going to the hospital,” Hal told him without cutting his stride. “Do you know what happened?”

“Something with the steering,” Tim said. She yelled it into the microphone but all Buster heard before she hit Dunn was *steering wheel*. I’m coming with you.”

It took thirty minutes to get clearance to cross the track and reach the lot where Hal’s Ram Charger was parked, and another frustrating twenty minutes getting out of the congested lot.

Tim sat in the front with Hal with Hunter, Nicole, and Quint taking up the back seat. In the forty minutes it took to get to Loudon Community Hospital, few words were spoken, most of those by Hal as he swore at one driver or another, who, according to him, had no business on the road. At the hospital he swore again when he wasted several minutes looking for the right entrance.

All five burst through the emergency room doors, causing a stir among the nurses on duty.

“Jamie LeCorre?” Quint said. “She came in by ambulance a little over an hour ago. How is she? Where is she? Is she all right? Can I see her?”

“She’s still in emergency,” the head nurse said, pointing to a room off to the left. Quint rushed past her.

Hunter, directly behind Quint, stopped at the door. “Is it okay if we all go in?”

The nurse waved him on. “I don’t see why not, Most of whole staff is in there.”

Quint stopped in front of a closed curtain. From behind it he heard the sound of racing engines. His heart in his throat, he swallowed, took a deep breath, and pushed the curtain aside.

Jamie lay reclined on a hospital exam bed, her left arm bandaged from wrist to elbow, and a contusion the size of a grapefruit on the upper arm. Another bruise on her right cheekbone made her look like she’d been in a barroom brawl. She looked up in surprise. “Quint. How did you get here so fast?”

Buster, his eyes red and weary-looking, sat in a chair beside the bed. Several nurses,

doctors, and interns perched on stools and tables were crowded into the tiny cubicle. They were all watching the end of the race on a television in the corner.

For the space of a few seconds, Quint gaped at her with the peculiar sensation that he was in the middle of a nightmare.

“Quint?” Jamie called his name again. This time she held her hand out to him.

Two nurses moved aside for him as he covered the three steps to the edge of Jamie’s bed. He sat down beside her and gently put his arms around her. He kissed her bruised cheek and taped wrist with feathery touches, buried his face in her hair and choked on a sob.

“My God, I thought you were dead.”

“I’m fine,” Jamie said. “Just banged up a bit. They’re still waiting for the X-rays, but everything appears okay.”

Quint finally leaned back to study her, assuring himself that she really was okay.

She reached up and brushed the dampness from his misty blue eyes with her thumb.

“Until today,” she said, softly, “nobody has ever shed a tear when I got hurt. I am blessed.”

“I’ve shed more than tears, sweetheart. I think my heart bled itself dry on the drive over here.”

A loud noise from the television drew their attention. Clay Riker had just won the race; Mitch Grady came in a close second. That brought both cheers and groans from the group scattered around the room.

Jamie watched with mixed emotions as Clay took his victory spin around the track. He had been waiting six years for his first win. She remembered him saying he was going to run his own race. She wondered if that had anything to do with his winning. Her taking out a good share of his competition might have helped too. When Clay pulled into Victory Lane the screen switched to a replay of Jamie’s crash.

“That looks worse every time I see it,” Hal said. “I don’t know how you came out of that with only a few scrapes and bruises.”

“I’ll second that,” Quint said, squeezing her hand.

Switching back to live action, a cheer went up from the stands when the commentator reported that Jamie was doing fine.

Nicole walked up to Jamie’s bed. Her eyes were glistening. “Are you really okay?” she

asked.

Jamie nodded. "I think so. Except for every inch of my body aching, I don't feel too bad. It'll probably be worse tomorrow."

One of the doctors stood up. "Those X-rays should be ready by now; I'll go take a look."

"I guess it's time we all went back to work," one of the nurses said. "Good luck, Jamie. Next time you come to visit us, please don't do it in an ambulance."

Jamie grimaced. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good luck," she said. "I hope you win next week."

"You aren't going to race next week?" Nicole said, incredulously.

Jamie glanced at Quint before she answered. "I have to, it's Talladega."

"I've already tried to talk her out of it," Buster said. "Talladega is the longest, fastest track on the circuit. She's good at high speeds, so the long track is her best chance of winning."

"Lord almighty," Quint said, under his breath. "How fast do they go?"

"The best qualifying run was at 212 miles per hour back in 1978," Tim said. "But that was before restrictor plates were required on the high-speed tracks. That's a metal plate installed in front of the carburetor; it cuts the horsepower from 770 to 390. They rarely get over 200 miles an hour anymore."

Quint pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. "Oh, that's a huge relief."

Tim stepped over to the foot of her bed. "Are you sure you should be racing at Talladega? You look like hell ran you over."

Jamie's face settled into a determined, stubborn line. "I'm going to race."

Tim scrutinized her with a long searching look. "What happened out there, Jamie? Buster said you mentioned the steering."

Jamie shook her head. "It came off. The steering wheel came off in my hands when I tried to turn. There wasn't a thing I could do."

"Now that's really peculiar," Tim said, looking at Hal. "I've never heard of that happening before."

"I think I did once a few years back," Hal said. "If I remember right, the pin came loose. Caused a nasty crash then, too."

"Could someone have tampered with it?" Quint asked.

Tim shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm going to take a serious look at her steering system

and see what went wrong.”

Buster shot to his feet. “Goddamn it! Who would do something like that?”

Tim shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not suggesting it was tampered with. All I’m saying is, it’s damn odd and I think we should look into it.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jamie slept most of the way on the drive back to New York. She was still aching but the X-rays had shown no broken bones. When Quint had asked if she still wanted to come to New York with him, she saw no reason to change their plans. However, since the doctor had strongly urged her to spend the night in the hospital under observation, they didn't leave until Monday morning. She had a plastic brace on her left wrist, held in place with elastic binding, with strict orders from the doctor to leave it on until the end of the week, longer if possible.

While Jamie rested, Quint mentally reviewed his meeting with Hunter.

