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**JANET  
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**MOTOR  
MOUTH**

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# ONE

Sometimes there's a decision to be made between winning fairly and cheating for a good cause. And sometimes, in the heat of competition, I've slipped south of fair. So I understand the temptation. But here's the thing about cheating . . . don't cheat me. I take it personally.

And I was pretty sure I had my eye on a guy who was cheating at my expense. He was wearing a red suit. He was driving a flashy car with a big 69 painted on the side. And he was going too fast. I had my binoculars trained on him as he took a turn, his left-front tire tight to the curve.

I was standing on the flat roof of the Homestead-Miami Speedway grandstand, getting a bird's-eye view of the scrubby Florida landscape. Heat waves shimmered on the track below me, and the air was thick with fumes from scorched rubber, high-octane gas, and the euphoria NASCAR brings to a race. I was with forty-two guys on the roof. I was the only one on the roof wearing a pink lace thong. At least I was almost certain I was the only one in a thong since I was the only female, but hell, what do I know? I was wearing tight black

jeans and a Stiller Racing shirt. The shirt had short sleeves, was white with black and gold trim, and the Stiller Racing logo was embroidered on the front. The embroidered name on the back was a garage joke: Motor Mouth. I'm Sam Hooker's race-day spotter. I'm the lip-glossed, bleached blonde who whispers into Hooker's ear while he sweats his brains out in a black-and-gold fire-resistant jumpsuit each week.

This week Hooker was running his black Metro-sponsored car around and around the Homestead 1.5-mile oval. It was the last race of the season and I was looking forward to a change of pace. I love my job, but there comes a time when a girl just wants to shimmy into a sexy little dress and sip a cosmo at a restaurant that doesn't feature barbecue. Not that I don't like barbecue, but I'd had a *lot* of it lately.

Hooker's voice was loud and clear in my headset. "Earth to Motor Mouth. Talk to me."

"I'm thinking thoughts that can't go public."

"Are these thoughts about getting naked?" Hooker asked.

"No, they're about getting even."

"Listen, it was an accident, I swear. I was drunk and I don't remember a thing. I don't know how I ended up in bed with that salesclerk. Darlin', you *know* I love you."

Mental head slap. "Not that, you moron. I'm talking about the race."

Hooker got his start on Texas dirt tracks. He's raced open-wheel karts, trucks, and everything in between. He's my age but he looks like a college kid. Sun-bleached blond hair, and a nice body that's got some muscle and stands a

couple inches taller than me. The difference between Hooker and the college kid is in Hooker's eyes. There are lines at the corners that tell his age and grit. And there's a depth that comes from living hard and gaining something from it.

I'd done some racing when I was in high school. Strictly local amateur stuff. I'd wreck the cars, and then I'd fix them up in my dad's garage in Baltimore. Turned out I was a lot better at fixing them than racing them, so I bailed on the driving and got an engineering degree instead. Hooker isn't worth anything as a mechanic, but he can really run a car. I've worked as his spotter and also as part of his R & D team for an entire season, thirty-six Cup races, and I'm knocked out by his consistently aggressive attitude and his ability to drive.

There are those who question Hooker's balls-to-brain ratio. I've never seen an X-ray of his head, so I'm taking a winger on his brain, but I've seen the other equipment in question and I'm pretty confident the ratio is two to one.

I'd been involved in a romantic relationship with Hooker when I'd taken the job with Stiller. And I'd been idiot enough to think the relationship was serious. Hooker had proved me wrong at four months with a one-night stand that had gotten splashed onto every tabloid. I was now over Hooker . . . pretty much. The only thing I was currently serious about was my job. I was devoted to Stiller Racing.

"You've done two hundred and forty-four laps," I said. "You have twenty-three laps to go. The red sixty-nine car is four car lengths in front of you."

The 69 was sponsored by Lube-A-Lot and owned by Huevo Motor Sports, a Mexican powerhouse with money to burn on race cars. Huevo built good cars, but sometimes the 69 was *too* good, and I was willing to put money down that the 69 car was cheating, running with illegal technology.

"Four car lengths," Hooker said to me. "That's too much. *Do something.*"

"I can tell you when it's safe to pass, and when it's okay to pit, and when there's trouble ahead. Being that I'm up here on the roof, and you're down there on the track, and I've left my magic voodoo dust back in the motor coach, it's going to be hard for me to *do something.*"

And that was when the big one happened. The monster car crash that car owners dread and fans love. A Stiller car driven by Nick Shrin got loose, slid out of its groove, and the car following it made contact and punted Shrin into the wall. Six other cars got caught in the wreck and were instantly turned into twisted, shredded scrap metal. Fortunately, they were all behind Hooker.

