

# ~ On the Fast Track to Love 2 ~

by Norsebard Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

## **DISCLAIMERS:**

This is an original story. All characters are created by me.

All characters and events depicted in this story are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons (living or dead) or events is purely coincidental.

The registered trademarks mentioned in this story are © of their respective owners. No infringement of their rights is intended, and no profit is gained.

This story depicts sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES:**

Written: November 24th, 2010 - January 10th, 2011.

**Ianic (Yorksbard)** - As always, you've been a great help. Thanks :D

**Scanto** - Thank you very much for giving me a (much needed) hand with the Italian dialogue. :D

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

**Description:** After sharing a home for several months, the bond between the biographer Kathleen O'Malley and the professional race car driver Francesca Carrara has grown very strong. Unfortunately, the new season brings new problems and as Francesca embarks on the world championship tour, unexpected - and very much unwanted - issues arise that may threaten their relationship and Kathleen's peace of mind.

## **PART 1**

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 1**

Trying to be as quiet as a mouse, Kathleen O'Malley slipped out of the double bed she was sharing with Francesca Carrara and tip-toed into her study.

Wrapping the warm housecoat tightly around herself, she sat down at her desk and turned on her little lamp. She grimaced when the hard, white light assaulted her and she rubbed her eyes to adjust to it.

After glancing at the clock on the wall - and shuddering when she realised it was only a quarter past six in the morning on Tuesday, January 11th - she pulled up her laptop and opened it. After loading the word processing program, she went to work on finishing a chapter in her latest biography.

The success of the book she had written on Francesca had made the offers come thick and fast and she had been able to pick and choose her clients at will. After debating with herself for several days, Kathleen had finally chosen to work on the biography for a celebrity pop star.

Her fingers flew across the laptop's small keyboard, creating paragraph after paragraph on the life of David Harting, better known to his fans as Davey Boy Hearty - every single time Kathleen typed that, she had to stop and giggle to herself.

Suddenly, the word processing program started acting oddly. When Kathleen tried to save the file, the only thing it did was to show a warning dialogue box where it said that the file format she was trying to save it to was 'incompatible with the formatting of the document'.

Kathleen sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Oh... I hate computers," she said softly in a resigned voice, wishing she had kept her trusty old typewriter.

She was able to highlight the entire file and then copy it into a new document. When that was saved without any problems, she'd had enough and closed the laptop with a hard *phlum*.

Sighing again, she clicked off the light and tip-toed back through the hallway to go into the living room down the other end of her cottage. Not bothering to turn on the lights, she sat down in the couch in the semi-darkness and started looking around at the things she had assembled over the years.

"Goodness me, it hasn't even been a year..." she whispered to herself as her eyes fell on the framed photographs on her mantelpiece. The pictures were all of herself and Francesca captured in various silly situations, like at the Christmas shopping or when they visited a New Year's Eve party hosted by one of Francesca's personal sponsors - or celebrating Francesca's victory in the Spa-Francorchamps 1000 kilometres sports car race in October.

When she looked at that photo, Kathleen was filled with a familiar, comforting warmth that could only be described as love. Love definitely hadn't been on the cards when she had first met the feisty, fiery race car driver Francesca Carrara the year before, but as soon as they had started working closely together on Francesca's biography, feelings had begun to develop that neither of them could deny.

And then Francesca had suffered a serious accident at Le Mans. The months of rehab that followed were hard on both of them, but they kept together and by Christmas time, they could no longer even contemplate living apart.

Kathleen chuckled quietly to herself when she remembered how they had met. In all the romance novels she had read, the two soon-to-be lovers would always meet in a cute or romantic fashion, perhaps with one saving the other from some hideous fate - but in her particular case, she actually thought that the tall, gorgeous brunette was a pain in the backside.

To Kathleen, they were the epitome of 'opposites attract' - where Francesca was tall and dark, Kathleen was short and blonde. Where Francesca was assertive and supremely confident in her abilities, Kathleen had always categorised herself as meek and a pushover. But like Kathleen had written in her diary, they fit together perfectly - physically and otherwise.

At those thoughts, Kathleen chuckled again and let her eyes continue to roam her living room. She looked at the shelf where Francesca kept the cups and trophies that meant the most to her; the first trophy she had won in karting, her Best Newcomer Award from a decade ago when she started in sports cars, and a copy of the British Empire Trophy she had won at Silverstone the year before - the original was safely locked away in the vault of their bank.

One trophy was missing from the shelf, and Kathleen knew that it annoyed Francesca greatly. The opulent golden statue given to the winners of the Le Mans Twenty-Four Hours had so far eluded Francesca, even after nearly a decade of trying.

Kathleen hummed to herself and ran a hand through her white-blond hair. She briefly considered going back to her study to try the laptop again, but she didn't feel like fighting the little devil living inside the plastic box any longer.

When the call of the warm bed drowned out the need to work on Davey Boy's biography, Kathleen yawned, scratched her hair and went back to the bedroom.

A few moments later, Kathleen put her housecoat over the back of a chair and kicked off her slippers. With a wide yawn, she got back in the bed and snuggled close to Francesca to steal some of the taller woman's body heat.

When she did so, the old brass bed creaked mercilessly and she held her breath in the vain hope that it wouldn't wake Francesca up - unfortunately, it did.

"Mmmmm... time to get up already?" Francesca slurred, not yet daring to open her eyes.

"No, just go back to sleep," Kathleen whispered and placed a small kiss on Francesca's cheek.

"What time is it?"

"Very early. Twenty to seven."

"God! Just two more hours..." Francesca slurred and turned over onto her right side so she could wrap an arm around Kathleen's body. Within a few seconds, Francesca fell asleep again; her even breathing tickling the side of Kathleen's face.

Kathleen smiled and put her hand on top of Francesca's arm. Buried under the delightful and comforting weight of her lover, Kathleen closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

---

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Francesca's bladder started sending out distress calls, so she rolled over onto her back and rubbed her face. The muffled snoring coming from Kathleen proved that she was still asleep, so Francesca left the bed and the bedroom very quietly.

After taking care of nature's business, she pulled her bathrobe tight and went into the kitchen to start setting the breakfast table.

*'Today's the day... ugh. How will I ever get out of there alive...?'* Francesca thought as she found the plates and the tumblers.

*'Why did I ever say yes to that silly request? God... I wonder if I could call in sick? No, that would be too transparent.'*

Francesca sighed and shook her head despondently. She opened a cupboard and pulled out the buns and the jam and then crouched down so she could get the toaster.

A creaking floorboard behind her gave away Kathleen's presence, and Francesca quickly put the items down and turned around so she could give her partner a hug.

"Good morning, darling," Francesca said and gave Kathleen a loving kiss on the lips.

"Morning. Just one cup of tea for me today, please."

"All right," Francesca said and began to pour water into the electric kettle.

"Aren't you excited?" Kathleen said sincerely.

"Well... not really, no."

"Oh. I'd be."

"That's because you're a natural in the limelight, darling," Francesca said and flashed Kathleen a blinding smile. She set up the toaster and took the buns out of the plastic bag. Finding a knife in a drawer, she began to cut the buns in half.

"I most certainly am not! Oh come on, you have plenty of experience. There's nothing to it, really."

"Perhaps I could tempt you to trade places with me today, then?"

"Sure, if you promise to write another chapter in Davey Boy Hearty's biography. My notes are all set, you just have to extract the correct information and insert it in the correct places in the document," Kathleen said and wrapped her arms around Francesca's waist. She leaned her head on the side of Francesca's shoulder and gave the taller woman a thorough squeeze.

"I'd better not," Francesca said with a chuckle. She put the buns on the flat toaster and turned it on. She dusted off her hands and turned around so she was face to face with Kathleen.

"I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun once you get there. I mean, they do this every day, don't they?" Kathleen said with a smile.

"I guess."

"I'm sure they know how to treat slightly reluctant celebrities."

"But it's just... that... me... Francesca Carrara, on... the... UK Home Shopping... Network," Francesca said, punctuating the sentence by placing little kisses on Kathleen's eyebrows, nose and lips.

"It'll be fun. I guarantee it," Kathleen whispered and started kissing Francesca for real - only stopping when the toaster turned itself off to protect the buns from being scorched.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*\_

After eating breakfast and showering, Francesca went into the living room to turn on the television. She started zapping through the channels until she arrived at the shopping network.

Grimacing, she pressed the Electronic Programme Guide button on the remote in the hope that they had cancelled the programme without bothering to tell her.

*'Two p.m. - high quality die cast model cars. Special guest: the acclaimed race car driver Francesca Carrara.'*

Francesca turned off the television, put down the remote and let out a long, slow, heartfelt sigh that didn't leave any room open for misinterpretation.

Leaning back on the couch, Francesca closed her eyes and concentrated on listening to Kathleen humming in the shower. A small smile flickered across her lips, but before her thoughts could begin to wander, the telephone rang.

Getting up from the couch, Francesca crossed the room with a slight limp and sat down in the comfy chair next to the phone. As she picked up the receiver, she put a hand on her aching hip, inwardly cursing over the fact that her hip and pelvis were still hurting seven months after her accident.

"The Carrara and O'Malley residence. This is Francesca."

*'Hello, Fran, it's Giampaolo.'*

"Buongiorno, signor Razotti, e felice anno nuovo. Come vanno le cose?" Francesca said and pulled a footstool over to her. With a grunt, she put her left leg on it and leaned back in the comfy chair.

*'Molto bene, grazie. Happy New Year to you, too. I called to tell you that we've scheduled a meeting on Monday at ten a.m. and you need to be present. It's to sort out various details for the coming year.'*

"All right. I'll be there. In the offices?"

*'Yes. Oh, by the way... Fran, are you interested in a drive at the Barcelona Invitational?'*

"Did the organisers change their plans? I thought they weren't going to allow factory-entered cars?"

*'That hasn't changed, but one of our customers is taking part in GT2 in a GranTurismo S.'*

"Oh, GT2, that's not really... hmmm."

*'I know that you're usually not interested in racing in the smaller categories, but this guy could be valuable for us later on. It would be a vote of confidence in his team and his abilities if we let him have a factory driver for the weekend.'*

"It's not whatshisname... Vittorio Franco again, is it?" Francesca said flatly.

*'Oh, no. No, he's long gone. Last I heard, he bought himself a vintage Ferrari he's playing with.'*

"I don't care what he's doing as long as he isn't doing it where I am."

*'Yeah, well... anyway, are you interested, Fran?'*

"Do I need to commit to it right now?"

*'No, you have a couple of days. Monday will suffice.'*

"Good. Tell you what, I need to discuss it with Kathleen before I can give you an answer. Once I have, I'll get back to you."

*'Sounds fine. That's it for now. Send Kathleen my regards, Fran.'*

"Sure. Arrivederci, signor Razotti."

*'Arrivederci, Francesca.'*

"Who was that?" Kathleen said, standing in the doorway. She was using a towel to dry her long hair and the movements caused her bathrobe to part slightly, offering a tantalising peek at the treasures inside.

"Giampaolo Razotti. He offered me a drive for the Barcelona Invitational."

"In Spain?"

"Yes, in February. The week of the twenty first."

"Is it warm in Spain in February?"

"Well, warmer than here, anyway."

"Then I think we should go," Kathleen said with a cheeky grin.

"Oh, 'we' should go?" Francesca said and got up from the chair. She hobbled over to Kathleen and put her hands on the shorter woman's shoulders.

"Yes, 'we' definitely should go."

"What about Davey Boy's biography?"

"Oh, that'll be done by then."

"Won't you be bored?"

"Oh, no. I can survive another twenty-four hour race easily. Hey, are you trying to tell me that you won't want me to come?" Kathleen said and crinkled her nose.

"Of course not. And the Invitational is only a four-hour race, actually."

"Oh... well, even better, then. Case closed."

"Well, it's not for a fair while yet, so..." Francesca said, leaning down to give Kathleen a kiss on the forehead. She let her hands roam freely and one of them somehow found its way underneath Kathleen's bathrobe.

"Fran?"

"Mmmm-yeah?"

"I think you're forgetting the time. You're supposed to be at the studio an hour ahead of the broadcast so they can powder your nose," Kathleen said and tapped her index finger lovingly on Francesca's aforementioned body part.

"Rats. I thought you had forgotten..."

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

"Will you be recording it?" Francesca said as she fixed her hair. Much to Kathleen's delight, she had let it grow over the winter so it just touched the collar of her Armani shirt.

"But of course I will."

"That'll be a video nasty for sure."

"Don't be silly. It'll be fine," Kathleen said, holding Francesca's dark blue blazer jacket.

"How do I look?"

Kathleen let her eyes roam slowly up the woman in front of her: dark shoes, dark blue trousers with razor-sharp creases, a black leather belt and a pale blue shirt with golden cufflinks.

"Mmmm. Fantastic," Kathleen said with a broad smile.

Francesca put on the jacket and straightened out the lapels. She brushed off a few pieces of lint and then closed the jacket, taking her time with the buttons. She began to fiddle with a loose thread on the small Maserati Corse logo on the breast pocket but Kathleen swatted the long fingers away.

"Don't play with that. It'll only get worse."

Francesca grinned cheekily and then leaned down to give Kathleen a proper goodbye kiss.

"You know, I have a feeling that this year is going to be something very special for the two of us," Francesca whispered into Kathleen's ear once they separated.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

Francesca put her hand on Kathleen's cheek and caressed it with her thumb. She was about to lean down again when Kathleen cleared her throat.

"Oh, dear, look at the time. You really should get going," she said with a well-placed wink.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_



Forty minutes later, Francesca drove into the TV station's parking lot. After finding a suitable spot for her company car, she looked at herself in the rear view mirror and chuckled quietly at the absurdity of it all.

Taking a deep breath, she got out of her car and walked towards the entrance.

---

Not long after, Francesca found herself in a makeup room having her face powdered for her appearance. The assistant applying the makeup was a young girl who was chewing noisily on a wad of bubble gum, and the resulting sounds were slowly driving Francesca bonkers.

"Miss Carrara?" a male voice said behind them.

Francesca craned her neck so she could see who it was in the mirror in front of her. It turned out to be a young man in his mid-twenties, holding a clipboard and a ball point pen in his hand.

"Yes?" Francesca said, still looking in the mirror.

"I'm James MacElhone. I'm your liaison, so to speak," the man said as he went into the makeup room.

"Good afternoon," Francesca said and tried to raise her hand from underneath the protective gown the makeup assistant had forced her into wearing.

"Good afternoon. We better shake hands later. I have a few questions for you, if you don't mind."

"Questions?"

"Yes, we need a little bit of info before we can go ahead. We always ask our guest celebrities about their preferences."

"Shoot."

"Do you have any live TV experience, Miss Carrara?"

"Well, I've been interviewed dozens of times before and after races, but I've never co-hosted a show before."

"All right. What do you prefer the hosts calls you on air?"

"Fran or Francesca will do fine."

"All right," James said and made notes on his clipboard.

After removing the excess powder from Francesca's forehead and hair, the makeup artist removed the protective gown and popped a huge gum bubble. Francesca swivelled the chair around and got up so she could shake hands with her liaison.

Standing a good three inches taller than the young man, she noticed at once that her presence unsettled him. With a mental shrug, she reached for her blazer jacket and put it on.

After saying goodbye to the makeup artist, Francesca and James left the small room and started walking down a pastel-coloured hallway, headed for a pair of frosted glass doors.

"Francesca, as you probably know, Lawrence White will be your host for the hour. Have you ever watched any his shows?"

"Can't say that I have, no," Francesca said and pulled down in her shirt sleeves so they lined up properly with the cuffs of the blazer.

"Well, he has a certain jovial style that has made him very popular with the viewers," James said and pulled open one of the glass doors. He held out his hand to allow Francesca to go through.

"Thank you. Are you warning me about him?"

"Oh, no, I'm just trying to get you settled in."

"Right. When do I go on?"

"Uh... soon. Less than ten minutes," James said after checking his wristwatch.

"Excellent. The sooner, the better," Francesca said, continuing the thought in her mind: *'The sooner I get in, the sooner I can get home.'*

When they reached the end of the hallway, James MacElhone pointed through a sheer glass window.

"Here we are, Miss Carrara."

Actually beginning to feel a little excited, Francesca turned to look where he was pointing - it took her a few seconds to realise that the thing she was looking at was the inside of a television studio and not a half-empty warehouse.

The set was smaller than she had imagined it would be: a colourful backdrop made to resemble a living room, a pale grey carpet on the floor, two chairs and a large table. In front of the set, two cameras had been placed on large, movable structures that allowed them to move freely around the set.

Three powerful spotlights were beaming down on the set from above, and Francesca instantly regretted her decision to wear the company jacket.

"Oh, Miss Carrara, here's Mr. White now," James said, pulling Francesca away from her thoughts. She looked up the hallway and saw a balding, slightly overweight man in his late forties with salt and pepper hair and a weak jaw walk towards them. He waved at the two people, careful not to spill anything from the Styrofoam cup of coffee he held in his other hand.

"Mr. White, this is your celebrity guest for the hour. Miss Francesca Carrara," James said with a smile.

"Right-o, Jimmy. So, Miss Carrara. Jimmy here tells me you're one of those fancy race car drivers?"

Francesca blinked twice before opening her mouth to speak. She observed Lawrence White's face closely, but there were no signs of him joking. She groaned inwardly and plastered a fake smile on her lips.

"That's right, Mr. White."

"Like one of those eff-one drivers?"

"No, more like a sports car driver, actually."

"Oh..."

"Like the toy cars we'll be presenting on the show," Francesca said. Her fake smile was already beginning to hurt her cheeks, but she wanted to keep up appearances.

"Oh... you mean, like, the rally cars?"

"Rally cars? No, sports cars."

"Oh... well, I don't know anything about that. I'll just call them rally cars. Anyway, once we're on air, just call me Lawrence. Not Larry. Lawrence. Okay?"

"All right."

Francesca's fake smile slowly melted away and turned into a deep frown, but she was saved by the bell - literally. Inside the studio, a small bell started ringing, alerting everyone that the next show would start in five minutes.

"That's our cue. Come on... uh, Jimmy...?"

"Francesca, Mr. White."

"Right-o. Come on, Francesca. It'll be fun. Oh, I have a word of advice for you, though. It's going to be far too hot for you with that jacket in the studio."

"Thank you, Mr. White," Francesca said. She hesitated for a few seconds, but then made up her mind and took off the blazer jacket.

Lawrence White's eyes instantly zeroed in on Francesca's chest, but she did her best to carry on like she hadn't noticed. She folded her jacket neatly and put it over her arm.

"Lead on, Francesca," Lawrence White said and pushed open a door that led into the studio itself.

As she crossed over the threshold, Francesca could feel Lawrence's eyes on her rear end. Dearly wishing that Kathleen had come with her, she started counting to fifty to try to keep a lid on her temper.

---

"And we're live in five, four..." a crew member said and continued the countdown by holding up first three, then two and finally one finger.

A monitor had been set up on the floor beyond the camera's reach so Francesca and Lawrence could see when they were in frame. The moment Francesca saw herself on it, her heart rate increased and she could feel her throat tighten up. She knew that she'd be teased mercilessly by Kathleen and everyone else watching if she messed it up, so she girded her loins and cleared her throat.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*\_

Back home in the cottage, Kathleen put a tray with a mug of tea and some slices of toast down on the coffee table. After turning on the television, she went over to the digital recorder and turned that on, too. Trying to remember what Francesca had taught her, she eventually found the right button and set it to record. Once she was sure it was running as it should, she went over to the comfy chair and folded her legs up underneath her.

The credits were still rolling from the earlier programme, so Kathleen took the mug and warmed her hands.

Soon, the new programme started, fading in from black to reveal two people sitting at a small table that was loaded with various toy cars. When Kathleen saw Francesca looking cool, calm, collected and oh-so-very sexy, she couldn't stop a childish squeal from escaping her lips and she bounced up and down in her chair.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*\_

"Hello and good afternoon, dear viewers, I'm Lawrence White. Welcome to the Toys For Big Boys hour. Joining us today is our very special guest, the acclaimed sports car driver Francesca Carrera," Lawrence said, reading off a teleprompter.

Francesca noted with a pang of irritation that Lawrence White pronounced her last name wrongly, but she decided to let it slip.

"We're going to look at plenty of high quality models today... one of which is sitting next to me right now," Lawrence said with a grin.

Francesca opened her mouth to growl, but at the last moment, she could see out of the corner of her eye that there was a huge close-up of her face on the monitor, so she quickly smiled instead.

"Oh, you're too kind, Lawrence," Francesca said, hoping that she wasn't hissing too much.

"The first model is a 1:18 scale Massaratty 250F. I believe it's from the 1950's, isn't that right, Francesca?" Lawrence said and held up a scarlet model car.

"Maserati, actually. Yes, the two-fifty was one of our most famous models."

"Looking at it, feeling the weight of it, it's not hard to see why it's thirty nine pounds ninety pence, dear viewers. It's heavy, which usually means that the company creating it used a lot of the good stuff."

"The good stuff, yes," Francesca echoed.

"What can you tell us about the racing heritage of this particular model, Francesca?"

"Well, it was a little before my time, but the '250F' was one of the most successful racers in Formula One. In 1957, it..."

"Fascinating. Well, we've got a lot of models to go through, so let's move on to the next one. Here's a 1:24 scale Massaratty Khamsin, reasonably priced at twenty four pounds ninety five pence. Did I pronounce that right?"

"No, it's Maserati, actually." - Francesca cringed inwardly - "The Khamsin was a high-performance car in the early 1970's. The design was ahead of its day, and is still quite evocative even today, as you can see with the flip-up..."

"I was just going to say that. Love those headlights," Lawrence White said and grinned. Francesca cocked her head and started chewing on the inside of her cheek.

---

"Oh, look at that, the hour has just flown by. We only have time for one more model so let's skip to the best one... this 1:18 scale Massaratty MC12. A real bargain at forty four pounds ninety five pence. This is your car from last year, isn't it, Francesca?" Lawrence said and held up a model of the dark blue #2 Francesca had used in the last race at Spa.

"Maserati. Yes, it's the..."

"Well, not this one exactly. Your long legs wouldn't fit," Lawrence said and laughed at his own joke.

"Ha, ha, no. But anyway, this is a model of the car I used to win the Spa-Francorchamps 1000 Kilometres race last October."

"So you might say this particular model has real pedigree. Fascinating."

"Yes, we..."

"As you can see, dear viewers, the graphics and lettering on the model aren't sticky decals like in the old days, no, they've been laser-etched into the model. This will guarantee that in five years, it'll still look the same. And look at this detail work. Look at this tiny antenna on top of the model, the wing mirrors and even the alloy wheels. All these miniature items still look as good as the rest of the car. Fascinating."

"Yes, it looks good," Francesca said flatly.

"Well, the clock is winding down and I think we've sold almost every model we had, so the only thing left to say is thank you very much for joining us today, Miss Carrera..."

"Carrara."

"... and we hope that you'll swing by another time," Lawrence White said and held out his hand.

Francesca shook it and then the programme's signature jingle started. As soon as Francesca could see the end credits roll on the monitor, she yanked her hand back and shot up from her chair.

"This was quite an experience, Mr. White," Francesca said as she put on her jacket.

"Yes, wasn't it? I thought it was kind of exciting, actually. It's rare that I have such a beautiful woman so close to me. Could I tempt you to join me for a cuppa?"

"Ahhhh, that would be a 'no,' Mr. White."

"Right-o. Can't fault a man for trying, eh?" Lawrence said and started walking towards the glass doors that led away from the studio.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

The powerful hum of the company car's engine gave away Francesca's return and Kathleen quickly turned off the news and ran to the door.

Before Francesca had time to find her keys, Kathleen opened the door and grabbed Francesca's hands.

"Oh, that was so exciting!" Kathleen enthused, but Francesca's dour expression soon made her realise that not everyone was as enthusiastic as she was.

"My name is Francesca Carrara and I seek humanitarian asylum... please...?" Francesca said flatly as she leaned down to hug Kathleen.

"Uh, sure. You don't think it was fun? Come in, it's too cold out here."

They moved into the hallway and Francesca hung her jacket on a coat hanger on the hallstand. She suddenly stopped and sniffed the air.

"Sniff... sniff... oh, did you bake scones?"

"I did. They're just cooling off."

"Ooooooh, you know how to spoil a girl. I can't wait to taste them."

"They're almost ready. So you don't think it was a fun experience? You looked fantastic, Francesca. Quite extraordinary, actually," Kathleen said and put her hands on Francesca's sides. Moving in closer, she slowly moved her hands up and down, marvelling at the feel of her partner's firm, athletic body.

"Thank you, but good Lord, that was gruesome. I'd rather do a six-hour race by myself around the world's dullest track than go through that again. The host, Lawrence White...? Well, he was a twit. Actually, that's an insult to the twits," Francesca said and leaned down to give Kathleen a kiss.

"So you don't want to see the recording?"

Francesca blinked a couple of times and then shook her head, wide-eyed.

"I'll delete it. Once I figure out how," Kathleen said and wrapped an arm around her partner's waist. "Come on, tea and scones await you."

They moved side by side into the living room where the coffee table had already been set. Francesca kissed Kathleen's hair and then sat down in her regular spot.

Kathleen went into the kitchen and poured water into the electric kettle. After checking that it was on, she picked up a tray with the freshly baked scones and a small bowl of butter and carried it back to the living room.

"Oh, that smells delicious, darling," Francesca said and took a knife for the butter. Moments before she spread it out on the first scone, she stopped and cocked her head.

"I know what you're doing. You're trying to fatten me up so you can watch me work it off in the gym, right?"

Kathleen just whistled the most innocent little trill she could come up with.

"Right. Knew it all along."

\*

\*

## CHAPTER 2

Running a little late, Francesca drove off the high street and pulled into the parking lot of the two-storey, non-descript building that housed the Maserati team's British base.

She could see by the number of luxury sedans and sports cars parked there that most of the big wigs had already arrived, so she hurried over to the glass doors and quickly showed her credentials to the security guard.

As she hurried up the seemingly endless metal staircase inside the warehouse, she noticed that four Maserati race cars were parked down on the floor - a pair of dark blue works MC12's, a bright yellow privateer MC12 and an unpainted, brand new GranTurismo S that had been stripped down to its essentials.

Once Francesca had raced up all forty-eight steps, she stopped to get her breath and to rub her hand against her hip. She looked left and right on the gallery leading to the offices, but only saw a few people there; one of them was Fabio Dell'Assandro, standing outside the conference room.

She waved at the reigning World Champion who waved back and pointed at his wristwatch. Francesca nodded and picked up the pace.

---

Francesca whooshed into the lavishly decorated conference room and closed the door behind her. When she turned around, she realised that she had sixteen pairs of eyes trained on her.

"Mi scusi," she said sheepishly and walked around the large rectangular table headed for the last vacant chair. She sat down next to Fabio who flashed her an impossibly cheeky grin.

Giampaolo Razotti got up from his chair and cleared his throat.

"So, now that we're all here, let's get down to business. First of all, we have a surprising announcement: Gio Bellichi's wife has been taken ill back home in Italy so he has decided to step down from #1 to have more time for her. I'm sure we all wish her a speedy recovery."

A murmur rippled through the assembly and Giampaolo held up his hand.



"Of course, that means we have to re-assign the driving squads. #1 will be driven by Dellasandro and Carrara, with Mario Balzani as the third driver in for Le Mans. #2 will be driven by DiLorenzi and Zorzi, as usual. We've yet to decide who'll be the ringer for Le Mans."

Francesca took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She had hoped to be selected to drive in #1, but she hadn't expected it to happen as a result of someone else's misfortune.

She cast a glance at Fabio who seemed to have known in advance. He noticed her eyes on him and he turned his head and smiled.

Luca DiLorenzi, who was sitting at the opposite side of the conference table, held up his hand.

"Yes, Mr. DiLorenzi?" Giampaolo said, knowing exactly what the self-proclaimed God's Gift To Women was going to say.

"Mr. Razotti, with all due respect. I believe it would be better if I shared #1 with Fabio. After all, we're closer in size. The pitstops would take less time."

Francesca ran her index finger across her eyebrows and looked down.

"Noted, Mr. DiLorenzi. However, the pairings stay as announced. If a problem arises over the course of the season, we'll rethink our plans," Giampaolo said.

Luca DiLorenzi nodded and crossed his arms over his chest.

"So, onto the next item on the agenda. As you may know, this is the final season we can use the MC12s as the technical regulations change for next year. We have already begun assessing other types of cars, and so far, it looks like we'll be going for an open-topped prototype," Giampaolo said.

A new wave of murmurs went through the drivers, some of them eager to get their hands on new machinery and some less so.

"Open-topped sounds good. That way, the fans can see who the driver is," DiLorenzi said.

Fabio leaned in towards Francesca and tapped her on her shoulder.

"Luca has just signed a new helmet deal," he whispered, earning himself a few chuckles from Francesca.

"Noted, Mr. DiLorenzi. The other alternative is to drop down to the GT2 class for less powerful Grand Tourers. As you probably noticed on your way up here, there's a GranTurismo S down in the work shop, recently bought by Mr. Petrovich," Giampaolo said and pointed at a man in his early forties who was sitting at the back of the conference room.

"What kind of horsepower are we talking about in GT2, Giampaolo?" Francesca said.

"Roughly four hundred and fifty brake horsepower instead of six hundred and eighty five."

This time, all the drivers groaned loudly.

"I know. Anyway, we'll see how it goes at the Invitational. Fran, I need a word with you in my office once we're done here. So, next on the agenda is..."

---

When the meeting was over and people had drifted away from the conference room, Francesca walked the short distance down to Giampaolo's office and knocked on the doorjamb.

"You wanted a word?"

"That's right, Fran. Come in," Giampaolo said and put a stack of files into a large attaché-case.

Francesca entered the office and sat down in one of the chairs that had been placed in front of a large desk. She crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap.

"I'm sorry, but Luca has snatched your seat at the Invitational," Giampaolo said and closed the attaché-case.

"Oh."

"Turns out he and Mr. Petrovich had a mutual friend. Sorry."

"No problem. It happens."

"We'll all be going there for the pre-season test, anyway, so perhaps something else will come up."

"Perhaps."

"Mmmm. To offset that, I'm giving you the keys to next year's car. The testing will commence at Monza later on this year."

"Oh...!" Francesca said and moved forward on her chair.

"Thought you might be interested," Giampaolo said with a crooked grin.

"Are we going with an in-house chassis?"

"The management hasn't decided yet. For now, we've leased a Lola and mated it to our regular twelve. We'll need a safe pair of hands on the steering wheel, Fran. That's why I thought of you. Luca is fast, no doubt about that, but he gets distracted all too easily."

"I agree. On both accounts."

"He'll probably still be at the test, but you'll be doing most of the driving."

"All right."

"Well, that's for later. By the way, I saw on you television the other day. Well done, Fran," Giampaolo said and held out his hand. Francesca caught the hint and got up from the chair.

"Oh... thank you."

"You showed remarkable restraint. I would'a punched the host's lights out!"

"Trust me, I almost did. If he had said 'Massaratty' one more time, I would have!" Francesca said, laughing.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_

Whistling merrily, Francesca locked herself into her home and took off her jacket, her scarf and her boots.

She soon picked up the easily recognisable sound of fingers tapping away on a keyboard and she tip-toed through the hallway in her stocking feet to pay Kathleen a surprise visit. When she reached the study, she peeked around the corner and saw Kathleen sitting by the laptop, completely absorbed in her work.

A mass of little, white notes were scattered out all around Kathleen and she constantly moved her head left and right, first looking at the various pieces of paper and then back at the monitor.

The steely gaze in Kathleen's eyes showed that she was concentrating hard and Francesca felt a pang of pride in her stomach.

A floorboard creaking under Francesca's foot broke the magic, causing Kathleen to turn her head and look directly into Francesca's eyes.

"Hi. Have you been here long?"

"No, just a few moments. Hi, darling," Francesca said and walked in to stand behind her partner. She moved the golden-blonde hair away from Kathleen's neck and leaned down to give it a gentle kiss.

"Uh... you're in a good mood today."

"Yes. I have good news and bad news."

"Good news first, please," Kathleen said and turned her swivel-chair around.

"Well, we're still going to Spain in a month's time, but I won't be driving in the race."

"Okay...? What happened?"

"Ah, that's a long story," Francesca said and waved her hand.

"Are you upset over it?"

"Nah. Not really. It happens. And besides, Giampaolo made me lead tester for the new car," Francesca said, beaming with pride.

"Oh... what does that mean, exactly?"

"Well, it means that I get to form the base setup for the new car once the new regulations come in, and also that I get to try out the drivability of our current engine when it's used in different configurations. That sort of thing."

"Oh... very exciting I'm sure," Kathleen said and got up from the chair.

"Oh, it is. It definitely is."

"Is that going to happen at Barcelona as well?"

"No, no, that's for later."

"Oh. I'm a little confused."

Kathleen smiled and put her arm around Francesca's waist. They moved out of the study and began to stroll down to the living room.

"I'll explain it better later on. For now, all I'm thinking of is to snuggle close to you for six straight weeks," Francesca said and took a deep sniff of Kathleen's hair.

"Ohhh. Well, I think we can accommodate that notion."

.\_\*.\_\*.\_

.\_\*.\_\*.\_

.\_\*.\_\*.\_

The first sound Francesca and Kathleen heard when they drove through the gates at the Barcelona International circuit at Montmeló on Wednesday, February 23rd was a racing engine driving at full chat down the front straight.

"Ferrari V8. One of the F430 GT2's. Their raspy sound is so easy to recognise," Francesca said as she rolled the window back up after showing their credentials to the guards.

"For you, perhaps," Kathleen said, giggling.

Francesca slowly manoeuvred their Fiat rental car through the half-full parking lot, searching for a suitable place to park. After settling for a space near the entrance to the paddock, they got out of the car and picked out their various travel bags from the trunk.

They had only walked a few steps when another race car turned onto the main straight and went up through the gears. The harmonic, rich, trombone-like sound of the engine reverberated through the parking lot and sent shivers down both women's backs.

"A big, fat twelve. That's one of ours," Francesca said, grinning broadly.

"I have to admit that it's a sexy sound," Kathleen said and pulled the strap for her bag higher up on her shoulder.

"Of course. It's Italian."

---

As they walked across the paddock headed for the backdoor to the Maserati Corse pits, another car raced past with a growlier, more rattling sound compared to the others.

"Which one was that?" Kathleen said and furrowed her brow.

"I'm not sure, actually. It's a V8, but it wasn't one of the GT2 Vettes. I've never heard that one before."

"That was my new toy. Hi, Fran," a young male voice said from somewhere behind them. Francesca put down her bags and spun around to see if the voice really belonged to the person she was expecting.

"Hey, Jonno! Good Lord, man, it's great to see you!" Francesca said and moved over to the young man. The two drivers embraced and then Francesca took a step back to look at Jonathan Baker's blue driving suit.

"I told you it was a good career move to go to the States, son," she joked and slapped him on his gut.

"That you did. Hi, Kathleen," Jonno said, waving. Kathleen waved back and then went over to stand next to Francesca.

"So you're a Ford works driver now?" Francesca said.

"That's right. We're just here to learn this year. We've got three works Ford GT's here for the test and another two entered in the race for customers."

"That was the car just now?"

"Yep. Four point seven litre, V8."

"That'll never hold up against our six litres," Francesca said cheekily.

"I wouldn't bet against us, Fran," Jonno said and laughed.

"Yeah, yeah. Who's on your roster?"

"I'm the only non-American on the squad. I'm sharing with a great guy called Miguel Gomez. Scott Friedman and Sally Sharpe usually share the other car, but Scott isn't here this weekend."

"Oh, you finally understood that you need a woman behind the wheel?" Francesca teased.

"She's mighty quick, that's for sure. She's going to make one hell of an impression this year."

"Is she from IMSA?"

"No, SCCA, but she's got plenty of experience in fast cars."

"They're two of the sanctioning bodies in the US," Francesca said, noticing the blank look on Kathleen's face.

"Oh. Right. Thanks," Kathleen said, grinning.

"Are you going to race this weekend, Fran?"

"No, I'm just here for the testing. You?"

"Yeah, for one of the customer teams. I'm going to share with Sally for the weekend. This is her first race in Europe so the management decided that she needed someone steady to show her the ropes."

"And they chose you?" Francesca said incredulously, quickly moving away in case Jonno was going to hit out after her.

"Oh, ha, ha. Sally is doing a few laps right now, but I'm sure you'll meet her later on. She's a bit of a wildcat, so you can't miss her."

"I'll keep that in mind. We better get going, Jonno. It was great talking to you," Francesca said and hugged her friend again.

"Likewise, Fran. Catch you on the race track."

---

A few minutes later, Francesca opened the rear door to the Maserati pit stall. Both the bays were empty so the mechanics were just lingering in the garage, waiting for the cars to come back in. At the rear end of the pit, four technicians were studying computers closely, monitoring the data being sent from the cars as they lapped the circuit.

"Hello, Fran. Kathleen," Giampaolo said. He was holding two stopwatches, a clipboard and a headset that he proceeded to put on.

"Giampaolo. How are things going?" Francesca said - Kathleen settled for nodding in the team manager's direction.

"Fairly well. #2 had a misfire at first, but we've cleared that up. Nothing wrong with #1. Fabio will be going through the program first, then it's your turn."

"All right. Is the motorhome ready?"

"I believe so."

"I'll go and change, then."

"Okay," Giampaolo said and turned his attention to a mechanic standing next to him.

"Kathleen, do you want to wait here or come with me?" Francesca said and put a hand on her partner's elbow.

"Uh, come with you. I have to spend a lot of time here today, so I'd rather see you for as long as I can."

"Sure. Come on," Francesca said and walked back out of the pit stall.

---

Once inside the Knaus Sunliner motorhome, Francesca put her travel bag on the narrow couch and began to take out her fireproof underwear. Stacking it neatly, she put it in the correct order so she could get into it quickly.

"It's bigger than the one we used last year," Kathleen noted and put her own bag down on a small table.

"Mmmm."

"I wonder if there's a vacuum cleaner...?"

"Mmmm. What? A vacuum cleaner?" Francesca said and turned around, wearing a rather puzzled expression.

"Uh, yes. Last year, when you were racing at Mugello, I vacuumed the small carpet in the kitchenette... oh, around twenty times."

"You never told me!" Francesca said with a throaty laugh.

"Well, it was a little embarrassing," Kathleen said sheepishly.

"No. Just another little thing that makes me love you even more."

"Ohhhh... thank you. I love you, too," Kathleen said and went over to stand next to Francesca. With a smile, she stood up on tip-toes and planted a wet kiss on the driver's lips.

"I better get changed. I have a feeling Giampaolo will run us hard today."

"Okay. I'll close the blinds."

When Francesca was sure no one could catch a glimpse of her, she took off all her street clothes and began to slip into her fireproof Nomex underwear. After donning the panties and the sports bra, she stepped into the longjohns and put on the undershirt.

Kathleen came up to her and folded her arms across her chest. With a sly smile, she let her eyes roam over the vast expanses of curves in front of her. Just for fun, she tried to figure out which part of Francesca's body she liked the best, but soon came to the conclusion that it was the package as a whole that sent those pleasant thrills racing through her.

"Wow, it's quite a show to see you get into all that gear," she said with a chuckle.

"I take that as a compliment," Francesca said and sat down on the couch so she could put on the socks.

"Oh, it certainly was," Kathleen said with a devious grin. She licked her suddenly dry lips, wishing that the day would soon come to an end so they could spend some quality time together.

Francesca took her driving suit out of the holdall and stepped into it - the right leg first, as demanded by superstition. After wiggling into it, she bent down and pulled the legs of the longjohns down so her ankles were protected.

Kathleen could see that Francesca's demeanour changed. The driver became more and more serious and the expression she wore on her face was already very focused.

"Do you have your racing boots and your gloves, love?"



"Mmmm. Right here," Francesca said and patted a plastic bag next to her. She leaned down, put on a pair of trainers and tied the laces.

Getting up from the couch, she Velcroed her driving suit all the way up and reached for the round bag that held her helmet. She unzipped it and took out the expensive equipment to give it a thorough once-over. After making sure that everything was okay, she took out the HANS-device and connected it to the helmet.

"You know, I still think that thing looks like a torture instrument from the dark ages," Kathleen said and touched the HANS with the tip of an index finger.

"Yeah. But it works. It restricts the movement of your neck in case you get into an accident. It sort of fixes your neck to your shoulders."

"Oh, that presents a charming picture," Kathleen said and laughed nervously.

"Of course, it's my job to make sure that I don't get involved in an accident to begin with," Francesca said and mussed Kathleen's hair.

"Hey, your hands are cold. Come on, let me warm them."

"No time, I'm afraid. We better get going. We have a long, long program to work through today. Oh, here's a key chain with your pit credentials and the keys to the motorhome in case you get bored waiting in the pits," Francesca said and handed Kathleen a colourful chain with an ID card and several keys on it.

"Thanks. Please stay safe. Love you," Kathleen said and pulled Francesca down so she could give her a proper 'see you later' kiss.

"Love you too, darling."

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

Once Kathleen and Francesca got back into the pit stall, Francesca found a chair and sat down so she could change into her racing boots.

"Three minutes, Fran," Giampaolo said and Francesca responded by giving him a thumbs-up.

After inserting her earplugs and putting on her fireproof balaclava, she pulled down her helmet and closed the visor so she could have a few moments of peace and quiet before everything would get loud.

Kathleen squeezed Francesca's hands and then moved back to stand in the spectator enclosure at the back of the pits. She found the little box with the earplugs Francesca had given her and took two of them out.

Soon, Maserati #1 came rolling down the pit lane, the engine banging and popping from running on the pit speed limiter. Fabio slowed to a halt in front of the bay and three mechanics wheeled the race car backwards into the garage. At once, a computer technician plugged a laptop into the socket on the car's dashboard and went to work downloading the data stored on the test run.

Fabio stepped out of the car and went over to Francesca.

"La macchina è a posto. La pista è scivolosa qua o là, specialmente alla chicane sul rettilineo in fondo."

Francesca nodded and patted his arm. Fabio had told her that the car was okay, but the track was slippery near the chicane on the back straight.

*'What else is new?'* Francesca thought and chuckled.

The technician removed the laptop and gave Giampaolo a thumbs-up. He turned around and repeated the gesture at Francesca who got up from the chair and waved at Kathleen.

After putting on her gloves and stepping into the car, Francesca first plugged the radio into the jack in the centre console and then activated her transponder, used to identify which driver was in the car.

*'Radio check, one-two-three,'* Giampaolo said on the radio.

"One-two-three, check. It works."

*'All right. We have added seventy kilograms of fuel. I want you to do a ten-lap run at race speed to check the performance and the durability of the tyres. Fabio says that the rears wear off quicker now because of the different wing configuration.'*

"All right, I understand. Ten laps at race speed."

*'That's correct. If you're not satisfied with the setup, come in and we'll change the air pressures.'*

"Right."

*'Go on,'* Giampaolo said and stepped in front of the car to give Francesca a thumbs-up.

Francesca pressed the button that would fire up the engine. After turning over for a few seconds, the twelve cylinders came alive with a dragon-like howl that made Kathleen jump a foot in the air despite the ear plugs.

When Francesca moved the sequential shifter ahead to select first gear, the car jerked forward slightly and the engine note became more muted. A mechanic waved her out and she soon left the pit stall and drove up the pit lane.

---

Kathleen let out a slow sigh. As always, she was slightly nervous whenever Francesca was out on the track. She began to fidget with her hands, constantly putting them into her trouser pockets and then taking them out.

She tried to look at the various computer monitors and at the people working at them, but she was too preoccupied thinking about Francesca to really appreciate the beehive of activity.

On the other side of the pit stall, Luca DiLorenzi was just getting ready to go into his car. Kathleen had only met him in person a couple of times, at the Silverstone test and at Spa-Francorchamps the year before, but she had heard enough about his antics from Francesca to dislike him and his primadonna ways.

"Salve, mi chiamo Patrizia. Vuole del caffè?"

Kathleen turned to look at a pretty young girl with mahogany hair and pale brown eyes. She seemed to be out of place in the busy pit, but since she was wearing the company colours, Kathleen surmised she belonged to the team's catering staff.

"Hello. I'm sorry, I don't speak Italian," Kathleen said with a smile.

"Oh... you like some coffee?" the young girl said in heavily accented English.

"Uh, coffee... do you have regular coffee?"

"Regular?"

"Yes. I'd like some regular coffee, please. Not espresso."

"Uhh..." the young girl said with a confused look on her face. Giampaolo noticed the little scene and went over to help out the young girl.

"Lei è la ragazza di Francesca. Vorrebbe un English coffee," he said.

"Oh...! Okay," the young girl said and hurried out of the pits.

"That's my daughter, Patrizia. Her English isn't so good, so I thought we could save some money for a tutor by bringing her here. I told her to get you some English coffee."

"I see. Thanks, Mr. Razotti, that was kind of you. She's a very pretty girl. How old is she?"

"She's fourteen. She's a fast learner, but she still has some way to go."

"What was it you said about Francesca? I recognised the name, but nothing else."

"Oh, I just said that you're Francesca's special friend. Patrizia idolises Francesca, actually. She's her big hero."

"I understand," Kathleen said with a laugh.

Moments later, Patrizia zipped back into the pits carrying a Styrofoam cup of coffee, four sugar cubes, a spoon, a small plastic carton of cream and a napkin.

"Goodness me, that's what I call service!" Kathleen said and took the many small items out of the young girl's hands.

"Uh... uh, grazie mille, Patrizia," Kathleen said, hoping that she hadn't just made a fool out of herself.

Patrizia's face lit up and she nodded vigorously.

"Non c'è problema. Come ti chiami?"

"Oh... Giampaolo, help, please..." Kathleen said sheepishly.

"She asked you what your name is."

"My name is Kathleen," Kathleen said, speaking slowly so Patrizia could understand it.

The young girl nodded again and then zipped back out of the pits.

"She's a nice girl, Giampaolo."

"I was quite surprised that my ex-wife even allowed us to..." the team manager started to say, but a radio transmission in his headset meant he couldn't stay and talk. He waved at Kathleen and then went over to one of the computers.

---

*'Say again, Fran,'* Giampaolo said over the radio.

"The track is extremely dirty now. The times won't be representative."

*'All right. Stay out for now.'*

"Okay," Francesca said, easing the sequential shifter into Fifth and then Sixth as she blasted past the pits.

The speed climbed steadily until it peaked at 185 m.p.h. At the one hundred metres board, Francesca applied the brakes hard and went back down into third. Driving at a slowish ninety

m.p.h., she stayed in third through the Elf right-hander and into the left-hander before changing up into fourth and then fifth as the corner opened up, going uphill.

At the top of the hill, she let it stay in fifth for the short straight and then moved back down to third for the Repoil right-hander that took her back down the hill. Up to fourth for another short straight and then into second for the tight, tricky off-camber left at Seat.

She blasted through the short straight, changing into fourth as she reached the chicane, first left and then right, rattling over the gravel and debris left by another car that had been off the track there.

Short-shifting into fifth for Campsa, Francesca balanced the Maserati on the throttle at 130 m.p.h. until she was through, and then went full blast down the back straight, changing into sixth at the exit of the old, abandoned, chicane.

Braking very hard from 175 m.p.h. at the one hundred metres board, Francesca went down into second and edged her way through the new, frustratingly tight La Caixa chicane built for the Grands Prix. Up into third and then fourth, she stepped hard on the throttle for the short blast out of Banc de Sabadell and into the re-profiled last corners.

She went back into second for the first part of the chicane and stayed in that gear for the second part. When she went through the final corner, New Holland, she moved up the gearbox until she eased the sequential shifter into fifth and then sixth on her way past the pits.

As Francesca approached the first corner again, marshals waved yellow flags to warn her that a car had gone off into the gravel trap. She slowed down accordingly, noticing as she went past it that it was a dark blue Ford GT carrying the number six on the side. A snatch vehicle was already on its way to the stranded race car, so Francesca surmised that it wouldn't take long to clear up the corner.

"There's a car off at turn one," Francesca said on the radio.

*'We see it. Three more laps, Fran.'*

"Okay."