Hunter had gone to Duluth to visit with Betsy Riker. He was quick to notice that Betsy had rightfully earned the nickname Ditzzy. She was more than anxious to talk. It seemed Betsy had married Kent when she lost Buster to Katherine. Odd twist of fate, Quint thought. Both women wanted Buster; both men wanted Katherine. Kent and Betsy married on the rebound.

When Katherine disappeared, Betsy and Kent mutually agreed on a divorce. They had a loveless marriage for the five years they were married, and the only thing holding them together for that long was Clay. In the end, Betsy had no qualms about giving up her son. She was unable to deal with a rambunctious four-year-old. Though she called Clay regularly, she never saw or heard from Katherine again.

When asked what kind of a man her husband was, Betsy replied, "A cold, bitter son of a bitch. Fortunately, he ignored me unless he wanted sex. That's all I was to him, sex."

When asked if Kent was unfaithful, Betsy shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't care, except if he wanted to do it with Katherine."

Did Kent *do it* with Katherine? She didn't think so because Buster was his friend. However, the four of them did get together socially quite often.

Did she know who might have killed Katherine? Betsy had replied, adamantly, "I would have, if I'd known where she was. I loved Buster. First she stole him from me, when he couldn't race any more, she threw him away like yesterday's leftovers and broke his heart."

On Tuesday, Quint called Ralph Sampson.

“Detective Sampson, Quint Douglas here. I wondered if you had any more information on the driver of the car that ran Jamie off the road?”

“Sorry, Quint, nothing new. We’re still working on it though.”

“How about Jamie’s mother, Katherine. Any new leads there?”

“I’m afraid not. I have some ideas but that’s all they are, ideas. Those NASCAR guys all have zipper lips.”

“Did you see an autopsy on Katherine?”

Several moments went by before Sampson answered. “Are you running your own investigation, Quint?”

“I’m concerned for Jamie. If you saw the race Sunday, you know she had a nasty crash.”

“Yeah, I saw it. Is she okay?”

“Just banged up a bit.”

“Are you suggesting somebody messed with her car?”

“I don’t know, but unless we find out who hit her on the freeway and why, she could still be in danger.”

“All right, Quint, I can understand that. If you find out anything, I hope you’re planning to let me in on it.”

“I will,” Quint lied. “Now, how about that autopsy?”

“Strangest thing. There wasn’t one. Doesn’t make sense either. When I called there before I flew to Richmond the information they gave me suggested there was an autopsy. Yet when I made copies of the file it wasn’t there. Without it there’s no way to prove that she was even murdered. Since your cousin, Virgil, was at the records department before I was, I hoped maybe he had it.”

“What do you mean, he was there before you were? Someone saw that file before Virgil got there. It was laying right on the counter.”

Sampson heaved a disgusted sigh. “Crap. Somebody got there ahead of us. They must have let whoever it was look at it and he made off with the autopsy. With such an old file they probably were a little lax with it. Shit, they even let me make my own copies because they were busy. Granted I flashed my badge, but that still doesn’t excuse it. I saw Virgil Douglas’ name on

the sigh-in sheet just ahead of me, but I didn't see another name I recognized. I'll make a call, but whoever it was wouldn't have been dumb enough to use his own name."

"Call me if you come up with anything on that," Quint said. He gave Sampson his cell phone number, ended the call, and brought up Vigil's number on speed dial.

Before he could punch it in, his phone rang. It was Tim Andrews.

"It appears that Jamie's steering wheel was tampered with," Tim said. "The pin holding the wheel on had a spot filed as thin as a toothpick, and then filled in with caulk and sprayed silver."

"The steering wheel is held on with a pin?" Quint asked, disbelievingly.

"Yeah. You need to remove the wheel to get in and out of the car. If there's an accident it has to come out easily and quickly. Whoever did it knew exactly what he was doing. The pins all look alike. He probably fixed it up somewhere else. It wouldn't have taken him more than a few seconds to exchange it. I'm surprised it lasted as long as it did."

After hearing that unpleasant bit of news, Quint was more determined than ever to find out who was responsible. In the meantime he did not want Jamie to be alone. Convincing her of that would be another story.

By Wednesday, Jamie was feeling almost back to normal. Quint took her to his office to introduce her to Marla, his secretary. In the lobby of the sky rise Jamie spotted a flower shop. She stopped to look in the display window.

"Oh, my, gosh, look at that plant. It's a Silver Sword. The only place they grow wild is in Hawaii. I've never even seen one. Let's go inside and see what else they have."

Quint laughed. "Most people coming to New York for the first time want to see the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. You want to see a flower shop."

"I love plants," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him through the swinging door. Inside, her eyes lit up. "Just look around. It's like a forest in here." She took a deep breath. "Can't you just smell the earth and the flowers?"

"It does smell pretty good in here. Would you believe I walk past this place every day on my way to and from work, and I've never been inside?"

Jamie pressed her nose into a bouquet of red baby roses. "Someday I'm going to own a shop just like this."

Quint chuckled at her. "You could put little checkered flags in with all the bouquets and

set them in race car vases.”

When she laughed, he walked up behind her and put his arms around her shoulders cradling her head with a gentle neck lock. He bent forward and brushed a kiss on her ear. “As lovely as these flowers are, I don’t see anything in here as beautiful as you. Let’s get these, you can sniff them all the way back to my place. All that heavy breathing excites me.”

Jamie smiled as he tickled her nose in his hairy arm. “Some people get high by drinking. I smell flowers. I could wrap myself up in them.”

He kissed the top of her head. “You’re a nut.” He picked up the red baby roses and took them to the checkout. “No need to wrap these,” he told the clerk. “She’s going to wear them home.”

Jamie had stopped to admire the floral arrangements in the cooler beside the counter. “These are spectacular,” she said. “Who does these?”

The fifty-something clerk gave her a sad smile. “My husband and I both do...or did. He had a heart attack two weeks ago and he’s not doing too well. I don’t know how much longer I can keep up. We try to hire people but they just don’t seem to understand what we want.”