When racing resumed and everyone lined up for the restart, the gap would be closed between the red 69 Lube-A-Lot car and Hooker's Metro car.

"Back her down," I told Hooker. "You just got lucky."

"What happened?"

"Shrin got loose and hit the wall, and after that he was hit by everyone except you and the pace car."

The caution flag was out and the field was frozen until the mess could be cleared. Stiller Racing runs three Cup cars.

Hooker drives one. Larry Karna drives another. And Nick Shrin drives the yellow-and-red car sponsored by YumYum Snack Cakes. Nick's a good driver and a good person, and I was experiencing some anxiety about him right now. Stock cars are entered and exited via the driver's-side window, and Shrin hadn't yet climbed out. I had my binoculars trained on him, but I couldn't tell much. He was still in his restraint system, still had his helmet on, visor down. The car was surrounded by emergency workers. A bunch of cars were trashed in the crash, but Shrin was the only driver not yet out of his.

"What's going on?" Hooker wanted to know.

"Shrin's still in his car."

Shrin's spotter was standing next to me. His name is Jefferson Davis Warner, and everyone calls him Gobbles. He's in his early thirties, his ears stick out, his brown hair sticks up, and he has a nose that got smashed in a bar fight and was left slightly crooked. He's gangly legged and rail thin, and his hands and feet are too big for his body . . . sort of a cross between a fluffy-headed crane and a Great Dane puppy. He eats nonstop and never gains an ounce. I'm told he got the name Gobbles when he was in school and was always first in the lunch line. I guess it's ironically appropriate that he's now on the YumYum Snack Cake team. He has a good heart, and he's a good spotter. And like a lot of people in the program, when Gobbles got out of the NASCAR bubble, he wasn't the sharpest tack on the corkboard. He could calculate pit road speed from a tach reading, but he couldn't



tell a con man from a cow flop. It all smelled the same to Gobbles. Right now his face was white, and he had the rail in a death grip.

“How is he?” I asked Gobbles. “Is he talking to you?”

“No. I heard him hit the wall, and since then there’s been nothing but silence. He’s not saying anything.”

Every spotter was binoculars up on the YumYum car. Conversation on the roof was hushed. No one moved. If a driver was really in trouble, a tarp would be raised, shielding him from view. I had my teeth sunk into my lower lip, and my stomach clenched into a knot, praying not to see the tarp.

Rescue workers were at both side windows. The EMT at the driver’s window backed out. He had Shrin in tow. They strapped Shrin onto a stretcher. I still couldn’t see much. Too many people at the accident scene. NASCAR came on over their own frequency and announced that Shrin was conscious and going for tests. The PA system relayed it. An audible sigh of relief went up from the stands. Spotters backed off, using the break in action to scarf down junk food or smoke or rush to the men’s room.

Gobbles was still attached to the rail, looking like he might keel over at any moment.

“He’s conscious,” I told Gobbles. “They’re taking him for tests. Looks like you’re done for the day.”

Gobbles nodded but held tight to the rail.

“You don’t look good,” I told him. “You should go down and get out of the sun.”

"It's not the sun," Gobbles said. "It's my life. My life sucks."

"It'll get better."

"Not likely," Gobbles said. "I'm a loser. I don't do nothin' right. Even my wife left me. I didn't do nothin' right there either. She took off six months ago with the kids and the dog. She said I didn't know nothin' about the man in the boat. The man in the boat don't like to be woke up in the middle of the night. And the man in the boat needs to have the oar in the water longer than thirty seconds. I tell you, there was a list a mile long about the man in the boat. Do this. Don't do that. Half the time I couldn't even *find* the man in the boat. It was just friggin' confusing. I mean, it wasn't like I didn't want to do right by the man in the boat, but golly jeez I couldn't get the hang of it. And if you ask me, the man in the boat is pretty fuckin' grumpy. I want to go back to the days when it was enough for a guy to take out the garbage. Whatever happened to those days? Those were simpler times. And now I'm making a mess of my job. I got my driver hurt."

"That wasn't your fault."

"It *was* my fault. Loser, loser, loser. That's me. I thought I was doing good, but it turned out bad. It's the man in the boat all over again."

