

the publishing house. She worried about finding a parking space, but fortunately she found an empty one almost immediately. It didn't hurt that it was right next to the entrance, either.

She picked up the letter and took the piece of paper out of the envelope. The words were simple enough, but she didn't quite understand why she, of all people, had been chosen.

'Dear Ms. O'Malley.

We kindly request your presence at a meeting on Wednesday, March 24th, 10:00 am in our offices on Bartholomew Road. The renowned sports personality Miss Francesca Carrara has given Carruthers Publishing, Ltd. first rights to publish her biography, and she has made it clear that she prefers a female biographer.

Yours,

*W.P. Carruthers,
Carruthers Publishing, Ltd.'*

She looked at herself in the rear view mirror.

'All right Kathleen, this is it. Do this right and you could find yourself with a contract. Lipstick or not?' she thought.

She decided on 'not', quickly ran a comb through her hair, and stepped out of the car. She looked at the expensive models parked next to her, and she felt her own family car, four years old and with mismatched hubcaps, was horribly out of place among the BMWs and Audis.

She opened the double glass doors and walked into the hall. It was so white it was almost sterile. Wall-to-wall white tiles on the floor, and white curtains in front of the windows. A round desk was situated in the centre of the hall, complete with a platinum blonde desk clerk, who was looking rather bored. Kathleen walked up to her and announced herself.

Kathleen sighed, crossed her legs and smoothed her skirt for the umpteenth time since she had been asked to wait. The large clock on the wall was now fifteen minutes past the time where this fabled race car driver was supposed to be here.

She looked around the waiting room. Everything was just too posh for her tastes, the polished chrome and the glass surfaces were too shiny, the furniture too modern and soulless, the carpet too grey. And it didn't help that the chair she was sitting on was uncomfortable, too.

The secretary came over to her and offered her another cup of coffee, which Kathleen politely declined. She almost told the secretary that the first cup of the so-called 'coffee' had tasted so horribly that it had been necessary to use twice the amount of sugar she usually used, but she let it go.

The door to the publisher's office was closed, as it had been for the entire time she had been waiting. She sighed again.

Suddenly she could hear loud voices, followed by heavy footsteps, echoing off the white tiles in the hall. The frosted glass door to the waiting room was flung open and a dark-haired woman strode in. Kathleen recognised her instantly, it was Francesca Carrara, the woman she had been waiting for. She was wearing a black pant-suit that outlined her figure very nicely, and a matching jacket. Kathleen couldn't recognise the cut, but she was sure it was Italian, and that it had probably cost more than she herself made in a month. Usually known for her 'hipness' and her cool, stoic behaviour, Carrara's face was now flushed and she had a murderous expression in her ice blue eyes.

The door to the publisher's office opened, and a well-dressed man in his early sixties came out.

"Hello, Miss Carrara, I'm W.P. Carruthers. So nice to see you, won't you come in?" he said, and motioned her inside with a big, fake smile.

The powerfully built woman walked into the office with long, aggressive strides.

Kathleen grabbed her attaché-case and started to get up, but the publisher closed the door without even looking at her. She sat down with a bump and rolled her eyes.

After a few seconds, Kathleen could hear Carrara throwing a tantrum inside the office, and she smirked. Oh dear, how was this ever going to work.

"The person who took the VIP parking space reserved for me had better be someone BLOODY IMPORTANT!" Carrara said loudly.

"...I had to park over on the other side of the parking lot. If my car is scratched when I get back there, I'll have my solicitor..." she continued.

Then the publisher said something, but his voice was muffled by the walls of the office. Carrara replied in a calmer tone, but Kathleen couldn't hear that either.

The door opened, and the man signalled Kathleen to come inside.

'Finally,' she thought. She smoothed her skirt again and took her attaché-case.

Carrara was sitting in a leather chair, still looking upset.

"Miss Francesca Carrara, this is Miss Kathleen O'Malley," the publisher said.

"Pleased to meet you," the race car driver hissed.

"Likewise," Kathleen said, and put her hand out.

Carrara shook it with an air of absolute arrogance, and she only looked at Kathleen for a second when she did so.

'Oh, how charming...' the author thought as she sat down in a leather chair next to Carrara's, both opposite a huge desk where the publisher was sitting.

In fact, Francesca Carrara had noticed the blonde woman. She looked to be in her early thirties, with misty green eyes and shoulder-length hair in a shade somewhere between white- and strawberry-blonde. A dark green shirt and a tan skirt covering a nice rear end - definitely easy on the eyes.

Francesca leaned forward and took off her jacket, revealing her muscular shoulders and arms, and a silver and black Certina wristwatch. A pleasant scent of some outrageously expensive perfume filled the office, and Kathleen couldn't help but stare at the other woman's muscular frame. She quickly looked away when the publisher cleared his throat.

"All right, now that we're all here, here are the details of the deal we're proposing. Miss Carrara has kindly agreed on having her biography published by us, if we can provide her with a female author. That's where you come in, Miss O'Malley," he said and looked expectantly at Kathleen. She looked back, and after a few seconds understood that she was supposed to speak.

"Oh, right. Well, after the successful biography I wrote the year before last for the Olympic Gold Medallist in Pentathlon, I feel I'm capable of being a part of the team. As you recall, sir, that book was published by your house, and it sold quite well."

"Indeed. That's why we wrote you the letter. Go on," the publisher said.

"I believe I can add a touch of..."

"Do you know why I want a woman to write it?" Francesca interrupted her.

"Ah... No?"

"Last month, I was offered a six-figure deal with a men's magazine, but I turned them down. Why? Because they wanted the book to be about my tits and my arse, and I want it to be about ME," Francesca said, and pointed her index finger at her chest.

Kathleen blushed over the direct language, but she nodded.

"That's what I do best, Miss Carrara. I'm not a reporter for a gossip rag. I'm not afraid of going in-depth nor of asking difficult questions," she said, and looked the dark haired woman straight in the eye.

A smile slowly spread out over Francesca's face - a very beautiful smile, Kathleen noticed, one which completely transformed her appearance.

"All right. That sounds good to me. I can accept that," Francesca said to the publisher, who put on another of his big, fake smiles.

"Sherry, anyone?" he said, and pushed a contract across the desk to each woman.

After signing, Francesca and Kathleen shook hands again, and this time, Francesca actually looked at her.

When the colourful woman had left, the publisher came over to Kathleen who was busy putting the contract into her attaché-case.

"Miss O'Malley, if I may ask... where did you park?" he said.

"Right next to the entrance. That was the only one available... why?"

"Well, that's the VIP parking space," he said and winked.

"Oh," Kathleen said and blushed slightly.

"No harm, no foul. But I'd wait until Miss Carrara's left before I'd go down there, myself," he said and laughed.

"Sounds like a very good plan, Mr. Carruthers..."

Two weeks later. In the mean time, Francesca had won the opening race of the season, the Silverstone 1000 kilometres, as the first woman ever, so her picture had been on the cover of several magazines and newspapers. As Kathleen noted as she parked in the slot marked 'guest' in front of the block of four condominiums, that fact might boost the sales of the book.

There weren't any names on the electronic door bells to the four apartments, but Kathleen had been told which one was Francesca's. She pressed the small button, and the front door opened soon after with a deep, buzzing sound. She walked into a lush hall and quickly found the correct door, the first one on the right.

Francesca opened the door herself, much to Kathleen's surprise. She was even more surprised when she saw that the dark haired woman was wearing faded blue jeans and a baggy sweatshirt - she had expected something by Armani at least.

"Hello, Miss O'Malley. Come in, make yourself comfortable," Francesca said, and at the same

time spotted Kathleen's red Ford through the glass of the windbreak, over the author's shoulder.

Kathleen walked inside and hung her coat on a hallstand. The condominium was just like she had expected: posh, posh, posh. Everything was luxurious and expensive. On her way to the living room, she glanced into the kitchen which, sure enough, looked like it had come straight out of a glossy magazine.

The living room was a half-step down from the hall. Colourful, abstract paintings were prominently displayed on the white walls, most of them looking so expensive Kathleen didn't even dare contemplate the fire insurance.

"Please have a seat, Miss O'Malley," Francesca said, and pointed at a selection of exquisite leather furniture.

Kathleen sat down on a leather sofa and felt horribly lost in all this grandeur.

Francesca sat down in her favourite chair, and looked at the other woman sitting opposite her. She seemed nervous, Francesca thought. My reputation has preceded me.

"I guess we should start at the beginning, Miss Carrara."

"Let's. That red Ford out there, isn't that the same one that occupied the VIP parking space at the publisher's the other week?" Francesca said, and raised an eyebrow.

Kathleen blushed.

"Oh... well... yes. Yes it is. I'm terribly sorry, I didn't notice the sign until I left."

"May I call you Kathleen?"

"... Of course."

"Kathleen, it's all right. I won't hold it against you. That day, I was already upset when I arrived, and when that happened... well, you know the result," the dark haired woman said.

Kathleen smiled and nodded nervously.

"Now, with that out of the way, let's get down to business. And please, call me Francesca."

"All right. Francesca. Well, I must say I'm not too well-versed in the world of motorsports. Congratulations on the victory last weekend... but unfortunately, I don't know exactly what it is you won...?" Kathleen said as she put a notebook, a pencil and a small tape recorder on the glass table.

"You're not using a laptop?"

"I don't have one," Kathleen said.

"You can have one of mine. I have four," Francesca said, and leaned forward in her chair, grinning.

"Four?"

"Don't forget, Hewlett-Packard is a technical partner of the team. They hand out laptops like cheese crackers."

"They do?"

"Sure. But anyway, I won the first race of the World Sportscar Championship."

"Oh..." Kathleen said, not quite sure what that actually meant.

"So now I'm leading the championship."

"Congratulations."

"Well, thank you, but I'd rather lead it after the last race."

A small pause.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what the World Sportscar Championship is, actually..." Kathleen said.

An expression of annoyance flashed across Francesca's face, but it soon passed.

"Well... It's a championship of nine long distance races, fought on three continents by some of the biggest car makers in the world. Currently, there are four factory teams, Mercedes-Benz, Maserati, Nissan and Toyota. I drive for Mercedes."

"Oh, I see. Thank you."

"Anything else you'd like to know while we're at it?" Francesca said in a slightly sharp tone.

"Well, why don't we start at the beginning like we said we would. Tell me a bit about yourself," Kathleen said, choosing to ignore the jab. She turned on her recorder, and picked up her notebook and her pencil.

Francesca again raised an eyebrow, but relaxed and leaned back in her chair.

"All right. My name is Francesca Carrara. I'm 32 years old, and my zodiac sign is the Scorpio, if you're interested in that nonsense. My father is English, and my mother is Italian. I was born in Rome, that's why I have an Italian name. For the first several years of my life, my family lived

there, until my father was promoted and we moved to London. I've been here ever since."

"Are your parents still alive?"

"Oh yes. They're divorced now, though. Mother's gone back to Italy," Francesca said and shrugged.

"When did you realise you had a knack for motor racing?"

"In the last year of school. At that point, we lived not far from a kart track, and I went there every day. Just to watch the others to begin with, but one day I was allowed to try a few laps... and I blew everyone else away."

Kathleen nodded, and write some words down in her notebook.

"But that's actually a little late, isn't it?"

"Hey, I thought you said you didn't know anything about motor racing?", Francesca joked.

"... but yes, it was a bit late. I was fifteen when I first sat in a kart. I guess the best age is about nine or ten. I was halfway through puberty and all that. Not that it hindered me. I knew from my height that I'd never get a fair shot at the single seaters, so I aimed for the sportscars from the outset. They're bigger, so larger drivers can fit in much more easily."

"Single seaters?"

"Like Formula 1."

"Oh, all right. Does that bother you?"

"Not really, no. And you can print that quote directly, if you want."

"How did you get from karting to where you are today?"

"Well, after two years in pro-karting, I went up the ladder to the junior formulae to get the feel for driving on the edge in heavier cars. When I got my driver's license when I turned eighteen, I switched to the tintops..."

"Tintops?"

"Cars with roofs, saloon cars, you know," Francesca said.

"All right."

"Le Mans was always my main aim, so after acquiring experience for three years in various national series, I started driving in the World Sportscar Championship for a privateer team. In

my third year, I had become good enough to get noticed by the right people, and I was selected to be a junior driver for Aston Martin. Unfortunately, they left the series two years later, but I was picked up by Mercedes, and... well, that's it, basically," she said.

Kathleen hurriedly jotted down a few cues on her notebook, nodding as she went along.

"Great!" she said, and smiled.

Over the next several hours the conversation flowed freely, and Kathleen picked up many interesting pieces of information about the race car driver. She began to understand why Francesca was able to turn heads everywhere she went. She was beautiful, no doubt about that, but more importantly she had presence and charisma, and those characteristics have always been vital to success.

"Do you need a refreshment? I don't have any alcohol, but I do have a large selection of juices and exotic teas."

"How exotic?"

"Mango-strawberry, passion fruit-chilli, thistle-blackberry..."

"Thistle...?!" Kathleen said shocked.

"It's very popular, I can assure you," Francesca said.

"I see. I'd like an orange juice, please."

A few minutes later, Francesca put down a coaster and a glass of freshly pressed orange juice on the glass table.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

"You know, there's one thing we haven't talked about yet," Kathleen said over the rim of her glass.

"And that is?"

"Money. The thing I hear the most from people outside the sport is 'why the hell do race car drivers always make so much money. All they do is sit down and drive'".

"True. I've heard that more than once, too," Francesca said, nodding.

"How much money did you make last year, then?"

Francesca looked up, slightly startled. Well, Kathleen had told her that she didn't shy away from asking pointed questions.

"A lot. I finished in third place in the world championship after winning three races, and another two in the US series... and I get a bonus for winning races, it's in my contract. Add to that a very nice wager from my employer, and I am all set," Francesca said while sipping some mango-strawberry flavoured tea.

"Well, how much is 'a lot', exactly?" Kathleen said, and chewed on the end of her pencil.

"Between two and a half and three million Euros. Closer to three."

Kathleen quickly calculated that into Pounds, and her eyebrows crept up her forehead.

"... OK, that's 'a lot', I agree with you there."

"Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Well... somewhat, yes," Kathleen admitted.

"There's a catch, though. You have to remember one thing - every single time I get strapped into the car, every single lap I start may be my last. The cars are much safer now, sure, but anything can happen at all times. We are doing in excess of 200 mph on most racetracks, you know. At that speed, if it goes wrong, you're..." Francesca snapped her fingers to underscore the words.

"... gone," she said.

"Honestly, Francesca, if it's that dangerous, I don't understand why you and your colleagues keep doing it," Kathleen said.

"Why do footballers play football? It's what I do, I love to do it, and I'm damned good at it, too," Francesca said, and shrugged.

Francesca could see that Kathleen wasn't entirely convinced, so she got up and pulled out a drawer.

"Tell you what, Kathleen, I have some DVD's the team made for me from the television broadcasts. It's from the races I won last year, and Le Mans. If you watch them, perhaps you'll get a better understanding of what it is we're doing out there," she said, and held up several DVD's.

"Oh, DVD, I don't... my player is broken," Kathleen said.

"Why don't you buy a new one?"

"I don't really have a need for it, to be honest. I don't watch many movies."

"Well... all right," Francesca said and put the discs back down into the drawer.

"You wouldn't happen to have a few spare DVD players as well, would you?" Kathleen said and chuckled nervously.

"Unfortunately, no. And I'm quite fond of my home cinema, so you can't borrow that," the driver said.

"Oh, no, I wasn't asking for..."

"I know, I'm pulling your leg," Francesca said and sat down again.

"Oh."

A little pause.

"I do have a video, actually..." Kathleen said.

"But I don't, so I can't transfer them for you."

"Oh..."

"Hey! I got it, one of the HP laptops has a DVD-drive. Problem solved," Francesca said and smiled.

"... right," Kathleen said, dreading the prospect of having to install and get the computer running.

After she returned home, Kathleen started transcribing the tape. She still used an old typewriter, and the sound of the arms hitting the paper made her relax. Francesca Carrara could be infuriating at times, but she could also be charming when she wanted to... unfortunately, that wasn't often, Kathleen thought, and chuckled. But she definitely was an intriguing woman.

Stopping to flip the tape, she reflected on how exciting the first day had been compared to when she was working on the other biography - Kaye Jason had nearly made her fall asleep. That woman may have been the consummate professional when she was in a pentathlon event, but Kathleen had found her to be insufferably dull in real life, and in the end, she had had to spice up the biography with all kinds of humorous bits and bobs to keep it afloat.

The tape came to Francesca telling a particularly saucy anecdote, and Kathleen paused for a minute to consider if she should omit that one. She went ahead and typed it, but in reality she knew that it would never get past the legal department of the publishing house.

When Kathleen was done with the first of the two tapes she had recorded that day, she turned around in her swivel-chair and looked at the brand new HP laptop that was placed on a table. Complete with all the optional extras, it was very impressive to look at... and very intimidating to her. Kathleen didn't even have a microwave oven, so how on Earth would she ever be able to get **that** thing up and running...? She made a little note on her to-do-list to call her nephew. He'd know how to get it to work.

She changed tapes in the small recorder, and went back to work. It didn't take long for her to reach a part that had caught her by surprise.

'Why have you never been married, Francesca?', she heard herself say on the tape.

A pause.

'When you said you weren't a gossip rag reporter, you weren't kidding, were you?'

'I... don't know exactly what you...'

'I'm a lesbian.'

'Oh.'

Another pause.

'I've been out since my late teens.'

'And that hasn't hindered your career?'

'Not in the slightest, no. In motor racing, that's not as important as it is in real life. It's more important to have a good head on your shoulders for the strategy game... and a lead foot for the racing game.'

'Does that apply equally for gay men and women?'

'No. Unfortunately, it doesn't. There are some gay men driving today, but they're all closeted. If they're outed, they're gone.'

'Why is that?'

'I honestly don't know. There is a lad-culture with your mechanics, that could a part of it. The inherent masculinity of driving fast could be another, but... honestly, Kathleen, I don't know.'

Kathleen re-read the lines she had just typed, and leaned back in her chair to ponder the unexpected development. Should she put this in the book? If the biography was a hit, the tabloids might start a witch hunt to discover the identities of the drivers Francesca talked about. She

rubbed her forehead, and decided to ask Francesca some time later. She took the paper out of the typewriter and put it into a drawer.

The large clock on the wall struck 11 pm, and Kathleen yawned accordingly. Reluctantly, she forced herself to finish transcribing the second tape before she would be allowed to go to bed. She stretched like a cat, and went back to work.

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CHAPTER 2

A week passed by quickly with the biography coming along nicely. Kathleen had to admit that she was beginning to feel very accustomed to being around the charismatic woman - on the days where they worked together in Francesca's house, she often found herself humming or whistling a happy little tune in the morning when she was getting ready to leave... she didn't know what to make of that. Well, it didn't really matter, anyway. They only had four more weeks of working together. After that, Francesca would be off to God knows where, and Kathleen would go back to her little cottage and start another book.

When the phone rang, Kathleen was on her knees with her head fully inside the drum of the washing machine, trying to find a missing sock. She didn't hear the telephone at first, but since whoever it was kept it ringing, and ringing, and ringing, she eventually heard.

She went into the living room and picked up the receiver.

"Kathleen O'Malley speaking."

"Hello Kathleen, it's me. Would you mind if I popped over?"

"Francesca? No, of course not..." she said, and looked around. She grimaced as she saw the not-quite presentable living room. Then she looked down at herself and grimaced again over the mismatched sweater and baggy sweat pants she was wearing.

"... Ah, can we say half an hour?"

"How about half a minute," Francesca said, and revved the engine of her car.

The sound echoed both inside and outside of the telephone, and Kathleen went over to the window and pulled apart the curtains. Francesca was right outside her cottage...

"Well, I guess I haven't much choice in the matter," Kathleen said into the telephone as she opened her front door and waved Francesca inside.

Francesca was impressed by the cottage Kathleen was living in. It couldn't possibly be further from her own avantgarde condominium, but it did have soul... and it didn't hurt that the golden-haired author looked so darn cute as she was standing in the open door waving her inside. Francesca got out of her car and clicked on the button on the remote. The car answered by flashing the lights twice.

She couldn't help but grin at the sight of the usually impeccably dressed Kathleen barefoot in bathing slippers, grey sweat pants that were about three sizes too large for her and a sweater that had probably been green when it was bought, but now was a comical mix of washed out green and pink. It didn't help the ensemble that the sleeves has been cut off at the elbows.

Kathleen pulled an unruly lock of hair behind an ear and put out her hand for Francesca to shake.

"Hello Kathleen."

"Hello. How nice of you to drop by," the author said in a voice full of sarcasm as she welcomed the other woman inside.

"Why thank you, dear," Francesca said and grinned again.

"Did I get my dates confused... we weren't supposed to be working on the book today, were we?" Kathleen said, and checked her calendar.

Francesca looked at her in a funny way, and then over at the calendar - which was still on yesterday's date.

"Well, actually, number 1, you've forgotten to change the day on your calendar, and number 2, we've scheduled a photo-session in an hour's time..."

"Oh god!" Kathleen said and panicked. She ran into her bedroom to change, her laundry completely forgotten.

They drove off the high street and into an alley. Two Porsche 911's, one mint green and one yellow, were parked in front of the sign advertising the Studio.

"Well, now we know why the photographer's so expensive. It takes a lot of cash to service those cars..." Francesca said as they parked.

"True, but they're the best, too. I worked with them on the other biography I made. They're very professional."

"I hope they'll accept the choice of clothes I've brought along."

"I think they will. And besides, it's my book, I have the last word on which photo is used for the cover."

"Sounds good," Francesca said as she took the traveller's bag full of clothes she had picked out from her wardrobe, and locked the car.

They opened the glass doors and entered the Studio.

"Which one is it?" Francesca asked as she saw several different names on a board.

"This one." Kathleen pointed at an unpronounceable French name.

"Set #3... that's over here," Francesca said, and started to walk towards the door with a large 3 on it.

Before she could reach it, the door opened and a woman came out, only wearing a see-through sarong with a polka dotted bikini underneath, huge sunglasses and high heels.

Francesca stopped dead in her tracks and stared at the scantily clad woman.

"It's all ready for you, darling," the woman said and blew her a kiss before waltzing away.

"Oh, 'ello Miss O'Malley, we'll be ready shortly," a man said, coming out of the door behind the model.

"I'm not dressing up like that," Francesca hissed at him, and pointed her thumb at the model.

"Of course not. It's for a book cover, no?"

Kathleen nodded, and patted Francesca's elbow to calm her down.

"We've built up a living room for you, it's going to be very classy, Miss," the photographer said.

"What was that model working on?"

"A cover for the debut album of a new rock group. I think they're called the Raging Hormones, or something..." he said.

"Oh, how charming," Francesca said icily - unfortunately, the irony was lost on the photographer.

"Yes, that's what I said!" he said and nodded.

Francesca rolled her eyes, and Kathleen had to pat her elbow again.

"But we can talk afterwards. I see you've brought your own costumes, no? The room to change is

over there. While you do, I'll 'ave a word with Miss O'Malley."

Francesca left them with a muffled string of words that sounded just like profanity - in several languages. Kathleen sighed.

"Right, Mr... ?"

"Jean-Philippe Douchateaux, Miss O'Malley. Let's go inside, ok?"

He opened the door to the studio, and they walked in. It was much larger than Kathleen had expected, at least sixty by sixty feet. The ceiling was an impressive array of lights, some with clear glass, and some had blue, red or green covers.

Two huge cameras were set up on flexible tripods, pointing at a set that looked just like a living room. As background, it had a large, white wall with a fake window frame with silver-grey venetian blinds, and in the foreground they had placed a sand-coloured reclining chair and a glass table with two candlesticks on it.

"Looks really good, Mr. Douchateaux," Kathleen said enthusiastically.

"It does, yes? When your friend returns, we can see if we should change the chair. Depends on the colours she's wearing."

As if on cue, Francesca walked onto the set. She was wearing dark grey slacks and an off-white sweater.

"Oooh, your 'air and your eyes will really stand out against the white of the sweater, Miss. Good choice!" the photographer said.

"Let's get to it," she said.

"Right. Please take a seat in the chair, and I'll re-arrange the lighting. I think I'll reduce the background slightly to get greater contrast, and have a spot with a soft-filter on your face. I'll start with the A-camera, full-body."

"Whatever," Francesca said and looked at Kathleen, who was standing outside of the set's boundaries. She smiled back and mouthed 'be nice, please'.

"Do you want some music to get into the mood, Miss?"

"Well... why not?"

"This set just oozes jazz... Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, we have it all. Who's your favourite?" he asked, standing next to a huge rack of CD's.

"Frank Sinatra?"

"Oooh, a perfect match for your eyes!" he said, and ran his finger down the spines of the CD's to find the 'S'. He found a suitable album, and popped it in the player. Before long, the dulcet tones of Sinatra filled the studio, and the photographer started working.

An hour later, they were looking through the results. The photographer had loaded all the images onto memory cards, and they were watching them on an enormous computer monitor.

Kathleen was astounded over the quality of the shots, every single one of them captured Francesca's beauty perfectly. The photographer had taken more than 300 photos in three different series, full-body and shoulders-up in colour, and closeups in high-contrast black and white.

"Series 3 number 97 will look fantastic on the back dust cover... that one," Kathleen said, and pointed at an index of pictures on the screen.

"3-97, marked," the photographer said, and moved the mouse to click in a checkbox. After marking it, he clicked on the image to enlarge it.

"Yes, looking good, I caught a nice look in your eye," he said to Francesca.

'That's when I was focusing on Kathleen instead of the camera,' Francesca thought and chuckled to herself.

"What's so funny?" Kathleen asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Hmmm?"

"You know, it just struck me. I'm a race car driver, won't my readers expect the cover to be of me sitting in a car? Or at least wear my driving suit?" Francesca said after looking through nearly 200 pictures of herself sitting on the reclining chair.

"Well, they might, but those pictures will date the book, Francesca. What happens if you change teams, for instance? Then the cover is out of date, and that'll make the book seem old," Kathleen said.

"Well... I hadn't thought about that. Good thinking. Not that I'm planning on changing teams, but I understand what you mean."

"Good. Oh, that one, definitely that one!" Kathleen said and pointed at the screen. It was one of the full-body shots, and Francesca looked like a Greek goddess reborn. Looking directly at the camera, her ice blue eyes threatened to burn a hole in the lens, and her lips were creased in the very beginnings of a smile.

"Well, I guess that's a pretty good shot of me," she said, and raised her eyebrows.

"C'est magnifique," Jean-Philippe said, grinning.

"And that makes it unanimous," Kathleen said, and asked the photographer to mark the image to be the cover-shot.

When they returned, Francesca parked her Mercedes behind Kathleen's red Ford.

"It's a very charming cottage, Kathleen. You know, I had you figured as someone who'd live in a house like this."

"Oh did you now?"

"Absolutely."

A pause.

"Can I have the house tour, please? I showed you mine," Francesca said.

"Oh, all right, but be warned, you might get sensory overload from all the clutter. I can't live like you do, pure white surfaces and empty tables. I like to have things around me," Kathleen said and smiled.

"I'll live," Francesca said, and got out of the car.

"Would you like some tea?" Kathleen said as she hung her jacket on the hallstand.

"Yes, please. No milk or sugar."

"I should warn you, I only have plain, old English breakfast tea, not any of those fancy new-age combinations like strawberry-chilli or passion fruit-red peppers or whatever it was you offered me..."

"I love plain, old English tea, so that's fine by me," Francesca said and smiled.

After finishing their tea, they walked around the cottage, with Kathleen showing Francesca all the little, charming details of a Victorian house from 1872. The dark haired woman was very impressed with the size of the author's library in her den, shelf after shelf of books, all filled past capacity.

"Good heavens," Francesca said, peeking into Kathleen's bedroom as she went past in the hall. The wooden floor was in original condition, so it creaked rustically when she walked in.

Kathleen had two Monéts hanging on the bedroom wall, but the real centrepiece of the room was an old, brass four-poster bed, complete with a pale blue canopy and two rows of tassels. The blanket was in a very delicate shade of rose, and the sheets and pillows were white.

There was a small two-drawer dresser next to the bed, with an antique lamp, an old-fashioned alarm clock, a pair of reading glasses, and a book with a bookmark on the highly polished top. Francesca looked over her shoulder to see if Kathleen was there, which she wasn't, so she leaned down to see the title of the book.

"No, it's not Lady Chatterley's Lover," Kathleen said from the door. Francesca quickly stood up straight, grinning broadly.

"Just checking," she said.

"Mmm-hmmm."

"Didn't know you needed glasses?" Francesca said to change the subject.

"Sometimes I do. Depends on how much I've been working during the day," Kathleen explained.

"You have a very beautiful cottage, Kathleen," Francesca said when they returned to the living room.

"Thank you."

"Oh, I almost forgot... I want to ask you if you have any plans for tonight?"

"You mean... are you asking me out on a date?" Kathleen said, and laughed heartily. She didn't notice Francesca's cheeks were tinted in a somewhat darker shade of pink than they usually were.

"No, of course not, ha ha. Well, not a 'date' date. One of our sponsors, 'Power Supply Energy Drinks', is having a bash tonight in a night club, and I was wondering if you'd be interested in going with me?"

"Oh... I'd love to, Francesca. Thank you for asking," Kathleen said and gave the other woman a blinding smile.

"Good. There's no dress code as such, but the last time they held one it was upscale."

"All right. I'll dig a dress out of my closet, then. Are you going to wear one...? I think I'd like to see that, actually," Kathleen said and winked.

"Oh no. No, I'll be wearing what I usually do at these things."

"Which is...?"

"A secret. You'll see when I pick you up. Is seven pm too early for you? It doesn't start until eight, but the traffic is usually horrendous."

"Seven sounds fine. I'll be ready."

"OK. See you then," Francesca said with a smile as she opened the front door. Kathleen waved to her as she reversed out of the driveway and onto the small road in front of her house.

6.58 pm, and Kathleen was putting the finishing touches on her makeup. She had very little experience with upscale events, but she knew that the worst thing she could do would be to look trumpy, so she settled for using a subtle eyeliner and a lipstick in a delicate shade of pink. She checked the results in the small mirror, and was quite satisfied. This was the first time in ages that she had been dolled up, and she had to admit that she was looking forward to the evening.

She put on the pumps, straightened her dress and made sure her hair was in place. All set. She was quite proud over the fact the dress still fit her, even after several years.

A few minutes later the door bell rang, and Kathleen opened it.

"Milady, your carriage is rea... WOW!" Francesca exclaimed loudly when she saw what Kathleen wore - a beautiful red dress that outlined all the right places, held up by a single, broad strap over her right shoulder, leaving the left one bare. She wore red pumps, and she held a small, red purse with a gold chain. Around her neck she wore a gold necklace with a tastefully sized pendant.

Both women were equally speechless - Kathleen couldn't stop staring at the suit Francesca was wearing. Shiny leather shoes, black pants with a black leather belt, an off-white shirt with golden cufflinks and the top two buttons opened. Add to that a black jacket with a small, white handkerchief in the pocket, and the dark haired woman looked like she had just stepped out of the cover page of a men's fashion magazine.

The image in front of her ignited a heated spark in Kathleen's centre that grew exponentially and rapidly enveloped her entire being. Nothing had ever turned her on quite like that before, and she had to shake her head to get rid of the unexpected, but definitely pleasant, feeling.

"Well, I'd say we're going to be the talk of the town..." Francesca said, and looked squarely into Kathleen's glowing green eyes.

A few hours later, the two women were standing by the bar at the party, Kathleen quietly sipping a GT, and Francesca holding on to a club soda.

The author had been blushing more or less constantly over the many glances she and Francesca

attracted from the partygoers. For Francesca this was nothing new, however, so she was able to ignore it.

"Have you ever seen the Power Supply ad, Francesca? The one with the marathon runner not wanting to stop?"