Jamie came to stand beside Quint. “I’m sorry to hear that. How long have you been here?”

“Since they put the building up,” the clerk said, handing Quint his change. She smiled at Jamie. “Before that we had a little corner stand.” Her eyes suddenly widened. “Good heavens, you’re Jamie LeCorre, the NASCAR driver.”

“You’re a NASCAR fan?” Quint asked.

“Both my husband and I are. It would mean so much to him if I could get your autograph.”

“Of course,” Jamie said. “Would you like it on a get-well card?”

“Oh yes, that would be so nice of you.” She reached over and picked a card off the floor rack. “This is one of my favorites.”

Jamie took the pen she offered and opened the card. “What’s his name?”

“Patrick. Patrick Quaster, but everybody calls him Quasy. I’m Janelle, by the way.”

Jamie wrote out the card, signing it to Quasy, wishing him a speedy recovery.

In the afternoon they went on a horse-drawn carriage tour of Central Park. Afterward, he

drove her past the home he'd grown up in, but didn't stop since Delta and Hank were still in Minnesota, looking after his cousin Corinne. By the end of the day Quint realized his feelings for Jamie had gone to another level. There was no doubt in his mind that he loved her.

On Thursday night, Quint accompanied Jamie to Talladega, Alabama, so she could qualify on Friday. Midway into the flight a thought struck him.

"Jamie, was your father in the habit of going out drinking alone after a race?"

Jamie shook her head. "I don't believe so. If he went out at all it was with at least one of the guys."

"Would he be likely to hang out with anyone besides your own crew members?"

"Of course. Most of those guys have worked together on the same teams at one time or another. What are you thinking?"

"Buster told me he was alone the night he saw Clay and Jimbo together, and Clay told you someone had seen them together, someone old enough to be his father, someone who later hit on him. You see where I'm going with this?"

Jamie was thoughtful for a moment. You think that person was with Buster?"

"It's possible. Clay and Jimbo were pretty careful about being seen alone together. I doubt it happened twice."

"That makes sense to me," Jamie said. "I think you need to have another little chat with my father."

Quint nodded. He didn't tell Jamie that he suspected that person to be Mitch Grady. She wouldn't have believed him. There was something about the way Grady kept sizing Quint up that disturbed him. Of course, he wasn't about to rule out Talon Davis. After the tampering of Jamie's car, Buster might be willing to name the person he was with. Quint would pin him down right after Jamie's qualifying run tomorrow.

Jamie drew twenty-fourth. She would be the last driver to run on Friday. She wouldn't be driving until four o'clock in the afternoon. When her turn finally came up, she had tough numbers to beat. Dunn had the lead with 195 mph, Clay close behind had done 192.5.

When Jamie strapped into her car, Quint's heart started hammering. He'd learned a lot about racing in the past weeks, and he knew how tenaciously she'd have to drive to start out in front.

She finished her test lap, jammed on the gas with a growl of the engine. At 2.66 miles, it was the longest track in the NASCAR circuit. It also had the steepest banks to ensure maximum speed.

Tim and Hal stood beside Quint as all eyes followed her around the track. When her car passed in front of them, Tim said she was going 200 mph—the maximum her restrictor plate allowed.

Quint released a long draft of air from his lungs when her car slowed and came into the starting pit. He was calmer than he expected to be. Maybe he was getting used to her driving, if that was possible.

Her numbers appeared on the screen before she got out of the car. A cheer arose from below. She clocked in at 194.5; she would start in second beside Tomas Dunn.

Quint waited by the trailer while the car was taken over to the inspection line. Jamie, Tim, and Hal went with it while the rest of the crew took off. Only Buster stayed behind.

Buster walked up to Quint, looking every bit a proud father. “Great run wasn’t it? She’s something else, that girl. A lot of drivers get a little squeamish after an accident. She just dives right back in there.” Buster gave Quint a searching look. “The guys mentioned that you’re having some trouble dealing with her racing. Don’t feel like the Lone Ranger. I get butterflies in my stomach every time she’s out there. I did with T-Roy too. But it’s not as dangerous as it looks. Those cars can take a lot of punishment. You saw that last week.”

That was hardly reassuring, but Quint smiled and said, “Thanks, I’ll try to remember that, but I’m concerned with this tampering business.”

“Not to worry, Sergio is going to sleep with that car until Jamie gets in it on Sunday.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but we also need to find out who this person is.”

Buster nodded. “I couldn’t agree more. I’ve seen you around talking to some of the guys. You come up with any ideas yet?”

Quint shook his head. “Just a lot of maybes. I was hoping you could help.”

“Be glad to. What do you need from me?”

“You told me that when you saw Clay and Jimbo together, you were alone. I just don’t think you’re in the habit of hanging out in bars by yourself. I can appreciate you trying to keep Clay’s father from finding out, but if someone was with you, I need to know. I’m convinced that whoever killed Jimbo is mixed up in Jamie’s car tampering, and running her off the road. I give

you my word I'll be discreet."

Buster stared at his shoes for a moment, massaging the back of his neck. "All right," he said finally. "I don't think it will help you, but you're right, I wasn't alone. I was meeting with Ray and Mitch Grady. Ray wants to buy another car for his son Lasco to drive so he can get some experience. Mitch Grady has been talking about retiring at the end of the season, and Ray wants Grady to get a crew together for him."

"Was Lasco with you?" Quint asked.

"Just Grady and Bentler. We mutually agreed it would be in everybody's best interest if we kept what we saw between us. That's why I hesitated telling you."

Quint didn't mention to Buster that one of those two had likely hit on Clay. Quint was putting his money on Grady, but he found it interesting that Bentler was planning to put another car in the race. He remembered Jamie talking about that at one time. Could that possibly mean that Bentler wanted Lasco to drive his Pink Mink car? It was a thought, but with Jamie doing so well, it made no sense at all.