"Maybe you should talk to Hooker. He knows a lot about the man in the boat."

Gobbles focused his binoculars on the infield and sucked in air. "And things aren't bad enough, the sonsabitches are talking to Ray Huevo. Lordy, what does that mean?"

The infield of a NASCAR track is a self-contained race city. The trucks that haul the cars are lined up across from the garages and serve as mobile command units. Beyond the trucks are the million-dollar-driver motor coaches. And if there's enough room, in a separate infield area, some lucky fans will get a campground space. I did a sweep, but I didn't know what I was looking for.

"I don't know Huevo by sight," I said to Gobbles. "Where is he?"

"There are three men standing alongside the sixty-nine car hauler. Ray Huevo's the one in the short-sleeved shirt. I only seen him a couple times. He don't usually show up at the races. He pretty much stays in Mexico. His brother Oscar is the head of Huevo Motor Sports, and it's usually him you see at the track. Ray is kind of the runt black sheep of the family. Anyhow, the little bald guy with Ray Huevo is the guy who run down Clay."

Clay Moogey worked in the engine department at Stiller. Three days ago he walked out of a bar, stepped off the curb to cross the street, and was killed by a hit-and-run driver.

"Are you sure?"

"That wasn't no accident what happened to Clay. I saw him run down," Gobbles said. "I was there. I seen Clay step off and then this guy come out of nowhere and aimed right for him."

"Did you tell the police?"

"I couldn't do that. I'm in a tight spot. I couldn't get myself involved. And it's not like I know a name or something. I'm

just telling you now because . . . hell, I don't know why I'm telling you. I'm telling you everything. Cripes, I told you about the man in the boat. How embarrassing is that?"

In the distance, Ray Huevo was standing, hands on hips, leaning forward to better hear over the track noise. He suddenly straightened, turned, and looked directly at us. He pointed with his finger, and Gobbles shrieked and jumped back.

"He's far away," I said to Gobbles. "He could be pointing at anyone."

Gobbles's voice was up an octave. "He was pointing at me! I know he was pointing at me. I saw him."

Ray Huevo pivoted on his heel and stalked off. The two men in suits followed a few feet behind him. They all disappeared behind another hauler, and I was pulled back to the track by Hooker's voice in my ear.

"There must be something wrong with my radio," he said. "I'm not *hearing* anything."

"That's because I'm not *saying* anything," I told him.

"How much are we paying you?"

"Not nearly enough. Anyway, I only have one piece of advice. I think you should pass the sixty-nine."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Gee, why didn't *I* think of that?"

If the 69 car stayed in front, we'd come in second for the season. And in my book, second didn't count. Dickie Bonnano, also known as Dickwad, Banana Dick, Dickhead, and sometimes just plain Asshole, was driving the 69.

Bonnano was an arrogant jerk. He was a mediocre driver. And he had a girlfriend who was equally disliked. She towered over Bonnano, had a preference for leather, lined her eyes to look like Catwoman, and she'd bought herself a pair of double-D boobs that didn't jiggle, droop, or have peripheral vision. The guys in the garage called her Delores Dominatrix. So when Bonnano wasn't being called Dickwad, Banana Dick, Dickhead, or Asshole, he was called Spanky.

Hooker had Bonnano by a few points, but Bonnano would win the series if he won this race. And unless God stepped in and blew Bonnano's engine, Bonnano was going to win.

There were thirty-two cars left in the race. They were lined up in running order behind the pace car, and they were circling the track at forty miles per hour, waiting for the signal that the track was clean and ready for racing. They approached turn number four, the pace car exited onto pit road, and the flag went green.

"The pace car's off," I said to Hooker. "Green, green."

The cars roared past me, all of them hard on the gas. Bonnano took the lead and kept it, gaining inches each time he came out of a turn. Hooker was silent on his radio.

"Steady," I told Hooker. "Drive smart. You have no one close behind you and only one guy in front of you."

"This is a nightmare," Hooker said. "A friggin' nightmare."

"Second isn't so bad. There are good points to second."

"I can hardly wait to hear."

"If you don't win the Cup, you don't have to sit on the stage and look like a moron at the awards banquet. Spanky and Delores will have to do the stage thing."

"You should be happy for that, too," Hooker said. "You would have been on the stage with me."

"No way."

"You would have been my date."

"I don't think so."

"You should check your contract. There's a clause in there about dating the driver under emergency conditions."

"What about the salesclerk?"