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

"Here you go," Kathleen said, handing Francesca a cup of steaming hot coffee that had been freshly delivered by Patrizia. Leaving the Maserati pits, they began strolling up through the paddock to see what else was going on.

"Thanks, darling."

"What's the programme for the rest of the day?"

"Well, first of all, once the track reopens after the lunch break, Fabio will go back out and do a quallie run with low tanks and soft rubbers, just to see where we are on a flying lap."

"Uh-huh?"

"Yes, and then I'll do the same later on."

"Uh-huh."

"Which part of it didn't you get?" Francesca said, bumping shoulders with Kathleen.

"No, I got most of it... it's just the quaint language. You have a way of using regular words in strange contexts."

"Why, thank you," Francesca said and chuckled.

"You're welcome. Jonno was right, wasn't he? The Fords are really quick here."

"Yes they are. Second and third right now. That's not bad considering it's their first time here."

"Faster than your car."

"Yes. That's going to be a right-old ding dong all year."

"There you go again!"

"Scusami, tesoro. Sorry, luv. Anyway, the Toyotas will arrive tomorrow and that'll probably change the look of the timing sheets. I have a feeling that the Nissans will come to regret not doing this test. They were the slowest of the works cars last year. Really, wouldn't you have thought that they could use the extra practice?"

"You're asking me?" Kathleen said, chuckling.

As they walked past the Ford works pit, the same engine note they had heard when they first arrived at the circuit streamed out of the back door to the garage. Francesca stopped and took a sip of her coffee, listening to the crispy sounds of the engine.

"I wonder if they'll have the same problems with vibrations I had when we used the V8 at Le Mans last year...?"

"In the Mercedes?"

"Yeah. The punchy V8's are great for the twistier circuits typically found in the US, but the faster European tracks tend to favour smoothness and top end performance more."

"Francesca... in English, please?" Kathleen said and shook her head.

"V8's deliver a kick in the pants which is great for getting off the corners in a hurry, but the big twelves just breathe best on the straights."

"Right..."

"We saw that at Adria Raceway a couple of years ago. None of us could keep up with the Toyotas. Grunt definitely won out that day," Francesca said and emptied her cup in a single gulp.

"Well, that was before my time, I'm afraid," Kathleen said and hooked her arm inside Francesca's.

"When we get home, I can show you what I'm talking about. I have that race on DVD."

"Uh, thanks."

Just before they turned away from the Ford garage, a woman in her mid-twenties with very short, ash-blond hair walked into view, catching Francesca's eye. The woman leaned against the edge of a tool box and ran both hands through her hair. She wiggled her way out of her driving suit and tied it around her waist, revealing her formfitting fireproof undershirt.

"Hey, Kathleen, I've just spotted someone I want to say hello to. Do you mind...?"

"Who...? Oh... her," Kathleen said, following Francesca's look.

"It must be Sally Sharpe, the driver Jonno mentioned," Francesca said and began to walk towards the Ford garage.

"Uh, okay," Kathleen said, following Francesca closely.

Francesca knocked twice on the doorjamb to the Ford garage to catch the ash-blond's attention - it worked. When the woman saw who it was, she put down the Styrofoam cup she had just picked up and wiped off her hands on her suit.

"Hi, you must be Sally Sharpe," Francesca said and put out her hand.

"That's right. And you're Francesca Carrara," Sally said in a voice that was higher in pitch than her compact, athletic frame suggested.

"Yep. This is my partner, Kathleen O'Malley. She's an author."

"Nice to meet you. My brother is a journalist back home in Michigan."

"Really? How interesting," Kathleen said and shook Sally's hand when it was her turn.

"How are things going? Jonno told me this is your first race in Europe?" Francesca said.

"Yeah, that's right. Everything's been pretty good so far. I had to learn the track as well... all in all, it's not going too bad."

Francesca noted that the Ford mechanics were busy changing the front splitter on the GT and that there was plenty of gravel on the floor of the garage, but she chose not to comment on it.

"Are you here for the full season?"

"That's the plan, yeah," Sally said, smiling.

"Okay. Well, we won't take too much of your time. See you on the track," Francesca said and shook Sally's hand again.

"See ya," Sally said and gave Kathleen a thumbs-up.

---

"She was flirting with you," Kathleen said as soon as they were out of earshot of the garage.

"I beg your pardon...?"

"She was flirting with you. Trust me," Kathleen said and hooked her arm inside Francesca's again - this time, a little more possessively.

"I didn't see it."

"I did. The way she looked at you. The way she smiled. The way she cocked her head when you spoke. The way her grey eyes sparkled. I'm telling you, Francesca, she was flirting with you."

"Look, honey..." Francesca said and put her hand on Kathleen's arm. Before she could speak, a group of mechanics walked past them pushing tyre trolleys down the paddock.

Instead of waiting until the mechanics had filed past, Francesca pulled Kathleen over to a more secluded part of the paddock.

"Look, not every female race car driver is gay, you know. I didn't see it at all. I think I'd know if a good-looking woman was flirting with me," Francesca said quietly, adding a little wink to take the edge off her words.

"Yes, but..."

"And besides, Kathleen, even if she was, why would I respond to it... when I have you?"

Francesca delivered the last four words in a whisper and then she leaned down to give Kathleen a gentle kiss on the lips.



After separating, Francesca moved her hand under Kathleen's long hair and ran her fingers along her partner's soft skin. Kathleen leaned into Francesca's touch and smiled wistfully.

"I'm sorry. Maybe I'm seeing ghosts."

"Don't worry about it. You're the one I love," Francesca said and scratched Kathleen's neck.

"And I love you."

The sequin moment was broken by an electronic horn blaring noisily somewhere in the distance. Seconds later, engines started all the way up and down the pits.

"I need to go back, Kathleen. If you don't want to wait, just go back to the motorhome. You have the keys."

"No. No, I'm staying in the pits until you return. I don't feel like being alone right now," Kathleen said in a voice that she thought sounded curiously insecure. She cleared her throat, hoping that Francesca hadn't noticed it.

Francesca smiled and wrapped her arm around Kathleen's shoulder, seemingly oblivious to the things Kathleen was worrying about.

With a nod, Kathleen breathed a quiet sigh of relief and started the short trek back to the Maserati pit arm in arm with Francesca.

\*

\*

### **CHAPTER 3**

*Sunday, March 13th.*

"Ohhh, we're going to be late!" Kathleen said, frantically searching for her other ear-ring. Taking off her pumps so she could move faster, she zipped back into the bedroom and looked high and low for the missing piece of jewellery.

Hoisting up her ivory-coloured dress, she got down on her knees to look under their brass bed. When there was no sign of the ear-ring there either, she could feel a panic building inside her, but she refused to give into it so easily. She looked all over the floor and finally caught a glimpse of something reflecting the light underneath their dresser.

"Here it is! Damn, how did it get there... Francesca, I need your help, please!" Kathleen said and wiggled her way over to the dresser.

"It's not like we're going to meet the Queen, we're only going to the launch party for the new season. Can't you just use another pair of ear-rings?" Francesca said, standing in the doorway.

"But you gave them to me for Christmas! It's the first time I get to wear them..."

"Oh, all right," Francesca said and took off her tuxedo jacket. She put it on the bed and got down on her knees next to Kathleen. Reaching in, she scooped up the wayward ear-ring without problems and handed it to Kathleen, still resting on her knees.

"Why, Francesca, it looks like you're asking me for my hand," Kathleen said with a giggle. She attached the stud to her ear lobe and fluffed her hair back in place.

"I'm saving that for your birthday," Francesca said and got up. She dusted off her hands and put on her jacket.

"Really?"

"Well, you just have to wait and see, won't you?" Francesca said huskily as she straightened out her lapels - Kathleen's lips were creased by an expectant little grin and she hummed quietly to herself.

"Don't forget your pumps, dear," Francesca said on her way out of the bedroom.

---

Forty minutes later, Francesca drove her Maserati road car into a well-lit parking lot next to a warehouse that had been converted into a posh night club.

Zooming around the car, she held the door open for Kathleen, allowing her to step out gracefully. As she did so, Francesca couldn't help but admire her partner's exquisite looks - underneath the coat Kathleen was wearing for the cold, the ivory dress accentuated her lithe body perfectly and turned the author into a Greek goddess. The tasteful jewellery was the icing on the cake, matching her golden mane perfectly and adding an air of supreme elegance to the ensemble.

"Oh, you look a-\*ma\*-zing," Francesca said for Kathleen's ears only.

"Thank you, Francesca. That Tux is quite special, too."

"This way, Madame," Francesca said in a jokey French accent and put her hand on the small of Kathleen's back.

Once they were inside the night-club, Kathleen handed the coat to the young woman working the cloakroom. After receiving a tag and putting it in her purse, Kathleen made sure that the silk scarf around her neck and the belt around her waist were on straight. She worked on them for a few seconds but then noticed that Francesca was wearing a huge grin on her face.

"What? Is it on backwards?" Kathleen said and looked down.

"No, it's just... Good Lord, that dress works so well on you. Do you mind going home at once so I can rip it off with my teeth?"

"Francesca!" Kathleen hissed, instantly blushing like mad. She tried to hide her red cheeks by fumbling with her purse, but when she finally dared to look up after a few seconds of frantic fidgeting, she noticed that no one was paying her any attention.

"Let's go inside, my dear," Francesca said and offered Kathleen her arm. Fanning her red cheeks, Kathleen took the arm and leaned in towards her partner.

"I'm open for suggestions later on... but can we please spare the dress?"

"Anything for you, darling. It's what's underneath the dress that I'm really interested in, anyway," Francesca said and gently bumped shoulders with Kathleen.

The night-club itself was more spacious than predicted - a large group of chairs and tables had been set up below a stage, and at the far end of the room, three bartenders were busy serving the guests from behind a long, shiny black bar counter.

The stage was framed by a rigging of lights and Francesca began to get a bad feeling in her stomach.

"Oh, no, they haven't booked one of those stand-up comedians, have they? I can't stand those people. They're always so aggressive. And unfunny," she growled.

"I really wouldn't know. Come on, let's get a drink while the bar is relatively quiet," Kathleen said and tugged at Francesca's arm.

"Good idea."

"Good evening, ladies, what can I get you?" one of the bartenders said as Kathleen and Francesca reached the counter.

"A Club Soda and a Gin and Tonic, please," Kathleen said.

"Will that be all, Miss?"

"For now, yes. Thank you."

As the bartender started preparing the drinks, Francesca turned around and looked at the rest of the guests. It was the usual mix of VIPs and hangers-on and one or two of them were already looking inebriated. Several waitresses zipped between the tables, carrying trays with drinks and a few snacks.

From the stage, soft music began playing and the lights seemed to dim even more than they already were.

"Hey, do you know what the entertainment will be?" Francesca asked as the bartender came back to them with the drinks.

"I'm sorry, no. I know they rehearsed something earlier this afternoon, but I wasn't here then," the bartender said and put the two glasses down on the counter. Typically, he put the G&T in front of Francesca and the Club Soda in front of Kathleen.

"All right. Thanks," Francesca said and swapped the drinks. She took two napkins and handed one of them to Kathleen.

"Thank you," Kathleen said with a smile.

Stepping away from the bar counter, they began to look for a table. Most of the tables close to the stage were already occupied, but most of those in the rear were vacant.

"At the back?" Kathleen said.

"Yes, please. At the very back."

As they strolled towards a cluster of tables, Luca DiLorenzi arrived with his arm around a doll in her early twenties. She was dressed in an electric green plastic dress that only came to mid-thigh and she had a fake, fluffy boa wrapped around her neck.

"Oh dear..." Kathleen said as she noticed the young woman. Francesca only chuckled and took a sip of her Club Soda.

Luca, as always wearing his expensive designer sunglasses, turned his head slowly from left to right, taking in everything that happened in the club. When he spotted Francesca and Kathleen, his left eyebrow went up at the sight of the ivory dress.

He blew Kathleen a kiss and then walked over to the bar, still holding onto the doll.

"He blew me a kiss, that... that..." Kathleen said, leaning in towards Francesca.

"Ah, forget him. He's not worth wasting a tantrum on."

At the exact same time, Giampaolo stepped up onto the stage wearing a headset with a small microphone on it.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please. As most of you will know, the Maserati Corse team has been involved in motorsport at the highest level for nearly a decade now."

The audience clapped politely.

"For seven years, we have been at the pinnacle of sports car racing. We've won many, many races and a few championships, and throughout those years, we've always received sterling support by the Mediterraneo Petrochemical Corporation. Therefore, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am extremely proud to announce..."

Giampaolo stepped aside and pulled on a chord that had appeared at the side of the stage. The entire backdrop fell down, revealing one of the MC12's. Four spotlights flared up, shining bright lights down onto the car that had been painted in the new factory colours.

"... the new look of the Maserati Corse team. From now on, the name on the entry lists will be Team Mediterraneo Maserati."

The guests erupted in a loud cheer and they all began to clap. An up-tempo version of the Italian national anthem began to play and two female models dressed in the new driving suits came out to stand in front of the car, posing for the photographers that had suddenly appeared at the edge of the stage.

Francesca rubbed her eyes and stared at the new company colours. This was a complete surprise to her and she didn't really know what to make of the combination of colours that had been used.

"It's black and..." she said, not quite comprehending what was going on.

"Turquoise. Black and turquoise," Kathleen said and began to chuckle.

"Black and turquoise. Well... I guess it could be worse."

"I think it looks good," Kathleen said, leaning in towards Francesca.

"Mmmm..."

Giampaolo stepped back onto the stage and held out his hands.

"Now the drivers will appear on the stage. Unfortunately, Fabio Dell'Assandro, the reigning World Champion, couldn't be here tonight, but here is last year's Le Mans winner, Luca DiLorenzi, and the winner of the British Empire Trophy, Francesca Carrara. Please give them a warm welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen."

"Ooooh, go on, Francesca!" Kathleen said and thumped her partner's shoulder.

Francesca sighed deeply and got up from her chair. She made her way through the tables and walked up onto the stage. She turned around and flashed her 200-watt smile at the photographers who all responded by taking dozens of photos.

Luca was a bit slow to get to the stage and Francesca could see by the annoyed look on his face that he was most unhappy that she had stolen his thunder - Francesca bit down a saucy remark and concentrated on presenting herself to the cameras.

Giampaolo came up to stand between them and put his hands on their shoulders.

"How do you like the new colours?" he said, smiling to the cameras.

"Well, they're certainly loud," Francesca said out of the corner of her mouth.

"Loud, effective and fill our coffers," the team manager responded and patted both his drivers on the back.

---

Once all the razzmatazz was over, the guests began to drift away from the night-club, Kathleen and Francesca among them.

Walking arm in arm back to the parking lot, they stopped at the rear of Francesca's car and gazed at each other.

"Weren't you supposed to give a few more interviews?" Kathleen said and ran her fingers down Francesca's cheek.

"Probably. I've already answered everything three times over, though. I can't believe one of the journos asked me how it was like to be the only woman in a factory team. Good Lord, do you know how often I've been asked that question?"

"Often."

"Too often. And besides, it isn't even true any more. Not with Sally Sharpe around. Anyway... earlier tonight, you said something about... oh, what was it... that you were open to suggestions later on...?"

"That's right."

"Well, it's 'later on' right now."

"Perhaps we should go home first, silly?"

"Perhaps we should \*run\* home," Francesca said quietly and leaned down towards Kathleen. An inch before their lips met, she stopped and looked deeply into Kathleen's misty green orbs.

When Francesca could see the excitement and barely hidden lust building in them, she closed the distance and claimed Kathleen's lips in a long, loving kiss.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

\*RRRRRRINNNNGGGG!\*

Kathleen put down the slice of toast she was eating for breakfast and pushed her chair back. Before she had time to reach the telephone, it rang again, and for some unknown reason, she knew it was trouble even before she had picked up the receiver.

"The Carrara and O'Malley residence, it's Kathleen," she said as she sat down.

*'Kathleen O'Malley, how dare you! How dare you do this to us!'* an agitated female voice said from the other end of the line.

"Wha... what? Mother? Is something wrong? Dare do what to you? What's going on?" Kathleen said and shot up from the chair.

*'You know perfectly well what's going on! How \*dare\* you!'* Kathleen's mother said, her voice trembling from the stress she appeared to be under.

"You're not making any sense!"

*'There's a picture of you in the Sun.'*

"Oh...?"

*'Kissing another woman! How dare you do that to us?'*

Kathleen's jaw gradually slipped down and her bottom lip started quivering. She covered her mouth with her hand and took a deep breath. As the warm air filtered through her fingers, she realised with alarming clarity that everything had just come crashing down again. She sat down with a bump and closed her eyes.

*'Kathleen, tell me you're not one of those... those people.'*

"Would it be so bad if I...?" Kathleen said in a trembling voice that matched her mother's.

*'Yes it would! We raised you as a good Catholic. Now look what you've become!'*

Kathleen rubbed her brow several times, trying to stop the tears from coming. Soon, a few crystal teardrops escaped her eyes and began to run down her cheeks.

"But... how can you say that..."

*'Is this why you broke up with Edward? Is this why you haven't had one, single boyfriend in the years since?'*

"I... yes. Yes, it is."

*'What did that awful woman do to you? Tell me, did she force herself on you? Please tell me that she did. Please tell me that this is just a big misunderstanding!'*

"A misunderstanding? Forced herself on me...? No... no, of course she didn..."

*'She must have. Explain to me how someone like that can...'*

"I love her," Kathleen said quietly.

*Silence.*

*'That woman is using you,'* Kathleen's mother said in a voice so thick with anger that it was barely intelligible.

"No!"

*'If she has laid a finger on you, I'll call the police and...'*

Kathleen clenched her fist so tightly around the receiver that it started to creak. Trying to control her temper, she slammed her eyes shut and took several deep breaths - suddenly the anger inside her won the battle and her green eyes shot fire.

"Too late! We've made love countless times including last night and it was the BEST SEX I'VE EVER HAD!" Kathleen roared into the phone. Unsurprisingly, the connection was lost and all that was left for Kathleen to do was to hold the silent receiver.

Francesca came out of the shower and stared wide-eyed at Kathleen.

"What in the world...?" she said, wrapping the towel around her and tucking it under her arms.

Kathleen tried to speak, but she was so choked up that she couldn't utter a word. The receiver slipped from her fingers and fell onto the floor. On the way down, the cord struck some letters on a small table which sent them fluttering to the floor, landing on the carpet in an unruly heap.

"Oh, darling, what's wrong?" Francesca said, rushing over to Kathleen. She knelt down in front of the stricken woman and took her hands in her own. When Francesca didn't get a response, she leaned in and gave Kathleen a big hug.

"What's wrong, Kathleen? Please tell me what's wrong...?"

"That was my mother. She knows."

"She knows? Knows what?"



"That I'm... that we're together."

"Oh..." Francesca said and framed Kathleen's face.

"There must've been a photographer nearby when we kissed last night. There's a pict..." Kathleen started to say, but her throat constricted again and she could only sob.

"A picture of us kissing?"

Kathleen nodded and took another deep breath.

"In the Sun. Everybody knows, Francesca," Kathleen said and didn't do anything to stop the steady stream of tears running down her cheeks.

"Maybe it's for the best, sweetheart."

"No... you don't understand. It wasn't supposed to be like this! Now, they'll all look at me and..."

"And know that you love another woman. Is that really that bad, Kathleen?"

"N-no, of course not, but... but... everything has changed now."

"Not everything. I still love you," Francesca said quietly. She found a snip of her towel and wiped off some of the tears that still ran down Kathleen's cheeks.

Kathleen's lips started quivering but she tried to hold it back for as long as she could. She nodded again and made to get up from the chair. Standing up straight, Francesca helped Kathleen up and guided her over to the couch.

"Can I get you something? I know it's early, but do you want a drink?" Francesca said, but Kathleen just shook her head.

"I... oh, the phone," Francesca said and picked up the receiver and the letters that had fallen onto the carpet. Five seconds later, the phone rang again.

"I don't want to talk to my mother again," Kathleen whispered hoarsely.

"I understand."

Francesca sat down in the chair and picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

*'Hi, Francesca, it's Giampaolo. Can you come over to the offices after lunch? I just wanted to discuss a few details regarding the upcoming test at Monza. Don't forget it starts this Friday, March 18th.'*

"Oh... oh, it's a really bad time right now, Giampaolo."

'Okay?'

"It's a... we're having an, uh... a family problem."

*'All right. How about tomorrow morning at nine, then? We have several things we need to talk about.'*

"Nine a.m. tomorrow. I'll be there, Giampaolo."

*'Good. Arrivederci, Francesca.'*

"Arrivederci."

"You don't have to change your plans for my sake," Kathleen said and blew her nose in an old hankie.

"I'm not going anywhere, Kathleen... oh, that bloody telephone!" Francesca said angrily when the phone suddenly rang again.

"This better be important!" Francesca barked into the receiver.

*'Good morning. Can I speak with Miss Kathleen O'Malley, please? My name is Christine Bennett and I'm calling on behalf of W.P. Carruthers of Carruthers Publishing, Limited.'*

"Miss O'Malley is indisposed. I'll give her the message," Francesca said curtly.

*'All right. Please tell Miss O'Malley that Mr. Carruthers is urgently requesting a meeting. Preferably today or tomorrow. Do you have that?'*

"Yes, I have that. I'll tell her. Good day, Miss Bennett," Francesca said and hung up before the person at the other end could object.

"Who was that?" Kathleen said.

"Christine Bennett from your publisher's. Looks like W.P. wants a meeting."

Kathleen's face became even paler than it had already been. She pressed a hand hard against her stomach and slowly got up from the couch. A few seconds later, her stomach clenched violently and she ran to the bathroom to throw up.

---

Fifteen minutes later, Francesca tucked Kathleen in and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. She brushed a damp lock of blonde hair away from Kathleen's eyes and then quietly left the bedroom to go to their local newsagent.

---

When Francesca returned, she went into the living room and put the tabloid down on their coffee table. Sighing, she sat down on the couch and opened the newspaper to the page containing the photo. The colours weren't great and the contrast was too high, but the motif was all too easy to make out.

'Celebrity Outing of the month!' the headline screamed. Francesca sighed again and read the relatively short blurb located beneath the photo.

*'The biographer Kathleen O'Malley, 36, (on the right) is seen here involved in a lip-wrestling match with 'out' lesbian Francesca Carrara, 32. Sorry boys, another one to scratch off the list.'*

"Those bastards..." Francesca growled and fought the urge to tear the tabloid to shreds.

.\_\*\_\*.\_

Twenty to four, p.m., Francesca and Kathleen drove into the parking lot at the publishing house. The VIP parking space at the main entrance was vacant so Francesca pulled into it, chuckling quietly to herself when she remembered the curious incident that had happened when she and Kathleen had first met.

Francesca turned off the engine and looked at Kathleen's profile. The author had calmed down somewhat, but she was still pale as a sheet and she was wearing a pair of extra-dark sunglasses to hide her red eyes.

"Sweetheart, do you remember what happened here... in this exact parking spot?"

"I remember," Kathleen said hoarsely.

"We've come a long way, haven't we? This is just a bump on the road. We'll get over this and then we'll move on," Francesca said and took Kathleen's hand.

"I hope so. I'm so sorry for dragging you into the tabloids."

"Ah, nonsense. I don't care one iota about the gutter press. Tomorrow, they'll find another defenceless victim to put their claws into. That's what they do."

Kathleen just shrugged.

"Come on, let's go in and get this thing sorted. Who knows, maybe your publisher wants to give you a bonus?"

"No. He wants to terminate my contract."

"Let's take it one step at a time. Okay?"

"Well... Okay."

---

"Miss O'Malley and Miss Carrara to see Mr. Carruthers, please," Francesca said to the clerk manning the desk in the centre of the sterile, white reception area.

"It's right this way," the platinum blonde desk clerk said and pointed at the frosted glass door that Francesca and Kathleen remembered so well from the year before.

"We know the way, thank you," Francesca said and put her hand on Kathleen's elbow.

Once they reached the front office, a tall, well-dressed woman in her mid-thirties greeted them in the door. She put out her hand and Francesca and Kathleen shook it.

"Good afternoon. I'm Christine Bennett, Mr. Carruthers' secretary. Mr. Carruthers has had a busy schedule today, so he's running a little late. Please have a seat. It won't be long."

"Thank you. Do you know what's going to happen?" Kathleen said in a croaky voice.

"I'm afraid I don't, Miss O'Malley."

"Oh. Well... oh."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Um, no thanks," Kathleen said, remembering the terrible coffee she'd had the first time she had been waiting to meet W.P. Carruthers. She looked over her shoulder and noticed that while the front office still looked much the same, the uncomfortable chairs had at least been changed.

Before they could reach the chairs, the door to the inner office flew open, revealing W.P. Carruthers himself standing in the doorway. W.P. had a harried expression on his face and his hair appeared to be whiter than the last time Kathleen had met him. He looked every one of his sixty-four years and a thought flashed through Kathleen's mind that it had all been caused by the picture in the Sun.

W.P. put out his hand, wearing his customary slightly plastic smile, and motioned Francesca and Kathleen to step into his office.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Carruthers," Francesca said and shook the publisher's hand.

"Good afternoon. What a mess."

"What a mess indeed," Kathleen said, shaking W.P.'s hand.

Carruthers closed the door behind him and walked around his huge desk to sit down in a leather armchair. Francesca and Kathleen sat down in two matching Chesterfield armchairs - Francesca, cool as usual, leaned back in the chair and crossed her hands over her chest, wearing an expression that told W.P. that he better not do anything that would cause Kathleen even more harm.

Kathleen sat with her legs together and her hands neatly folded in her lap, almost disappearing in the huge armchair. She had taken off her sunglasses, but the light was so hard in the office that she wished she hadn't.

"Well, this is quite a mess. I've spent most of today speaking to Mr. Harting's agents. They've agree to see out the contract. It wouldn't be a good signal to send to his fans if he..."

"To the people buying his third-rate songs, you mean?" Francesca said icily.

"Yes. Well, to keep the story short... Miss O'Malley, how much work is left on the Davey Boy biography?"

"Not much. Five working days at the most. Three if I rush it. Then it needs to go to the legal department, et cetera. I can have it done by next Monday," Kathleen said quietly.

"All right. Miss O'Malley, to tell you the truth, when I asked for this meeting, I was certain that Mr. Harting's agents would call off the contract, but after the aforementioned development... not to mention that we've had several inquiries today asking if you were available... I don't think this will have much of an impact."

"So you're saying that any PR is good PR?" Francesca said.

"Well, I can understand how it must be for you..."

"No, I don't think you can, frankly. With all due respect, Sir."

"You're right, Miss Carrara, I can't. But I do know that this will be forgotten quicker than you think. It's been less than two weeks since the 'keeper on the English national team was arrested after the police found recreational drugs in his car, but who is talking about that now? Nobody."

"My parents won't forget about that picture," Kathleen said quietly. Smiling, Francesca leaned over and gently clawed the back of Kathleen's hand to offer some support.

"Well. The bottom line is that the Davey Boy contract will be upheld. I'm quite sure that several new opportunities will present themselves once you're available, Miss O'Malley," W.P. Carruthers said and got up from his armchair, signalling the end of the meeting.

"I told you it'd be good news, Kathleen," Francesca said and got up.

"Thank you, Mr. Carruthers. I only wish it hadn't been necessary to hold this meeting at all," Kathleen said and shook hands with her publisher.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_

*Wednesday, March 16th.*

"All right ... All right, Dad. We'll be over at six thirty tonight ... No, I said that *\*we'll\** be over ... Yes ... Yes, 'that woman' will be coming, too ... Yes. Goodbye, Dad," Kathleen said and hung up. After putting down the receiver, she sighed deeply and rubbed her face.

"So...?" Francesca said, sitting in the couch.

"Well, he wasn't too pleased about it, but I think he accepted it. My mom refuses to speak with me."

"Oh..."

Getting up from the chair by the telephone, Kathleen went straight over to the cupboard in the corner of the living room and opened it. After finding a bottle of brandy, she poured herself a small drink and gulped it down in a single motion.

At once, Kathleen poured herself a new drink - two fingers of the dark red liquid instead of one like in the first one. She took the glass back to the couch and sat down next to Francesca.

"At least your publisher was right. It's Wednesday, two days after the picture was printed, but you haven't heard anything from anybody," Francesca said, gently bumping shoulders with Kathleen.

"Well, except from my parents. The very people I didn't want to find out."

"You couldn't keep it a secret forever, Kathleen. Not something like that."

"Well... I could for nearly six years."

"Hey, they'll come around. You'll see," Francesca said and mussed Kathleen's hair.

"You don't know my parents. Right now, they hate us. That's why we need to visit them tonight. God, I wish none of this had ever happened..." Kathleen said and emptied her glass in one gulp. When the strong liquid burned its way down her throat, she coughed dryly a few times and leaned forward to put her elbows on her knees.

Francesca seized the golden opportunity and began to run her hand slowly up and down Kathleen's back. Kathleen sighed again and put her hand on Francesca's thigh.

"Thank you for being here for me, Francesca."

"You're welcome, darling."

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

Six twenty-five, p.m., Kathleen parked her red Ford Focus behind her father's Mondeo. She turned off the engine and sighed deeply.

"So this is where you grew up? It looks like a nice neighbourhood," Francesca said, looking around at the houses and the cars parked on the street.

Kathleen cast a brief glance at the street where she had spent a lot of her childhood. Everything still appeared much the same, save for a few houses that had been repainted in the intervening years.

"I've only been here maybe five times in the twenty years since I moved out. Once for my Gran's funeral, once for my thirtieth birthday... I can't even remember the other times," Kathleen said looking at her parents' house.

"Perhaps so, but in the months we've been together, you've spoken regularly to your mother over the phone, so it's not like they're complete strangers. Don't worry about it, darling."

"You don't know my parents," Kathleen said quietly.

"No, but I'm looking forward to getting to know them. They raised you, they can't be all bad. Oh, your father is already standing in the door," Francesca said, looking past Kathleen at the front door of the house where a dark silhouette of a man stood out against the light coming from behind him.

Kathleen gulped several times and immediately pressed a hand against her upset stomach. With a sigh, she took the key out of the ignition and opened the door.

Francesca stepped out of the car and went around the back. To make sure that Kathleen's parents wouldn't think she was some kind of intolerable fop, she had chosen to dress low-key: a blue cotton jacket, a pair of charcoal grey slacks and a dusty white button-down shirt over a charcoal grey T-shirt.

For much the same reason, Kathleen had insisted that they used her Focus instead of Francesca's posh sports car so they could show that it was an equal relationship - but now that they had arrived, she felt a childish, irrational urge to show her parents that there was much more to life than a terraced house and a sensible family saloon.

Walking around the back to join Francesca, she opened the hatchback and reached in to take a small vase she had found in a gift shop. Once that was prepared, she found the bouquet of roses she had bought at the supermarket, removed the green protective paper and stuck the flowers into the vase.

"Please hold it for a sec," Kathleen said and handed Francesca the vase. After taking off her windbreaker and putting it in the back of the car, Kathleen closed the hatch, smoothed out her tan skirt and straightened her bottle green blouse.

"How do I look?" Kathleen said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

"Prim and proper," Francesca said, holding the vase with the roses.

"Good. I love you."

"I love you, too. Let's get this over with," Francesca said and handed the vase back to Kathleen.

Moving as one, they began to walk up the garden path. Every step felt like a thousand-mile journey to Kathleen, and for each yard they got closer, her legs became more and more wobbly.

Once they were at the door, Kathleen's father reached out for his only daughter. Embracing her and pulling her into a hug, he whispered something in her ear that Francesca couldn't hear.

They separated after a few moments, and as Kathleen walked into the house, her father put out his hand at Francesca.

"I'm Dennis O'Malley. How do you do, Miss...?"

"Carrara. Francesca Carrara. Good evening, Sir," Francesca said and shook Dennis' hand.

Kathleen's father was in his late sixties and he was dressed in a white shirt and grey trousers with a black leather belt. His features were soft, reminding Francesca of Kathleen. When he shook Francesca's hand, she could smell cigarette smoke on his clothes and she felt at once that his grip was firm and unwavering, just like his daughter's.

"Carrara? You're Italian?"

"My mother is. My father is English. I've lived here for nearly thirty years."

"Oh. Well, anyway, welcome to my house."

"Thank you, Sir," Francesca said and stepped into the hall, finding it to be nice and cosy, if a little over-decorated. A closed sliding door went off to the right, presumably into the living room, and at the far end of the hall, the door to the kitchen was open, allowing a flood of bright light to come out into the hall.

"Let's go into the living room, shall we? I think Kathleen needs to have a moment alone with her mother," Dennis said and pulled the sliding door open.

Francesca and Kathleen briefly locked eyes - smiling faintly, Kathleen nodded to show that she agreed with her father.



Once she was sure Kathleen was doing all right, Francesca and Dennis stepped into the living room and closed the sliding door behind them.

As Kathleen fixed her hair in front of a mirror, her face was set in stone. She could hear her mother working in the kitchen, but suddenly, her legs wouldn't obey her commands at all.

She took a deep breath, turned around slowly and forced herself to walk over to stand in the door to the kitchen. She knocked on the doorjamb and prepared for the worst.

At first, Kate O'Malley didn't seem to have noticed her daughter at all. She was busy tending to a large pot, but after a few moments, her movements became slower and slower until they finally stopped.

Kate turned around and looked at her daughter, wearing an unreadable expression on her face. She noticed with some curiosity that both she and Kathleen had chosen to wear green blouses to bring out their misty green eyes.

As Kate was looking at Kathleen's pensive face, she realised that the strong-willed author had inherited so many of her own traits that any form of reconciliation would be difficult. Tapping the spoon on the side of the pot, she put it on the table next to the stove and wiped her hands on a tea towel.

"Hello, Mom," Kathleen said quietly. She took a hesitant step forward and put out her arms, hoping that her mother would at least grant her a hug.

Kate furrowed her brow but came forward and embraced her daughter.

"Hello, Kathleen. It's good to see you. I wish it could've been under better circumstances."

"Yes. What are you making?"

"Roast beef and potato salad."

"Smells delicious."

"Your father said that you'd bring that woman along. Did you?" Kate said as she went back to stirring the pot.

Kathleen felt stung by the words, but she bit back a barb that would only have made the situation worse.

"Yes, I did. Her name is Francesca and she's the best thing that ever happened to me."

Kathleen could feel that she started fidgeting, something that her mother had scolded her for countless times when she was a child.

Kate snorted loudly and took the pot off the stove.

The corner of Kathleen's mouth twitched at the sound, and she started wringing her hands even more.

"Another Catholic, I'll bet," Kate said.

"Religion doesn't play any role in our lives, Mom."

"No? Well, look where that got you."

"Mom..."

"Dinner's almost ready. Go wash your hands."

Kathleen hesitated briefly. One part of her was annoyed that her mother treated her like a child, but another part knew that it wasn't worth it to have the inevitable argument so soon. She turned around on her heel and went into the bathroom to freshen up even though she didn't need to.

A few minutes later, all four people were sitting at a dinner table that had been set up at one end of the living room.

Kathleen looked around the room, finding it hard to believe that her parents had so many little trinkets but suddenly realising that her own cottage was just as overcrowded.

Dennis was sitting at the side of the table that was facing away from the kitchen, and Kathleen shook her head when she realised that it meant that her mother had to do all the work carrying the food.

*'Some things never change,'* she thought.

Kate had made the seating arrangements so that Kathleen and Francesca faced each other, with Kathleen to her mother's right.

*'If nothing else, it means that I can have eye contact with Francesca,'* Kathleen thought and locked eyes with her lover. When she did, Francesca's bright blue eyes lit up and a small smile graced her features. Kathleen mirrored the smile, a gesture that wasn't lost on Dennis.

Kate O'Malley came into the living room and placed a tray with the freshly sliced roast beef in the centre of the table. Taking a step back, she gave Francesca a quietly defiant stare that was closer to a silent Third Degree Interrogation than a simple once-over.

Francesca caught the hint and pushed her chair back. She got up and put out her hand, wearing her most winning smile.

When she looked closely at Kate, she thought to herself that it was easy to see where Kathleen had her looks from. Her mother, though thirty years older, looked more like an older sister than a parent. Her eyes, nose and lips were the same as Kathleen's, and although her hair was shorter and her figure was rounder than her daughter's, there was a great family likeness - even down to using some of the same mannerisms.

"How do you do, Mrs. O'Malley. My name is Francesca Carrara."

At first, Kate seemed to be reluctant to touch Francesca's hand, but her manners finally won out and she stepped forward to shake it.

"How do you do. Well, let's eat while it's hot," Kate said and sat down. She placed a slice of the roast beef on her plate and took a few spoonfuls of the potato salad.

---

During the first ten minutes of the dinner, they only engaged in trivial chit-chat like discussing the weather, but Kathleen knew it was too good to last. She had watched her mother study Francesca's table manners carefully, no doubt hoping to expose her daughter's girlfriend as an ill-mannered tart.

"So, Miss Carrara, what do you do, exactly?" Kate said.

"I'm a race car driver. I'm working for the Maserati factory team."

"Really? That sounds exciting. So you get to see the world?" Dennis said.

"Yes, but mostly airports and hotel rooms."

"Being a factory driver, you must make a lot of money...?" Dennis said, trying to make the question sound as innocuous as he could.

"Oh, Dennis! That's hardly appropriate," Kate said, but with slightly less conviction in her voice than Kathleen had expected to hear.

"I'm well covered, financially speaking," Francesca said, discreetly wiping her mouth on her napkin.

"Oh..."

Kathleen cringed inwardly, knowing exactly what kind of game her parents were playing. She wanted to speak up to make her mother aware of the fact, but she knew that her words wouldn't have any impact, so she didn't.

Francesca's answer seemed to take the wind out of Kate's sails and the dinner went on in silence for a few more minutes.

"In that photo in the Sun..." Kate said, leaning forward on her chair.

"Mother! Can't it wait until we've eaten... please?" Kathleen said, alarmed over the direction the conversation was going. When Kathleen saw the look her mother sent her, she lost her appetite and put down her knife and fork.

"No, it can't. In that photo in the Sun...?"

"Yes?" Francesca said.

"Why were you dressed like a man? I mean, you're a woman, aren't you? Isn't that what this whole lesbian thing is about?"

"Mother! How *dare* you?!" Kathleen said, her voice breaking as she spoke the sentence. When she realised that she had used the same words her mother had when they'd had the telephone conversation earlier in the week, she clenched her fist and punched her thigh in frustration.

"I want to hear her answer, Kathleen."

"Her name is *Francesca*!"

Kate ignored her daughter and looked directly at Francesca.

"Well?" she said, putting down her napkin in her lap.

"Mrs. O'Malley, we're as different as everyone else. Some of us like to wear dresses and makeup and some of us don't. Personally, I don't. I only have a few clothing items that are feminine in nature and I rarely wear them."

"Oh, that's interesting. So you don't wear jewellery either?"

"No, not apart from my wristwatch."

"I see. When did you realise you were a lesbian?"

"Oh, mother, is this really necessary?" Kathleen said, rubbing her brow.

"It's all right, Kathleen. I don't mind," Francesca said with a smile.

Kathleen just sighed and crossed her arms over her chest, the food long forgotten.

"I began to realise that I was different to the girls around me when I was fifteen. After a few years of uncertainty, I came out when I was eighteen."

"Mmmm. Oh, Kathleen, we had such high hopes that you would gift us a grandchild. A little girl you could call Kate, like you were named after my mother," Kate said and picked up her fork and began to eat again.

"There's still time for that. I'm only thirty-six. That book hasn't closed yet," Kathleen said, drawing little patterns on the tablecloth with her index finger.

Kate leaned back in her chair, narrowing her eyes dangerously. She looked at Francesca and then back at Kathleen.

"I will never allow that my grandchild is raised by homosexuals."

At first, Kathleen just stared at her mother, frozen in shock and refusing to believe that her mother could be so cruel. When the words finally sunk in, an ice cold sensation engulfed her entire being, making her shiver deep inside. Her face contorted into a mask of pain and she pushed the chair back.

Wordlessly, Kathleen got up from the dinner table and left the living room.

Francesca put down her napkin and followed Kathleen away from the table. By the time she took her jacket from the coat hanger, Kathleen was already out of the front door and halfway down the garden path. With a deep sigh, Francesca closed and locked the door behind her.

Down by the car, Kathleen's hands were shaking so hard that she couldn't put the key into the lock on the car door. When she dropped the keys onto the ground, she let out a strangled sob and tried to squat down to pick them up but the skirt restricted her movements.

Putting a calming hand on Kathleen's shoulder, Francesca bent down to pick up the keys. After unlocking the car, she opened the hatchback so Kathleen could get her windbreaker, and then helped Kathleen around the car and into the passenger seat.

With a final look at the house, Francesca started the engine and drove off.

---

As soon as they got home, Kathleen went straight for the cupboard in the corner of her own living room. Taking out a bottle of Scotch, she poured herself a stiff drink and gulped it down in one.

After draining the glass, she let out a trembling sigh and fell into the couch. She shook her head slowly, still not comprehending what had just happened.

Francesca sat down on the couch and ran her hand up and down Kathleen's back.

"Now you know my parents. I'm so, so sorry that you had to experience that," Kathleen half-whispered, coughing dryly when the strong drink burned its way down her throat and into her stomach.

"Mmmm. It's not your fault, darling. Some people are like that."

"The next time I'll see my mother will be at her funeral," Kathleen said, sounding very much like she meant it.

"Oh, Kathleen... that's..."

"I'm serious. I'm done with them," Kathleen said and got up from the couch. She poured herself another drink and gulped it down like the first one.

"Do you want one?" she said and held up the bottle of Scotch.

"No, thank you."

"When are you leaving for the Monza test?"

"Late tomorrow evening. We have a big program to go through, so I need to be at the circuit when it opens at nine a.m. on Friday," Francesca said and crossed her legs.

"Would you mind if I came along?"

"Of course not... but Kathleen, there won't be anything for you to do there. The motorhome will be there, but that's it. None of the teams attending the test will bring their hospitality crews."

"I want to come. There's nothing left for me here... now."

"Oh, darling. I'd love you to come... but you need to take a few books or something. You'll get bored out of your skull."

"I'll take my laptop. Maybe I can finish that damn book on Davey Boy. Do you know if I could stay in the pits, like at Barcelona?"

"I honestly don't know. But I'll ask," Francesca said and put out her hand. Kathleen took it and walked around the couch. She sat down next to Francesca and leaned her head on the taller woman's shoulder.

"I... I knew something like this was going to happen. I just knew it," Kathleen said and let out another long sigh. She closed her eyes, hoping that the Scotch in her stomach would soon take control over her and dull her aching heart.

\*

\*

## CHAPTER 4

Eight minutes past nine a.m., on Friday, March 18th, Francesca pulled her Fiat rental car up to the end of a line of cars waiting to get into the circuit located in the middle of the Parco di Monza. Someone ahead of them honked several times and Francesca chuckled to herself.

"Why hasn't the circuit opened yet? I thought it was supposed to open at nine?" Kathleen said and checked her watch.

"Eh... we're in Italy," Francesca said with a shrug.

"Not that we're any better in old Blighty."

"No."

Ahead of them, someone honked again. When that didn't seem to have any effect, a man stuck his head out of his window and roared something in Italian at the gate keeper. The watchman - a slightly overweight, forty-something man in a uniform that was one size too small for him - just waved his hand as he made his way across the parking lot.

Francesca snorted and then laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Kathleen said, turning around in her seat.

"Oh... that's Luca honking. And yelling," Francesca said and adjusted her designer sunglasses.

"What did he say?"

"I... uh, a lot."

"Oh."

Francesca turned to face Kathleen and flashed her a brilliant, cheeky grin.

"I get the picture," Kathleen said, chuckling.

The watchman finally opened the gate and stepped into his booth. One by one, he checked the credentials of the people waiting in the line. When it was Luca DiLorenzi's turn, the watchman made a big show out of checking the credentials extra-thoroughly.

"If we had been here three minutes earlier, we would've been in front of Luca," Francesca said as she put the Fiat in gear and rolled a car-length ahead.

"Well, on the bright side, everyone is late now. If Giampaolo is driving, he'll be late, too."

"True."

---

When it was finally their turn, Francesca rolled down the window and handed their passes to the watchman.

"Buongiorno. Bella giornata oggi, eh?" the watchman said as he ran the plastic pit passes through the computer, checking to see if they had been registered.

"Buongiorno."

"Siete in due in macchina?"

"Esatto. Francesca Carrara e Kathleen O'Malley."

"Okay... Buona giornata. Guidare con prudenza," the watchman said and handed the passes back to Francesca.

"Grazie," Francesca said and drove into the parking lot.

"Wow, what was that all about?" Kathleen said, scrunching up her face.

"Nothing really. Just small talk. Then he told me to drive carefully today."

"Oh, that was nice of him."

"Yep," Francesca said and pulled into a parking space close to the Maserati garage.

A few minutes later, they walked between two huge transporters to get to the back door of the pit building. As soon as Francesca opened the door, they spotted the car she had come to test.

The low, sleek, open-topped Lola chassis acted as the eye of the hurricane, surrounded by a swarming mass of technicians and mechanics who were all busy preparing the car for its first lap of the circuit.

Francesca whistled appreciatively when she saw the new chassis. Still standing in the door, she studied the graceful curves closely, nodding to herself when she realised that it was a true racing machine.

"Oooh, I can't wait to get my hands on that baby," Francesca said dreamily.

"Hey, should I get jealous?" Kathleen said in jest, poking Francesca in the side.

"No, of course not. But you have to admit that it's a sexy car."



"Well. It's certainly a car."

"But what a car," Francesca said, looking back at the prototype. Still unpainted, the black-and-brown patterns of the carbon fibre weave stood out quite clearly, giving the car a dark, dangerous look that Francesca found very appealing.

"Ehi, Carrara, come diavolo hai fatto a persuadere Giampaolo a lasciarti provare per prima la macchina nuova?" Luca DiLorenzi said, having snuck up behind Francesca and Kathleen without any of them noticing.

"Mmmm? Oh, that's easy. He knew I'm the smartest," Francesca said and raised an eyebrow. She moved past Luca, took Kathleen by the elbow and led her back out into the parking lot.

"What did he say?" Kathleen said once they were out of earshot.

"Ah, he just asked me how the Hell I persuaded Giampaolo to give me the first drive in the new car."

"Wait a minute, was he insinuating that you...?"

"It's Luca. Forget it. That's just the way he is, Kathleen."

"Yes, but..."

"Forget it. Come on, I better get changed before Giampaolo gets here. That way, he won't know that we were late."

"Clever," Kathleen said and picked up the pace, heading for the motorhome that had already been set up for them.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

While Francesca was putting on her fireproof underwear and the driving suit, Kathleen unpacked her travel bags and found her mobile phone, her laptop and her uni-socket adapter set so she could plug her electronics into the Italian sockets.

Getting everything set up and ready for use, Kathleen plugged her phone into the laptop and turned both on. After waiting for a few moments while the laptop booted, she opened the mail program to see if anyone had contacted her.

"Anything?" Francesca said as she bent down and pulled the legs of the longjohns down. She zipped the driving suit all the way up and then a bit down so she wouldn't get too hot before she even got into the car.

"No. Only spam."

"Oh."

"Maybe there's something on the voicemail," Kathleen said and turned off the mobile phone so she could unplug it.

"Francesca...?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Less than a year ago, I couldn't even get my old video to work. And now..." Kathleen said and held up a mess of cables and plugs.

Francesca chuckled and mussed Kathleen's hair.

"Welcome to the 21st century, darling."

"I do miss my typewriter, though..." Kathleen said under her breath as she turned the mobile phone back on and put it up to her ear. A few moments later, she furrowed her brow and looked at the display.

"A message from your mother?"

"Yes. How could you tell?"

"I could see it in your eyes," Francesca said and put her helmet back in the bag so it would be easy to carry over to the pits.

"She wants me to contact her. God, just hearing her voice gave me a knot in my stomach."

"I think you should, Kathleen."

"Maybe later," Kathleen said and moved the phone back to her ear. After she had listened to the next message, she scrunched up her face and sighed. Turning off the phone, she stored it in its protective pouch and put it back into the travel bag.