* * * *

Jamie didn't have to be at the track until noon on Saturday, so she snuggled up against Quint, enjoying her time with him. The bruises on her arm and cheek were still visible but the aching was gone. She felt good about her qualifying run.

She hadn't told anyone, especially Quint, how she really felt about getting back in her car after the accident in New Hampshire. Even being out there by herself, her hands were sweating and her heart felt like it wanted to leap from her chest. It was far more than the adrenalin rush of racing, but she knew from experience that if she didn't get back in her car and drive aggressively she was finished. It had happened to more than one person she knew.

Voicing her fear would not only make Quint more nervous, but have an effect on her as well. As long as she didn't talk about it, she could pretend it wasn't there.

It seemed like since Quint had come into her life, some of the enthusiasm for racing had left her. She still wanted to win, but she had more to live for now. Racing was no longer the most important thing in her life. She also had a promising relationship with her father now.

Jamie recalled the night after Nicole's wedding when she'd opened her door and let Quint in. At that time the only meaningful thing in her life besides racing was her interest in plants. Except for a long distance friendship with Nicole, she had no family and no friends other

than those she knew from the track. She wondered what it would be like to belong to a loving family the size of the Douglas clan.

Cherishing that thought, Jamie pressed against Quint's warmth. He was lying on his back with one arm cradling her neck. His even breathing told her he was sleeping. Very quietly, she bent over, kissed his ear and whispered, "I love you, Quinton Douglas."

His arm tightened around her immediately. He rolled over to face her and nuzzle her sweet smelling hair. He was smiling. "I have a secret to tell you, sweetheart," he said softly. "I fell in love with you the moment I saw you in that old Mickey Mouse T-shirt."

"That's crazy. You thought I was a hooker."

"Yes, it's crazy. I was like a man possessed that week. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't concentrate on work, and I avoided everybody, especially Virgil."

"Why Virgil?"

"Because he knew. He finally pinned me down and laid a guilt trip on me about coming to the Douglas Labor Day party. At the party, Delta came out with the wedding video, and when I saw you in my arms, carrying you from the church, I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest. That's also when Stephen recognized you. Just for the record though, I'd already decided, one way or another, I had to see you again."

Quint turned her face up to look into her eyes. "That fact is, Jamie LeCorre, I love you more than life itself. You fill a void in my life that's been there for as long as I can remember."

Sunday morning it rained. After it cleared up, the race was delayed an hour due to the condition of the track. At one o'clock, Jamie kissed Quint goodbye, whispering something naughty in his ear. It had the right effect on him. She left him smiling and relaxed as she climbed off the trailer and strapped into her car.

Alabama was unseasonably warm for the last week in September; unfortunately the rain had left the humidity high. Jamie wore her skimpies, as Bentler called them, under her suit to help keep her body cool.

As she pulled up beside Tomas Dunn, they exchanged a thumbs-up sign. Adrenalin leaped in her veins when the pacer car veered away, and the roaring train of cars was set free.

The EA Sports 500 was underway.

Jamie loved this track. With over two and a half miles of raceway it only required 188

laps to finish and it was usually over quickly.

For twenty laps she drafted behind Dunn, with no action and few changes in positions behind her. Most fans would call it a boring start. Five laps later, Charlie warned her a yellow flag was up. Two cars, in the tenth and eleventh positions, had kissed metal, and cars were spinning on the track behind her.

Jamie weaved through the wreckage, keeping her eyes on Dunn, less than a car length in front of her. Three laps later they got the all clear. She picked up speed quicker than Dunn, and passed him coming out of the fourth corner. Her speedometer read 198 mph as she entered the straightaway. She ignored Buster's swearing voice coming through the headphones, telling her she was going too fast.

She held the lead for another twenty laps until a yellow flag came up and Buster called her in for a pit stop. She was back out on the track in seventeen seconds. Dunn had pitted in fifteen seconds and regained the lead.

It took her five laps to repass Dunn. Clay also passed Dunn, and was now directly behind her.

Again Buster swore into the headphone.

Jamie swore back at him. "Dammit, if your crew hadn't been twiddling their thumbs when I stopped, I wouldn't have had to pass Dunn again. Next time I want a fifteen-second pit."

She heard Buster passing that information on to his crew. Loud audible groans sounded in the background.

Lap one hundred and ten yielded a fiery crash. The red flag came up, and Jamie brought her car to a standstill directly behind Clay. She'd lost her lead to him ten laps earlier. Dunn was behind Jamie, next came Grady and Talon Davis. After what Quint had told her about Davis' ex-wives she preferred seeing him at a distance. Three cars back was close enough. Until her last conversation with Clay, she'd had the same feeling about him.

As Quint sat on the trailer with Hal and Tim watching the wreckage being cleared he gave a prayer of thanks that Jamie was safe. In spite of the high speeds involved in this race he found himself far more relaxed than at any other race he'd been to. He'd actually leaped to his feet and cheered with the others each time Jamie took the lead. Quint was even wearing a Pink Mink cap set on his head by Tim.

When the red flag lifted, six cars were eliminated, with one driver taken away in an ambulance.

The race restarted with Jamie still in second place. Clay held tenaciously to the lead for thirty laps when the last pit stops were called for. Five lead cars all pulled in at the same time. Jamie left her pit in fifteen seconds and regained the lead position.

With twenty laps to go another crash took Talon Davis out of contention. He hit the wall on the third curve going 170 mph. He lost control, taking five other cars with him.

A recap put the ranking order as: LeCorre, Riker, Dunn, and Grady, leading the pack in that order. Twenty-eight cars remained in the race.

In lap one hundred and eighty, Grady made a dangerous but successful move to pass both Riker and Dunn. Jamie held him at bay by escalating to the maximum speed of 200 mph. Tim Andrews jumped up on his feet, waving his fists, and screaming at her not to blow the engine.

As the last laps rushed by, Grady tried doggedly to pass her. He came out beside her after every turn only to move back in behind her when she out maneuvered him.