"I've seen it. They wanted me to be in it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was all set to do it, and then they showed me the costume I'd be wearing. It was *this* big. I told them where they could put it, and then I left."

"Oh, wow..."

"Yeah. Amazingly, they continued to sponsor us after that. Heh," she said and took a swig from her drink.

"I don't like it," Kathleen said, looking at all the sponsor logos on the tarp behind the bar.

"Power Supply?"

"Yes, I think it tastes poorly. It's much too artificial, too chemical."

"I guess you're right about that."

"Do you like it?"

"Not really, actually. But it doesn't matter, since I can't have any of it. There's so much caffeine in the bloomin' thing that we can't pass a doping control afterwards," Francesca said and shrugged.

"No... really? ...and where does that leave the marathon runner?" Kathleen said and started to laugh. The sound was contagious, and soon Francesca joined her.

"But I've been in other ads. I did two fun ones for Mercedes-Benz for Italian television, you can probably find those on the Internet somewhere, and one for Davidoff Cool Water for a magazine. That was slightly less fun," Francesca said.

"Another tiny costume?"

"Bathing suit, in a swimming pool."

"Oh," Kathleen said, and really, really tried to get the pictures of the dark haired woman in a wet bathing suit out of her mind.

"I guess it turned out all right. You can't see anything on the picture. I was in the water, resting my arms on the edge of the pool, and the camera was in front of me, so..." Francesca said and shrugged.

"Oh," Kathleen said again.

"But I remember the director being angry with me. He said my shoulders and arms looked like I was a wrestler," Francesca said and chuckled.

Kathleen shook her head. To her, Francesca's muscular shoulders and arms were among her best features. Along with her eyes... and her lips... and her... well, never mind.

A slightly inebriated man came up to the bar to order a new drink. While the bartender was mixing it, the man looked very intently at Kathleen. His eyes ran up and down the red dress, and she began to feel very uncomfortable.

"So... can I get you a drink, or something...?" he said to her.

"No thank you."

"Oh, come on, just a little one."

"No," she said, and went over to stand on the other side of Francesca, making her a buffer 5'10" tall and, as a result of her broad back, looking nearly as wide.

"Oh, come on," he said again, trying to get around the driver.

"The lady said no, Frank. Didn't I see you with your wife earlier?" Francesca said sternly.

"Well... she's here somewhere."

"How nice."

The man got his drink and was about to speak up again when Francesca's very dark expression convinced him not to. Instead he walked away, clutching his drink, making sure not to spill any of it with his slightly clumsy walk.

"Thank you for rescuing me, Francesca."

"My pleasure. Unfortunately, this happens from time to time at these types of events. There's always someone who doesn't know when to stop. I hope it hasn't ruined your evening?" she said, and put a hand on Kathleen's arm.

"It hasn't," Kathleen said. She noticed her arm was tingling where Francesca was holding her, and she smiled warmly at the driver.

A pair who were clearly husband and wife came over to Francesca and asked if it was all right to take a few pictures. She agreed, and stood up straight while they snapped away again and again. The flash was annoying her greatly, but she kept a fake smile plastered on her face. The pair shook her hand and left, much to her relief.

Kathleen was just about to ask Francesca a question when an important-looking elderly man arrived at the bar. Kathleen immediately noticed the difference in Francesca's body language, so she reckoned it was someone from the company.

"Good evening, Dr. Jäger," Francesca said, and put her hand out.

"Good evening, Miss Carrara. You must introduce me to your charming ladyfriend," the man said and smiled at the two women.

"I'm Kathleen O'Malley, Sir. I'm the author who's writing Miss Carrara's biography."

"Oh! I've heard of that. Not too many saucy anecdotes, please?" he said and laughed.

"Oh, you know me too well, Dr. Jäger," Francesca joked. Kathleen laughed.

"Indeed I do," he said, and looked appreciatively at Kathleen.

"Well, I better be mingling. Have a nice evening, both of you," he said and bowed slightly.

"Who was that?" Kathleen said when he was out of earshot.

"Dr. Jäger's the CEO of Mercedes-Benz AG. He's the man who pays my wages."

"Hmmm. I thought as much. He had that certain air of importance about him."

In the background, an announcement was made that a world famous DJ would start doing his stuff in twenty minutes, so Francesca leaned in towards Kathleen.

"I'm too old for the music he'll be playing. How about we head for home?"

They left the party and waited for the valet to find Francesca's car. He soon arrived in her jet black Mercedes CLK, and they got in.

"I've had a fantastic evening, Francesca. Thank you very much for inviting me," Kathleen said.

"Oh, you're very welcome. I've had a great time too, actually. Usually these sponsor events are terribly boring and long-winded, but tonight's just flown by," Francesca said, and smiled broadly

at the author.

Kathleen felt the unfamiliar tingling sensation return, and she couldn't help but smile back.

"I was thinking... would you like to come over to my place for a night cap?" Francesca asked when they were waiting at a red light.

Kathleen's mouth went bone dry, and she tried, unsuccessfully, to lick her lips a couple of times.

"Well, I'm... I'm sorry, Francesca. Not tonight. I'm really tired, it's been years since I've been to such a large party. Maybe we could do that some other time?" she said.

"All right. We'll do it next time, OK?" Francesca said, and smiled again. Kathleen nodded, but realised the driver couldn't see in the darkness, so she said,

"I'd like that."

Kathleen waved goodbye to Francesca, who replied by honking twice as she drove off. She put the key in the front door and walked inside. As soon as she closed the door behind her, she leaned against it, and let out a long, slow sigh.

Her body was humming with an energy she hadn't felt in years. She knew exactly what it was, but still it surprised her. She was falling for the dark haired beauty. Francesca was a woman who excited her in a way no other woman had - not since Becky, and that was... God, five years ago. That suit Francesca was wearing tonight... if Kathleen had been a bit less inhibited, they might never have gotten further than the living room floor. She closed her eyes and let her imagination fill out the blanks.

She stepped down from the pumps and headed for her bedroom. She undressed and put the dress back into the closet. She walked across the hall and turned on the water heater in the bathroom. She knew she needed a hot shower before she could relax enough to go to bed. While the hot water was getting ready, she sat down on the bed and looked at the dresser. After a little while, she opened the top drawer of the small dresser, took out a purple object and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

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CHAPTER 3

Two weeks later, at the Palace Exhibition Centre.

The six drivers walked onto the stage and stood in threes on either side of the car, which was still

wrapped in a silver-grey satin tarp carrying the Star logo.

"First of all... if you please..." the emcee said, and the drivers each grabbed a small hook connected to the tarp. He nodded to them, and the tarp was pulled away, revealing the spit-shined car. The people on the stage were greeted by a shockwave of flashes going off. Even though the car had already been presented in Stuttgart the day before, it seemed like the entire British press was gathered to get a glimpse of the car and the all-British driving crew that Mercedes pinned their hopes on for Le Mans.

"And here we have it, the Mercedes-Benz CLR! Powered by a 6-litre twin turbo V8, it produces nearly 700 bhp, controlled by the regulation air restrictors - unrestricted, it would be capable of 1000 bhp."

The audience ooh'ed and aah'ed, and the emcee let the sound die down before he continued.

"It has a new and revolutionary gear change system, created and perfected by the finest technicians in the auto industry today, and one that our drivers have already predicted will take seconds off the lap time."

"Speaking of which, Ladies and Gentlemen, here are the six drivers of the Mercedes-Benz factory squad. From left to right, driving car #5, Jonathan Baker, Francesca Carrara and Derek Harrison, all from Great Britain - let's give them a warm welcome," the slick emcee said.

As the applause died down, the emcee went over to the other side of the stage and continued his spiel:

"Then we have the drivers of car #6 - Johannes Heinrich from Germany, Piercarlo Paletti from Italy, and Hans Wochalewski from Germany. Let's give them a hand, too."

All six drivers were lined up next to the car, fully dressed in their fireproof driving suits and holding their helmets. They had been split up into the same two squads they would later be using for Le Mans: three taller British drivers and three shorter drivers from the Continent.

One by one, the emcee shoved a microphone under the nose of a driver, and he or she was expected to deliver a few words for the press and the dignitaries in the audience, among which Kathleen sat. When it was Francesca's turn, she looked directly at the author the whole time, completely ignoring the stage manager's frantic arm waving, telling her to look at the entire crowd. In her seat, Kathleen never broke eye contact with Francesca, enjoying the curious intimacy even in front of nearly five hundred people.

With the first part of the presentation over, the drivers walked into the crowd to give reporters pre-fabricated 'scoops'. Kathleen saw the stage manager storm over to Francesca, but she said a few words to him and calmly walked away from him.

"Francesca, you looked fantastic up on the stage," Kathleen said.

"Thank you. Do you want to see the car?"

"I'd love to."

"Come on, then."

They walked back up the small flight of stairs leading to the stage. One of the other drivers was showing the car to a TV crew, so they waited for a minute or so until the broadcast was done.

"Right. As you can see, it looks very different to this year's car, it's much flatter and smoother, and much more advanced aerodynamically. According to the engineers, this'll give us a bit more grunt at Le Mans. A higher top speed on the straights will inevitably equal a higher chance of overtaking other cars," Francesca explained.

"I see."

"We've changed the engine configuration radically. It's still mid-engined as you can see, but last year, and the first races of this, we used a normally aspirated V12, but now we're changing to a twin-turbo V8 for Le Mans. It'll give us better fuel economy, which is important. If you can add a lap to each stint, compared to your nearest competitor, it's bound to make a difference in the end. Paddle-shift on the steering wheel, as you can see..." Francesca said, and pointed at two strange pieces of plastic behind the wheel.

"Oh, yes," Kathleen said, not quite sure what it was exactly she was looking at.

"It's much faster to use than a regular H-pattern."

Kathleen nodded.

"Why does the car have blue wing mirrors?" she asked.

"Well, why do you think," Francesca said and batted her eyelids, giving the author a not-so-subtle hint.

"Because you have blue eyes?" she said incredulously.

"Yup!"

"How fast can you go in this thing, anyway?"

"Oh, if the wings and the gearing is set for maximum speed, probably 230 mph."

"Really! That much?"

"Yes."

"God, I get frightened when I drive 60 on the motorway," Kathleen said and laughed.

"I do too, all those lorries..." Francesca said and winked, earning her a gentle slap on her arm.

"All in all, I think we have a good shot at victory this year... barring unforeseen disasters, of course," Francesca said as she led Kathleen back down the stairs to the rows of chairs.

"Come on, let me introduce you to my team-mates."

"Oh, but surely they're too busy now?"

"No. This is all just hot air. Come on," Francesca said, and put an arm around Kathleen's shoulder.

"Jonno, this is my friend Kathleen," the dark haired woman said to a man a few years younger than her.

"Delighted to meet you, Miss," he said and shook her hand.

"Kathleen, this is Jonathan Baker, the Benjamin of car #5. He won Silverstone with me."

"Hello, pleased to meet you," Kathleen said.

"And over there we have the grand old man himself, Derek Harrison, he's only joining us for Le Mans," Francesca said and pointed at a man being interviewed by a Sky Sports camera crew.

"We'll get to him in a little while. Over on the far side of the room, you'll find the drivers of #6, 'Pico' Paletti and Jo, the two regular drivers, and Hans Wochalewski, the experienced ringer for Le Mans."

"I'm glad you arranged a pass for me to come, Francesca. This is really fun," Kathleen said.

"I thought you might like it. I have another surprise for you. How would you like to..."

The Sky crew came over to Francesca and turned on the powerful light right in her face. She blinked a few times to get used to the brightness.

"We're hot," the camera operator said. The sports presenter started asking Francesca all the usual trivialities, and Kathleen stepped into the background.

When they moved away, searching for the next hapless victim, Francesca mocked the presenter.

"How do you feel about being the only woman in a factory team, Miss Carrara?" she said in a distorted voice.

"Oh, how imaginative. I've only been asked that fifty times," she said in her normal voice, rolling

her eyes.

Kathleen couldn't hide a grin over Francesca's discomfort, which earned her a raised eyebrow and a crooked smile from the other woman.

"You said you had another surprise for me?" Kathleen said.

"Have you ever been to Italy?"

"No."

"Would you like to go there?"

"Well... sure," Kathleen said and shrugged.

"Good... because I have an airline ticket and a free 'gold' paddock pass with your name on it for the Monza 1000 Kilometre's coming up next weekend. Entry to the uber-luxurious Star Club, free food and drink, free everything. Please say yes," Francesca said and winked at the author.

Kathleen was gobsmacked over the offer. She looked disbelieving at Francesca's smiling face. A voice at the back of Kathleen's mind was asking her if it was possible that the beautiful race car driver was feeling the same way she was.

"Good heavens! That must've been very expensive for you. Yes, please!" she said.

"I'm really glad to hear that, Kathleen. There isn't much work left on the book, and I thought it would be a nice goodbye present for you," Francesca said.

Kathleen only heard the word 'goodbye'. Her smile froze on her face, and she could barely breathe. She settled for nodding.

Francesca was ushered away by the still fuming stage manager to get the official team photos taken. She smiled and waved at the stunned Kathleen as she was led away.

A week later.

The days had gone by in a blur for Kathleen. She had kept up the façade, so she doubted that Francesca knew anything about the turmoil within her. She had been looking forward to spending a weekend in Italy with the charismatic dark haired woman, no doubt about that, but at the same time, she couldn't believe that the rug had been pulled out from under her quite so viciously... and how much it actually hurt.

The first night after the presentation of the car, she couldn't sleep at all; Francesca's words had just kept on churning in her mind. 'Goodbye', well of course, it was supposed to be, after all.

Kathleen had never said anything that might lead them down another path, and now she was very unsure if she should. Francesca was a woman of the world, how could a little, strawberry-blonde mouse who needed reading glasses possibly interest her?

No matter how she tried to come up with alternatives, the book was just about finished. Even if she slowed down to a snail's pace, there was no way she could stretch out the remaining work to more than a few weeks. Really, all she needed was to tie up the loose ends and double check the index - that was it. Then her master copy would be sent to the printer's for a test run. If that was all right, the book would go into print. The legal department had even approved of the saucy anecdote about why another driver's nickname was 'The Shrimp'.

The look on Francesca's face when she told the anecdote had been priceless. Her eyes really lit up when she was enjoying herself, and she definitely had been that afternoon. It was a good thing Kathleen had turned on the tape recorder, because for the rest of the session she was transfixed onto Francesca's ice blue eyes, and she couldn't remember a word that had been said.

The ear-splitting scream of an Italian V12 driving by shook Kathleen back to the real world. She looked around, but none of the other guests in the Star Club had noticed that she had zoned out. Three Italian waiters were constantly walking among the tables, ready to serve the guests.

Kathleen raised her hand, and one of the waiters quickly arrived at her table.

"Signorina?"

"I'd like another glass of white, please."

"As you wish, signorina. How was your Pasta Pollo?" he said, as he removed the plates.

"Oh, it was magnificent, thank you. Please tell me, how many laps are left?"

"Let me see... 20 laps, signorina," the waiter said, looking at the TV screen constantly updating the timing and scoring information.

"One last thing, do you mind telling me who is leading? I'm new to all this, and I'm lost," Kathleen said and gave the waiter a blinding smile.

"The Maseratis are one-two," he said with some pride.

"Oh... thank you very much," Kathleen said.

The Star Club was located on top of the pit complex on the front straight, so Kathleen had an excellent view of the victory celebrations. The Maserati team did in fact finish one-two, with Francesca's car in third, two laps down.

After the drivers had received their trophies, the Italian anthem blasted out over the track, ending with a huge cheer from the spectators massing below. The winning drivers splashed the champagne over everyone, and finally they threw their caps into the crowd, Francesca included.

Kathleen walked down the stairs from the Star Club and into a VIP enclosure where she'd be able to see the drivers up close when they returned from the obligatory press conference.

She didn't have to wait long - within moments, the four Maserati drivers came through the glass doors, laughing and slapping each other on the backs. They cheerily whistled at her, and she blushed slightly. Then Francesca entered, looking like she was about to kill someone. Her lips were reduced to a narrow line in her face, and her hand held the third place trophy so tightly her knuckles were white. Walking right behind her, Jonathan Baker was trying to blend in with the white walls.

Kathleen didn't know what had happened, but she could certainly read the body language, and she guessed a better result had slipped through their fingers.

Francesca walked briskly and nearly passed Kathleen before she spotted her. Taking a deep breath, she turned around to talk to the author.

"Hi. You look bothered," Kathleen said, slightly worried that the driver would snap at her.

"Mmmm. Third place. That's... mmmm," Francesca said, and Kathleen knew that she was really trying to control her temper.

"You need a hot shower, Francesca."

"Mmmm. Good idea."

Purely as a reflex, Kathleen reached out, grabbed Francesca's hand and held it tight. Francesca looked down at the clasped hands in amazement. Her strained facial expression softened, and she couldn't stop a smile from breaking out on her face.

When Kathleen noticed where her hand was, and the effect it had on the driver, she blushed furiously... but she didn't let go of Francesca's hand.

That same evening, they decided to go to a restaurant together to celebrate the result. Even though Francesca called it 'celebrate' in quotation marks, she was more than willing to spend some time with Kathleen.

The waiter led them to a quiet table for two and pulled the chairs out for each of them. Smiling, he gave them a menu each and withdrew.

"I had Pasta Pollo for lunch, so I think I'll have some veal," Kathleen said, and looked up from

the menu. For the briefest of moments, the two women made eye contact, but Francesca hurriedly looked down into her own menu.

"How about #25 then, roast veal in mushroom sauce?"

"Sounds good. What'll you have?"

"Oh, I don't know. I eat pasta daily for the carbohydrates, so... I think I'll splash out for once and have a pizza," Francesca said.

"Wine?" Kathleen asked.

"Not for me, but if you want?"

"Well, I never say no to white wine," Kathleen said and smiled.

"Deal, then. Waiter!"

The waiter came over to their table and took their orders. This was the first time Kathleen heard Francesca speak Italian, and the sound of the fast cadence was so sexy to her that her ears started burning.

Francesca smiled mischievously at the author.

"What?"

"Your ears are redder than a lobster's rear end."

"I must have had too much sun..."

"It was overcast the entire day. And you were inside the entire day, too."

"Oh."

Francesca pulled back her chair slightly and crossed her legs. She flipped her hair back, and Kathleen almost melted. Francesca was wearing the same black pant suit she had worn when they had first met in the publisher's office, and Kathleen had to admit that she liked that outfit a lot.

"Everybody's watching you," she whispered to Francesca after having looked around in the restaurant.

"Everybody's watching *us*," Francesca said and winked.

"Hardly," Kathleen said quietly.

The waiter arrived with a basket of hot bread and some olives and their drinks, a carafe of white wine for Kathleen and a club soda for Francesca.

"If you keep sitting like that, you'll have someone serenading you pretty soon," Kathleen said, as she broke off a piece of bread and started to eat it.

"Like what? I'm just sitting here."

"And how..."

"Oh, all right," Francesca said and moved back to the table.

"Do you want to talk about what happened today?" Kathleen asked.

"Well... it's really quite simple. I don't know if we could've won, the Maseratis are always very fast on their home track, but we had second place in the bag. Jonno wasn't patient enough overtaking a lapped car, and he slipped off the track and ended in the gravel at the Parabolica, the final corner of the track. It took a lap and a half to dig him out, and we finished two laps back, so..."

"I'm sorry, Francesca. But at least you got a trophy," Kathleen offered.

"I'm here to win. I'm paid to win, and I want to win. Second place is the first of the losers. I wasn't even that today," Francesca said, and emptied her club soda.

"But enough talk about that failure. Kathleen, I just realised, you know everything there is to know about me, but I hardly know anything about you. So, Kathleen O'Malley, who are you?" Francesca said and smiled.

"Oh... well... I'm just me, you know. I live a quiet life in a quiet house doing quiet things... when I'm not visiting the race tracks of the world, of course," Kathleen said and laughed.

"There must be more to you than that. Come on," Francesca teased.

"Well..."

The waiter interrupted them by bringing their meals. He lit a candle with a lighter and asked if he could do anything more at this point. Francesca asked for another club soda, and he quickly delivered it.

"I guess I'm just not that interesting," Kathleen said and shrugged.

"That's nonsense, Kathleen. You have a great mind, and a quick wit. And great writing skills, too. I have your other biography, the one about Kaye Jason, and..."

"You have?" Kathleen asked surprised.

"Yes. And let me tell you a secret: I know Kaye Jason. She's a hole in the ground when it comes to humour. But your book is so much fun to read, and it makes her look very good. That's why I wanted you."

"You know Kaye Jason?" Kathleen said, her fork stopped halfway to her mouth.

"I do. We've met on several occasions."

"Imagine that. Well!" Kathleen said, and continued eating.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Kathleen noticed Francesca looking at her with a curious gleam in her eye.

"What?"

"You were talking about yourself, remember?"

"I forgot."

"Funny. I'd love to get to know you better, Kathleen," Francesca said and smiled.

"How come a beautiful woman like yourself doesn't have anyone to share her house with?" Francesca asked.

"Well, I went through a terrible break-up some time ago, and I guess I've needed the solitude."

"What happened? If it's too personal, it's OK to tell me that it's none of my business."

Kathleen put down the fork and sighed. She considered for a few seconds whether or not to tell Francesca the story, and finally came to the conclusion that she wanted to share it with someone.

"I was living with a man I had known since my school days. We never married, but it almost felt like we had. We'd been together for five years, but then I met someone else, and I realised I didn't love Edward... at all. We were friends, but that was all it ever had been."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kathleen."

"His sister, Becky, had worked on a charity project in Africa for several years, but then she returned to England. I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. After a few months, I told her, and I told Edward, and then... everything came crashing down," Kathleen said bitterly. She wiped her mouth in a napkin, and emptied her glass of wine in a gulp.

"Oh... Kathleen, I never would have guessed... but you're not out, then?" Francesca said.

"No. Not even to my parents. I went 'in' instead, the furthest I could go. That was five years ago."

"Five years! You've been living like a hermit for five years?" Francesca said, clearly shocked.

"I didn't choose it to be that way, but... after a while it felt like the safest option. No adventures, no disappointments," Kathleen said and crossed her arms over her chest. She sighed again.

A pregnant silence filled the air between them.

'Time for a leap of faith,' Francesca thought.

"Well, I was very much hoping that we could still... see each other. Even after the book is done," Francesca said, unable to look at Kathleen.

The author's mouth gaped open, and her face looked like a question mark.

"You... you do?" she asked, completely perplexed.

Francesca nodded, her face a mask of shyness that Kathleen thought was very becoming of the usually highly confident race car driver.

"Oh god, I'd like that very much, Francesca... but why did you call this trip a goodbye present, then?"

"Well, you might have laughed at me... I'm not very good with these emotional things," Francesca said quietly.

And laugh Kathleen did, a wonderfully liberating laugh that cleared her mind of the last remaining cobwebs. It was so good to know they were both on the same page now. Now she actually had a chance to look forward to something, for the first time in years.

"You should have told me earlier, it would have saved me from a few sleepless nights," Kathleen said and used her napkin to dab away some tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes.

"Well, I wanted to, but... I could never find the right moment," Francesca said sheepishly, still looking like she didn't entirely understand what was going on.

Kathleen grabbed both of Francesca's hands across the table and held them tight. No words were necessary as their eyes made contact. They didn't have time for little things like breathing or hearing, so they didn't notice the waiter standing by their table until he cleared his throat for the third time.

They both had huge, silly grins on their faces as they let go so Francesca could get to her wallet to pay the bill.

Francesca parked the rental car in the parking garage underneath the hotel, and the elevator ride up to their floor was made in silence.

They had rented adjacent suites, but Francesca followed Kathleen into hers. They were on the top floor of the hotel, the twelfth, and the vista overlooking the city was magnificent. It was past 9 pm when they returned, so the sun had nearly set in the western sky, but the air was still warm.

Kathleen pulled open the sliding door and stepped out on the balcony. The sounds of the large city were muffled this high up, but she could still hear the typical cacophony of cars honking and sirens far below her. She leaned against the metal railing and enjoyed the sights of the thousands of lights coming from the city's many houses and apartments. In the far distance, she could see red lights blinking on the chimneys of a large power plant, and far above her, she could see the landing lights of a passenger jet, coming in to land in the same airport she and Francesca would go to early tomorrow morning.

Francesca came out onto the balcony, having changed from the uncomfortable ankle boots she had been wearing in the restaurant to flats. She stood next to Kathleen and looked at the city. She used the approaching darkness to put her hand on Kathleen's hip.

The author turned around and looked lovingly at Francesca. She put her own hands around the taller woman's waist and pulled her close. Francesca leaned down and brushed her lips gently against Kathleen's, just to allow both women to get a feel for the other. Kathleen opened her eyes, and to the driver, it looked like they were on fire. Another kiss followed, deeper this time, making Kathleen moan.

They separated, and Kathleen turned away from Francesca. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, and she could feel the heated blood coursing through her veins. Her whole body was throbbing with need, but she wanted the first time they made love to be special, and an impersonal hotel room couldn't give her that feeling.

"Please, Francesca, I... I can't go any further... not just yet," she whispered.

"All right. Try to get some sleep. We're leaving very early in the morning. Sweet dreams," Francesca whispered back, and kissed the top of Kathleen's head before slipping quietly out of the suite.

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CHAPTER 4

Kathleen put her hand down on the alarm clock, silencing the infernal noise. She sighed and looked around in her bedroom. Everything was as it had always been, but now she was a year older. Today was her 36th birthday, May 26th, and she didn't particularly feel like celebrating.

Her life had been so wonderfully straightforward in the years where she hadn't allowed herself to get involved with anyone else, but in the three weeks since that fantastic evening in Italy, she had become confused. To find out that Francesca did actually feel something for her had been a life-changing event for Kathleen, but... they were so different. Francesca was a pragmatist - she was a romantic; She still felt like a little grey mouse, even though Francesca often told her differently - and Francesca was never any less than stunningly beautiful; she felt lost at times - and Francesca was always in perfect and complete control... Kathleen sighed again.

She got out of bed and stuck her feet into her slippers. She put her bathrobe on, and padded into the kitchen to make some tea and breakfast.

After she had done the dishes and had a quick shower, she sat down to finish the biography. Officially, her co-operation with Francesca had ended on Monday, and all that remained was to write the page with all the acknowledgements. She started typing, and was soon lost to the world.

After a little while, it rang on the door, and Kathleen got up to open it. She looked left and right, but the place was deserted - apart from a large... well, 'something' on her doorstep. At first, she couldn't understand what it was, but it soon dawned on her that it was a glass vase of mammoth proportions, maybe three feet tall, and tinted in a dark orange. She scratched her hair. She couldn't just leave it on the doorstep, so she carried it inside. It was lighter than it looked, but it still weighed a good twenty pounds. She had barely had time to place it on the living room floor when the door bell rang again.

This time, Kathleen was there in an instant, hoping to catch whoever it was playing pranks on her.

Francesca was waiting outside, carrying three dozen red roses.

"Happy Birthday, Kathleen," she said and smiled.

"May I come in?"

She walked past a stunned Kathleen who couldn't have formed a coherent sentence if her life had depended on it.

Francesca carefully put down the three sheaves of twelve roses each on the kitchen table.

"They're pre-cut, so we won't have to do that. Let me get some water for the vase, and I'll put them in," she said.

Kathleen had followed her into the kitchen, still speechless. Her hands were covering her mouth, and she was afraid she would start to cry if she didn't have something to hold on to.

Francesca filled water in the glass vase until she was satisfied with the level. She put in the roses two or three at a time, so they wouldn't be harmed.

Kathleen sat down on her couch, shook her head and looked silently at all the roses. After a little while, she trusted her voice wouldn't break, so she took a deep breath.

"My god, thank you Francesca. I... I..."

The dark haired woman sat down next to Kathleen and hugged her.

"I'm glad you like them," she said, and snuggled up to the author.

"... there are so many..." Kathleen said.

"Well, it is your 36th birthday, isn't it? Couldn't come with just one rose, you know."

"I would've been happy with just one..."

"I know you would, but Kathleen... sometimes you just have to do something extravagant," Francesca said, and leaned in to kiss the other woman on her cheek.

"I'm very happy you did," Kathleen whispered, and turned her head so they could kiss properly.

A little while later, after much kissing and a few tears of joy, Francesca was back in the kitchen, making tea.

She added a spoonful of honey to Kathleen's and picked up the two mugs. She carried them into the living room, and handed Kathleen hers.

"Here you go - with honey."

"Thank you," Kathleen sniffed.

"Do you have any plans for the weekend?" Francesca said as she sat down on the couch, her face as innocent as a cherub.

Kathleen raised an eyebrow.

"You're not going to surprise me with another trip to Italy, or something like that, are you?"

"No."

"Good, I..."

"Not Italy."

"Francesca!"

"What?"

"You're spending bundles of money on me, I don't deserve that..."

"It's my money, so let me be the judge of that. And my opinion is that you deserve every penny. But, it's not Italy, I can assure you."

"Are we going out to eat, then?"

"Well... yes, but not like you think," Francesca said and winked.

"Do I need fancy clothes?"

"Ah... no. Nothing more fancy than what you wear regularly."

"...?"

"Do you need a hint?"

"Yes, please."

"It begins with an 'F'," Francesca said, and sipped her tea.

"Oh, that's so much help,"

"F', 'R'."

"... I give up," Kathleen said, and grinned.

"It's a four day trip to France. Saturday and Sunday I have to work, and then we'll have Monday and Tuesday to ourselves."

"France! Oh, god Francesca! Hang on, I know what it is... it's the Le Mans test day, right?"

"Yep."

Kathleen put down the mug on the table, and got up from her couch. She stretched her arms out, and almost fell on top of Francesca, who fortunately had already emptied her mug.

"Ooof!" she exclaimed as 122 lbs. of author came down on her, hugging and kissing her senseless.

When Kathleen had calmed down, Francesca scooted up on the couch, and put her head on the arm rest. Kathleen was sprawled across the driver with her head in the nook of Francesca's chin. The misty green eyes were closed and she was smiling contentedly. The smaller woman's arm were placed just below Francesca's breasts, and the intimate touch was doing things to her body that she didn't think it was capable of. She could feel a tremendous warmth spreading out from her centre, and she ached for Kathleen to touch her, to kiss her, to make love to her - but she knew that they should wait until it felt right for both of them.

With Kathleen seemingly content to stay where she was, Francesca started daydreaming - about what they could do together, where they could go. Paris was only 250 kilometres away from Le Mans, and the City Of Love was an exciting prospect. Francesca hoped Kathleen would enjoy a trip to Paris, and she was almost sure the author would. She made a mental note to look for a romantic pension the next time she was online.

"I love it when you smile..." Kathleen said. Francesca looked down and saw Kathleen's eyes fixed on her.

"Oh?"

"You have such a beautiful smile..." the author purred, and started to place tiny kisses on the side of Francesca's neck. She moved her arm from its resting place across Francesca's chest and started to caress a full breast through the shirt. The movement sent a jolt of passion through Francesca, and she could feel every nerve in her standing on edge.

Never stopping her kisses on Francesca's neck and jaw, Kathleen moved her hand underneath the driver's shirt and started to gently claw and caress the muscular stomach she found there. Francesca closed her eyes, and allowed the incredible sensations to engulf her.

"Francesca..."

"Mmmmm?"

"I want to make love with you..." Kathleen whispered, and moved her hand from the stomach to Francesca's right breast, gently cupping and caressing the soft skin, moving ever closer to the sensitive peak in the centre.

Francesca moaned throatily, and arced her back off the couch from the sensation. With trembling fingers, she started to unbutton her shirt, sending the last two buttons flying when they wouldn't come open. She took the shirt off and let it fall to the floor, exposing her sculpted torso to Kathleen.

The author stopped kissing Francesca's neck and went down to continue on the inviting breasts. When her tongue circled the hardened nipples, Francesca moaned again, spurring Kathleen on.