"The other one was Christine Bennett from my publisher's. Looks like someone didn't appreciate the picture in the Sun. Even though the person had already signed a preliminary contract, he had phoned Carruthers again and said that he didn't want to work with one of those quote 'ungodly people' unquote," Kathleen said and waved her fingers in the air to form the quotation marks.

"Bastard. Who was that? Some here-today gone-tomorrow celebrity like Davey Boy?"

"I'm rarely told the names of my clients until I meet them for the first time. It could be anybody."

"Oh. Look, Kathleen, I'm sorry to leave you now, but I have to go," Francesca said and pulled Kathleen up towards her. She wrapped her strong arms around the smaller woman and gave her a fierce hug. Finishing off with a flurry, Francesca winked and kissed Kathleen on her nose.

"No problem. I'll be in the pits in a little while, I just need to go over the final chapter one last time. Love you... if I don't see you before you get in the car, please drive carefully."

"I will. Love you, too, darling."

---

The motorhome became very quiet after Francesca had left and Kathleen soon ran out of things to do. She had fired up her laptop to continue working on the final chapter, but the blank page just laughed in her face.

Sighing, she took her mobile phone back out of the travel bag and put it on the low table, thinking that if she could see it at all times, she'd reconsider and call her mother.

When that didn't seem to be working, she found the remote for the television set and began to zap through the many satellite channels.

---

Ten minutes later, she turned off the television and threw the remote onto the slab of plywood doubling as a couch, fed up with the forty-or-so Italian channels that all seemed to be broadcasting infomercials or dubbed American soaps at that time of the day.

Suddenly, her phone rang, making her jump back in surprise. She looked intently at the advanced, but noisy, piece of electronic equipment, not sure whether she should pick it up or not.

After the third ring, she relented and pressed the Off Hook button on the phone.

"Yes?" she said - deciding on the spot that if it was her mother calling, she'd hang up at once.

*'Miss O'Malley? It's Christine Bennett from W.P. Carruthers.'*

"Oh... oh, yes, good morning, Miss Bennett. I got your message. It's too bad that the contract was lost, but I guess..."

*'Well, you can forget about that now. We've just scored a big one,'* Christine said, interrupting Kathleen.

"Oh?"

*'Yes, someone who specifically said she wanted you to write her biography.'*

"Oh! That's great news."

*'When can you come to the offices, Miss O'Malley?'*

"Not until Monday, I'm afraid. I'm not in the UK at the moment."

*'Monday?'* Christine Bennett echoed, and Kathleen could hear through the connection that the woman was typing on a keyboard.

"That's very much the plan, yes."

*'All right. That's noted. By the way, I'm not supposed to tell you, but are you interested in hearing who the client is?'*

"Well, uh..."

*'It's Rachel Silverman.'*

"The actress who won an Oscar for Love Lost, Love Found?!" Kathleen said and almost jumped up from the couch.

*'The very same, yes.'*

"Wow... how on Earth did she ever hear of me...?"

*'I don't know, but I'm sure you'll find out on Monday. She's coming in so you can get acquainted.'*

"Huh!"

*'I'll call you again with the details. All right?'*

"Sure!"

*'All right. Goodbye, Miss O'Malley.'*

"Goodbye, Miss Bennett," Kathleen said and terminated the connection. She sat down on the couch and rubbed her face. Once again, she couldn't quite believe what had just happened, but this time, at least, it was something positive.

"Rachel Silverman...! Oh, I can't wait to work with someone who has more than nonsense on their mind," Kathleen said out loud, remembering all the wasted interview sessions with Davey Boy where he was bragging endlessly about his weekend exploits.

Needing to tell Francesca at once, she closed the laptop, picked up her jacket and left the motorhome in a hurry, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

---

Kathleen barged into the pits, making every one there turn their heads and stare at her. She blushed furiously but managed a quick smile.

"Is something wrong, Kathleen?" Giampaolo asked, holding his customary clipboard.

"Oh... uh, no. No, everything is fine. Is Francesca out on the circuit... I guess she isn't..." Kathleen said, suddenly noticing that the new car was still being worked on in the pits.

"No, she's up at race control having a word with the clerk of the course. It's up the other end of the pit lane if you need to speak with her."

"Uh, no. It can wait. What's she doing there?" Kathleen said, putting her hands into her jacket pockets.

"Ah, it's nothing out of the ordinary. He's just talking to the drivers so they know that even though it's a test and not a race meeting, he'll still be watching if they cut too many corners and things like that."

"Oh..."

"By the way, you've forgotten your earplugs and your pit credentials," Giampaolo said with a smile.

"Oh, damn!" Kathleen said and spun around on her heel.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Francesca walked into the Maserati pit reading from a piece of paper with a list of all the fire posts. She studied it so hard that she didn't notice Kathleen standing inside the pit until she was right next to her.

"Oh... hello again, darling," Francesca said and gave Kathleen a quick kiss on the forehead.

"Hi... I've got some fantastic news!" Kathleen said, completely unable to hide her excitement.

"What's up?"

"I had another call from Christine Bennett. A world famous actress has told them that she wants \*me\* to write her biography."

"Oh, wow, that's terrific. Is it anyone I know?"

"Rachel Silverman."

"Doesn't ring a bell..."

"She works mainly in dramas and things like that. Two years ago, she won an Oscar for Love Lost, Love Found."

"I remember the title better than the movie," Francesca said and laughed.

"If everything goes well, we'll sign the contract on Monday."

"I'm definitely crossing my fingers for you, darling," Francesca said and leaned down so she could give Kathleen a kiss on the lips.

"Oh, not in front of all these people," Kathleen said, embarrassed over the unexpected show of affection.

"Ah, they know me. C'mon."

"What's that you're reading?" Kathleen said after they separated.

"A list of where the fire posts are. Monza is on another level to the other tracks, so it's good to know where the help is in case there's trouble."

"Another level? What do you mean by that?"

"It's the fastest track we go to all year. The fastest straights, the quickest corners. I love it. It's a real challenge, not these sanitised Formula One circuits with acres of runoff."

"And that's a good thing?" Kathleen said, narrowing her eyes.

"Yep. The nickname for the track is The Cathedral Of Speed and it's an apt one, considering that an F1 car went down the main straight at 233 m.p.h. a few years ago."

"Oh..."

"We'll not be going that fast, though. I don't think we'll get much over 200 m.p.h."

"Two hundred miles an hour... that just goes way over my head."

"It's not really that fast once you're doing it," Francesca said and wrapped her arm around Kathleen's shoulder.

"I'll have to take your word for it."

"Fran!" Giampaolo said from the other side of the pit. When she looked at him, he waved her over.

"Time to go to work, I think," Francesca said and gave Kathleen a little squeeze.

---

"The computer technicians tell me that everything's A-okay, so the test starts now," Giampaolo said.

"I'm ready."

"I want you to do an installation lap first. This engine hasn't run in this chassis before so we want to check all the plumbing and the fittings thoroughly."

"All right."

"If that's all in the green, you should do two or three laps to get used to the car and how it works on the track when it's in the basic setup."

"Yep."

"Don't forget, it's a lot lighter than the MC12 so you can brake later, corner faster and accelerate quicker."

"How is the brake bias set?"

"At neutral. We don't have any Lola engineers here so you'll have to work that out by yourself."

"All right. Well, that's all part of the test, anyway," Francesca said and clenched her fists a few times to get some heat into them.

"Yes. Get your helmet and get into the car. We have a roll-out to conduct," Giampaolo said and put on his headset.

Francesca nodded and went over to the small shelf at the back of the pits where she had put the bag with her helmet and the HANS-device.

---

*'Radio check, radio check,'* Giampaolo said.

"Radio check. One-two, one-two," Francesca replied, looking at Giampaolo standing only three feet away. He nodded and then wrote something down on his clipboard.

Francesca looked up - not being protected by a roof was a curious feeling. She tried to remember when she had last driven a race car in anger that didn't have a roof, but she couldn't. She knew that she was about to experience the full force of the headwind down the straights, but she really had no idea how much buffeting there would be.

After tightening the belts again, she stretched out her arms so she was sure she could reach all the little switches around the cockpit. Mission accomplished, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was ready.

*'Fran, it's all yours,'* Giampaolo said and gave her a thumbs-up.

Francesca reached out and put her index finger on the Starter button. After turning over for a few seconds, the twelve came alive with a scream that seemed to be even louder than in the old car. She pulled on the right paddle shifter located behind the steering wheel and felt how the car jerked a bit when the first gear engaged.

Letting the clutch out slowly, she rolled out of the pit bay and into the slow lane, remembering to look left to see if anyone else was coming down the pit - she was clear.

Moments later, she took her thumb off the pit lane speed limiter on the steering wheel and ventured out onto the circuit for the installation lap.

---

One minute and fifty seconds later, she came back in, slowing to the required 60 k.p.h. at the entrance to the pits. The car banged and popped on the limiter as it travelled up the pit lane, and soon, Francesca returned to the Maserati pit.

Two mechanics pushed the car backwards into the bay and attached the hose with the compressed air to the nozzle at the rear of the car, making the car groan as it went up on its pneumatic jacks.

Two other mechanics took off the rear bodywork and started checking for leaks, using high-tech work lights and a low-tech, old-fashioned rag.

"Asciutta come le mutande di una monaca!" one of the mechanics shouted before he suddenly remembered that they had a visitor in the shape of Kathleen. He grinned at her, but it appeared that she hadn't understood what he said.

Giampaolo cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow, but then signalled the mechanics that they should put the bodywork back on.

"Fran, everything is looking good. I want you to do three laps at race pace to see how the car reacts. Don't forget it's still at basic setup," he said into the microphone on his headset.

*'Okay, Giampaolo.'*

A mechanic pulled off the hose with the compressed air which produced a loud PFFFFFFFFFT sound as the pneumatic jacks retracted and the car fell down onto its wheels. Francesca pushed the starter button, firing up the twelve.



Once Francesca had left the pit, Kathleen came over to Giampaolo, holding her pit credentials so he could see that she had remembered them.

"Giampaolo, that mechanic before... what did he say?"

"Oh, that was just a little joke about something being as dry as a, uh, a nun and... something. Mechanics have a special brand of humour, Kathleen."

"I guessed as much," she said with a laugh.

---

Out on the circuit, Francesca went down the back straight, headed for the Parabolica corner at the end of it. She was taking it fairly easy on her out lap, but as soon as she was halfway through the Parabolica, she pressed the throttle down all the way.

Soon, the speed climbed to 195 m.p.h. as she blasted past the pits on the seemingly endless front straight. Standing on the brakes at the Variante del Rettifilo, the car snaked so much under braking that it nearly threw itself off the circuit.

Going down to second gear, Francesca turned hard right and then hard left to navigate through the Formula One chicane and then kept her foot on the throttle going up through the gearbox. While she went through the Curva Grande at 155 m.p.h., she reached down to her left to turn the knob on the brake bias one half notch to the front, hoping that it would improve the way the car handled under braking.

For the next chicane, the Variante della Roggia, the braking felt much better and Francesca was able to fling the car through the left-right sequence in second gear without too much effort.

After going through Lesmo One and Two in third gear, she went down the first section of the back straight, touching 190 m.p.h. in sixth as she went through Curva del Serraglio and under the old banked circuit.

Braking hard for the Variante Ascari, she flipped the paddle shifter until she found third and then guided the car into the first left hander, immediately changing up into fourth and sliding across the track to hug the inside curb through the right hander that followed.

Flying through the final left hander at 135 m.p.h. in fifth, she ran a little wide on the exit like always and then went up into sixth, blasting down the back straight headed for the Parabolica.

Just touching 195 m.p.h. on the entry, she braked hard, went down into third and turned into the corner. Halfway through, she allowed the car to move to the outside of the track, following the white line through the turn and onto the straight, changing up into fourth, then fifth and finally sixth just as she crossed the start-finish line. Soon, she moved past the massive pits complex having completed a flying lap of the Monza circuit.

---

The rich, trombone-like sound from the six litre V12 reverberated through both the pit and Kathleen's body, giving her goosebumps all over. She wiggled uncomfortably to get rid of them, but they didn't disappear until the engine note changed when Francesca took her foot off the throttle and went down through the gearbox at the first chicane.

Kathleen felt her nipples grow hard and she quickly folded her arms across her chest to hide it. Shaking her head, she chuckled quietly when she realised that the tall, passionate driver didn't even have to be there in person to have that sort of effect on Kathleen's body.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

After pitting again to check the car and to adjust a few things on the setup, Francesca continued pounding round the circuit. The next seven laps went well, but on the eighth lap, the engine started sounding rough and she could feel the car losing power on the straight.

"Pits, I have a problem. Power loss," she said into her radio.

*'We can see it, Fran. Pit, pit, pit.'*

"Okay," Francesca said and eased off the throttle going through Curva Grande. She looked in the mirrors to check for any signs of smoke behind her, but she couldn't see anything. She went slowly past two fire posts, but they didn't react, so she reckoned she'd be able to get back to the pits.

Cruising back in at an easy 95 m.p.h., she checked all the gauges but found that they were all in the green zone. Going through the Variante Ascari, she could hear the engine get rougher and she keyed the mic.

"Pits, I think it's a cracked exhaust. It sounds terrible and there's no pull at all."

*'Do you need to park it?'*

"No, I can get back."

*'We're ready for you.'*

"Okay."

Francesca finally entered the pitlane and pressed the pit speed limiter button on the steering wheel. As soon as her thumb connected with the button, the engine started rattling and she could see in the mirror that it sent out a large plume of grey smoke.

"Pits, I'm in. I have a small barbecue at the back," she said, already loosening her seatbelts.

*'Roger, Fran. Stay out in the pit lane. Don't go into the bay.'*

"Yep," Francesca said, switched off the engine and let car cruise down to the Maserati pits in neutral.

As soon as the car stopped, she took off her belts and jumped out. A couple of mechanics ran out into the pitlane with fire extinguishers and began to douse down the smouldering bodywork.

Francesca shrugged and walked into the pits. She waved at Kathleen to show that she was safe and then went over to Giampaolo who was studying one of the telemetry monitors.

"I think the exhaust broke, Giampaolo. Once I hit the limiter, it just rattled apart and set fire to the bodywork," Francesca said and took off her gloves.

"Looks like it. Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure."

"Give me an initial evaluation of the car," Giampaolo said and leaned against the table.

"Well, it's definitely got potential. I need to try a quallie-simulation and a long run on full tanks before I can give you a detailed report. Perhaps there'll be time for that later on today," Francesca said and took off the helmet and the HANS-device. Putting them on the shelf at the back wall of the pits, she ruffled her damp hair and then zipped the driving suit down a bit.

"Let's hope so. We've got a spare engine cover."

"All right. But anyway, a tentative evaluation is that it responds well to changes in the setup. The engine is on the heavy side for such a light chassis, you can definitely feel the bulk in the first and second chicanes. It's like throwing a dart the wrong way... if you know what I mean?"

"Yeah. Go on."

"The tyre degradation didn't seem to be a problem, but I only did nine laps in total, so... but, all in all, it's got potential."

Giampaolo nodded and wrote everything down on his clipboard.

"Has the management made a decision on the chassis yet?"

"No... not from what I've heard, anyway. The board of directors can be a supertanker at times. It's funny you should mention the heavy engine. The latest rumour floating around is that we might change to a four litre V8 Turbo."

"Oh, really? That's the same displacement as the Toyotas. That's bound to be a lot lighter."

"Yep."

Francesca looked over Giampaolo's shoulder and saw Kathleen waiting for her, wearing a cheeky grin that Francesca couldn't really decipher.

Giampaolo closed his clipboard and nodded to himself.

"Fran, we don't need you right now. We have to change the engine and clean up the car, and most importantly, we have to analyse why the exhaust failed. Go take a rest. I'll send a runner for you when we're ready to carry on with the Lola."

"All right, Giampaolo. I'll do that."

The team manager rolled back his sleeve and checked his watch.

"In the mean time, we'll push up the tyre tests that were planned for this afternoon. One of the MC12s is warming up out back as we speak. Luca can scrub in some tyres for Silverstone so we're not wasting time doing nothing."

"I'll bet he'll like that," Francesca said with a grin.

---

"Hi again," Kathleen said, still wearing the same cheeky grin from before.

"Hi. What's up with you?" Francesca said, running her index finger down Kathleen's cheek.

Kathleen looked left and right and then leaned in to whisper in Francesca's ear.

"Oh... and I did that?"

Kathleen nodded conspiratorially, adding a little wink at the end.

"Hmmm...! Fascinating. Perhaps I should try to sell that if I'm ever invited back to the UK Home Shopping Network."

"It'd break all records."

"All the bored housewives would love it. Anyway, I have some time off now. Care to join me in the motorhome?" Francesca said and put out her hand.

"I'd love to, thank you," Kathleen said and hooked her arm inside Francesca's.

With a little wave at Giampaolo, the two women left the Maserati pit.

---

"Oh, dear Lord..." Francesca said as they walked past the black-and-turquoise MC12 warming up in the paddock. She crinkled her nose and tried to shield her eyes, earning her a slap in the gut from Kathleen.

"Silly! I think the new colours are nice, actually."

"Uh-huh? All black, sure. But black and turquoise?"

"Well, you won't be overlooked," Kathleen said, sticking her fingers in her ears when the mechanic sitting in the car began to blip the engine.

"Overlooked? No. We'll be lucky if we're not thrown out of the championship for bringing it into disrepute."

"Noooo. Come on!" Kathleen said and resumed walking.

Francesca mussed her partner's hair and leaned down to kiss the golden locks.

"Who did you say the actress was who wanted you to write her biography?"

"Rachel Silverman."

"Still doesn't ring a bell."

---

A few minutes later, Francesca went around in the motorhome and closed all the blinds. Once that was done, she zipped the driving suit all the way down, stepped out of it and put it into the miniature bathroom so it could dry.

Kathleen sat down on the couch and crossed her legs. With a grin, she patted the seat next to her.

"Darling, I'm really sweaty," Francesca said with a shrug.

"I can take a bit of sweat. I just want to give you a little, oh... neck rub. But if you don't want me to...?"

Francesca immediately took off her fireproof undershirt and sat down next to Kathleen. She found the author's hands and placed them on her own neck muscles.

"They're all yours," Francesca purred seductively.

"All righty. Here we go."

Kathleen started moulding the well-defined muscles, making sure she was doing it properly by taking her time, going in deep and slow.

Francesca let out a sensuous sigh that made Kathleen's nape hairs stand on edge. On a whim, Kathleen decided to up the ante by leaning forward and letting her tongue run along the base of Francesca's neck.

"Ohhhh!"

"Did you like that?" Kathleen whispered, running her fingers down from Francesca's neck muscles and onto her muscular shoulders.

"Yeahhhhh."

"There's plenty more where that came from, but we better wait until we're back home in our own bed."

"Tease!"

"I know," Kathleen said and resumed the massage.

"It's so good to see you smile again, darling. After what happened Wednesday, I was afraid I wouldn't..."

"Shhh. Not now."

"Sorry."

"Flex your muscles," Kathleen whispered into Francesca's ear.

"What?"

"Go on, flex your muscles for me... please."

"Uh, okay. Which ones?"

"Your arms."

When Francesca did as asked, Kathleen let her hands glide down the taut, firm biceps. Feeling her mouth go dry, she licked her lips several times, just enjoying the night-and-day contrast between the smoothness of Francesca's skin and the hardness of her muscles. Stopping at Francesca's elbows, she went back up on the outside, feeling up Francesca's well-defined triceps.

Francesca chuckled and shook her head.

"Why do you have such a thing for my muscles, darling?"

"No idea. I just do," Kathleen husked. Once her fingers came back to Francesca's shoulders, she pulled back and sighed deeply.

"I'm glad you do. Hey, think of all the money we save on romantic candlelight dinners. I can just whip off my shirt and you're putty in my hands," Francesca said as she turned around. She grinned and leaned in to give Kathleen a loving kiss on the lips.

"I... I'm sorry if you feel objectified. I just needed something to hold on to, and..." Kathleen said, suddenly embarrassed. She looked away and started to blush, but Francesca put a finger under Kathleen's chin and turned her head back.

"Ah, it's all right. I don't even know what that word means. All I know is that I love you... and that you can touch me whenever you need it. Huh?"

"Thanks. I love you, too," Kathleen said and pulled Francesca into a hug.

"When we get home, I'll show you just how *\*hard\** I love you," Francesca said in a mock growl. She dove in and pretended to feast on Kathleen's neck.

"Oh...! Uh... uh... Francesca, we... uhhhh... we better not start something we don't have time to finish...!" Kathleen said, giggling loudly and squirming under the relentless onslaught. On their own accord, Kathleen's hands began to run up and down Francesca's back, sometimes clawing the smooth skin and sometimes just caressing it.

"You're right," Francesca said and sighed in an overly theatrical fashion that made Kathleen giggle some more.

In the background, they could hear the easily recognisable sound of a big twelve leaving the pits and beginning a lap.

"I'll bet that Luca was thrilled when he found out that Giampaolo wanted him to scrub in some tyres," Francesca said with a deep chuckle.

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"It just means that the shine is taken off the surface of the tires. When they've been put through a heat cycle, they respond better. It means that Luca has to do a one or two lap run and then come in to get the tires changed. And so on and so forth."

"Oh... that's all Greek to me, I'm afraid," Kathleen said and ran a hand through Francesca's short, slightly damp hair.

"Well, it's a long story."

Kathleen chuckled and pulled back slightly so she could look her partner in the eye.

"Francesca, on a more serious note, we need to talk about the immediate future. Once the contract with Ms. Silverman is signed, I'll have less time to go to the races with you."

"Hrmppf," Francesca said, wearing a world-class pout.

"Don't be silly, Silly. The first race of the championship is at Silverstone, right?"

"Yes. The British Empire Trophy, April 10th."

"Oh... Well, I'll be there for that one, of course. What's coming up after that?"

"Back to Monza for the 1000 Kilometres on May 1st, then we'll be going to Romania for a two-hour supersprint running through downtown Bucharest on May 15th... and then the big one. Le Mans. June 18th and 19th," Francesca said, kissing Kathleen's eyebrows.

"I don't think I can make it to Monza or Bucharest."

"That's okay. I'll just text you hourly updates."

"And then Le Mans. Francesca, I don't know... if... if I want to go back there. Not after what happened last year," Kathleen said quietly.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to go, darling. If you feel you're up for it, I'd love to see you there. But if you don't, I'll understand fully."

"Well, that's not for a good while yet."

"No. We have plenty of time to decide," Francesca said and gave Kathleen another little kiss.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*

Just before lunch time on Monday, March 21st, Kathleen turned off Bartholomew Road and entered the parking lot at Carruthers Publishing, Ltd.

As she was fixing her hair in the rear view mirror, she could feel two dozen butterflies flapping furiously in her stomach. This was her biggest deal yet and she was painfully aware of that fact.

After she had stepped out of her Ford Focus, she rolled her shoulders a couple of times like a prize fighter getting ready for a championship bout. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly - then she went around the back of the car to take her briefcase.

---

A few minutes later, she met Christine Bennett who greeted her with a broad smile. The secretary got up from her desk and pulled out a chair for Kathleen.



"Hello, Miss O'Malley. Coffee?"

"Um, no thank you."

"Aren't you excited?"

"Oh, just a little bit," Kathleen fibbed, suddenly feeling an urge to press a hand against her stomach.

"Well, we certainly are. Even W.P. himself is a bit edgy today," Christine said and sat down again.

"Oh... I would've thought this was a run-of-the-mill deal for you...?"

"It's anything but, Miss O'Malley. How do you do," W.P. interrupted, appearing in the doorway to the inner office.

"How do you do, Mr. Carruthers."

"I've just spoken to Miss Silverman. She's a few minutes late. Apparently the traffic is horrendous today."

*'Hmmm... I didn't have any problems on my way over here...'* Kathleen thought, but wisely kept her comments to herself. "Oh, yes. Dreadful," she said to W.P., nodding in sympathy.

W.P. donned his usual not-quite-genuine smile and ushered Kathleen into his office. Before she even had time to put her briefcase down on the lush carpet, he offered her a drink.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Carruthers?" Kathleen said when she suddenly noticed that W.P. had spoken to her.

"I said, would you like a sherry, Miss O'Malley?"

"Oh... no thank, you. I'm driving."

"But of course. I'll have one," W.P. said and poured himself a drink into a crystal glass.

"I can't quite fathom why an international star like Rachel Silverman would be interested in having me as her biographer. I mean, there's no connection at all," Kathleen said and sat down in one of the Chesterfields, smoothing her skirt as she did so.

"I have no idea myself, Miss O'Malley. I only know that it's a great honour."

"Oh... it certainly is."

Outside the windows of W.P.'s office, a black Mercedes limousine drove around the parking lot, eventually stopping at the main entrance.

"That must be her. Excuse me, please," W.P. said and got up from his armchair quicker than Kathleen had ever seen him move. Once the publisher had left his office, Kathleen shook her head and sniggered to herself.

Soon, gushing voices were heard from the reception area and Kathleen could hear the rhythmical click-click-click of hard heels on the white tiles. A moment later, the door to the inner office opened, revealing the much-lauded and much-anticipated Rachel Silverman.

Instead of being bowled over by the presence of an Oscar-winning actress, Kathleen furrowed her brow when she realised that Rachel Silverman was older, shorter and a lot less glamorous in real life than when she appeared on the silver screen.

The actress was in her early forties and she had almond-coloured eyes and short, sandy brown hair. She was almost exactly the same height as Kathleen, five-foot four, and of a similar build - and she wasn't wearing the latest fashion from Milan, but rather a pair of faded jeans and a black vest over an ochre-coloured short tunic with long sleeves. Her face was quite pretty, but she wasn't anywhere near the knockout she had been in *Love Lost, Love Found*.

"Oh..." Kathleen said, so surprised by Rachel Silverman's unglamorous appearance that she didn't even get up from the chair.

W.P. rushed into his office and began to introduce the two women. Halfway through the introduction, Kathleen realised that she was still sitting down and she shot up from the Chesterfield so she wouldn't look like a fool.

Wearing a wide grin, Rachel put out her hand and waited for Kathleen to do the same. After they had shaken hands, W.P. invited them to sit down.

Rachel took the other Chesterfield and crossed her legs at the knees. She put her hands together and studied Kathleen closely - so closely, in fact, that Kathleen began to feel uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny.

"Miss Silverman, I can't put words to how exciting it is to have such an esteemed guest here in my office," W.P. said, his enthusiasm almost bubbling over.

"Thank you, Mr. Carruthers," Rachel said in a rich voice that wasn't anything like how it was in her movies - instead of the posh English accent she'd had in her award-winning performance, she had a Canadian accent.

Kathleen furrowed her brow again and discreetly scratched her neck.

"I'm an ex-pat Torontonionian," Rachel said off Kathleen's slightly confused look.

"Oh... I see," Kathleen said, suddenly realising that she didn't know anything about the woman sitting across from her.

"Well, here's the contract, Miss Silverman. If you would sign on the dotted line, please," W.P. said and pushed a contract and a ball point pen across his mahogany desk.

"Actually, Mr. Carruthers, I'd like a word with Miss O'Malley first."

"But of course. Be my guest," W.P. said and leaned back in his armchair.

"... In private," the actress said, looking expectantly at the publisher.

"Oh. All right. My office is all yours," W.P. said and got up from his chair.

Once he had left his own office, Rachel turned to look at Kathleen, again studying her intently.

"Do you know why I requested you, Miss O'Malley?"

"No, but I presume it's because I've had eight biographies in the top-twenty over the last five years, including one in the top-three."

"Those are admittedly good reasons, but it's not why I'm interested in working with you," Rachel said and dug her wallet out of her back pocket. She found a small newspaper clipping and unfolded it.

"This is why," the actress said and held up the clipping. It was the picture from the Sun. As soon as Kathleen saw it, she gripped the armrests of the chair, feeling like the rug had just been pulled out from under her.

"But..."

"I want a fellow lesbian to tell my story. I need someone who understands me completely... my motivations, my struggles. What I enjoy and what I don't. You follow me?"

Kathleen's only answer was a sigh.

"I've tried collaborating with a straight biographer before, but it didn't work. She only wanted to talk about crap, crap and more crap, like my fashion sense or my adventures on the red carpets."

"Look, Miss Silverman, I take pride in daring to go in-depth and to ask unpolished questions, but one thing I'm not is a political writer. If that's what you're looking for, I'm afraid you have the wrong biographer," Kathleen said, leaning forward in her chair.

"Noted. Here's what I think we should do. I think we should sign a preliminary contract and then work together on the first chapter... or two. If that goes well, we can finalise the contract and take it from there."

"... All right, but I'll still need to think about it."

"Fine with me. I'll take a cup of coffee and then I'll be back in ten minutes. That'll leave you plenty of time to think about it," Rachel said and signed on the dotted line on the contract. She pushed it back across the desk and then got up from her chair to get some coffee.

Kathleen leaned back in her Chesterfield and folded her arms across her chest. She started biting her lip, yet again taken by surprise by an unexpected development - and terribly unsure of what she should do.

After weighing the pros and cons thoroughly, she made up her mind - even though she hated to be forced into such situations, she reached for the contract and signed her name on the dotted line.

\*

\*

## CHAPTER 5

*Saturday, April 9th.*

*'Welcome to Silverstone! Welcome to the British Empire Trophy! ... oday, we'll have... works cars from... yota, Nissan, Ford and Mase... everal privateer Porsches and Ferrar... romises to be an exci... eekend...'* the PA system droned, fading in and out in the inevitable wind so it was impossible to understand more than half of what the circuit commentator was saying.

In the paddock behind the pits, Kathleen had almost her entire index finger stuck in her left ear so she could hear what Rachel Silverman was trying to tell her at the other end of the phone line.

"So you want the chapters to have titles? All right, we can do that. What did you have in mind? ... I'm sorry, you want the index to be called 'How To Rob A Bank Without Getting Caught' ? ... but what does that have to do with... all right. I'll give it a look. Goodbye, Rachel," Kathleen said and terminated the connection.

She growled and shook her head, once more regretting her decision to accept the deal. After closing the phone, she inserted her earplugs and walked back into the incredibly noisy Maserati pit where both black-and-turquoise works MC12s were warming up at the same time, preparing for the qualifying session that was about to start.

She moved into the spectator enclosure at the back of the pit and waved at Francesca who was busy talking to Giampaolo. Francesca waved back and then concentrated on the data in front of her.

"Looks like there's rain coming, but it'll most likely stay away until after the quallie," Giampaolo said, wearing no less than two stopwatches around his neck. His trusty clipboard already had

several pages of closely written text on it, and his compulsory fireproof suit had already been zipped down a bit.

"Okay."

"After analysing the laps run in free practice yesterday, we're guessing that the main competition will come from the Toyotas, specifically Kaneichi and Hattori in #7. Kaneichi will do most of the quallie."

"As expected. How do Fabio and I share?"

"You go first. I want you to do a banker and two flyers and then come back in for a tyre change. Fabio will go out after that and do the same. The final run at the end of the session will be made by the quickest of you. Okay?"

"Yep," Francesca said and unzipped the bag with her helmet so she was ready to go into the car. She looked up at the clock on the wall - eight minutes to go until the qualifying session would commence.

Carrying her helmet, Francesca walked over to the enclosure, took Kathleen's offered hand and gave it a little squeeze.

"Be careful out there, please," Kathleen said, still shouting to be heard over the din of the excited crowd around her and the two V12s warming up.

"I will," Francesca mouthed and put on the HANS-device.

---

At two p.m. sharp, the light at the end of the pitlane changed from red to green, signalling the official opening of the qualifying session.

By that time, Francesca was firmly strapped into her MC12, fully helmeted up and ready to go. Her breath was deep and calm and she was very much looking forward to measuring herself against the opposition; her own team mate and the other factory entered cars from Toyota, Nissan and Ford. Seven additional GT1s were entered by privateers, usually driven by a wealthy enthusiast and a young, local hotshot eager to prove his or her worth.

It would be difficult enough to find a clear piece of track for the qualifying with the fifteen GT1s alone, so Francesca was glad the organisers had split the qualifying in two - later on in the day, the sixteen cars of the smaller GT2 category would take to the track on their own.

Six minutes past two, the radio crackled to life.

*'Fran, the initial flurry is over. Whenever you're ready,'* Giampaolo said from his position at row of computers at the back wall of the pit.

Francesca responded by pressing the starter button. Once the engine was running cleanly, she put it into first and left the pits.

---

"Ciao, Kathleen," Fabio Dellassandro said, patting Kathleen's shoulder. When she turned around to see who it was, Fabio kissed her on both cheeks like he always did.

"Oh, hi, Fabio. Francesca has just gone out. This is quite exciting!"

"I know. The first race of the season is all about putting down a marker. I'm sure Fran can stick it somewhere in the top three or so,"

"What's going to happen now? Will she drive the whole hour?"

"Oh, no, Fran will only do two or three flyers. Then she'll come in."

"Two or three... what?"

"A flyer. That's a fast lap. We have flyers and bankers. A banker lap means that you just go out and set a base time so we have one in the bank in case we get problems later in the quallie."

"Oh... thank you. You speak just like Francesca. You're using common words in weird contexts!" Kathleen said with a chuckle.

From the other pit bay, Luca DiLorenzi left the garage in his MC12. A modicum of quiet fell on the garage, but it only lasted for a few seconds before the next car blasted past the pit complex on the front straight.

"The Toyotas are really fast this weekend. They've worked hard over the winter," Fabio said.

"Oh, that was a Toyota right now?" Kathleen said, looking out of the garage at the track, but the car she was looking for was long gone.

"Yes. You can tell by the way the Turbo is chirping when it enters Copse."

"You can, perhaps. Oh, the first times are coming in now," Kathleen said, looking at a timing monitor that had been set up so the spectators in the pit could see it.

"Is Francesca only sixth quickest?" she said, puzzled.

"Yes, but she's just set a fastest time in sector #1. The pink dot," Fabio said, pointing at a column on the right of the monitor.

"Oh... okay. Go, Francesca!"

Fabio chuckled and patted Kathleen's shoulder again.

"I better get ready. Ehi, Kathleen."

"Ciao, Fabio," Kathleen said, grinning when she saw Fabio react surprised over the Italian word.

---

Out on the circuit, Francesca was just completing her first flyer, blasting through the Woodcote corner. As she went past the start-finish line to start her final flying lap, she checked the timing display in the centre console which read 1 minute 37.68 seconds. She was now third quickest, three tenths down on the car currently in pole position, Toyota #7.

Copse was approaching fast, so Francesca changed down twice to take the corner in fourth, edging through it at 125 m.p.h. Up to fifth and sixth for the short straight and then into the first left-hander at the Maggotts-Becketts complex, taking it with 155 m.p.h. on the speedometer. Stepping hard on the brakes, she changed down into third through Chapel and then she was back on the gas for the following Hangar Straight.

Screaming down the back straight at nearly 180 m.p.h., she applied the brakes hard and went down the gearbox, turning in for Stowe in third gear. She went through Stowe, the Vale and then reached the entry of the tight chicane at Club.

The exit of Club opened up onto another straight and Francesca stepped hard on the gas, making the MC12 snake under acceleration; the shudder in the car showed that it was on the limit of adhesion.

Taking Abbey flat out in sixth, she feathered the throttle through Bridge, blasting through it at 160 m.p.h. Immediately following that, she went hard on the brakes for Priors, going down to second. Staying in second for the Brooklands-Luffield complex, she went up through the gears as she reached the first part of Woodcote.

As she passed the start-finish line, 1:37:42 lit up on the display. Her run completed, Francesca eased off the throttle, constantly checking the wing mirrors to see if she needed to make way for a faster car.

*'Position three, Fran. Position three. Toyota in p1. Luca in p2. Pit, pit, pit.'*

"Okay!" Francesca said, furrowing her brows.

---

Two and half minutes later, Francesca stopped in front of the Maserati pit and waited for the mechanics to come out and push her in. Once she was inside the bay, she opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Taking off her helmet and the HANS-device, she walked down to the back wall of the pit and put them on the shelf.

"1:37.42, Fran," Giampaolo said.

"I know. We're slower than the test last year. Are we still in third?"

"For now, but the second Toyota is on a flyer right now."

"Hmmm. It's the new wing configuration. There's a lot less grip on the rears. It's hurting us in Maggotts-Becketts. On my banker lap, I followed a Toyota through there and he was just zip... gone," Francesca said and ran a hand through her damp hair.

"The data shows the same. What can you suggest?"

"Another fifty horsepower?" Francesca said, adding a cheeky grin.

"I'll move your request up the system, but I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you," Giampaolo deadpanned.

"Nah. What did Luca do?"

"1:37.30."

"Hmmm. There's only one tenth and change in it. I think Fabio can find that."

"We'll, let's see if he can."

The #8 Toyota roared past the pits and the time it had set flashed onto the timing monitor soon after - second place, pushing Francesca and Fabio's Maserati #1 down to fourth.

"Boy, we're going to have trouble with those guys this year. They've gained a lot over the winter," Francesca said, whistling appreciatively.

"According to Trackracer, they've spent more than twice the amount we did," Giampaolo said and clicked off his ball point pen.

"Frankly, I can't believe you read that rag," Francesca joked and then went over to Kathleen.

---

"Hi," Kathleen said, waving at Francesca.

"Hi. Did you see my laps?"

"Only the times. How was it out there?"



"Mmmm. Could've been better," Francesca said and sat down on a lawn chair that had been set up next to the spectator enclosure.

"What happens now?"

"Now Fabio will try to better our time. I hope he can. I think the Toyotas are out of reach, but we should be able to beat Luca's time."

"Why aren't the Fords quicker here? They were so quick at Barcelona...?"

"This is the real deal, not testing. It's always different once we get to the race weekends. Where are they?" Francesca said, craning her neck to look at the timing screen.

"Uh... eighth and twelfth. Jonno ahead of Sally," Kathleen said, secretly quite proud that she could decipher the confusing data on the monitor.

"Mmmm, yeah. That's about where I had expected them to be."

At that moment, Fabio started the car, making all conversation impossible. Francesca put her fingers in her ears and waited for the World Champion to leave the pits - as soon as he did, she got up from her chair so she could watch the monitor closely.

---

Four minutes later, Fabio's first flying lap clocked onto the timing monitor - 1:37.32, exactly one tenth faster than Francesca, but still slower than Luca's time.

Francesca frowned and took a deep breath. When pink dots appeared on all three sectors on Fabio's second flying lap indicating that he was going even faster than before, she couldn't quite decide whether she was happy or annoyed.

As the #1 MC12 screamed across the start-finish line, the clock stopped at 1:37.26 - fast enough to beat Luca's time, but still slower than both Toyotas.

"Oh, that's great, you're third!" Kathleen said and clapped her hands.

"Yeah. Mmmmm."

"Aren't you? Am I reading it wrong...?"

"No, we're third. But I was two tenths slower than Fabio," Francesca said and sat down again. She unzipped her driving suit, knowing that she wouldn't be driving any more in the qualifying session.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

Ten thirty a.m. on Sunday April 10th, Francesca stood outside the pits, studying the sky closely. The weather had deteriorated for race day, but the blue patches still outnumbered the grey clouds.

"You look really serious today, Francesca. What's bothering you?" Kathleen said, realising that Francesca hadn't listened to a word of the things she had told her about her work on Rachel Silverman's book.

"I'm sorry, darling... I'm just a little preoccupied," Francesca said, smiling apologetically.

"You didn't sleep well, either. You were tossing and turning from five o'clock or so."

"Yeah. I'm just a bit annoyed about my lack of speed here."

"Well, it can't be that bad. You're starting third," Kathleen said and hooked her arm inside Francesca's.

"Mmmm, yes, but that was all Fabio's doing. Come on, let's go out to the grid."

"Okay."

They began to stroll through the garage arm in arm, but as soon as they were in range of the television cameras that were covering the pre-race grid, Kathleen pulled her arm away from Francesca and put on a pair of dark sunglasses.

Walking through a gap in the pit wall, they soon found themselves in the middle of a sea of humanity. Scores of VIPs, would-be VIPs and general hangers-on were milling about between the cars, causing chaos and mayhem for the engineers and mechanics trying to get them ready for the race start.

On their way to Fabio's place on the starting grid, Francesca and Kathleen were surprised by the sheer number of men and women wearing red and white clothing and carrying similarly coloured umbrellas up near the Toyotas.

"Well, they certainly have a big entourage with them," Kathleen said, shaking her head slightly over the large number of people.

"Speaking of entourage, look at Luca," Francesca said and put her hand on Kathleen's shoulder so she'd know where to look.

Luca DiLorenzi was standing in front of his Maserati #2, surrounded by a bevy of beauties from the event sponsor, a car magazine. They were all wearing bikinis and they all looked like they were freezing their behinds off. Luca still had his designer sunglasses on, but the unbelievably broad smile underneath it betrayed his thoughts.

"He's in heaven, the poor chump," Francesca said with a chuckle.

Once they reached Fabio in Maserati #1, Francesca began talking Italian with him and Giampaolo, who had come over from the #2 car, so Kathleen wandered a bit further down the grid to see what else was going on.

"Hello, Miss O'Malley," a female voice said from somewhere behind her.

"Huh? Oh... hi, Sally," Kathleen said and put out her hand. Sally Sharpe shook it and then put her hands in the pockets of her driving suit.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just looking at the opposition," Kathleen said with a smile. She still hadn't overcome the feeling she'd had back in Barcelona. Inside, she still felt that Sally had been flirting with Francesca.

"Is Francesca starting?"

"No. You?"

"Yep."

"How did it go in the Barcelona Invitational? I never heard about that."

"Well, I kinda had a little accident," Sally said, scratching her cheek,

"Oh. Well, I'm sure lightning won't strike twice. Anyway, good l... uh, break a leg," Kathleen said, suddenly remembering that wishing someone good luck was considered bad form.

"Thanks, Miss O'Malley," Sally said and gave Kathleen a thumbs-up.

Suddenly, a noisy klaxon blared out, signalling five minutes to the start. A race official walked down between the two rows of cars, holding a board that said 'CLEAR THE GRID'.

When she saw the board, Kathleen hurried back to Francesca so they could leave together. She arrived just in time before they were ushered off the track.

---

Four minutes to eleven, the safety car took off from the grid to give the track a final inspection. On the dot of eleven o'clock, the green light on the gantry above the starting grid turned green and the front row Toyotas set off on the warmup lap, followed closely by the remaining twenty-nine cars.

Giampaolo and two of the Maserati engineers had assumed their place on the small perch on the wall between the pitlane and the track, and both Francesca and Kathleen were in the back of the

pits, wearing headsets and looking at the television pictures from Eurosport on a TV set that had been set up in the spectator enclosure.

"Oh, this is so exciting! I can hardly watch it," Kathleen said, wringing her hands. Glancing at Francesca, she could see in the dark look on the driver's face that she would much rather be out on the track than inside the pits.

---

As the train of cars made its way around the track, the cameras caught an unfortunate privateer GT2 Porsche that had to pull over by the side of the road on the Hangar Straight with smoke pouring off the left front wheel.

"Huh? What's wrong with that car?" Kathleen said and pointed at the TV.

"Wheel bearing failure, perhaps. Or maybe the brakes have locked on. It's happened before."

"Oh... perhaps someone wished them good luck..." Kathleen said to herself. Francesca chuckled and reached over to squeeze Kathleen's shoulder.

A few minutes later, the cars filed through the Woodcote chicane and lined up in a perfect two-by-two formation - approaching the red lights very slowly, they were all trying to anticipate when the green lights would flash on so they could start the race.

They were almost at the gantry before the lights went green - in an ear-splitting wail, nearly eighteen thousand horsepower were unleashed at once as the thirty remaining racecars were set free, all accelerating hard along the front straight. The crowd cheered and rose to their feet so they wouldn't miss anything in case there was an accident in the first turn.

The lead Toyotas went through Copse in line-astern formation, #7 ahead of #8, but behind them, Luca shuffled ahead of Fabio as they turned into the first corner. Fabio lost some momentum, but he was able to keep his third place as the cars screamed into the first left-hander at the Maggotts-Becketts complex.

"Hmmm," Francesca said, not looking particularly excited. Kathleen, on the other hand, was staring wide-eyed at the TV, caught between wanting to look at the action and covering her eyes in case something horrible happened.

The pack of cars soon blasted onto the Hangar Straight. The two Toyotas out front were still in perfect formation, but most of the rest of the following pack were in disarray, trying to shuffle ahead of the car in front of them without opening the door for the car behind.

The leading cars went through The Vale and into Club without problems, but behind them, a dark blue car with two white stripes on the front tried an overly optimistic outbraking manoeuvre and ended up pointing the wrong way and facing the oncoming traffic.

*'Oh! And look at that!' the Eurosport commentator howled. 'It's the number six Ford, Sally Sharpe... on the very first lap. Oh, deary me, that wasn't supposed to happen...'*

"Sheesh," Francesca said and shook her head.

The camera stayed with the blue Ford for a few moments, but when it was clear that the car wasn't damaged and that Sally was trying to get it turned around so she could rejoin, the producer cut to the leading cars.

The two works Toyotas came out of Bridge and entered Priory, sliding effortlessly into Brooklands and Luffield and then through Woodcote and onto the start-finish straight. The first lap had been completed - one hundred and eighty laps to go.

The two black-and-turquoise works Maseratis followed them, but a small gap of roughly a second and a half had already opened up. Behind the Maseratis, a privateer Toyota and the yellow privateer MC12 were already ahead of the two blue-and-red factory Nissans. The remainder of the GT1 field thundered across the start-finish line, with Jonno's dark blue Ford #5 mixing it up in the midfield.

Sally had caught the tail end of the GT2 pack after her mishap, but the GT2 cars were, as usual, fighting tooth and nail amongst themselves, so she had a hard time finding a way through. The entire length of the front straight went by before she found a gap to overtake two Porsches fighting each other.

"What a baptism of fire," Kathleen said, looking at the progress of Sally's Ford.

"Mmmm. Of course, if she hadn't thrown it off the track, she wouldn't have been back there," Francesca said laconically.

"When are you going to get in?"

"Fabio will do the first two stints, so I guess I'll get into the car in eighty minutes or so. I hope we won't be too far back by then."

"Well, right now, Fabio is able to stay close to Luca," Kathleen said, still studying the TV intently.

The producer cut to show Sally's progress up through the field. At the end of the Hangar Straight, she dove inside a privateer Ferrari, her right front tyre sending off streams of smoke as she braked too hard and too late.

"Jonno wasn't wrong when he called Sally a wildcat," Francesca said under her breath.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*\_

One hour and eighteen minutes later, Francesca was fully suited, booted and waiting in the pitlane with her drinks bottle and her foam seat under her arm. Rolling her shoulders a few times, she tried her best to control her breath and to empty her mind. Looking to her left, she could see Fabio drive the Maserati #1 down the pit lane, still in third place.

She was joined by four mechanics - two holding the fuel hose and two holding the wheel guns and the fresh tires that were going on to the car.

As soon as the car had come to a stop, the mechanics and Francesca ran around it. The mechanics holding the fuel hose attached it to the car while another mechanic ducked down behind the rear bodywork and attached the air line for the pneumatic jacks - while all of this was going on, Francesca punched the locking mechanism that secured the door.

Fabio jumped out and spun around so he could help Francesca get in. In a flash, Francesca inserted her foam seat and the drinks bottle and then flung herself into the cockpit, immediately attaching the radio plug and activating her transponder that would identify who was driving the car.

Francesca reached down, grabbed the lower seatbelts that would hold her legs and connected them to the centre lock. Fabio reached into the car and did the side-belts and then Francesca connected and tightened the shoulder straps of the six-point harness.

After giving Francesca an ultra-quick thumbs-up, Fabio slammed the door shut and ran back to the pits.

Giampaolo started counting down on the radio, and soon, Francesca could hear the fuel hose being pulled off the car. With a loud PFFFFT, the car was dropped down from the pneumatic jacks, bouncing slightly as it hit the asphalt in the pit lane.

"Go!" Giampaolo shouted over the radio, but Francesca's finger was already on the starter button. The twelve fired at once and she put it in first, dropped the clutch and screamed out of the pit box at six and a half thousand revs, remembering to keep her thumb on the pit speed limiter.