Quint experienced a thrill he'd never forget when she passed the checkered flag to take the win. He brushed at his eyes wondering where the moisture had come from. He noticed Hal and Tim doing the same thing as they tossed each other around hugging like playful bears.

The crowd was on its feet cheering Jamie as she did her victory drive around the track, finishing it up with the traditional spin on the track and in the grass. The sports commentator was having a field day recapping the race and listing the records she'd beaten. The most significant one, of course, was being the first female to win a Nextell Cup race.

By the time she reached Victory Lane the entire Pink Mink crew surrounded the car. She had taken her helmet off inside the car, and somebody reached in and stuck a pink hat on her head and handed her a bottle of water.

Ray Bentler was there to help pull her out. He gave her a hug so fierce she thought her bones would crush. When he finally released her, she looked for Quint through the spraying champagne. He stood on the edge of the crowd between Hal and Tim, a grin as wide as the Mississippi River on his face.

She held out her hand to him and he pushed his way through the revelers. When he reached her, he stooped down, put his arms around her lower body, and lifted her up. Somebody stuck a foaming bottle of champagne in her hand. She took a drink, and tilted it up to Quint's

lips. He barely got a sip before she lifted the bottle and spilled the rest of it over his pink-capped head. Someone else reached up to spray another bottle over her head. An onslaught of flash cameras captured the moment.

By the time she got to hug her father, tears mixed with champagne were streaming down her face.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” he said. “So double-damn proud!”

Somebody yelled, “Show us your skimpies, Jamie!”

Before she could respond, Ray Bentler yelled, “Don’t ask her that until Tomas Dunn strips down to a Speedo after a win.” He looked her and winked.

Jamie met his admiring gaze with a mischievous grin, just before she shook a champagne bottle and sprayed it over his head.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A victory celebration was quickly planned to take place in the hotel where Jamie, Buster and most of the crew were staying. By the time Jamie and Quint passed the lounge on the way to their room, some of the guys were already there. Tim and Hal came out and waylaid them in the hall.

“Where do you think you two are going?” Tim asked.

Jamie laughed. “I’m soaked with champagne from head to foot—where do you think I’m going?”

Tim turned to Quint and grinned. “Gonna lick it off of her?”

Before Quint could answer Hal wrapped a husky arm around Quint’s neck. “Come on, son, let the little lady go pretty herself up. We need you. Buster’s trying to order hors d’oeuvres, and he needs help with the selection. We’re trying to talk him into ordering everything on the menu.”

Jamie shook her head, laughing. “Why don’t you go with them?” she said to Quint. “I’ll be down shortly.”

“You sure?” he asked.

She nodded, reaching up to give his champagne soaked hat a tug at the brim. “You look terrific in pink.”

He bent down and gave her a thorough kiss on the lips that lasted until the guys started howling. She broke away, laughing, and headed for the elevator.

Her room was on the sixth floor and she had to restrain herself from peeling her sticky suit off right there in the elevator. She opened the door to her room and headed straight for the shower. The phone rang before she made it ten feet.

It was Clay.

“Jamie, congratulations. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Clay. Why don’t you come down to the lounge where the guys are partying?”

“I—I can’t Jamie. Not right now.” His voice faltered.

“What’s wrong, Clay?”

“Jamie, I think I know who killed Jimbo.”

Jamie’s heart did a double beat. “My God, who is it Clay? And how do you know?”

“I—I have a room on the fourth floor. Could you come down? I know you are in the middle of your celebration but...I need to talk to somebody.”

“What’s your room number?” she asked.

“415—the door’s unlocked.”

“I’ll be right there.”

On her way out, she dashed off a quick note to Quint in case he decided to break away from the party and come to the room after all. She didn’t want him to worry.

She took the stairs down the two flights and found room 415. She knocked once on the door, opened it, and went inside. Clay was slumped in a chair at the table, a half empty drink cradled in his hands. He looked ghostly pale.

“Thanks for coming, Jamie. I didn’t know who else to call.”

Jamie sat down across from him. “Tell me what happened.”

Clay tossed the rest of his drink down in one gulp, shuddering. “When Grady was beside you today trying to overtake you in those last laps, I was right behind you. My father wanted me to take you out. For eight laps he kept shouting into the headphones, pressuring me. I finally called him a sick bastard. Then he said I was the fucking sick one. He said I was a flaming faggot and a chicken shit to boot.”

“He knows?” Jamie whispered.

Clay rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. “Yeah. I don’t know when or how, but when he said those words, I almost turned my car into the wall.”

Jamie sucked in her breath. “God no, Clay. Don’t let him do that to you. He’s not worth it.”

“If he’d been standing in front of the wall I would have done it without thinking twice. I can’t let him get away with it. I know he killed Jimbo.”

“Your father?”

Clay nodded. “I don’t have any proof, but I think he was also the one who ran you off the road and messed with your car. While he was yelling at me he said something like, ‘I made sure

she didn't win last week, now it's your turn. She knows, you dumb bastard, we have to get rid of her.'"

Jamie just stared at him. She didn't know what to say.

She wasn't aware that someone else had entered the room until a voice broke the silence behind her.

"And now I'm going to finish the job."

She whirled around to face a gun pointed straight at her head.

* * * *

When Quint walked into the lounge, the first thing he noticed was that Buster wasn't wearing his pink hat. Instead, he wore a green one. When Buster turned to confer with the maitre d', Quint found himself staring at the back of the hat. On it he saw the circles, four entwined circles. It was identical to the one worn by the man who'd run Jamie off the road.

An instant, icy rage consumed Quint. He grabbed Buster, slammed him against the wall, and shoved a sturdy arm into his throat. A hushed silence pervaded the once noisy room as all eyes riveted on Quint and Buster. Hal and Tim grabbed Quint's arms and yanked him away from their crew chief.

"What the hell's got into you?" Buster croaked, massaging his throat.

Quint tried to break loose but Hal and Tim held him firm. "He was the one who ran Jamie off the road." Quint shouted. "He killed Katherine!"

"You're insane," Hal said.