Kathleen reached down with her free hand to unbutton her jeans and shimmied out of them, the cool air feeling wonderful on her heated skin. Francesca started tugging on Kathleen's blouse, and she leaned over to her left so it would come off.

Francesca rose off the couch to find the soft lips waiting there. Kathleen opened her mouth to allow the driver inside, and soon their tongues were engaged in a passionate dance.

When they separated to get some air, Francesca quickly shed her slacks, and turned to her left so she could hold Kathleen better. She traced her hand up Kathleen's back and found the release on the bra and unhitched it, liberating the author's breasts.

"My turn," she whispered, and effortlessly moved the smaller woman onto her back. Kathleen giggled over how easily she was picked up and moved, but soon lost her ability to think, as Francesca leaned down and started to kiss her way from the collar bone down to the sternum. She used both hands to play with Kathleen's breasts, gently squeezing and pulling the erect nipples between her thumbs and index fingers. She cupped the two mounds with her hands and let her tongue run slowly over the sensitive tips, sending a wave of electric shocks crashing through Kathleen's body. She bucked and groaned wildly, putting her hands behind Francesca's head to press her down even more.

Instead Francesca moved up, making Kathleen whimper from the sudden lack of contact. The driver hovered above Kathleen's face for a few seconds, and then she kissed her passionately.

"I want you, please..." Kathleen whispered between kisses.

Francesca complied, kissing her way down Kathleen's body, before stopping at the elastic band of the pink panties. Instinctively, Kathleen spread her legs slightly to ease Francesca's access, and the driver responded by using her thumb to apply pressure through the soaked panties. She moved her finger rhythmically in small circles, some times gently, some times harder.

Kathleen tried to get out of the panties, and Francesca helped by snagging a finger inside the elastic band and pulling them off. She admired the view of Kathleen's blonde curls for a few seconds, and then ran her fingers over the moist folds.

Kathleen raised her hips off the couch and pressed her throbbing centre against Francesca's hand.

"Oh gaaaawd..." she moaned, her voice thick with passion. At the first touch of Francesca's tongue on her, Kathleen was unable to resist any longer and surrendered to a powerful climax surging through her body, making her buck and groan Francesca's name loudly.

After settling down slightly, the groans turned to quiet sobs, and Francesca scooted up Kathleen's body to hold her in her arms.

"Shhhh, I've got you, I've got you..." she whispered, cradling and gently rocking Kathleen in her arms.

"That was... that was my first time with a woman..." Kathleen whispered.

"Oh..."

"I love you so much, Francesca," Kathleen said shakily between sobs, and hugged the driver for all she was worth.

Francesca froze for a brief second, but relaxed before Kathleen could feel it.

'Love?' she thought. She stored the information in her mind - that was for later.

"Happy birthday..." Francesca whispered, and moved a stray lock of hair away from the blonde woman's eyes.

Kathleen chuckled and snuggled down in Francesca's arms.

"Thank you... for the roses and... everything. I could get used to this, you know," she said, and looked deep into Francesca's blue eyes.

"Good," the driver said, and claimed Kathleen's soft lips.

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Three days later, Francesca and Kathleen were standing in a small waiting room at a local airport in Kent, waiting for the Mercedes-Benz AG business jet to arrive. They could see the plane being prepared inside a hangar on the other side of the runway.

"You know, Francesca, I've never flown in such a small jet before..." Kathleen said, and fidgeted with her sleeves.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Don't worry, I'll hold your hand during take-off and the landing," Francesca said, and squeezed Kathleen's shoulder.

The Citation was towed out of the hangar by a tractor, and when it had cleared the building, it fired up its two jet engines. Slowly, it taxied onto the runway and towards the terminal building. When it was in place, the door was opened, and a small set of stairs was extended from the jet.

The two women took their suitcases and waited for the gate to open. When it did, they and the other passengers walked out to the jet.

The other four passengers, all computer technicians or engineers working for the team, got

settled in the single-seats, which left the only double for Francesca and Kathleen.

"Oh, how convenient," Francesca said and smiled mischievously.

With such an expression on her face, Kathleen knew that Francesca had arranged it that way. She had probably bribed all the others to stay away from the double.

The Captain came into the cabin and said hello to the passengers.

"Guten Tag, I'm Captain Holzer. Is everyone settled in? The trip is expected to last 45 minutes, and the weather looks fine all the way to our destination, so it should be a smooth ride. In case it isn't, you'll find your parachutes next to the rear escape hatch."

The other passengers had heard it countless times, so they all laughed dutifully.

Kathleen blinked a few times, and her mouth gaped open.

"German humour," Francesca said quietly to her.

"Ha... ha..." Kathleen replied dryly.

The flight was indeed smooth, but Francesca kept her promise by holding Kathleen's hand during the scary bits.

"How do we get to the circuit from here?" Kathleen said, as they were standing in the French airport. She looked at her watch, it was 4:50 PM local time.

"Before we took off, we rented a minibus from Hertz. The circuit's not far, actually. Only about half an hours' drive from here," Francesca said.

The rental bus signalled its arrival by honking, so they all picked up their bags and walked out to it.

'WELCOME TO LE MANS - CIRCUIT DE LA SARTHE' was proudly displayed on the side of a pedestrian bridge across the road. Francesca drove slowly underneath the bridge, and pulled up to a booth. They showed their credentials and received instructions on how to get to their pit area.

As they drove into the paddock behind the pit complex, Kathleen couldn't believe her eyes. Everything was enormous, even larger than the buildings in Monza. The pit complex stretched on for what seemed like miles in either direction, and there were hundreds of people milling about in the paddock, even though there wasn't a single car on the track yet.

"My goodness," she said and stared wide eyed at the anthill-like activity.

"Wait 'till you see the pit straight, Kathleen," Francesca said and grinned over the expression on the author's face.

They found the Mercedes pit easily enough, and they all got out of the minibus. The engineers and the technicians immediately joined their already present colleagues, and soon Francesca and Kathleen were alone. Francesca motioned to Kathleen that she should follow her, and they went over to stand between the large lorries carrying the race cars and the spares.

"Kathleen, as soon as they know I'm here, we won't see much of each other until after the test is finished at 9 or 10 pm tonight, so..." she leaned down to kiss the author, and continued:

"... have fun until we meet again, OK? Go to the Mercedes hospitality area, and ask for Belle. She's the press liaison, and she'll help you get comfortable."

"Hospitality area, Belle, okie-dokie," Kathleen said and looked around. Safe in the knowledge that no one could see them, she stood up on tiptoes and kissed the driver again.

"Please be safe, Francesca. Break a leg!" she said.

"Thanks... but I think I'd rather not, if you don't mind," Francesca said with a laugh, and left, heading towards the entrance to the pit complex.

Kathleen looked after her, and saw that she was greeted by man in a Mercedes suit who said something to her, and tapped on his wristwatch. Francesca shrugged, as if to say, 'whatever', and then they went inside the building.

Kathleen didn't have to look long for the Mercedes hospitality area. She could see the Star logo on the front of a big tent almost at once, so she made her way over there, careful not to get in the way of the many mechanics moving around in the paddock, some with laptops and some towing large trolleys carrying stacks of racing wheels.

When she walked inside, she saw the Star logo was prominently placed on everything - the carpet, the chairs, the tables, the uniforms the waitresses were wearing, and even on the glasses and plates themselves. She had to chuckle over the attention to detail.

Kathleen walked up to the bar and ordered a mineral water. A security guard came over to her.

"I'm sorry, Miss, you can't be in here without proper credentials," he said.

"Erm... oh, the plastic thing?"

"Yes," he replied.

Kathleen pulled a plastic card on a long keychain out of her purse and showed it to him.

"This one?"

"Yes. It checks out, so you're allowed to stay in here. You need to keep it visible," the guard said. At the same time, the bartender put down a tall glass of mineral water and a napkin in front of her.

"All right, thank you," she said to the guard, and looked at the card. She put the long chain around her neck, and put the card into the chest pocket of her blazer.

"Will this do?"

"It will. Good day, Miss."

"Good day," she said, and turned to the bartender.

"Hello. What do I owe?"

"Oh, nothing, Miss. The food and beverages are free for people with Mercedes credentials."

"Are they really? Then I should have ordered champagne," Kathleen said and smiled.

"You can have a whole bottle if you want," the bartender said, and showed her the well-equipped bar - rows and rows of bottles of the best known labels of spirits, beers and what looked like very exquisite wines.

"I'll keep that in mind... maybe later, thank you. By the way, I'm hoping you can help me, I'm looking for Belle, the press liaison?" Kathleen said.

He quickly scanned the tent.

"She's not here yet, but you can't miss her when she comes in, she's about your height, with a full head of ash-blonde curls."

"All right, that sounds easy enough to identify. Thank you," she said, and took her glass. She chuckled when she noticed that even the napkin had the Star logo on it. She quickly found a free table right next to two palm trees and sat down. Above the table, a flatscreen TV was continuously showing Mercedes-Benz ads and infrequently a highlights programme of last year's race that hadn't gone well for the team.

Kathleen had asked Francesca about it in one of the sessions, and she had told her that they had experienced technical difficulties that hadn't shown up in any of the testing they'd done. Both cars had been out after only 40 laps, and it was hugely disappointing, not to mention

embarrassing, to the crew, the drivers and not least the senior management who were all hoping for a great deal more. This year *had* to be better, and everybody had redoubled their efforts to make sure it would be.

A lady in a dark grey skirt and an off-white blouse entered the tent. She also had a full head of bobbing curls, and Kathleen quickly finished her drink and got up so she wouldn't miss her. The woman was talking to the bartender when Kathleen arrived, so she waited politely.

"Excuse me, are you Belle?" she said, when their conversation was over.

"I am. And you must be Kathleen O'Malley?" Belle said.

"That's right. How do you do." They shook hands, and Kathleen was surprised to see that Belle was much younger than she had anticipated. The woman couldn't be more than 30-31, and she was very good looking, with sharply drawn eyebrows, high cheek bones and lush lips.

"How do you do. Let me get you sorted... let's see," Belle said, and pulled out a PDA that was clipped to her belt.

"Oh, yes. I have you in room 11 in the Mercedes Hotel. How much luggage do you have?"

"Just my purse and this suitcase."

"I see. Do you require a porter?"

Kathleen felt somewhat insulted by that, and her facial expression told Belle so.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss O'Malley, I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't carry it, but a lot of our guests insist on having their luggage moved there by porters," Belle said apologetically.

"Really?" Kathleen said disbelieving.

"Yes."

"Well, I can handle my luggage just fine, thank you."

"All right. Then it's this way, please," Belle said, and motioned for Kathleen to leave the tent.

Belle walked very fast, and Kathleen had to hurry to keep up with her. They arrived at a temporary building with an advanced looking electronic security system on the front door.

"Miss O'Malley, you'll need this to get in. Here you go..." she said, and handed Kathleen a yellow keycard.

"OK,"

"And this is for your room. It's on the first floor," she said, and gave her a red keycard.

Kathleen looked exasperated at all the plastic cards, but reluctantly understood that it was necessary.

"Let me help you, here..." Belle said, and took the yellow keycard and put it into a slot next to a door. A red light blinked green after a few seconds, and the door unlocked.

"You have ten seconds to get in, after that it'll lock automatically, Miss O'Malley."

"What is this, Alcatraz?" Kathleen grumbled to herself, slowly getting annoyed over all this electronic nonsense.

"In your room, you'll find an ethernet socket, courtesy of Mercedes-Benz AG, with free and unlimited use of the Internet for your laptop. You'll also find charging equipment for all major brands of cell phones. Do you have any questions about the accommodations, Miss O'Malley?"

"I have neither a laptop nor a cell phone, but other than that, no. I'm fine," she said, and smiled.

"Oh... well, in any case, the kitchen in our hospitality area can provide you with breakfast, lunch and dinner at all times of the day. And I'm sure André has already told you that all food and beverages are free, courtesy of Mercedes-Benz AG, for those guests with full Mercedes credentials," Belle said.

"Yes, he has. Thank you. I don't want to take any more of your time, so... thank you," Kathleen said.

"Thank you, Miss O'Malley," Belle said, and left.

Kathleen let out a long, suffering sigh, and found the yellow keycard for the front door. She ran it through the slot, and it unlocked. She went inside, and started to climb the stairs.

Francesca rubbed her weary eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Four hours of looking at computer monitors and data printouts had taken its toll on her, and she badly needed a break. She looked at her watch, 9:30 PM.

"Are we done here?" she asked a technician who sat next to her at a computer console.

"Just about, Francesca. We only need to check the..." he said, and droned on.

She sighed and rolled her eyes.

A quarter past ten, they finally called it a night. She threw the plastic plates and a cup from her pasta dinner, nourishing but with no taste whatsoever, into the wastebin and stretched her back.

The crowd in the paddock had thinned out considerably now, so she had no problems in getting to the hospitality area.

She saw Belle and André, the bartender, sitting at a table, quietly talking.

"Hi, André, Belle," she said, and nodded to the two of them.

"Miss Carrara," the bartender said and returned the nod.

"Hello, Fran," Belle said, smiling seductively.

"I need a drink, so do you mind fixing me a Club Soda with a lemon twist, please, André?"

"My pleasure, Miss Carrara," he said, and went up to the bar.

"Have a seat," Belle said, and smiled.

Francesca raised an eyebrow, but sat down anyway.

"How have you been?"

"Just fine."

"Mmmm? I'm off in fifteen minutes. I know you have to get up early in the morning, but I was thinking..." Belle purred.

"I'm sorry, I can't."

"You could last year, as I recall."

A pause.

"That was then, and this is now, Belle."

"Well. Maybe some other time, then."

"Did Kathleen O'Malley find you?"

"She did, I put her in #11," Belle said, irritated over the change in subject.

"What the hell? Why isn't she in my room?" Francesca said surprised.

"In your room?"

"She's with me, Belle."

"Oh... You mean, like..."

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean."

"Oh."

"Somebody must've messed up," Francesca growled, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I better go and fix it right away," she said and got up. André had the Club Soda ready, but Francesca brushed past him without even looking at it.

"What was that all about?" he asked Belle, but didn't get an answer, as she got up and left in a huff, too.

"Women!" he said, and took a swig from the glass.

Francesca locked herself into the building and bounded up the stairs, two steps at a time. She quickly found room #11, and quietly knocked on the door.

"Kathleen? Are you in there, it's me, Francesca!"

The door was unlocked and opened.

"Hello... I think there's been some mistake..." Kathleen said, and stepped aside so Francesca could come in.

"I know, but... first things first," the driver said and proceeded to pull Kathleen close and kiss her senseless.

"Now, that's what I call a 'hello'," Kathleen said, giggling, after they separated.

"Good lord, I needed that," Francesca said, and sighed.

"There's only one bed in here," Kathleen said.

"I know. There's been a foul-up somewhere. You were supposed to stay in my room, down the hall in #17."

"Oh. Belle mustn't have been told, obviously."

"Obviously," Francesca said icily, and ran a hand through her hair.

"Now what?"

"Now we pack your suitcase again, and relocate you down to my room. I'll deal with Belle in the morning."

"Please don't be too hard on her. I'm sure she didn't have anything to do with it," Kathleen said, and put a hand on Francesca's arm.

"Mmmm. That's for tomorrow. Let's go," the driver said.

Some time later, they were resting in each other's arms in the double bed in Francesca's room.

"Muuuuch better," Kathleen whispered and nibbled at the tempting earlobe right in front of her face.

Francesca squirmed, but Kathleen held her tight and ran her tongue over the driver's exposed neck.

"We really need to get some sleep, Kathleen."

"We'll get to that eventually," she replied.

"No, I'm serious. I have to get up at 7 am," Francesca said and squirmed again over the delicate touch on her neck.

Kathleen stopped licking the driver's neck and snuggled down into the nook of her chin instead.

"Oh, all right. But when we get to Paris, I expect to be compensated."

"You will, no doubt about that," Francesca said, and reached up to turn off the reading light.

"Good night, Kathleen, sweet dreams," she whispered.

"Good night, Francesca, you too."

7:15 am, and Francesca stepped out of the shower to see Kathleen fast asleep draped across the table in the kitchenette. She smiled at the cute sight, and started to get dressed.

She took her driving suit and the fireproof nomex underwear from the closet and put it on the unmade bed.

First the panties and the sportsbra, then the long johns, the socks and the undershirt. She held out the suit and stepped in it, superstition demanding that she inserted the right leg first. She bent over and pulled the long john legs down, and then pulled the top of the suit up and put her arms into it. She zipped it, and the sound woke Kathleen up.

"Oh, I must've fallen asleep," she said, wiping her eyes and yawning.

"You did," Francesca said, as she was checking her gloves and her boots. She would wear tennis shoes until she was ready to get in the car, the delicate soles of the driving boots didn't like the rough asphalt in the paddock.

She opened the cupboard and took out her helmet and the 'Head & Neck Support'-device. She put them, the boots and the gloves into a holdall and zipped it.

"Well, I guess I'm ready," she said to Kathleen.

"Not quite, I haven't given you a goodbye kiss yet," the author said.

"Oh, that's right, I knew I had forgotten something." Francesca walked over to where Kathleen was sitting.

"Cheeky," Kathleen said, and rose to meet the taller woman's lips.

"Please stay safe," she whispered into Francesca's ear.

"I'll try. See you tonight at six," the driver said, and kissed Kathleen again for luck.

An hour later, the first of the test sessions officially started, and the potent racing engines came to life all the way up and down the pitlane. Italian and British V12's, American V8's, German flat-sixes and Japanese inline-four Turbos all competed for attention, the cacophony of sounds completely drowning out the PA speakers.

Kathleen could feel the vibrations in her chest, even sitting in the hospitality area, which was quite some distance from the front of pit garages.

All the TV's were now showing live pictures from the circuit - still mostly empty, save for a brave few who dared to go out on the still dusty track. One of those few was rewarded for his impatience with a lazy half-spin in the Esses.

Fifteen minutes into the session, the first of the major players took to the track - the #1 Maserati, last year's winner. The track announcer started to get excited and he reported the sector times as they came in on the official timing and scoring computers.

A few minutes after that, Mercedes #5, Francesca's car, took to the track, but unfortunately, the

caption didn't say who was driving. The TV followed it around the lap, and Kathleen stared at the screen the whole time, hoping that it was announced who the driver was. After the installation lap, #5 went back into the pits, and Kathleen relaxed again.

The TV cut to Francesca standing in the rear of the garage, talking to an engineer. The car was wheeled backwards into the garage with the driver's side door open, and she came forward and kneeled next to it, clearly talking to the driver.

A shadow fell over the table Kathleen was sitting at, and she looked up.

"Good morning, Miss O'Malley, do you need anything?" Belle said, with all the warmth of an icicle.

"Not right now, thank you," Kathleen replied, and turned her attention back to the screen.

"I'm terribly sorry the rooms were mixed up yesterday."

"It's all right, it wasn't your fault," Kathleen said politely.

"No. It wasn't," Belle replied with a scowl that Kathleen didn't see.

The TV was showing the action on the track. By now there were plenty of cars out, and the first fast laps started to come in. On the back straight, a privateer Ferrari was parked at the side of the track, and the driver was looking under the engine cover. Yellow flags were being waved leading up to the incident and green flags ahead of it.

The events soon turned into routine work for most of the teams, with only a few of them daring to go for fast times. None of the factory teams or the major privateers really needed to risk the cars, as they were practically sure to pre-qualify for the race, but a few of the smaller teams who always found themselves at the back of the grid were going for it.

The TV cut back to the Mercedes garage, and Francesca was strapping on her helmet, getting ready to go out. Kathleen's heart rate started going up again, and she found herself holding her breath. Kathleen had always thought that Francesca's helmet design was very pretty - very simple, yet highly effective to look at, it had a scarlet top and a ribbon around the crown in the same red and blue as the Union Jack, a heavily stylised FC in red and gold on the sides, and a ribbon in the Italian colours around the bottom of the helmet, where her chin would be.

Francesca put on her gloves and stepped into the car. The door was closed and the engine was started. A mechanic waved her out of the garage and onto the pitlane. Because of the 40 mph speed limit there, it looked like she was going so slow you could walk faster. At the end of the pits, she accelerated, and the TV cut to an onboard shot from over her shoulder. She wasn't visible in the shot apart from her hands, but Kathleen was mesmerised by the pictures. She got up and stood right in front of the TV, not wanting to miss anything.

Whoever the TV producer was, he had listened to her prayers, as it looked like they'd stay with

Francesca for a whole lap using the onboard camera. And not only that, but they put up a little onscreen graphic with the name of the corner when Francesca arrived at it.

She went through the Dunlop Corner and under the old bridge. She plunged down the Chapelle and into the Esses, heading for Tertre Rouge, constantly accelerating at this point. Through Tertre Rouge and onto the first part of the Mulsanne straight, the speed building to around 215 mph.

Kathleen couldn't believe how fast the scenery went by, and she had trouble remembering to breathe.

Francesca braked at the 150 meters board, and turned right into the first chicane. Through that, and back onto the straight. Again building up to maximum speed, and holding it for a while. Brake for the second chicane, a mirror image of the first one, and back onto the straight. She went through the kink, and the engine note sounded like she had the foot to the floor. Over the Mulsanne hump where the car seemed to be a bit skittish, and then braking hard for Mulsanne Corner.

Through that, past the old signalling pits, and onto the section of the track that Kathleen remembered Francesca had told her was the most dangerous of them all, the return trip from Mulsanne Corner. Over the first brow, then the second, driving at insane speeds with trees lining the circuit, and then she braked hard for the Indianapolis Corner. A short burst of acceleration and then through Arnage.

Again climbing to maximum speed, she swept through the countryside heading for the Porsche Curves, first a right, then a left, then a very long right that led into a left turn at Maison Blanche. Onto a short straight and then into the Ford Chicane, approaching the end of the lap. Left, right, left, right and onto the pit straight. The lap completed, the TV cut to the Mercedes thundering past the pits and out of sight.

Kathleen felt her legs turn wobbly, and she had to sit down. She felt completely drained by the pictures she had just seen. She couldn't fathom how anyone would volunteer to do that, and not just once, but 370 times or more in the race itself.

"How does it feel, Francesca?" the engineer asked over the radio.

"Not too bad, a bit unsteady," she replied over the background noise of the engine blasting away at full revs.

"Pit, pit, pit," the engineer said.

"Roger."

A few minutes later, Francesca brought the car into the pitlane, where it was wheeled into the

garage by the mechanics.

The engineer who had spoken with her on the radio kneeled next to the car.

"Jonno said it felt skittish over the hump and the brows after Mulsanne, do you concur?"

"Yes. It becomes light and floaty. I think we need more downforce on the front."

"It's already on max."

"Hmmm," Francesca said and wiped her brow with her gloved fingers. As soon as the car was stopped, the heat from the engine came forward into the cockpit.

"How's #6 doing?" she asked.

"They're saying the same thing you are."

"Hmmm."

"We'll experiment with varying fuel loads. First, we're going to do a run with full tanks. Do a six lap stint now, and if the car feels the same, we'll make some adjustments in the lunch break," the engineer said.

"All right. The engine is OK, but I still like the Twelve better. The V8 vibrates like hell."

"We know, we can see it on the telemetry," he said and jotted something down on a piece of paper stuck on a clipboard.

A mechanic shouted something from the rear of the car, and the engineer gave Francesca the thumbsup. He closed the door, and she drove out of the garage.

At lunch, the chequered flag ended the first test session, and the teams started analysing the data they had collected. Francesca had hoped to find Kathleen, but with this peculiar instability problem needing to be fixed, there would be no time for personal business.

"I don't understand why this problem hasn't shown up in the thousands of miles we've tested already?" Jonno said. All three drivers of #5 and the chief engineer of the car had a meeting in the corner of the garage.

"It's the track, we can't recreate it anywhere else," the engineer said.

"Derek? What does your experience tell you?" Francesca said.

"More downforce on the front, but we've already got all it can have. I don't know. Maybe it's a

design flaw somewhere?"

"No," the engineer said decisively, earning a raised eyebrow from all three drivers at once.

"Where are we in the times?" Jonno asked.

"10th and 12th," the engineer said, looking at the data on the screen.

"In other words, we're the slowest of the factory teams, right?"

"Right."

"How about bolting two winglets on each side of the front?" Derek asked.

"That'll alter the handling characteristics fundamentally," the engineer warned.

"It can't be worse," the veteran driver grumbled, and looked at Francesca.

"I say, why not. Let's try it," she said.

When the green flag was waved for the afternoon session, Kathleen was back in the hospitality area, eating a delicious fried chicken and salad and sipping white wine. She briefly wondered why the two Mercedes didn't take to the track when seemingly everyone else did, but she got the answer when the TV picture found the Mercedes garage.

Several mechanics were working on the front of both cars, but the camera couldn't get close enough to pick up what it might be. The workers looked to be in a great deal of haste, and it seemed less organised than usual.

After a little while, first #6 and then Francesca's #5, with her behind the wheel, left the garage. They circulated together for a lap, and then #6 came back into the pits - Francesca continued on.

The TV cut away to show other things, and Kathleen wondered what the unusual commotion in the garage had been all about.

André came over to her, holding a bottle of wine.

"More wine, Miss?"

"No, thank you," Kathleen said and smiled.

The TV suddenly cut to a yellow privateer Porsche, looking rather second hand, parked across the track at the exit of the first chicane on the Mulsanne. The driver got out of the car and walked away, gesticulating wildly on the way to the cornerworkers, who were busy waving yellow flags.

The camera showed a replay, which turned out to be a classic Porsche accident - the driver giving it too much throttle at the exit of the corner and getting the tail all out of shape, finally ending up in the barrier. After the replay, they zoomed in on the hapless driver, who was still mouthing off to anyone who'd listen. Kathleen chuckled at the sight of the irate man, and toasted him with the last of her wine.

Francesca came into the picture and passed the accident site with greatly reduced speed, like she was supposed to. The camera followed the factory Mercedes as it sped away from the stranded Porsche, and again Kathleen marvelled over the incredible acceleration of the race car.

"That shunt ruined my qually test, should I go on?" Francesca said on the radio as she accelerated away from the incident.

"Yes. You have fuel for one more lap," the engineer replied.

"Roger that."

The next lap, Francesca went around in maximum attack mode, completely throwing caution to the wind, shaving the apexes more than she had done before, and generally driving very aggressive.

The reward came when she passed the start-finish line, and the engineer congratulated her over the radio.

"Well done, Fran - position 1, fastest time of the day," he said.

"It should've come sooner," Francesca replied, dissatisfied with the day's work.

A little later on, Francesca joined Kathleen in the hospitality area, and the author immediately knew that she was unhappy. A steady stream of people congratulating her and patting her on her shoulders didn't improve Francesca's mood, as company policy dictated that she should wear a smile when dealing with the corporate guests.

Finally she was allowed to go to the table Kathleen was sitting at. She sat down and the fake smile melted from her face.

"Bad day?" Kathleen asked, concerned.

"Mmmm. Terrible day. The car's awful."

"But you're fastest?"

"Sure, but if we were to drive like that in the race, the car won't last twenty laps. I had to kick it in the arse to get that time out of it."

"Oh."

"There's some kind of aerodynamic instability somewhere in the system. It really got on my last nerve, I can assure you," Francesca said, and sighed.

"I believe you," Kathleen said, grabbed Francesca's hands, and started to squeeze and massage them.

"Are you done for the day?" she asked.

"Almost. Belle probably needs a few words for the website and the press releases."

"Here she is now, actually," Kathleen said, as she saw Belle entering the tent.

Francesca sighed again. Belle came over to her with a small recording device in her hands, and asked Francesca a few stock questions. The driver gave a few stock answers, and Belle left again, completely ignoring Kathleen.

"Now I'm done," Francesca said, and got up from the table.

Francesca felt much better the next day when they arrived at the small pension in Rue Gabrielle in Montmartre in Paris. It wasn't easy to find a parking space for the little Peugeot they had rented - Kathleen had insisted on not only renting it in her name, but driving it, too - but they finally did, and were quickly at the pension, suitcases in hand.

"Oh! Look at that! Pure charm, none of those glass- and concrete towers they call hotels these days," Kathleen said and looked up at the façade of the typical French hotel from the early 1900's.

"Glad you like it. I've been here a couple of times," Francesca said, and opened the door for Kathleen.

"Hopefully not with too many other women," Kathleen said, only half-joking.

"Of course not. I go here when I want to get away from everything."

Kathleen instantly fell in love with the apartment they were given. It was simple, only two rooms, with a small kitchen and a bathroom, but it had everything they would need for their brief

stay.

The bedroom had an old brass bed that reminded her of her own one back home, and several beautiful paintings were hanging on the wall. Everywhere else, the walls were draped in a wallpaper with a wonderfully old-fashioned design, and the living room had a dark green velvet chaise lounge that appeared to be from the turn of the last century, as well as other antique furniture, like a charming set of matching oil lamps on a low sideboard.

Kathleen looked around the room with sparkling eyes, and sat her suitcase down on the floor. Behind her, Francesca came in, and put her arms around Kathleen's waist.

"What do you think, Kathleen?"

"Oh god, I love it. I never want to leave!"

"Good," Francesca said, and moved Kathleen's hair aside to kiss her on the neck.

"But there's one thing I can't quite understand..."

"And that is?"

"Why you choose to go to *this* place when you want to get away from everything... Francesca, are you a closeted romantic?"

"I'll give you romantic!" she said, and poked Kathleen in both sides at once.

The blonde woman shrieked and jumped a foot in the air. When she landed, she chased Francesca around the room until she finally caught and tackled her onto the chaise lounge, all the while laughing like a pair of lunatics.

After settling down, they kicked off their shoes and just enjoyed the moment.

"Running around like a couple of love crazed teenagers!" Kathleen said, still a bit out of breath.

"I like having women chasing me," Francesca said, mussing Kathleen's hair.

"Well, it's a whole new experience for me. I'm more of a 'nice and slow' type," the author replied, leaning into the touch.

"Mmmm, not always..." Francesca purred, and tenderly kissed Kathleen's hair.

"Listen, I'm starved, so how about we venture out into the big city and go down the street to Chez Marie... what do you say?" Francesca said.

"That sounds like a very good idea, Francesca."

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CHAPTER 5

"Good lord, I thought this place was crowded for the test days... this is madness!" Kathleen said out loud, sitting on a high chair in a booth in the paddock in Le Mans on race weekend, staring at the thousands upon thousands of spectators walking around. Several dozen fans had gathered in front of the booth, talking amongst themselves in all possible languages.

She nervously scanned the crowd and checked her watch. The presentation of the biography was scheduled to start in five minutes, but Francesca was not to be seen anywhere. She adjusted her collar for the umpteenth time, and once again cursed silently that she hadn't chosen one of her v-neck blouses to wear instead of this damned uncomfortable brand name design. The skirt wasn't any better, it kept riding up her thigh, and the crowd didn't need to see that much of her.

'Oh, this is fantastic. She's deserted me, and now I have to talk to all these people,' Kathleen thought, and got the shivers just thinking about it.

Suddenly, the crowd parted and started clapping. Francesca came through the mill of people, smiling and talking to everyone.

'About bloomin' time!' Kathleen thought, and raised an eyebrow at Francesca when she was close enough to see it.

"I had to sign a few autographs, but I made it," she said.

"Barely."

"There's no need to win by a minute when a second will do," Francesca teased.

"Funny."

The representative of the publishing house turned on the microphone and blew into it, creating a deafening roar from the loudspeakers that had everyone covering their ears.

"Oops... I guess it works," he said.

"So, anyway, we're here today to talk about the new biography, written by acclaimed and best selling author Kathleen O'Malley, about the racing driver Francesca Carrara, who needs no introduction to you lot," he said.

Kathleen was discouraged to see some of the spectators walking away, but Francesca leaned in and whispered to her that it was perfectly normal.

"And here's Francesca herself to give us a few words of wisdom... Fran?" the presenter said, and handed Francesca the microphone.