The traffic lights at the end of the pits were green, indicating that there were no cars coming up behind her out on the race track itself. After navigating through the ridiculously tight exit of the pit lane, she took her finger off the button and gripped the steering wheel hard to control the sudden onslaught of the six hundred and eighty five horses.

The big twelve in the back of the MC12 howled and the car quickly got up to speed. She went cleanly and efficiently up through the gears, second-third-fourth and a short blast in fifth before she reached the first left-hander at Maggotts.

The car was a lot heavier on full tanks, so Francesca took it relatively careful through the fast complex, not applying full throttle until she exited Chapel and went onto the Hangar Straight.

In the right wing mirror, she could see a car flashing its headlights behind her and she positioned the MC12 in the centre of the track on the run up to Stowe. The car behind her ducked back into place and she took the corner using the regular line.

As she exited Stowe and went through the Vale, the car behind her appeared in her left mirror so she drove defensively, making the other driver's task harder by drifting to the centre of the track. Once she was through Club, her tires were up to normal operating temperature and she was able to pull away from the car behind her.

"Pits, who am I racing?" she said, keying the mic by pressing another button on the steering wheel.

*'Nissan #23. You're in ninth place after the stop. Five cars ahead of you have yet to stop. We're looking good, Fran.'*

"Okay," Francesca said, taking the Abbey corner at 175 m.p.h. in sixth gear.

---

Seventeen trouble-free laps later, Francesca had returned to fourth place when she suddenly felt a big vibration from the rear of the car as she exited Copse. Almost at once, the steering became light and floaty, suggesting that the car had dropped down at the back.

She let out a long series of colourful Italian expletives and then keyed the radio.

"Pits, puncture! Puncture!"

*'Pit, pit, pit, Fran. Pit now!'*

"Copy," Francesca said as she slowed down through the Maggotts-Becketts complex. She craned her neck to look in the wing mirrors, but she couldn't see any debris falling off the car so she couldn't determine which side the puncture was on.

---

In the pits, Kathleen was watching the race on Eurosport when the camera suddenly whipped around and picked up Francesca's crawling #1 car.

"Oh, no!" Kathleen said and threw her arms in the air. She began looking for the headset she had taken off earlier so she could listen in on the radio.

On the TV, she could see Francesca hugging the white line on the left side of the Hangar Straight all the way down to Stowe. As the #1 car came closer to the turn, the camera on the outside of the corner zoomed in on the Maserati, showing Francesca gesticulating wildly inside the cockpit.

*'Oh, dear, that's Francesca Carrara having an, um, a very Italian moment, let's call it that. The left rear tyre is down. She'll have to come in for an unscheduled pitstop. Perhaps she found some debris on the track...'* the Eurosport commentator said.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Kathleen couldn't help but snigger at the pictures. She could well imagine that Francesca was cursing and swearing in several languages - the mere thought of the words Francesca's Latin temper would make her say caused Kathleen to blush furiously.

As Francesca crawled through Club and back up to Abbey, Toyota #7 - the race leader - lapped her, going at what seemed to be three times the speed of the stricken Maserati.

At long last, Francesca entered the pitlane. Crawling along it, she wasn't even going fast enough to reach the pit speed limit, but she still pressed the button to make sure she didn't go over it.

*'Fran, do you want to get out?'*

"Negative, pits."

*'Copy.'*

As Francesca slid the car into the bay and watched the mechanics go to work on the car, she took several deep breaths to calm herself down. She knew that the victory was long gone, but she wasn't about to roll over and give up - not when the podium was still in reach.

Francesca already had her finger on the starter button and when the car bounced down onto the ground, she depressed it at once. Starting with a howl, the Maserati left the pits and stuttered its way down the pit lane.

.\_\*.\_\*\_.\_

*'And there's the white flag, signalling one lap to go,'* the Eurosport commentator said as the red-and-white Toyota #7 streaked across the start- finish line to begin the last lap of the Silverstone 1000 Kilometres.

With most on-track battles settled, the camera stayed with the race leader on the final lap. The car had already visibly slowed down from the ultimate pace, not wanting to risk anything so late in the race.

Francesca sat on the chair next to the spectator enclosure, wearing a towel over her head so she could have a private moment. A brief glance at the timing monitor confirmed that Maserati #1 Dell'Assandro-Carrara was only in fourth place, two laps down after nearly six hours of racing.

She knew from the stopwatch that it was actually closer to three laps down, but with the reduced pace from the Toyota, Fabio wouldn't be caught so it didn't matter.



When she could feel someone squeezing her shoulder, she moved the towel aside and locked eyes with Kathleen. A smile spread out over Francesca's lips and she took Kathleen's hands in her own and returned the squeeze.

"The result wasn't that bad, Francesca. There's always the next race," Kathleen said.

"I know. But I didn't come here to finish fourth. Especially not after winning last year."

"At least you have some points in the bag for the championship."

"Yeah. Now where did... Okay, Jonno finished seventh, four laps down, and Sally finished last among the GT1s, eight laps down. Well. They can't be satisfied with that," Francesca said, once again looking at the timing monitor.

"See? There's always someone in worse shape than you," Kathleen said with a laugh.

Francesca chuckled and then got up and used the towel to wipe her neck and her hair. After throwing the towel onto the small shelf next to the bag with her helmet, she turned around and zipped up her driving suit.

Out on the circuit, Toyota #7 took the chequered flag to the applause of the spectators and the unbridled joy of the entire Toyota entourage three garages up from the Maserati Corse pits. Scores of people ran from the Toyota pit over to the pit wall to wave at the car as it slowly drove past.

Forty-four seconds later, Luca DiLorenzi crossed the line in a black-and-turquoise blur in Maserati #2, ten seconds ahead of Nishigawa in Nissan #23.

---

Fifteen minutes later, Luca and Donny Zorzi returned to the Maserati pits, soaking wet from the Champagne they had sprayed up on the podium. Their second place trophies were given to a team member and then they shook hands with all their mechanics.

With the spectator enclosure being closed off after the race, Kathleen had returned to the motorhome, leaving Francesca standing by herself in the corner of the pits. She observed with interest how Luca - for once - handled the success gracefully instead of behaving like a spoilt child - he even waved at her. She waved back and then left the pit garage.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

A good while later, Francesca finally escaped the team debriefing and strode through the paddock to get to the motorhome to get a much needed shower.

As she turned a corner in the paddock, she ran into a Eurosport camera crew who was busy filming interviews for the highlights show. When the reporter spotted Francesca, she held up a microphone like she was asking for an interview.

Francesca sighed, but agreed to it by nodding.

The reporter, a pretty young Asian woman in her late twenties, readied her microphone and waited for her camera man to start filming.

"We're rolling!" the camera operator said.

"Francesca Carrara, a fourth place today. Could you have made it onto the podium?" the reporter said, moving the microphone in under Francesca's nose.

"I believe we could, yes. We had the speed but unfortunately not the luck. That's racing," Francesca said and crossed her arms over her chest. After a few seconds, she remembered that her gesture was covering the new Mediterraneo logo across the top of her driving suit, so she quickly put her arms down her sides.

"The Toyotas look to be in a class of their own this year."

"Yes, they're very quick, but the season has only just started. Let's see if they're able to maintain their pace. Last year, they weren't."

"The next race is another home race for you, Monza. You've recently tested there. How do you see your prospects in that race?"

"Oh, that's much too early to say. Let's see how the cards fall after qualifying, shall we?"

"Finally, Francesca, where can you go from here?"

"From here? Straight into the shower," Francesca said with a wide, but tired grin.

The reporter laughed and turned off her microphone.

"Thanks, Fran. 'preciate it."

"You're welcome."

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

"No... No, Rachel, you can't come over for dinner tonight ... No ... No, I've been at the racetrack all day. I'm tired and I have a headache ... I beg your pardon? ... No, I don't want you to give me a deep shiatsu massage, thank you very much," Kathleen said into the telephone, sitting on the couch in the motorhome. She was covering her eyes with her hand and slowly shaking her head left to right.

Francesca had entered the motorhome in time to hear Kathleen talk about the massage, and she stopped and narrowed her eyes.

Kathleen waved Francesca off, pointed at the mobile phone and rolled her eyes.

With a chuckle, Francesca zipped down her driving suit and stepped out of the sweat-soaked garment. Reaching into the miniature bathroom, she turned on the pre-heater to get the water to be just the right temperature. After doing that, she went into the bedroom to take off her soaked fireproof underwear.

*'How about tomorrow night at six? ... You could meet Francesca, I'm sure you two would hit it off famously ... No? Why not? ... You feel intimidated by tall women?'* Francesca heard Kathleen say in the living area of the motorhome.

Chuckling again, Francesca slipped into the shower cabin and turned on the hot water, moaning in delight as it pounded down on her naked, tired body.

---

When the water began to get cold, she turned it off and wiped the excess water out of her eyes. As the shower cabin became silent, she could hear voices from the living room and she laughed to herself, thinking that even when Kathleen was away from home, she didn't want to miss an episode of her favourite show. Opening the cabin door, Francesca reached for her towel - and established that she had forgotten it in the bedroom.

"Damn... darling, would you mind fetching my towel? I'm dripping wet in here," she said loudly enough for Kathleen to hear it over the TV.

In the living area of the motorhome, the conversation stopped abruptly and Kathleen quickly came to Francesca's rescue.

"Um, Francesca, we have a visitor," Kathleen said, blushing from the embarrassing situation. She ducked into the bedroom, found the towel and threw it into the gap in the cabin door.

"Oh... who?"

"Sally."

"Oh... Uh... in that case, would you mind handing me my dry underwear as well?" Francesca said, adding a cheeky grin.

---

A few minutes later, Francesca came into the living area, pulling down a sweatshirt as she did so.

"Hi, Sally. Sorry about that before," Francesca said and put out her hand.

"Hi, Francesca. Ah, don't worry 'bout it."

"So...?" Francesca said, looking over Sally's shoulder at Kathleen who was sitting on the couch, wearing the same unreadable expression she always wore when they were talking about the blonde driver.

"Oh, I just wanted to congratulate you on your fourth place. Not too bad," Sally said with a charming smile.

When Kathleen noticed the smile, her left eyebrow slowly crept up her forehead and the corner of her mouth went the other direction.

"Thanks, Sally. I'd rather have won, but, you know."

"And I wanted to ask if you were interested in going out for a drink or something...?"

"Oh... I, er..." Francesca said, scrunching up her face.

"Both of you, of course," Sally added with another smile.

Francesca started looking a bit closer at Sally. The blonde driver was wearing black ankle boots, tight, black hipster jeans and a crimson cotton shirt over a black t-shirt - and underneath it all, a Wonderbra that really accentuated her bosom. All in all, she was looking terrific.

"No, I'm sorry, Sally, we can't. Kathleen has a headache. I think we need to get home so we can do something about it."

"Oh. All right. Some other time, perhaps," Sally said. The smile she had been wearing briefly faded from her face, but it soon returned. Behind Sally's back, Kathleen smirked.

"Sure. Get home safely," Francesca said and put her hand on Sally's elbow to let her know that the conversation was over.

Sally turned around to wave at Kathleen - who quickly wiped the smirk off her face - and then left the motorhome. As Sally walked across the paddock headed for her company car, Francesca studied her figure from behind. Sally's tight hipster jeans left very little to the imagination and the way her hips wiggled when she walked didn't help, either - she was definitely dressed to kill.

"Hmmm..." Francesca said and sat down next to Kathleen.

"Well, I hate to say I told you so... but I told you so," Kathleen said and put her hand on Francesca's thigh.

"I know. I think I need to ask Jonno if she really is gay or if she's just curious."

"You know, we seem to be attracting a lot of women recently... you have Sally and I have Rachel Silverman. God, that woman is... how can I put it... not for beginners," Kathleen said, running her hand up and down Francesca's long leg.

"Do you want to swap?"

"No, thank you! Besides, Rachel feels intimidated by tall women. She said it's because you remind her of her own imperfections."

"Huh? I sincerely hope that you've never felt intimidated by my presence...?" Francesca said, putting her hand on her own cheek for dramatic effect.

"Ohhhhh, a little bit at the very beginning. But as soon as I got to know you better, I discovered that you were in fact a big, cuddly Italian teddy bear," Kathleen said, laughing.

"Cheeky. I don't know why these women even bother. All I could ever wish for is right here," Francesca said and leaned down to kiss Kathleen thoroughly.

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 6**

*Sunday, May 1st.*

The second the phone rang, Kathleen jumped up from her desk in the study and sprinted through the hallway. She was tempted to jump over the couch and the coffee table to get to the phone quicker, but in the end, she settled for running around them. Throwing herself into the chair, she moved her hair out of her face and picked up the receiver.

"The Carrara and O'Malley residence, this is Kathleen," she said breathlessly.

*'Hello, may I speak to Miss O'Malley, please,'* a female voice said in an impossibly snobby accent.

"Sill-ly!" Kathleen said, sniggering over Francesca's attempt at humour.

*'Aw, didn't I even fool you for a second?'*

"Not even close. What's going on down at Monza?"

*'The weather is great. We're an hour away from the race start.'*

"Are you nervous yet?"

*'Not really. But I miss having my good luck charm with me.'*

Kathleen sniggered again and folded her legs up underneath her in the chair.

"I'll bet your hands are cold."

*'They are indeed. Oh, by the way, I don't know if you've read it on the 'Net yet, but Luca's car was hit with a penalty after qualifying. He was deemed to have blocked a competitor on his first quallie run. They've been pushed back five places on the starting grid... down to seventh.'*

"Oh... that's too bad. I guess it was his own fault."

*'Yes. It was one of the Nissans. Anyway, I'll move up to the front row because of it, so I can't complain too loudly.'*

"Oh, that's right. God, now you've made me nervous..."

*'Darling, there isn't that much of a difference between starting third or second, you know...'*

"I know, but still."

*'I wish you were here with me. The motorhome is so quiet without you. Last night, I had to resort to doing a crossword puzzle to kill the time.'*

"Awww, poor you! When you get home, I'll make it up to you, I promise."

*'Lovely. Listen, I have to run. I just wanted to hear your voice before the race. I love you, darling.'*

"Love you, too, Francesca. Uh, break a... um, something. Break a fingernail!" Kathleen said and laughed over her own joke.

*'Thanks. I'll call once the race is over. Best of success with your own event today.'*

"Ughh. Thank you. I'm not really looking forward to having Rachel over for lunch, believe me..."

*'I believe you. Oh, I really do have to run. Bye-bye, darling.'*

"Bye!" Kathleen said and hung up once the connection had ended.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Looking down at herself, she realised she needed to change into something more classy than a faded t-shirt and a pair of cut-off sweatpants - not to mention wearing socks in her bathing slippers.

---

A while later, Kathleen reached behind her head and moved her hair aside so she could fasten a thin, golden necklace. After getting up from the chair by her dresser, she double-checked that she had zipped her jeans and then she fluffed her moussed hair back out over the collar of her sunflower yellow blouse.

Turning around in front of the mirror like a fashion model, she gave herself a thorough once-over to see if everything was as it should be - satisfied with the result, she walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to re-check the food she would be offering the actress.

"Hmmm... let's see, the sandwiches... vegetarian... check. Chicken... check. Corned beef... check. Turkey coldcuts... check. And the wine...?" Kathleen said, working through the contents of her refrigerator with military precision.

"Check," she said after she had touched the bag-in-box white wine. Closing the refrigerator door, she went into the living room to check that the dinner table had been set satisfactorily.

"That's all I can do. If anyone is listening, please make this lunch a pleasurable one..." Kathleen said, looking towards the heavens.

---

twelve minutes later, the door bell rang and Kathleen got up to answer it.

"Hello, Rachel. Please come in," Kathleen said and stepped aside so the actress could come in.

"Thank you. What a nice little romantic cottage. Exactly what I had expected," Rachel said and took off a leather jacket and a pair of gloves.

"Oh?" Kathleen said, craning her neck to see what kind of car the actress had arrived in - it turned out to be a Yamaha motorcycle.

Kathleen closed the front door quietly and walked into her own living room to greet the actress.

"Yeah. I had a hunch you'd be that kind of woman. Damn, you're looking fine today, Kathleen," Rachel said, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Oh... thank you. You're, uh... dressed nicely, too," Kathleen said, having to do a double-take at the outfit the actress was wearing - a tan tunic-style shirt stuck into black leather pants that were held in place by a wide leather belt, equipped with rivets.

"Thanks. Hey, it smells great here," Rachel said, already making herself comfortable by spreading her arms over the backrest of the couch.

"Actually, we're having sandwiches."

"Oh. Must be your natural scent, then," Rachel said with a grin.

"Uh... anyway. Lunch will be served in a few moments, so please have a seat at the dinner table."

Rachel got up and put her hands in her trouser pockets. Just as Kathleen walked past her to get to the kitchen, Rachel put out her arm to block her.

"You're a wonderful hostess, Kathleen."

"Thank you. Go on, have a seat. I'll be right there with the food."

As Kathleen entered the kitchen, she rolled her eyes and shook her head slowly. Opening the refrigerator door, she took out the bag-in-box wine and the tray with the sandwiches and then closed the door with her rear end.

---

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel had already wolfed down three of the four sandwiches and two glasses of wine. Kathleen was left with the Turkey coldcut sandwich, the only one she didn't like. To compensate, she poured herself a healthy glass of white wine.

"So, Rachel... let's talk about the book."

"Yes, let's," Rachel said and leaned forward, placing her elbows on the dinner table.

"I've been looking at your notes and I have to admit that I'm not particularly enchanted with your chapter titles."

"No?"

"No. Quite honestly, I don't think they'll work. One thing is that they're rather vulgar... if done well, that can still be effective. But I sincerely doubt that these titles will go unscathed through the legal department."

"What's wrong with 'Benny Dean Let Me Touch His Hard-On'?"

Just hearing the word made Kathleen's cheeks burn slightly and she took a deep breath to calm down.

"Rachel, Benjamin Dean is an American movie actor, right?"

"Yes, he's done a lot of adult comedies. What are you getting at...?"

"Did it really happen?"

"Hell, no! Of course not. I wouldn't go anywhere near that thing. Jeez!" Rachel said, grimacing.

"Then do you really think he'd like to see such a chapter title?"



"Ah, he's cool with it," Rachel said and waved her hand. She emptied her glass and poured herself some more wine.

"There is no chance, and I do really mean no chance at \*all\* that the legal department will approve that title."

"Look, Kathleen, sometimes you just have to be a bit adventurous. That particular title stays. And I don't care what anyone says."

"Adventurous... well, I guess that's one way of putting it. One of the other chapter titles, 'I Had Susanne Dawson For Breakfast.' Rachel... please... can't we do something about it? Please?!"

"But that one is true!" Rachel said, adding a throaty laugh.

The corners of Kathleen's mouth twitched into something that was supposed to have been an attempt at smiling.

"Look, I can see that my earthiness bothers you, but since this biography is going to be about me and not you, I think it's only fair that I get to put my fingerprint on it. Right?"

"Well... right."

"Right. I've already come up with a title for the book."

Kathleen blinked a few times, but decided to play nice.

"Oh? What is it?"

"Bohemes, Balls and Bitches," Rachel said with a beaming smile.

The smile froze on Kathleen's lips and she leaned back in her seat. After a few seconds, she picked up her half-full glass and drained it in one gulp.

---

An hour later, they had moved into Kathleen's study to work more actively on the book. As Kathleen was typing away on the laptop, Rachel looked around the room, nodding approvingly as she saw the various items there.

"This is a really nice and cosy little den, Kathleen."

"Thank you. It's my refuge," Kathleen said, typing furiously.

"I can certainly see why. Did you write all your books in here?"

"Yes. At first, I was using a typewriter. It was slower and I used more paper, but I loved that thing. I still have it, it's down in the cellar somewhere," Kathleen said, swivelling her chair around so she could look at the actress.

"Quaint."

"Perhaps so, but there were never any problems with it. It didn't even need power to run," Kathleen said and resumed her typing.

"Mmmm."

"Rachel, is this part true? Did you really go into a hunger strike when you were arrested in 1989?" Kathleen said, pointing at a paragraph on the hand-written notes.

"Yes, that's true. I did that to voice a protest against the corrupt police department that held me against my will."

"Well, actually, you were arrested because you had forgotten to renew your driver's license..."

"That's irrelevant. And besides, I did that on purpose to show the world that a driver's license is only a piece of paper."

Kathleen swivelled back around and stared wide-eyed at the actress.

"Right. Okay. I'll work that in... somehow."

---

Half an hour later, Kathleen yawned widely and stretched her arms above her head, making her spine crackle and pop. She rubbed her eyes and reached into her desk drawer to find her reading glasses.

"Do you want me to give you a shiatsu massage now? I have excellent hands," Rachel said and moved a bit closer.

"Uh, no thank you," Kathleen said and put on her glasses.

"Oh, that's a great look for you. Really sexy in a bookish kind of way."

"Well... thank you. Now, where were we...?"

"I was about to sign the deal for Love Lost, Love Found."

"Oh, right. When you read the script, did you know that it was going to be such a smashing success?"

"To tell you the truth, no. I thought it was just going to be another romantic drama... the world has too many of those already, in my opinion."

"Oh... uh," Kathleen said, thinking that it probably wasn't the best time to mention that she had an entire shelf full of romantic DVDs in the living room.

"But I was snared in by the way my character evolved through the script. At first, she was just a stick figure, but at the end, it was the lead role."

"Great," Kathleen said and started typing to get all Rachel's words down.

"I don't want to talk too much about that movie. I'd rather talk about my independent films," Rachel said and ran a hand through her hair.

"I think I understand that, but I know that your readers need to get hooked before they can move on to the lesser-known things. Do you have any anecdotes from Love Lost?"

"No."

"No...?"

"No. Like I said, I want to talk about my other works."

"Oh. All right," Kathleen said and resumed typing.

"Once, a few years ago, we were shooting a short called 'Spiky Pleasure' in the Mojave desert. I've never been so stoned in my life," Rachel said, laughing.

"Um... why?"

"It was in the middle of the desert! There was nothing for us to do but to get loaded on Tequila and smoke pot. And the rest of the cast were all guys so I couldn't even get laid."

"Well, that's certainly charming," Kathleen said icily, but the coldness in her voice was lost on Rachel.

"I have plenty of that kind of anecdotes if you're interested?"

"I was hoping they'd be more..."

"More glitzy? Forget it. Don't have any of those. But I can tell you all about squatting down to take a piss in a forest out in British Columbia and discovering that I was sitting on top of an anthill...?"

"Maybe we'll get to that one... later."

---

Half an hour later, Kathleen rubbed her eyes again and yawned widely, a sure-fire sign that she needed a break.

"I think I'll put the kettle on. Would you like a cup?" Kathleen said and got up from the swivel chair.

"Sure. In here?"

"No, in the living room. I need a break from the monitor," Kathleen said and held out her hand to let Rachel know that she wanted to leave the study.

"All right. I need to use the little girl's room, anyway, so..."

"That's to the right, at the end of the hall. The light switch is on the outside."

"Thanks," Rachel said and walked down the hallway. Kathleen watched the actress as she turned on the light and went into the bathroom. Once the door was closed, Kathleen let out a slow sigh and shook her head repeatedly.

---

After the tea break, they continued in another writing session where Kathleen could feel her enthusiasm evaporate like the morning dew. Time and time again, Rachel gave bizarre answers to Kathleen's carefully prepared questions - and finally, Kathleen had reached the limits of her patience. She saved the file she was working on, closed the lid on the laptop and swivelled around to face the actress.

"Rachel... I'm sorry. This isn't working."

"Yeah, you're right," Rachel said and sat down on a chair. She crossed her legs at the knees and put her hands on her shin.

"We're just too far apart. If I say X, you'll say Z. We haven't agreed on anything so far and that's one of the most important elements of making any biography work. If there isn't any rapport between the writer and the subject, the reader will simply skip it."

"Do you think we can salvage any of it?"

"Frankly, no. And that's my professional opinion," Kathleen said and folded her arms over her chest.

"Hmmm. All right. Well. I guess that's how it goes sometimes. Hey, I was planning to offer you this once we were done, but with this development, I better cut to the chase. Kathleen, I think you're a very attractive woman."

"Wh-what?"

Rachel leaned forward on her chair and gave Kathleen a dark, husky look. Her almond-coloured eyes grew darker by the second and almost gained a hypnotic quality.

"You're a very attractive woman and your sexual aura is the most beautiful combination of sparkling gold and deep purple I've ever seen. As a 'thank you' and a goodbye present, I very much want to give you an introductory lesson in tantric sex."

"I. Beg. Your. Pardon?!" Kathleen stuttered; her mind spinning from Rachel's words. Her lips turned into a thin line in her face and she clenched her fists, feeling a spark of anger building inside her.

"Tantric sex. Old world wisdom for the new world."

"Uh..."

"Kathleen, did you know that I could give you ten orgasms in a row just by stroking your clitoris in a particular way? No toys, no tricks... just simple technique," Rachel said, illustrating what she meant by moving her fingers.

"I, uh..."

"A lot of women would jump at the chance."

For a few seconds, Kathleen stared wide-eyed at the actress, trying to figure out if she was pulling her leg. When the expression on Rachel's appeared to be genuine, Kathleen snapped and shot up from the swivel chair.

"All right, that does it. Get out! You're not welcome in my house any longer!" Kathleen said and grabbed Rachel's elbow. Pulling the actress up from her chair, Kathleen forcibly dragged her through the hallway.

"Come on, Kathleen, don't be silly. You're throwing away a golden opportunity here. My experience and your innocence would make it perfect. We'd be so great together," Rachel said as she put on her leather jacket and her gloves.

"You... you... I... Ahhh...!" Kathleen said, getting so agitated that she wasn't even able to finish the sentence. She ran past the actress, opened the front door and pointed out of it. When Rachel didn't seem to want to go, Kathleen bared her teeth in a sneer.

"Thanks for the wine and the sandwiches," Rachel said, winking as she walked through the door.

After Kathleen had watched the actress leave on her motorcycle, she slammed the front door so hard that a small picture frame fell off its nail. Stomping into the living room, she clenched her fists and brought them up to her face.

She wanted to scream out in frustration but she knew that it wouldn't do any good. Instead, she strode over to the cupboard in the corner and poured herself a very large Scotch.

---

Five minutes later, she put the empty glass on the coffee table, kicked off her shoes and let herself flop down onto the couch. Sighing deeply, she put her arm over her eyes and started mulling over all the time and effort that had gone to waste.

Off and on over the course of the next few minutes, she let out a series of choice curse words that became increasingly loud until she had worked herself into such a state that she needed another drink to calm down.

Getting up from the couch, she went over to the cupboard to refill the glass. On her way there, she happened to look at the shelf that held all the biographies she had written. Sighing, she went over to it to have a look at her previous titles. Running her finger along the spines, she started reminiscing about how it had been to work on them.

She was proud of all of them, but some meant more to her than others - like the one she had made for Kaye Jason, the Olympic gold Medallist in Pentathlon. That book had been her first major success and it had been the catalyst for meeting Francesca.

When she moved her finger down the line to Francesca's biography, she took great care when she pulled it out, even though it was only a pre-run test copy.

The picture on the front of the dust jacket always gave her a warm feeling inside, and this time was no exception. The photographer had captured the tall driver perfectly, highlighting her ice blue eyes and giving her a Goddess-like appearance.

*'FRANCESCA CARRARA*

*with Kathleen O'Malley*

*Strength & Beauty*

*- An extraordinary tale of an*

*extraordinary woman.'*

Kathleen sighed and put the book back on the shelf. She continued along the spines, stopping at the one she had made with Margaret Lester-Williams, a patron of a charity organisation. That biography had been less successful on the sales charts, but working with the wise woman had been a very inspiring and rewarding experience for her.

She moved over to the cupboard to refill her glass. As she stood with the bottle of Scotch in her hand, she weighed her options - finally deciding on taking the bottle back to the couch instead of just having another drink.

Sitting down again, she suddenly spotted her mobile phone. Remembering that she had turned it off before Rachel had arrived so it wouldn't interrupt their writing session, she grabbed it at once and turned it back on.

A text message beeped in and she feverishly clicked through the menu to read it.

'I WON!! LUV U! B HOME 2MRW AFTRNN FRAN'

Kathleen quickly typed a congratulatory reply and sent it, and then found Francesca's number on the quick dial. After a few moments, she put the phone down, unable to establish contact.

"I can't believe it... I can't believe it! BLOODY HELL, I CAN'T BELIEVE I MISSED FRANCESCA WINNING A RACE BECAUSE OF THAT... THAT... \*DAMNED\* \*INSANE\* \*COW!\*" Kathleen roared into thin air, once again clenching her fists tightly together.

Feeling her blood boil with anger, she grabbed the bottle of Scotch and poured herself another stiff drink.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

When the clock on the wall chimed six p.m., Kathleen swung her legs over the side of the couch. She held onto the coffee table for a moment or two to catch her balance, and when the world had stopped tilting, she reached for her trusty bottle of Scotch.

Staring dumbfoundedly at the nearly empty bottle, she shrugged in an overly dramatic fashion and then poured the last remaining drops out into her glass. After draining it in one gulp, she got up and walked on unsteady legs over to the chair by the telephone.

Sitting down with a bump, she picked up the receiver and began punching in a set of numbers. She couldn't quite remember what those numbers were for, but her index finger worked on auto-pilot so she didn't really care.

*'It's Kate O'Malley speaking,'* her mother said from the other end of the connection.

"Um... hi, mom," Kathleen slurred, not sure whether she should put the receiver back down or not.

*'Kathleen, is something wrong? You sound odd?'*

"Oh, no, I'm quite all right. I'm all fine, chipper and dandy. I've just thrown six weeks of hard work down the toilet."

*'Kathleen, your language!'*

"Ah, who cares about that shit now."

*'Are you drunk? You're drunk! How dare you call me in such a state?'*

"I just wanted to hear a friendly voice. Is that too much to ask for?"

*'What about that woman? Can't you talk to her? Or maybe she's left you already?'*

Kathleen rubbed her face, trying to keep her temper in check. As her fingers moved across her cheeks and brow, she was surprised to note that it felt alien to her, almost like it wasn't her own skin at all. She looked down at her free hand, but couldn't see anything wrong with it - actually, she couldn't see much at all.

"Not now, mom. Not now..."

*'It's a Sunday evening. Where is she? Has she gone out to one of those gay bars there's been so much talk about? They're...'*

"You don't know anything, so stop talking about Francesca like that! She's down in Italy, racing!"

*'How rude of her not to take you along. I'm sure she didn't even ask.'*

"God, no, that doesn't have anyth..."

*'Oh, Kathleen, why can't you see that such a relationship isn't good for you? You're so much better than that. If you could only meet a few nice men, I'm sure you'd realise at once that you've been deceiving yourself thinking that you're one of those people.'*

"So you're saying this is just a phase...?"

*'Yes!'*

"You're saying that... that if I went to a disco and let some random guy fuck me up against the wall in one of the bathroom stalls, I'd realise that I wasn..."

*'KATHLEEN!'*

"But isn't that what you're saying?"

*'No, that's NOT what I'm saying! I'm saying that you need to be with someone who'll be there for you when you need him. Someone from your own circle... someone who shares your interests. Oh, Kathleen, life is so much better if you have someone to hold... to love.'*



"Mom! Just what the hell do you think I have right now with Francesca? I already told you, she's the best thing that ever happened to me."

*'Looking at you at the dinner nearly broke my heart. Your eyes held so much sadness, Kathleen. I'm telling you, that woman isn't good for you.'*

Kathleen moved the receiver away from her ear and just stared at it. After a few seconds, she put it back and took a deep breath.

"You saw sadness in my eyes? You should. You put it there."

*'How dare you speak to me like that... I'm your mother!'*

"I'll speak to you any which way I damn well please! I love Francesca from the bottom of my heart and she has always been so good to me. Why the FUCK won't you understand that?" Kathleen said, suddenly finding herself sobbing. Angrily, she cleared her throat and tried to sit up a bit straighter.

*'You only think you love her. I've told you from the start that she's just using you. I don't know what kind of pinch she has on you or why, but mark my words, Kathleen, she is using you. It was plain to see at the dinner. She's just some...'*

"Mother, there's something I've just realised. You're a cruel, heartless homophobe who doesn't want her only daughter to be loved by anyone," Kathleen said in a brief moment of clarity.

*'This conversation is over. You're a petulant, ungrateful little child, Kathleen. You always were. Goodbye!'* SLAM!

Feeling deflated rather than angry or upset, Kathleen calmly put the receiver down on the telephone and rubbed her face again. Putting a hand on the wall, she got up from the chair and staggered towards the kitchen.

Once there, she tried to make herself another sandwich just so she would have something in her stomach other than The Glenlivet, but somewhere on her journey through the bottle she had lost the ability to co-ordinate her eye and hand movements. She ended up with two very uneven slices of white bread that she put some Miracle Whip and a slice of tomato on. The tomato fell onto the kitchen floor at once, rolling in under a small table next to the refrigerator - Kathleen didn't even notice.

She started chewing on the first slice of white bread, but it didn't take her more than two bites to know that it was a bad idea. She threw the remains of the slice onto the table and left the kitchen, headed for her bedroom.

On her way there, she had to put her hand on the doorjamb so she wouldn't keel over. She sighed deeply, inwardly cursing Rachel Silverman, her mother, and everyone else crossing her down to the flaming pits of hell.

When she was able to move again, she kicked off her shoes and then unbuttoned her jeans and stepped out of them. Taking off her blouse proved to be more difficult as it ended up getting snagged on her bra.

By pulling, tugging and finally tearing, she eventually managed to get it all off. Not caring about anything any longer, she dove into her bed and snuggled up under the covers. Soon, her loud, drunken snoring filled the room.

.\_\*.\_\*\_.\_

*'Kathleen?'*

Kathleen slowly surfaced from her deep sleep where she had been suffering through all sorts of alcohol-induced bad dreams, including one where her mother had her on a leash, dragging her through the local church, naked as the day she was born.

*'Kathlee-eeen?'*

"Hhhmmmpff... go away, mother," Kathleen croaked. Her tongue felt like it was glued to the roof of her mouth. When she tried to swallow, she wasn't able to produce any saliva so nothing happened.

"Gawd..." she croaked, moving a hand up from underneath the cover and placing it on her throbbing forehead.

"Wrong again. It's Francesca," Kathleen heard someone say. The person seemed to be at least two hundred miles away, but at least she recognised the voice.

"Francesca...?"

"Uh-huh. You're hung over."

Kathleen tried to open her eyes, but the bright lights in the bedroom made her slam them shut again.

"Gawd, turn off the lights...!"

"It's the sun, darling."

"Make it go away..."

"I can't. The curtains are already drawn. It's nearly one p.m., Kathleen."

"One p.m....? What day?"

"Monday," Francesca said with a chuckle. She sat down on the bed and ran her hand up Kathleen's arm.

"Monday?"

"Comes after Sunday, remember?"

Apparently, Kathleen couldn't, because she just put her head back down on the pillow and promptly fell asleep.

With a grin, Francesca got off the bed. As she went into the hallway, she chuckled once more when she looked at the bundle of clothes on the floor. On her way to the hallstand, she made sure that she didn't step on any of Kathleen's garments in case they were hiding something valuable.

After Francesca had taken off her jacket and hung it on a coat hanger, she briefly looked into the kitchen, noting the half-eaten slice of bread and the tomato on the floor. She shook her head, picked up her travel bag and went into the living room to unpack.

When she spotted the empty bottle of Scotch on the coffee table, she became worried and went straight back to the bedroom.

"Kathleen?" she said as she sat down on the bed.

"Gawd, will you go away, mother? I don't want to talk to you..." Kathleen slurred. She attempted to turn over onto her right side, but she soon gave up.

"No, it's me, Francesca. How much did you drink last night?"

"Some."

"Too much, I'd say. That bottle of Glenlivet was nearly full the other day, wasn't it?"

"I guess," Kathleen said, once again trying to turn onto her right side so she didn't have to face Francesca.

"Why?" Francesca said quietly, caressing Kathleen's cheek.

"Several things."

"Such as...?"

Kathleen sighed and opened her eyes. The lights still bothered her, but she shielded her eyes with her hand and turned away from the window.

"Well, among them, the deal with Rachel Silverman fell through."

"Oh?"

"She just became... ugh."

Kathleen sighed and tried to sit up. As soon as she swung her bare legs over the side of the bed, her head started throbbing mercilessly.

"Ohhhh...." she moaned, clutching her head. When that just made the pain even worse, she grabbed hold of the blanket instead.

"Hang on, I'll fix you an Aspirin," Francesca said and left the bedroom.

Something touched Kathleen's right hand and she looked down. In her foggy state, it took her a while to understand what it was, but she suddenly realised that it was her gold necklace.

Kathleen picked it up and looked at it through her bloodshot eyes. When she realised that it had fallen off because the catch had been damaged, she sighed deeply and clenched her fist around the gold chain.

She tried to get up so she could put the necklace into her jewellery box, but as soon as her rear end left the bed, the world started tilting and she had to let herself fall back down with a bump.

"Whoa, let me help you," Francesca said, holding a glass of water filled with a clear, fizzy liquid.

"I... I've ruined my necklace. Damn," Kathleen said and showed Francesca the golden chain.

"Oh... Well, here's the Aspirin. Try to drink all of it," Francesca said and handed Kathleen the glass. She took the gold chain and studied the lock closely.

With a sigh, Kathleen started drinking from the glass.

"I don't know if we can save it, but in any case, we need to take it to a goldsmith," Francesca said and put the chain on top of the dresser.

Kathleen burped discreetly and handed the glass back to Francesca.

"When I came home and saw the mess in the living room, I got worried. For a minute there, I thought you had invited an entire travelling circus without telling me."

"Mess?"

"Well, there's a glass and the empty bottle of Scotch on the coffee table and the dinner table is still set. Plates, trays, everything. There's one half of what looks like a Turkey sandwich left, by the way."

"Uggh," Kathleen said, trying not to think of food.

"And the kitchen isn't any better. Oh, and all your clothes are on the floor out in the hallway... with your bra right in the middle of everything. You know, I actually wondered if you were alone in here or if you were sharing the bed with a trapeze artist or a snake charmer... or both," Francesca said, trying to lighten the mood.

At first, Kathleen scoffed at Francesca's attempts at humour, but then she chuckled and ran a hand through her unruly mop of hair.

"Rachel was the snake, not the snake charmer. She wanted to... God, she wanted to teach me tantric sex. That's when I'd had enough."

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me."

"I heard you, but I don't believe you. Like in Arabian Nights?"

"No, the Kama Sutra. She's bonkers, Francesca. Just bonkers. I just couldn't listen to all her... all her shit any more," Kathleen said and coughed dryly. She turned her head to look at Francesca - and was surprised to see the driver's reaction.

"What?"

"Darling, I think you're still feeling the effects of the Glenlivet... you said 'shit'. And even more so, you need a shower. Your face is pale grey and the black circles under your eyes reach down to your lips. Tell you what, I'll help you get into the shower and then I'll start to clean up. Okay?"

"I want to help..."

"Kathleen... today, you won't be able to do anything apart from sitting in the couch. Trust me," Francesca said and put her arms around Kathleen's body to help her get up.

---

While Kathleen was showering, Francesca cleaned up in the kitchen. She sniffed the slices of white bread and quickly threw them into the garbage bin with a horrified expression on her face.

After picking up the wayward tomato and throwing that out as well, she wiped off the kitchen table so it was ready for lunch.

As Francesca walked into the living room, she noticed the little red light blinking on the answering machine. She debated with herself whether she should clean the table or listen to the messages first, but in the end, the messages won out.

She sat down on the chair next to the telephone and pressed the small button on the machine. After the tape had rewound, she pressed play and waited for the messages to be played back.

*'Kathleen, this is your father. I'm calling to hear your side of the story. Your conversation with your mother has upset her tremendously and frankly, you need to apologise.'*

*'Kathleen, it's your father again. Please call me on my mobile as soon as you hear this.'*

*'Kathleen, I'm serious. Please call my mobile.'*

Francesca's shoulders slumped and she rubbed her brow - now she had a better explanation as to why Kathleen had emptied the bottle of Glenlivet all by herself. With a sigh, she got up and began to clean up the dinner table.

---

Fifteen minutes later, Kathleen, wearing her favourite house coat, shuffled into the living room and plopped down on the couch.

"Ohhhhhh," she whispered hoarsely, looking very much like the hangover was killing her slowly.

When she spotted her mobile on the table, her abused brain began to creak into action. She reached for the phone and turned it on. Looking through it, she found the text message Francesca had sent the day before.

"Oh... Oh! Francesca!"

"Yes?" Francesca said, coming out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel after doing the dishes.

"You won yesterday! God, I'm so sorry... I forgot all about it..." Kathleen said and tried to get up from the couch. Reluctantly, she had to give up and fell back down.

"I won and it felt damn good," Francesca said and kneeled in front of Kathleen. She took her partner's hands in her own and gave them a little squeeze. Two identical smiles spread out over the two women's faces, and after a few moments, Francesca got up and sat down next to Kathleen.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you," Kathleen said, putting an arm around Francesca's waist and giving the tall woman an almighty squeeze.

"Thanks, darling," Francesca said and leaned down to kiss the top of Kathleen's head.

"Did you get the message I sent back to you?"

"No...?"

"Oh... I must've made a mistake. Blech. Modern technology. Who needs it?" Kathleen said and made a face.

"It's the thought that counts. Anyway, I was the starting driver and I led from start to finish. I muscled past the Toyota in the first corner and never looked back from there. Luca finished second so it was a perfect day for us. Hey, the new lap record has my name written on it."

Kathleen sighed deeply and shook her head.

"And I wasn't there to see it. I..."

"It doesn't matter, darling. With the project finished, perhaps you'd be interested in coming with me to Bucharest in a fortnight's time?"

"Oh, I'd love to... but I don't know how W.P. will react when he's informed."

"Ah, never mind him now. Listen... Kathleen... there is something we need to talk about."

"Oh?"

"You spoke with your mother while you were... you know, drunk."

Kathleen opened her mouth to reply, but found that she didn't really have an answer for that. Rubbing her brow, she shrugged non-committally.

"Well... I vaguely remember talking to someone, but I can't remember any details. How do you know?"

"Your Dad has called you no less than three times, leaving messages on the machine. You need to call him."

"I'll call him, but I won't talk to my mother."

"I think you probably should," Francesca said and got up from the couch. She went over to the answering machine and pressed play.

Once Kathleen had heard the three messages, she buried her head in her hands and drew several deep, trembling breaths.

"Darling, you need to call them."

"I know," Kathleen said and got up. She staggered over to the phone and sat down on the chair with a bump.

"Do you want me to leave while you talk?" Francesca said, leaning down to give Kathleen a gentle kiss on the forehead.

"No. No, I want you to be right here with me," Kathleen said, wearing a faint smile.

Francesca nodded, pulled up a chair and sat down right in front of Kathleen so she'd be able to support her through what was no doubt going to be a couple of difficult conversations.

Sighing, Kathleen took the receiver in her hand and punched in the numbers to her father's mobile. When she heard her father's dulcet tones, her heart skipped a beat.

*'It's Dennis O'Malley.'*

"Hi, Dad. It's Kathleen..."

**[Concluded in Part 2](#)**

**[Norsebard's Scrolls](#)**  
**[Index Page](#)**

---

---

**[~ On the Fast Track to Love 2 ~](#)**  
**[by Norsebard Contact: \[norsebarddk@gmail.com\]\(mailto:norsebarddk@gmail.com\)](#)**

**[DISCLAIMERS: In Part 1](#)**

**[PART 2](#)**

**\***

**\***

**[CHAPTER 7](#)**

*[Friday, May 13th.](#)*

[The photo on page nineteen of the previous week's issue of Trackracer magazine had a very telling caption: 'Ouch!'. The photo above the caption was of Sally's #6 Ford GT half-buried in a tyre wall at the first chicane at Monza. Sally herself was standing next to the wreck, nursing her right elbow.](#)

[Francesca continued to leaf on in the very worn copy of the magazine, trying to kill some time while the entire collective of drivers and team personnel waited for the Bucharest track marshals to repair the section of guard-rail a wayward GT2 Porsche had destroyed.](#)



Quickly losing interest in the magazine, she threw it back into the corner where she had found it, and got up from the lawn chair she had been sitting on.

Strolling out into the pitlane, she walked over to the perch on the pitwall where Giampaolo was located, looking more bored than humanly possible.

"Giampaolo."

"Francesca."

"Are we going anywhere or what?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Terrific. I only managed to do three laps. What do the sporting regulations say in case they won't get the track opened before the free practice session runs out?" Francesca said and put her hand under her head.

"Well, let's see... hmmm," Giampaolo said, opening a very large book.

"Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm... all right. 'If an untimed practice session cannot be...' hmmm, hmmm, hmmm... looks like they might need to squeeze it in tomorrow morning, extending the final free practice," he said, closing the book again.

"Do we even know when the track opens?"

"No," Giampaolo said, looking at the timing and scoring monitor that only showed a 'SESSION STOPPED - RED FLAG - SESSION WILL RESUME AT xx:xx' message scrolling along the bottom of the screen.

"It'll resume when we reach double-X o'clock," he said with a grin.

"It that a.m. or p.m.? Whatever. Wake me up when we get there," Francesca said and left the perch.

---

Walking through the Maserati garage and out into the paddock, Francesca turned left, then right and finally left again to find her way through the maze of trucks parked in the lot that was far too small for all the things they were hauling.

When Francesca finally reached their Knaus Sunliner motorhome, she stopped and scratched her hair, wondering how on Earth it was able to fit into such a narrow space. Looking absolutely minuscule sitting between all the large trucks, the motorhome was crammed in between the Maserati spares truck and one of the Nissan transporters.

Shrugging, she knocked on the door to the motorhome and waited for Kathleen to open it.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," Kathleen said with a laugh. Stepping aside, she let Francesca into the motorhome and then closed the door behind her.

"God, I haven't been this bored since... I don't know when, actually," Francesca said and sat down on the couch. Yawning, she swung her legs up and got comfortable, using a small pillow as a headrest.

"But why aren't you driving?"

"One of the GT2 cars made a mess of the guard-rail in the Playboy Chicane. It's too dangerous to continue before they've fixed it, so... well, we're stuck here."

"I don't like this circuit," Kathleen said and sat down on a chair.

"The layout is actually pretty good; better than I had feared. But, you know, it's a street circuit. The barriers are directly on the edges of the track. Zero room for error."

"Like I said, I don't like it. I don't like that sort of thing at all, actually."

"It's an acquired taste, I agree. We haven't had many of them in the championship in the last few years simply because if something goes wrong, it takes ages to get it cleaned up. I actually like fighting in between the concrete walls."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, street circuits separate the true drivers from the posers. Street circuits are for drivers with big... um," Francesca said, looking at Kathleen who nodded in return.

"I get it."

"Good. Then you won't have to suffer one of your characteristic blushes you'd surely have when I would describe the..."

"I get it! I get it! Sheesh!" Kathleen said and got up from the chair. Francesca made some room for her, so she hopped over to the couch and sat down in front of Francesca's stomach.

Kathleen put her hand on Francesca's side and gave it a little squeeze - unfortunately, Francesca couldn't feel a thing through her triple-layer fireproof driving suit.

"What do you think the other drivers are doing right now?"

"Luca is bound to be polishing his collection of designer sunglasses. Fabio is reading a men's magazine, and I know that for a fact because I saw it with my own eyes just now. I have no idea what Donny is doing... but I'm sure none of them are having as much fun as I am."

Kathleen sniggered and tried unsuccessfully to claw her way through the Nomex.

"What happens now?"

"Well..."

The question was answered when there was a knock on the door. Kathleen got up to open it and found herself face to face with Patrizia, Giampaolo's daughter.

"Buongiorno, signorina O'Malley. C'è Francesca?" the young girl said with a nervous smile.

"Oh... I'm... in English please, Patrizia."

"Uh... uh, hello, Miss O'Malley. Francesca is here?"

"Sono qua. Ciao, Patrizia," Francesca said as she came over to the door, zipping her driving suit back up.

When the young girl saw the statuesque driver, her eyes lit up like little suns. Her cheeks and ears were tinted in a cute shade of red and she became visibly shy.