Tim gave Quint the benefit of a doubt. "Maybe you'd like to explain that," he said, not letting up on his grip.

"The hat! I saw his hat! I was right behind him on the road that night!"

Buster stared at Quint, suddenly comprehending. "I'm not the only person who has a hat like this," he said slowly. "We all had 'em."

Quint's chest felt heavy, like it was ready to burst. "Who?" he demanded, not ready to let go of his anger. "Who else has one?"

"All four of us...Percy, Charlie, Kent, and I. We had them made when we started racing. We were all on the same team that first year."

Charlie stepped up and pulled his hat out of his back pocket. "He's right, Quint, here's mine."

Quint stared at the hat as Charlie turned it over to display the rings. “That one is so faded you can barely see the rings. It couldn’t have been the hat I saw in the car.”

“Whoa,” Sergio said. “That leaves Kent Riker. He walked by heading for the elevator not ten minutes ago. By the look on his face, he was stalking a grizzly.”

Quint sucked in his breath. “My God, Jamie’s upstairs.”

He jerked free of Tim and Hal and charged for the elevator. It was descending from the fourth floor. Slamming his thumb repeatedly on the up button, he willed it to move faster. “Somebody take the stairs!” he yelled. “Sixth floor, room 661.”

Hal charged for the stairway, with Tim right behind him.

When the elevator finally came Buster leaped into it shoving Quint ahead of him before the doors had entirely opened. Quint stabbed his index finger on number six and began working the ‘close door’ button, cursing as he waited impatiently for the door to close. All he could do was try to stay calm, while his heart hammered in his throat. The elevator finally started moving upward with the speed of a sloth.

He watched the floor numbers change all too slowly as they ascended. “I’m sorry,” he said to Buster. “I saw the hat and went a little crazy.”

“We can worry about that later, after we make sure Jamie’s okay.”

Quint pulled his key card out of his pocket as the door opened on six. He raced to the room with Buster close on his heels. As he expected, the door was locked. It took him three tries with the plastic key until the green light showed. He burst into the suite and started searching the rooms, calling for Jamie as he went.

She didn’t answer.

“There’s a note,” Buster said picking up a slip of hotel stationery from the table. He read:

Went down to Clay’s room.

He thinks he knows who killed Jimbo.

Quint grabbed the note from Buster’s hand. “What’s the room number?”

“It doesn’t say.”

Quint snatched up the phone and dialed the front desk just as Hal and Tim came huffing into the room. Before the desk answered, Quint yelled at Hal and Tim. “She’s not here! She went down to Clay’s room. Start checking the floors below us. Look for anything.”

Jamie stared at Kent Riker. She knew he was holding a .38 Magnum in his hand. T-Roy had had the same kind of gun. People aimed guns at other people all the time in the movies. Most of the time the victims laughed or said something clever in the face of danger, but she hadn't laughed the time T-Roy jokingly pointed his supposedly empty gun at her, and she wasn't laughing now. Her heart was pounding so fiercely in her throat it choked off any possibility of clever speech.

She stood numb and unmoving until Clay shoved her behind him. "Dad, have you lost your mind? Put that gun down."

"We have to take care of her, Clay. She knows about you. And she was there that night at your house."

"What night?"

Kent's mouth twisted into a sneer. "The night your *lover* was killed."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Jamie's known about me for a long time; she's not going to tell anyone. Put the gun down."

"She was there and so was her new boyfriend. They killed him. Go ahead, ask her if she was there."

Clay turned to look at her. "Jamie?"

Jamie felt the blood drain from her face. For a moment she thought she would faint.

"It's true, Clay, I was there. I went to get the Indianapolis tape. But Jimbo was already dead. You've got to believe me. I had no reason to kill him. Besides, how would he know I was there unless he was there himself?"

Clay whirled back to face his father. "So how do you explain that?"

When Kent didn't answer, Clay erupted. "You rotten bastard. You killed an innocent, decent man. And why? Because I loved him? Because he loved me? Like you sure as hell never did."

An angry shade of red colored Kent's face. "I tried to love you, but you were so damn much like your simpering, stupid mother. If only you could have been more like T-Roy. T-Roy didn't let anybody shit on his head. If he wanted to do something, he did it and asked questions later. He had guts, T-Roy did. He was like me. He—"

"I'm your son," Clay said. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

A cold smile spread across Kent's hardened face. "T-Roy was my son too."

Jamie tried to move past Clay. "That's a lie, you evil bastard."

Clay grabbed Jamie and held her to the side. "What do you expect to gain by making up a story like that?" he asked his father.

"It's not a story. He was my son. I couldn't claim him, because Katherine wanted to marry Buster.

"What are you saying?" Jamie hissed, her breath coming in short gasps.

Kent Riker laughed, an ugly empty laugh. "She was pregnant with my son, but she wouldn't marry me. She had to have Buster. Buster had more money than I did, and a better driving record. The only things important to her had dollar signs on them. I was stuck with Clay's ditzzy mother."

Jamie pressed a hand over her mouth. Her stomach roiled. "Did Buster know that?" she managed to ask.

"No, and I couldn't tell him because Katherine would have cut me off. I finally talked her into leaving him, but instead of coming to me, she disappeared. It took me five years to track her down."

Kent leveled the gun at Jamie's head, his expression darkening. "I don't want to shoot you, Jamie, too messy. You're going to jump over the balcony. Who knows, it's only four stories, you might live. Help her, Clay. If we can keep it under wraps that you sleep with men, I just might be able to love you like a son."

Nobody knew Quint was in the room until his arms wrapped around Kent Riker from behind. He jerked Kent's body to the side so the gun was no longer aimed at Jamie. An instant later Clay and Buster were on top of Kent, helping to hold him down.

Clay pried the gun from his father's fingers. He stood up, tears streaming down his face, and aimed it at Kent's head. "Now I'm going to send you to hell where you belong."

Before Clay could pull the trigger, Jamie stepped in front of him. "No, Clay, don't do it."