"Right. Any questions?" she said, and the crowd laughed.

She started telling a few anecdotes and promised there would be plenty more of that in the biography. Kathleen smiled from ear to ear over the way Francesca had the crowd in her hands, and as a result, the time just flew by. Soon the fifteen minute Q&A session was all over, and Francesca sat down at a small table to sign autographs and pose for pictures. Not everyone bought the book, but more than a few did, and by the end of the thirty minutes, they had sold nearly 35 copies.

The crowd started thinning out, and Francesca put down her Sharpie and massaged her wrist. Kathleen was standing next to her, still smiling for all she was worth - and with an open collar, the top button having finally surrendered to all her re-adjusting, disappearing without a trace.

"That was something else, Francesca. It was never like this with my Kaye Jason book."

"Well, motorsport fans are enthusiastic. You'll see that at the parade, too. You are coming, aren't you?" Francesca said.

"Well, if you want me there?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I want you there!" the driver said and smiled.

"Let's hope I won't get lost in the massive crowd," Kathleen said and laughed nervously.

"You won't," Francesca said, and straightened Kathleen's loose collar.

But she did. All the drivers of the race went by in veteran cars, driving very slowly so everyone would get a chance to see their heroes. They started in chronological order based on the entry number, so Francesca's car was fortunately one of the first.

Kathleen was being manhandled this way and that, caught between the crowd and the red and white tape marking the restricted area. She had screaming children on one side, and drunken fans of all nationalities, all holding plastic cups of beer, on the other. Her designer shirt now sported a very damp left sleeve, courtesy of a pint of Kronenbourg. Well, if nothing else, it gave her a reason to throw the uncomfortable thing away, so she wasn't too upset.

Finally Francesca's car went by, naturally an old Mercedes-Benz from the 1920's. The three British drivers waved enthusiastically to the crowd, and threw little trinkets out to them, like Mercedes keychains or autographed photos.

Jonno was sitting closest to the side where Kathleen was standing, and he recognised her and

waved. He tapped Francesca on the shoulder and pointed at Kathleen. Francesca's face lit up in a huge smile, waved at the author, and threw her one of the photos.

With Francesca moving on, Kathleen decided that she had had enough of this rugby scrum and wiggled her way out of the crowd. She knew she'd be black and blue in the morning from all the elbows she'd received, and her ears were ringing from all the drunken chanting going on around her, but when she looked at the photo Francesca had thrown her, she still smiled.

Francesca opened the door to her room in the Mercedes Hotel and furrowed her brow. She sniffed again... the place reeked like a tavern! She hung her jacket into the closet and looked at Kathleen, who was reclining on the bed, reading a magazine.

"Ah, Kathleen, dear... how much beer have you had today?" she asked sweetly.

"Plenty. Most of it went down my shirt," the author replied with a grin.

"I can tell."

"Yes, I know... but unfortunately, the window only opens two inches, and it's not enough for the air to circulate," Kathleen said and laughed.

"You stood next to the Drinking For Holland team at the parade, didn't you?"

"I must have. The name fits!" Kathleen said and sat up on the bed.

Francesca came over and kneeled in front of the author. They kissed and rubbed noses.

"But it was fun, wasn't it?" Francesca asked.

"Well... thank you for the picture, by the way."

"You're welcome. Don't you think it was fun?"

"It was a little too loud and loony for me, to be perfectly honest," Kathleen said.

"You haven't seen anything yet. After the race is over, all the spectators from the main grandstand will run onto the track and meet below the victory dais. That's tens of thousands of people. Guess how loud *that* usually is?" Francesca said and caressed Kathleen's cheek with her thumb.

"I'd rather not," the author said, leaning into the touch.

"Well, you're going to see it Sunday, after I win."

"Oh? Confident, are we?"

"Yes. I'm not going to say that I 'hope for a good result'. For me, and for the team, it's win or bust. I'd rather win," Francesca said.

Kathleen nodded.

"So... how does the time plan look like from now until the race starts?"

"First, we go and eat in the tent, then we come back here and make mad love all night, then it's the warmup, starting at 8 am tomorrow," Francesca said.

"Hey, I thought that athletes weren't supposed to make mad love all night in the buildup to a big match...?" Kathleen said and grinned wickedly.

"That's right.. for male athletes. We women improve our stamina by making love..." Francesca purred into Kathleen's ear, and started to nibble her earlobe.

"OK, OK, I get the picture!" Kathleen said, giggling.

"Too bad, I would've loved to spell it out for you," Francesca said, still busy with Kathleen's earlobe.

The morning warmup went well for the Mercedes team, finishing third and sixth fastest. Apart from a single lap in the beginning when Derek was behind the wheel, Francesca drove the entire thirty minutes, so when she returned to the pits and got out of the car, she immediately unzipped the top of her driving suit and tied it around her waist. The day had turned out to be hot, so she grabbed a towel and wiped her neck and her arms.

She picked up the official bulletin with the qualifying times and looked for a quiet place to sit down and read it. Having found a chair in the corner of the garage, she studied the lap times.

The Toyotas had proved to be a strong contender all weekend, and they emerged as the team most likely to win, lining up in pole position and in second place on the grid after the four qualifying sessions. That also meant that Francesca and the others now had a well-defined target. Beat the Toyotas, and they would probably find themselves at the front of the field.

Mercedes #5 had qualified fourth, with Francesca doing the time. In the two week period since they discovered the instability problem on the test day, the engineers had developed a new aerodynamic package for the car by adding three winglets on each side of the front, and adjusting the rear wing to realign the balance. It felt much better to the drivers, and the increase in confidence resulted in faster lap times. Francesca was slightly annoyed over the fact that a privateer BMW had squeezed ahead of her in the dying moments of the last qualifying session, but she knew that car couldn't be driven at that speed for long.

Unfortunately for #6, 'Pico' Paletti had a spin when the track was at its fastest, so when everyone else were going for quick times, they had to stay in the garage to get several buckets worth of gravel scooped out of the car. In the end, they qualified ninth, nearly six seconds slower than Francesca's fastest lap time in #5.

All in all, everything looked good for the team in general, and for Francesca in particular.

The tension was building, everyone felt it. Thirty minutes to the start of the race, and the butterflies had begun to flap their wings. Kathleen could see it clear as day on Francesca's face. Gone were the bright smiles from yesterday, replaced by a stoic mask of calmness - and yet Kathleen knew that Francesca was getting agitated, as the driver's hands were cold. The author had volunteered to be the umbrella-girl for car #5, keeping the driver cool and out of the afternoon sun.

The grid was awash with people - TV crews, mechanics, all kinds of engineers and technicians and assorted more-or-less important hangers-on. There were even scantily clad women in the shape of the Hawaiian Tropic Girls, strutting their stuff draped across cars and drivers, and attracting choirs of lewd shouts and catcalls from the grandstand.

Francesca kept her cool through all this pandemonium. She was standing next to the car, focusing on getting the job done. As she had always said, you can't win an endurance race at the first corner, you can only lose it. It was so easy to overdo it at the start and ending up looking like a complete idiot in front of the TV cameras - and more importantly, in front of the people who were paying her wages. Some of the Mercedes-Benz board of directors were at the track, and at this level, and in front of those kinds of people, you only get one chance. Foul that up, and you better start looking for another job.

Much to Kathleen's shock, she had decided to get a haircut prior to the race, leaving it very short. Looking at the climbing temperatures, she was happy she had made that decision. With the ambient temperature around the 28-30 centigrade mark, it would be awfully hot in the cars today, possibly reaching 70 degrees centigrade.

A klaxon bellowed out an infernal sound, signalling fifteen minutes to go to the start of the warmup lap. A track marshal walked down the grid holding a sign with the same message.

Francesca opened a small case containing new earplugs and prepared them by shaping them with her fingers. She smiled at Kathleen.

"Now long to go now, huh?" she said.

"No. This is incredible. Look at all these people!" Kathleen said.

"Yeah. There seems to be more and more each year. I don't know what the hell they're all here for..." Francesca said, and inserted one of the earplugs.

"They can't all be umbrella-holders, can they?" Kathleen said and laughed.

The long line of Hawaiian Tropic Girls waltzed past the Mercedes and the two women, heading for the small opening in the barrier to get off the track.

Kathleen blushed over the excess of skin on display, but Francesca completely ignored them, instead concentrating on getting the other earplug in correctly.

The klaxon sounded again, ordering the grid to be cleared.

"This is it, Kathleen. Thank you for your umbrella-holding services," Francesca said and smiled broadly.

"Oh, you're welcome. Please be safe, all right?"

"I will. Hug."

"... in front of all these people?" Kathleen said, blushing again.

"Hug," Francesca repeated, and took the author in her arms, giving her an almighty squeeze.

"See you in a few hours," Francesca said and winked at Kathleen. The author waved in return as she was led away by the track marshals, guiding the remaining people off the grid.

Two mechanics strapped Francesca into the car and tightened her seatbelts almost to the point of crushing her. They closed the door, and she was left all alone. She pressed the starter button, and the engine came to life. Rumbling away at a very low idle, she blipped the throttle a few times to check the engine note. She looked at the gauges and nodded to herself.

She was set.

At the front of the field, the clerk of the course waved the green flag, and the car in pole position slowly left the grid and started the warmup lap. After a few seconds, Francesca followed the leaders, remembering to prepare the brakes by slightly holding her left foot on the brake pedal while she accelerated. She started to weave left and right to try to get some more heat into the tires.

Kathleen watched the start of the warmup lap on the TV screens in the hospitality area. She was more nervous than at any point in her life. So many things could go wrong for Francesca...

The tent was packed to the rafters, and the noise level was grating on Kathleen, but their room back in the Hotel didn't have a TV, and she *had* to see what happened.

The cars made their way around the circuit in orderly fashion, and at one minute to three, they were lined up in rows of two, approaching the Ford Chicanes.

The pace car peeled off, and the Tricolour was ready. At the exact stroke of three o'clock, the flag dropped and the cars set off. The sound of 50 racing cars accelerating at once echoed through the paddock and drowned out the TV commentators. As predicted, the two Toyotas immediately took the lead, but Francesca slotted into third place by passing the privateer BMW even before they reached the Dunlop Chicane.

All the front runners went through the chicane without problems, but as usual, some of the more inexperienced backmarkers tried too much and ended up cutting across the gravel trap.

The leaders went through Tertre Rouge heading onto the Mulsanne, and the race was on proper. The two Toyotas battled for the lead, screaming down the Mulsanne, pulling slightly away from the rest of the field. At the braking point to the first chicane, the privateer BMW divebombed Francesca's Mercedes, locking up the near side front wheel in the process, and just squeezing past on the inside. Wisely, she let him go, concentrating on her own race.

The rest of the lap had no dramas of consequence for the front runners, and Kathleen began to relax slightly, though the concrete block in her stomach refused to loosen up. The first lap of Le Mans ended with the two Toyotas out front, as predicted, then the privateer interloper, and then Francesca's Mercedes, its tail stepping out slightly as she applied the throttle onto the front straight.

The field streamed by, but Kathleen didn't really notice what was going on behind the top four. One lap down, more than 370 to go if the fair weather held up, and it looked like it would.

Some 36 laps later, amounting to slightly more than two hours and five minutes, Francesca entered the pits after her third stint. She jumped out of the car and helped Jonathan Baker getting strapped in. Watching the mechanics changing the tires and refuelling the car, she took off her helmet and put it on a shelf at the back of the garage. In the heat of the day, the tires needed to be changed after each stint, so they had decided there was no point in stressing the drivers needlessly, and they would only triple-stint for now. Later, when the temperature fell, the tires would last longer, and they'd go for quadruple stints.

After talking to the engineers and Derek Harrison, she walked out the back of the garage and picked up a fresh driving suit in the depot, before heading off to the physio for a shower and her massage.

Twenty minutes later, she came into the hospitality tent and looked around for Kathleen. She quickly spotted the fair-haired author and went over to her table.

"Hello Kathleen," Francesca said, and pulled out a chair.

"Hi. How's it going?" Kathleen said and smiled, putting away the newspaper she'd been reading.

"Fairly well. We're still in third place. Jonno's in now."

"OK. I've missed you."

"I was only gone for two hours," Francesca said and laughed.

"I saw the start on the big-screen TV. God, was I nervous..."

"It was nothing. Piece of cake."

"Oh, suuure," Kathleen said and smiled sarcastically.

Francesca chuckled over the expression on Kathleen's face, and gave her a wink.

"Do you have time to go back to the Hotel?"

"Unfortunately, no. I'm not even supposed to be over here, but I wanted to see you," Francesca said.

"Oh..."

"You aren't bored, are you?"

"No. I'm nervous."

"Don't worry about me, Kathleen. I know what I'm doing."

"I know, but you're sharing the track with 49 other drivers, who might not know what *they're* doing..."

Francesca laughed.

"True, that. No, I'll be fine, don't worry," she said, and caressed Kathleen's hand. Kathleen

nodded.

"But, tell you what, if you're interested, you can come to the garage and watch from there while I'm driving... are you?"

"Interested? Oh yes, definitely, but won't I need a pit pass...?"

"Yep. And it looks a lot like this one..." Francesca said, and pulled a plastic card on a keychain out of her driving suit, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"Oh, Francesca!" Kathleen said loudly, causing a few of the people sitting at the neighbouring tables to stretch their necks to see what was going on.

"Now, I know you'll have to deal with Belle... and vice versa... but if you show this to her, she'll let you stay there," Francesca said.

Kathleen took the pit pass and put it around her neck with the three others she already had there.

"I'm looking like an advertisement for keychains," she said and laughed out loud.

Francesca leaned in towards Kathleen.

"I think you look cute, that's what I think," Francesca whispered, causing the author to blush slightly.

"Well, I better get back to the pits in case they need me. See you in a few hours," Francesca said, and ran her thumb over the back of Kathleen's hand.

"See you then, Francesca. And thank you very much for the pit pass."

Francesca nodded and waved as she left the tent.

Nearly three hours later, Kathleen proudly showed her pass to the Mercedes security guards standing at the back of the garages, and walked in. She had arrived between pit stops, so the mechanics were sitting on plastic chairs, trying to get some rest. She waited behind a yellow line that said 'restricted area'.

Belle spotted her, and reluctantly decided to go and talk to the author.

"Hello, Miss O'Malley. I didn't know you had a pit pass?" she said.

"Francesca gave me one."

"Oh, how kind of her. She's like that, very giving."

"Yes," Kathleen said, and mentally rolled her eyes.

"Well, I suppose you're part of the family now, so if you want to have a closer look around the pits, I can give you a 'visitor' badge?" Belle said.

"I'd like that, thank you."

"All right," Belle said, and took a small metal badge from a table, signed it, and gave it to Kathleen.

"You better put this on yourself, I don't want to risk injuring a guest of Mercedes-Benz" she said, smiling sweetly.

Kathleen returned the smile, refusing to join the juvenile game played by the other woman.

"Fran's in the car right now. Do you want to listen in? I'll give you a headset," Belle said as they walked over to the other side of the garage.

"Oh, that would be fun - yes, please," Kathleen said.

"All right, hang on, they're around here somewhere... here you go," Belle said, and presented the headset to Kathleen.

Kathleen adjusted the strap, and put them on.

"She's on lap 5 of her stint, and she's due in on lap 12, which is in about 24 minutes or so," Belle said to her.

"Where is she on the track?"

"Let me see... she's on the Mulsanne right now. That's the back straight, it's on the far side of the circuit," Belle explained carefully, after checking the monitor.

"I know. Thank you," Kathleen said, and had to struggle to not let it show how much the other woman annoyed her.

A few laps passed without any radio communication, but on the next lap, Francesca keyed the mic as she was coming out of the Porsche Curves.

"Pits, I've nudged a car. He turned in on me. Check for damage," she said.

"10-4."

A minute or so later, Francesca thundered past the pits, heading onto another lap, the 93rd.

"Fran, it looks OK."

"OK."

Half a lap later, Kathleen heard Francesca's voice in her headset.

"It's skittish, I must have some damage."

"OK. Pit, pit, pit," one of the engineers replied.

"Roger. I'm at the second chicane on the Mulsanne."

Kathleen loved it when Francesca talked shop, so she was smiling broadly, but at the same time she was disappointed to hear about an apparent problem with the car. Francesca had told her several times that Le Mans is really won in the pits. The car that spends the least time in there will have an edge over a car that's faster but more fragile.

A TV was droning on in the background, and Kathleen looked at it from time to time. She looked at her watch, 8:19 pm. Suddenly she noticed Francesca's voice had become strained.

"I have a problem. It's handling like a pig, I can't..." she said, and then the contact was lost.

The TV cut to a picture of a flash of silver in the air, and the spectators in the grandstand on the opposite side of the pit straight fell silent.

Kathleen was confused - she had only caught the last glimpse of what the TV had showed, so she looked to Belle for an answer. The headset was only sending static, so she took it off.

Everyone in the garage were looking at the monitor, and Kathleen felt a chill creeping up her spine. The picture on the TV was still showing an empty piece of track, even though she could hear cars circulating. Suddenly several track marshals came into the picture, carrying fire extinguishers, apparently running towards a section of the track that was just after the second brow on the return stretch from Mulsanne Corner... but there wasn't a car where they were running to...?

Suddenly it dawned on Kathleen that Francesca's car had left the circuit and had gone into the trees. Her heart started hammering in her chest, and she didn't know whether to stand up or sit down.

Belle came over to her, and Kathleen saw the usually cool woman was white as a sheet. Someone shouted something, and they both looked up at the monitor.

The TV began showing a replay of what had happened. Francesca was rapidly catching another car when the front of the Mercedes suddenly started lifting. The TV cut to another camera angle,

and caught her car taking to the air. It made four reverse flips in mid-air, probably 15 feet off the ground, before disappearing out of the camera's view, heading towards the trees.

"Oh dear god!" Kathleen cried out in a trembling voice.

Stunned silence filled the Mercedes garage. Kathleen felt cold as ice on the inside, and she clenched her fists and held them to her chest.

The clerk of the course came inside the garage and spoke in hushed tones with the team manager, who nodded in response to the older man's words. After the senior track official had left, the team manager pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and dialled a number.

The TV changed to a helicopter shot of the crash site. Francesca's car had landed on its wheels about 30 yards from the edge of the circuit. By pure luck, the grove where the car landed appeared to be recently forested, so there weren't any trees at all, not even stubs. As the helicopter hovered over the site, a doctor team arrived on the track and began to make their way across the guardrail and towards the car.

The front bodywork had been ripped off and was lying across the rear deck, hiding the extent of damage there, and both front wheels had been torn off. The driver's side door was open, but there hadn't been any movement in the car, so it was impossible to say if Francesca had opened it, or if it had been forced open in the impact.

The doctor ducked into the cockpit and quickly came back out. He talked to the other medics there, and a man was sent for a stretcher from the ambulance.

"I have their frequency!", one of the technicians in the garage suddenly said, holding a portable radio in his hand.

"... ah, the doctor says the driver is awake and alert, but complaining of severe pain in her lower back and her left leg."

A sigh of relief was heard throughout the garage, but everyone knew that a back injury could still be serious. All kinds of horrible images flashed through Kathleen's mind, but she forced herself to focus on the TV pictures.

The growl of an engine signalled #6's arrival in the adjacent garage. The team manager opened the door and spoke to the driver. Behind them, two mechanics pulled down the garage doors - the team manager's phone call to Stuttgart had resulted in the team pulling out of the race immediately.

"They're taking her out of the car now," the interpreter said, and the TV pictures confirmed it. Francesca was extracted from the wreckage and placed very gingerly on the stretcher. She was fitted with a neckbrace, and it looked like the doctor gave her an injection of some kind.

The medical team carried the stretcher across the grove, over the guard rail and into the waiting ambulance. A medic closed the double doors and the ambulance began moving, the blue lights flashing away.

"Where are they taking her?" Kathleen asked out loud. Wherever it was, she needed to be there when Francesca arrived.

"She'll go to the infield medical centre first. If the extent of her injuries exceed their capabilities, she'll be airlifted to a hospital in the area," Belle told her, sounding like a robot and clearly in a state of shock.

"Can I get there? Belle? I need to be with her..." Kathleen said, and put her hand on Belle's shoulder, but the other woman wasn't responding.

"Dammit Belle, where is the bloody medical centre?!" Kathleen shouted.

No one had time to answer her, so Kathleen ran out of the garage and into the paddock. She stopped three people before she found one who knew where it was - clear down the other end of the paddock. Kathleen cursed and set off running.

When she arrived at the medical centre, she was completely out of breath, and she had to lean forward and put her hands on her knees. Her lungs were burning and her ankles and calves were aching from the shoes that definitely weren't designed to be used in a sprint - but she had beat the ambulance there.

Half a minute later, it arrived and drove up to the door of the medical centre. The doctor Kathleen had seen on the TV pictures climbed out and went to the rear of the car to open the double doors. Two nurses came out of the hospital to help.

The stretcher was wheeled out and to Kathleen's eyes, Francesca looked very pale. The driving suit had been cut off of her and her body was wrapped in a blue blanket.

"Francesca!" Kathleen shouted, but there was no reaction from the driver. The stretcher was pushed into the medical centre, and the nurses closed the doors behind it.

"Bloody hell!" Kathleen said, and wiped her eyes angrily.

The Mercedes team manager and someone Kathleen didn't know, but who was wearing a Mercedes shirt, arrived at the medical centre on a scooter and went inside. Kathleen tried to follow them, but she was denied access by one of the nurses.

She went back outside and sat down on a curb. She held her head in her hands and let out a long, trembling sigh.

Ten minutes later, she heard the unmistakable sound of a helicopter warming up, and she bolted to her feet. She looked around to see where it was, and was filled with dread when she realised that it was on the other side of the medical centre, in an area she couldn't get to.

Kathleen's heart was hurting terribly when the white and orange Air Rescue helicopter took off a few minutes later, taking Francesca away from her and to an unknown hospital.

She followed the helicopter with her eyes until she couldn't see it any more. When it was just a black spot in the far distance, she started walking back to the pits. After a few dozen yards, she was caught by the team manager who was on the scooter.

"Miss O'Malley, we haven't been introduced. My name's Jochen Graumann. Do you want a lift?" he said, and put out his hand. She shook it.

"Where are they taking Francesca?"

"They're transferring her to the Le Mans city hospital. It's only a few miles away, but it would take too long on these congested roads. She's probably there already."

Kathleen nodded. At least she knew where Francesca was. The hospital was familiar to her, they had driven by it on their way to the circuit on Wednesday morning.

"I have a press release with me. Basically she's all right, but she has a fractured pelvis and possibly a fractured left leg or hip. And she's got a concussion," he said.

"God, you call that 'basically all right'?"

"It could've been a lot worse, Miss."

"... Did... did she ask for me?"

"She was sedated the whole time I was there... I'm sorry."

Kathleen nodded.

"What now?" she asked.

"Well... first of all, come back to the pits with me. I'll give the crew a briefing, and then we'll work out a plan. OK?"

Kathleen sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

"OK. But I demand to see her," she said forcefully, and got seated on the scooter.

"I understand. Hang on," the team manager said, and selected first gear.

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CHAPTER 6

Several hours later, Kathleen was in her bed in the Mercedes hotel, staring up at the ceiling. The race was still going on, but she couldn't care less about that now. She had taken a sleeping tablet, but she was far too shaken up to relax.

In the hours following the accident, the team had dismantled the garage and loaded the giant lorries who rumbled out of the paddock just after midnight. The hotel and the hospitality tent would stay for the remainder of the race, but only because they were used by other people as well as Mercedes personnel.

Just before Kathleen left for the night, the man she had seen on the scooter with the team manager returned, and she found out he was the team's physiotherapist and doctor. He had been with Francesca in the helicopter, escorting her to the hospital, and he explained in great detail to Kathleen and the team what and how serious Francesca's injuries were.

She had been x-rayed and thoroughly checked, and the initial diagnosis had proven correct: her pelvis was fractured, but fortunately it didn't appear to have caused any internal bleeding or tears in the surrounding soft tissue. Her left hip was fractured as well, a piece of bone had been chipped off the pelvis, and her thigh bone had a clean break two inches from the top. The injuries were no doubt a result of the car's very hard impact on the ground.

The lower spine had been compressed, but not dangerously so, and there was no risk of Francesca losing the use of her legs.

The impact itself had knocked her out, and she couldn't remember anything about the accident. Francesca had told him that she regained consciousness just as the first doctor arrived at the car.

All this information churned on mercilessly inside Kathleen. No matter how hard she tried to relax, she couldn't get the evening's events out of her mind. She sighed and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She could feel a headache coming on, so she got up and took an Aspirin and a glass of water. Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was 3:31 am, seven and a bit hours after the accident - the worst seven hours of her life, even beating the horrible evening five years ago when Becky had slapped her across the face after she told her that she loved her.

Kathleen sighed deeply and went back to the bed. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, and she knew she'd be terribly exhausted if she didn't catch some sleep now. It was a warm night, so she threw the blanket down to the footend of the bed that she was too short to reach anyway, and settled for her oversized T-shirt. She found a comfortable position on her left side, and after a

little while, she fell into a restless sleep.

The alarm clock chimed at 7 am, waking Kathleen from a horrible nightmare where she dragged a fatally injured Francesca out of a destroyed car, and even though there were plenty of people around her, they refused to help.

Kathleen rolled over onto her back and rubbed her face to get the last fragments of that nightmare out of her system. She could see the sun shining through the protective cover she had pulled down in front of the window, and in the distance, she could hear the racecars still going round. A part of her felt very disappointed over the fact that Francesca had again lost the opportunity to win this race, but another, stronger, part of her vowed to never have anything to do with race cars again, or even go to a race again.

Jochen Graumann had stayed behind when the rest of the team left after midnight, and he had promised to pick up Kathleen and go with her to the hospital - he'd be there at 7:30 am. She knew she had to hurry to make it, so she got off the bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

After a very quick shower, she got dressed and packed everything into their suitcases. The large holdall usually used for Francesca's helmet was empty, so she picked that up as the last item, and took it under her arm. She checked the room for any forgotten belongings, but it was empty. She locked the door and went down the hallway to the stairs.

She didn't have to wait long for the team manager who was there nearly on time.

"Are you ready, Miss?"

"Yes. We have a rental car, a blue Mercedes C-class, in the car park, what will happen to that?" she asked, as they walked through the paddock, heading for the main exit.

"We'll deal with that later. Did you have any breakfast?"

"No. No time for that."

"Do you want any before we go?"

"No. I want to see Francesca," Kathleen said, a bit more strongly than she wanted to.

Jochen merely nodded.

"Belle fainted last night, after you had run off to the medical centre."

"She did?"

"Yes. The accident struck her quite hard."

"I think she and Francesca used to be... to know each other privately."

"I've heard that rumour. I sent her home with the rest of the crew last night. Anyway, it was a madhouse this morning. I had reporters from every newspaper and TV station imaginable shouting questions at me in several different languages at once. I could really have used Belle."

"Well, I guess it's big news," Kathleen said.

"We're going to get roasted in the German press," he said and sighed.

A short pause.

"I don't think the team will go on."

"Really?" Kathleen said surprised.

"I had Dr. Jäger on the telephone all through the night. He's furious with what's happened. And he's the one controlling the money flow, so..."

They reached a silver grey Mercedes minibus, parked just inside the main gate. Jochen opened the back door, took Kathleen's suitcases and put them in the back.

Silently, they got in and drove off. For both of them, Le Mans was a closed chapter.

The visiting hours didn't begin until 8:15 am, so they had to wait in a hallway for nearly twenty minutes before a rather stern matron gave them permission to enter the ward.

Kathleen was getting really impatient, but the doctor accompanying them insisted on checking up on Francesca before they were allowed to see her, and instead escorted them to a room set up for relatives where they could wait in the meantime.

The team's doctor slept on one of the couches, and Jochen nudged him when they came in. Kathleen took her jacket off, and hung it over the back of the chair. She sat down and sighed.

"Hello, I'm Sebastián Thierry. I'm the team's physiotherapist. Pleased to meet you," he said, stifling a yawn.

"Kathleen O'Malley. Likewise. We actually met last night. I was in the pits when you returned."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't notice you," he said.

"Well, we were all pre-occupied," Kathleen said and tried to smile.

"Yes. What a damned mess."

"How is Francesca?" she asked.

"I don't know. After the team had left, I came back here, but she was still in surgery. I believe she's in the recovery room now."

"Yes, there's a doctor in there with her," Jochen said.

"I see."

Kathleen was about to speak when the door was opened and the doctor they had talked to before came in.

"Miss Carrara's ready to see you now. A word of caution: She's still somewhat disoriented, the anaesthetic still has some effect on her. She might be forgetful, or nod off in the middle of the conversation. These are all normal reactions to the anaesthetic, and are not lasting effects from her accident. Do you understand?"

They all nodded, and started to get up from their chairs.

"Please, Sirs, Miss Carrara asked to see Miss O'Malley first," the doctor said, and helped Kathleen up from the chair.

Kathleen choked up and couldn't speak a word. Her stomach tightened into a knot, and she felt nauseous, but she managed to get her legs moving. She followed the doctor to the door, where he stood aside and allowed her to go alone into the single-bed room where Francesca was.

It looked like any other hospital room, with white walls and pale green linoleum on the floor. A thick, brown curtain was pulled in front of the window, effectively closing out the sunshine. A clock on the wall tick-tocked loudly, but Kathleen noted with great relief that Francesca didn't have one of those horrible machines that measured her heartrate. One of the things she had always been most frightened of ever since she was a little girl was the sound of that machine, sending out the long, flat beeeep that indicated the patient had died.

Kathleen closed the door behind her, and steeled her resolve. She could see the footend of Francesca's hospital bed, but the top end was hidden from view by a large closet. Even though her legs felt like they were made of lead, Kathleen went a few steps further and peeked around the corner.

Francesca's bed was open to her right side, with a chair and a small nightstand with a reading lamp and a jug of water next to it.

Francesca looked so pale, so fragile... so unlike her usual appearance. She was asleep, or perhaps merely resting, Kathleen couldn't say which, but in any case, her eyes were closed. Her chest rose and fell steadily, and the motion calmed Kathleen's nerves somewhat. A blue tube was protruding from Francesca's left hand, and it was connected to a drip that was hanging on a rack above her.

Suddenly Francesca stirred, and she opened her eyes and blinked a few times to get her bearings. It didn't take long for her to focus, and then she noticed she wasn't alone. She looked directly at Kathleen, and the corners of her mouth creased upwards. She tried to speak, but all that came out was a hoarse croak.

Kathleen dropped her jacket and her purse and rushed over to the bed, framing Francesca's face with her hands. The tears that had threatened to fall since she saw the accident yesterday evening finally came, and she let out a long sob. She leaned down and feverishly kissed Francesca on the lips and she was relieved to feel the driver responding.

"Oh god, I thought I had lost you!" Kathleen said when they separated, her tears leaving damp stains on the white blanket.

"I'm still here," Francesca said.

Kathleen kissed her again, a bit more controlled this time. She finished off by kissing the tip of Francesca's nose, earning a broad smile from the driver. Kathleen wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

"You look terrible," Francesca said.

"*I* look terrible?"

"You have dark circles under your eyes and your hair is a mess."

"Well... I didn't get much sleep last night," Kathleen said, and grabbed Francesca's right hand.

"I understand," Francesca said, and gave Kathleen's hand a little squeeze.

"Can you see me if I sit down on the chair...? My legs are like rubber, and I don't want to fall on top of you," Kathleen said, trying to smile, but not quite succeeding.

"Good idea. I think we have to save falling on top of each other for a little later," Francesca said.

Kathleen sat down on the chair and clenched her fists in her lap.

"Are you in much pain?" she said.

"Not right now. I'm still numb from the surgery. But I guess I got banged up a bit this time."

"Do... do you remember anything from the accident?"

"Not really. Bits and pieces. Seb told me some things on the way here, but my memory's blank. It must've been a big one."