"C'è un messaggio per lei A più tardi. Goodbye, Miss O'Malley," Patrizia said and handed Francesca an official press release. She waved briefly, spun around on her heel and ran away.

"Boy, you have definitely got yourself a fan there," Kathleen said and poked Francesca in the side.

"I know. What's this...? Hmmm. Oh, that's interesting. The free practise has been called off for good now, but the organisers have arranged a pitstop competition in the pit lane at a quarter past three, so the spectators won't feel cheated," Francesca said, reading from the press release.

"A quarter past three?" Kathleen said and checked her wristwatch - it was twenty to three.

"Do you want to go?"

"Sure... but don't expect me to carry any heavy equipment or anything."

"Kathleen, the contest is for the mechanics, not us!" Francesca said and laughed out loud.

"Ohhhh. Well, in that case, I'd love to go."

"Good. We've got half an hour. Just enough time to snuggle up and be very, very friendly to each other," Francesca said and pulled Kathleen into an embrace.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Unlike Friday and Saturday, Sunday the 15th dawned with leaden skies that threatened to dump their watery contents onto the circuit at any time.

Francesca stood in the living room of the motorhome at a quarter past eight, quietly contemplating the weather. She was fully suited, booted and ready to go, but the inclement conditions had definitely put a damper on her mood.

From the bathroom, Francesca could hear the toilet flush and a few moments later, Kathleen came out and turned off the light.

"Are you all right, darling?"

"Oh... I'm fine. My stomach reacted because I got nervous from watching you get nervous. You're never nervous. But you are today, and that's why I got nervous."

Francesca chuckled quietly to herself over the cute babbling and then moved back to wrap her arms around Kathleen's shoulders.

"I'm not nervous, Kathleen. I'm just... mmmm... over the weather. You know?"

"I hate the rain. Now, everything is fifty times more dangerous. Isn't it?"

"Not fifty times, no. But we'll see incidents and accidents aplenty today, that's for sure. Some of the privateers will end up kissing the wall instead of the trophy."

"Some of the works cars, too, probably..." Kathleen said quietly.

"Probably. But it won't be Maserati #1, I can tell you that much."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I'm damn good in the rain, that's what."

"I'm not convinced," Kathleen said and snuggled even closer to the driver.

"Oh, thanks for the vote of no-confidence! No, driving in the rain is tough, but if you know the basic rules, it can be even more rewarding than driving in the dry."

"Like what?"

"Well, stay off the white lines as much as you can. Try alternative racing lines through the corners. Compensate for the reduction in friction by braking smarter, not earlier. Easy on the throttle away from the corner so you won't fishtail it. Things like that. This is what I'm good at, Kathleen."

"But what about things like the spray we always see in Formula One? Won't that be dangerous on such a narrow circuit?"

"We have that, but, you know... I'm starting on the front row again so all I have to do is to get by the Toyota #7 before the first corner. That worked back in Monza, so perhaps it'll work here, too."

"I'm praying that it will."

"That's all I can ask for," Francesca said and leaned down to kiss Kathleen's hair.

As the two women were talking, the first sprinkles of water hit the windows of the motorhome.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

Five minutes to twelve, a klaxon blared and a race official walked down the rows of cars holding the CLEAR THE GRID sign.

Kathleen quickly reached into the cockpit and gave Francesca's gloved hands an almighty squeeze. Stepping back to let one of the mechanics close the door, she blew Francesca a good-luck kiss and then left the grid with the engineers.

Francesca watched Kathleen walk away and then concentrated on the race. The rain had eased off to a certain extent, but the track was still quite wet in places.

Having already started the engine, Francesca checked all the gauges and displays thoroughly. The water temperature was a bit on the cold side and she made a mental note to check the gauge frequently.

'Francesca, it's going to be a safety car start, repeat a safety car start. Two exploratory laps under the safety car and then the race will be given free as a single-file re-start,' Giampaolo said over the radio.

"Copy, Giampaolo. Two yellow laps then green. Single-file restart."

'That's right. Out.'

'Damn', Francesca thought. 'There goes my chance at the first corner.'

The lights on the gantry turned green and the safety car, a Dodge Charger, started with a roar and drove up the front straight. A few moments later, the Toyota #7 in pole position left the grid and followed the safety car. All the cars started on full wet tyres and all of them immediately began to weave back and forth to get the tyres up to operating temperature.

Inside the pits, Kathleen put on her headset, leaving one ear free so she could also listen to the television broadcast. The picture showed a shining track, lit up by the headlights of the twenty-

eight cars - the GT2 Porsche that had crashed in free practice had gone home and they had lost one of the privateer Nissans in qualifying as well.

'... no doubt about it, this two-hour Supersprint around the old presidential palace will separate the men from the boys... and girls for that matter. We can throw away the times from the free practice and the qualifying now. This is all about survival and getting to the chequered flag,' the Eurosport commentator said, giving Kathleen yet another hard knot in her stomach.

---

With the safety car laps over, all the race cars stuttered in line-astern formation through the last chicane before the start-finish line. Francesca had her eyes glued to the rear end of the pole position car so she was ready when the race would be given free.

She turned on the windscreen wiper and briefly checked the right hand side wing mirror to see if the cars behind her were lined up properly - if they weren't, the start would be flagged off for another yellow lap.

Moving closer and closer to the green flag at the gantry, Francesca was about to ask on the radio if the start was delayed when the lights changed to green and the Toyota #7 set off down the track.

A split second later, Francesca hit the throttle and went up through the gears, the cold tyres creating wheelspin even in fourth gear on the way down to the first corner, a ninety degree right-hander.

She changed down to second for the corner and then went up to fourth on a short straight. Watching the stop lights of the Toyota intently, Francesca tried to brake before the leading car did so she wouldn't rear end it on the opening lap.

Down to second again for the ninety-degree left-right sequence at the Pepsi Max Chicane, up to third as she went through a small chute, and then down into second again for the ninety-degree right-left Playboy Chicane.

Even though Francesca was very careful on the throttle, the back end of the Maserati stepped out several times as she exited Playboy. Going up the gearbox, she had it in fifth for a few seconds before she went back down to second for the right-left-right Michelin Chicane that would bring her onto the back straight.

A car flashed its headlights in her left wing mirror and she glanced at it briefly to see who it was - it was Luca, trying to unsettle her so he could slip through.

Luca tried to go alongside Francesca as they screamed down the back straight headed for the Toro Chicane, but Francesca wasn't about to let herself be taken that easily so she kept her car on the racing line, forcing Luca to either back off or go off. As Francesca braked and went down

into second gear for the left-right Toro Chicane, Luca came sailing past her, having outbraked himself comprehensively.

---

'Ohhhh! That's the two works Maseratis going at it on the first lap. Careful chaps, you know what the team manager is going to say if you both come back on foot!' the Eurosport commentator howled, causing Kathleen to take a deep breath.

---

Francesca retook Luca going into Toro and as she went through the slow chicane, she could see in the mirror that he was scrabbling to get back to the racing line and to stay ahead of the cars queuing up behind him.

The manoeuvre had been costly for both of them as Toyota #7 had managed to stretch out a bit of a lead while the two black-and-turquoise cars had been battling. Coming out of the Toro Chicane, Francesca could see that the Toyota had gained fifty yards on her through that section alone.

She went up through the gears, again briefly touching fifth before she had to brake for the DHL Chicane, a seemingly endless corner that went on and on and on before it finally opened up into the main straight.

Francesca went into third, fourth, fifth and finally sixth gear as she completed the first lap in second place; the car dancing about wildly on the uneven street surface.

She could feel the rough treatment already beginning to gnaw at her tender hip, but she knew that she'd be letting Fabio and the team down if she didn't drive for her full stint - which would last at least forty minutes - so she clenched her teeth and willed herself into ignoring the pain.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Twenty-two minutes later, Kathleen was pacing back and forth in the spectator enclosure, chewing on several fingernails at once. The weather had worsened and the rain was now coming down steadily, making the track even more slippery than it had been before.

There seemed to be a car off at every corner of the circuit and the TV producer and the commentator couldn't keep up with the frantic action.

'... so that's the number sixty three Ferrari F430 in the wall between the Michelin and the Toro chicanes. That could bring out the safety car because it's parked in an unsafe pla... OHHH!' the Eurosport commentator said as the camera whipped around to catch another accident, making Kathleen jump as a result.

The camera showed that one of the works Nissans had ploughed almost head-on into the stationary Ferrari, sending a cascade of carbon fibre fragments all over the racing surface.

'They need to scramble the safety car, there's debris all over the track. The cars will pick up punctures at once if they try to go through the accident site at race pace,' the commentator said.

---

'Caution, caution, debris on track after Michelin! Debris on track,' Giampaolo said over the radio.

"Copy."

'The safety car is out. It's too early to pit, Fran. Stay out, stay out.'

"Copy. Staying out. I'm at Playboy. Where's the safety car?" Francesca said and turned through the right-left chicane.

'Behind you. It'll be a while before you catch the queue. Careful, debris after Michelin.'

"Okay."

As Francesca exited the tight Playboy chicane, she was caught behind two GT2 Porsches that were already going slowly. All around the track, marshals were busy waving the yellow flags, signalling that the cars should slow down.

In the wing mirrors, she could see a privateer Nissan that was already a lap down, another GT2 car and then Luca's Maserati - the Toyota #7 had been fifteen seconds ahead of her, but now she'd get a second chance at battling with it.

In the pits, Kathleen had been listening in on the conversation on her headset. She thought that Francesca's voice had sounded strained and she started getting concerned that not all was right with the driver. She chewed some more on her fingernails, debating with herself whether she should tell Fabio or not - but came to the conclusion that Francesca wouldn't like it one bit, even if it had been done to help her.

Behind her, two cars blubbered down the pitlane and she turned her attention to the TV screen, hoping that she could see who it was.

The TV cameras picked up the stops a bit late, but it turned out to be both the dark blue works Ford GTs. The drivers were changed in both cars and soon, #5 left ahead of #6, the same order that they had come in. The onscreen graphics said that the cars were now driven by Gomez and Sharpe and Kathleen furrowed her brow, wondering why they'd stop now when no one else did.

She looked around for someone to ask but found that everyone was busy with the race. Shrugging, she returned to the TV.



'Fran, both Fords have pitted. They're trying to get out of sequence with the rest of us. They'll be close to us after the stop,' Giampaolo said.

"Okay. Do we have an estimate as to when the Toyota will stop?"

'Negative, Fran.'

"Copy."

Feeling the strain on her shoulders, she drove with only one hand on the steering wheel for a few hundred yards and then changed to the other hand. Staying awake through the safety car periods had always been a problem she had found difficult to overcome, and this time was no exception.

The last time she had gone past the accident site after Michelin, the Nissan had been cleared from the track but the Ferrari was still there, meaning that the safety car would still be out for a fair while.

---

Four slow, achingly dull laps later, the 'SAFETY CAR IN THIS LAP' message appeared on the timing and scoring monitor, making the team managers up and down the pitlane key their microphones and talk to their drivers.

'Fran, get ready. Safety car in this lap, safety car in this lap.'

"Okay. About bloomin' time," she said under her breath as she weaved left and right on the straight to try to keep some heat into the full wets.

The queue of cars crept slowly into the DHL Chicane, following the Dodge Charger safety car. At the last moment, it peeled off into the pit lane and the pack of cars was released.

At once, Francesca nailed the throttle and went up through the gears, closely following the #7 Toyota. The period of low-speed driving had meant that the puddles hadn't dissipated and that there were large areas of standing water on the front straight, so when the cars blasted through it, plumes of spray rose from the wheel arches and the diffusers on the rear of the cars.

Suddenly, the Toyota in front faltered and Francesca ducked to the right, almost coming up alongside it. The other driver tried to squeeze her to the outside of the track, but Francesca kept her nerve, out-braked the competitor cleanly and swept into the first corner ahead of the red and white Toyota.

'P1, Fran.'

"Copy," Francesca said calmly as she went up the short straight and into the Pepsi Max chicane, placing her MC12 in the centre of the track so the Toyota couldn't make a stab at her.

Inside the pits, Kathleen let out a loud whoop and jumped up and down several times. Eurosport showed a slow-motion replay and the commentator lauded Francesca for the opportunist move.

"Aw, you better believe it!" Kathleen said loudly.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Fourteen minutes later, Francesca turned off the race track and headed into the pitlane, still scored as the leader of the race.

The handover went smoothly and according to plan - after getting out, Francesca helped Fabio get in, tightened his belts, slammed the door shut and then stepped back so she wouldn't get in the way of the mechanics changing tyres on the left side of the car.

Fabio pressed the starter button and the #1 Maserati was soon off again, stuttering up the pitlane on the limiter.

After checking that the pitlane was clear, Francesca ran across it towards the perch where Giampaolo was seated.

"Everything okay?" he asked as soon as she had reached him.

"Yes, no problems. The traffic is horrendous and I don't think we've seen the last safety car yet. Some of the privateers are way out of their depth today."

"I agree. Stay sharp. On days like these, the strategy tends to be flexible."

"Yep," Francesca said and gave her team manager a thumbs-up. Checking the pitlane again, she ran back across it and went into the Maserati garage.

---

"Oh, I'm so proud of you!" Kathleen said the split second Francesca sat down on the lawn chair next to the spectator enclosure.

"Thanks, darling. The race isn't over yet."

"I know, I know. But that was a great manoeuvre. Even the Eurosport commentator thought so!"

"Oh? In that case, I guess it must be," Francesca said with a laugh.

Patrizia came up to Francesca holding a towel and a plastic bottle of water.

"Ecco qua, Francesca," the young girl said with a shy smile, handing Francesca the items.

"Grazie mille, Patrizia. E' stato gentile da parte tua," Francesca said and flashed her patented 200-watt smile at Patrizia, making the young girl blush and run away.

At once, Francesca opened the bottle and gulped it down, draining it in one. Putting the empty bottle away, she took the towel and proceeded to wipe her face, neck and arms thoroughly.

"Francesca, are you all right? I think you look pale," Kathleen said quietly, remembering the things she had thought about earlier.

"Oh, I'm fine. It's nothing. I'm fine."

"Now I know something is wrong... what is it?"

"I guess my hip hurts a little bit. The surface is insanely uneven. Especially the big bump on the back straight coming into Toro. The car bottoms out every single time there... and it goes straight up into the seat. And me."

"Oh... can you even finish the race?"

Francesca's head whipped around and for the briefest of moments, her eyes shot fire.

"Of course I can!" she said vehemently.

"All right, all right. I'm just worried about you," Kathleen said and put a hand on Francesca's shoulder.

Francesca sighed and put her own hand on top of Kathleen's.

"I'm sorry, honey. I shouldn't have barked at you."

"Oh, that wasn't a bark. That was just a meow," Kathleen joked.

On the TV behind them, they could hear the Eurosport commentator mention the words that no driver wants to hear - drive-through penalty.

Getting a bad feeling, Francesca got up from the chair and looked at the television to see if it was her car they were talking about. Working on its own accord, her arm found a way around Kathleen's waist and she gave her partner a little squeeze. Kathleen smiled and winked in response.

'... Oh dear, Maserati #2, Luca DiLorenzi and Donny Zorzi, has been given a drive-through penalty. We don't know why yet, perhaps race control will give us that information later on. Currently in fifth place after the recent stops, Donny Zorzi is battling with Toyota #8. This will really ruin their race.'

"Luca is going to blow a gasket," Francesca said, looking over her shoulder trying to find the driver of the #2. When she couldn't see him anywhere, she turned her attention back to the TV.

'... and we've just received confirmation that Maserati #2 has been given a drive-through penalty for passing under yellow. We haven't seen anything after the stop, so Luca DiLorenzi must have done it in the laps leading up to the stop.'

"Why would he pass under yellow? Is it because he's such a hothead?" Kathleen asked, making Francesca snigger loudly.

"No. It's a very easy mistake to make, actually. Especially if it's against a GT2 car. You have to understand that they're a lot slower than us, so we catch them so fast that there isn't much time to react if there's a yellow at the corner or on the straight where we overtook them."

"Oh... but you've never done that, have you?"

"Sure I have. Most drivers have at one point. Like I said, it's a very easy mistake to make."

"Did you blow your gasket when it happened?" Kathleen said, poking Francesca in the side.

"You better believe I did!"

On the TV screen, they followed Donny Zorzi as he peeled off the track and went down the pitlane. Soon, he drove past the Maserati pits, the car stuttering away on the limiter as usual - once he was through, he released the full force of the six hundred and eighty five b.h.p. and re-joined the race, right in front of Sally's Ford #6.

"Oh, there's Sally. The Fords are doing really well today," Kathleen said.

"Yes. They gambled at the first pitstops and it seems to have paid off for them. They depend on another safety car, though. If it's a clean race to the finish... and there's no way in hell it will be... they'll lose time by coming in under green."

The words hadn't even left Francesca's mouth when one of the cameras spun around to show an accident unfolding.

'OHHH! That's the #6 Ford straight up the back of Zorzi's Maserati at the... where is that... at the Michelin Chicane! Sally Sharpe! Good Lord, did she forget which pedal was the brake? Trying an impossible out-braking manoeuvre up the inside at a corner where there is no way to get through, she rammed him at nearly unabated speed! She was going so fast there was no way on God's green Earth she would have made it through that corner by herself,' the Eurosport commentator said.

"Oh, Sally, Sally, Sally..." Francesca groaned, shaking her head.

An emotional outburst at the other side of the garage made both Francesca and Kathleen turn around - Luca had arrived back in the pits just in time to see his car wrecked. Ranting and raving loudly in Italian, he was using a lot of unsavoury words describing Sally Sharpe's lineage, his fortune in general and female drivers in particular.

"Uh...?" Kathleen said, looking to Francesca for a translation.

"I'll tell you later. In private."

"Oh."

Continuing on and on, Luca strode out of the pits and headed down the pitlane.

"Now where's he going?" Kathleen said.

"I'll bet he's on his way up to the Ford pit to give them a piece of his mind," Francesca said laconically.

"What a prima-donna," Kathleen growled under her breath, making Francesca chuckle.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'...Welcome back. We have forty-five minutes to go and the race is building up to a great climax. The safety car is out while the corner workers clean up an accident in the DHL Chicane and we're right in the middle of the final round of pitstops,' the Eurosport commentator said.

In the pits, Francesca gave Kathleen a quick kiss and then pulled her helmet down over her head.

"Love you, Francesca. Go out and win this one!" Kathleen said, smiling broadly - mostly to instil some confidence in herself.

Francesca nodded, fastened her chin strap and closed the visor. Giving Kathleen a brief wave, she went out to wait for Fabio to come in so he could hand the car back to her.

Crossing all her fingers, Kathleen turned back around so she could follow the TV.

'The big story of the race is the fortunes of the Ford team. One car badly damaged after yet another accident and one in third place. The gutsy pitstop strategy definitely paid off for Jonathan Baker in the #5 Ford, vaulting the car up the order. Once the pitstop sequence is over, it'll be in third place after the leading Carrara-Dellassandro Maserati and the second placed Toyota of Kaneichi and Hattori,' the commentator said as one of the cameras picked up the dark blue Ford weaving back and forth.

---

Fabio finally brought the #1 Maserati into the pits, coming to a perfect stop in front of the mechanics. The driver change went smoothly and before long, Francesca hit the starter button and drove off down the pits.

'Caution, Fran. Coolant and water in DHL Chicane,' Giampaolo said over the radio.

"Copy. Where are we? Who am I racing?"

'Kaneichi Toyota, Baker Ford. You'll slot into the safety car queue right in the middle of a string of GT2 cars. Toyota #7 will be a few cars behind you.'

Francesca smiled briefly when she heard Jonno Baker's name mentioned, but the message that she'd be in the middle of the traffic soon wiped it off her face.

The blue light at the exit of the pits was flashing furiously and she was extra careful when she re-joined the track, almost staring a hole in the right side wing mirror to see where she should slot in.

'Stay behind the blue Porsche, Fran,' Giampaolo said.

"Okay. I'm there. How many laps to go under the safety car?"

'Unknown. More than one.'

"Copy," Francesca said and sighed.

---

Three laps later, the radio crackled to life again.

'Fran, safety car in this lap, safety car in this lap.'

"Copy, Giampaolo," Francesca said and flashed her headlights, hoping that the GT2 driver in front would make room for her once the race went green.

Coming up to the DHL Chicane for the final time under yellow, Francesca checked the track thoroughly, looking for any remnants of the coolant dropped by the car that had crashed there. The next time by, she'd be going at least twice the speed and she didn't want any surprises.

As she was weaving left and right, she could sometimes spot the red-and-white Toyota in her mirrors. The other car had also turned on its headlights and the two cones of light were illuminating the shiny asphalt.

The rain had fortunately stopped, but since the track was a public street any other day of the week, it was very slow in drying up. Prior to the last stop, Fabio had suggested intermediate tyres but Giampaolo had overruled him and Francesca was glad that he had. She thought to herself that

she needed to have a word with Fabio about what he'd been thinking when he made his suggestion.

Francesca finally went through the final part of the DHL chicane and came onto the front straight. The yellow flag was still waved from the gantry at the start-finish line, but just as she was watching it, it was withdrawn and replaced by a green one.

'Go! Go!' Giampaolo said over the radio but Francesca was already under way. Nailing the throttle and going up through the gears, she flashed the headlights non-stop to alert the driver in the Porsche while trying to control the fishtailing car as it danced left and right over the puddles that had formed.

The first backmarker left her plenty of room and she was past that before they reached the first corner, but the timing didn't work for her to get past the next one. Following a red GT2 Ferrari through the corner, she immediately ducked out of its slipstream and raced alongside it towards the Pepsi Max chicane.

As she turned in, she could see the Toyota's headlights in her wing mirror - meaning that it had found a quicker way through the traffic. Mentally girding her loins, Francesca knew that she had a fight on her hands and she concentrated on driving as fast as she could while still keeping off the walls.

Through Playboy, through the short straight and then into Michelin, she let the Maserati fly without taking unnecessary risks. Every time she checked the mirrors, the Toyota shadowed her, but when she reached the nasty bump at the Toro Chicane, it seemed to fall back slightly.

Getting too busy to look in the mirrors, Francesca blasted out of Toro and onto the short straight that would take her to DHL. As she entered the final chicane, she left the tiniest bit of room to react in case the track hadn't been sufficiently cleared, but the racing line was in good condition.

After turning through DHL, she went onto the front straight, blasting past the start-finish line and into another lap.

Kathleen covered her mouth with her hands, staring wide-eyed and completely mesmerised at the television. The battle behind Francesca between the #7 Toyota and the #5 Ford proved to be a very even affair that was eventually won by a do-or-die out-braking manoeuvre by Jonno three laps after the restart.

Sweeping into second place at Toro, he quickly set off after Francesca who was another five seconds up the road.

"Good race today, eh?" Fabio said, but Kathleen hadn't even noticed that he was there. He grinned and tapped her on her shoulder.

"Good race today."

"Yes, yes... really exciting," Kathleen said, unable to pry her eyes away from the television screen.

Fabio grinned again and sat down on one of the lawn chairs to watch the race unfold.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

As Francesca crossed the start-finish line for the penultimate time, she looked in both mirrors to see how close the competition was. When she could only see a pair of yellow headlights, indicating that it was a GT2 car, she keyed the microphone.

"Pits, gap to p2."

'P2 plus eight seconds, Fran. Final lap, final lap.'

"Copy."

Without any threats directly behind her, she reduced the pace a fraction to make sure the car would last the distance. Wanting to take care of the engine and the gearbox, she let the car glide into the corners instead of throwing it in like she had done the entire race.

After going through the first corner, she short-shifted into fifth and then sixth on the way up the short straight towards the Pepsi Max Chicane. Going through that and Playboy, she short-shifted again, conserving the engine by not using the full band of revs.

On her way between the Toro and the DHL Chicanes, she thought that the final lap took twice as long to complete as the earlier ones had, but finally she went through DHL, headed for the flag.

The TV cameras were following Francesca's car on the final lap, but Kathleen caught very little of it. She was hiding behind her hands, too nervous by far to look at the TV, but at the same time, she was concerned that she would miss out on anything, so she peeked through her fingers on a regular basis.

Around her, the mechanics and Fabio got up and ran to the pit wall so they were ready to celebrate when the #1 would cross the line, but Kathleen was rooted to the spot in front of the television, holding her breath almost to the point of suffocation.

Coming out of the final corner, Francesca could see a track official wave the chequered flag from his booth. As she crossed the finish line to win the Bucharest Supersprint, she let out a loud whoop and put her hand out of the small porthole in the Plexiglas window of the Maserati.

On the pit wall, all the mechanics were cheering and frantically waving black-and-turquoise and Italian flags. Francesca tried to look for Kathleen's easily recognisable shock of white-blond hair, but she only had a few seconds and she wasn't able to see her. In celebration, Francesca put her foot down on the throttle in first gear, creating a fifty-foot skidmark right past the pit wall.



A few minutes later, Francesca pulled into Parc Ferme, guided by a track official who showed her where to park the Maserati.

Aching and feeling exhausted, Francesca opened the door and then undid her seatbelts. Climbing out of the car, she took off her helmet and the HANS-device and then proceeded to wipe her flushed face and neck with the balaclava.

Looking around, she soon spotted Kathleen who was standing with the mechanics as close as they were allowed to outside the Parc Ferme, and she gave her a big thumbs-up and a wave. Kathleen jumped up and down and pretended to embrace Francesca from afar.

Behind Francesca, Jonno pulled into the slot for second place in his Ford GT. He revved the V8 a few times for his mechanics and then shut it down and stepped out of the dark blue Ford.

"Well done, Jonno. Great work," Francesca said and patted Jonno across the belly.

"Thanks, Fran. We'll get you yet!"

"Next year... perhaps," Francesca said cheekily.

---

Five minutes later, all the top three drivers gathered behind the podium, waiting to go outside to collect their trophies. Francesca and Fabio were busy talking excitedly to each other in Italian, but most of the others were just worn out from the exhausting race.

The emcee turned on his microphone and went outside to introduce the top three driver pairings.

"And here's the third placed crew. In the Nippondenso Toyota GT-One, Toshihiro Kaneichi and Shikeagi Hattori," he said, clapping into the microphone.

The two Toyota drivers came out, waving to the crowd below - but not looking particularly pleased with their third place. They went over to the far side of the podium and stepped up onto it.

"And the second placed crew, driving for the Ford Motor Company, Jonathan Baker and Miguel Gomez in the Ford GT," the emcee said. The applause for Jonno and his car mate was much larger than for the two Toyota drivers and they waved back enthusiastically.

"And finally, the winning drivers from Team Mediterraneo Maserati, Francesca Carrara and Fabio Dell'Assandro!"

Francesca and Fabio went out onto the podium and jumped up onto the top step accompanied by a loud cheer from the spectators and the mechanics. Francesca found Kathleen in the crowd below and blew her a kiss. Fabio settled for waving at the cameras wearing a huge grin.

When the first strains of the Italian national anthem began to play, all the drivers took off their caps and stood up straight - Francesca and Fabio both put their hands behind their backs so the TV cameras could get a clear picture of the name of their sponsor across their driving suits.

Once the anthem was done, Francesca threw her cap into the crowd, but, as usual, Kathleen's arms were too short so she wasn't able to catch it. Francesca noticed and gave her partner a smile and a shrug.

After collecting their trophies, all the drivers stepped off the dais so they could go down to the television interviews.

---

Ten minutes later, Fabio and Francesca returned to the pits holding their trophies high in the air. They went around among all the mechanics and engineers and congratulated each and every one of them for a job well done.

Her official duties over, Francesca shook hands with Giampaolo and then hurried over to the spectator enclosure to look for Kathleen - she never made it that far. Even before she reached the enclosure, a white-blond whirlwind flew through the air and wrapped itself around Francesca's long torso.

"Ohhhhh, Francesca, I'm so happy for you!" Kathleen cried out in an almost ecstatic fashion, giving her partner the hug of a lifetime. She finished off by reaching up on tip-toes and planting a big, wet kiss right on Francesca's lips.

After separating, she became slightly more conscious about what she had done, but when she looked around, she couldn't see any people with cameras.

"Thanks, darling. This was a good one. Good Lord, I need a little breather now," Francesca said with a tired smile.

"Good thing we have a bed out in the motorhome, huh?"

"Oh yeah. And a shower. Shower first, I think. Come on, let's..."

Before they had time to go anywhere, Patrizia zipped into the pits and ran up to the two women. She was holding a promotional photograph of Francesca and a pen that could write in gold print.

"Francesca... Potrei avere un autografo, per favore? E' per il mio album," Patrizia said, her face beaming with delight.

"Ma certo, Patrizia. It's for her scrapbook," Francesca said off Kathleen's slightly confused look.

"Oh... I had a scrapbook when I was a little girl. Do you have pictures of all Francesca's victories?" Kathleen said to Patrizia.

"Uh, I do not. I only started at Monza," Patrizia said, shaking her head.

Francesca took the gold pen and decorated the photograph with her name and a lot of little smiley faces.

"Ecco qua. Abbine cura," Francesca said and handed the photo back to Patrizia.

"Senz'altro. Grazie mille, Francesca," Patrizia said with a shy smile. She spun around on her heel and zipped back out of the pits before either Francesca or Kathleen had time to reply.

"I told her to take care of it," Francesca explained once they were by themselves.

"Oh... Francesca, I need to learn to speak Italian. This is starting to annoy me."

"Does it need to be right now? After the shower, I need to get back to the team debriefing," Francesca said with a tired grin.

"No. It can wait until we get home."

"Good. I think I can come up with a few words that should be easy for you to learn. 'Amore'... that's love, get it?"

"Got it. Silly," Kathleen said and wrapped her arm around Francesca's waist.

Laughing, they began to walk back to the motorhome.

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 8**

*Tuesday, May 17th.*

Kathleen put her fingers across her lips, trying to hide the devilish little grin she was wearing. She licked her lips and turned her attention back to Francesca who was sitting on a bench, busy lifting weights - it didn't help that Francesca had insisted on wearing only a simple sports bra and a pair of cut-off sweat pants, leaving her shoulders, arms and her entire midriff bare.

"Just once more, Fran. Just once more," Kathleen said, slithering up behind Francesca.

"You're... distracting... me... darling!" Francesca said as she put the bar back on the rack, out of breath after having lifted nearly 150 lbs. ten times.

"Oh, we can't have that, can we," Kathleen said and let her fingers run across Francesca's taut stomach, clawing the smooth, bronzed skin.

Francesca sniggered and tried to take Kathleen's hand, but the author was too quick and she moved away before she was caught.

"I'm so envious of you. You're always so deliciously tanned. Look at me, I never go beyond pink, even at the height of summer," Kathleen said and kissed Francesca's shoulder.

"Personally, I'm quite fond of pink," Francesca said and wiped her face with a towel.

"No, you're not!"

"On you, you better believe I am. C'mere."

"Not yet. I need to see a bit more first," Kathleen said and ran her hands up Francesca's long arms. Using her fingernails, she started scratching Francesca's biceps hoping to get a reward - she did; a saucy little flex.

Kathleen continued to stand behind Francesca, keeping a grip on the firm body. She let her hands roam freely, up the arms and down the long torso. Over the flat stomach and down across the abs, stopping tantalisingly close to the elastic band of Francesca's sweat pants before moving further down and around the well-toned thighs.

"Mmmm," Kathleen hummed, definitely liking what she saw and felt.

"Have you seen enough now?"

"Nope."

"You're a hard mistress. But I'm sure you know that already," Francesca said and stepped away from the rack.

"Oh yeah. Are you going to try the other machine... you know? The one where you put your legs into the..."

"No, I can't today, darling. My hip is still too sore."

"Oh. Okay," Kathleen said and started chewing on her lip, pondering which one of the exercise machines she'd like to see Francesca work on.

"The treadmill?"

"Mmmm, no. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps we should just stop talking," Francesca said and gently pushed Kathleen up against the wall of the exercise room.

"Perhaps we shou..." Kathleen said but was silenced by Francesca's lips on her own. The kiss started easy but soon went far beyond that. When Kathleen could feel an insistent tongue probing her lips, she sighed sensually and allowed Francesca inside.

Kathleen's hands worked on their own accord - one of them ran up and down Francesca's arm, feeling up all the muscles it found there, and the other behind Francesca's head, pulling her even closer into the kiss.

Soon, their tongues were engaged in a wonderful dance that only ended when they had to break off to get some air into their lungs. With a cheeky grin, Francesca pulled Kathleen off the wall and over to the bench at the rack. Putting her hands on Kathleen's shoulders, she pushed her all the way down so she ended up flat on her back.

"How far do you want to go, darling?" Francesca said, toying with the button in Kathleen's jeans.

"All the way, baby," Kathleen said breathlessly, earning herself a new grin from Francesca. She started fumbling with the button, but Francesca swatted her hand away.

"Hands off. That's my job," Francesca said and unbuttoned Kathleen's jeans. Leaning down, she took the zipper between her lips and tried to pull it down, but it was too tight so she ended up having to do it with her fingers.

Once the zipper was fully down, Kathleen raised her hips off the bench so her jeans could slip off. Francesca put her strong hands on Kathleen's hips and pulled the trousers off painfully slowly, loving every inch of the dark green panties that slowly saw the light of day.

Putting her hand on Kathleen's panties, Francesca clawed the golden patch of hair and then used her free hand to pull off the jeans in a quick manoeuvre, making Kathleen sigh in surprise.

The sigh was instantly turned into a moan when Francesca reached down and pulled Kathleen's panties up so the hook strained against her already sensitive folds. Content to be toying with her partner for the time being, Francesca pretended to begin slipping off the panties, but as soon as Kathleen raised her hips, Francesca let go and continued elsewhere.

After doing that twice, Kathleen whimpered and pressed her abdomen insistently against Francesca's hands.

With a grin, Francesca relented and pulled off Kathleen's already quite soaked panties. She pulled back, staring lecherously at the writhing, half-naked woman before her. Licking her lips in anticipation, Francesca moved her strong hands up under Kathleen's blouse and pulled it up, sliding her hands up along the firm, but delicate, torso.

Kathleen helped by whipping off her blouse, giving Francesca a heated kiss while they were close.

Coming to a rest just below Kathleen's breasts, Francesca began to claw the flesh gently, something she knew always drove Kathleen wild. Moving her hands further up to cup the two mounds, Francesca leaned down and kissed Kathleen's cleavage several times.

After a few kisses, Francesca pulled back and moved in between Kathleen's legs so she could lie down flat on top of her. As soon as Kathleen felt Francesca's weight on her, she instinctively pulled up her legs and crossed them behind Francesca's back so she could pull her very close.

"Baby, I'm going to take you. I'm going to take you hard," Francesca whispered into Kathleen's ear.

"Ohhhh... Oh, God," Kathleen groaned, her hips bucking as a response to Francesca's words.

"I'm going to take you so hard that the only thing you'll be capable of is to come for me. Do you understand?"

Kathleen moaned again, trying to nod.

"Do you understand?" Francesca repeated, pressing her abdomen down onto Kathleen's throbbing centre to prove her point.

"God! Yes! Come on... Oh, God, I want you," Kathleen breathed, grabbing Francesca's arms and digging into the hard muscles.

"Get up and turn around," Francesca said sternly and moved back. When Kathleen followed the role-playing by responding a little slowly, Francesca pulled her up from the bench.

Francesca reached down and took off her sweat pants. She had been hoping that the event would turn into what it had, so she wasn't wearing any underwear - a wise choice as it turned out.

"Kneel," Francesca said, took Kathleen by the shoulders and turned her around so she was kneeling on the bench, facing away from Francesca.

Kathleen whimpered again, feeling a delightful buzz flow through her. Within moments, Francesca's strong arms had wrapped themselves around her body and gave her a squeeze that left her wanting more.

Francesca's hands began to move all over Kathleen's body, across her neck and her breasts, fondling her already erect nipples. After lingering there for a few seconds, the hands continued further down, running over Kathleen's soft, smooth stomach and onto her thighs.

Growing ever more impatient, Kathleen steered Francesca's hand onto her slick folds, groaning when the strong fingers ran across the sensitive area, caressing, probing, teasing.

The moment lasted all too briefly as Francesca moved her hand back up to Kathleen's stomach, caressing it slowly by moving the tips of her fingers from left to right and then back the other

way. The response was immediate - Kathleen sighed sensually and clamped her hand down onto Francesca's.

Undaunted, Francesca moved her free hand up and began to caress Kathleen's neck and throat. With her fingers, she began drawing little lines on the skin from the centre of the inviting neck, going forward towards the left ear and further down Kathleen's throat. When Kathleen cocked her head to the right to make the access easier, Francesca continued the movement down onto her chest, stopping above the swell of Kathleen's breasts.

Kathleen sighed again and let go of Francesca's hand that immediately went down to cover her well-lubricated centre. When Francesca briefly let her middle finger slip through the folds and into the velvety cavern, Kathleen bucked hard into Francesca's hand, an instinctive signal that she was ready to move onto the next level.

"Are you ready?" Francesca whispered.

"Oh, God, yes..."

With a growl, Francesca turned Kathleen around and picked her up effortlessly, pressing her bronzed thigh up against Kathleen's heated centre.

Electric currents raced through both women the split second their heated skin made contact, and they both let out identical throaty moans and continued to press hard against each other.

Francesca wrapped her strong arms around Kathleen and moved the two of them down onto the bench as one body. A few seconds went by and then Francesca spread Kathleen's legs and carefully inserted first two, then three fingers into her burning hot opening.

A deep moan bubbled up from Kathleen's chest and she leaned her head forward, silently begging Francesca to begin. Francesca listened and began a rhythmic motion - slow at first, but soon building up speed until the two women found a rhythm that satisfied both of them.

Francesca had her free arm underneath Kathleen's shoulder, and at random intervals, she flexed her muscles to give the author a firm squeeze. Kathleen always responded by groaning and by digging her fingers into Francesca's back - in turn prompting Francesca to add a few twists and tricks to the grinding motion.

Kathleen opened her eyes and looked at Francesca's face as she was making love to her. The ice blue eyes were hooded and almost dark, and her face and upper body were flushed from the exertion of constantly riding Kathleen's centre.

"Ohhh, baby..." Kathleen whispered, feeling every single thrust that Francesca offered her. Deep inside her, a spark ignited that sent cascades of fire through her system, making her skin tingle and become super-sensitive.

Every little touch, every little breath that hit her skin sent a wave of thrills through her, and suddenly she felt like she and Francesca were one soul sharing the experience.

Instinctively, she tightened her grip around Francesca. The firmness of Francesca's body added to her pleasure, making her feel like she was riding on the crest of a wave. Closing her eyes again, she leaned her head back and let out a long, growly groan.

Sensing that Kathleen was already close to climaxing, Francesca eased off the grinding motion, gradually slowing down until she was barely moving. Baring her teeth in a wolfish grin, she knew that switching positions once Kathleen was close would increase the author's orgasm exponentially, so she decided to take it easy for the next few thrusts.

"No, no, God, no... don't stop.. don't stop now," Kathleen breathed, but Francesca just shook her head.

"I won't allow you to come yet," Francesca said and began to fondle Kathleen's breasts and rock hard nipples. She cupped the two mounds, squeezing and kneading them gently, just applying enough pressure for Kathleen to feel it but not enough to make it painful.

"Ohhh..."

"Not yet," Francesca whispered, moving the palms of her hands back and forth across Kathleen's nipples. As she cupped the breasts again, she moved up onto the bench and positioned herself between Kathleen's legs.

Deciding that it was time to resume the game, she let her hands run slowly down Kathleen's body until they were at the golden patch of hair. Clawing the skin gently and enjoying the whimpers it produced, she moved her hands even further down, gripping Kathleen's thighs and separating them so she had full access.

Francesca leaned down and kissed the outer folds, earning herself yet another sigh. Once again, she started probing and teasing, running her tongue up and down and occasionally venturing inside.

Carefully spreading the folds with her fingers, she found Kathleen's little bundle of nerves and let the tip of her tongue run across it - a split second later, Kathleen responded by groaning and pressing her abdomen up into Francesca's face.

Feeling her own fluids drip down her thighs, Francesca inserted a finger into Kathleen's opening and resumed the riding motion at a very slow cadence. As she was doing that, she continued alternating between suckling gently on the clit and swirling her tongue around it; trying to get Kathleen as close to the edge as possible without actually falling over it yet.

After a few seconds, Francesca inserted a second finger and began to pick up the pace, riding faster and faster against Kathleen's completely soaked centre. By the time she squeezed a



wonderfully erect nipple between her thumb and index finger, she was back to full speed, using three fingers to thrust hard into Kathleen.

Kathleen leaned her head back and let out a series of increasingly uninhibited moans and groans, and Francesca knew that it was time to deliver the final blow.

"Open your eyes!" Francesca said sternly. When Kathleen complied, Francesca plunged a fourth finger deep into her centre and rode her as hard as she dared. Looking directly into Kathleen's misty green orbs, she said,

"Kathleen, I want you to come. Come for me... Now!"

The look on Kathleen's face changed to one of shock and then unbridled ecstasy as she let go. Within seconds, the orgasm that exploded somewhere deep inside her made her entire body tremble and arc off the bench. Her inner muscles trapped Francesca's fingers like they wanted to squeeze the life out of them, and the gesture was mirrored by Kathleen's hands grabbing Francesca's arms.

When Kathleen finally cried out, it was a husky, hoarse scream that sounded like it came from a being much more dangerous than a 36-year old author, and it made all of Francesca's nape hairs stand on edge.

As the aftershocks rushed through Kathleen's body, she convulsed several times and pressed her abdomen against Francesca's hand in an attempt to extend the pleasure. When the tension finally left her, she became a boneless creature that slumped down onto the bench; her arms lost their grip on Francesca and fell limply down her sides.

Several heartbeats later, Kathleen opened her eyes and looked at Francesca. She began to cry quietly, like she nearly always did when the afterglow engulfed her. Large teardrops rolled down her cheeks and onto the bench below, staining the leather surface.

"Shhhh. I've got ya. Enjoy it, baby. I've got ya," Francesca whispered in a voice that had lost the sternness it'd had before. Holding Kathleen's body tight, she soothed the author by humming quietly.

"I love you, Francesca," Kathleen whispered in a trembling voice.

"I love you, too, baby," Francesca said, kissing Kathleen's eyebrows.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Wednesday, May 18th.

When the telephone rang, Kathleen put down the newspaper she was reading and walked over to pick up the receiver.

"The Carrara and O'Malley residence, it's Kathleen."

'Hello, Miss O'Malley, it's Sally Sharpe. I was wondering if I could get to speak with Miss Carrara, please?' the young driver said in a distinctively American accent.

Kathleen narrowed her eyes and stared blankly into thin air. Suddenly a flock of butterflies started flapping their wings in her stomach, almost like it was trying to tell her that trouble was brewing.

'Uh, hello?'

"Oh... yes... yes, of course. Hang on," Kathleen said and put the receiver down on the small table.

"Francesca? Telephone for you!"

"For me?" Francesca said, peeking around the corner to the kitchen.

"It's Sally. Sally Sharpe," Kathleen said and moved away from the telephone.

"Sally Sharpe? What on Earth...?"

Francesca put the bread knife down on the kitchen table and walked into the living room. Kathleen had already moved over to the couch, and on Francesca's way past her, she reached down and mussed the white-blond hair as a quiet reassurance.

"Hello, Sally? It's Francesca."

'Hi. Ummm, I was wondering if you... well... no, I better take it from the top. I have something I need to talk to you about.'

"Oh...?"

'Career related.'

"Oh," Francesca said, relieved that she wasn't about to hear some half-baked declaration of love.

'I've been... well, I've been rested from the team. I've had too many accidents this year.'

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Sally," Francesca said, getting Kathleen's attention.

'Thanks. So, to come back to the question I wanted to ask you... I was wondering if you could give me any pointers, career wise?'

"Pointers?"

'Yes, the dos and don'ts, you know. Things like that. How I can improve, frankly.'

"Well, I... Sally, I can't do that over the phone. I need to talk to Kathleen first, but would you have time to come to our cottage tonight for dinner?" Francesca said, looking intently at Kathleen.

*'Yes, no problem. I can come over for dinner.'*

Kathleen furrowed her brow and leaned forward on the couch. Her initial reaction was so say 'no', but on the other hand, it sounded like it could be a good opportunity to really get underneath the young driver's facade. After weighing the pros and cons for a short while, Kathleen nodded at Francesca who replied by quickly waving a thumbs-up.

"All right. Kathleen agrees. How about a quarter to seven tonight?"

*'Six forty-five sounds fine by me. By the way, I already know where you live. I asked Jonno if he thought it was all right that I called you and he told me the directions.'*

"Oh... Okay. Well, see you just before seven, then. Goodbye, Sally."

*'Bye, Miss Carrara.'*

Francesca hung up and leaned back in the chair. She crossed her legs and put an index finger across her lips.

"What was that all about?" Kathleen said, folding the newspaper she was reading and putting it away.

"Sally's been taken off the driving squad."

"Oh...! Because of her accidents?"

"Most likely."

"How unfair!" Kathleen said, surprising herself by defending the young driver.

"Mmmm. To be brutally honest, it was inevitable. At this level, there's no room for so many errors," Francesca said and moved over to sit next to Kathleen in the couch.

"I think that's very harsh."

"It's harsh, but you have to remember that the teams invest an incredible amount of money into the sport. Drivers employed by the works teams must deliver at all times, or else..."

"I understand... could this happen to you? Surely it couldn't?" Kathleen said and put a hand on Francesca's knee.

"Yes, it could. If I started getting lazy or if I caused too many incidents or accidents on the track, I'd be warming the reserve bench in no time."

Kathleen opened her mouth to speak, but she closed it again at once. She sighed and leaned in towards Francesca, resting her head on the taller woman's shoulder.

"I'll bet that Fabio or Luca wouldn't get treated like that," she said quietly.

"Actually, they would. All right, it would be very bad press for the team to bench the reigning world champion, but Luca has been moved aside a few times."

"He has? I didn't know that. When?"

"Well, you were right there for one of them. Last year at Spa. Remember that he wanted to take my seat during the race?"

"Oh yeah, that's right... that was so charming of him..."

"I would've done the exact same thing, darling. Anyway, Giampaolo knew that upsetting the team right in the middle of the championship race would be idiotic so he told Luca no."

"And then the prima-donna left in a huff, didn't he?"

"That's right," Francesca said and gave Kathleen a little squeeze.

"Typical."

Francesca laughed and then mussed Kathleen's hair again.

"So Sally Sharpe is coming over for dinner. What should we make for her? I'm not doing sandwiches again. I always end up with the turkey coldcuts. I hate turkey coldcuts," Kathleen said with a deep sigh.

"It doesn't have to be anything fancy. She's a driver, remember? She probably won't eat more than two lettuce leaves and have a glass of mineral water on the side."

"Even if she's being rested?" Kathleen said, turning around to look at Francesca with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Well, yes. She might get a call-up from someone else. If she arrived at a test out of shape and flabby, she'd kill her career in an instant."

"Oh... I didn't think of that. Not that she's particularly out of shape..."

"No, she's quite good-looking."

"Francesca..."

"What? Do you want me to wear a chastity belt while she's here just to be on the safe side? I'll even let you keep the bronze key," Francesca said in a teasing voice.

"No, I... hey, I didn't know you had a chastity belt?" Kathleen said, suddenly interested.

"I don't. Down, tiger."

"Oh. Mmmm. Maybe for your birthday," Kathleen said and snuggled closer to her partner.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

A quarter past six, Kathleen was strung up so high that she was positively electric. She was bustling back and forth, setting the dinner table, stirring the pot with the fancy Italian tomato sauce, minding the oven where she was making tagliatelle and wafer-thin slices of pork cutlets with melted cheese on top, and constantly checking and rechecking everything.

Francesca was standing in the doorway, holding a stack of napkins she had been given and staring wide-eyed at Kathleen's frantic activity.

"Good Lord, darling... will you calm down? This wasn't supposed to be a state dinner, you know. It's just a fellow driver."

"That's no excuse for not doing it right. Perhaps you expected me to serve bangers and mash?" Kathleen said sternly, putting her hands on her hips.