He tried to shove Jamie aside but she clamped her fingers on his shirt and stood her ground.

"Jamie, get out of the way," Quint and Buster yelled simultaneously.

"Let me go," Clay said. He stepped back a couple of feet, trying to shake free of Jamie's clutching fingers.

"No, Clay," she pleaded, with broken sobs. "He's not worth it. You'll spend the rest of

your life in jail. He's not worth it, Clay. Please."

As Clay looked down at her, his face crumpled. He drew a shuddering breath, dropped the gun, and threw his arms around Jamie, sobbing. "He killed Jimbo, Jamie. He killed my poor sweet Jimbo. I loved him so much."

Jamie held Clay while Quint and Buster kept Kent Riker pinned to the floor on his stomach with his arms twisted behind his back.

"He killed my mother too," Jamie said softly.

"You can't prove that," Riker shouted from the floor.

He howled when Quint gave his twisted arm a jerk. "The hell we can't. You really should start wearing gloves when you go around trying to kill people. The prints on Bentler's Cadillac matched those on a wrench found in Katherine's car. Want to make any bets about whose prints they are? And what about Jimbo?"

Kent grimaced from pain but it didn't stop him from snarling. "You can't prove I killed that fucking fag, and there's no proof that Katherine was killed. For all you know it might have been suicide."

"Maybe a search warrant will find a missing autopsy report at your place," Quint said.

Riker laughed. "If I had it, do you think I'd be stupid enough to keep it?" He yelped again when Quint gave his arm another tug.

Quint looked up at Clay. "Pick up the gun Clay, and bring it over here."

"No," Jamie screamed.

Quint narrowed his eyes at Clay and jerked his head toward the gun. "Do it, Clay."

Tim and Hal burst through the open door breathing hard. It took them three seconds to assess the situation.

"I'll call the police," Tim gasped.

"No," Quint ordered. "Not yet."

"Are you all fucking crazy?" Kent hollered.

"Yeah," Quint said, "we're all a little crazy here. Bring the gun over and point it at his head, Clay."

This time Jamie and Clay understood. Clay released Jamie and picked up the gun. His hand trembled as he held the weapon within inches of his father's head.

"Tell me what happened with Jimbo, and I might just spare your miserable life," he

growled.

Kent Riker cursed, trying to move his head. Clay moved the gun closer, pressing it against his father's temple. Clay's hand stopped shaking as he wiggled his finger on the trigger. "I really hate to do this but—"

"Goddamn you," Kent yelled. "I'm your father!"

"It's too late for sentimental bullshit. Tell me about Jimbo."

Kent squirmed and swore again. "I saw the two of you together in a bar just before the Labor Day race. I was so disgusted, I went into the john and threw up. If any of the guys found out I wouldn't be able to hold my head up, and you would have been finished. I went there that night to tell him to leave you alone, that he was ruining your career. I wasn't planning to kill him, but he attacked me."

"That's a lie," Clay said, leaning on the gun, making an imprint in the hard surface of Kent's head. "Jimbo had no violence in him whatsoever."

With his face pressed to the floor and a loaded gun at his head, Kent Riker laughed. "You'd be surprised how a sniveling coward will fight when you wave a gun in his face."

Clay's breathing intensified and his eyes glazed over. Sweat dotted his forehead.

"Clay?" Quint said quietly, then more urgently. "Clay!"

Clay looked up and nodded. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed the bile in his throat. "What about Katherine?" he rasped.

"I didn't mean to kill her. It was an accident. I wanted to make love to her and she laughed at me. I slapped her and told her to quit laughing. She did, but she started calling me names, said I wasn't even half a man. I told the bitch to shut up but she just kept at me. Finally, I shoved her back against the car. She fell and hit her head on the bumper. I didn't mean for her to die. I loved her. I wouldn't have killed her."

Quint nodded at Tim. "Okay, now you can make that call."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I saw a movie once where a man was asked to name the best day of his life. He said it was the day his abusive father walked out. Then he went on to say it was also the worst day of his life. I think that’s how Clay must have felt tonight when they led his father out of that room in handcuffs.”

Jamie sat at the table in her room with her hands clenched in front of her. She was still wearing her champagne-splattered pink suit.

“I’d say that pretty well sums it up,” Quint said.

Jamie looked up at Quint, her eyes full of pain. “I’m just thankful T-Roy never had to find out that Kent Riker was his father. Did you know about that?”

“Did I know about what?”

“That T-Roy wasn’t Buster’s son?”

Quint sat down across from her and placed his hands over hers. “You’re cold,” he said. He started rubbing her fingers. “I knew that one of you didn’t belong to him, but I didn’t know if it was you or T-Roy.”

“Do you think Buster was telling the truth about me being his real daughter?”

“Yes, I do. I don’t think he’d lie about a thing like that. Not now. Not after all that’s happened.”

“I still can’t believe Kent killed Jimbo just because he was gay.”

“He killed him because of his association with Clay. Kent must have thought if he got rid of everyone who knew about Clay it would all go away. Some people just don’t understand. They can’t handle anyone who’s different.”

“I think he was serious when he said he didn’t mean to kill my mother. He really loved her.”

“Frankly, I don’t think the man knows what love is.” Quint got up and stepped around the table. He lifted Jamie to her feet and pulled her into his arms. “Listen honey, you’ve had one

helluva day. But I know the guys downstairs are all worried about you. Especially after they all saw me shove Buster up against the wall and accuse him of killing your mother.”

Jamie gaped up at him “You did what?”

Quint grimaced. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Right now why don’t you go in and take a shower and we’ll go downstairs and join your party. You are the main attraction, you know.”

Jamie sighed. “It’s hard to feel like partying right now, but you’re right, we’ll party now and talk later. I’ll go shower.” She pulled away from him, unzipped her suit, and wearing nothing but pink short-shorts and a belly-baring top, headed for the bathroom.

Quint watched her, smiling. Her outfit reminded him of the first time he’d seen her. He marched into the bathroom behind her. “Remember that rain check you promised me, the one about a joint shower?”