Kathleen let out a strangled sob, and wiped her nose with the handkerchief.

"God, yes... it was... a horrible accident. I saw it on the TV. I was in the pits at the time," Kathleen said quietly.

"Christ, I'm so sorry, Kathleen... I wanted the pit pass to be a fun gift, not..." Francesca said and shook her head. She reached up with her free hand to rub her brow angrily.

"Please don't blame yourself, it's not your fault, Francesca. Until the accident happened, I had a great time in the pits," Kathleen said, and held out her hand again.

Francesca squeezed the hand that was offered her, and she needed so badly to say the three little words that had been on her mind for some time, but her nerve deserted her when she saw the green eyes glistening with tears.

"Who's with you here? You're not here alone, are you?" Francesca said, choosing to ask a safe question.

"No, your physiotherapist is here, and your team manager."

"Oh? ...Listen, Kathleen, we'll have all the time in the world to speak later on, but right now, I need to have a few words with Jochen. All right?"

"I understand," Kathleen said and got up from the chair. She leaned down and gave Francesca a loving kiss and caressed her face tenderly.

"Just concentrate on getting better, OK? Don't overstress yourself too soon," she said.

"I will, and I won't," Francesca said, and stroked Kathleen's arm with her free hand.

The next day, Francesca could already begin to sense an improvement in her condition - but the headlines of the newspapers and magazines spread out over her bed made her grumpy. Kathleen had picked them up for her, looking wonderfully cute trying to navigate into the hospital room with her arms full when the visiting hours began.

Kathleen came out of the small bathroom and turned off the light with her elbow. She wiped her hands in a brown paper towel that she threw into the wastepaper bin.

"There was more ink on my fingers than on the newspapers," she joked, and leaned down to give Francesca a 'good morning' kiss.

"Good morning, Francesca."

"Good morning. I trust you found a place to stay?"

"Yes, I was able to find a small pension here in Le Mans. It's not too far, it's almost walking distance to here."

"And I suppose it's outrageously romantic?" Francesca said, and winked.

"Well... yes, yes it is," Kathleen said.

"Thought so. Thanks for all the newspapers... look at this one, this really makes me sick... figuratively speaking..."

"TOYOTA SUFFERS SHOCK DEFEAT - MASERATI WINS!" the headline screamed.

Francesca sighed and rested her head on the pillow.

"I could've won the bloomin' thing, you know?"

"I know."

"We were miles ahead of the Maseratis... bloody hell," Francesca said, and closed her eyes.

"What does this one say?"

"SCHANDE! - Eine blamage für Mercedes-Benz," was on the front page of a German tabloid.

"Well... I think it would be 'disgrace, a blemish on Mercedes' reputation.'

"Wow, Jochen was right when he told me you'd get in trouble in Germany."

"Yeah. Has he told you it's all over?" Francesca said, and put the tabloid away.

"It is? Really? He said he was worried about it, but..."

"Jochen came by again yesterday afternoon, just before leaving for Germany. Dr. Jäger closed us down with immediate effect. We're not even going to continue the championship."

"But... that means..."

"Yeah. I'm unemployed... and my shot at the championship is..." Francesca made a whistling noise, and pointed her thumb down.

"Well, it would've been anyway, right? I mean, you're not going to compete for the rest of the season, or maybe..."

"Oh, I'll probably miss the next two races at least, but I'm going to make a comeback this year, you can bet your cute little belly button on that," Francesca said, and picked up another newspaper.

Kathleen's shoulders slumped, and she turned her back to the bed. She felt immensely disappointed in Francesca's words, but she didn't want the driver to see.

"Were you hoping that I'd stop racing?" Francesca said quietly.

Kathleen sighed and turned around.

"Yes... Oh, I... don't know what I was hoping. But I do know I never thought you'd be so eager to get back to something that nearly killed you..."

Francesca struggled to come up with an answer that would express how she felt, when they were interrupted by a nurse, wheeling in a telephone on a small cart.

"Miss Carrara, telephone for you, it's a journalist," she said.

Francesca didn't know if she should take the call or not. She turned her head towards Kathleen who had walked over to the window and looked out, facing away from her.

"All right, I'll take it."

"Press '1' on the numberpad. I'll be back for it later," the nurse said, and left.

"Francesca Carrara speaking,"

"Hello Miss Carrara, it's James Fenton from Trackracer. I don't have to tell you what the headline story will be for our next issue, and we need a quote and a Q&A. Is that all right with you?"

"I guess."

"OK. This is what we're planning on for the blurb on the cover: 'Under-fire Mercedes defends Le Mans shunt' - we've cleared that with the legal department, so that's the final one. It'll be our opening story, and I quote 'Mercedes has denied its CLR sportscar is unsafe - even after Francesca Carrara's car cartwheeled over the barrier and into a forest at 200 mph.', unquote."

"All right," Francesca said and rubbed her brow.

"Was the car unsafe?"

"No. There was a design flaw, but the winglets cured it. We raced for five hours before the prob..."

"The team's folded, you know. You don't have to toe the party line any more," the journalist said, interrupting her.

"Charming," she said icily.

"Well, we just want to extrapolate the truth from this mess."

"Oh, the truth, what a concept," Francesca grumbled.

"Quite. Are you ready for the Q&A?" the journalist said.

"Go on."

"By the way, I'm recording the conversation. Here we go... was Mercedes right to race?"

"All of the drivers wanted to race at Le Mans. If we had said we didn't want to race, they would have withdrawn. We had been preparing for the event for six or seven months and we had a chance of winning. We found a problem on the car on the test day, but we fixed it."

"What happened in the accident?"

"I only know what I've seen on the TV. I was close to the Toyota, and the turbulence behind the car must've disturbed the airflow over the wings."

"Do you remember somersaulting through the air?"

"No. I can't remember anything from the last lap prior to the accident. I was most likely rendered unconscious upon impact, wiping out my short-term memory. The next thing I know is that I'm on the ground with the doctor next to me."

"...You're not giving us much to work with, Miss Carrara," the journalist said.

"I've given you the truth," she answered.

"Well, thank you for the conversation. I hope you'll buy our magazine on Thursday,"

"Thank you," Francesca said, and hung up.

"... and I wouldn't dream of it," she said to herself.

'All right, back to the real world...', Francesca thought.

"Kathleen, please look at me."

Kathleen turned away from the window, but couldn't face Francesca. They were separated by the safety rail on the left side of the bed.

"I'm sorry. It was foolish of me to expect you to give up your career when it's obvious how much it means to you..." she said quietly, and continued,

"... but I know that I'll worry myself sick whenever you race, so perhaps we should..."

A sudden chill flashed across Francesca's entire body - *'so perhaps we should...'*

"No, no, no, please don't say that. Please!" Francesca said, and cursed the fact that she couldn't get out of bed to give Kathleen a reassuring hug.

Kathleen looked at her with sad eyes.

"Well, I..." she said, and raised her shoulders in a shrug.

"I love you," Francesca said, the three little words she had been keeping inside for so long finally blurted out of her mouth on their own accord - she felt her face and neck grow hot from the blush that rapidly crept upwards, and soon her features were coloured crimson red.

Kathleen's jaw dropped slightly when her brain had processed the unfamiliar words coming from the driver. Her breath hitched and her heart skipped a beat.

"Oh..." she said, blinking several times, trying to understand what was going on.

Francesca was dying a slow and painful death in the bed over the lack of an answer, so she reached her arms out to Kathleen, and said:

"Whatever you feel about that, please, give me a hug..."

Kathleen hurried over to the right side of the bed and leaned down to take Francesca in her arms. The tears that had been her constant companion for the last two days returned and she wept openly as she hugged Francesca.

"Oh Francesca, I love you too..." she said, crying into Francesca's dark hair.

Francesca closed her eyes and allowed an incredible feeling of happiness to wash over her. She was 32 years old and for the first time in her life, she had said 'I love you' to someone and actually meant it... and it felt so good.

She stroked Kathleen's back, and turned her head to seek the delicate lips she knew were very close by.

"No, wait, Francesca... I'm a mess, I need to splash some water in my face before I can kiss

anything," Kathleen said, and laughed through the tears. She pulled back, and tried to wipe her face and her nose with the handkerchief, but it was too soggy.

"I'm just going to..." she said, and pointed at the bathroom.

Francesca smiled and nodded.

Kathleen clicked on the light and looked disbelieving at herself in the mirror. She couldn't quite understand what had just happened. The strange hole that had been in her heart for five years had just vanished completely. The part of her soul that remembered Becky's stinging rejection told her to calm down and stop acting like a teenager, but she willed herself not to listen. Happiness was rare, and when it presented itself, you had to grab it with both hands.

... And she had been two words from telling Francesca that perhaps it would be best if they stopped seeing each other, or at least saw each other less frequent.

'I love you' - she had hoped and dreamed she'd hear those words, but for some reason, she never figured they'd come from the usually unflappable Francesca Carrara.

"Hey, did you get lost in there? Where did you go?" Francesca said loudly, and Kathleen laughed. She opened the faucet and cupped her hands, splashing her face with water.

"I'm back," she said, and sat down on the chair.

They looked at each other for a minute or so, before Francesca broke the silence.

"You're so beautiful, Kathleen."

"Careful, you'll make me cry again," the author said and sniffed.

"Can't have that, because I seem to recall you promised me a kiss...?"

"Oh, that's true..." Kathleen said and rose from the chair. She leaned down towards the bedridden woman and closed her eyes. As their lips met in a tender kiss, her heart began to flutter and she felt a wonderful warmth flow through her body. When they separated, she felt light and floaty, and she could see in Francesca's sparkling eyes that she felt the same.

"I hate to break up the moment, but we still need to talk about the future," Kathleen said, and traced her finger down Francesca's jaw and onto her neck.

"I know."

"When we return home, you can't manage by yourself, you know. You'll need help," Kathleen said.

"I suppose so."

"And... I could... I could move in with you...?" she said as a question.

Francesca's eyes lit up at the thought of the two of them sharing a home.

"I guess you could, yes," she said, beaming.

"I promise I won't clutter up your fancy apartment... at least not the first two days," Kathleen said, and leaned down to kiss Francesca again.

"But what about your own cottage... are you going to give that up?"

Kathleen drew back slightly and thought very hard about that question.

"... No... I'm... quite attached to that house, and my things, and my..."

"... your way of life?"

She nodded.

"I'm not attached to my condo at all. I'd sell it in a heartbeat."

"Really? But what about all the abstract art, and your top of the line home cinema and all that?"

"Doesn't mean anything to me. Making you happy, however, means everything," Francesca said with determination.

Kathleen's bottom lip started quivering, and within a few heartbeats she burst into tears. She framed Francesca's face with her hands and assaulted her with kisses.

"All right, all right, already!" Francesca said, laughing out loud over the outpouring of emotions from the other woman.

"First, I need to get out of here. We'll have plenty of time to sort out the details when we're back home in Blighty."

Kathleen nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"God, I wish you were back to full strength. If you were, I'd ravish you right here..." she said to the dark haired woman, getting a wicked grin in return.

She got the weights all the way up and held it there for several seconds, making the muscles in her thigh spasm and quiver like a bowl of jelly. Finally she released it, and the weights tumbled down to the bottom, making the machine rattle when they hit the bump stop.

"Bloody hell..." she said, and released the death grip she had had on two small metal handrests. She opened the Velcro strip on her bicycle gloves, and looked down at her body. She was sweating profusely, and she felt sticky and generally disgusting. Not to mention the sports clothes she was wearing. She thought they belonged in a 1980's Sheena Easton music video - a pale grey body suit with a loose fitting purple top, made of cotton - but Kathleen had picked them out for her, and when she had seen the love in the green eyes, she couldn't make herself say 'no thanks!' to the author.

"Are you ready for the next exercise?" Kathleen asked, and gave Francesca a bottle of spring water.

"Do I have to?" Francesca said, and gulped down half of the bottle's contents.

"According to the program, you do."

"Oh, all right, then..." Francesca said, and moved wearily over to another machine. She arranged the weights and sat down on the bench, leaning on the backrest. This particular machine had nearly ripped her leg off when she had first tried it, and she was convinced there was a demon living inside it somewhere.

"Come on, Francesca, please...? I'll give you a kiss if you can give me five pushes?" Kathleen said, kneeling next to Francesca.

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything." She spread her legs and put her knees on either side of two large, leather covered arms. She took a deep breath to control her shaking insides, and placed her hands on two handrests above her.

She started pushing her legs in towards each other, and the two arms slowly came closer. The muscles in her arms were bulging, and her face was red from the exertion.

"One!" Kathleen said enthusiastically, as Francesca managed to make the two arms touch. She released the pressure, and the arms gradually grew apart. She went through the stress one more time, but she knew she wouldn't be able to go the distance today.

"Two! Come on, just three more,"

"I can't, Kathleen..."

"Sure you can, come on,"

"I BLOODY WELL CAN'T!" Francesca barked, and lost her concentration. The arms clanged to

their outer stops too quickly - her legs were forced apart with a jerk and her hip received a nasty jolt.

A strangled cry escaped her, and her face lost all colour. A wave of white hot pain shot through her, and she had to slam her eyes shut until it receded. When it finally did, she felt sick to her stomach, but by sheer determination she forced herself not to vomit. She opened her eyes and looked around for Kathleen. The author was nowhere to be seen, but a faint sound of crying from the hall gave away her location.

Francesca sighed and reached for her cane. With a great deal of difficulty, she stood up and got off the damn machine. Pausing a moment to get her wobbly legs to cooperate, she went out of the exercise room to search for Kathleen.

"Kathleen? Where did you go?"

Kathleen didn't reply, but as Francesca hobbled along the hall, she could hear the author in the kitchen. She turned the corner and found Kathleen standing above the sink, crying. Francesca suddenly felt tongue-tied, so she settled for clearing her throat.

Kathleen turned around and looked at the battered woman. She didn't stop crying, and Francesca didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," she offered, leaning on her cane.

"If you hate me, I'll understand," Kathleen said.

"Hate you? Why on Earth should I hate you?" Francesca said shocked.

"For making you hurt so much..."

"That was my own fault. I tried too much too soon... and I lost concentration. That was all my own fault, Kathleen," she said, and pulled out a chair so she could sit down and rest her hip. The tremendous strain on her had left her completely exhausted, and her pelvic area had begun to throb, so she knew she'd be needing some painkillers soon. She took the bicycle gloves off and put them on a small table. She rubbed her face and ran a hand through her very short hair.

"You wouldn't have tried if I hadn't pushed you to it," Kathleen said and sighed.

"I probably wouldn't. But there are many things I wouldn't have done unless you had pushed me," Francesca said.

Kathleen looked up, unsure what the driver meant.

"Like telling you how much I love you."

New tears began rolling down Kathleen's cheeks, and she blushed.

"Will you please give me glass of water? My throat's as dry as the Sahara right now..." Francesca said.

"Of course... hang on." Kathleen opened the cold water tap and took a glass from the cupboard. She filled it, and put it on the table in front of Francesca.

"Here you go."

"Thank you. I... I know I didn't quite go the distance, but do you think it'd be possible to get a kiss anyway?" Francesca said with a shy smile on her face.

A little while later, Kathleen was sitting in Francesca's posh living room, studying the user's manual for the outrageously advanced TV set. She put the booklet down on the table, not a bit wiser. Instead, she walked over to the equally advanced sound system, but she didn't dare turn it on while Francesca was taking a little nap, because she couldn't see any knob for the volume, and the risk of it playing on full-blast was too great. She sighed, and settled for looking out of the window.

The look on Francesca's face when she experienced the pain played over and over in Kathleen's mind. For a second, Kathleen had been afraid Francesca might pass out. She had turned white as a sheet, and the pained look on her face had scared Kathleen no end.

She tried to push the negative thoughts from her mind by shaking her head, but they wouldn't leave.

If Francesca had fainted while her legs were still in the machine, she might have twisted her abdomen and her pelvic area severely if she had fallen off. Kathleen felt a panic creeping up on her, and she half-ran from the living room and into Francesca's bedroom to see if the driver was all right.

Kathleen stopped in the doorway, looking at the sleeping woman. She could hear Francesca snore softly, and the sound soothed her soul. She buried her face in her hands, and sighed. She had treated Francesca's recovery far too lightly. This wasn't just a broken arm, this was something that demanded her utmost respect.

A week later, Francesca's stamina had improved so much that she was able to get to four pushes on the 'torture machine' before needing to stop, and Kathleen had started to exercise to show her solidarity with Francesca. And since they were both hot and sweaty now, it didn't hurt one bit that Francesca's bathroom was large enough for the two of them to shower together...

Francesca had finally taught Kathleen how to use the Hewlett-Packard laptop she gave her months earlier, and now she was sitting on the leather couch, happily browsing the web. Francesca was sitting in a comfy chair, resting her legs on a stool, and zapped her way through the many channels on her bigscreen TV.

"Hey Francesca, do you want to know the results from Mosport?" Kathleen said.

"Just who won. Don't care about the rest."

"Maserati #1, DiLorenzi and Zorzi."

"Oh? How far were they ahead of the competition?"

"... don't know," Kathleen said, and looked in vain at the laptop to find the info.

"Gimme," Francesca said, and Kathleen turned the laptop around so Francesca could see the screen.

"They were two laps ahead, that's was the '-2' on the next car stands for," she explained.

"Right."

"Last year, the Canadian round of the world championship was held at the Grand Prix track in Montreal, but the tarmac couldn't handle our heavier cars, so it broke up."

"Oh?"

"Yes. While we were there, I got an offer from a Canadian Mercedes importer to drive one of his cars in the Mosport event, which was a round of the US Championship, and... well, I won."

"I'm happy for you," Kathleen said and smiled.

"Well, thank you. Actually, I have it on DVD, if you're interested...?" Francesca said, and turned around to look at Kathleen.

"Ah, no... I'm sorry. Do you mind?"

"No... I guess not."

"It's not that I don't want to watch you win a race, but there are so many aspects to the sport that I don't understand..."

"Well, you've seen so much this year. I think you'd be able to follow it, and it's a highlights programme, it's only 45 minutes..."

"Maybe I would, but no thanks," Kathleen said and smiled apologetically.

"I watched the dog show the other day when you asked," Francesca said with a pout.

Kathleen giggled. She knew when she was beaten.

"Oh, all right, then. Which drawer is it in?" she said, and got up from the couch.

"The one in the middle. It has a blue cover, and it says Mosport on the spine, you can't miss it."

Kathleen opened the drawer and looked for the DVD. She quickly found the one with the blue cover, took the disc out, and popped it into the player.

The next morning, Kathleen went to her cottage to water her flowers and check up on her mail. She had trouble opening the front door because of a small anthill of letters and newspapers behind it, but she finally managed. On the top of the pile was a formal looking letter from W.P. Carruthers, Ltd. She quickly picked it up and opened it. It read,

'Dear Ms. O'Malley.

The tremendous success of your biography on Francesca Carrara had led to a flood of requests for biographies, some of which were made by famous actresses and sports stars. We are most excited to be able to present you with a wide selection of names you can choose from freely.

Therefore, we kindly request your presence at a meeting on Tuesday, July 13th, at 10:00 am in our offices on Bartholomew Road.

Yours,

*W.P. Carruthers,
Carruthers Publishing, Ltd.'*

'Wow,' Kathleen thought. 'Famous actresses... wide selection of names I can choose from... and the meeting's tomorrow!'

Kathleen looked at the date on the stamp. This must have arrived the day before yesterday. She wanted to confirm that she'd be there, so she took her jacket off and sat down next to the telephone. She dialled the number to the publishers and waited.

After five minutes of listening to a horrible muzak version of 'I Just Called To Say I Love You', she hung up and decided to call Francesca instead to tell her the exciting news.

The next day saw Kathleen back at the office where it all began. She experienced a severe case of déjà vu as she walked up to the desk clerk and announced herself. Unlike the last time she was there, W.P. Carruthers quickly came out to greet her.

"Well, Miss O'Malley, I must say you've been a great asset to Carruthers Publishing", the old man himself said a few moments later when they were sitting in his office, sipping a sherry. Kathleen listened intently to W.P. talking about the sales figures for her book on Francesca.

"...and here's the list of names who've expressed an interest in acquiring your services for a biography," he said, and pushed a piece of paper across the mahogany desk.

Kathleen's eyebrows shot up to her hairline when she saw some of the names.

"Good heavens, even... even..." she said, and pointed at a particularly surprising name.

"Yes, even her," W.P. said, and smiled broadly. For once, his smile was genuine, at least that's what it looked like to Kathleen.

"Good heavens..." Kathleen repeated.

She moved her finger down the list, carefully considering each of the names, some more illustrious than others. It was tempting to get involved with the glitz of showbiz or the international jetset, but she knew deep down that those people were much too flashy for her. She recognised a name from her mother's generation, a woman who had been a major star in the world of ballroom dancing when she was younger, and who had become the leader of a charity organisation when she retired.

"Her, Margaret Lester-Williams," Kathleen said, and pointed at the name on the list.

"Oh, that's a good choice, Miss O'Malley. Mrs. Lester-Williams is a very well respected woman. I'm sure we'll... I mean, you, can create a fantastic book from working with her."

"Well, let's see," Kathleen said, and leaned back in the Chesterfield chair.

"Indeed. Sign here, please," W.P. said, and presented a preliminary contract to Kathleen. She did so, and they shook hands.

Kathleen unlocked the front door and then the inner door to Francesca's apartment.

"Francesca, I'm back!" she said loudly.

"I'm in the exercise room!"

Kathleen hung her jacket on the hallstand, and took her pumps and her gold earrings off. She unclipped her pearl necklace and put that and the earrings in the jewellery box. She looked at herself in the mirror in the hallway, unable to get the huge smile off her face.

On bare feet, she walked silently into the exercise room, stopping in the doorway to admire Francesca. The driver was sitting on a bench, lifting weights, and Kathleen's mouth went dry at the sight of Francesca's taut biceps and shoulders. She licked her lips, and made sure to walk the long way round so she wouldn't spook Francesca.

"Hi. How did it go?" the driver asked.

"Very fine. I signed a preliminary contract to work on a biography for Margaret Lester-Williams."

"Never heard of her," Francesca said, and resumed lifting the bar.

"Of course you have. How much do you have on it?" Kathleen said, and pointed at the bells.

"Eighty lbs."

"Dear lord," Kathleen said with an evil grin, staring at Francesca's arms.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You're looking like the cat that ate the canary," Francesca said, and put the bar into the holders. She wiped her arms off with a towel.

Kathleen said something Francesca couldn't quite hear.

"What's that?"

"I haven't eaten it yet," Kathleen said, and tried in vain to fight off a blush.

"The world must be coming to an end, Kathleen O'Malley's making dirty jokes," Francesca said, and winked.

Kathleen looked down and blushed furiously.

"So, this Margaret whatshername is someone important, then?"

"She's the leader of 'A Safer World For Children', surely you've heard of that?"

"Oh... I only know them from their ads, actually," Francesca said, and took her cane.

"I'll have a few meetings with her, and then I'll start working on the research. But I promise it won't interfere with us moving. That still happens on Monday," Kathleen said, and helped Francesca up from the bench.

"Good, because I think the movers would be upset if we rescheduled now," Francesca said, and leaned down to kiss Kathleen on the lips.

"Oh, I think that's a given."

Kathleen took Francesca's arm, and helped her out of the exercise room and into the bathroom across the hall so she could freshen up for lunch.

When the movers arrived, it only took twenty minutes for Francesca to go through the roof in a hissy fit. Despite Kathleen's best efforts in organising the event, the two men hired to move Francesca's furniture were bumbling about, clumsily getting in each other's way, and generally making a mess of things.

"No, this one goes there, *that* one goes *there*," Kathleen had said and pointed at two boxes the movers had put in the wrong order.

The two movers, remarkably similar in their filthy white t-shirts and identical, unkempt moustaches, looked at each other and shrugged.

"Lady, we are skilled movers. Please leave the organising to us," one of the men had said in a patronising voice, and that had triggered Francesca's Latin temper.

Right now, she was sitting in the kitchen, growling, and drinking a cup of the strongest cappuccino she could make. She felt tempted to pour a shot of Amaretto in it to calm her temper, but she decided against it. A loud bump and a couple of rasping curses from the living room made her bury her face in her hands and shake her head in disgust. If she had been in one piece, she could've rented a van and Kathleen and her could've done this so much more easily.

She sighed and looked at her cane. Kathleen had bought it for her, and the shop claimed it was a genuine Italian walking cane, but Francesca had never seen such a model when she was in Italy - she didn't see a point in telling Kathleen, though. It was a lovely gift, and there was no reason to make Kathleen unhappy.

In the living room, something went bump-bump-bump across the floor, and Francesca waited for the inevitable crash... that miraculously didn't come. She rolled her eyes and considered praying for guidance from above.

Later that evening in Kathleen's cottage, Francesca and Kathleen shared a bottle of white wine. Francesca got one glass, and Kathleen drank the rest - the author's nerves were completely frazzled by the incompetence of the two movers.

They looked around at the myriad of boxes that were standing left, right and centre - and in some cases on top of each other. Kathleen's meticulous system had been shot full of holes when the movers had deposited the boxes in her living room in completely random order instead of sticking to the plan, and Francesca had never seen her so upset.

She put her arm around the shorter woman, and pulled her closer. Kathleen rested her head on Francesca's shoulder and sighed.

"How are we ever going to get this mess sorted out?"

"We'll just take one thing at a time. I told you it was a good thing I decided to leave my couch and the two chairs behind."

"Those two imbeciles would've put them on top of the box marked 'fragile', don't you think?" Kathleen asked, and giggled.

"Probably."

"Lady, we are skilled movers. Please leave the organising to us'," Kathleen said with a deepened voice, mocking what the mover had told her earlier.

The two women looked at each other and started laughing heartily.

"Welcome to my cottage, Francesca." Kathleen raised her glass and smiled at Francesca, who returned the gesture by kissing Kathleen soundly.

"Wow, I can't believe we're actually doing this..." Kathleen said when they separated.

"You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No, of course not, but... I'd be lying if I said I'm not nervous about it. There are some pretty big butterflies flapping their wings inside my stomach," she said and chuckled nervously.

"Let me calm them down," Francesca said, and unbuttoned the middle button on Kathleen's shirt. She stuck her hand inside and caressed the soft skin she found there.

The touch felt electric to Kathleen, and she closed her eyes and let out a sensuous sigh. Francesca leaned in and started nibbling on Kathleen's earlobe and neck.

"How about you and me go to your bedroom and introduce your brass bed to the new resident of the house...?" she whispered, making Kathleen giggle.

"Are you sure you're up to the challenge?" Kathleen said teasingly.

"I think I can manage..."

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Kathleen desperately needed a drink when she returned from yet another meeting with Margaret Lester-Williams. In the two weeks since Francesca had moved in, they had hardly seen each other during the days. Everything had been so hectic and confusing, and if there was one thing Kathleen couldn't cope with, it was stress.

Her work on the new biography had so far proved to be interesting, as Margaret was a woman who had travelled the world and met all kinds of exciting people, but Kathleen had to admit her heart wasn't fully in the new job. It certainly didn't leave much room for spending quality time with Francesca, and that pained her.

Kathleen locked the car and opened the front door. Francesca was sitting on the couch with her legs up on a stool, talking Italian on her cell phone. When she saw the author, she winked and smiled a 200-watt smile that left Kathleen's knees weak.

A couple of magazines and a newspaper lay opened on the table and the couch, and Francesca had a notepad and a pencil in her lap. It looked like she had written quite a lot on the notepad, but Kathleen couldn't see enough to understand what it said.

After washing her hands in the bathroom, Kathleen went to the small bar she had in a cupboard in a corner of the living room, and poured herself a glass of Scotch. Francesca was still talking in Italian, so Kathleen sat down in her favourite chair and waited for Francesca to tell her what was going on.

It only took a few more minutes, and then Francesca turned off the cell phone and put it on the table. She looked at the notepad and leaned back in the couch, her face unreadable to Kathleen.

"Who was that you were talking to?" she said interested.

"Giampaolo Razotti, the team manager of Maserati. They won again in Laguna Seca last Sunday."

"Oh?"

"Yes. And they have a seat available in their third car," Francesca said, locking eyes with Kathleen.

Kathleen opened her mouth, and then closed it again without a sound. She put her empty glass down on the table and defensively crossed her arms over her chest.

"So you are going racing again?" she said, her voice tinged with a hint of frustration.

"We already spoke about it at the hospital, remember? I thought we had straightened it out...?" Francesca said.

Silence.

"Kathleen, I'm improving every single day. I'm able to do things now that I couldn't do just a week ago. You know me, I'll get cabin fever if I'm not doing anything..."

"I understand all of that, Francesca, but I had hoped that you'd..." Kathleen said, not finishing the sentence.

"That I'd what?"

"Come to your senses, honestly," Kathleen said and sighed.

Now it was Francesca's turn to become silent, and Kathleen could feel tears starting to well up in her eyes. She blinked a few times to make them go away, and then she went over to the couch, removed the newspaper, and sat down next to the driver.

"I'm sorry."

Francesca shrugged but still didn't speak.

"I know it's wrong of me to treat you like an overgrown teddy bear. Please accept my apology."

Francesca sighed and put her arm around Kathleen's shoulders.

"Francesca, yell at me if you will, but please say something. I hate this silence," Kathleen said, grabbing Francesca's hand that was hovering above her chest.

"This is something I need to do, Kathleen. I need to see if I still have what it takes," Francesca said quietly.

"I understand... I just wish that didn't include driving cars at 200 mph."

Kathleen looked at Francesca's profile, at her chiselled jawbone, at her well-defined cheekbones and finally at her ice blue eyes. She sighed, and rested her head on Francesca's shoulder.

"Our lives would've been much more peaceful if you were playing darts."

"Actually, I'm not very good with pointy things," Francesca said and chuckled.

"You know what I mean. But please... you have to promise me that you'll be careful. I don't want to organise your funeral any time soon," Kathleen said, and moved into a kneeling position on

the couch so she was face to face with Francesca.

"I promise. I haven't arranged anything yet. I wanted to discuss it with you first. The team manager offered me a meeting so he could evaluate my health. And if he considers me fit enough, I might make a comeback for them."

Kathleen nodded her acceptance, but she could feel a knot forming in her stomach that hadn't been there since the days she visited Francesca in the hospital.

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"I have to ask you again... are you sure about this?" Kathleen said as she stopped her Ford Focus in front of a non-descript, two-storey building that housed the Maserati team's British base.

"I'm sure," Francesca said, and leaned over to kiss Kathleen on the cheek.

"Well, good luck, then. How long do you think it'll take?"

"Can't say, but I'll call you when we're done."

"Let's hope I know how to operate that fancy cell phone you gave me..." Kathleen said with a chuckle.

"Hey, if you can drive a car, you can use a phone. How do I look?"

Francesca wanted to present herself in the best possible way, so she had splashed out and bought a pair of black slacks and a pale blue shirt that matched her eyes. Kathleen had ordered her to leave the shirt's top two buttons undone, and when combined with her black blazer, Francesca looked stunning.

"Oh... just... exquisite," Kathleen said.

Francesca opened the door and got out, hobbling slightly. She had left her cane at home as she suspected it wouldn't look good to the people who might become her new employers.

"Don't move too fast, or you might keel over," Kathleen said with an evil grin. Francesca waved dismissively at her, and then gave her a thumbsup.

Kathleen drove off with a slight toot of the horn.

Francesca turned around and headed for the glass doors. She went inside the building and walked up to a large security guard.

"Francesca Carrara to see Giampaolo Razotti," she said.

The guard pressed a button on an intercom and repeated what she had said.

"Please wait here," he told her.

A few minutes later, a tall man in his late fifties with short salt-and-pepper hair and a matching beard arrived at the door and waved at the security guard. The guard pressed another button, and the door to the building was unlocked.

Francesca walked through the door, trying not to limp. It wasn't entirely successful, but it merely looked like she was walking with a swagger.