"No, that's not what I..."

"This is my kitchen. I'm the General here."

"Of course, but..."

"You drive, I cook, we each have our gifts. Now let me do my job," Kathleen said and spun around to tend to the pot.

"Yes, dear. I better put these onto the table. Just yell when you need me," Francesca said, not particularly eager to get into a debate with Kathleen.

"Don't worry, I will!"

Kathleen's voice carried all the way into the living room, quickly followed by a stern harrumph.

"I'll bet," Francesca said to herself as she put down the napkins. She took a step back and studied the dinner table - everything was carefully selected so the colours would match perfectly. The dinner plates had a small, green band on them around the outer rim, and the tablecloth, the

cutlery, the glasses, the napkins and even the salt and pepper shakers all wore an identical green band.

Chuckling over Kathleen's perfectionist streak, she fluffed and arranged a few of the pillows in the couch and then moved the vase on the coffee table so it was at the exact centre.

"Do you think she'll be here on time?" Kathleen suddenly said, peeking around the corner.

"Sorry?"

"Do you think Sally will be here on time?"

"I really have no way of knowing, darling," Francesca said with a smile.

"Oh... no. You're right. I better be ready for anything."

"I'd say you already are," Francesca added under her breath.

"Pardon?" Kathleen said, peeking around the corner again.

"Oh, nothing."

"Huh?"

"Love you," Francesca said, wearing a broad smile.

At first, Kathleen raised an eyebrow, but then she relented and cracked a smile.

"Love you, too," she said and winked.

---

On the dot of a quarter to seven, a car pulled into the driveway and stopped. A car door was closed and Francesca could hear crunching footsteps in the gravel leading up the front door.

She got up and went over to the door even before Sally had time to press the doorbell. Opening the door, Francesca smiled at their guest, who smiled back, holding a large bouquet of flowers.

"Hello, Miss Carrara. Thank you for inviting me."

"Oh for cryin' out loud, Sally, my name is Francesca. And you're very welcome. Oh..." Francesca said, instinctively reaching for the flowers when she spotted them.

At the exact same moment, Kathleen came into the living room wearing an apron and carrying a small tray. When she saw what was going on at the door, she came to a screeching halt, the

unreadable expression on her face showing that she wasn't too pleased with the situation. A few moments later, she spun around on her heel and went back into the kitchen.

"Actually, they're for Miss O'Malley," Sally said with a grin and walked past Francesca's outstretched hand on her way into the cottage.

"Oh. Cheeky," Francesca said and closed the front door softly. She went over to the bookshelves and found an empty vase to put the flowers into.

Walking a bit slower than before, Kathleen came back into the living room. She had taken off the apron and had brushed her white-blond hair so it was absolutely perfect. She was wearing a pair of dark tan slacks and a fairly tight, form-fitting forest green shirt, and in her ears, she had the studs Francesca had given her for Christmas.

Francesca's eyebrows twitched when she looked at her partner and she only had one thought in mind - 'Rrrrwoarhhh!'.

She looked at her own black jeans and her faded cotton shirt and wondered if she should've dressed for the occasion, but shrugged it off when she saw that Sally was dressed more or less the same - blue jeans and a denim shirt.

"Look, darling, Sally brought you flowers," Francesca said, trying to steer her mind back to safe ground.

"Me? They're for me?" Kathleen said, once again stopping with a jerk.

"They are, Miss O'Malley. I know it was rather short notice, so I thought I'd better bring a hostess gift," Sally said and walked around the couch.

Kathleen involuntarily took a step back, but when she noticed that Sally was putting out her hand for her to shake, she mentally scolded herself for being so insecure.

"Hello, Sally. I'm sorry about your situation."

"Thank you, Miss O'Malley. Well..."

"Oh, what's this Miss-thing, Sally? We've already met. Please, call me Kathleen," Kathleen said and put her hand on Sally's biceps. She didn't know if she had done it deliberately or by accident, but the result was the same - the muscle mass she felt underneath the denim shirt was quite similar to Francesca's, and it only made her even more conflicted than she already was when it came to the young woman standing before her.

"All right. Hi, Kathleen," Sally said, oblivious to Kathleen's confused state.

"Uh... hi, Sally. So... the dinner is ready, actually. Let's get something to eat while it's still hot."

"Sounds good to me. It definitely smells wonderful here," Sally said, trying to be as polite as she possibly could.

"Yes, it does, doesn't it? We're having pork chops a la Roma and tagliatelle with my mother's super-secret recipe for the tomato sauce," Francesca said and put her hand on Sally's back to guide her over to the dinner table.

"Oh, excellent. I love pasta. Um, would you mind if I didn't drink alcohol?" Sally said, finding her chair.

"Francesca doesn't either, so we've made a pitcher of mineral water the two of you can share," Kathleen said and put a tray with the steaming hot pork chops down on the table.

"Oh, that's great," Sally said with a smile.

"Yep, and we've even bought some lemons and a few mint leaves so we can make ourselves a real Club Soda if we want to," Francesca said, grinning.

"Wow, we really live a life of luxury, huh?" Sally said, taking her napkin.

As Kathleen carried a bowl with the tagliatelle to the table, she paused momentarily and looked at the smiling Sally. Kathleen felt like she was getting ever more confused by each passing moment. She knew that she didn't really have a logical, rational reason for disliking the young woman so much but she knew that she definitely did - and it annoyed her.

---

The dinner proved to be a lively affair with Francesca and Sally sharing tall tales from their exploits around the race tracks of the world. Mostly, Kathleen sat quietly and listened to them;

even though she had a few stories to tell of unexpected events and peculiar goings-on from the world of biographies, she felt they weren't good enough to match the colourful stories told by Francesca and Sally.

Kathleen leaned back in her chair and studied Sally closely. The ash-blonde woman with the pretty grey eyes had told them that she was twenty-five years old, that she was a graduate of some Michigan college Kathleen had never heard of and that she had raced in the smaller divisions for nearly eight years - but Kathleen didn't pay much attention to any of that.

Instead, Kathleen was studying Sally's body language. Studying how her foot bopped up and down when she told an exciting or funny story. Studying how she liked to play with her right ear lobe as she was looking to the left, towards Francesca. Studying the gestures she made with her long, slender fingers. Studying how she cocked her head in a very particular fashion whenever she spoke with Francesca - but never when she spoke to Kathleen.

Studying how Sally Sharpe seemed to be trying to flirt the panties off Francesca.



Kathleen crossed her arms over her chest, slowly getting that feeling she dreaded the most - that unstoppable sinking feeling where she could only watch helplessly while everything around her came crashing down.

Kathleen's thoughts began to roam freely, finally stopping at the darkest place she could imagine: being alone and lonely, with only her infrequent biographies as companions... and the only physical love she would experience would come from the purple vibrator in her dresser drawer.

*I lived like that for five years before I met Francesca. I can't go back to that. I just can't,*  
Kathleen thought with a sigh that actually felt more like a sob.

Francesca picked up Kathleen's almost inaudible sigh and the two partners locked eyes. Some of Kathleen's insecurities must have been transmitted because Francesca put her napkin up on the table and pulled back her chair.

"Sally, why don't you take a seat over on the couch? I think we're boring Kathleen with all our stories," Francesca said and began to collect some of the empty plates.

"All right. Oh, let me help you with that," Sally said and reached for the same plate Francesca had already picked up.

"No, it's all right, Sally, I've got it. Darling, why don't you show Sally some of your biographies while I do the dishes?"

"Oh, I..." Kathleen said, looking from Francesca to Sally and back. She noticed that Francesca was winking at her, and she finally connected the dots.

"I'm sure it'll bore our guest," Kathleen said with a polite laugh.

"Oh, no, I'd love to see your books, Kathleen."

"That's settled, then. I shan't be long, dear," Francesca said and picked up a stack of the green-rimmed plates.

---

"I'm quite envious of you, Kathleen," Sally said as she was leafing through the biography on Davey Boy Hearty.

"Oh... really?" Kathleen said, feeling a chill race down her spine.

"Yes. You have a great command over the written word. I wish I had that skill," Sally said as she put the biography back on the shelf.

"Well, I... uh."

"I have a touch of dyslexia. When I get tired, I suddenly... well, I have a hard time reading even simple texts; makes it difficult to go over the data printouts in the team debriefings."

"Oh, I didn't know, Sally."

Sally shrugged and pulled out another biography. After quickly leafing through it, she put it back on the shelf and then turned around to face Kathleen. She put her hands into her pockets and chuckled quietly to herself.

"Of course, it gives me an excuse for not reading the articles written about me in Trackracer Magazine," she said, shrugging again.

"Trackracer... now there's a gutter rag," Kathleen said, remembering the poor article James Fenton had written on Francesca a few months after her accident at Le Mans the year before.

"It's the market leader, unfortunately. If we ignore the journalists, or even tell them to go to hell, we'll end up reading all about it in big, bold types," Sally said, casually scuffing the tip of her right shoe on the back of her left trouser leg.

Kathleen had an unpleasant flashback to the photo of her and Francesca in the Sun and she shivered briefly.

"Yes, well. I don't know what drives those people. I c..." Kathleen said, but then stopped abruptly when she realised that she had just used yet another term her mother had often used - 'those people'. She hid her discomfort by coughing and then taking a deep breath.

"Uh, ahem, I couldn't work for such a magazine," she said, studying Sally's face for any reaction. When she didn't get any, she furrowed her brow.

"Which magazine, darling?" Francesca said and clicked off the light in the kitchen. Rolling down her sleeves, she came back into the living room and sat down in the couch.

Kathleen and Sally took that as a cue and sat down as well - Kathleen made sure that she was sitting next to Francesca, and she put her hand on her partner's thigh at once to claim her stake.

"Trackracer."

"Ugh."

"My words exactly," Kathleen said with a chuckle.

"Sally, we haven't really talked about your problem," Francesca said and put her hand on top of Kathleen's.

Sally sighed and leaned back in the chair, crossing her legs at the knee.

"I've tried, I really have. I just find myself in situations I can't get out of... literally. In Barcelona, I was just trying too hard to impress the suits who had come over from the States. When I finished Silverstone with only a few problems, I thought I had the worst behind me, but..."

"But then it went the wrong way," Francesca said.

"Yes. The crash at Monza was so damn embarrassing. I just lost it under braking, rattled over the curbs and smacked into the tyre wall."

"Sally, we've all done that."

"I know, but now I've done it four damn races in a row. Man, I'm telling you, I got my ass handed to me on a plate when I returned to the pits over in Bucharest. Jeez," Sally said and ran her hand through her hair. She sighed deeply and suddenly looked far less confident than she had been only moments earlier.

"And this Monday afternoon, my team manager called and told me that I've been taken off the driving squad. They've got a pre-Le Mans test lined up a few days ahead of the official test day. Unless I can show that I'm good enough there, I can just bend over and kiss my ass goodbye," she continued.

Chuckling over the direct language, Kathleen snuggled even closer to Francesca so Sally couldn't possibly miss their connection.

"Sally, I think you're trying too hard. And I think it's just gone too quickly for you. Granted, the championship was different when I started a decade ago, but I spent two seasons driving for a privateer before I was noticed and was given a factory ride. And even then, it was in the junior car. If I had to start today in a full factory car... frankly, I think I'd crack under the pressure," Francesca said sincerely.

"I know what you mean. I... I think one of the reasons why they picked me out of the SCCA ranks was because they had little, sparkly dollar-signs in their eyes when they thought of the PR possibilities."

"Mmmmm," Francesca said, nodding. That had been at the core of her thinking, but she hadn't wanted to say it to Sally's face.

"You should see some of the commercials they've made me do. Jeez, one of them made me feel so damn uncomfortable. It was for a hair care product. I mean, it was filmed in a shower and the director practically asked me to act like I was in a soft core skin flick. And I was like 'what the fu... uh, what the flip is going on here?'"

"I know exactly what you mean, trust me," Francesca said, remembering her own mishaps in the seedy world of advertisements.

"But I did it. I had to... it's in my contract that I have to be available for commercials. If I had refused, they could've sued me for breach of contract."

"Oh, that just reeks of sexism," Kathleen said angrily, slapping the palm of her hand down onto Francesca's thigh.

"Ouch...!"

"Sorry, Francesca. Oh, things like that just... just... just make me upset! I'll bet that none of the men in your team were pressured into doing such a provocative ad."

"You're right, they weren't," Sally said, nodding.

"You see? Sexism. On that note, I need a cuppa. Would you like some?" Kathleen said to Francesca and Sally as she got up from the couch.

"Good idea, darling. I'd like a thistle-blackberry, please."

"All right. Sally?"

"I have to admit that I'm not sure what we're talking about...?"

"Tea," Kathleen said with a polite, little grin.

"Oh. Would it be too much trouble to make me a cup of coffee instead? I'm not too hot on tea."

"Coffee is fine, but we only have instant."

"Oh, that'll do just great, thanks," Sally said with a genuine smile.

"Go on, you can talk shop while I'm in the kitchen," Kathleen said and winked at Francesca.

After Kathleen had gone into the kitchen, Sally put her leg down and shuffled around on the chair. With a sigh, she turned her attention back to Francesca.

"So you're saying that getting taken off the squad could actually be a blessing in disguise? That I need to, uh, pay my dues at a smaller team first?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd put it like that, Sally. But I do know that we all have to learn the ropes before we can climb the podium... to mix a few metaphors."

"Yeah..."

"What is Ford doing next year when the GT1s are going to be abolished? Drop down into GT2 ?"

"That's what I've heard, yes. That way, we'll be up against General Motors. That fight is still very important in the States. We'll be using the same car with a detuned engine."

"I see."

"And Maserati?"

"We haven't decided yet."

"Oh. Well, anyway, I'm going to try my damndest at the pre-Le Mans test. I really want to be included in the squad at Le Mans. That race is why I started doing sports cars in the first place, dammit!" Sally said and slammed her fist down into her open palm.

"Me, too," Francesca said, leaning forward on the couch with a knowing grin on

her lips.

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 9**

*Saturday, June 4th.*

*'Where are you now, darling?'*

"Just driving into the parking lot at W.P. Carruthers," Kathleen said into the mic on her Bluetooth headset.

*'Better you than me. Good Lord, to spend a Saturday afternoon in the company of God knows how many stuffed shirts... ugh.'*

"Oh, ha, ha. It's their seventieth anniversary, Francesca. I was invited by W.P. himself in a handwritten letter. I have to be here," Kathleen said as she manoeuvred her Focus into a parking space.

*'I definitely wish you all the best.'*

"Thank you. What are you doing right now?"

*'We're having a sort of a tea break. We lost a spark plug on the car and the...'*

"... Mechanics are trying to find it? Did they look in the motorhome?" Kathleen said, sniggering loudly. She turned off the engine and leaned back in the seat, trying to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible.

'Cute. They're replacing all of them. Once they've done that, we'll go back out on the circuit.'

"How is the test day going, apart from that?"

'Pretty good so far. The usual little worries and niggles. Odds and sods, you know.'

"Did you set a time yet?"

'Yes, I was third quickest in the first session. Currently, we're fourth in the second session. Fabio set it, I haven't been in the car yet.'

"Oh...?"

'The misfire started halfway through his opening stint, but we can handle it. No problem.'

"Oh. Listen, I have to run. Thank you so very much for calling. Take care, okay? I love you," Kathleen said and blew Francesca a kiss through the telephone.

'Love you, too, darling. Don't bore yourself to death at W.P.'s, please.'

"I won't. Bye!"

'Bye-bye, Kathleen.'

Kathleen sighed and took the Bluetooth headpiece off her ear. Rubbing her ear thoroughly afterwards, she cursed the designer of that electronic nonsense, opened the glove compartment and threw the headset in there.

With a groan, she got out of the car and took off her windbreaker. After she had put it in the back, she smoothed down her skirt and locked the car.

She began walking towards the entrance of the building on slightly wobbly legs. Because she didn't want to get a crimp in her neck from spending an entire afternoon looking up at people, she was wearing the only pair of high heeled shoes she had - but she was regretting it even as she was walking across the parking lot.

---

A few minutes later, Kathleen found herself mingling with a whole host of 'stuffed shirts' inside a conference room at W.P. Carruthers Publishing, Limited.

The centre of the room was equipped with several tall tables that looked like they had come from some old-fashioned Gentlemen's Club, and in the corners of the room, large leather armchairs had been placed in clusters of three, all turned towards each other so the people there could talk semi-privately.

Waiters and waitresses carrying trays loaded with wine glasses and snacks walked around the room servicing the guests and the staff. When Kathleen noticed that they were all wearing identical blank stares, she shivered, wondering if she had accidentally stepped into an episode of Doctor Who.

Kathleen snatched a glass of white wine from one of the waitresses and began to walk around the room. She didn't know any of the other guests so the infrequent greetings never went beyond 'how do you do,' and all in all, the reception soon became a chore for her.

To kill the time, she positioned herself at one end of the room and started observing the other guests closely.

*'So, let's see... roughly fifty guests. Six... no, seven women, the rest men. Four blondes, two brunettes and a redhead. Six of the seven wear glasses. Hmmm. Perhaps I should've brought my reading glasses. Looks like it's almost compulsory here. God, I'm bored,' Kathleen thought, sighing audibly.*

She sipped the white wine and was astounded when she discovered that it was actually quite good for a change. Taking a larger sip, she made a mental note to ask one of the waiters which brand it was.

"Oh, hello, Miss O'Malley. I'm really glad to see you here," W.P. Carruthers said and put his hand on Kathleen's elbow.

"Hello, Mr. Carruthers. Thank you for inviting me."

"You're welcome."

W.P. began looking around, soon spotting two empty armchairs across the room.

"Miss O'Malley, would you mind...? I have something I need to talk to you about," he said, nodding at the chairs.

"Oh... of course not, Mr. Carruthers," Kathleen said and took her wine glass.

As they walked together across the room, the guests parted like the Red Sea for Moses.

*'Probably don't want to upset the big boss,' Kathleen thought, trying hard to suppress a snigger.*

When they reached the leather armchairs, W.P. waited for Kathleen to sit down before he sat down himself. Kathleen crossed her legs in a very proper fashion and tried to hold her wine glass like a real lady.

"Miss O'Malley, regarding the unfortunate incident with Miss Silverman..."

*'Uh-oh,' Kathleen thought.*

"... since the biography will not go ahead as planned, I'm afraid that we have to ask you to return the advance fee."

"All right."

"You understand?" W.P. said, leaning towards Kathleen.

"Oh, I certainly do, Mr. Carruthers. But perhaps it would be easier for both parties if I found another client for a new biography instead."

"We already have someone else lined up for you, Miss O'Malley. That is, if you're interested...?"

"Well, I... I know it's not common practice to ask for these things, but considering the complete lack of success with Miss Silverman, I think I need to know who it is before I can commit to it."

"It's a snooker player by the name of 'Steady Hands' Andy Merrick."

"Snooker? A snooker player?" Kathleen said and sat up straight.

"Yes. He's won the East Anglia regional snooker championship eleven years in a row so you should have plenty to write about."

"But I... snooker...?"

"His wife had read your biography on Kaye Jason and she thought that you did such a good job on that one that she called the publishing house to inquire about you."

"Oh. Well, that's... that's something at least."

"Indeed. Now, if you will excuse me, Miss O'Malley. I have other guests to see."

"But of course, Mr. Carruthers. Thank you for letting me know."

W.P. nodded as he left the cluster of armchairs. Kathleen slumped down in hers, leaning her head against the backrest.

'A snooker player? A bloomin' snooker player?!' Kathleen thought and drained her wine glass in one gulp. When a waiter walked by in the very same moment, Kathleen expertly put the empty glass on his tray and snatched a full one in a single motion.

'Well, at least it isn't likely that a snooker player would want to teach me the intricacies of tantric sex...' Kathleen thought and began to snigger.

"Ohhh! You're Kathleen O'Malley!" a female voice said from somewhere behind Kathleen, who craned her neck trying to see where the voice came from.



A middle-aged woman came around the chairs and sat down in the one recently vacated by W.P. She clapped her hands together excitedly and leaned forward so she could get closer to Kathleen.

"I read your biography on Margaret Lester-Williams. Oh, that was excellent," the woman said and waved her hand at Kathleen.

"Um, thank you," Kathleen said - she vaguely recognised the woman, but she couldn't remember her name at all. She desperately tried to dig through her brain so she wouldn't appear to be impolite and uncivilised, but she soon had to give up. A faint smile creased Kathleen's lips and the other woman seemed to pick up on it.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm S.J. Robertson, the author of the Inspector Morrison series."

"Oh, of course! Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Miss Robertson. How do you do," Kathleen said and shot forward so she could shake hands with the acclaimed author.

"How do you do. It's Mrs., actually, but please call me Sandy. You've written so many good biographies. My daughter just swallowed the one on Davey Boy in one sitting."

"Did she? I'm pleased to hear that. That was an, uh... interesting biography to work on," Kathleen said, hoping that the other woman didn't look through the PR talk.

Sandy looked left and right and then leaned even further forward, prompting Kathleen to do the same.

"I have to admit, if that had happened to me, I would've escaped to Timbuktu or Outer Mongolia, or somewhere similarly remote," Sandy said quietly.

"Ummm... Davey Boy's biography?"

"No, the picture in the Sun. The one where you kiss that tall, gorgeous woman. I'm heterosexual and happily married to a wonderful husband myself, but it makes me really proud to be so close to someone who is willing to fly the flag for gay rights."

Kathleen leaned back in her chair with a bump. The smile faded from her face and left her staring blankly at Sandy Robertson.

"... but I'm sure you've heard that countless times already. Please tell me that you're still seeing her?"

"Y-yes. We, uh... we live together."

"Oh, that's so wonderful to hear! Are you going to participate in the London Pride?"

"The London Pride?"

"It's in August... don't tell me you've never been to the Pride?" Sandy said and touched her throat with the tips of her fingers in a very theatrical fashion.

Kathleen shook her head.

"Oh, but you should! I went with a few friends last year to show our support. It's loud and colourful and everyone is having so much fun. You really should consider going, Kathleen. You'll meet so many of your gay brothers and sisters there."

"Well, I'll..." Kathleen said and shrugged non-committally.

"I hope you'll consider it. Oh, there's W.P. I need a word with him. It was very nice to meet you in person, Kathleen," Sandy said and got up from the chair. They shook hands again and then the middle-aged woman left Kathleen behind, striding across the conference room floor.

Kathleen sighed deeply and drained the second glass of wine. Over the next few minutes, she thought she could hear whispers going around the room that all said the same thing - 'Kathleen O'Malley... the Sun... kissing...'

She thought she could feel their eyes burning into the back of her head and little by little, she was working herself into a state of anxiety and anger. Snatching another wine glass from a waiter, she drained that, too, and then got up from the leather armchairs. Not bothering to say goodbye to W.P. or any of the guests, she staggered towards the exit on suddenly unsteady legs.

A warm summer breeze caressed her face as she left the building, and she took a deep breath to remove some of the cobwebs that had formed in her mind. Wiping her eyes to get rid of the tears that trickled down her cheeks for no logical reason, she began to walk towards her car.

After sitting down in the driver's seat, she let out a long, trembling sigh.

"God, why is it such a big deal for everyone? Why can't they just let me live my life how \*I\* want to live it...?" she said out loud, wiping her eyes again. Feeling deflated, she buckled up and put her fingers on the ignition key. Her conscience was screaming at her that she was well over the legal limit, but after pausing for a few moments to weigh her options, she turned the key.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Several hours later, Kathleen put her favourite ball point pen away and leaned back in her swivel chair. She let her eyes skim the words she had just spent the last few hours writing, thinking that it had done her good to pour out her inner feelings onto the paper.

After she had read her own words for the umpteenth time, she reached for the bottle of white wine she had brought into the study when she started writing. Suddenly noticing that it was empty, she looked up at the clock to see what time it actually was - nearly eight p.m.

"God... no wonder I'm hungry," she said and started to get up from the swivel chair. A few moments later, she bumped back down, too tipsy to get up in a hurry.

She sighed and rubbed her face with her hand. Trying again, she managed to get up and staggered into the kitchen. When she had so much trouble aiming for the light switch that she didn't hit it until the third attempt, she realised that she was in trouble again.

She groaned and leaned her forehead against the cool tiles in the kitchen. New tears escaped her eyes and began to drip down onto her cheeks. Wiping them off angrily, she turned around and opened the refrigerator.

---

Five minutes later, Kathleen carried a tray with a few sandwiches on it into the living room and put it down on the dinner table. She cracked open the can of 7Up she had chosen and poured some of it into a glass, hoping that the carbonated soft drink would help her clear her mind.

Picking up a salami sandwich, she took a bite and began to chew slowly. The living room was so quiet that she could clearly hear the rhythmic tick-tock from the clock on the shelf, and even the faint hum from the refrigerator out in the kitchen.

Suddenly feeling that the silence was threatening her, she got up from the table and walked over to the CD player. Once she started going through her CDs, it didn't take her long to decide to hear one of Loreena McKennitt's older albums. Taking the silver disc out of the cover, she popped it into the player and soon, the easily recognisable opening strains of The Mystic's Dream filled the room, drowning out the dreaded silence.

After finishing her snack and doing the dishes, she came back into the living room and sat down in the couch. Pulling a blanket over her, she snuggled down in the corner of the couch like she had done hundreds of times in the five years where her life had been devoid of any close relationships.

Eating alone had given her a few unpleasant flashbacks to the time when she did that every single day, and as the sandman slowly claimed her, her mind began to connect the separate images into a sequence.

///

'So, what do you think of her? What do you think of Becky?' Edward had said the morning after Kathleen and he had been at the airport to pick up his sister after she had returned from Africa where she had worked for a charity organisation.

'She's a very pretty girl, Edward. That obviously runs in the family.'

...

'Are you staring at me? Why are you staring at me?' Becky had said after she had caught Kathleen red-handed trying to stare a hole in the back of the brunette's head.

'Oh, no particular reason,' Kathleen had said. At the time, she was wondering why her stomach had been transformed into an aviary.

...

'Becky, I...' Kathleen had said a few weeks later, stuttering as she tried to get the words across.

'I...' she tried again, but the words still wouldn't come.

'Kathleen...'

'No, Becky, please let me speak. I... I th...'

At that point, Kathleen had taken a deep breath that was supposed to give her confidence.

'Becky, I think I'm in love with you.'

'In love? In love with me? You're in love with me?' Becky had said, seemingly taken aback by the statement.

'Y-Yes.'

Becky leaned back in her chair and began to chuckle. The chuckle soon evolved into a full belly laugh that grated terribly in Kathleen's ears. After a little while, the laughter died down.

'Filthy dyke!' Becky had suddenly said, jumping forward to deliver a hard slap across Kathleen's face.

///

Kathleen awoke with a jerk strong enough to send the blanket flying down onto the floor. She looked around in a panic, unable to comprehend where she was or what she was doing. After a few frantic moments, her foggy mind connected the dots and she became aware of her surroundings.

Letting out a trembling sigh, Kathleen fell back down on the couch and rubbed her brow. Peeking at the clock on the wall, she could see that she had slept for slightly less than two hours - it was now ten thirty. The buzz the wine had given her had worn off, replaced by a dull pain originating somewhere deep inside her brain.

Sighing, she swung her legs down onto the carpet and walked out into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea.

A few minutes later, she realised that she had an almost painful urge to hear Francesca's voice, so she put down the mug of tea and picked up her mobile phone.

Turning it on, she quickly found Francesca's number in the registry and then leaned back in the couch while it rang.

'It's Francesca,' the familiar female voice said at the other end of the connection.

"Hi, honey, it's me," Kathleen said and pulled her legs up underneath her.

'Oh... hi.'

"You sound tired...?"

'I was sleeping.'

"Oh... so soon?"

'Yes. It's been a long day.'

"Oh. I... uh, I'm so sorry, Francesca. I just wanted to hear your voice and... I'm sorry. I'll hang up now so you can go back to sleep."

'No, wait a minute. I'm up now, so we might as well talk. Are you all right? You sound a little funny.'

"Funny? I guess I'm a little down tonight. I miss you."

'I miss you, too, darling. How did the reception go?'

"Poorly."

'Oh...'

"I'll tell you later. I think I may have a new client for a biography, though."

'That's good news,' Francesca said and yawned audibly.

"Oh, God, I wish you were here with me. I need your arms around me so badly," Kathleen said in a very despondent voice. She rubbed her brow, trying to stop the inevitable tears from coming.

'Darling, I...'

"I need you," Kathleen said quietly.

'I... I can't come home right now. I have another full day tomorrow. I have obligations here, Kathleen. You know that.'

"But what about your obligations \*here\*?" Kathleen said. The words had been far stronger than she had intended and she knew the split second they had left her lips that she had crossed the line.

Her words were answered by a very long silence.

'That. Was. Unfair,' Francesca eventually said, emphasising every word in a tone of voice Kathleen hadn't heard her use since at the very start of their relationship.

Immediately, Kathleen felt an icy wave crash over her and her lower lip started quivering. She slammed her eyes shut but the tears still came, soon spilling over and running down onto her cheeks.

"God, I'm s-sorry, Francesca. I d-didn't mean t-to... I'm so s-sorry," Kathleen said, sobbing more than speaking.

'Mmmm.'

"Please f-forgive me. Please!"

'I love you, Kathleen. Of course I'll forgive you. But I did not deserve that quip.'

"I know. Please forgive me. I didn't mean it, it j-just... slipped out."

'Have you been drinking again?' Francesca suddenly said.

"D-drinking...? Earlier, yes... B-but I'm sober now."

'Kathleen, when I get back on Monday, we need to have a talk about that. I worry about you sometimes.'

"Wh-why?"

'Let's talk about that when I get home. I really need a good night's sleep, so... so how about we said goodnight now. I promise I'll call you tomorrow morning before the early session starts.'

"I... Okay. I understand. Goodnight, Francesca. L-love you...?" Kathleen said, adding a question mark to the end of the sentence. Fearing the worst, she held her breath as she waited to find out how much she had hurt Francesca with her juvenile remark.

'Love you, too, darling. Talk to you tomorrow morning. Goodnight,' Francesca said and hung up.

Mightily relieved but still rather upset, Kathleen let out the breath she had been holding and turned off the telephone. When she reached for her mug of tea, she discovered that it had gone cold while she had spoken to Francesca, and she pushed it away in frustration.

Feeling a familiar spark of anger inside, she got up from the couch and went straight over to the cupboard in the corner. She tore the door open with a whoosh and stared at the bottles of spirits she kept there - Gin, vodka and an exclusive Italian brandy.

Rounding up all three bottles, she stomped into the kitchen and put them down on the kitchen table with a loud clunk. The vodka only had a fifth left so that was the one she decided to start with. Unscrewing the cap, she poured the clear contents into the kitchen sink and down the drain, watching intently as the bottle rapidly emptied itself. Once that was done, the half-full bottle of gin soon followed.

When she held the brandy ready over the drain, she suddenly remembered that Francesca had given it to her for Christmas. As they had been unwrapping the gifts on Christmas morning, Francesca had told her a silly little story that it was practically a family brand because the distillery was owned by her father's half-brother's grandfather.

Kathleen's lips creased into a faint smile when she remembered that story - and the 'thank you' kiss that had followed.

*To throw one of Francesca's Christmas gifts away would be the ultimate insult. And I've only had one drink of it. No. This stays.'*

Sighing, she put the cap back on the bottle and carried it back into the living room.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

*Monday, June 6th.*

Kathleen was looking out of the window, fidgeting endlessly and feeling very much like a sailor's wife waiting for her partner to come home after a six months journey on the seven seas. She checked the clock on the wall every five seconds, wondering why time always went by so slowly when she was waiting for something important to happen.

When the taxi finally pulled up at the end of the driveway, Kathleen felt she would explode if she had to wait for one more second, so she opened the front door and ran down the garden path.

Francesca barely had time to pay the driver and carry her travel bags out of the taxi before Kathleen arrived, and the crushing hug that followed almost made the two of them tip over and land rear-end first on the gravelly surface.

After almost smothering Francesca with a kiss, Kathleen took a step back and put her hands on Francesca's sides.

"I'm so sorry for the things I said the other night, Francesca. Please forgive me," Kathleen said, trying very hard to keep eye contact with her partner through a veil of tears.

"I forgive you, darling. I told you Saturday night and I told you again Sunday morning," Francesca said and wiped away a few of Kathleen's tears with her fingers.

"Still."

"Come on, let's go inside. I really, really need to get my shoes off," Francesca said with a chuckle. Reaching down, she picked up her bags and began to stroll towards the cottage.

"I've made us lunch. I think you'll love it."

"Sounds good, darling. Do we have time for me to freshen up first?"

"Oh, of course. I've bought you a new shampoo. I noticed that the old one was nearly empty."

"Uh... thanks."

"Let me take that," Kathleen said and took the bag with Francesca's helmet. Smiling broadly, she skipped back up the garden path, leaving Francesca behind with a dumbstruck, gawping expression on her face.

---

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting at the dinner table eating a freshly made Greek salad with black olives and chunks of soft feta cheese - one of Francesca's favourite dishes.

"Do you like it?" Kathleen said, only stabbing at her own plate.

"It's exquisite, darling," Francesca said around a mouthful of salad. She reached for the garlic granulate shaker, but before she could pick it up, Kathleen had intercepted her hand.

"Francesca... no garlic. Please. I have something special planned for tonight and I'd rather not be wearing a gas mask... if you know what I mean," Kathleen said, batting her eyelids.

"Oh... I believe I do. I very much believe I do, darling," Francesca said and pulled her hand back. She picked up her fork and continued eating. "It tastes absolutely wonderful without, anyway. New shampoo, Greek salad... what's the occasion?" she continued.

"Oh, that you've returned."

"Well, I was only gone for three and a half days, you know."

"I also wanted to make up for the things I said over the phone. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm really sorry f-for those... those words," Kathleen said, shaking her head slowly.



Francesca put the fork back down and reached up to caress Kathleen's cheek. She let her thumb run across the delicate cheekbone, earning herself a wistful little smile in the process.

"Look, darling, I've already told you more than once.... I forgive you. It's very easy to do because I love you so much. Your words stung, I won't deny that. But I've always believed that it's better to get it out than to keep it bottled up. And you most decidedly did. All right?"

Kathleen shrugged and reached up to put her hand on Francesca's.

"All right," she said. Her voice broke up slightly so she cleared her throat and looked down, unable to hold Francesca's gaze.

"All right. That's all water under the bridge," Francesca said and clawed Kathleen's cheek gently.

"Thank you. I didn't tell you yesterday morning, but after we had spoken Saturday night, I thought about what you had told me. You said you worried about me sometimes, and... and I think you are right. I was drinking far too much. Well, I've poured the gin and the vodka down the drain. This is a new start for me," Kathleen said quietly, putting both hands on the table.

"Oh, I'm so glad, darling. I don't want to judge you, but you did drink too much at times. That's what I meant when I said I worried about you. I'm glad you saw it, too," Francesca said sincerely.

"The only thing left in the cupboard is the Italian brandy you gave me for Christmas. I.. I didn't want to throw away a Christmas present."

Francesca smiled and stabbed the last black olive with her fork.

---

Kathleen had volunteered to do the dishes so she was busy out in the kitchen. Frowning and taking a deep breath, worrying over what she might find, Francesca got up from the dinner table and walked towards the cupboard in the corner of the living room.

Constantly looking over her shoulder at the hallway so Kathleen wouldn't catch her snooping around, she opened the door to the cupboard and peeked inside. All that remained of their spirits was the bottle of Italian brandy, and that was only half-full.

For the briefest of moments, a thought regarding how much had been in the bottle the last time she had looked at it flashed through Francesca's mind, but it was too elusive for her to grasp hold of.

A contented smile broke out over her face and she nodded to herself, having just had a fantastic idea. After closing the door to the cupboard, she turned around and tip-toed over to the telephone.

A few minutes later, she put down the receiver and went into the kitchen to help Kathleen dry the dishes.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

"Darling, you said you had a possible new biography lined up. Should I hire some protection for you? A few beefy bodyguards?" Francesca said as they were sitting in the couch, listening to some relaxing music.

"No, no... it's a snooker player."

Francesca bit her lip to stop laughing but it only took her a few seconds to realise that it wasn't going to work. Laughter bubbled up from her chest and she leaned her head over the backrest of the couch and let out a loud belly laugh.

"A snooker player? What's the world coming to?" she said, still chuckling.

"Well, just so you know, his wife recommended me," Kathleen said and poked Francesca in the side with her thumb.

"Oh, did she? Well, that's something at least. A snooker player... Well, perhaps you could get some tips and tricks that we could use when we go on one of our infrequent visits down to the pub. We could make a fortune, you know. You could be a snooker wizard and I could be your manager."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Francesca said and pulled Kathleen even closer.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and Kathleen looked up at the clock on the wall - it was a quarter past three in the afternoon.

"Who on Earth could that be...? Are you expecting someone?"

"Nope," Francesca said, wearing a sly grin.

"Francesca Carrara, what did you do?"

"I didden do nuthin'," Francesca said in a mock accent, doing the sign of the cross and then kissing her fingers.

"Oh, sure. That's what they all say," Kathleen said and got up from the couch. She went over to the front door and opened it - and stopped dead in her tracks.

A twenty-something man was waiting outside, dressed in a typical courier uniform and holding a gigantic bouquet of flowers and a small white card in his hand.

"Miss Kathleen O'Malley?" he said, reading off the card.

"Y-yes...?"

"Flowers-4-U would like to wish you a happy anniversary, courtesy of Miss Francesca Carrara," he said and handed Kathleen the bouquet.

Kathleen stared in wide-eyed disbelief at the bouquet. She didn't know what to say or to do so she just turned away from the door and walked back into the living room.

"Miss? Miss...? I need your signature on the receipt," the courier said and held up the white card.

Kathleen looked back at him, wearing a completely blank expression on her face. When it finally got through to her what the man was saying, she nodded and carefully put down the flowers on the dinner table. Walking on very wobbly legs, she returned to the door to write her name on the dotted line.

Once the courier had left, Kathleen turned around to look at Francesca who hadn't moved at all - apart from curling herself up into a corner, resting her hands on her head. The look of pure, unbridled love in her ice blue eyes was undeniable and unmistakable.

Kathleen let out a cheerful whoop that unfortunately came out as a strangled sob. She forgot all about the flowers and ran straight over to Francesca and threw herself into her partner's arms, hugging her strong torso to the point of crushing it.

"Oh, God... oh, God..." Kathleen said; her voice was muffled by speaking into the nook of Francesca's neck.

"Shhh, it's all right, darling," Francesca said and ran her hands up and down Kathleen's back.

"God, I love you so much."

"I love you, too, darling. Did you like the flowers?"

"Y-yes, they're magnificent. Wh-when did you order those?"

"Not long ago. While you were doing the dishes," Francesca said with a beaming smile.

"Oh... but why did he say it was an anniversary?"

"Well, that's because they didn't have a 'miscellaneous' category. It was either a birthday or an anniversary. I chose anniversary. And actually, it is an anniversary of sorts."

"It is?"

"Sure. This time last year, we were sharing a flat in the pension in Paris, remember?"

"I remember. I had a wonderful time," Kathleen said and gave Francesca a new hug.

"Umm, darling...?"

"Mmmm?"

"Do you want to go back with me to Le Mans on Tuesday the fourteenth or would you rather stay at home?"

Kathleen's only reply was to bury herself even deeper into Francesca's embrace.

"Darling?" Francesca said after a little while of complete silence.

"I'm thinking."

"Oh."

Kathleen sighed and pulled back so she could slip down next to Francesca on the couch. Baring her teeth in a grimace, she ran a hand through her hair and wrapped an arm around Francesca's waist.

"I swore that I'd never go back to that dreadful place, but on the other hand, I know how much that race means to you."

"Darling, if you don't want to go, that's fine by me. I'll just text you regular updates like..."

"No, hear me out, please," Kathleen said and put a finger across Francesca's lips.

"Okay...?"

"I'll go out of my mind if I have to stay here... at home, alone... while you're racing around the clock."

"But you could follow the race live on the 'Net...?"

"No. If I listen to Radio 24, I'll be a nervous wreck. I'll constantly worry about hearing your name when they're talking about an acci... no, that won't work. I'll have a panic attack before the first hour is over."

"That could happen at the track, too, you know," Francesca said and mussed Kathleen's white-blond hair.

"I know, but I want to be with you, Francesca. Wherever you may wish to go, I want to be right there, next to you," Kathleen said, leaning her head down on Francesca's shoulder.

"Oh..."

Kathleen sighed again and turned to look at Francesca. Making up her mind, she took Francesca's hands and gave them a little squeeze.

"Love, I wrote something on Saturday afternoon that... that wasn't really supposed to be read by anybody. But now, I'd like you to read it. It's very personal."

"All right?"

"Hang on, I'll get it. You'll know what I mean when you start reading it," Kathleen said and got up from the couch. A minute later, she returned holding the hand-written note she had made on Saturday.

"Here. Please don't comment on it until you've read it all," Kathleen said quietly, handing Francesca the note.

As Francesca started unfolding the piece of paper so she could read it, Kathleen moved away and began to take care of the bouquet of flowers.

I need to put these thoughts down on paper or else I'll go insane from the pent-up frustration. I have good things I want to talk about and bad things I need to talk about. I'll start with the bad things to get them off my chest first.

Sally Sharpe, my rival.

One day, Francesca will come home and tell me that she's leaving me. Leaving me for Sally Sharpe. I know she will. It's inevitable. How can I compete with her? I'm a mouse and she's beautiful, clever, young, witty and she already knows the ins and outs of Francesca's world. Unlike me who has to have everything explained; sometimes more than once. I have a feeling it frustrates Francesca more than she lets on.

Rachel Silverman, rebel without a cause. Or a clue.

I don't even know where to start with Rachel. I never thought the difference between someone's public persona and the way they conducted their private life could be so great. I felt annoyed. Disgusted. Betrayed. The straw that broke the camel's back wasn't even her peculiar, inappropriate offer - no, it was the simple fact that she was so irresponsible. Clearly a case of too much money, too little sense.

Kate O'Malley, my mother.

Like in the tragic tales of the ancient world, I have become my mother. At least, that's how I feel sometimes. I don't understand why or when it happened, but it has. All I need to do to see my mother is to hold up a mirror. Every now and then, I catch myself using phrases that she has used; I judge people by negative stereotypes like she does; I make the same wrong decisions she has already made. I look, act and sound so much like her it scares me.

I can't understand where she's coming from or why she's acting the way she is towards us. I wish I did. Unfortunately, I have a feeling that I'll never know why she's so dead set against us. That also means that we'll never have a chance to set things right between us.

And now the good things:

My recent birthday on May 26th.

I had such a wonderful time. Francesca and I went to eat lunch in a fancy restaurant, then we caught a movie I had wanted to see. When darkness fell, we had a simple, late dinner and then we had a glorious time in the bedroom, making love in the most extravagant, wild, unrestrained fashion imaginable. We collapsed in each other's arms, completely spent and completely in love. It was a wonderful day.

Francesca Carrara, my friend, my lover, my soulmate.

Whenever Francesca is away, I feel incomplete. Like one half of my soul is missing. I have never felt this way before in my life; I have never even heard or read about it. At first, I thought something was wrong with me... but then I realised that it was love. I love Francesca dearly, of that there's no doubt. I could live without water, without air, without food. It would be impossible for me to live without Francesca.

When I first met her, I was intimidated by her. She was an imposing woman; a blue-eyed Italian Goddess. However, it didn't take me more than a few days to realise that she was far more than that. She was a warm, wonderful human being - with a Goddess-like stature, mind you.

All she needs to do to make my knees weak is to smile at me. That beautiful, sexy smile of hers that can light up a dark room. When her eyes sparkle, I lose the ability to speak. When we touch, I lose the ability to think. When we make love, I lose myself completely! Every last bit of me becomes a part of her. It's quite extraordinary. I never, ever want to lose that.

I will love Francesca with all my heart until the day I draw my last breath.

Kathleen O'Malley.'

"Oh, darling," Francesca said quietly as she put away the note. Finding a balled-up hankie, she used it to discreetly dab away a few tears that had escaped her eyes. Suddenly feeling quite emotional, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a long, trembling sigh.

"Did you read it? All of it?" Kathleen said, coming up to stand behind Francesca so she didn't have to look her in the eye.

"I did."

"Well, that's who I am. That's what I feel right now."

Francesca turned around in the couch so she could look at her partner.

"You needn't worry at all, darling. The only thing that can make me leave you is \*you\* telling me to take a hike," she said and took Kathleen's hands.

"That won't happen," Kathleen said with a sad, little chuckle.

"Then I'll never leave. That's a promise, not a threat. And by the way, I never tire of explaining things to you."

"I love you, Francesca," Kathleen said and put her hands on Francesca's shoulders.

"I love you, too, Kathleen. Now come and sit down so we can, uh, cuddle for an hour or two," Francesca said, patting the seat next to her. Her features were graced by the very smile Kathleen had described in the note, and as usual, it made the author's resolve melt away like a snowball in summer.

Kathleen nodded. With a sniff, she walked around the couch and let herself fall down into Francesca's waiting arms.

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 10**

*Tuesday, June 14th.*

"Uh... Francesca Carrara, uh, avec Kathleen O'Malley. Uh, equipe company automobile. Je suis pilote de Maserati Corse. Racing pilote, uh, in, uh, la course. Le Vingt-Quatre, you know," Francesca said to the French highway patrol officer who had pulled them over at the side of the Auto Route that led to the city of Le Mans.

The officer didn't seem too impressed by Francesca's attempt at speaking French - instead, he was studying her driver's license closely, occasionally looking at her face to compare it with the picture on the plastic card.

"Miss Carrara, I'm giving you a ticket for driving above the speed limit. You were driving 67 KM/H in a 60 zone. That's a 100 Euro fine. Here you go, Miss," the officer said in near-perfect English, tearing off a ticket from his well-used notepad and handing it to Francesca.

"Oh... uh. Thank you, officer," Francesca said, chewing on her lip as she was looking at the ticket.

"And Miss Carrara?"

"Yes, officer?"

"The next time you get pulled over, try English first."

"Er... thank you, officer."

The Gendarme closed his visor and went back to his motorcycle. A few moments later, he turned around and went back to the place he had been watching from.

"Oh, great. Just great," Francesca said and handed Kathleen the speeding ticket.

"I'm sorry, Francesca. I didn't even notice how fast we were going. I would have told you if I had," Kathleen said and patted Francesca's thigh.

"I know you would, darling. Oh, well. Are you still buckled up?"

"Oh, yes."

"We better continue on, then," Francesca said and started the engine of her brand new Maserati GranTurismo S company car.

"Love, will this affect your racing license?"

"No, not when it's just a speeding ticket. If I lose my regular driver's license, I'll lose my racing license as well."

"Oh. Well, let's hope that won't happen on this trip," Kathleen said and patted Francesca's thigh again.

"Huh! I'd say!"

---

Twenty minutes later, they drove slowly underneath a bridge that had 'WELCOME TO LE MANS - CIRCUIT DE LA SARTHE' written on it in large, bold letters.

Francesca pulled up to a booth and showed hers and Kathleen's access cards and pit credentials to the man working there. After checking them thoroughly, he nodded and handed them back to Francesca.

Francesca was about to drive off when an idea hit her. She looked briefly at Kathleen and then back at the man in the booth.

"Is it still possible to buy a pass for a lap of the circuit?" Francesca said, digging into her jacket to find her wallet.



"Yes, Miss. Fifty Euros for two laps."

"Actually we only need one lap, if you have it."

"Sorry, Miss, two laps is the minimum."

"Okay. Whatever," Francesca said and handed the man in the booth a fifty Euro bill.

He tore off a small piece of paper with a sticker on it and handed it back to Francesca.

"This needs to go on your windshield before you enter the circuit, Miss. You can apply it right over there," the man said and pointed at a small parking lot not far from the booth.

"All right. Thank you," Francesca said and drove off, headed for the small parking lot.

"Wait a minute, are you... are we actually going onto the circuit now? Isn't that dangerous?" Kathleen said and turned around in her seat.

"I thought I'd show you a lap of the Circuit de la Sarthe, yes. And no, it's not dangerous. The race cars won't take to the track until tomorrow afternoon. They're all in the city of Le Mans itself, at the Place Des Jacobins for the technical scrutineering."