"Can't hear you," he yelled. "Too much static."

I had my binoculars still trained on Hooker, and I watched him sail under the checkered flag, a car length behind Bonnano.

"Wahoo, lookit me," Hooker sang out. "I'm second. I came in second."

"Very funny," I told him. "Just try to control yourself and don't hit anyone in the face when you get out of the car."

The radio went dead, so I packed up and turned to leave and realized Gobbles was still at the rail.

"You don't mind if I walk down with you, do you?" Gobbles asked. "I don't want to go down alone."

We took the elevator to ground level, and we fought our way through the crowd exiting the stands. Ordinarily I'd cut across the track, but Gobbles wasn't looking great, so I hitched us a ride on a golf cart that was going back to the infield. I squished Gobbles in as the third man on a two-man

rear seat and kept watch to see that he didn't faint and fall out of the cart.

The track has golf carts, the teams have golf carts, the sponsors have golf carts, and the drivers have golf carts. Sometimes the golf carts are generic little white jobs and sometimes the golf carts are souped up and custom painted. Hooker's golf cart matched his motor coach and traveled to each race with the coach. At the start of the season, when I was involved with Hooker, I had had the use of his golf cart. After the salesclerk incident, I didn't feel comfortable using the cart and gave Hooker back his keys. Looking at it in retrospect, I probably should have kept the keys. Just because you're no longer sleeping with a guy doesn't mean you can't use his golf cart, right?

We took the tunnel under the track and came out into the infield. The deep rumble of stock cars had been replaced with the *wup wup wup* of helicopters passing overhead, transporting people back to Miami. On race day, helicopters start arriving early in the morning, a new bird touching down every few minutes, dumping celebrities, captains of industry, NASCAR family members, and sometimes sponsors into the infield, repeating the drill throughout the day and reversing the operation late into the night.

"Where are you going now?" Gobbles asked me. "Are you going to Hooker's hauler?"

"No. I want to watch the sixty-nine go through inspection."

"You think there's something fishy about the sixty-nine?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I surely do," Gobbles said. "And this isn't the only race where I thought that. And now that I seen them two guys talkin' to Ray Huevo, I'm getting real bad vibes. I can't tell you more than that on account of like I said before, I'm in a tight spot. Problem is, they inspected that sixty-nine car before and never found anything."

The drill was that Spanky would do a burnout for the fans and then drive the 69 into Victory Lane for pictures. When the photo op was over, NASCAR would commandeer the car for inspection and testing, along with the other top five cars and a couple more chosen at random. By the time the 69 got to the garage, NASCAR would already have rolled it through the scales and measured its height and weight. Once it was in the garage, fuel would be drawn, ignition boxes taken out and cut apart, the engine heads removed, gears checked, cylinders measured, and shocks examined.

When you watch a car get stripped down and tested, it's hard to believe anyone would try to cheat. And even harder to believe they'd get away with it. And yet almost everyone tries at one time or another.

If you've got an experienced crew, the entire exercise takes about ninety minutes. The carcass of the car after it's been picked clean is then loaded into the hauler, along with the backup car, and brought back to the shop in North Carolina where it'll get rebuilt for another race.

Gobbles stayed glued to my side while I stood at a distance and watched the 69 get taken apart.

"I never watched this whole inspection thing," Gobbles



said. "The team's always in a hurry to leave. I never got a chance to do this."

I looked back at the line of haulers. The YumYum car hauler was ready to go, motor running. I didn't see any of Gobbles's team.

"You're looking like a man without a country," I said to him.

"Yeah, I should have met up with everybody at the van a while ago, but I got business to do. Not that I really want to do it. Anyways, I was hoping to take care of it here, only it don't seem to be happening. I guess I need to take off." Gobbles gave me a hug. "I appreciate your being a friend and all."

"Be careful."

"I'm trying," Gobbles said, walking off toward media parking.

Fifteen minutes later, when it was obvious nothing illegal was going to turn up on the 69, I headed for the drivers' lot.

I found Hooker's motor coach, opened the door, and yelled to Hooker, "Are you decent?"

"Guess that's a matter of opinion," Hooker said.

Hooker was showered and dressed in jeans and a ratty T-shirt and was watching cartoons with Beans, his newly adopted Saint Bernard. Beans gave an excited *woof* when he saw me, launched himself off the couch, and caught me midchest with his two massive front paws. I went flat on my back with Beans on top, giving me lots of slurpy Saint Bernard kisses.