It was after midnight when Quint and Jamie got back to their room.

“It was a great party in spite of that nasty business earlier,” Jamie said, slipping off her denim skirt and cotton blouse. “It’s a good thing the guys who aren’t staying in the hotel are within walking distance.”

Quint pulled off his own shirt as he watched her undress with growing interest. He felt pleased about how comfortable they’d become with each other. Just like old married folks, he thought.

“Oh, but the party’s not over,” he said.

Jamie glanced at him as he dropped his pants. “Oh.” she said.

“Come here, sweetheart, so I can congratulate you properly, or are you too tired?”

Jamie grinned. “The sight of you naked has a way of energizing me.”

“Need an extra battery?”

Jamie went into his arms, laughing.

For a moment he just held her. “I love you, Jamie LeCorre, NASCAR driver. You are the light of my life.”

“And you are the change in mine. You’ve taught me what it’s like to love and be loved in return,” she said.

“Let’s get married, Jamie.”

Jamie looked up at him. “I want to marry you, Quint, but...what about racing? I know

you hate it when I drive.”

Quint smiled down at her. “Today I was actually cheering you on. It was exhilarating. I can’t even begin to tell you how I felt when you won. At least now I know no one will be out there deliberately trying to put you in harm’s way, more than you already are, that is. I’ve learned a lot. I’ve watched several races and seen numerous crashes. In all that time no one was killed or even seriously injured. I guess I’ll choose to believe those cars are well protected.” He kissed her ear and whispered, “We can write our own vows. I will promise to cheer for you when you win, comfort you when you lose, and nurse you back to health if you get hurt.”

“What will my vows be?” she asked.

“You tell me, honey.”

“All right,” she said, pausing a moment to think. “I will live wherever you want me to, New York or Chicago, or South Africa if that’s what you choose. We’ll work it out. I just want to be with you every possible minute we can manage. And I will vow not to drive while I’m pregnant.”

Quint blinked at the happiness pooling in his eyes. Next to wanting her, he wanted a family, a real family, their family. “Tell me you want to start planning a wedding.”

She put her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Quint Douglas. The racing season ends in seven weeks and we can be married anytime after that.”

He picked her up and swung her around. “I love you so much,” he said. “I can’t even remember what life was like without you.”

“Probably pretty quiet,” she said.

“Now that’s an understatement.”

Epilogue

By the time the racing season ended in November, Jamie had two more wins. She had also totaled two cars in violent crashes, walking away from both without injury. She ranked a respectable fifth place in the Nextell Cup Challenge.

Spending Christmas in New York with Quint and the entire Douglas family was a dream come true for Jamie. Corinne and Billy were there with their two-month-old daughter, Diana Rose. Nicole and Hunter came from Minnesota, bringing Shanna and Kyle to their first Douglas family Christmas in New York.

Virgil and Stephen enjoyed playing the proud uncles to the fullest.

When Nicole announced on Christmas Eve that she and Hunter were going to have a baby in June, Jamie beamed with emotion. She threw her arms around her dearest friend, blinking rapidly at the tears scalding her eyes.

"I'm so happy for you," Jamie said.

Nicole smiled. "Maybe next year at this time, you'll be making your own announcement."

"Actually," Jamie said, smiling mistily at Quint. "We have one now. We're getting married in February."

Quint put an arm around Jamie. "If I have anything to say about it, we'll have another announcement soon after that."

"Where are you going to live?" Hunter asked.

Quint gave Jamie a squeeze. "Jamie is moving to New York. We're looking at houses."

Stephen walked into the room carrying a tray of eggnog mugs. "You aren't going to give up racing, are you?"

Jamie sighed. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I have some time to think about it."

* * * *

One week after Christmas, while on her way to meet Quint for lunch, she happened by the florist shop in his office building. On impulse, she went in to say hello to Janelle Quaster and inquire about her husband.

“He’s home from the hospital,” Janelle said. “However, the doctor warned him about taking it easy. We’re considering selling the shop and moving south where it’s warmer.”

Jamie walked out into the tiny mall in a thoughtful daze, staring vacantly at the holiday decorations, listening to the overhead speakers chiming, *Winter Wonderland*. She sat down on a bench and watched identically dressed twin girls playing in the courtyard. Their animated giggles blended with the music.

Buying a flower shop had been her dream for as long as she could remember. Making a move like that would be a big change in her lifestyle, but so was marrying Quint. They both wanted children as soon as possible. Nicole’s pregnancy and Corinne’s darling little girl made Jamie realize how much she, too, looked forward to starting a family.

It was her first Christmas to enjoy not only the camaraderie of Quint’s family, but also that of her own father. Two nights ago, he’d told her that if she quit racing he would retire. He’d made it clear he was looking forward to grandchildren, and promised to be a better grandfather than he was a father.

Her true goal in racing had been winning, in hopes of gaining her father’s love, only to learn, ironically, that one had nothing to do with the other.

She was determined not to make that kind of mistake again. With that thought in mind she was certain of one thing; she didn’t want to raise her children on the sidelines of the NASCAR circuit.

It was decidedly time for a change.

About the Author

Born and raised on a North Dakota farm, Jannifer started writing at the age of twelve, creating novels by memory while walking home from a one-room schoolhouse. After moving to Minnesota she began serious writing in 1974 while working full time. She has since retired and spends summers in Minnesota and migrates with the birds to Yuma, Arizona for the winter.



When she's not writing, she's sewing for craft shows, painting rocks, and pursuing her favorite pastime—traveling the world on a cruise ship. And, last but not least, spending valuable time with her incredibly awesome family.

She is currently working on her sixth novel, *Blood Crystal*.

Learn more at: www.janniferhoffman.com

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Timeline: Seven weeks, starting from the completion of Project Flowchart.

Target: Georgina's downstairs neighbor, a surly cop named Rick Matisse.

Complication: Rick's 12-year-old daughter Angelina, who thinks Georgina would be the perfect girlfriend to keep Dad on his toes.

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