"Miss Carrara, I'm Giampaolo Razotti," the man said, and put out his hand.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Razotti."

"Welcome to Maserati Cars GB. This is our official importer, and we use their warehouse for preparing our race cars. That was a nasty accident you had back at Le Mans. Are you sure you're fully recovered?"

"Mostly. I'm 99% back to normal," Francesca said, which was a little bit of a white lie. The correct figure was probably closer to 85%.

"Glad to hear it. I have Vittorio Franco waiting in my office, but we'll get to him eventually. Do you want to have a tour of the car?"

"Well... I'd like that, yes. Thank you."

"The two works cars aren't here, they're on a cargo ship bound for Buenos Aires, but we're prepping Mr. Franco's own car. We're planning to use it as a ringer in the last three races. Here it is," he said, and pointed at a dark blue car parked in the middle of the warehouse. The doors, the engine cover, and the front bodywork had been removed to ease the access of the engineers who were busy upgrading the car to the latest works specifications.

"I see," Francesca said and looked intently at the race car. She already knew it from duelling with the works cars at the first three races of the season, but it was always interesting to get a closer look at cars from different makes.

The engine was a normally aspirated six litre V12, with around 685 bhp. This car still used an H-pattern shift, but Giampaolo told her the works cars had been fitted with paddle shifts. Francesca looked inside and noted the cockpit was larger than both the two different types of Mercedes' she had used over the course of the season.

"Looks pretty good, Mr. Razotti."

"Please, call me Giampaolo. Yes, it does. It's too early to say if we can win the championship this year, but we're definitely giving it a shot," he said.

"All right, Giampaolo."

"Let's go and meet Mr. Franco. Miss Carrara, a word of... advice. When you see him, don't stare too much at his girth..." Giampaolo said quietly. Francesca's left eyebrow slowly crept up her forehead.

"... he isn't the fittest man imaginable. But at least half of his bulk is his wallet. I trust you understand?"

"Fully."

"All right. Follow me, please," he said, and started walking up a metal staircase, headed for a gallery that connected the work floor with the offices on the first floor. Francesca looked up at all the steps and swallowed nervously. She hadn't planned on that at all...

Finally arriving at the top, a small drop of sweat found its way down Francesca's neck and into the collar of her shirt. Her hip was throbbing, but she felt it was probably not constructive for her to mention that fact right now. Giampaolo opened the door to his office and welcomed her inside.

A large man, some might call him fat, was sitting in a leather chair smoking a cigar. He turned to the door and his face lit up when he saw the attractive figure walking in. He got up and put forth his hand.

"Vittorio Franco, Miss Carrara. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, Mr. Franco."

"Let's get down to business, shall we?" Giampaolo said, and closed the door behind him.

An hour later, Francesca was waiting by the curb, carrying a signed contract for the remaining three World Championship races. Kathleen drove up, and she got in.

"How did it go?"

"I got a contract," Francesca said with a smile, and showed Kathleen the papers.

"Congratulations. Are you all right? You look pale."

"I'm fine. The office was upstairs... 48 steps from the ground level," Francesca said as she put on her seatbelt.

"Good heavens... does it hurt much?" Kathleen said shocked.

"Meh... it's throbbing. It was a good workout."

"Let's get you home so I can give you a massage," Kathleen said, and put her Ford into first gear.

"Aren't you interested in how much I'll make?" Francesca said as they drove through traffic, heading for home.

"How much?"

"£ 20,000."

"For three races?! Pfff!" Kathleen said, and made a whistling sound.

"Well, that's how it works in motor racing."

"When's the first race?"

"It's in Mugello in Italy, in five and a half weeks, so I have plenty of time to get back to my old level of fitness," Francesca said, and rubbed her aching hip.

"I'll help you."

"Thank you."

"So, it's back to Italy, then?" Kathleen said, remembering that wonderful evening in Monza where they kissed for the first time.

"Yes. I don't want to pressure you into coming... if you don't want to be there, I'll understand," Francesca said.

"My book will be done by then. You'll need to put me in a straitjacket to keep me away, Francesca," Kathleen said, and smiled lovingly at the dark haired woman next to her.

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CHAPTER 8

"Giampaolo, Vittorio was eight seconds slower on his qually lap than I went in free practice... eight seconds!" Francesca said angrily. She slammed her fist down on the armrest of the chair.

"And he's also the one that makes it financially possible to have a third car, so... what's your

problem, Francesca?"

She bit down hard on the inside of her lips so she wouldn't tell him what she really thought, and counted to ten.

"I knew you'd see it from my point of view. Calm down, have fun this weekend, Francesca. It's your comeback, you can't expect to be fighting for the victory right away," he said, and started to get up from his leather chair.

"I'm not having fun, Giampaolo. I'm not here to finish last."

"But you are here, aren't you? Let's take it race by race, OK? Now, if you will excuse me, I have plenty to do..." he said and showed her the way out.

She left the team manager's office thoroughly fed up, and almost ready to pack up and go home. As one of the support races droned on in the background, she walked back to her own Knaus Sunliner motorhome, parked on the other end of the paddock. On her way there, she was approached by several fans holding magazines for her to autograph, and she wanted most of all to brush them off, but reconsidered and started to sign when she saw the expectant faces.

A large group of people quickly formed around her, and she was secretly pleased to see how much they were smiling and exchanging small quips with her. Compared to Germany where people were more distant, she felt right at home here in Italy. She joked in Italian with several of them, earning laughs and even a couple of blushes along the way.

When she was done, her mood was much improved and she continued her walk back to her motorhome with a spring in her step. She still had to start at the wrong end of the grid, but at least the fans had treated her like always. Of course, it didn't hurt that she was now proudly displaying the Trident on her suit - the Maserati team had always been very popular in Italy.

"Honey, I'm home!" she said and knocked on the front door.

"I'm in the kitchen, making sandwiches," Kathleen said over her shoulder.

"So you are. Hello," Francesca said, admiring the view of Kathleen's back in white cotton shorts and a green spaghetti strap tank top. She walked up to stand closely behind the author and pulled away Kathleen's hair to kiss her on the neck.

Kathleen squirmed and giggled.

"Your hair is getting long," Francesca said and wrapped her arms around Kathleen's waist.

"I like it that way," Kathleen said, leaning into the touch.

"Perhaps I could cut it for you? There's a pair of scissors in the medical kit."

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you?"

"I'd love it," Francesca purred into Kathleen's ear.

"How did qualifying go?"

"Like shit," Francesca said matter-of-factly, and unzipped her dark blue driving suit.

"Oh?"

"We qualified 23rd."

"23rd...?" Kathleen said and put down the knife and wiped her hands on a towel.

"Vittorio was the qualifier today. He did a bad job. And I have to thank him for it."

"What on Earth for?"

"His fat wallet pays for my comeback."

"Oh... all right. Is Mugello a difficult track to learn?"

"Not particularly. The problem is that he's just a wealthy amateur with an expensive weekend hobby."

"Why isn't he driving in one of the slower categories, then? It sounds a bit dangerous to me..."

"Heh! Big toys for big boys, you know," Francesca said and grinned.

Kathleen rolled her eyes.

"Phew, it's hot in here!" Francesca said, and pulled down the driving suit, tying it around her waist. Kathleen picked up the tray with the sandwiches, and turned around to put them in the refrigerator. She couldn't avoid looking at the very form-fitting fireproof undershirt the driver was wearing, and suddenly felt rather warm herself.

"Yeah... the air condition thingamajig is broken. I never knew Italy was so warm in early September."

"Well, it is. I need a shower, I smell rather strongly," Francesca said and winked at Kathleen.

"...now you mention it... I'll have the tea ready when you're done," Kathleen said, returning the

wink.

"Cheeky so-and-so," Francesca said on her way to the bathroom.

"How's your hip?" Kathleen said as she bit down into a cucumber sandwich.

"A bit sore, but the free practice this morning didn't hurt at all. It's getting better day by day."

"Good. Listen, I've been going over the files. I honestly don't know if we should go ahead with writing a second book. So much of what I've written is so... private. What do you think?"

Francesca put down her mug of tea and scratched her damp hair.

"I can't tell you how to write the book, Kathleen. You're the expert in that field. The first one still sells pretty well, right?"

Kathleen nodded.

"And we know that people love to read about someone coming back from injury. Just look at all the biographies on footballers, half of those are comeback stories... all right, usually from alcohol-related issues rather than actual accidents, but you know what I mean," Francesca said, and took a sip of her tea.

"I do, but if we decide to go ahead with it, we have to go over the text very thoroughly. There are things in there I don't want the world to know about," Kathleen said and dabbed her mouth with a napkin.

"I agree. But that's for later. It might be a moot point anyway - if my comeback fizzles out, I'll be forgotten by Christmas."

"Oh, surely not!"

"We're only as good as our last race. That's always been a part of the game in motor racing."

"Well, I won't forget you," Kathleen said and patted Francesca's hand in a very motherly fashion.

"Awwwwwww," Francesca said and batted her eyelids.

The next morning saw Francesca making her usual preparations for race day. The colour of the driving suit was different, but everything else was as it had always been, right down to Kathleen falling asleep again after the alarm clock had chimed.

"Come on, Kathleen, wakey-wakey, it's time for me to go," Francesca whispered and nudged the author's shoulder.

"There should be a law against getting up before 9 am," Kathleen said, and yawned so wide Francesca was worried she might dislocate her jaw.

"There might be, who knows - but right now, all I need is a 'see-you-soon' kiss."

They kissed, and Kathleen squeezed Francesca's arm.

"Please be safe, OK? My stomach's in a knot already, and you haven't even left yet..."

"I'll try my best. I love you," Francesca said, and kissed Kathleen again.

"Love you, too," the author echoed, and waved.

After Francesca had closed the outer door, Kathleen was left with her thoughts. She sighed and looked around - the motorhome was equipped with all kinds of electronic gadgets, but it didn't feel like a home to her. It was too impersonal, and 65 pan-European satellite channels on the 40" flatscreen TV couldn't compensate for that. She got up and decided to do something useful so she wouldn't get an ulcer from worrying so much. She opened a small cupboard and pulled out the vacuum cleaner. The lush carpet was only 25 feet long and four feet wide, but she'd work hard to make it the cleanest carpet in all of Italy... or the entire continent for that matter.

Vittorio Franco insisted on starting the race, and after the green flag fell he immediately lost another three places in a wild manoeuvre at the first corner. As the first lap was completed, he wasn't just stone last among the factory cars, he was even behind most of the top privateers.

Francesca was watching in the Maserati pits, her face a dark grey mask of irritation. Because of the rules of the championship, no driver could be in the car for longer than four hours, and since Mugello nearly always went to the full six hour distance, Vittorio would need to be in the car for two hours.

Fortunately, even he knew that a two-hour stint would go far beyond his fitness levels and his skills, so he was scheduled to do a 75 minute double stint to begin with, and then Francesca would take over for the next four hours, leaving him with the honour of taking the chequered flag... provided he hadn't thrown the car off the circuit before he could hand over to Francesca.

Francesca cursed silently as the TV broadcast zoomed in on her car, the #3 Maserati MC12, making yet another wild manoeuvre overtaking a slower car. On one hand, she was surprised there were actually drivers in the race who were slower than Vittorio, and on the other she wished that she was back with Jonno. Even though he was young and relatively inexperienced, he was fast, and owned up to his mistakes. Vittorio never made mistakes - or so he said.

Finally he came into the pits, two laps down and completely out of contention for even the top 10. Francesca was waiting impatiently with her drinks bottle and her foam seat - which she needed to fill out the seat in the car because Vittorio's backside was twice the size of hers - and as soon as the car was stopped she tore the door open and almost forced him out of it. Vittorio fumbled and bumbled getting his legs over the wide tunnels in the sides of the car, and when he finally did, he could barely hold his balance.

Francesca inserted her seat and the drinks bottle, and grabbed the roof of the car. She lifted herself off the ground and practically flung herself into the seat. A white hot stab of pain shot up from her hip, and she had to clench her teeth sharply for a few seconds before the pain receded somewhat.

A mechanic grabbed the seatbelts and reached between Francesca's legs to connect them to the centre lock. She took the side-belts herself and did the same. As she was tightening the shoulder straps, the top belts on the six-point harness, the door was closed, and she could hear the team manager counting down on the radio in her helmet.

When he shouted "GO!", she depressed the yellow starter button, and the six litre V12 screamed to life right behind her. She selected first gear and dropped the clutch, making the car roar out of the pits. She kept her finger on the pit-speed limiter all the way down the long pitlane until she passed the traffic light at the end of it. It showed a blinking blue light, warning her that a faster car was approaching from behind. She spotted it in her mirror, and it passed her safely before she was up to full speed.

She checked the gauges, everything looked all right. The engine was a little cool, no wonder, really, she thought, as she went through the second-gear first corner - Vittorio hadn't done enough to make it come up to temperature. She chuckled, but soon concentrated on getting back into the rhythm of driving 210 mph race cars.

At the end of the day, all Francesca's efforts had earned car #3 a tenth-place finish, two laps down. In her stint, she had reclaimed one of the laps Vittorio had lost, only to see him lose it again in the final thirty minutes. She became furious when she saw him dance around in the paddock afterwards, splashing champagne on everyone in his way, behaving like a tenth place finish was some kind of victory.

"Look alive, Francesca. It's his best finish of the year," the team manager said to her, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Mmmm. How nice."

"Listen, you did well today, but if you're not interested in racing for us for the rest of the season, just tell me straight up, OK? Because I don't need that kind of attitude," the team manager said

sternly.

Francesca looked down at her driving boots, her ears growing red.

"I apologise. You're right, I'm acting like a prat."

"If that word means what I think it does, you're right," he said, and patted her back again.

"And that's the end of that, yes?"

Francesca nodded.

Kathleen jumped up from the couch and ran to the door when Francesca arrived at their motorhome.

"Welcome back, I'm so glad to see you're all right," she said, and hugged the driver - sweat-soaked driving suit and all. Francesca felt as stiff as a statue, so Kathleen knew something wasn't right.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, this and that," Francesca said in a tone of voice that Kathleen instantly recognised as one the driver used when she was fed up.

"My co-driver drives slower than my gran ever did, I just made a damned fool out of myself in front of my team manager... and my hip hurts like hell," she said and leaned against the door jamb.

"First things first. Get out of your clothes, and I'll find the massage oil," Kathleen said.

"The oil isn't necessary today. It's a different kind of pain. And I stink, I need a shower first," Francesca said, and limped towards the bathroom.

"I can live with a little sweat... please?"

Francesca looked at Kathleen's nervous expression, and relented. She unzipped and stepped out of her driving suit, leaving it in a pile on the floor. She tried to bend down to pick it up, but her hip wouldn't let her.

"I'll get it later, come on, we need you to lie down," Kathleen said, and took Francesca's elbow, guiding her to the other end of the motorhome. Kathleen closed the curtains separating the beds from the living area and shut the window she had opened earlier. Finally, she closed the venetian blinds.

"Let's get you undressed," Kathleen said.

Francesca pulled the fireproof long johns off her hips and Kathleen dragged them off the rest of the way. They were soaked with sweat as well, and the driver knew it wasn't a pleasant job for her.

Francesca was in a great deal of discomfort, and when she sat down, the pressure on her hip made her moan in pain - a sound that made Kathleen's nape hairs stand on end. Francesca pulled off her undershirt, but felt so vulnerable that she preferred to keep her fireproof sportsbra and panties on.

Kathleen helped moving her legs up onto the bed, and Francesca slowly let herself slide backwards until she was flat on her back.

"I just need to rest for a few minutes..." she said, releasing a long sigh.

"When did the pain begin?"

"The second I got into the car..."

"Oh, Francesca!"

"There was something in the seat that pressed against it..."

Kathleen sighed. She simply did not understand why someone was willing to risk so much just to prove themselves - especially not when it wasn't necessary at all.

"How on Earth did you get out of the car?"

"I just jumped out like I always do. I'm not about to look weak in front of a new team."

"But you are weak, woman!" Kathleen said exasperated.

"No, I'm not."

'All right, change of subject,' Kathleen thought.

"What was that you said about making a fool out of yourself," she asked.

Francesca sighed and put her arm across her eyes.

"Vittorio celebrated his best result of the year, and I guess I... mocked him. Giampaolo, my team manager, basically told me to put up or ship out."

"Oh. Was he wrong?"

Francesca moved her arm away from her eyes and looked directly at Kathleen, raising an eyebrow. When it didn't have any effect on the author, she sighed, and lowered her arm again.

"... no, he wasn't. But I just don't feel we've accomplished anything when all we've done is a damned tenth place finish. Toyota won, so the championship has closed right up. I could've had a shot at it this year..."

Kathleen placed her hand on Francesca's heart, feeling the steady rhythm.

"*That's* all I care about. You and me, not another cup on the mantelpiece."

Francesca smiled and squeezed Kathleen's hand.

"I know..." Francesca said, and reached behind Kathleen to pull her down so she could claim her lips.

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Three weeks later at the Nürburgring, high in the German Eifel mountains.

"Kathleen O'Malley speaking," the familiar voice said in Francesca's cell phone.

"Hello honey. I love you and I miss you," Francesca said, and smiled broadly. It was Sunday at lunch time, just before the traditional Nürburgring Six Hours was scheduled to start. She sat in the Maserati motorhome with her feet up on the a coffee table. If Kathleen had seen that, she'd never have allowed it.

"Me, too," Kathleen replied and sneezed.

"It's just so weird not to have you here."

"That bloomin' cold. I knew it the instant we got home from Italy. Remember I told you? I was right. I hate it when I'm right," Kathleen said, and sneezed again.

"Are you wrapped up warmly?"

"Oh yes. I'm in bed, drinking hot cocoa with a shot of rum, and I have my slippers and my bathrobe on. I'm comfy."

"You have your bathrobe on in bed? Let me guess, it's the pink one with the fluffy collar."

"...Yes. You know me too well."

"I do," Francesca purred into the telephone. Kathleen sneezed again.

"Oh, it feels like I have a wad of cotton inside my head!" she whined.

"I can hear, your voice sounds different."

"Everything's different... the race isn't over, is it?"

"No, it hasn't started yet. I'll call you again when it's done."

"All right. Please be safe. I love you," Kathleen said, and attempted to blow a kiss through the telephone, but she had a sneezing fit instead.

"Settle down, settle down. Love you too, bye bye," Francesca said, trying not to laugh.

"So long," Kathleen said and hung up.

Francesca had urged Vittorio to make her the qualifying driver for this race, and he had agreed. When the green flag waved for the warmup lap, she took off from the sixth starting position her hard work had earned her in qualifying. She noted with a great deal of pride that even her supposed team leader, the #1 car, was behind her. The Toyotas were again occupying the front row, their campaign coming on very strongly at the end of the season.

The Nürburgring Six Hours was true to form by being run in adverse conditions. A drizzle fell on the cars as they went around the warmup lap, and judging by the clouds Francesca could see in the horizon when she went through the Dunlop hairpin at the bottom of the circuit, it wouldn't be long before real rain arrived. It didn't bother her a bit, she loved driving in the rain, but Vittorio would be quaking in his boots by now, she thought - and chuckled.

This weekend's race was on the southern 'Grand Prix' loop of the Nürburgring instead of the old Nordschleife. Francesca had only driven on the old circuit in a road car, but she would've loved to race there. That track really separated the wheat from the chaff. The new 'Ring had few of the old track's charms, but it was fast and sweeping, and it suited the Maseratis well. Francesca was determined to achieve a good result this time.

She ran slowly through the Veedol-S chicane and onto the front straight, heading for the start-finish line. The car in pole position controlled the speed of the pack of cars until the light turned to green on the gantry over the track, and the Toyota had them creeping along. Francesca was starting to wonder if something had gone wrong when the red light finally turned off. She floored the throttle and went up through the gears - the race was on.

She found a gap at the first corner and managed to overtake two cars. When the leaders streamed through the Mercedes Arena, she was already in fourth place. Ahead of her were only the two Toyotas and one of the Nissans.

She had advanced to third place when the rain arrived. Everybody dove into the pits to change to wets, and she considered for a brief moment if she should chance it and stay out. A radio message from the team manager overruled her decision, and she followed the two Toyotas into the pits.

The Maserati pit crew was slower than what she was used to at Mercedes, and when Francesca returned to the track, the Nissan had snatched back third place. No matter, there was plenty of time to get it back.

After an excellent two hour stint that saw her trade fastest laps with the Toyotas, the team manager ordered her to rest and to swap to Vittorio. Grudgingly, she had to accept, and she took to the pits to hand over the car.

She helped strap Vittorio in, not an easy task considering his girth, and made sure his drinks bottle was in place. She stepped back from the car and slammed the door shut. The refuellers finished, and the car was sent off.

She went inside the garage and grabbed a bottle of water. She emptied it in two gulps and used a towel to dry her neck and her hair.

"Is everything all right?" The team manager said.

"Yep. Pretty good race today," she replied.

"Slippery much out there?"

"Well... it's not too bad." she said and shrugged,

"Please be on alert in case Vittorio aborts," he said, jotting some info down on a clipboard.

"I will."

She didn't need to. Twenty minutes later, the cameras zoomed in on a crashed car that looked very much like... a dark blue Maserati with a #3 on the side.

Francesca's shoulders slumped and she shook her head in defeat. Suddenly the team manager exploded in a hissy fit and hurled his headset across the garage. The expensive electronic equipment made a devastating impact with a wall, shattering in a dozen pieces and making a crack loud enough to make Francesca jump. The team manager started shouting a string of profanities in Italian, and the rest of the team soon knew why - the camera panned to another crashed car that had been hiding behind the #3... it was the #2 - the car that held a slender lead in

the championship...

A replay started on the TV, showing Vittorio losing control under braking to the Veedol-S chicane and skidding right up the backside of his team mate in the #2 car at nearly unabated speed. Giampaolo fell silent for a few seconds, and then he went off like Mount Etna all over again. Francesca didn't need to see or hear more, so she quietly slipped out the back of the garage, heading for her motorhome. This race was over for her.

When she returned after a shower and a change to street clothes, Giampaolo hadn't calmed down yet. He was in the back of the garage, telling Vittorio Franco the a-b-c's of driving in the wet, and by the red-faced look of the wealthy amateur, he had been going on for quite some time.

The #3 car had been returned to the pits on the back of a flatbed lorry, and Francesca gave it a quick once-over. Not surprisingly, it was a mess. The front bodywork had been firmly remodelled, the suspension on the right front was completely gone, and the hoses guiding the air to the radiators were torn off.

She shook her head and thrust her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

The lecture finally over, Vittorio brushed past Francesca without even looking at her, and on his way out of the garage, he slammed the door so hard the lamps shook.

'Great. There goes my comeback,' she thought.

"Carrara, don't leave yet. I need to have a word with you after the race," the team manager said to her as she was searching for a new headset.

"All right," she replied, and went back to lean against the back wall of the garage so she wouldn't interfere with the work in the pits.

It was easy to overlook through the pandemonium that the race was still going on - the #1 car had inherited third place when #2 crashed, and he was right on the tail of the Toyota that posed the biggest threat to #2's championship lead. This was a vital time of the race. The laps were winding down, and the other Toyota wasn't far up the road. If #1 managed to get by the Toyota, they couldn't play the team order card and have their two cars swap positions.

The current driver of #1, Luca DiLorenzi, was a man Francesca considered a primadonna, but she had to admit he was a fast driver. Giampaolo was constantly on the radio telling him to hurry up, and the TV pictures proved that he listened. With about thirty minutes of the race left to run, DiLorenzi tried a daring manoeuvre on the Toyota in front which paid off, and he swept around it and into second place, making the mechanics cheer wildly.

The positions remained the same until the chequered flag, and #2's lead in the championship had been protected.

After the mechanics had celebrated the second place finish, Giampaolo found Francesca and walked with her to the Maserati motorhome.

He closed the sliding door to the office and turned on the little red light over the door, indicating a confidential conversation was taking place.

"Well. Here we are."

"Pretty good finish by Luca," Francesca offered.

"Yes. Let's get to the point. Vittorio's gone, he won't be back, and he's taking #3 with him."

"Shit," Francesca said, the news confirming what she had already expected.

"It might've been, but I've decided #2 needs a firm pair of hands on the steering wheel for Spa, so I'm bumping you up to be the ringer in that car."

Francesca's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh... I..."

"We've arranged a private test in Silverstone in ten days' time, and we'll use it to get the base setup sorted. You need to be there to adapt to Fabio and Gio's setup, and... well, we need to see if you're back to full strength. Your stint today was excellent, but Spa is much more strenuous than the Nürburgring... I guess I don't have to tell you, you won there last year, after all."

Francesca nodded absentmindedly, she had a hundred things going through her mind all at once. Such a chance rarely presented itself, and she had to make sure she took it with both hands... plus there was a small matter of maybe earning a contract for next year if she did well.

"All right?" Giampaolo said, and stretched out his hand so she could shake it.

"Yes. I'll see you there, then."

When the meeting was over, Francesca almost couldn't wait to tell Kathleen, so she dialled her number on the cell phone and waited impatiently for the author to pick it up.

"Kathleen O'Ma..."

"Hi honey, it's me. I have some fantastic news..." Francesca blurted out, interrupting Kathleen.

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CHAPTER 9

"Francesca, dear, if you have to whistle while you work, can't you at least do it on key?" Kathleen asked while she was cleaning up a bit around the house.

"I am on key," Francesca said, and demonstrated a perfect scale.

"Now you are. You definitely weren't before."

"When I'm working, I can't hit the tones."

"I'll say," Kathleen said under her breath.

"The bottom right corner needs to go down a bit," Francesca said from her position on the floor, where she was busy wiping off the underside of the glass table with a soft cloth. Kathleen stepped back from the picture frame she was trying to get level, and squinted.

"Hmmm... no. It's straight now," she said.

"It's crooked."

"Maybe I want it crooked!" Kathleen said with her hands on her hips.

Francesca started whistling another unrecognisable song, totally off key, occasionally pausing to breathe on the glass table.

"I think I'll start to vacuum the bedroom. Then I can't hear you murdering some poor song," Kathleen said, and opened the cupboard where they stored the vacuum cleaner.

Suddenly the phone rang, right above where Francesca was working.

"I got it!" she said, still sitting on the floor. She reached up on top of the glass table and took the receiver.

"Francesca Carrara."

"Hi Fran, it's Jonno. Remember me?" he said and laughed.

"Hello Jonno. It's been a while. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I trust you are, too?"

"Getting better all the time, thank you."

"That's good to hear. Listen, Fran... have you seen this week's issue of Trackracer?"

"No," she said, and sighed. She got up from the floor and sat down on the couch.

"Well, perhaps you should buy it. There's an article in there about you."

"I haven't spoken to a Trackracer reporter since June," she said, her good mood evaporating rapidly.

"Thought as much. It's ah... how can I put it, I think 'peculiar' is a fitting word."

"Mmmmm?"

"I'm afraid so, yes," Jonno said, recognising Francesca's tone of voice.

"What's it about?"

"Oh, Fran... I'd rather not... I think you should buy it and see. And please don't shoot the messenger."

"Don't worry, Jonno, I won't. I'll deal with that later. Have you found another ride yet?"

"Well, I think I have something cooking. But let's see."

"For the World Championship?"

"No. For the US series, actually," he said.

"Oh? Well, you're a bachelor, and there's good money to be found over there, so break a leg, friend!"

"Thank you, Fran. How's Kathleen?"

"Oh, she's fine. A bit grumpy today," Francesca said and chuckled.

"That happens on a monthly basis with most women, you know."

"Ha ha."

"It's been fun to hear your voice again, Fran."

"Likewise, Jonno. If your plans come to fruition, swing by for dinner before you leave, OK?"

"I'd love that, Fran. That's a promise."

"Great. Bye bye, Jonno."

"Bye."

"Kathleen, I have to go to the newsagent. Do you want a magazine or something?" Francesca shouted as she was tying her shoelaces.

"No, thank you. Was that Jonno?" Kathleen said, and dragged the vacuum cleaner into the living room.

"Yes. He gave me a warning about an negative article in Trackracer... just what I didn't need now."

"Why would they want to do that?" Kathleen asked confused.

"Who knows why they do anything. They want to sell copies, and then they think they have to write garbage. I shan't be long," Francesca said, and gave Kathleen a quick kiss.

Forty minutes later, Francesca returned with the magazine under her arm. She hung her jacket on the hallstand and threw her shoes into the bedroom. Kathleen had put on some music while Francesca was away, and Loreena McKennitt's crystal clear voice filled the room.

Francesca put down the magazine on the glass table and sat down on the couch, simply staring at the glossy mag, and not making a move to read it. Kathleen moved from the chair to sit next to her.

"Do you want me to see what it's all about first?" she asked.

"No. I can handle it."

"I don't want you to have a heart attack..." Kathleen said, and wrapped her arm around Francesca's waist.

"I won't."

She sighed, and opened the magazine. There wasn't anything untoward on the cover, the top story of the week was that some GP2 driver had failed a drugs test. She leafed past several pages of ads to get to the index. Her finger went down the list of articles and stopped at page 26. 'Francesca Carrara - losing the edge?' the headline said.

Francesca flipped the magazine to the correct page. The first thing she saw was a photo of her Le

Mans accident, spread out over two pages. Francesca felt Kathleen shudder, so she reached out and mussed the blonde hair.

"Hey, it's all right. It's just a picture," she said.

"I know, but I still don't like looking at it," Kathleen said.

The byline said it had been written by James Fenton, the same reporter who had called her in the hospital in Le Mans. She flipped the page, and started to read the article. She quickly found that it was barely coherent. Column after column of psychobabble, occasionally interrupted by boxes with fragments of an interview with a psychologist Francesca had never seen or heard of, and certainly hadn't spoken to.

After reading the first page over Francesca's shoulder, Kathleen rose from the couch.

"I still don't understand why they'd do something like that. The article is poorly written, and apart from using your name in the headline, you're hardly mentioned. It's about how accidents can have long-lasting psychological effects... and you clearly don't have any of those."

"No, but how would they know? They didn't speak to me when they wrote it."

Kathleen rolled her eyes and sighed.

"I feel a headache coming on. I think I need some tea. Do you want anything?" she said.

"No, thank you."

"Not even a butter cookie?"

"Well... maybe just one?" Francesca said and grinned.

On the next page, Trackracer had inserted a picture of her from the pre-season tests. She was of course wearing her Mercedes driving suit, and she was talking to Derek Harrison and Jochen Graumann. She shook her head, not quite grasping how so much could have happened in such a short span of time.

"Do you want to phone Trackracer and talk to this Fenton-character?" Kathleen said, as she put down her mug of tea and a plate with five butter cookies on the glass table. She handed Francesca her one cookie, and winked at the dark haired woman.

"Thank you. No, there's no point," Francesca said, and started munching on the cookie straight away.

"But the article is nonsense...?"

"Well, yes it is, but I know exactly what he'll say. 'If you have a problem with the magazine, you should contact our solicitor, and blah blah blah.'"

"I couldn't work like that," Kathleen said.

"Me neither," Francesca said, and stole another butter cookie from the plate, earning her a swat on the hand.

"Do you think Giampaolo will have read the magazine?"

"Probably. But I refuse to let it affect me. Once I'm in the car, I leave everything from the real world behind. The only things that exist then are myself, the car and the track. If I foul up, there's no one else to blame but me, and likewise, if I do a good job, then I expect to be praised."

"You leave everything behind... even me?" Kathleen asked.

"Well... I know it sounds terrible, but yes. I need to concentrate and focus exclusively on the driving," Francesca said, and looked at Kathleen with an apologetic expression on her face.

Kathleen nodded, and asked a question that had been burning on her mind for a while.

"What happens if you're not fast enough in the test, Francesca?"

"Then I'm unemployed again. And third chances are non-existent in this business," Francesca said matter-of-factly, looking directly into Kathleen's eyes.