"Oh... Okay. Francesca, please don't drive at 200 m.p.h. I think I'd wet my pants if you did that."

"That's a promise. I'll drive like my grandmother did when she travelled around Rome in her Fiat Cinquecento," Francesca said with a broad grin.

After making sure the sticker was on straight, Francesca got back in the car and started the engine.

"Welcome to Le Mans, darling. You're about to go where very few women have gone before."

"And for a good reason. Very few women are crazy enough to be here," Kathleen added under her breath and made sure her seatbelt was tight.

"Oh, no. It's such a wonderful circuit. I think you'll agree once we've done a lap," Francesca said and drove slowly past the pits complex and out into the empty pitlane.

Seeing the track and the main grandstand completely empty was a strange experience for Francesca. Even on the test day, there would be activity in the pitlane, and there were always fans looking on.

As soon as they drove past the lights at the end of the pitlane, Francesca accelerated, enjoying the responsiveness of the rumbling V8 in the front of the GranTurismo S.

"All right, first we go up the hill towards the Dunlop Chicane. We usually take the entry in first and stay in that gear until we've through. Back in the old days, this chicane didn't exist. It was just a flat-out blast from the Ford Chicane and down into Tertre Rouge," Francesca explained as they drove through the chicane and under the Dunlop bridge.

"That sounds dangerous."

"Back then, it was murderously fast, so for once, I agree with you. Okay, here we have the Chapelle and the Forest Esses. Pretty boring section of the track, if you ask me," Francesca said as they swept through a long right, then a harder left and into the short straight that would take them to the famous Tertre Rouge section.

"This corner has actually been opened up quite a lot for this year. Now, it's really great. We can accelerate non-stop from the exit of the Esses until this point..." Francesca said and pointed at a signboard they went past.

"... feather the throttle through Tertre Rouge and then it's foot to the floor for the fastest part of the track, the first part of the Hunaudieres... better known as the Mulsanne Straight."

"Fascinating," Kathleen said, secretly rather enjoying being able to watch Francesca applying her trade in person instead of on the TV.

"On the test day we reached 208 m.p.h. here, foot to the bulkhead in sixth, going at nearly ten thousand revs. The twelve is making that glorious trombone-like sound again, howling at the top of its lungs."

"It's a car, dear, not a human being," Kathleen said and patted Francesca's thigh. Suddenly she noticed that the speedo read 110 m.p.h. and she could feel her jaw fall down.

"Are we doing a hundred and ten? We're doing a hundred and ten!" Kathleen said and grabbed her seatbelt.

"Yeah, and you can hardly feel it. Lovely stuff," Francesca said and began to brake for the first chicane on the Mulsanne Straight. She crawled through it at 35 m.p.h. so Kathleen wouldn't get scared, but as soon as she went back onto the second part of the Mulsanne, she floored the throttle again.

"The second chicane is much faster even though they're supposed to be mirror images of each other. I've never worked out why," Francesca said as they were approaching the second chicane. Checking her mirrors, she let the car glide into the chicane, scrubbing off speed as it entered. The right-hand side tyres howled briefly, but Francesca soon turned the car to the right, transferring the weight to the left side.

Once they were back out on the straight, Francesca kept to a lower speed for one of the more spectacular sections of the track.

"Here we go, darling, this is the hump," Francesca said as they crossed over the Mulsanne Hump at the end of the straight.

As the car plunged down the other side of the hump, Kathleen felt her stomach fly up into her throat and she let out a squeal.

"God, how fast did we go just now?" she said, trying to see what the speedo said.

"85 m.p.h. In the race car, it's closer to twice that."

"God..."

"I didn't want you to lose your lunch all over the upholstery, darling," Francesca said with a grin.

"Thank you!"

Francesca was already braking for the second-gear Mulsanne Corner, taking it easy on the road car's brakes so they wouldn't get too hot too soon in the lap.

"Now we're on the return trip. I'm going to stop in a moment," Francesca said as they made their way past the old signalling pits and up towards the first brow on the straight between Mulsanne Corner and Indianapolis.

"This is where you had your accident, isn't it?" Kathleen said quietly.

"Yes."

After they had gone over the second brow, Francesca pulled over by the side of the road and turned off the engine. Putting both hands on top of the steering wheel, she took a deep breath and looked at the guard-rail on the left side of the track.

"That spot right over there is where I ended my race last year. And probably lost the world championship as well."

"God, Francesca! Who cares about that... you could've lost your life there!" Kathleen said, claspng her hands together in front of her in a gesture that almost looked like she was praying.

In her mind's eye, Kathleen saw the accident unfold - she saw the silver Mercedes come up behind the Toyota and then take off, flying through the air more than fifteen feet off the ground. She remembered the silence that spread out in the pits and in the main grandstand; she remembered how she had sprinted all the way up the paddock to get to the infield medical facility to see Francesca, and most of all, she remembered how frail Francesca had looked in the hospital the next day when Kathleen had gone to see her.

"Mmmm. I don't remember much from the crash. I can remember some of the lap leading up to it, but not the actual impact," Francesca said, absentmindedly rubbing her hip.

"Francesca, ten days ago on the test day... did you hesitate when you reached the second brow for the first time?"

"No."

"Not even a little bit?"

"No. I didn't hesitate, I didn't lift the throttle, I didn't do anything out of the ordinary. Kathleen, like I've told you before, the moment we start thinking that, even subconsciously, is the moment we're done. And I'm not done yet. Not by a long shot."

Behind them, a Porsche 997 Turbo on German license plates came out of Mulsanne Corner and began the drive up through the forest. Within seconds, it came whistling past where the Maserati was parked, reminding Kathleen how fast the cars would actually be going there once the race started.

"This is a dangerous section of the track. It's so narrow and the trees are so close... I can't understand why they don't change it," Kathleen said, looking at the tail lights of the Porsche as it turned into Indianapolis several hundred metres ahead of them.

"Well, I don't know, to be honest. I guess this is the heart of Le Mans. The straight between Mulsanne and Indy is pretty much unchanged since 1923."

"How many drivers have died here over the decades?"

"On the track as a whole, or just here?"

"As a whole."

Francesca sighed and looked back at the guard-rail on the opposite side of the track.

"I don't know the exact number, but it's a few. It's been a couple of years since the last one now, but the next one is always just one mistake or a mechanical problem away. If you want to measure yourself against the greats, you'll have to come here. Some drivers want it just a little too much, I guess."

"I understand the history of the place, but..." Kathleen said and visibly got the shivers.

"Come on, let's move on. No point in dwelling on the past," Francesca said and started the engine. After checking the mirrors thoroughly, she drove back onto the track and was soon up to speed.

Six hundred metres further up the track, she went through the soft right kink, braked into the left-hand Indianapolis corner and immediately set the car up for the ninety degree right-hander at Arnage.

"Do you know why it's called Indianapolis, darling?"

"Uh, no?"

"It's because it's banked."

"Oh. So?"

"It's a long story, darling. Anyway, this is Arnage, the slowest corner on the circuit. It's so damn slippery even when the track is bone dry. It's definitely not my favourite part. Look at the tyre barrier at the outside of the corner," Francesca said and pointed at a large stack of tyres protecting the outside.

"Yes?"

"I'll guarantee you that those tyres will get intimately acquainted with at least five cars through the race. Gua-ran-tee it. It always catches out the unprepared... and even the prepared some times."

"Oh..."

Francesca stepped hard on the throttle coming out of Arnage and the Maserati began the trip towards the entry of the Porsche Turns.

"This section of the circuit is fantastic, especially in the magic hour when the sun goes down. It's so fast, you almost feel like you're flying... er, bad choice of words. Anyway, the soft left and the hard right are fantastic corners."

"I have to take your word for it. I just think they're fast," Kathleen said; her eyes glued to the speedo which read 95 m.p.h.

As Francesca entered the first of the Porsche Turns, she kept to a moderate pace and just let the car flow through the sequence of left and right corners.

"Back in the really old days, the circuit didn't come through here. It went straight on where we entered the Turns, going through the Maison Blanche section. Damn, I would've loved to try that."

"I believe you! Sheesh!" Kathleen said with a loud chuckle. She hung onto the panic grip above the door, getting shoved left and right in the seat as the car went through the turns.

"We're coming up to the end of the lap now, darling. Do you want to do another one? We bought two laps, remember."

"Oh, I... would you feel disappointed if I said no?"

"Of course not."

"I'd rather go back to the pits. I'm not cut out for all this fast driving. I think I need a pair of pliers to get my fingers off the panic grip, actually," Kathleen said with an apologetic chuckle.

"No problem," Francesca said and took her foot off the throttle so the car could run out of steam on its own. Instead of going left into the Ford Chicane, she steered right into the pit lane entrance, braking gently as she navigated the left-right sequence designed to slow down the cars.

Once they were back in the pitlane, she made sure that she was sticking to the 15 m.p.h. speed limit so they wouldn't get in trouble with the track officials. A short while later, she turned into a small access tunnel that would take them back to the paddock.

"That was a lap of Le Mans, Kathleen. This weekend, I'll hopefully do, oh... three hundred and eighty laps or so. That should take us somewhere near the podium. The rest is up to the racing Gods."

"I hope you'll make it. I know how much it means to you," Kathleen said and reached over to give Francesca a soft kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, darling. It would be awfully nice to see my name on the trophy, that's for sure. Oh, here we are," Francesca said and drove into a small parking space next to their regular Knaus Sunliner motorhome.

"Motorhome, sweet motorhome," Kathleen joked and unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Definitely beats the sheep shearing shed we were staying in last year. God, remember that?"

"Yes. The blanket was too short even for me."

Francesca laughed and rubbed Kathleen's thigh with her hand.

"While we're on the subject... remember Belle?" Kathleen said, winking.

"I remember Belle. I wonder if she's here this year. She was a pretty good press liaison, so I'm thinking she must be. Hey, I'm sorry the two of you didn't get along last year."

"Well... it was inevitable, really. The ex and the current never get along."

"True," Francesca said and opened the door.

Once out, she stretched her back and went around the car to open the trunk. Taking out their travel bags, she looked around at some of the other motorhomes present.

"Jeez, look at the behemoth Toyota has put up. That's not a hospitality area, that's a bloomin' palace," she said, nodding at the three-story structure made exclusively in glass and chrome.

"Where is the Maserati one?" Kathleen said, putting the strap of a bag over her shoulder.

"It's the dark blue one with the large trident on the front. Looks like they're working on putting up the tent for the guests as we speak," Francesca said, pointing at a group of men working hard to erect a large tent a bit further down the paddock.

"The Mercedes hospitality had free food and drink last year. Do you think Maserati will have the same now?"

"Not sure... but we have plenty of time to check it out later. I think we probably will. We're Italians, how can we live without pasta e vino?" Francesca said and unlocked the door to the motorhome.

"Oh... and amore, of course," Francesca added after a few moments, flashing Kathleen her patented 200-watt smile.

.\_\*.\_\*\_.\_

Wednesday, June 15th.

"Honey, would you mind getting the door? I'm standing in my knickers here..." Francesca said from the bedroom.

"I'm on it. Don't want to give anybody a heart attack before the race has even started," Kathleen said and got up from the plywood bench doubling for a couch.

When she opened the door, she was greeted by Patrizia's smiling face. When the young girl saw that it wasn't Francesca, the smile briefly faded but was soon back on.

"Buongiorno, signorina O'Malley. C'è un messaggio per Francesca. Uh, I mean... note for Francesca," Patrizia said and held out a formal looking piece of paper.

"Grazie, Patrizia. I'll let Francesca know that you were here," Kathleen said with a smile and a little wave. Patrizia echoed the wave and ran off.

"Francesca, there's a note for you!" Kathleen said loudly so Francesca could hear it through the closed door. "It's the, uh... the time table for the weekend!"

"No need to shout, I'm right here," Francesca said and opened the door to the bedroom. As she came out, she zipped her driving suit down a little bit so she had more space to breathe.

"Oh, ha, ha. You weren't before."

"What does it say?" Francesca said and sat down so she could put on her racing boots.

"What?"

"The time table, darling."

"Oh. Well, it's..." - Kathleen checked her watch - "Twenty past two now. All right, let's see... At three, there's an official team photo shoot in the pit lane. Three fifteen, team briefing. Four thirty, official start to the first free practice session. Seven thirty, dinner break. Eight thirty, second free practice. Eleven thirty, the track closes for the night. Eleven forty-five, team debriefing."

"Thanks," Francesca said and moved Kathleen's hair away so she could kiss her on the neck.

"Wait a minute, does that mean I won't get to see you until past midnight?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Mmmmhh! In that case, you better give me a goodbye kiss that'll last for a wee while! And I mean right this instant!" Kathleen said and stomped down her foot on the plush carpet.

"Your wish is my command, my dear," Francesca said and grabbed Kathleen with both arms. In a fluid motion, she dipped her impossibly low and claimed her lips in a searing kiss that left both of them out of breath - and wearing goofy grins.

"Will that do?" Francesca husked.

"Ohhhhhh yeah."

---

Ten minutes later, Francesca and Kathleen left the motorhome and ventured out into the pitlane that was slowly coming alive. More drivers had arrived in their posh company cars and hordes of mechanics were swarming around the large transporters, unloading the precious cargo that had returned from the scrutineering.

As they were walking slowly through the paddock, Kathleen looked left and right, taking in all the sights. With the things she had learned in the twelve months that had passed since she had been there last, she understood far more of what she saw than she initially thought, and she was quite proud of herself for doing so.

She had borrowed a dark blue Maserati polo shirt with a small, white Trident on the breast pocket, and she was wearing the colours with pride. She had decided on wearing a pair of dark blue jeans so the ensemble would match, and as she walked very close to Francesca, she thought she very much looked the part.

"What's the time, darling?"

"Two thirty plus two minutes. You have plenty of time to make it to the photo shoot. Would you mind if we..."



"Francesca! Hey, Francesca!" someone said from somewhere behind them. When they turned around, they could see a group of fans walk towards them carrying Maserati bags with PR material sticking out. One of them turned around and waved excitedly at someone even further away.

"Photo?" a man said, holding up a small digital camera.

"Sure, why not," Francesca said and put her arm around the man's shoulder.

The man's wife snapped a couple of times and then gave Francesca and her husband a thumbs-up.

"Anyone else want a picture while we're at it?" Francesca said loudly in an exaggerated Cockney accent, much to the amusement of the fans.

Several people put their hands in the air, and Francesca waved them over with a broad smile on her face. One after the other, people took pictures of Francesca and each other until they all were satisfied.

When most of the group of fans walked on, a young boy of about ten stayed behind, clearly wanting to ask for something - and equally clearly not finding the courage to do so.

Kathleen picked up on his hesitancy and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Would you like to have your picture taken with Francesca?"

"N-no. I w-would like her to autograph my poster... please," he stuttered.

"Well, who says we can't do both. I need a pen, though. Do you have one?" Francesca said with a smile.

"Y-yes. Right here," the boy said and held out a ball point pen he had been clutching in his hand.

"And then I need the poster, please."

"H-here," the boy said, reached into his Maserati bag and picked out a promotional poster from the championship race at Spa the year before.

"Oh, that's a nice promo shot of me, don't you think, darling?" Francesca said as she doodled her signature on the poster in a free space above her own head.

"Absolutely."

"What's your name?" Francesca said.

"T-Tommy Wilkins."

"Tommy Wilkins it is. Here you go," Francesca said and handed back the poster.

"Do you have a camera?" Kathleen said, but the boy just shook his head as he very carefully put the poster back in the bag.

"Oh... well, perhaps we'll bump into each other again some time this weekend, huh?" Francesca said and gave the boy his ball point pen back.

"Th-thank you, Miss Francesca."

"You're welcome, Tommy. Now run along before your parents get worried."

"Yes, Miss," the boy said and darted off down the paddock.

"Oh, God, if only every celebrity was as accommodating as you are," Kathleen said and wrapped her arm around Francesca's waist.

"Well, you know... hey, what time is it?"

"Quarter to three."

"Damn, then we don't have time to check out the hospitality area," Francesca said and slapped her forehead.

"But I'm hungry!"

"You can go there yourself, you're a big girl," Francesca teased and quickly moved away in case Kathleen would retaliate.

"So now we won't see each other until after midnight, right?"

"Probably, yes."

Kathleen looked left and right and then leaned in towards Francesca to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Love you. Please drive carefully."

"I will. Love you, too," Francesca said and gave Kathleen's hands a little squeeze before she took off down the paddock.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Thursday, June 16th.

'Hello and welcome to the third qualifying session here at Le Mans. It's nearly six p.m. and the track is about to be opened. If you weren't watching last night, all you need to know is that it was raining on and off the entire evening so hardly any competitive times were set. You're watching Eurosport, I'm Patrick Murphy and with me in the booth is a true Le Mans veteran, Derek Harrison. Welcome, Derek,' the commentator droned.

Kathleen was sitting on a chair in the spectator enclosure, watching the preparations unfold with great interest. She could feel that everyone was more nervous because of the bad weather the previous day and she wished she was taking notes for a book - she was sure it would be a best-seller.

'Today it's going to be make or break, do or die, now or never... or any of the two dozen other clichés you can think of. Derek, you've often been in this situation. How does a driver prepare him- or herself the best?'

'Well, he or she closes the visor and steps on the throttle, Patrick.'

'And that's all there is to it?'

'More or less, yes.'

'Where do you think we'll see the most fireworks tonight?'

'Well, Maserati for one. They're defending champions and they're really on a roll. Fabio Dellasandro and my old team-mate Francesca Carrara...'

As soon as Francesca's name was mentioned, Kathleen picked up her ears and put on the headset.

'... have won two in a row and they're joint leaders of the championship. Let's see, where are they on the provisional grid...?'

'The two works Maseratis #1 and #2 and the semi-works #33 are in ninth, fifth and twelfth respectively after last night's rain-affected session, but that doesn't mean anything.'

'No, those times are inconclusive. Anyway, they'll be worth looking out for. The two factory Nissans form the other major story. Their entire project is based on success here, but so far, they haven't really shown anything. However, scuttlebutt has it that they're running with an engine referred to as a 'superbomb'. They've screwed the turbo boost knob up as far as it'll go and according to a mechanic I spoke to, they're squeezing nearly one thousand b.h.p. out of it,' Derek Harrison said.

'Well, that's quite astounding if that figure is really true. Derek, one team that isn't here this year is of course Mercedes, your old team. Do you think we'll ever see them back?'

'There's a very short answer to that question, Patrick, and it's 'no'. We all remember what happened to Francesca last year, and... frankly, it was a PR disaster.'

'Yes. I believe the clip of the accident has several million hits on YouTube.'

When Kathleen heard that, she got the shivers and crinkled her nose in disgust.

'Indeed. Well, like I said, the focus will be on those two teams with the factory Toyotas possibly getting a look in. My gut is telling me that the turbo cars, chiefly the Nissans but again, possibly the Toyotas, will claim the first row but third and further down is up for grabs for anyone interested.'

'And they all are. We're just going to take a quick commercial break before the action begins, so stay with us, please.'

Once the ads started, Kathleen took off the headset and turned back around so she could watch everything that went on in the pits.

---

"Fran, you're going out first. The weather report says that it'll be clear and dry all evening. Very little wind and twenty degrees centigrade. Conditions should be pretty good," Giampaolo said.

"Right," Francesca said and closed the little Velcro straps on her gloves.

"No heroics to begin with, don't forget we're only ninth after yesterday's times. I want you to do a banker and two flyers as usual. Once the front runners have set times, we can look at adjusting the approach."

"All right."

"Green light in two minutes. Get in and get ready."

"Yep," Francesca said and pressed the little button to open the door. Taking a deep breath, she slid across the wide tunnels and climbed into the racing seat.

---

'Green light in thirty seconds, Fran. Off you go,' Giampaolo said over the radio, giving her a thumbs-up through the windscreen.

Francesca put her finger on the starter button and felt the twelve coming to life behind her. She checked the gauges thoroughly and then selected first gear.

After stuttering down the pitlane on the limiter, she went up to the end of a line of cars waiting for the lights at the end of the pits to change to green. Finding herself looking straight up the tailpipes of one of the factory Toyotas, Francesca couldn't help but wonder how often she'd be in the same situation come race day.

When the lights changed to green, she and all the other drivers let the clutch in slowly and began to roll out of the pits and onto the track. It only took her two corners to feel that the surface was still quite slippery after the rain the day before, and she made a mental note to remember to take it careful in the Dunlop Chicane on her first fast lap.

The exploratory lap went by quickly as usual and Francesca soon turned out of the Ford Chicane and onto the pits straight. She eased it into sixth just as she passed the start-finish line, soon preparing to let the car glide into the first chicane.

As she reached Dunlop, she knew at once she had gone in too fast. The fronts lost grip and the MC12 understeered into the first part of the chicane. Francesca let out a few colourful curses and tried to steer it through the left-right sequence, but the car just went straight on and rattled over the curbs on the outside of the corner, ending up four feet off the track - but more importantly, just short of the deep gravel trap.

Francesca cursed again and checked her mirror before she re-joined the track. Knowing that her mistake would soon turn up on the timing monitor, she keyed the mic.

"Pits, I went off at Dunlop. Skimmed the gravel. Car okay, car okay," she said and turned back onto the track itself.

*'Roger, Fran.'*

She hugged the inside line down through the Chapelle and into Tertre Rouge to keep out of the way of any faster cars that could come up behind her. Once she was back on the Mulsanne, she went up through the gears and was soon mentally preparing herself for another attempt at setting a qualifying time.

---

At the end of the next lap, Francesca could see on the on-board display that she was well up on the split time in the second sector. Feeling a lot more confident in the car than on the first lap, she threw it into the first of the Porsche Turns, hoping that she wouldn't meet any slower traffic that would disrupt her flyer.

She went through the fast sweepers on the very edge of the tyres' adhesion, riding the razor's edge between being in total control and being totally out of control.

Coming into the Ford Chicane, she braked at the limit and flung the car into the left-right-left-right mess at the end of the lap. The car fishtailed slightly as it came onto the front straight, but it wasn't enough to have an impact on the lap time.

When Francesca saw 3:38.472 show up on the display as she crossed the start- finish line, she grunted and allowed herself the briefest of smiles.

*'Second position, Fran. Position two, position two.'*

"Copy, pits. Starting final flyer."

---

Kathleen listened in on the headset, using both hands to hold it close to her head to drown out the sound of Luca's MC12 that was still warming up in the other pit bay.

"Come on, come on..." she whispered, trying to cross her fingers.

One of the TV cameras picked up Francesca's black-and-turquoise Maserati as it went onto the first part of the Mulsanne Straight. Francesca was flashing the headlights furiously to warn a slower GT2 some two hundred yards ahead of her.

'There's Francesca Carrara in the #1 Maserati. She's just set a time of three minutes thirty-eight and change, good enough for second place. Let's see, what's her time in the first sector...? All right, thirty-four seconds, not bad. But now she's coming up behind some traffic and that could spoil this lap,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'Well, never count Francesca out. I've seen her do a few surprising things,' Derek Harrison said.

"Oh, you better believe it!" Kathleen said loudly and then realised that she was talking to the television set. She looked around but no one had noticed.

'One of the Nissans flashes across the line aaaaaaand... yes! We have a new pole position time of three minutes thirty-six seconds point eight nine seven. That's going to be tough for the others to beat,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'Indeed. Looks like the mechanic was right when he told me about the superbomb engine.'

'Well, one thing's for sure... they can't use that in the race. They'd only last five laps!'

---

When Francesca crossed the line on her second and final flying lap, she did it with a time that was slower than her first attempt, and because of the pole position time set by the Nissan, she had been bumped down to third.

Kathleen grunted and sat down on the lawn chair. A few minutes later, she could hear Francesca's voice in the headset and she pressed it even closer against her ear so she wouldn't miss a thing.

'...seeing a water temperature warning light. I'm on my in-lap. Procedure?'

'Continue at reduced pace, Fran. We can see an increase in the water temp on the telemetry. There's no need to take risks. Pit, pit, pit.'

'Copy. Pitting. I don't think I've run over any debris.'

'We'll find out when we scoop out the radiators. You're in third, plus 1.575 seconds behind Nishigawa in Nissan #23.'

Grunting again, Kathleen turned around, trying to see if she could spot anything on the computer monitors, but they were too far away for her to see any details. Disappointed, she turned back around to study the timing and scoring monitor instead.

Running her finger down the screen to find the Fords of Sally and Jonno, she was rather surprised to note that they weren't even on the first page. After clicking on the NEXT button, she finally found them languishing in seventeenth and twenty-second place; Jonno ahead of Sally.

As usual, Kathleen felt conflicted when she thought of Sally Sharpe. One part of her - the one where her jealousy lived - was quite satisfied with Sally's poor showing, but another part knew that it was terribly unfair to think that way.

At the other side of the pits, Luca's Maserati finally left the bay, leaving everything in relative silence and making Kathleen breathe a sigh of relief. She took off the headset, but moments before she would've put it on a small shelf, she could hear Francesca's voice again - and this time, she was sounding upset.

'Pits, every... lit up like... ristmas tre... lectrical failu... othing wor...' Francesca said - and Kathleen could clearly hear the unrestrained frustration in her voice.

'Fran, repeat please. Do you have an electrical failure?'

'...firm. Electri... ure. The dashboard is lit up... a Christm... Oh, fuck it!'

The last three words came through loud and clear, and Kathleen's cheeks instantly blushed crimson red. She covered her eyes with her hand and couldn't stop a throaty laugh from escaping her lips.

'All right. Where are you? Can you get back under your own power?'

'...rnage. Misfire, misf... I'm putter... econd gear. I'm tryi... ge... ack, but I can... loody do anyth...'

'Fran, you're breaking up.'

'I'm no... reaking up, I'm breaking down!' Francesca said in a growly voice followed by several Italian words that Kathleen didn't need a dictionary to understand.

Three minutes later, Francesca drove up in front of the Maserati pit. As usual, several mechanics ran out into the pitlane and pulled the car back - even before it was fully into its bay, Francesca opened the door to get some fresh air inside.

Realising that it wouldn't be a two-minute job, she unbuckled her seatbelts and climbed out of the car wearing a frustrated expression on her face. Putting her hands on her hips, she took a step back and cast a critical eye on the car.

While a mechanic dove into the cockpit to check the fuse box, others went to work on unclipping the front and rear bodywork. Once the engine and the other mechanical parts were revealed, they began to meticulously check the air ducts, the radiators and the engine bay for the cause of the problems, using flashlights and smaller penlights that could go in anywhere.

Giampaolo came up to stand next to Francesca and put his hand on her shoulder.

"We'll fix it. Don't worry," he said and gave her a pat on the back.

"Who did you say was on pole?"

"Nishigawa, 3:36.897."

"We can't beat that," Francesca said and zipped her driving suit down a bit.

"Well, we can try," Giampaolo said and went back over to check the computer monitors.

Out of the corner of her eye, Francesca caught a glimpse of Kathleen's worried face, and she gave her a small wave. Deciding that she had a few moments to talk, she went over to the spectator enclosure, going the long way around the car so she wouldn't disturb the mechanics.

"Hi, darling."

"Hi. Problems?"

"Yes. Electrical failure of some kind. Everything lit up like a Christmas tree. We can probably fix it, but it may take some time," Francesca said through her helmet.

"But you have several hours to do it, haven't you?" Kathleen said, checking her wristwatch.

"Oh, sure. We have until eight o'clock, and then again from ten 'til midnight."

"Derek Harrison spoke very highly of you, Francesca," Kathleen said with a smile.

"Derek was here?"

"No, no. He's one of the Eurosport commentators," Kathleen said and pointed at the television still droning on in the background. The cameras were following Luca's Maserati #2 as it went through Indianapolis and up the short straight to Arnage.

"That's nice. Perhaps I'll pay them a visit some time this weekend. It'd be fun to see the old man again."



"Uh...?"

"All the TV stations share the glass suites on the top row of the main grandstand," Francesca said and pointed out of the pits at the gigantic structure across the track.

"Oh... I wasn't aware of that."

"Yeah, you need to remember not to pick your nose. You might get caught on camera or something... oh... sorry, that didn't come out right," Francesca said and reached up to muss Kathleen's hair with her gloved hand.

"It's all right. I'm mostly over it now," Kathleen said and took Francesca's hand in her own.

Behind them, a mechanic started the engine in the #1 Maserati. At first, it sounded a bit rough, but after a few cycles, it ran cleanly.

The chief engineer unplugged the laptop from the jack on the side of the car and shouted several words in Italian.

"Great, they've fixed it. I better get going," Francesca said and gave Kathleen's hand a little squeeze.

"Uh... uh, um, fair wind, Francesca! Remember, please drive carefully. Fast, but carefully."

"Thanks, darling. I'll do my very best."

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 11**

*Saturday, June 18th - Raceday.*

'La Marseillaise!' the circuit commentator said proudly, cueing the French national anthem. A large part of the two hundred and fifty thousand spectators sang along to the familiar tune, creating an atmosphere that gave Kathleen goosebumps all over her body as she was wading her way through the various VIPs and hangers-on trying to reach Francesca's car.

Back in duty as Francesca's umbrella-girl, she found the going incredibly hard, and at one point, she was worried she wouldn't make it up to the sharp end of the grid before the race would start.

Up near the front, Francesca manoeuvred her car into the proper starting slot without too much difficulty. After turning off the engine, she checked both the wing mirrors to see if they were in the right place and then unbuckled the seatbelts.

Climbing out of her car, she wore a neutral expression on her face that concealed the fact that she felt untypically nervous. As her mechanics began the final preparations by plugging several laptops into the car, she rolled back her sleeve and checked her wristwatch again - half past two, p.m.

After taking off her helmet and the HANS-device and putting them inside the car so they wouldn't get lost, she ran a hand through her short, and recently trimmed, hair.

Behind her, a few fans chanted her name, so she turned around and gave them a thumbs-up and a brief wave, constantly hoping that Kathleen would hurry up and get there before the strong sun had time to burn a hole in the top of her head.

Two minutes later, Kathleen slipped through the final line of people and half-walked, half-ran up to stand next to Francesca.

"I'm so sorry, Francesca. I couldn't even kick my way through this crowd," Kathleen said and opened the umbrella.

"It's all right, darling. I'm just glad you're here."

"Here's the concoction you call water," Kathleen said, holding a bottle of a vaguely brown liquid.

"Thanks," Francesca said and immediately unscrewed the cap of the energy potion that the team's physiotherapist had mixed for her.

"You know, I think the grid is even more crowded than it was last year," Kathleen said, looking up and down the incredibly busy grid, awash with all sorts of team personnel, VIPs and scantily clad women promoting Hawaiian Tropic and several other items that apparently required showing a lot of skin.

"I think you're right."

On the PA system, the German national anthem started playing, prompting a new wave of singing from a different group of fans.

"Have you seen any celebrities yet?" Francesca said as she put on her sunglasses.

"I wouldn't know. I can only see their backs. But I did see a few expensive suits so I guess it's possible that celebrities were wearing them."

Francesca laughed and went over to muss Kathleen's hair.

"Your hands are cold. Nervous?"

"Mmmm. Darling, I'm glad we kept up this tradition. It calms me down to see you here," Francesca said for Kathleen's ears only.

"Oh... thank you. I never thought I'd come back here, that's for sure," Kathleen said, first looking at the gigantic building that housed the pits and then at the equally large grandstand.

"I'll bet. Oh... I think we're going to get interviewed in a moment."

"Oh...?" Kathleen said and craned her neck to see what Francesca meant - not far from them, a Eurosport camera crew was walking directly towards them. "Looks like it. Is my hair okay?"

"It's fine, darling."

"Francesca, do you have a moment?" the Eurosport interviewer, an Asian woman in her late twenties, said.

"Sure."

"I'm Josephine, by the way."

"Hi, Josephine. Nice to meet you," Francesca said with a smile.

"Likewise. So, we're not live just yet, but we'll ask you a few questions for the highlights. Maybe we'll go live, I don't know yet."

"Okay...?"

"Ready?" Josephine said.

"I'm ready," Francesca said and took off her sunglasses. In the background, *'God Save The Queen'* started and Francesca knew immediately she'd get in trouble with some viewers for talking over the national anthem. The British fans began singing loudly as usual, and for a few moments, it felt more like the British Grand Prix than Le Mans.

Josephine cleared her throat and then held up the microphone. Looking intently at her camera operator, she waited for the man to give her a signal to go ahead. When it came, she took a deep breath and turned around.

"We're here with Francesca Carrara. Francesca, we all know how your race ended last year, but what do you think you can do this year?"

"Well, Josephine, Team Mediterraneo Maserati very much hopes that we'll be in the fight for the podium. We didn't come to finish fourth, fifth or whatever. I don't know yet if we have what it takes to challenge for the lead. Time will tell."

"You're starting in fourth place on the grid with a 3:38.177 that you set yourself late on Thursday evening. Will you be able to maintain that pace throughout?"

"Yes, I believe we will. We realise that our main competitors are a couple of seconds ahead of us, but we're quite confident that they won't be able to keep up that pace over an extended period of time."

"Well, for your information, Francesca, the Nissan on pole has changed its engine, the regular race engine is now back in after the so-called Superbomb was used to grab the pole position."

"And there you have it. We've beaten the Nissans on a regular basis in the first three races; we shouldn't have many problems doing it here again."

"Well, there's certainly no lack of confidence in the Maserati team. All right, thank you Francesca," Josephine said and turned off her microphone.

"You're welcome."

Once the camera crew had moved away, Kathleen moved back in so she could resume her duties with the umbrella.

"Are you really that confident or was that just a load of hot air?" she said into Francesca's ear.

"Well... you know. Little of this, little of that," Francesca said, adding a wink.

In the background, the Italian national anthem started playing and several of the Maserati mechanics began to hum along to the grandiose tune. Francesca discreetly crossed her fingers, hoping that she'd hear it on Sunday afternoon while she was standing on the podium instead of watching it on TV.

The anthem had only just finished when no less than nine fighter jets from the French Air Force performed a flyby over the circuit trailing red, white and blue smoke. The crowd erupted in a large cheer that nearly overpowered the sound of the jets.

"Now I know we're at Le Mans!" Francesca said and laughed out loud.

---

At twelve minutes to three, the klaxon blared out and two track officials began walking down the grid, one holding a FIVE MINUTES TO PACE LAP board and the other the familiar CLEAR THE GRID.

"This is it, darling. Wish me luck."

"No! No, I won't do that! Are you kidding? If I jinx you, I'll never forgive myself. And I won't say break a leg, either, because that's exactly what happened last year..."

Francesca chuckled and began to mould her earplugs so they'd fit perfectly. After doing that, she put on her balaclava and the HANS-device and then pulled the helmet down. Rolling her shoulders, she put on her gloves and closed the little Velcro straps on the back of her hands.

"Oh! I know... break a record! Ha! That should do it," Kathleen said, wrapped her arms around Francesca and gave her a strong hug - mindful of not giving herself a black eye from bumping into the hard helmet.

"Thanks, darling. See you in two and a half hours or so after my first three stints," Francesca said in a voice that was muffled by the helmet.

"I'll be waiting in the pits. Take care. I love you."

"I love you, too, love," Francesca said and climbed into the car. Two mechanics helped her get strapped in and then adjusted the wing mirrors one last time.

Giampaolo talked into his headset and a few moments later, the engine came to life. It belched out a tiny amount of black smoke at first, but after Francesca had blipped the throttle a few seconds, it ran cleanly.

Like the year before, the line of bikini-clad Hawaiian Tropic girls all thought it very, very funny to walk very close to Kathleen, and, just like the year before, Kathleen's cheeks blossomed crimson red.

"Sheesh, I wouldn't do that for a million quid," Kathleen said under her breath as she closed the umbrella. When she realised she had to follow the semi-dressed women closely all the way back to the pits, she let out a groan and rolled her eyes.

Once the grid had been cleared, the clerk of the course stepped out in front of the race cars and waved a large green flag.

As per tradition, the pole position car left on its own, but it was soon followed by the rest of the pack. One by one, the cars left the starting grid and immediately began to weave left and right to scrub off the tyres and to get some heat into them.

Like always, Francesca put some weight on the brake pedal with her left foot while she was accelerating so the carbon brakes would get up to temperature quickly. Filing into the Dunlop Chicane, she checked both mirrors and all the gauges, trying to empty her mind of everything but the coming start.

Kathleen hurried back into the spectator enclosure of the Maserati pit and put the umbrella and the bottle with the energy potion away. A throng of guests had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, but Kathleen pushed her way through, determined to get as close to the TV as she could.

Once she got there, she noticed that the sticker on the headset she had been using wasn't reading 'Guest' any more but 'K. O'Malley. Team Mediterraneo Maserati.' She felt an acute sense of pride and started looking around for Giampaolo so she could thank him, but soon came to the conclusion that everyone would be insanely busy for the start so she better wait a while.

Instead, she turned to the TV and concentrated on watching the cars drive around on the warm-up lap.

'... In pole position with a time of 3:36.879, we have the #23 Calsonic Nissan GTR driven by Ukyo Nichigawa, Kazuyoshi Hoshino and Hideo Fukuyama. Nichigawa is the starting driver. On the outside of the front row is Calsonic Nissan #22, making it an all-Nissan front row, driven by Richard LeMarie, Masahiko Kondo and Shunji Kasuya. The GP2 hotshot Richard LeMarie set the time of 3:36.912 and will take the start.

Row two sees the #7 Nippondenso Toyota GT-One driven by Toshihiro Kaneichi, Shigeaki Hattori and Masanori Sekiya. Kaneichi will start after setting a time of 3:37.467... and then we have the #1 Mediterraneo Maserati MC12 with Francesca Carrara and the reigning world champion, Fabio Dell'Assandro. Mario Balzani, the third driver, will join the crew for the night hours. Francesca Carrara set the time of 3:38.177 and will take the start. This is the fastest of the normally aspirated cars and it will be quite interesting to see how much they can hound the turbo cars ahead of them... if at all.

On row three, we have last year's winners, the #2 Mediterraneo Maserati MC12 on 3:38.520 with Luca DiLorenzi, Donny Zorzi and Carlo del Bello, Luca DiLorenzi starting, and then the second Nippondenso Toyota GT-One, the #8 car, driven by Toshio Suzuki, Naoki Nagasaka and Hitoshi Ogawa. Ogawa will start after setting the car's time of 3:39.255.

In seventh place, we find the first of the privateer GT1s with the #37 Yamashi Galleries Toyota GT-One...'

---

At the end of the warm-up lap, the pack of race cars, led by the Audi S6 safety car, came out of the last of the Porsche Turns and drove slowly towards the Ford Chicane. All the cars at the front were driven by professionals so they were all lined up in orderly rows of two, but further back, some of the less experienced drivers weren't as disciplined, creating a bit of a mess from the tenth row back.

Up on the gantry above the race track, the clerk of the course held the Tricolour ready. As the arms on the clock slowly made their way around to the top of the hour, 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' started blasting out of the PA system, adding yet another dimension to the already surreal atmosphere.

As the cars drove through the Ford Chicane headed for the flag, Kathleen held her breath and began to chew on her knuckles. Even the TV commentators kept quiet so the viewers could enjoy the magical moment.

When the safety car peeled off into the pitlane, the clerk of the course raised the starting flag - moments later, the clock struck three p.m. and he waved the flag three times.

The drivers never saw more than the first wave, because as soon as the flag moved, they all stepped on the throttle. Within moments, the ear-splitting sound of more than thirty one thousand horsepower unleashed at once ripped through the air; the howl of the V12s mixed with the rumble from the big V8s, the growling Flat-6s and the whistling turbos to create a wall of sound that sent deep vibrations through the grandstands, the pits and the people in them.

Inside the pits, Kathleen clenched her teeth and tried to telepathically transmit all the positive vibes she could to Francesca. The people around her all cheered, but she fell quiet, just staring at the screen.

*'And they're off! The fifty-five cars stream down towards the Dunlop Chicane, some of them ducking and diving for position already!'* the Eurosport commentator screamed from the television.

The cars streamed through the Dunlop Chicane and down the Forest Esses without any incidents. Francesca had been able to keep her fourth place behind the two factory Nissans and the #7 Toyota, and even though she was hard at work, she felt comfortable and quite confident.

Right behind her, she could see the headlights of Luca's Maserati, closely followed by the second Toyota and the first of the privateer GT1s. As she went through Tertre Rouge and onto the first part of the Mulsanne Straight for the first time, she positioned the car closer to the right hand lane than she normally would to keep Luca from getting any funny ideas.

Ahead, the blue-and-red factory Nissans were jostling for position, with #22 suddenly pulling out to drive alongside #23 as they approached the first chicane, appropriately named the Nissan chicane.

The Toyota soon tried to take advantage of the situation by pulling up very close to the rear end of #22, hoping to shut out the other Nissan in the process.

Francesca decided to hold back slightly so she wouldn't get caught up in an accident on the opening lap. Staring intently at the three cars ahead of her so she was ready to avoid any potential trouble, she almost missed Luca making a move down her inside.

Just catching a glimpse of the headlights in the wing mirror, Francesca edged her MC12 even further right to effectively shut the door. Luca ducked back into her slipstream and at once tried on her left side, but there wasn't any room there, either.

As predicted, the three cars ahead of Francesca ended up trying to out-brake each other, sending off streams of smoke from their tyres. Somehow, #23 kept the lead, but #22 was shuffled back behind Toyota #7 in an opportunist manoeuvre.

As the three cars scabbled through the Nissan Chicane, Francesca was right on top of them, ducking to the inside of the #22 that had lost a lot of momentum when it had been passed going into the chicane.

They raced side by side up to the second chicane, Playstation, but since the Nissan had the better line for the left-right-left sequence of corners, Francesca chose to forfeit the fight and let her Maserati slip back behind the other car.

Blasting over the hump, Francesca once again went to the inside so Luca wouldn't have any room there. Without further incidents, the front running cars drove through Mulsanne Corner in line-astern and began the climb up through the forest on their way to Indianapolis.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'Nissan, Toyota, Nissan, Maserati, Maserati... it's that close. Nichigawa leads from Kaneichi, LeMarie, Carrara and DiLorenzi. No problems coming into Indianapolis, all the cars treat the difficult corner with respect on the opening lap. Here's Arnage... oh, and DiLorenzi! DiLorenzi tries an impossibly late manoeuvre on Carrara! ... And he's through. Luca DiLorenzi takes fourth place from his team-mate,' the Eurosport commentator howled, sending Kathleen into a state of near-frenzy.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Suddenly finding herself under threat from the second of the two works Toyotas, Francesca placed her car in the centre of the circuit, keeping a close eye on both mirrors. She accelerated smoothly, going up through the gears in a very restrained fashion so she wouldn't put unnecessary stress on the drivetrain.

'Fran, position five. Luca is on a more aggressive strategy. We'll get him later,' Enrico Finotto, Francesca's race engineer, said over the radio.

"Copy, Enrico."

The field of cars filed through the Porsche Turns, going through the fast sweepers at blinding speeds. Francesca was able to pull back some of the gap between herself and Luca, and by the time they reached the Ford Chicane at the end of the first lap, she was right up his tailpipes.

'And that's the first lap of Le Mans! Across the line they go, Nissan, Toyota, Nissan, Maserati, Maserati, Toyota. So, Derek, Nissan leads Le Mans,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'Yes, marvellous stuff. So far, it's been smooth sailing up front, but we've already seen a bit of argy-bargy down the field. Well, that won't be the last time in this race,' Derek Harrison said.

'It most certainly won't be. And there we have the GT2 cars across the line. The GT2 leader is the car that started from the class pole position. In thirty-sixth position, the...'



Kathleen wiped a few drops of sweat off her brow and put a finger down the hem of her T-shirt to get some fresh air down her front.

'If Francesca continues to be involved in so much drama, I'm going to need a towel pretty soon...'  
Kathleen thought, shaking her head quietly.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'Oh...! And... oh! We have an accident coming down the Forest Esses! A GT2 Ferrari has lost it coming down the hill... and... it skips across the gravel trap and slams head-on into the tyres, sending a truck load of gravel flying onto the circuit. Will this bring out the safety car...? It's on stand-by... yes, all three safety cars have been deployed. Goodness me... on lap four!' Patrick Murphy said on Eurosport, making Kathleen jump up from the lawn chair she had only just sat down on.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'Safety car, safety car!' Giampaolo said on the radio.

"Copy, pits," Francesca said into her microphone as she was going through the soft kink right before Indianapolis. The track marshals already had the yellow flags and the white 'SC' boards out all around the circuit, slowing down the race cars.

Exiting Arnage, she began to weave left and right to distribute the heat evenly across the contact patches of the tyres.

'Fran, there's a ton of gravel on the track just after the Dunlop bridge. Careful with your tyres. It's a single-car accident so it shouldn't take too long to clean up,' Enrico Finotto said.

"Roger, Enrico. Careful after the bridge. Jeez, on lap four..." Francesca said, rolling her eyes underneath the closed visor.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

Five minutes past eight, Kathleen stepped into the Maserati hospitality tent with a hand pressed firmly against her growling stomach. The mere smell of the food and spices used made it complain even louder and she almost felt light-headed.

She made a beeline for the counter to get a menu - and was nearly bowled over when she saw that it contained no less than a dozen different types of pasta. After analysing every item on the menu several times, she finally decided on a relatively simple dish that wouldn't overstress her delicate English tastebuds.

"Hello, Miss O'Malley. Is Francesca driving?" Patrizia said, coming into the tent from another direction, holding a stack of menus similar to the one Kathleen was reading from.

"Hi, Patrizia. Yes, she's just got in for her second turn. I'm really hungry, so I hope I can eat here...?"

"You need a... a..." Patrizia said, trying to find the right words. When she couldn't, she furrowed her brow and started pointing at the various key chains Kathleen was wearing around her neck.

"Oh, the credentials. Uh, I guess it's this one," Kathleen said and held out a turquoise key chain with a plastic card attached to it. Patrizia looked at it and then nodded, wearing a broad smile.

Behind Patrizia, one of the waiters came in and picked up a notepad.

"Good evening, Miss. Can I help you?" he said, holding a pencil ready.

"Good evening. I'd like the Spaghetti Quattro Formaggi, please. And a Club Soda with a lemon twist, please."

"We have an excellent red wine that goes fantastically well with your order, Miss."

"Uh... no, thank you."

"Quattro Formaggi and a Club, noted. Will there be anything else?" the waiter said with a smile.

"Not right now, thank you. Can I sit anywhere?" Kathleen said, having eyed a large television set standing near a cluster of tables in one of the corners of the large tent.

"Oh, yes."

"I'm over by the telly," Kathleen said and pointed at the flatscreen TV.

"We'll bring your food there when it's ready, Miss."

"Thank you," Kathleen said and hurried over to the TV so she wouldn't miss anything.

*'Welcome back to Le Mans. It's eight minutes past eight, and the leader, the #23 Nissan currently driven by Hideo Fujiyama, has just gone onto lap 84. Here's a quick recap of the race so far. The start was without major drama for the front runners, but on lap four, the Scuderia Geneva Ferrari F430 GT2 crashed at the Forest Esses, causing our first safety car period. The restart followed on lap eight, and the first of the regular pitstops began on lap seventeen,' the Eurosport commentator said.*

Kathleen unfolded a napkin and put it down on her lap. If there was one thing she had learned from living with a pasta-loving half-Italian, it was that the sauce would inevitably end up on her shirt.

*The next thirty laps went by without drama, but then we had the #36 Yamashi Galleries Toyota GT-One stopping and retiring on the Mulsanne Straight with a suspected broken fuel pump.*

*Three laps later, the #8 factory Toyota went into the pits to change a punctured tyre, having dragged itself halfway around the circuit on three wheels and a rim.'*

The waiter arrived surprisingly fast and Kathleen's mouth watered instantly at the sight of the spaghetti.

"Here you go, Miss. Club Soda and Spaghetti Quattro Formaggi. Not so spicy, just for you," the waiter said and put down a glass of mineral water and a plate of steaming hot pasta on Kathleen's table.

"Ohhh, it smells great. Thank you very much."

"Anytime, Miss. Buon apetito," the waiter said and made his way back to the kitchen.