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"Papers, please," the security guard said, as Francesca and Kathleen drove up to the gates at Silverstone. In World War 2, it had been an airfield for the heavy American bombers, and the preserved runways still had several RAF-style barracks on them. The circuit was lined with miles and miles of ten-foot high catchfencing, and the grandstands were huge structures, all very reminiscent of an active airbase.

"You know, whenever I race here, I feel like an extra in a remake of 'The Battle Of Britain'," Francesca said and laughed, as they were driving through the gate to get to the paddock.

"You're right, it does have that feel to it. I've never been here in person, but I've seen it many times on the TV. The British Grand Prix was the only motorsports event my dad watched," Kathleen said.

"The track was very different back then. It's constantly being updated to keep abreast of all the modern safety ideas."

Kathleen nodded, busy looking out of the side window at the imposing grandstands.

They found a parking space behind the team's transporters and prepared to venture outside in the early October wind. The day was gloomy, with low clouds and a threat of rain.

"Yikes, my hair!" Kathleen said, as the wind made a right mess of her long hair when she got out of the car.

"Good thing you weren't wearing a hat, it'd have been in the next village by now,"

"Why is it so windy here? It's not anywhere else!"

"The paddock and the pits are perpetually blustery here. It doesn't matter how it is elsewhere - in Silverstone, it's always windy," Francesca said as she took the bag with her clothing and the smaller holdall with her helmet out of the trunk of Kathleen's car.

"Oh, how charming. You can't see that on the TV," Kathleen said, and raised the collar on her jacket up to her ears.

Francesca shut the hatchback, and they started to walk over to an open door in the pits complex.

Inside the garage, a young-ish man with typical Latin good looks was sitting on a plastic chair, holding a steaming mug of coffee. He was wearing a dark blue Maserati driving suit with some slightly unusual accessories: yellow winter gloves and a fire engine red 'Snoopy' beanie hat he had pulled down past his ears.

"Ciao, Francesca. Come stai?" he said when he saw her.

"Ciao, Fabio."

He started talking to her in Italian, but Francesca put her hands in the air.

"Abbiamo bisogno di parlare inglese, per favore, Fabio. This is my friend, Kathleen, and she doesn't speak Italian."

"Salute a la bella donna!" Fabio said with a huge smile and raised his mug to Kathleen.

"He's toasting the pretty lady," Francesca leaned in and said, nudging Kathleen in the side.

"Oh... I've never been greeted quite like that before," Kathleen said, and laughed. She put out her hand.

"Kathleen O'Malley. How do you do."

"Fabio Dellassandro. Very nice to meet you," he said.

"I'm off to change. Think you can stay out of trouble for that long?" Francesca said to Kathleen.

"Of course."

As Francesca passed Fabio, she said a few words to him in Italian, and he nodded - 'hands off, she's not available.'

"So you're one of the drivers in #2 ?" Kathleen asked, and dug her hands into her pockets to try to get some warmth in them.

"Yes I am."

"I see. So you're fighting for the championship?"

"That's right. And I hope Francesca can help us get there. You're the lady that wrote her biography, right?" he said and smiled.

"Yes."

"I saw the presentation at Le Mans, it looked pretty full."

"It was," Kathleen said and laughed, remembering the huge crowd at the event.

The door opened behind them and another driver walked in. He was a few years older than Francesca, and with very little hair on his head. He started talking very fast in Italian to Fabio, and at first, he didn't notice Kathleen at all.

"Gio, this is Francesca's friend Kathleen," Fabio said, and pointed at the blonde woman.

"Oh, hello, I'm sorry, I didn't see you. My name's Giovanni Bellichi. Everyone calls me Gio."

"Hello. I'm Kathleen O'Malley."

"Where's Francesca?" Gio said.

"She's changing. She won't be long," Fabio said.

"Good, because there are several things we need to go over with her before we can start the test."

They started talking Italian to each other, and Kathleen felt slightly overlooked. It didn't last long, as Francesca put her hands on the blonde woman's shoulders.

"Ciao, Gio. Nice to see you."

"Francesca," he said.

"Fabio's the ladies' man, and Gio's the serious one... but I think you've found that out already," she said to Kathleen, who smirked in return. Fabio laughed out loud, raising his mug to her again.

"I've got you a set of earplugs, and you have to use them, Kathleen. The cars need to warm up, and as soon as they're started, it'll be louder than hell in here," Francesca said, and gave Kathleen a small plastic box with the Maserati Trident on it.

"All right. I was..."

Giampaolo strode into the garage holding a clipboard and a headset.

"Team briefing in five minutes in the bus. Has everyone heard it?"

"Luca and Donny aren't here yet," Gio said.

The team manager raised an eyebrow and was about to set off on one of his trademark tirades when he spotted Kathleen.

"Oh, hello, Miss O'Malley."

Kathleen opened her mouth to say hello, but Giampaolo didn't wait for her.

"Team briefing in ten minutes, and we'll start with or without them!" he said and tapped his wristwatch. He spun around on his heel, and left the garage.

Half an hour later, Francesca and the others came out of the bus, ready to begin the testing. Kathleen had been busy watching the mechanics preparing and taking the cars out of the transporters, and they were now wheeling them into the garage.

"The cars are looking fabulous, don't you think?" she said to Francesca as she came over to her.

"They look good, I guess. All right. We're set. Fabio's going out first to set a base time."

"And then you'll get in?"

"Yes. Well, that's the plan, anyway. All kinds of things usually happen at tests. It might be that he isn't happy with the basic setup, and comes in to get it adjusted."

"Right. Well, whenever you do go out... please be careful."

"I always am, Kathleen," Francesca said, and took the hand offered to her.

Right at that moment, one of the mechanics pressed the starter button on #2, and the V12 came to life with a scream. Kathleen jumped a foot in the air and wrapped her arms around Francesca.

"Oh dear," she said when she noticed what she was doing.

"Doesn't bother me at all," Francesca drawled.

"Of course not, but there are so many people here..."

"They'll be fine. Don't you worry about that. Come on, let's go someplace where it's more quiet..."

"I have arrived!" a man walking down the pitlane suddenly shouted. Everyone turned to look at the newcomer, Luca DiLorenzi. He was in his late twenties, and his hair and beard were trimmed to the latest fashion standards. He wore a pair of sunglasses even though it was overcast, and his driving suit wasn't closed all the way up, so everyone could get a good look at the undoubtedly expensive piece of gold jewellery around his neck. A rail-thin woman walked a step behind him.

He walked over to Francesca and Kathleen and took Kathleen's hand. He bent down and kissed it, trying to appear like a matinee idol - not entirely successful.

"Enchanted. I'm Luca DiLorenzi, you've probably heard of me," he said, lifting his sunglasses and flashing his big, brown eyes at Kathleen.

"I have, yes. I'm Kathleen O'Malley," she replied, feeling acutely embarrassed.

"And she's with me, Luca. Who's your lady friend?" Francesca said, and reached over to remove his hand from Kathleen's.

"Louisa, get over here," he said, and waved at the woman.

The woman was probably in her early twenties, but it was hard to tell since her face was covered by what looked like an inch of makeup. She had bleached blonde hair, fake eyelashes, and most likely fake breasts, too. Her pink blouse and very tight leather pants didn't leave anything to the imagination, and the way she walked didn't either.

She had an air of arrogance about her that led to Kathleen disliking her immediately, and she showed it by shoving her hands in her pockets.

"Hi," Louisa said, and never stopped chewing a wad of bubblegum. She looked at the two older women with barely hidden boredom.

"Nice to meet you. But anyway, we're busy, so if you will excuse us..." Francesca said, and took Kathleen by the shoulders.

"Whatever," Louisa said, and waltzed back to Luca who was busy talking loudly to one of the mechanics.

"Dear God, what a tramp!" Kathleen growled when they were out of earshot.

"Calm down, tiger. Not everyone can have your grace, you know," Francesca said, smiling broadly behind Kathleen's back.

"Where are we going, anyway?"

"Right over here..." Francesca said, and turned off the pitlane, walking in between two lorries.

"Give me a 'good luck' kiss. It worked the last time."

"Well, in that case, it would be a crime not to do it again..." Kathleen said, and pulled Francesca close. Their lips touched in a very loving kiss, and both women closed their eyes and savoured the moment.

A little while later, Fabio was driving #2 slowly down the pitlane after doing four flying laps and establishing a time Francesca should try to match or improve on.

She was ready to go into the car, and Kathleen could see in Francesca's eyes that she was nervous. She was looking straight ahead and not sensing anything, not even Kathleen's hand on her back. She fidgeted, first with her gloves, constantly pulling the fingers out and then pushing them in again, and then re-adjusting the HANS device and her helmet four times in three minutes.

The car stopped in front of the garage, and Fabio turned off the engine. He came over to her and explained a few details about the track conditions. Francesca nodded a couple of times, and finally said,

"OK."

She turned to Kathleen and gave her a little squeeze on the arm. Showtime.

She pressed the yellow starter button, and the engine came to life. She checked the gauges, and everything was in order.

"Fran, I want you to do a slow recon lap, two flyers, and then come in. You copy?" Giampaolo said over the radio.

"I copy. Slow-fast-fast-pit."

"All right. Get to it."

Francesca selected first gear and released the clutch. There was no need for the pitlane speed limiter to be used, since the Maserati team was the only one there, so the car quickly gained speed and soon went through the right turn at the end of the pitlane.

The familiar knot in Kathleen's stomach returned, and she had to keep her hands in her pockets, because she was clenching her fists so they wouldn't shake. She could hear the engine note rise and fall as Francesca drove around the circuit on her slow lap.

Giampaolo came over to her.

"Do you want to listen in?" he said, and presented her with a headset.

"Ah... I don't... I don't have very good experiences with that, so... um..."

"Well, it's your choice if you want to use them, but here... take them."

"O... K. Thank you," she said and looked at the headset like it was a monster ready to harm her.

Suddenly she could hear Francesca's voice from the headset, and the need to connect with her was stronger than the fear, so Kathleen brushed her hair into an impromptu ponytail and put the headset on.

"Everything looks A-OK. Starting my first flyer," Francesca said, and Kathleen could hear through the radio how the engine note changed from a lazy growl to an aggressive howl.

#2 screamed past the pits, heading for the first corner, Copse. Even though the car was fitted with electronic transponders to log the time, Giampaolo still used his trusty old stopwatch to time it himself.

They could hear Francesca going at maximum revs through the Maggotts-Becketts complex, and then down the Hangar straight, before braking for Stowe.

"What's the target time?" Kathleen asked.

"1 minute 37 point 2-1," he said.

"And how is Francesca doing?"

Giampaolo looked at her, trying not appear too patronising.

"Well, she hasn't completed a lap yet, so..."

"Oh. Of course. Silly me," Kathleen said and blushed.

"Here she is. I'll tell you in a moment," he said, as Francesca came through Bridge corner and into the infield. She drove the car aggressively through the turns and ran a bit wide on the approach to Woodcote, the final corner. She crossed the line and headed onto her second flying lap.

"1:37.37. Not bad, but not quite there yet, either," he said, and wrote the figure down on his clipboard.

Kathleen willed Francesca on by crossing her fingers, and it seemed to work, because when the car crossed the line after the second flying lap, the stop watch read 1:37.05 - two tenths quicker than the target time.

"Pit, pit, pit," Giampaolo said into the radio.

"Understood. How did I do?" Francesca said, making Kathleen press her headset closer to her ears so she could hear everything.

"First lap 37-3, second lap 37 flat. Adequate for now."

'Adequate!' Kathleen thought, and was a heartbeat away from asking Giampaolo what the hell he was on about, when she realised that it was probably all part of a grander scheme, and that she better keep quiet.

"Understood," Francesca said, sounding winded after the two fast laps.

"Gio, stand by for a race handover," Giampaolo said to the thin-haired man, who nodded and closed his visor. He stepped into the pitlane with his seat and a drinks bottle.

"Francesca, simulation handover," Giampaolo said into his radio.

"Roger that. I'm entering the pits now."

Within a few seconds, Kathleen could hear the car approaching, the pit speed limiter making the car stutter loudly. Francesca dived in and stopped exactly on the yellow marker tape on the ground. She jumped out of the car, and helped Gio get in. She went down on her knees and strapped the lower belts, and then clipped the drinks bottle in place. She got up, shut the door, and stood back. Gio started and drove about fifty feet down the pitlane before stopping.

"All right Gio. Cut it," Giampaolo said, and signalled to three mechanics that they should pull the car backwards.

Francesca removed her helmet and her balaclava, She scratched her hair and looked for Kathleen. The author was still standing inside the garage and waved at the driver.

"Hi. What that it?" Kathleen asked, as they walked to the back wall of the garage.

"No, just the overture. Now we'll do a full tank simulation where they'll check if I can keep a consistent pace, and then we'll do what we came for - setting up the car for Spa."

"Oh... I thought we were done."

"Oh, no. It'll be several hours yet. Have you had a cup of coffee?" Francesca asked.

"It's not coffee, it's espresso! And it smells like rocket fuel!" Kathleen said and chuckled.

"Well, try the hot soup, then. It's great from what I've heard."

Behind them, Luca went out in #1, quickly gaining speed down the pitlane.

"Oh, there's Prince Irresistible," Kathleen said and scrunched her nose.

"He's a primadonna, but he's quick. His job is simpler. All he needs to do is to find the setup that suits himself. His co-driver doesn't have any say in the matter," Francesca explained.

"That doesn't sound productive?" Kathleen said.

"He's the star."

"You're my star," Kathleen said with a smile, and hooked her hand inside Francesca's arm.

"I'm glad you think so. Perhaps you could join me the next time I'll negotiate my contract?"

"Now you mention it, how do you rate your chances?"

"Can't say, but I know I'm trying my best," Francesca said, and shrugged.

"Don't you think you could find another team to work for for next year... I mean, if this falls through?"

"Well... I probably could, but I want to be at the business end of the grid. Even the top privateers only have irregular chances of winning. I think I'd get frustrated too quickly in such a scenario," Francesca said.

"Carrara!" Giampaolo barked from out front.

"I guess that's my cue, see you later," she said, and quickly gave Kathleen a little kiss on the cheek.

"All right, here's what we'll do. We've bolted new tires on it and filled the tank to capacity. I

want you to drive a full stint... and Francesca, no stunts, no bravery, only fast, consistent laps, OK?" Giampaolo said, with a very fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"I understand."

"Off you go."

She got into the car and drove off. After a few minutes, Giampaolo started writing down the times off his stop watch. Because of the heavier car, she was now doing 1:42's, but she was very consistent, only going a tenth or two in either direction. He nodded his approval and wrote something more on the clipboard.

"How are things going?" Kathleen said, holding a bowl of chicken soup that was steaming in the October cold.

"So far so good," Giampaolo said, and wrote down another lap time after Francesca had screamed by on the straight.

45 minutes later, and Francesca entered the pits with her tank nearly empty. Kathleen was out front watching them, hoping the anxious wait would soon be over for the driver.

"Simulation handover," Giampaolo said into the radio, and looked at his clipboard.

"Understood," Francesca replied. She approached the pit and stopped at the marker tape. Fabio was standing by to take over after her.

"Scramble, front bodywork!" Giampaolo suddenly said into the radio. Two mechanics ran into the pits and took a spare nose section. As per regulation, they couldn't touch the car while it was being refuelled, but as soon as the hoses were off, the mechanics set to work unclipping the old front. One man reached in and took off the electronic cables connected to the headlights, while the other made sure the front bodywork was lined up properly. Francesca finished the handover to Fabio and stepped back to watch them.

The exchange didn't go smoothly, as they couldn't get the front bodywork on correctly. Giampaolo cursed in Italian, came out onto the pitlane and started waving his hands.

"Stop, stop, stop, this is screwed up. Reset and do it again - and this time do it right! Fabio, stay in the car," he said.

Her work done, Francesca took her helmet off, and walked over to Kathleen.

The author smiled nervously, and took Francesca's gloved hand.

"How did it go?"

"Meh," Francesca said and shrugged.

"I think Giampaolo was satisfied," Kathleen whispered.

"Well, you never know with him. I've seen him smile when things go wrong, because then he has a legitimate reason to shout at someone."

"Oh... I don't think it was like that, actually..." Kathleen said.

"Carrara! Briefing in the bus!" Giampaolo shouted.

"I wish he would learn how to say 'please'," Kathleen said and sighed.

"I better go and see what he wants," Francesca said, and squeezed Kathleen's hand.

Inside the team bus, Giampaolo sat down in his leather chair, and Francesca pulled a plastic chair over to sit on. He went through the rows of numbers on a piece of paper on his clipboard, and his face was unreadable to Francesca.

"Well, Fran, you did 27 laps in that stint, most of them acceptable, but there were two consecutive laps where you lost 1.2 and 0.8 seconds respectively. What happened?" he said, and pointed at two lines on the data sheet.

"There was gravel on the track on the exit of the Abbey Chicane. It had been blown away when I returned for the third pass."

"Oh?"

"After Luca's spin."

"Oh. I see."

"He made a kamikaze move on me, but went flying off into the gravel. I think he forgot the brake pedal's the one in the middle," Francesca said and smirked.

"Hmmm. Yes... I heard a few words on the radio about that," he said, and wrote something down.

A pause.

"And?" Francesca said.

"And... congratulations, Fran. You're in," Giampaolo said, and stretched out his hand.

"Thank you, Giampaolo," she said, and shook it.

"Now let's go win that damned championship, huh?" he said, and leaned back in his leather chair.

Later that evening.

On their way home from the track, Francesca and Kathleen had stopped and bought a bottle of champagne. Safely home, they had lit a fire in the fireplace, and now they were sitting on a rug on the floor, watching the flames flicker. On Kathleen's insistence, they had turned off all the lights in the house, so they could get the most out of the fire.

"I can't believe you only want one glass of this champagne, Francesca. It's great," Kathleen said and took another swig of her tall glass.

"You know I don't drink alcohol... well, much, anyway," the driver said, quite content with looking at Kathleen's profile.

"Well, I do, so if you don't mind..." Kathleen said, and refilled her glass.

"By all means."

"Isn't this romantic? You, me, an open fire... what more do we want?"

"Oh, I could think of one or two things," Francesca said, and pulled one of the chairs over so she could lean against it. When she was comfortable, she stretched out her legs.

"Could you now?"

"Yes."

Kathleen moved over to sit between the long legs, her back resting against Francesca's full breasts underneath her grey sweater. The driver wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and sighed deeply.

"This was one of them," she whispered into Kathleen's ear.

"Nice."

"I still think your hair is too long," she said, and kissed the top of Kathleen's head.

"How many times do I have to tell you I like it long," Kathleen said, and chuckled. She started moving her fingers up and down the driver's arms, and was pleased to feel a shiver running through the taller woman behind her.

"Be careful. You might start something you can't stop," Francesca purred, gently clawing at Kathleen's stomach.

"I'm not planning on stopping..." the author said, and turned around to sit on her knees. Their faces, and more importantly, their lips, were suddenly right next to each other, and the temptation proved too great for the two women.

Kathleen leaned in and kissed the soft lips in front of her. She closed her eyes and let herself float away on the kiss. Francesca's tongue traced her lips and Kathleen opened her mouth to let it in. It didn't take long for the kisses to become much more passionate, and pretty soon both Francesca and Kathleen were ready for more.

Kathleen pulled back slightly and looked lustfully at Francesca's ice blue eyes, who were darkened by the passion coursing within her. She started to unbutton her shirt, taking it slowly, teasing Francesca one button at a time. When she was done, she flipped the shirt clear of her shoulders, revealing her curvaceous body to the driver, who had great difficulty in tearing her eyes from Kathleen's enticing breasts. She leaned in again and kissed Francesca lovingly. Her body trembled when she felt the other woman's hands caress her back.

"Come," she whispered, and tugged on Francesca's shoulders, inviting her to lie down in front of the fire.

The driver complied, making herself comfortable on the rug.

"Don't go anywhere..." Kathleen whispered.

Francesca grinned and put her arms behind her head. This was turning into an interesting evening.

Kathleen went into her bedroom and opened her drawer. She wanted to take the purple object, but she suddenly remembered an item that had given her much satisfaction in the years she had been alone. She rummaged through the drawer until she found it - she looked at it, and came to the conclusion that such a special occasion needed a special celebration.

She went back to Francesca, hiding her special friend behind her back. The sight of Kathleen walking in, only wearing trousers and a bra, stirred Francesca a great deal, and she looked greedily at the author. Kathleen kneeled and began to lift Francesca's blouse.

"Come on, let's get this off of you," she said.

"Hey, you're dressed too!" Francesca said, touching the leg of Kathleen's trousers.

"One thing at a time. You first..." Kathleen purred.

Francesca quickly shed her clothes. Kathleen's eyes feasted on the taller woman's exquisite body,

the muscled planes, the delicate curves and the triangle of jet black curls, and she felt her mouth go bone dry in anticipation.

"Here's the special friend I told you about... she's called Lady Feather," Kathleen whispered, and presented a large goose feather from behind her back.

Without warning, she let the tip of the feather travel up the inside of Francesca's right thigh and across her centre, applying some gentle pressure. Francesca drew a sharp breath and her eyes grew wide from the touch.

"... and she'll bring you pleasure, if you let her..." Kathleen continued, and drew patterns across Francesca's abs with the tip of the feather. The driver's impressive muscles contracted and stood out clearly in the flickering glow of the fire.

"You're a devil woman, you know that?" Francesca said, and ran her fingers up Kathleen's arm.

Kathleen grinned, and let the feather do the talking by moving back down the inside of Francesca's other thigh. Then, she let the feather run little rings around the driver's breasts, and moved down to gently kiss the erect nipples. Francesca's breath hitched, and she pulled Kathleen up to her and kissed her passionately.

Kathleen let the feather roam all over Francesca's body, and the driver closed her eyes and just enjoyed the delicate touch. The tip of the feather felt like fire on her heated skin, and pretty soon, her body cried out for a firmer touch.

"Please, I need you," she whispered, and took Kathleen's hand.

The author leaned down and kissed Francesca very gently on the lips. When they separated, she drew back slightly and looked into the ice blue eyes of the other woman. The magnetic pull was so strong she couldn't help falling in love all over again.

"God, I love you so much..." she whispered.

"I love you too, honey," Francesca said, and pulled Kathleen down again.

The heat, the crackling of the burning wood, and the flickering orange light from the fireplace awoke primal feelings in Kathleen and Francesca, and soon, they were lost to the world.

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CHAPTER 10

Francesca woke up and rubbed her eyes. She sat up in bed, partially opened one of the venetian blinds, and peeked out into the dark, deserted paddock of Spa-Francorchamps. The world

championship would be decided today, and the fact that Francesca herself wasn't in the hunt annoyed her a great deal. Well, at least she had a ride.

Next to her, Kathleen was sleeping on her stomach, facing away from the driver. Francesca admired the sculpted rear end of the fair headed woman, and wished they had a bit more time.

Francesca listened intently, but she couldn't hear any rain on the roof of the Sunliner. Because the track wound its way through the Ardennes forest, showers were never far away here in Spa. She checked the alarm clock, October 10th, 6:10 am. She still had twenty minutes before she needed to get up, so she snuggled back down in bed, pulling the blanket up to her ears.

A little while later, Francesca stepped out of the shower and put on a bathrobe. She wiped her hair dry with a towel that she threw into the bathroom when she was done.

"How do you feel?" Kathleen asked, still lying on the bed.

"Oh, you know... ready," the driver said, and unzipped the travelling bag with her clean fireproof clothes.

"Cold hands?"

"Well... I guess," Francesca said, and clenched her fists a couple of times to get the circulation going.

"Let me warm them for you," Kathleen said, and rose from the bed. She wrapped the blanket around her body and walked over to the driver on bare feet. Making sure the blanket was safely tucked under her arms, she started rubbing Francesca's cold hands.

"Is that better?" she asked.

"Oh yes... much better", Francesca said, and leaned down to give Kathleen a good morning kiss.

When they separated, Kathleen didn't let go of Francesca's hands.

"I know you must be getting tired of me telling you the same thing each and every time, but Francesca... please me careful."

"I will. I love you far too much to take stupid risks now," Francesca said, and leaned down to kiss Kathleen again.

"I love you too," Kathleen said, and stuck her hand inside Francesca's bathrobe.

"I'm on pole, I had a fantastic lap yesterday, and yes, I feel we can deliver the goods today."

"Vittorio Franco is here in a privateer Maserati. Have you said hello to him?"

"No, but I'll make sure to wave every time I lap him," Francesca deadpanned, making Kathleen nearly choke on her tongue.

"Are you aware that the latest weather reports suggest rain within thirty minutes? As you know, rain is very dangerous here because the spray gets stuck in the trees, creating clouds of mist."

"Yes, I've heard the weather reports, and yes, I'm aware of the problem with the mist. The best place to be when it's raining is out front, and that's where we are. I just have to control the start, and not let the Toyota outfox me on the run up to the Les Combes. If I can stay in front on the first lap, I believe we have a good chance of controlling the race in the first hours."

"All right, thank you, Francesca Carrara."

"Thank you," she said, and walked away from the camera crew with Kathleen in tow.

"Is that true? About the spray?" Kathleen said, looking anxiously at the clouds.

"Yes it is. But don't worry, Kathleen. I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Well, I am worrying. Please remember what I said, Francesca. Be careful," Kathleen said, and grabbed hold of Francesca's gloved hand.

"I promise, Kathleen. I promise."

Francesca clicked the HANS-device onto the helmet and wiped the visor. Fabio came over to them and surprised Kathleen by giving her an Italian greeting - kissing her on both cheeks. She blushed, making Francesca chuckle.

"Ciao Francesca, Kathleen," he said and smiled.

"Come stai, Fabio?"

"So-so. I'm glad I'm not starting, rain's on the way," he said.

"Yeah, well, I happen to like the rain."

"So I've heard."

"Who's starting the Toyota?" Francesca said, and pointed at the red and white car next to her Maserati.

"Kaneichi."

"Hmmm. He's a hothead."

"Yep. I fought with him all race long at Mosport. He's aggressive," Fabio said, and looked with great interest at two scantily clad grid girls walking by.

"Focus, Fabio, focus."

"I am focused! Well, gotta go. Be cool, guys," Fabio said and left the two women by themselves.

Francesca looked up at the clouds, which weren't any heavier now than they had been earlier. She took her fireproof balaclava from a small bag Kathleen was carrying and put it on, smoothing out the wrinkles, and adjusting it so it fit around her eyes.

"Are you going to watch the race?" Francesca asked.

"Yes. There's a bigscreen TV set up in the back of the garage. But I don't understand why Maserati doesn't have a big hospitality tent like Mercedes did?"

"Probably because Maserati prefers to spend the money on the cars instead of on nonsense," Francesca said flatly.

"True. Still, at least you have a caterer this time. In Mugello, I had to pay for all the food myself!"

"Awwww, poor you," Francesca said and winked.

Kathleen was about to answer when a noisy group of VIP's passed, and the moment was lost.

"Hug," Francesca said to Kathleen. She put her arms around the author's waist and gave her a bearhug, almost smothering the smaller woman.

"Love you," she told her through the fireproof cloth.

"Love you too," Kathleen said, and gave Francesca's backside a squeeze.

A klaxon sounded, and two track marshals began walking down the grid holding signs that read 'CLEAR THE GRID' and 'FIVE MINUTES TO START'.

The grid was quickly cleared of the hangers-on, leaving only the mechanics and the drivers. Francesca put on her helmet and made sure the HANS-device was secured. She got in the car, and a mechanic tightened her seatbelts.

Kathleen walked briskly back to the Maserati garage, pushing her way through the masses of people - there was no way she was going to miss the start. She turned a corner and went into the garage that was packed with people in dark blue Maserati gear. Giampaolo was talking to someone on the radio, with his indispensable clipboard in his hand, and Fabio and Gio were discussing something in the corner. Luca DiLorenzi was starting from fifth place in #1, and his co-driver, Donny Zorzi, whom Kathleen hadn't met yet, was sitting on a plastic chair playing with his cell phone.

Kathleen went directly to the back of the garage to find a vacant lawn chair to sit on. The TV was showing a static shot of the pit straight, and she could easily see Francesca's Maserati #2 on the front row. A track official waved the green flag, and the cars started to move - Francesca set off first, quickly followed by the others.

As the TV followed the field around on the warmup lap, Kathleen began to understand why Francesca treated this track with such respect. Some of the corners were incredibly fast and sweeping, demanding a high level of commitment, and some of them were tight, fidgety chicanes where it'd be so easy to damage the undertray or the front splitter.

Francesca took the car through the Bus Stop chicane and past the F1 pits, unused by the sportscars. As the pole position car, she had to control the 47 cars behind her, and she was doing her job well. She went round the La Source hairpin on the outside, careful not to go over the drainage manholes on the exit of the corner, and crept down the pit straight in first gear, waiting for the red light to go off and the green light to go on.

Finally the light changed, and she floored the throttle. The V12 screamed and she quickly changed into second, then third, then fourth gear, going down the hill towards Eau Rouge. The Toyota had kept up with her, but she held the inside line into the corner, and she was ahead.

Going through the fast left in fifth gear, she could feel the car bottoming out from the weight of the full tanks. She dropped down a gear and crossed the track to apex the sweeping right, seemingly climbing straight up - and then back up to fifth gear for the left at Raidillon. As she flew onto the Kimmel straight, she changed into sixth and the revs climbed steadily to around 12,000 rpm, which translated to 200 mph. She checked her mirrors and saw the Toyota was trying a move on the inside, but she changed her line towards the centre of the track, and kept it behind her.

She braked hard for the Le Combes chicane, a right-left complex going onto a short straight, and then another hard right. Down another short straight, and then through the right hand hairpin of Malmedy. Francesca constantly checked her mirrors to see where the aggressive Toyota was, but she was in control of the situation. From time to time, she could see a flash of blue behind her, and she reckoned it meant that Luca had gone up to third place from his fifth starting position.

Francesca went through a medium-fast left in third gear, and found herself on the fast part of the circuit. She accelerated steadily up to sixth gear before snatching fifth at the entrance to Pouhon,

blasting through the double-apex left at 180 mph. When she checked her mirrors, she could see the Toyota had fallen back slightly, so it looked like Kaneichi had run out of steam already. Back to sixth gear for a short straight, and then she braked and dropped down two gears for the right-left Fagnes complex.

She went down to third gear for the right hand corner at Stavelot, and cleared it effortlessly. Accelerating steadily back up to sixth gear, she prepared herself for the important Blanchimont corner.

This was a section of the track where she just didn't fancy going off - the car would veer straight into the barriers, and they would hurt, considering how fast she'd be going. Holding the correct line on the right hand side of the track, she eased the car into Blanchimont with her foot flat on the throttle in sixth gear, going 200 mph, and pulling over 4 G's through the corner.

She stood on the middle pedal for the Bus Stop, wasting no time going through the fiddly chicane. Onto a short straight, and then she dove into La Source.

"P1, 2.4 seconds ahead, looking good," Giampaolo told her over the radio as she screamed past the pits.

"10-4. Feels good," she replied, and went down the hill to start another lap.

Kathleen's heart was going nearly as fast as Francesca's. She'd been able to follow the opening lap on the bigscreen TV, and now she had to release the breath she'd been holding for the last two minutes. The familiar knot in her stomach had returned, and she crossed her fingers, hoping that Francesca would stay safe, and that everything would proceed as planned.

Francesca had told her they were going for a slightly unusual schedule here: she'd do the opening stint, the first 40 minutes, and then change to Fabio who'd do a full two hours. Then, Francesca would get back in the car for another 40-minute stint, before handing over to Gio who'd take the wheel for the next two hours. All that would leave Francesca fresh to take over for the run to the finish... provided they'd get that far, of course.

Kathleen looked at the small stopwatch she was holding. She had started it when the green flag fell, and it was now showing five minutes and counting.

After 42 minutes, Francesca jumped out of the car and handed over to Fabio.

"There's a hint of rain on the other side of the circuit!" she shouted, as she helped him get the belts done. He gave her a thumbsup, and she patted him on the helmet.

The refuelling crew pulled out the hoses and the mechanics began changing the tires. Francesca

slammed the door shut and ran around the back of the car. When the tires had been changed, a mechanic pulled the pressure valve for the pneumatic jacks, making the car fall to the ground, ready to take off. Fabio pressed the starter button and the engine came to life. He set off down the pitlane, with the car stuttering away on the pit speed limiter.

Francesca took off her helmet and the balaclava and went over to the small booth on the pit wall.

"Any problems, Fran?" Giampaolo asked.

"No. Rain's coming."

"We know. Can't be long until it's here."

A group of five cars went by on the track, making conversation impossible. Francesca flinched from the noises coming out of the back of a privateer Mazda with a rotary engine.

"Where's Luca?" she asked.

"Bogged down behind a Nissan and both Toyotas. He took third on the first lap, but tried too much," Giampaolo explained.

Francesca nodded. Very typical of Luca.

"Thanks. I'll take one of these, and then I'll be in the garage," Francesca said, taking a small, portable radio and putting it in the pocket of her driving suit.

"All right."

Francesca crossed the pitlane again and noticed Kathleen waving at her from the guest enclosure. She waved back and hurried over to her.

"Hi. It's going pretty well, isn't it?" Kathleen said.

"So far, yes. More than five hours to go, though."

"Of course."

Francesca looked around in the hectic garage.

"Come on, let's go somewhere quiet," she said, and took Kathleen by the shoulders, leading her away from the pits.

"Aren't you on standby, or something?"

"Yes, but I have a portable radio with me. It'll be fine."

They walked past the area where the bigscreen TV was, and some of the corporate guests starting clapping at Francesca when they saw her.

"Thank you, thank you, but please - no clapping until the race is over. Superstition, you know," she told them, and laughed.

Kathleen opened the back door and they walked out into the paddock. Francesca looked at the clouds, and tried to calculate which way they would blow. She could feel a light precipitation on the wind, and the air smelled of moisture.

"It's going to rain soon," Kathleen said.

"I think it's started already. I can feel it sooner, 'cos I'm taller, you know," she said, and grinned at Kathleen.

"I beg your pardon!" Kathleen said with a smirk, poking Francesca in the ribs. The driver laughed, and pulled the shorter woman closer.

"You're in a good mood today. You're always so stoic at the race weekends," Kathleen said.

"Well, I have a good feeling about this race. I don't know why, but I think something good will come out of it."

"Let's hope so."

The portable radio in Francesca's pocket squawked, and she took it out. Giampaolo was telling the mechanics to prepare the wet tires. Francesca looked up again, and at the exact same moment, large drops began falling.

"Let's go inside, I don't want to get wet," Kathleen said, and tugged at Francesca's driving suit.

"Sure."

They went back inside and sat down at the bigscreen TV. The rain was falling hard on the far side of the circuit, but all the works car seemed to be able to handle it. A large part of the privateers dove into the pits to change to wets, creating pandemonium in the pitlane.

"Why aren't the factory cars changing yet, Francesca?"

"We're better drivers, quite simply. And it might just be a shower. Time lost in the pits is hard to regain on the track."

Francesca turned around to check the timing screens. The lap times had increased by around 3-5 seconds since the rain started.

"Let's wait and see what happens," she told Kathleen.

Twenty minutes later, a clear dry line had emerged around the circuit, and the lap times had begun to improve again. Only one of the works car, the fourth placed Nissan, had changed tires, and that was now in the unfortunate situation of being on wets on a drying track. They fell back rapidly and finally had to come in and change back to a dry set.

Because they were running on a different strategy to the #2 car, Maserati #1, still with Luca DiLorenzi at the wheel, had assumed third place when the Nissan pitted, and he was still holding it, although he was some distance behind the two Toyotas, who were both yet to stop. Fabio had fallen back to fourth place after the pitstop, and he was quite a long way behind Luca in third.

Francesca was busy telling Kathleen about the relative strategies between the teams, when the TV picture suddenly cut to a car, half-buried in a tirewall. Kathleen instinctively grabbed Francesca's arm and held her tightly.

"It's a privateer Ferrari," Francesca said to calm the author down.

The driver of the yellow Ferrari got out and didn't even bother to shut the door. He went back and looked at the rear end of the car, completely crushed against a row of tires.

The TV showed a replay of the car losing traction coming out of Stavelot, and slamming into the tirewall.

"That was his own fault - too much throttle," Francesca said flatly.

"Is he all right?"

"Oh sure. He's walking around. He's fine," Francesca said, and put her arm around Kathleen's shoulders.

The words 'SAFETY CAR' flashed on the TV screen, and not far from where the two women were sitting, the Seat Altea Turbodiesel turned on its flashing lights and entered the circuit.

"Now what?" Kathleen asked.

"Now the driver of the safety car must find the leader of the race, and run to a set pace." She checked her watch.

"... and it's a pretty good time to make a pitstop anyway, so most of the leaders will do that."

"Does that mean that Fabio will lead again?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on where he is in the queue. We haven't seen him on the TV recently, so I don't know where he is in relation to the other cars," Francesca explained.

Five dreadfully slow laps later, Giampaolo was having a hissy fit because of the time it took for the track marshals to fix the tirewall. The crashed Ferrari had long since left the scene, but they were still trying to get the tires in place.

Fabio hadn't been able to assume the lead because he had been trapped behind a gaggle of backmarkers, losing a lot of time on the lap the safety car came out. Both Luca and the two Toyotas had pitted, but the running order remained the same with the Japanese cars leading the race.

Suddenly Giampaolo went still, listening to a radio communication from Fabio. He rubbed his eyebrows, and pushed a button so the pit crew could hear him.

"Scramble! #2's overheating!" he said, and slammed his fist down on his laptop.

Francesca jumped up and quickly donned her balaclava and her helmet in case she was needed.

"Trouble," she said to Kathleen, who followed her into the garage.

Giampaolo crossed the pitlane, and went over to the row of computers to see for himself.

"It doesn't register on the telemetry," a technician said.

"We can't chance it."

He pushed the button to the driver, and said

"Pit, pit, pit."

A few minutes later, Fabio brought the car down the pitlane without any obvious signs of overheating. He stopped at the marker tape, but was told to stay in the car. Francesca was ready on the sidelines, but it didn't look like she was going in right now.

With the engine still running, the mechanics took the engine cover off and frantically looked inside the engine bay. Giampaolo opened the driver's side door and stuck his head in, and sure enough, the needle on the water temperature gauge read 120 C.

"Anything?" he said to the mechanics, who were busy checking all the hoses and the radiator for leakages.

"Nothing!" someone shouted, and Giampaolo rolled his eyes. He tapped his fingers on the rollbar.

"Does it feel strangled?" he asked Fabio.

"No."

"All right, software reset!" Giampaolo shouted, and motioned to Fabio that he should turn off the engine. A technician came out of the pits and plugged a laptop into a socket on the dashboard. The instruments all lit up like candles on a Christmas tree, and then turned off.

"Done!" he said, and pulled out the plug.

"Hit it," Giampaolo said to Fabio, who pressed the yellow button. The engine came to life, still sounding healthy, and the instruments all appeared normal, including the water temperature.

"All right, off you go!" Giampaolo said, and shut the door. Fabio drove off down the pitlane, and soon rejoined the race.

In the confusion, #2 had lost a lap, and it didn't help that the Toyota they were fighting for the championship was still out front.

Francesca took off her helmet and put it on a shelf. She ran her fingers through her hair and went back to the rear of the garage where Kathleen was waiting.

"What was that all about?" Kathleen asked.

"Instrument failure, by the looks of it," Francesca said and shrugged.

"Hey, I thought you said you had a good feeling about the race?"

"Well, I could be mistaken..."

Francesca's next stint went without further problems, but she wasn't able to get the lap back they had lost in the pits. With Gio now in the car, all Francesca could do was to wait for her final turn.

She checked her watch and saw there was an hour and ten minutes left of the race. This was going to be closer than they had imagined it would be. To everyone's surprise, Nissan #21 was leading the race, but Francesca doubted that crew's ability to fight with the Toyota in second place if push came to shove. They had already shown weakness by losing a safe lead in the closing stages of the race at the Nürburgring, and Francesca couldn't see them improving that much in the short period since that race. Gio was in third, half a lap ahead of the fourth placed car, which was the second Toyota, but quite some distance behind the two front runners.

The situation was crystal clear: if the Toyota overtook the Nissan for the lead, then #2 had to follow it into second place. If the driver, regardless of who it was, couldn't do that, Maserati

would lose the championship.

Francesca was sharing a bowl of soup with Kathleen when the TV showed a smoking Maserati parked on the side of the track. For a brief second, Francesca feared it was her car, but as the door opened and the driver climbed out, she could see it was #1.

She looked over at Giampaolo, who was busy talking to Luca over the radio.

"Engine failure?" Kathleen asked.

"Looks like it. I believe it's had a misfire for the last half hour."

"Could that happen to your car, too?" Kathleen asked, and put her hand on Francesca's.

"Well, it can - they're running the same specs and electronics after all, but if Gio had problems, he would report them."

"Oh... he probably would. He's a very serious chap."

Giampaolo walked over to them and leaned down to whisper in Francesca's ear.

"I need a word, Fran... outside," he said quietly. She looked at him and furrowed her brow.

"I'll be back before I'm going out, Kathleen," Francesca said, and handed the author the bowl of soup.

"All right..."

"What's up, Giampaolo?"

"Luca wants to take your seat in #2."

The news took Francesca by surprise.

"What the fuck for?" she asked, stunned.

"Look, you know he's a star in Italy. It'll be great PR for the brand if the front page of La Gazzetta dello Sport shows him on the podium, holding the trophy."

"And what am I? Chopped liver?"

"You're a Brit, it's different. If this wasn't the championship race, I'd let you stay in."

"So you've already made up your mind, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's the wrong fucking decision, Giampaolo. Luca's a showboat, you know that. Do you honestly think he gives a shit about the brand?"

"You got a point, but he's also faster than you, Francesca."

"That may be, but he's ten times as erratic as I am."

Giampaolo opened his mouth to answer, but Francesca cut him off.

"The Nissan's slowing down now, there's going to be a fight on the track pretty damn soon. Luca's great on his own, sure, but you know as well as I do that he's not very good in a close fight. I am." When she said the last two words, she thumped her index finger into her chest.

"Jesus, Carrara... I hear what you're saying, but if I let you stay in the car, and we lose, we're fucked... you and me both."

"I'll give it 150% ...Giampaolo, you can count on me," Francesca said, and looked him directly in the eyes. He nodded.

"All right... I'll deal with Luca. You better get ready at once - you might be going out soon. Gio has a cramp."

"OK," Francesca said and put out her hand. Giampaolo shook it, and left.

Francesca let out a long breath and put her hands on her hips. If she had to race at full chat, she couldn't be as cautious as Kathleen wanted her to be. She steeled herself, and then went back to the pits to tell Kathleen about the news.

Kathleen pressed a hand against her stomach that suddenly insisted on making flip-flops. Francesca had pulled her over to a corner of the garage and explained the situation to her, but Kathleen knew that it couldn't be as simple as Francesca said it was.

"I don't care about the championship, I only care about you... and this sounds really dangerous."

"I love you too, but it's not dangerous. It's necessary for me to do this, and you have to trust me. It's not like I'm going out there to race with my head under my arm, is it?" Francesca said, unsuccessfully trying to coax a smile out of the author.

"Look, Kathleen, I can make a difference here. It's possible for me to win the championship for my team by using my skills and my experience. This is what I'm best at, driving cars fast."

Kathleen looked down and shook her head.

"Something might happen, and you might get injured again... I... I'm not sure I could..."

"I won't be."

"But..."

"I won't be. I know what I'm doing," Francesca said, and put her hand on Kathleen's cheek, stroking it gently with her thumb. She leaned down and kissed the author lovingly.

Behind them, Giampaolo cleared his throat. Francesca turned around, raising an eyebrow.

"I bet you don't like it when someone interrupts you while you're kissing *your* wife," she growled. Kathleen merely blushed.

"Pardon me. Gio's coming in on the next lap. And I'm divorced, actually."

"Oh... All right, I'll be ready."

She turned around and kissed Kathleen again.

"You heard him," she said as they separated.

"I did. Do what you have to, but please be careful. I love you."

"I will. Love you too," Francesca said, and kissed Kathleen on her forehead.

Francesca pushed the starter button, and the engine came to life. She set off down the pitlane to rejoin the fray.

Her orders were simple: In the remaining 55 minutes of the race, she had to go for it - maximum attack, nothing else would do. She needed to get past the Toyota for second place no matter what. If she could catch the Nissan in the lead, all the better, but the primary objective was to finish ahead of the Toyota.

She eliminated everything from her mind apart from the car she was chasing, and found a 'zone' where she was concentrating fully on the driving. Steering, braking, accelerating and changing gears were all that existed for her.

She set a blistering pace and she was very close to the lap record on her first three flying laps after the pitstop. Somewhere along the way, she unlapped herself when the Nissan pitted, but she didn't even notice. She had instructed the pits to not use the radio at all, unless they could see on the telemetry that something was wrong.

Her timing and luck were impeccable, and she sliced through the traffic as if it wasn't there. Pretty soon, the distance between her and the Toyota in front had withered down to practically nothing, and she could see the car ahead on some of the straights. This spurred her on even more, and two laps later, she was right behind it.

Kathleen was too nervous to sit, so she was standing behind the rows of lawn chairs, watching the race on the bigscreen TV. Because of the way Francesca drove, the camera was following her for most of the time, and Kathleen didn't dare take her eyes off the screen in case something happened while she was looking away.

The next time Francesca screamed past the pits, she had caught the Toyota, and the TV showed the two cars dicing for position going down the hill, headed for the Eau Rouge. Francesca fell back slightly to get her aerodynamics to work through the fearsome set of corners, but as soon as they were through Raidillon, she was back at work, trying to get alongside the Toyota.

Kathleen covered her mouth with her hands, unable to do much else than just stare at the screen.

Suddenly a technician shouted something in Italian, and Giampaolo spewed out a string of Italian curses that Kathleen didn't need to get translated to understand. She looked at the TV, and immediately noticed that both cars had turned their wipers on. The rain had returned.

Francesca turned on the wipers on the approach to the Malmedy hairpin. She didn't know how well the driver of the Toyota would perform in the wet, but since the Japanese drivers often had extensive experience with poor weather, he might be as good as she was.

The cars began slipping and sliding on the slick track, and it seemed to get worse. When they tiptoed through Pouhon, they had a good look at the oncoming clouds, and Francesca immediately hit the radio button.

"Wets! This lap!" she barked, scrambling the mechanics into action.

"Pit, pit, pit," Giampaolo said, and wiped his brow with a handkerchief.

But first she had to negotiate the rest of the lap she was on. The rain was coming down harder than ever as they went through Fagnes and then through Stavelot. The Toyota in front twitched viciously, and Francesca grabbed the opportunity and went for the gap. She squeezed through on the inside, and was clear of the other car.

Kathleen watched the scene completely mesmerised, and she jumped in the air when Francesca

went by the Toyota. Embarrassed over the display of emotions, she blushed, but when she looked around she saw that all the other guests were too busy to even look in her direction. She clenched her fists and looked at her watch - 40 minutes to go.

Both cars went very carefully through Blanchimont and the Bus Stop. It didn't come as a surprise to Francesca when she saw the Toyota follow her into the pits.

Francesca stopped right on the marks and the mechanics went to work. The Toyota continued past her and slotted into its own pit a bit further down the pitlane. The wheelguns clattered away, and Francesca's car was quickly fitted with wets. The car was released from the pneumatic jacks and she started the engine.

She went into the pitlane with her finger on the limiter, staring intently at the back of the Toyota. She came closer and closer to it, and finally she went by it. She breathed a sigh of relief - for once, the Maserati pit crew had been quicker than the opposition.

She released the limiter at the end of the pitlane and quickly went up through the gears. The entire circuit was soaked by now, and judging by the looks of the clouds, the rain would persist for the rest of the race.

"Fran, you've got full wets, the Toyota's on intermediates," Giampaolo told her over the radio.

"10-4," she said, and digested the information. Intermediates had a lot less profile than her full wets, so if the track started to dry out, the Toyota would be a lot quicker. She checked the clouds again, but couldn't see any change from a few minutes ago. She put the Toyota out of her mind, concluding they were taking a gamble on the weather improving dramatically. And besides, she was where she needed to be.

Kathleen was pacing back and forth. She was sure her hair would turn grey from the state of near-panic she found herself in. She had weighed the pros and cons for the better part of ten minutes before the need to hear Francesca's voice won out, and she had asked Giampaolo for a headset so she could listen in on the radio communication.

The TV was still showing pictures from the track, but Francesca hadn't been on since she had left the pits. According to the timing and scoring monitors, she was catching the Nissan, but probably not enough to get past it before the end of the race.

The terrible conditions continued to catch out some of the drivers, even the professionals weren't spared the humiliation of spinning off. The race was over for the second of the Toyotas, as it was beached in the gravel at Pouhon, no doubt after trying too hard.

The TV cut to a picture of the Nissan #21 rejoining the race, after a lazy spin in La Source had

caused it to end up facing the wrong way. Kathleen furrowed her brows, and checked the timing monitors... #21 was the car Francesca was chasing, and sure enough, only five seconds or so after the Nissan had carried on, the dark blue Maserati #2 came slithering around the corner... and then the TV cut away to something else.

"D'OH!" Kathleen said, and slapped her forehead.

Francesca thundered down the hill towards Eau Rouge. On her way there, she could see the Nissan cresting the hill ahead of her, and she calculated it must be around 4-5 seconds up the road. She went through Raidillon and onto the Kimmeline straight. This section of the track wasn't pleasant in the wet, as the trees lining the circuit prevented the spray from being cleared.

She braked too late for Les Combes, and the near side front locked up. She cursed as the car slid wide and bounced over the wet grass. The Nissan disappeared around the next corner and out of sight. When Francesca returned to the track, she jerked the steering left and right to clear the fronts of any grass and gravel she might've picked up, and resumed her race.

"I went off at Les Combes. Nothing damaged. Continuing."

"10-4," Giampaolo replied.

Kathleen stopped between steps, but continued pacing when she came to the realisation that Francesca was calmer than she was. Not long after, the cameras finally found #2 again, and Kathleen could see there wasn't any damage to the front of the car. She rolled her shoulders to loosen the tension in her neck, and wiped her sweaty palms on her pants.

"I think you need some coffee," Giampaolo said, and handed her a cup. She took it, but sniffed the contents before she drank from it.

"It's not that rocket fuel espresso again, is it?" she said.

"No, it's regular European coffee," he said and chuckled.

"Good. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

"I feel like a father in a delivery room - I'm waiting and waiting, but I have absolutely no influence on the thing I'm waiting for," Kathleen said and laughed. She took the headset off and put it around her neck.

"Oh... I know what you mean. But I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. Francesca is one of

the best when it comes to driving fast in the rain," Giampaolo said.

"How did Luca take the news?"

"He walked away in a huff."

"Just like that? ...that's not very professional," Kathleen said surprised.

Giampaolo shrugged.

"That's a fight for another day. If we win the championship it won't matter. If we don't..." he left the sentence hanging in the air.

Francesca's voice was heard in their headsets, and Kathleen quickly put hers on again. She looked at the TV, but it was showing something else. The official timing was showing 25 minutes to go.

"Say again," Giampaolo said on his way back into the garage.

"The gauge says I'm overheating!" Francesca said, and tried to tap on the glass, but she couldn't quite reach it. The needle was again stuck on more than 100 degrees.

She went down two gears and drove through Fagnes. The engine still ran smoothly, and she had no problems accelerating out of Stavelot, heading towards Blanchimont.

"I might've picked up some grass when I went off," she said in the radio.

"Anything on the telemetry?" the team manager barked.

"Negative. It's nowhere near overheating," the technician said.

Giampaolo pushed the button for the radio.

"Fran, ignore it. If it pops, it pops."

"10-4."

Francesca passed a slower car going into the Bus Stop, and another one coming out. She had the Nissan in her sights - it couldn't be more than 70 yards ahead of her. She could literally see how the other driver struggled to get the traction down coming out of La Source, as the Nissan kicked

its tail out accelerating away from the hairpin. She had a perfect exit to the same corner, and she was much closer going down the hill.

Coming onto the Kemmel straight, she was close enough to smell his exhaust fumes, and she feinted right to try and psyche the other driver into making a mistake. He wasn't fooled, and kept his line into the next chicane. Unfortunately for him, he ran wide on the exit, and Francesca was almost on top of him.

She made an opening move going into Malmedy, but the driver in the Nissan closed the door. She fell back and waited for another opportunity. It arrived soon after, as the Nissan went wide on the next turn and had both its right hand wheels on the grass. Francesca made a quick decision and used her momentum to pass the other car - for the lead of the race. She went through Pouhon at nearly full speed, constantly checking her mirrors. The Nissan had already fallen some way back, so it wasn't a threat any more.

"P1, Fran," Giampaolo said on the radio.

"10-4," she acknowledged calmly.

Kathleen was on the verge of a heart attack. She couldn't even concentrate on pacing back and forth, so she just stood still, staring at the TV. She looked at her watch, 18 minutes to go.

With Francesca pulling away from the Nissan seemingly at will, the excitement fizzled out of the race. All that was left now was for #2 to get safely to the finish, but even Kathleen knew that it wasn't as easy as it sounded. Because of the rain, the 1000 kilometres wouldn't be reached before the clock reached the time limit of six hours, but the cars had still been pushed to, or even beyond, their limits. Everything could still go wrong, and often did.

Out on the track, even the Toyota passed the ailing Nissan, but they had obviously given up chasing after Francesca, as their lap times were slower by a few seconds. They would have to wait another year.

"Fran, cool down a bit," Giampaolo said.

"Understood," Francesca replied, and followed orders by braking a bit earlier into the corners and accelerating less aggressively out of them. She also started to shortshift to save the engine and the gearbox.

"Everything looks A-OK," she said into the radio.

"We're green too," Giampaolo said.

"Give me the gap to the second placed car."

"Negative, they're slower than you. Four laps to go."

"10-4."

Now it was just a case of counting down the laps. Fabio and Gio joined Kathleen at the TV, and they were as nervous as she was. Exhaustion had forced her to sit down, and now her legs felt like lead. By now, the TV room was filled with corporate guests, and the special occasion had created an intangible air of excitement, the likes of which Kathleen had never experienced before. Maserati was poised to win the championship for the second year running, this time with the other car, and that of course meant a great deal to all the sponsors and the suppliers.

Fabio began chewing on his fingernails, and the usually jovial Italian was as quiet as a mouse. Gio had a strange look on his face that Kathleen couldn't quite read, but she was very surprised to see a few tears escape from his eyes.

Francesca went around La Source and received the white flag, indicating she was about to start the last lap of the race. The rain had eased off again, and her lap times were back down to around 2:25, some 11 seconds slower than her qualifying lap from yesterday. She had also scored the fastest lap of the race, a 2:16.885, set in her middle stint, after the track had dried up from the first shower, and before the second, longer one had arrived.

Kathleen couldn't speak - her throat simply didn't allow anything to pass through it. She was filled with restless energy, but at this late stage in the race, there was nothing to be done about it. If she left her seat, she'd never get it back, and she didn't want to miss the magical moment when Francesca crossed the finish line.

Fabio and Gio got up and left the TV area. They ran to the pitwall, together with all the mechanics. They were picked up by the cameras, so Kathleen watched their own pit on the TV. Giampaolo came in and looked for the blonde woman. When he had found her, he tapped her on the shoulder, and put a keychain with a yellow plastic card on it in her lap. She looked up at him, not quite understanding what it was.

He leaned down and whispered,

"It's credentials for the pitwall, c'mon, there's plenty of time." He took Kathleen's elbow, helped her up from the chair, and guided her through the pits and across the pitlane.

"Make some room!" he shouted, and the people already standing on the pitwall spread out to

allow Giampaolo and Kathleen to get up there.

Francesca was driving at 85 % of the car's capabilities, and she went through Blanchimont for the last time at the leisurely pace of 160 mph. Down to second gear for the Bus Stop, and then up to fourth along the old pits. Back down to first for La Source, and when she exited the hairpin, she could see the chequered flag waiting for her.

As Francesca crossed the line, the mechanics went into a frenzy. Screaming and cheering, they climbed the fence separating the track from the pitlane, and generally behaved like fans at a football game. Italian flags were waved everywhere, even Kathleen had picked one up. Unfortunately, she couldn't see much of the track through the broad backs of the chanting mechanics, but she did get a glimpse of the roof of the car, and of Francesca's hand as the driver poked it through the small opening in the side window.

Kathleen's exhaustion was swept away by the celebrations on the pitwall, and she shouted along with the others. She felt so damned proud over Francesca's accomplishments, and she couldn't wait to see her. Looking around at the mayhem, she knew she would have to wait a while to get the dark haired woman in her arms, but when she did, watch out Francesca...

A row of track marshals had formed a human chain at the bottom of the hill, and they guided Francesca and the other finishers off the track and into the pitlane.

"P1, Fran. Well done. Plus 19 seconds to the Toyota, and that means the championship is ours. Excellent job," Giampaolo said over the radio.

"It was my pleasure, Giampaolo," she replied calmly as she was shown the way into Parc Fermé.

A track marshal waved to her where she should park, and she followed him into the slot. She turned off the engine and let out a long sigh. She felt absolutely knackered. Driving so hard and giving her all for so long had taken a lot out of her. As the adrenaline left her system, she could feel her hip starting to throb, and she unbuckled herself from the seatbelts to get the circulation going.

She got out of the car and waved to the crowd, who responded by sending out a deafening cheer. She took off her helmet and her gloves and put them on the roof of the car. Running a shaky hand through her sweat-soaked hair, she started to look around for Kathleen.

"Francesca! Over here!" a familiar voice shouted behind her, and she turned around to find the owner. The mechanics and the other members of the teams were kept out of Parc Fermé by a low fence, so they were all standing in a huge group behind it. Francesca immediately spotted the blonde beauty with the misty green eyes. Kathleen was waving an Italian flag, and she had tears running down her cheeks. In a heartbeat, Francesca stood by the fence and reached out to hug

her.

Francesca framed Kathleen's face with her hands, and gave her an almighty smooch right on the lips, making the author blush furiously. The mechanics next to them all whistled and clapped, and Francesca raised an eyebrow in a mock threat.

Behind her, the second placed Toyota arrived in Parc Fermé, and Francesca went over to shake the driver's hand. His face was a mask of disappointment, but he accepted her hand and shook it.

"You'll get it next year," Francesca said, and the other driver shrugged.

The clerk of the course arrived in Parc Fermé to usher the drivers away to the podium. Giampaolo again took Kathleen by the shoulders, and helped her push her way through the massive crowd. A minute or so later, they stood below the dais, waiting for Francesca and the other drivers to appear.

They didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, the emcee stood on the left side of the podium and presented the drivers of the third placed car, the Nissan. The three men came onto the podium, waving to the crowd, and looking generally pleased. Next up were the three Toyota drivers, who all looked distinctively miserable. Below them, Kathleen and the others applauded their valiant effort.

The crowd erupted in a massive cheer when the emcee presented the winning crew. Fabio came out first, waving and throwing his cap into the crowd, as did Gio behind him. Francesca came out last, wearing her 200-watt smile that, as usual, made Kathleen's knees weak.

The Italian anthem started playing for the winning constructor, and all the drivers took their caps off in respect. Down where Kathleen was standing, all the mechanics sang along, and even though she didn't know a single word of the lyrics, she couldn't help but tralala along with them.

When the anthem finished, the crowd cheered again, and Francesca threw her cap into the spectators, aiming straight for Kathleen. The author reached up as far as she could go, but didn't catch it - instead a hand right next to hers did. She cursed, and tried to go up on tiptoes to see who had caught it, when one of the mechanics presented Francesca's cap to her with a huge smile on his face. She squeezed his arm and took the cap. With a proud expression on her face, she put the dark blue Maserati cap on, and the mechanics cheered and clapped her on her back. She sent a thumbsup to Francesca, who returned it.

The local dignitaries came out onto the podium with the trophies. When the three Maserati drivers and Giampaolo raised theirs high in the air, the sound from the crowd was deafening, and Kathleen had to cover her ears. Finally, Francesca and the others received the customary bottles of champagne, and as soon as the dignitaries had left the podium, the drivers started spraying it all over each other, as tradition dictates.

Francesca gave as good as she got, and soon she and everybody else were soaked to the core. Her hair was a mess, and she had champagne dripping out of her sleeves. Fabio and Gio whispered something to each other, and without warning, they hoisted Francesca up on their shoulders. She laughed out loud and waved to the crowd again, earning yet another round of cheers. They lowered her down gently, and she put her arms around them, giving them a mighty crush.

When the official photos had been taken, the drivers were led off the podium and into the press room where they had to answer questions from the world's press.

Kathleen had tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, and she felt immensely proud over the woman she loved. They had only known each other for six and a half months, but in that time, Kathleen had experienced more and felt more loved than she had in her first 35 years on this planet.

The crowd below the podium was massive, even after the drivers had left, so it took Kathleen ages to get over to the glass doors of the pits building where Francesca and the others would eventually emerge. She knew it was going to be a long and no doubt noisy evening and night for the Maserati team and their corporate guests, and she desperately wanted some time alone with Francesca before the party began.

Kathleen had only just arrived at the glass doors when they were opened and the drivers came out. The looks on the faces of the three Toyota drivers hadn't improved, but everybody else were smiling and laughing.

Francesca came out first of the Maserati drivers, and she proudly showed the crowd her huge, golden trophy. She spotted Kathleen and strode over to her.

"Congratulations, Francesca. God, I'm so proud of you," the author said and sniffed. She put her arm possessively around Francesca's waist as they started to walk through the crowd to get back to their motorhome.

"Thank you. It went well today. I got what I came for," Francesca said, and shook the trophy.

"Do you have a moment before the party begins?"

"Definitely. I need a shower so badly..."

"I'd say... you reek of champagne," Kathleen said and tickled Francesca in the ribs with her fingers.

"Hey!" Francesca shrieked and tried in vain to squirm away from the tickle-attack.

"Oh no you don't - you're mine, and I'm never letting you go," Kathleen purred.

"I'm not going anywhere without you," Francesca said, and kissed Kathleen's hair.

After she had closed the door to the motorhome, Francesca placed the trophy on the table and wiggled out of the champagne soaked driving suit. She threw it into the small bathroom, and turned around to face Kathleen, who had sat down on the couch.

They looked lovingly at each other for a few seconds. Francesca smiled broadly and put her hand out, intending to drag Kathleen up to her for a hug. Instead, Kathleen suddenly tugged on Francesca's arm and pulled her down on the couch. She put her hand behind Francesca's head, and claimed her lips in a ferocious kiss. The driver was taken completely by surprise, but she soon recovered and dove headfirst into the passionate kiss, allowing Kathleen's probing tongue inside.

When they drew apart to get some air into their lungs, Kathleen framed Francesca's face and used her thumbs to caress the chiselled cheekbones - the unshed tears in her misty green eyes were for once matched by Francesca's ice blue orbs.

"God, I needed that!" Kathleen said, a single tear escaping down her cheek. She wiped it away, and laughed at the look on Francesca's face, a curious mix of shock and happiness.

"What?"

"I'm gobsmacked, Kathleen O'Malley, I really am...!" Francesca joked.

Kathleen laughed out loud and tickled Francesca on the thigh.

"You shouldn't be. Don't you know how much I love you?"

"Oh, I do. I know that you love me just as much as I love you..." Francesca said, and leaned in to kiss Kathleen again.

"Let's take that shower, shall we?" Kathleen said in a thick, husky voice.

"But the party...? And the guys are waiting for us..." Francesca said, grinning.

"They'll have to wait longer."

THE END.