"Oh, you can count on it," Kathleen said and picked up a spoon and a fork.

*'On lap 52, we had our second safety car period when the #79 Franz Lausch Motorsport Porsche 911 GT2 stopped at Mulsanne corner with a blown engine that had given the track a Castrol coating all the way back from the hump. The safety car came back in on lap 57 and since then, we haven't had any major issues,' the Eurosport commentator said.*

While the recap was running, they had been showing highlights of the race, but now it went back to showing live pictures. The first car they picked up was Francesca's Maserati, and Kathleen froze in place, her fork suspended comically halfway between the plate and her mouth.

Francesca didn't look like she had any problems; she was braking normally into the Nissan Chicane and powering out of it a few seconds later. A dark blue Ford GT drove roughly three hundred yards ahead of her, and Kathleen's mind instantly knew that it was Sally.

*'Francesca Carrara in fourth place, catching Sally Sharpe's Ford GT hand over fist. I'm afraid this has been a tough baptism of fire for the likeable American lady racer. She's in nineteenth place and she's already been hit with a penalty for speeding in the pitlane. Now she's about to receive a lesson from one of the masters of the sport.'*

"One of the masters!" Kathleen said around a mouthful of spaghetti, trying to swallow it so she wouldn't choke on it. As soon as she had, she punched the air, feeling very proud.

At the end of the Mulsanne Straight, Francesca had caught Sally and the two cars drove line-astern up towards the forest.

*'Oh, looks like we'll have a battle of the Valkyries now,' the Eurosport commentator said.*

*'Not much of a battle, I'm afraid. Sally is already two laps down so she'll have to make way pretty quickly,' Derek Harrison said.*

The camera stayed with the two cars and Kathleen began to relax a little. She took the Club Soda and brought it up to her lips.

'Ohhhhhh! Sally Sharpe tries to make room but runs wide... loses the rear end... goes off the track... and thump! Backwards into the tyres at Indianapolis! Right in front of Francesca Carrara who had to slam on the brakes to avoid getting caught up in the accident.'

Kathleen nearly spewed out the mouthful of mineral water she had just taken and stared wide-eyed at the television. On it, Francesca's black-and-turquoise Maserati resumed the race, having almost come to a stop at the outside of Indianapolis.

'That won't have done Francesca Carrara's tyres any good. If she's unlucky, she'll have a huge flatspot on that right front. We better keep an eye on her to see if she has to make an unscheduled pitstop. This could really hurt that car in the short run. As we all know, Le Mans is typically won by the car that isn't afflicted by unscheduled stops.'

The camera stayed with the accident so Francesca's Maserati soon drove out of the picture. Sally got out of the car and walked around it, obviously trying to ascertain the damage. A few moments later, she got back in and started the engine.

"Oh, Sally!" Kathleen groaned as she looked at the pictures of the car that was quite literally sitting on its floor in the gravel trap. All Sally was able to do was to make the tyres spin furiously - the car had dug itself in so deep that she needed a snatch vehicle to get out.

Kathleen shook her head and took another spoonful of the spaghetti. She could well imagine the language Francesca had used in that near-miss.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

A few minutes after half past eleven, p.m., Francesca peeled off the track and entered the pit lane entrance. She navigated through the narrow chicane and then drove onto the pit lane itself, remembering to put her thumb on the limiter.

'Fran, handover to Fabio,' Enrico Finotto said over the radio.

"Copy, Enrico. Getting ready," Francesca replied and started unlocking her seatbelts.

A few hundred yards further on, she came to a halt in front of the Maserati pit, stopping exactly at the feet of the mechanic holding the 'STOP' sign.

As the mechanics came running out into the pitlane carrying the new tyres, she switched off the engine and climbed out of the car. Moments later, a mechanic attached the air line for the pneumatic jacks, and two other mechanics attached the fuel hose and the breather bottle and went to work on the refuelling.

Jumping away from the car, Francesca spun around and helped Fabio get strapped in. She did the lower belts and then reached up to hold the centre belts ready. Once Fabio had locked the centres, she patted him on the thigh and stepped back from the car.

Francesca walked behind the pit line and waited for the various mechanics to complete their assignments. The new tyres were on before the fuel was ready, and the car was dropped down onto the ground after the air line was removed.

A few seconds later, the fuel reached the breather bottle, and the mechanic holding it gave off a shout. The fuel hose was detached and Giampaolo gave Fabio the command to start the engine - three seconds later, first gear was selected and the car went back into the race.

Once the car had left, Francesca took off her gloves, her helmet and the HANS-device. Walking back to the back wall of the pits, she put the items on the small shelf and then wiped her sweaty face with the sleeve of the driving suit.

She sat down with a bump on a lawn chair and took the towel that had been prepared for her. After wiping her neck and her arms thoroughly, she let the towel hang over her head to create just the tiniest amount of personal space in the middle of all the hectic activity.

Out in the pitlane, Luca brought the #2 Maserati in to swap over to Carlo del Bello, that car's third driver. A minute later, Luca walked through the pit, disappearing out the back without even acknowledging Francesca's presence.

"I can't stand him," someone suddenly said, prompting Francesca to raise the towel.

"Hi, darling. Luca?"

"Yes. He annoys me greatly. How did it go?" Kathleen said and reached out for Francesca's shoulder.

"Up and down."

"Oh, you and Sally were on TV! We saw everything."

"Sheesh, I thought she was going to take me out. That would've been something. The spectators would've witnessed a bout of Amazonic gravel wrestling if she had."

Kathleen chuckled and tried to massage Francesca's shoulder but the fireproof driving suit was too thick.

"You're on a break now, right?"

"Yeah. I'm not due back in the car until one a.m. or so. Fabio is doing a triple of, oh, thirty-nine laps. Hopefully. Of course, if he has a problem, he'll be back sooner."

"Do you have time to come over to the hospitality tent?"

"Sure. I just need to talk to my race engineer first. How about I meet you at the tent in ten minutes?" Francesca said and got up.

"We have a date."

---

twelve minutes later, Francesca entered the hospitality tent and started to look around for Kathleen - quickly spotting the familiar mop of white-blond hair sitting on a bench by the television, she began to make her way over there but was intercepted by Patrizia.

"Ciao, Francesca. Oggi stai guidando alla grande," the young girl said with a shy smile.

"Hi, Patrizia. Yep, everything's been going pretty good so far. Let's hope it stays that way," Francesca said and mussed the young girl's hair.

"When I saw you come in, I made you a Club Soda," Patrizia said in her charming, slightly faltering accent. She held up a glass of mineral water and smiled broadly.

"Oh, thank you very much. That's very kind of you," Francesca said, adding a wink that made Patrizia blush and then run away, giggling.

On the television, the picture showed a forlorn Sally Sharpe - already wearing street clothes - standing behind the pits, waiting to be interviewed by Josephine, the Eurosport pit reporter.

Francesca took a sip of the Club Soda and walked over to stand behind Kathleen.

"Hi again. Sally doesn't look good, does she?" Kathleen said.

"No. I've been there. Having to explain yourself to the world is just awful."

'... lly Sharpe, this wasn't the best Le Mans debut for you. You're out of the race. Tell us what happened,' Josephine said, sticking a microphone up Sally's nose.

'Well, I... I fuc... uh, I fouled up. I tried to get out of the way of the faster car, but I guess I... uh, I guess I got too far out onto the dirt, and, uh, I just lost it,' Sally said, visibly upset by her less than stellar race performance.

'You were able to bring the car back, but it couldn't be fixed. What was the problem that eventually sidelined you?'

'Basically, the rearwards impact cracked the gearbox casing. Under the new rules, we can change the internals, but not the casing itself. So...' Sally said and shrugged.

'All right. Thank you, Sally Sharpe. Back upstairs,' Josephine said and turned away from Sally.

---

A few minutes later, Sally walked into the Maserati hospitality tent. She kept standing in the entrance, almost like she was trying to find someone.

"Hey, look who's here," Kathleen said, tapping Francesca on the elbow.

"Sally, we're over here," Francesca said with a wave.

Shuffling along in a very dejected fashion, Sally crossed the floor and sat down at the table Kathleen and Francesca shared.

"Hi," Kathleen said, not at all surprised to see the despondent look on the young blonde's face.

"Hi. Look, Francesca, I'm really sorry for screwing up. I nearly had you off."

"Ah, it happens. Don't worry about it. I did kinda yell at you inside my helmet," Francesca said, trying to coax a smile out of Sally.

"I bet you did. Well, it's all over now," Sally said and leaned back in the seat. She crossed her arms over her chest and let out a long sigh.

"Wait a minute... 'all over'... for good?" Kathleen said and put a hand on Sally's arm.

"Yeah. This was my last chance."

"Oh... Jesus, I'm sorry to hear that, Sally," Kathleen said.

Sally just shrugged. A few moments later, she reached into her back pocket and took out her wallet. Opening it, she found a small photo and began to stare at it.

Kathleen tried to crane her neck to see who was on the photo, but she wasn't able to see it. Even though she wasn't proud of it, her curiosity soon got the better of her and she cleared her throat as politely as she could - but before she had time to make an inquiry on the photo, Sally put it back in her wallet.

"Damn, this won't be the homecoming I was hoping for," Sally said, putting her wallet back into her pocket.

"Sally, wait a minute. Who's that on the photo? Your girlfriend?" Kathleen said, prompting Francesca to scrunch up her face and groan under her breath.

"My \*girl\*-friend...? No, my husband and our kid," Sally said, her face one, large question mark.

"Your h... husband...? And your kid?"

"Yes, I'm married. I have been for several years now. I thought you knew that?"

Ten thousand thoughts rushed through Kathleen's mind all at once. At first, she thought about all the angst she had been through, all the insecurities and the drinking, but then she felt a large weight fall off her shoulders and she let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"Oh, uh, no... uh. No, I didn't. May I see the photo?" Kathleen said. Her cheeks were beginning to blush crimson red and she had to fan herself to stop the blush from getting any worse.

"Sure," Sally said and found her wallet again. She handed the photo to Kathleen who turned around and showed it to Francesca as well. Two people were on the photo, a man in his late twenties and a five year old girl, dressed in a miniature driving suit.

"Oh, God, Sally, she's so cute! What's her name?"

"You won't believe it."

"Sally, I'm dying here..."

"Her name is Kathleen," Sally said with a chuckle.

"Oh! Imagine that. Huh?" Kathleen said and thumped Francesca's shoulder.

"Imagine that," Francesca echoed and drained the last drops from her glass.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

*The clock has just struck one thirty, a.m., and, as you may have noticed, we're well into the darkness hours. When the team managers read the weather report that has just been handed to me, I have a feeling that their faces will match that particular colour. According to the weather radar at the nearby airfield, rain will arrive within the hour. It looks like showers, but it could get heavier.'*

Kathleen was sitting on the couch in the motorhome, watching the race on their flatscreen television. Despite her best intentions - and plenty of coffee - she had trouble keeping her eyes open. Before long, her head slipped back onto the backrest and she fell asleep.

---

*Lap 164, Fran. P4, one lap off the lead. 36 seconds behind third place. Plus one minute to fifth.'*

"Copy, Enrico," Francesca said as she went up through the gearbox on the start-finish straight. She was soon in sixth, letting the twelve stretch its legs along the all too short straight.



She braked into the Dunlop Chicane and went through it without any problems; then under the Dunlop Bridge and down the Chapelle and the Forest Esses. She caught a slower privateer GT1 on the entry to Tertre Rouge, so she had to play the waiting game until she reached the Mulsanne Straight.

Streaking along the first part of the straight, she could see the characteristic yellow reflective boards being waved at the first chicane, and when she got there, she noticed that they were joined by the red-and-yellow-striped Reduced Friction flag.

Just after the first chicane, a car was parked by the side of the road with a tell-tale orange light flickering from the right hand side exhaust.

As Francesca drove past the car at reduced speed, her headlights briefly illuminated the race number on its side - it was the Calsonic Nissan #23.

Once she was clear of the yellow flag zone, she put her foot hard down on the throttle and went up the gearbox - soon, she was back to flying along in top gear.

When she came out of Mulsanne Corner, she could see a few sprinkles of water begin to form on the windshield. The prospect of driving on slicks in the rain at night wasn't an attractive one and she groaned inwardly. She knew better than to turn on the wipers, but she also knew that if it really started to rain, all the muck on the windshield would cause the raindrops to reflect the lights around the circuit, creating a million little sparkling suns she would have to look through.

"Pits, spots of rain at Mulsanne Corner," she said on the radio.

'Copy, Fran. It'll get stronger,' Giampaolo's easily recognisable voice replied.

"Copy."

Flat out in sixth, she rushed over the first brow and then the second. She could feel the car begin to get skittish, but the foremost thing on her mind was to keep up the pace for as long as possible. If it turned out to be only a shower, she would end up looking bad if she decided to ease off too soon.

---

'Oh! And we have a drama! There's drama for the leader!' the Eurosport commentator said, causing Kathleen to wake up with a jerk. The odd angle she'd had her head in caused her to moan loudly, and she clamped a hand down onto her neck as she leaned forward on the couch.

'We saw a car stopped on the Mulsanne a few minutes ago, but we didn't get confirmation on who it was. Now we know! It's the leader, the #23 Calsonic Nissan GTR, currently driven by Kazuyoshi Hoshino. We haven't seen a replay, but from the brief shots we did see, it definitely looked like it had lost the right-hand side turbo.'

'Judging by the pictures, it's game over, I'm afraid. This is a major turning point in the race. The #23 car led from the start with nary a hitch, but now it's all been turned upside down. This means that the first of the factory Toyotas will assume the lead. Uh, let me see... the #7 car, driven by... who's in it...? It's Ukyo Kaneichi again. He's going to...' Derek Harrison said.

'He must've passed it already. The timing and scoring has just updated itself.'

'Yes, he's already in the lead. This will promote the #22 Nissan into second place and Francesca Carrara's #1 Maserati into third, still one lap down. The cars behind her are on the same lap as her, or even further back.'

'If this really is a mechanical failure for the #23, do you think it could hit the #22 as well?'

'Oh, I wouldn't want to guess, I really wouldn't. But it's possible.'

Kathleen was suddenly wide awake. She hitched forward to sit at the edge of the couch and stared wide-eyed at the television, hoping to catch a glimpse of Francesca's car or at the very least, a shot from the pits.

---

Coming into the Porsche Turns, Francesca could feel the track get more and more slippery. She briefly considered ducking into the pits to change tyres, but she knew that since they weren't ready for her, they'd only end up losing valuable time in the mad scramble.

As she braked into the Ford Chicane, the car suddenly locked the fronts and ran wide onto the curbs. She did her best to stay off the biggest ones, but she couldn't stop the car from running over a few of the smaller curbs. It rocked and rattled for a few seconds but then she was back on the track.

"Pits, I need Inters. It's getting too slippery out here," she said over the radio.

'Copy, Fran. Lap 165. Position three, position three, one lap off the lead. One minute ten seconds behind second place. Plus one minute to fifth. Intermediate rain tyres on standby. Pit, pit, pit,' Enrico Finotto said.

"Copy, Enrico. Pitting."

After she had driven for another few hundred yards, she realised that the pits had told her she was in third place. Scrunching up her face underneath the helmet and the fireproof balaclava, she gripped the steering wheel even firmer and concentrated hard on staying on the track.

By the time she reached the yellow flag zone just beyond the first chicane on the Mulsanne Straight, the rain had started coming down harder. Soon, streaks of water began to run up the windshield, forced there by the car's advanced aerodynamics.

Track marshals had begun to push the stranded Nissan to a place of safety, and Francesca noted that they were partially obscured by a light mist that hadn't been there when she had passed them a lap earlier.

Once she reached the green flag, she stepped on the gas and went back up the gearbox. Her many years of experience kicked in and she started driving in a much rounder fashion, treating the steering wheel and the pedals with kid gloves.

The rest of the lap only saw the rain increasing, and by the time she reached Arnage, it had turned into a steady drizzle that made the already oily and greasy track treacherous to drive on.

She turned into Arnage as usual, but she suddenly felt the rear end wanting to swap places with the front. She quickly applied an armful of opposite lock but it wasn't enough to stop the rear end from coming around. As a last resort, she slammed on the brakes, but the car skidded off the track and bumped fairly softly into the tyre wall at the outside of the corner.

"Oh, maledizione! Questa stupida macchina del cazzo..." Francesca growled, shaking her head angrily. She selected first gear, blipping the throttle constantly while she waited for the track to clear so she could get back in the race.

---

Back in the motorhome, Kathleen figured the excitement was over for the time being, so she turned down the volume and got comfortable on the couch. Yawning widely, she reached for a pillow so her neck wouldn't get a crimp in it again.

'Oh, and there's another car in trouble... It's Maserati #1...'

"Ohhhhhhh!" Kathleen said and jumped up so fast that her knee hit the table, sending a bowl of salty crackers flying all over the carpet. Clutching her throbbing knee, she stared at the television and prayed to all the racing Gods she could think of.

'... a half-spin at Arnage. That's... uh, that's Francesca Carrara, waiting for a gap in the traffic... and she's off. Now, let's see if there's any damage at the back of that Mase... no, it looks good. That's four cars off on this lap alone. The conditions must be horrendous...'

When Francesca seemed to have escaped the spin unscathed, Kathleen let out a sigh of relief - and then she threw her hands in the air when she realised that she needed to pick up thirty salty crackers so she wouldn't grind them into the motorhome's carpet.

---

"Pits, I've been off at Arnage. Rearwards. Not too bad. Check the bodywork and the left-hand exhaust. Clear the screen. Need Inters pronto!" Francesca said on her way up to the Porsche Turns.

'Copy, Fran. Still position three. Check bodywork and exhaust. Inters are ready. Pit, pit, pit,' Enrico said.

"Copy, Enrico, still pitting."

---

Two minutes later, Francesca dove into the pitlane, driving right behind another car that she couldn't identify.

As she slotted into her pit, she could see that the car ahead did the same - when it came into the cone of light from a lamp on a gantry above the pitlane, she was able to recognise it - it was the red-and-blue #22 Nissan GTR.

Francesca's mechanics ran out of the pits and swarmed around the Maserati, attaching various hoses and checking the bodywork. Within moments of its arrival, the car was briskly lifted up in the air on the pneumatic jacks so the slicks could be taken off and the Inters be put on.

While the wheel guns were clattering away, Francesca could hear someone shouting from the rear of the car. She checked the left hand wing mirror and saw to her great relief that Giampaolo was giving the mechanics a thumbs-up.

When she looked ahead, she could see the Nissan mechanics remove the rear bodywork of #22 and a small spark of hope ignited deep inside her.

'Get ready, Fran. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...'

The #1 MC12 dropped off the jacks and Francesca put her index finger on the starter button. The next thing she heard was the fuel hose being pulled off the car and the valve closing automatically.

'GO!' Giampaolo shouted, but before he had even finished speaking, Francesca had started the Maserati and was on her way up the pitlane on a fresh set of Intermediates.

\*

\*

## CHAPTER 12

Ten to four a.m., Francesca locked herself into the Knaus Sunliner motorhome, trying to be as quiet as she possibly could.

She tip-toed through the living room, but she only made it as far as the kitchenette when the sliding door to the bedroom was opened and Kathleen came running towards her, only wearing an oversized T-shirt and a pair of panties.

"Oh, Francesca," she said and pulled the driver into a strong embrace.

"Hey, darling."

"How are things going?"

"Pretty well, knock on wood. Mario Balzani is in now. He's a veteran, he knows what to do," Francesca said and stifled a yawn.

"Where are you? I had to turn off the telly... the commentators gave me a headache."

"The race is on lap 204 and Toyota #7 is still in the lead. We're in seco..."

"Oh, really! God, I'm so glad to hear that," Kathleen said and hugged Francesca again.

"Well, thanks, but it's not over yet. There's a long way to go still."

"I know, but second is better than third. That's where you were when I went to bed. What happened?"

"Mercifully, the rain was short-lived, but it was hairy enough when it was here. Nissan #22 has been struck with the same problem as its sister car. They're still in third, though, one lap back from us. Listen, darling, I really, \*really\* need a shower..."

"Uh, of course. When are you due back in?"

"Not in a wee while. Mario will drive until six and then Fabio will do a triple. I need to back in the pits at eight."

"Great! Then we can cuddle," Kathleen said and crinkled her nose.

"Yeah... but I need the shower first," Francesca said and began to unzip her sticky driving suit.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

At seven-thirty, a.m., Francesca sat on a chair, using a spoon to stir her cup of instant coffee. She had one eye on an official Maserati race update bulletin that Patrizia had just delivered to them, and one on the television that was droning on in the background as usual.

"Damn..." she muttered under her breath.

"Something wrong, dear?"

"Mario had a right rear go down on him during his second stint. Lap 231. He lost a lap and a half getting back and getting it fixed. Damn... We're back down to third place behind Toyota #7 and Nissan #22. Three laps off the lead now."

"Oh... but can't you catch the Nissan?" Kathleen said, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Well... we're sort of equally fast, so it'll be difficult."

Francesca went back to studying the bulletin, but the rest of the text didn't bring further unwanted drama.

"Fabio is driving now, and so far, he hasn't reported any knock-on effects from the puncture. It sounds like it was a biggie, though. They had to change the rear bodywork because the flailing rubber had torn it to shreds," Francesca said and put the piece of paper on the coffee table.

Out of the corner of her eye, Francesca noticed that Eurosport had begun to go through the top ten positions, so she quickly turned up the volume on the television so she could see for herself what was going on.

'...eader, the #7 Nippondenso Toyota GT-One, currently driven by Masanori Sekiya, has completed 262 laps and is one and a bit laps ahead of the delayed #22 Calsonic Nissan GTR of Richard LeMarie. In third place, we have Fabio Dellasandro in the #1 Mediterraneo Maserati; he's three laps down after the puncture that hampered Mario Balzani's progress in the very early hours of the morning,' Patrick Murphy, the Eurosport commentator, said.

Francesca commented on the bad news with a groan.

'In fourth place, which is quite sensational in my humble opinion, is the #5 Ford GT of Baker/Gomez/Wilds. Jonathan Baker is at the wheel. He's six, nearly seven laps down, but nobody had expected to see the Fords doing so well in their comeback race. After all, it's been nearly forty years since they were here last.'

'Or even still running at this time, frankly,' Derek Harrison said.

'Indeed. In fifth, we have...'

"All right, Jonno," Francesca said and gave the television a thumbs-up.

"Is Jonno still running?" Kathleen said and sat down on the couch.

"They're in fourth."

"Wow, really?"

"Yep," Francesca said and took a long swig from the coffee. Furrowing her brow, she looked down at something that had been ground into the carpet just next to one of the legs of the table.

"Honey, did you throw a party in here last night before I came back?"

"Uh, why?"

"We've got salt crackers all over the place..."

"Oh bother, I thought I'd got them all," Kathleen said and got up. "Hey, that was your fault, actually," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

"My fault?"

"Yeah! If you hadn't slid off at Arnage, I wouldn't have bumped my knee on the bloomin' table and the crackers would have stayed in the bowl."

"Oh... well, in that case, I better help you vacuum them up," Francesca said with a chuckle and put the cup down on the table.

.\_\*\_\*\_\*.\_

"Francesca! Francesca! Come quick!" Kathleen said, jumping up and down in front of the television.

"Whut? Where's the fire?" Francesca said as she hurried through the kitchenette with only one leg down the longjohns and the fireproof undershirt suspended around her neck.

"Right there! Look!"

The picture on the television clearly showed the #22 Nissan slowing on the Mulsanne with white smoke billowing out of the right hand side exhaust pipe.

"Ohhhh...!" Kathleen said, wrapping both her arms around Francesca and giving her a strong hug.

"Mmmm."

"But doesn't this mean you're in second place?"

"Yes. But I would've preferred to do it in a straight fight on the circuit," Francesca said and finished getting dressed.

"Does that really matter that much? Second is second."

"Yeah, well... but anyway, it's only ten to eight. Seven hours to go and absolutely anything can happen in that time."

"True... Francesca, why do you sound a little down? I thought everything was going fairly well?" Kathleen said, giving Francesca a little squeeze.

"Well, the truth is that we haven't been quick enough to consistently challenge for the lead. I think we got blindsided a bit by the Toyotas. We focused too much on the Nissans and we failed to see that the red-and-white cars were actually quicker. And more reliable."

"But you're in second? Oh, I'll never understand this game..."

Francesca chuckled and reached up to muss Kathleen's hair.

"We're three laps off the lead. There's no way we can catch that on our own. That's when it gets frustrating... when we have to rely on the misfortunes of others to improve our own position."

"But you can still win, can't you?"

"We can still win, and we're still going for the win, but at this point, I'd say our chances are less than, uh... less than they were before."

They turned around and watched the #22 Nissan being pushed off to the side of the road, its race over.

"I know exactly how that feels. Four years ago, I stopped just before the kink on the Mulsanne. That was my first year for Mercedes. I was at the wheel in seventh place when the gearbox shattered at nine in the morning," Francesca said and sat down on the chair so she could put on her racing boots.

"Oh..."

"Le Mans can be a cruel mistress."

"I discovered that last year," Kathleen said, nodding to herself.

"Of course, Le Mans can also be a soothing lover if everything goes right," Francesca said and got up. She pulled Kathleen into an embrace and placed her hands directly on the author's perfectly sculpted derriere, earning herself a cute little yelp.

With a wink, Francesca gave Kathleen's backside a little squeeze and then she leaned down to place a loving kiss on her enticing lips.

.\_\*.\_\*\_.\_

'Fran, lap 297. Position two. Three laps to leader. Plus seven laps to third, #5 Ford,' Enrico Finotto said over the radio.

"Copy, Enrico," Francesca said, flashing the headlights as she went past the pits to signal that she had understood the message.



Entering the Dunlop Chicane, she braked sooner than she had done earlier in the race, and she generally took it easy on the gearbox and the rest of the drivetrain so she wouldn't overstress any vital components so late in the proceedings.

Driving down the Chapelle and through the Forest Esses, she suddenly thought she could smell hot oil and she cast a worried glance at the gauges connected to the engine. When they all appeared to be in the green, she furrowed her brow and quickly checked the mirrors to see if she was trailing any smoke.

The second she entered Tertre Rouge, feathering the throttle in sixth and pulling 145 m.p.h., she discovered where the smell of oil had come from. As she was looking ahead, a yellow-and-red GT2 Porsche with plumes of pale blue smoke rising from the twin exhaust pipes came into view, pulling over to the right side of the track and parking up against the Armco barrier.

A split second later, two marshals furiously began to wave yellow flags to warn Francesca of what she had already seen and was trying desperately to avoid - the Porsche had deposited a large puddle of oil right in the middle of the corner.

Another split second further on, she knew she wouldn't be able to miss the oil.

When she hit the puddle, the #1 Maserati snapped sideways and she instantly depressed the clutch and grabbed an armful of opposite lock to keep the car from going into the guard-rail lining the track. Once it had cleared the puddle, it snapped back just as hard and Francesca quickly turned the steering wheel back the other direction to try to keep up with the fishtailing car.

Thirty yards further down the track, the car finally settled down and Francesca selected third gear and drove on. Checking the mirrors thoroughly, she could see another car hit the guard-rail hard behind her, and she knew that the safety car would be deployed.

'Fran, safety car, safety car! Caution, oil at Tertre Rouge,' Giampaolo said over the radio only a few moments later.

"Thanks, pits. I've noticed."

'It looks like it could be a long one. Pit, pit, pit.'

"Copy. Pitting," Francesca said and eased off the throttle as she came up to the first marshal holding a yellow flag and the 'SC' sign.

---

At much the same time, Kathleen walked through the back door to the Maserati pits and entered the spectator enclosure. She claimed her favourite lawn chair by putting down a plastic bag on it, and then went searching for a hankie so she could wipe her hands of the residue of the sticky croissant she had just eaten.

Out on the track, two cars went by the pits at a much lower speed than usual - and then the main grandstand suddenly fell silent.

The eerie silence sent an ice cold shiver running down Kathleen's spine as she experienced a deja vu of Francesca's accident from the year before. Forgetting all about the hankie, she spun around and stared at the flatscreen television suspended on the wall.

The camera at Tertre Rouge showed a yellow car buried deep into the guard-rail on the left side of the circuit, and Kathleen breathed a sigh of relief. At the same time, she could see that it was a serious accident, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

Marshals came running towards the yellow car, all carrying fire extinguishers even though the car wasn't actually on fire. The camera turned around and followed a medical car and an ambulance entering the circuit through a gate on the outside of Tertre Rouge.

Kathleen realised that the sound had been muted on the television, and she started looking around everywhere to find the remote. Finally finding it on the small shelf at the back wall of the pits, she hurried back to the TV and turned on the sound.

'... serati #33, driven by Olivar, Capillino and Guerrero, formerly in ninth place, fourteen laps down. We believe it's Benito Guerrero in the car. It was a very bad hit, almost head-on into the guard-rail on driver's left of the circuit. Two cars had been off before Guerrero arrived, the second-placed #1 Maserati and the #96 Ferrari F430, but they were both able to continue,' the Eurosport commentator said in a sombre voice.

Kathleen got the shivers when she heard that Francesca had been off as well and she turned around to see what was going on outside the pits. Both crews appeared to be standing by, ready for the #1 and #2 cars to come in.

Eurosport cut to a commercial, so Kathleen picked up the headset instead, only holding it to her ear so she'd still be able to follow Eurosport when they returned.

'Pits, four new rubbers. I flatspotted all of them,' Francesca's voice said from the headset, prompting Kathleen to put it on fully.

'Copy, Fran. Still position two. Three laps to leader.'

A few moments later, Francesca slid the car to a halt right in front of the Maserati pit. Kathleen craned her neck to try to follow as much of the pitstop as she could, but she was too far back to see any details.

As soon as the car went up in the air, the mechanics attached the fuel hose and began to change tyres. One man sprayed a cleaning foam onto the windshield and began to wipe it down, wildly moving his arm back and forth to clear off all the crushed French bugs.

'Get ready, Fran. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... GO!' Kathleen heard Giampaolo say; as soon as the car was back on the ground, Francesca started it and left the pits, seemingly without drama.

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Kathleen turned back to the television with a worried look on her face. Eurosport still wasn't showing pictures from the accident, something she knew was a bad sign.

The producer cut to show Francesca drive out of the pits and blend in with the train of cars that followed one of the three pace cars. The black-and-turquoise car began to weave back and forth to keep some heat in the tyres, and Kathleen found herself wishing that the race would soon be over. She checked her watch - twenty past nine, a.m..

'Still more than five and a half hours to go...' she thought and sighed deeply.

---

A few minutes later, Giampaolo walked into the pits, holding a clipboard and his two indispensable stopwatches. When he spotted Kathleen, he waved briefly but then concentrated on talking to one of the computer engineers.

'... octors are helping Guerrero out of the car now. Like always, they're treating it very seriously by putting him on a stretcher and fitting a neckbrace. Dear viewers, please don't jump to conclusions based on these pictures. These days, when a driver is extricated from a wrecked car, the medical personnel always follow the universal procedure known as 'better safe than sorry', and in my opinion, that's a very good development,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'I agree. When I started racing, it was completely different. A lot of injuries and even fatalities could've been prevented had we had something similar to what's on offer today,' Derek Harrison said, making Kathleen shiver yet again.

Patrizia walked into the pits, apparently blissfully unaware of the accident on the track. In her hand, she was holding a pencil and a small notepad that she used to take orders from the engineers and technicians.

"Salve, signorina O'Malley. You want some coffee? English coffee?" she said when she arrived at the spectator enclosure.

"Uh, hi, Patrizia. Yes, a cup of coffee sounds good. Thank you. I could use a strong one, actually," Kathleen said with a smile.

"A strong one? Espresso?"

"Uh, no... never mind. I'd like a regular coffee, please."

"Okay. Two minutes," Patrizia said and darted off out of the pits.

"No need to rush, Patrizia. I'll be here for the rest of the race," Kathleen said loudly, but the young girl was already long gone.

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*

'Fran, safety car in this lap, safety car in this lap,' Giampaolo said.

"Copy, pits. Where am I?"

'Ninth in the queue. Leader of the race is at the head of the queue you're in. Four GT2s, three GT1s between him and you.'

'That's something at least. Maybe I can unlap myself,' Francesca thought and got herself prepared for the restart. Driving through the Playstation chicane on the Mulsanne, she was still weaving left and right and checking the gauges from time to time.

'Fran, your safety car will stop at the end of the Mulsanne. Repeat, your safety car will stop at the end of the Mulsanne. You'll get the green flag at the end of the Mulsanne.'

"I understand, pits. I'm ready. I can't see the safety car from here. Let me know when it leaves."

'Will do, Fran. Stand by.'

The train of cars drove through the kink at greatly reduced speed, almost like everyone was waiting for the safety car to pull off the track so they could resume the race - just when Francesca thought that the plans had changed, the lights went out on top of the safety car and it peeled off to the right, out of the way of the cars behind it.

'Green, green, green!'

"Copy."

Everybody accelerated at once, feeding in the power and going up through the gears. Even before she reached Mulsanne Corner, Francesca disposed of two of the GT2 cars between herself and the #7 Toyota, and then she lined up the first of the privateer GT1s going up through the forest.

After sweeping over the first and the second brows, she ducked out from behind a privateer Nissan and drove side by side with the white-and-blue Nichi-Ra GTR for nearly six hundred yards. The other driver was apparently reluctant to let her pass, because he didn't back off until they reached the braking point at Indianapolis.

Francesca growled under her breath as the botched overtaking manoeuvre forced her to brake on the unfavoured side of the track, but she soon calmed down and concentrated on catching the red-and-white Nippondenso Toyota ahead of her so she could unlap herself.

By the time she reached the entry to the Porsche Turns, she only had one GT1 car between her MC12 and the leader - but that was one of the other Toyotas, the #37 Yamashi Galleries car.

She was right up its tailpipes as she went into the first of the fast sweepers, balancing the throttle carefully so she wouldn't lose any downforce by getting too close to the car in front. By the third of the Porsche Turns, she realised that the privateer Toyota wasn't driving to its full potential and was acting as a very effective cork in a bottle.

Francesca decided to play it coolly and not get flustered by the obvious stalling tactics. She let herself fall back slightly so her aerodynamics would work better and to get fresher air into the radiators.

Coming into the Ford Chicane, she tried an opportunist manoeuvre down the inside of the Yamashi Galleries Toyota that took the other driver completely by surprise. Even as the Toyota was getting blue flags, telling it to move over, Francesca was blasting past on the inside.

After successfully negotiating the chicane, she drove onto the front straight and went up through the gearbox, letting the twelve stretch its legs more than she had allowed it to before the safety car had gone out. In the distance, she could see the race-leading Toyota drive into the soft kink that would take it up to the Dunlop Chicane.

'Fran, lap 302. Position two. Three laps and six seconds to leader. Plus eight laps to third, #5 Ford,' Enrico Finotto said.

"Roger, Enrico."

.\_\*.\_\*.\_\*

'A bit of gamesmanship from the #37 Yamashi Galleries Toyota there. Not really necessary at this point of the race, I would've thought, especially not from a car that's in seventh place. Who's driving it at the moment...? Oh, how piquant, it's Tomiko Kageyama, the Japanese lady racer. I doubt Francesca Carrara will add her to her Christmas card list. Further down the field, we have...'

In the pits, Kathleen had finally sat down on her lawn chair, thinking that she had better preserve her energy until the final hours. Crossing her legs at the knee, she leaned back on the chair and put her arms behind her head.

Around her, some of the other guests had begun to drop in. They were talking excitedly amongst themselves but only a few of them dared go anywhere near Kathleen, no doubt scared off by her hard stare and the no-nonsense expression she was wearing.

Fabio came into the pits from the other side holding two Styrofoam cups of coffee. When he saw Kathleen sitting by the television, he walked over to her and stepped over the strings of plastic forming the spectator enclosure.

"Ciao, bella Kathleen," Fabio said and kissed her on both cheeks like he always did.

"Hello, Fabio. Is that my coffee?"

"Yes, Patrizia suddenly had a lot to do over in the tent so she asked if I would mind," Fabio said and gave Kathleen one of the cups. Once he had a free hand, he pulled up a lawn chair and sat down next to Kathleen.

"We've hardly spoken this weekend," Kathleen said with a smile. She took a little sip of the coffee, finding it to be pretty good.

"Well, I've been busy, you know."

"Oh, I know. Second place isn't bad at all, in my opinion."

"It isn't, but... I was second last year. I'd like to go one better this year."

"I understand. At least you're, uh..." Kathleen lowered her voice and leaned in towards Fabio, glancing left and right to make sure no one was close enough to hear them. "At least you're beating Luca."

Fabio nodded, grinning cheekily.

"When are you going back in?"

"On lap 311 if everything goes to plan. Plenty of time to talk to the most beautiful donna here," Fabio said with another grin.

"Careful, Fabio. I'm going to tell Francesca you said that," Kathleen said and thumped Fabio's shoulder.

"Go ahead. She'll agree!"

---

When Eurosport returned from an ad break, the camera caught several Nippondenso Toyota mechanics lining up in the pitlane, seemingly preparing for a pitstop.

*'That's strange... are we expecting a Toyota #7 pitstop? Didn't we just have one? Let me see... yes, they were in only six laps ago. Derek, do you suppose they're trying to trick the opposition?'*  
the Eurosport commentator said.

Both Kathleen and Fabio lost their smiles and sat up straight in their chairs, staring hard at the television.

*'No, I don't, frankly. With three laps in hand, what would be the point?'*

'You're right. This could be an important development in the race which is on... uh, lap 307. Let's hope the camera picks up the Toyota before it returns to the pits. Perhaps the driver has reported a vibration or a slow puncture.'

Kathleen began to lick her lips, suddenly realising what could happen if the cards fell right. On the TV, the camera found the #7 Toyota driving up through the forest from Mulsanne Corner. Several hundred yards behind it, Francesca's black-and-turquoise Maserati could be seen in some of the long shots.

"Fabio, can you see anything wrong with the Toyota?"

"Mmmmm, no. It's got four good tyres. Headlights are strong... no smoke or steam. Maybe the driver has got a cramp. That can happen so easily."

"Really? But I thought you were all top fit?" Kathleen said without taking her eyes off the television.

"I remember last year in Mosport... Gio and I were leading, but I hadn't been drinking enough so I got a cramp in my left calf. Hurt like a sonovabitch. I had to come in out of sequence, and in the end, it cost us the race."

"Mmmm..."

On the TV, the Toyota went through the Porsche Turns, seemingly going at its usual speed. Kathleen scrunched up her face and scratched her hair. A few moments later, the #7 peeled off into the pitlane.

'And there we have the Toyota, the leader of the race, getting onto lap 308 as it crosses the line in the pitlane. Oh, this could be a crucial moment in the race if they're having some sort of problem. The #1 Maserati of Carrara, Dellassandro and Balzani is three laps down, but that's only slightly more than 10 minutes on the track. Let's see what they do... the refuellers are ready, but that's standard. They're changing the tyres... Oh! They're taking off the rear bodywork! They do have a problem!'

The massive crowd in the main grandstand all responded by oooh'ing loudly and rising to their feet, a gesture that was mirrored in the pits by both Kathleen and Fabio.

'What are they doing? Are they... yes, it looks like they're dumping water down the radiators, trying to flush them or cool them off. It looks like they have some sort of overheating issue. Where is the second placed car...? Okay, Carrara has just gone past, but that was to unlap herself once. They still have some distance to go.'

"Ohhh... come on, come on, Francesca," Kathleen said, crossing her fingers and staring wide-eyed at the TV.

'Yes, but the leader is stationary and the Maserati is still going round. Like you said, Patrick, this is a crucial moment in the race,' Derek Harrison said.

---

'Lap 305. Position two. Three laps off the leader. Plus eight laps to third, #5 Ford,' Enrico said when Francesca went past the pits to commence yet another lap.

"I copy, Enrico. When am I pitting?"

'In six laps, Fran. Pitstop in six laps.'

"Okay."

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

'The bodywork is going back on... the mechanics are clipping it on as I speak. Right, that unscheduled stop took roughly three minutes. The #1 Maserati has gained nearly a full lap of the three it was behind, but if the Toyota can get back to the sort of lap times it did prior to this problem, it should still be more than enough to maintain the lead. Shigeaki Hattori brought the car in and they haven't swapped drivers.'

"Mmmm..." Kathleen said, feeling slightly disappointed over the fact that after all that excitement, the problem was apparently only a minor one.

'And he's off down the pitlane. Shigeaki Hattori takes the #7 Nippondenso Toyota GT-One back into the race, still in first place.'

"Perhaps he'll be flustered enough to forget to use the pit speed limiter... nah," Fabio said, studying the television intently.

Kathleen sat down with a sigh and folded her arms over her chest. Sighing, she wished she had a bottle of chilled white wine to calm her frazzled nerves.

"Well, Kathleen, the company has been charming as always but I'm afraid I have to leave you now. I'm going into the car in a few laps," Fabio said and patted Kathleen on her shoulder.

"Ciao, Fabio. It was nice talking to you. Drive carefully," Kathleen said and put out her hand.

"Thanks. I will. Ciao," Fabio said and leaned in so he could kiss both Kathleen's cheeks. With a wave, he left the spectator enclosure and walked out to the perch on the wall between the pitlane and the track.

'We have the first sector time for the #7 Toyota and it looks okay... but of course, they weren't slowing down before they came into the pits with that overheating issue, so the figures could be



*inconclusive. All we can do up here in the tribunes is to keep an eye on the red and white car. So... what else is going on...?'*

Kathleen tried to pick up the headset to listen in on Francesca, but even though the race engineer was often feeding Francesca tidbits of information, she typically only replied with 'okay' or 'copy', and after a few minutes, Kathleen got bored by it and put down the headset on the small shelf.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

On lap 310, Francesca drove into the pitlane entrance and navigated the tight chicane that mirrored the track. As she put her thumb on the pit lane limiter, she began to loosen her seatbelts so the swap would be quicker.

It didn't take her long to drive down the pitlane and she was soon slotting into the space in front of the Maserati pit. Removing the seatbelts, she jumped out of the #1 car and helped Fabio get in - a scant minute and a half later, the reigning world champion left the pits with a glorious howl from the twelve.

Even before she had taken off her helmet, Francesca ran across the pitlane, headed for the personnel perch on the pitwall.

"Giampaolo, you wanted to speak to me...?"

Giampaolo partially took off his headset and turned around so he was facing Francesca.

"Yes, it looks like the leader is in trouble. They had an unscheduled pitstop to clean the radiators. After that, they've been running five, sometimes ten seconds off the pace to preserve the car. It's still not enough for us to catch them on the track, but I've told Fabio to press on. We might be able to stress them," he said, gesturing with his hands.

"All right. Is Fabio going for a triple?"

"Yes, he'll be in the car until lap 350 or so."

"Okay. Excellent. I'll remain in the pits so I'll be ready in case you need me."

Giampaolo nodded and then turned his attention back to the computer monitors on the perch. Francesca stepped down onto the pitlane, waiting patiently for one of the GT2 cars to pass her. As soon as it was gone, she crossed the pitlane and ducked into the Maserati pits.

She went straight down to the back wall and grabbed a towel. As she was wiping her neck and her arms, she started to wonder why Kathleen wasn't there. She looked around and spotted the headset on the small shelf and then the plastic bag on the lawn chair. Shrugging, she went over to stand behind some of the computer technicians.

---

Five minutes later, Kathleen came back holding a half-full glass of white wine. When she noticed that Francesca had returned, she smiled sheepishly and drained the glass of its last contents.

"Hi," Kathleen said, discreetly dabbing a few drops of white wine off her lips.

"Hi, darling. Thirsty?" Francesca said and walked over to stand next to the spectator enclosure.

"Ah, yes. I needed a... well, I needed a glass of wine," Kathleen said and looked down, unable to hold Francesca's gaze - what she didn't see was that Francesca actually had a look of love in her eyes.

"It's all right, darling. I didn't expect you to turn into a teetotaler. It's perfectly all right for you to enjoy some wine when you want to. I know how much you like it."

"Thanks. For a minute there, I was afraid you might be angry. It was all that excitement with the Toyota... oh, did you hear about that?"

"Yes, Giampaolo told me. And darling, I wouldn't get angry with you over something like this. We're adults. And besides, I don't have you on a leash, do I?"

"A leash...? Hmm...?" Kathleen said, adding a little wink.

"Well, that's for later. Much later. \*Much\*, much later."

"Indeed. Anyway, for the briefest of moments, I thought everything was going your way, but then the Toyota mechanics managed to get the car back into the race. Unfortunately."

"Well, yes, but you have to remember that they've worked just as hard for it as we have. Perhaps even more so after coming so close to winning it last year."

"I guess that's true. I didn't think of that," Kathleen said and put her hand on Francesca's elbow.

"One thing's for certain... down in the Toyota pit, there'll be a lot of people crossing their fingers right now," Francesca said and reached up so she could caress Kathleen's cheek.

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'Oh... what's that? That's THE LEADER! DRAMA FOR THE LEADER ON LAP 347! I can't believe it... I can't believe that it's happened again... this is almost a mirror image of what we saw last year. The #7 Nippondenso Toyota GT-One has parked on the inside of the circuit just after Arnage!' the Eurosport commentator screamed.

In the pits, all the Maserati guests went silent at the same time - and then erupted into a cheer loud enough to make the rafters shake. Kathleen jumped up from the lawn chair and ran over to the television so she'd be able to watch without getting her view blocked by all the people dancing around and waving their arms in the air.

She started sucking on her lips, suddenly feeling a lot more nervous than she had anticipated she'd be. She tried to crane her neck to see where Francesca had gone off to, but she was nowhere to be found.

'The driver is out of the car, trying to get the bodywork off, but judging by the amount of steam escaping from underneath and behind the car, it's a waste of time. Now, don't forget, it's technically still in the lead, so if... who is driving it...?'

'It's Kaneichi,' Derek Harrison said.

'If Toshihiro Kaneichi can fix the malady himself and is able to continue, they still have a shot at winning the race... but... no, I don't think it's possible. His body language says that it's all over... Oh dear, that's the second year in a row they've lost Le Mans in the final hours, although for different reasons. Last year, it was the gearbox. This year, it appears to be related to the problem they had a few hours ago where the car began to overheat.'

'Quite tragic. They definitely didn't deserve this.'

The television pictures showed Kaneichi climb back into the cockpit, no doubt to radio back to the pits.

Kathleen began to chew on her fingernails, getting more and more nervous by the second. When she felt Francesca's calming hand on her shoulder, she turned around and wrapped her arm around the driver's waist.

"Wow. Francesca..."

"Don't say it. Now the worst part begins," Francesca said, leaning down towards Kathleen's ear so that she could heard over the din of the excited guests.

"The worst part...?"

"The anxious wait. The waiting is the real killer here at Le Mans."

"Oh..."

"I'm going into the car in three laps' time. If everything goes well, I'll get to drive to the flag."

"But surely..."

"Don't say it!" Francesca said and kissed Kathleen's forehead.

"I won't, love. I won't even think it," Kathleen said, nodding solemnly.

"Thank you."

Out on the circuit, Kaneichi had been joined by a group of Toyota mechanics who were standing behind the guard-rail, trying to help him by telling him what to do in his attempts at fixing the car.

"Hey, wait a minute...? Are they allowed to do that?" Kathleen said, pointing at the screen.

"Yes, they can stand behind the Armco and shout at him, but they can't touch the car. That would be outside assistance and that would earn them an automatic disqualification."

"Oh... weird rules."

*Fabio Dell'Assandro in Maserati #1 has just gone by onto lap 347 and that means that when he passes the stranded Toyota in roughly three minutes' time, he'll take the lead,' the Eurosport commentator said, making Francesca take a deep breath.*

"On a related note... Isn't it fun to see Jonno doing so well?" Kathleen said to take Francesca's mind off the obvious.

"Yes, it definitely is. I'm happy for them... although they won't be satisfied with being nine laps off the lead."

"Ohhhh! You're always so... so..."

"Ambitious?"

"Something like that," Kathleen said and poked Francesca in the side.

"Well, they're a factory team, they're here to win. That's what we're all here for. They still have a long way to go. And next year, they won't even be able to use much of the information they've gathered this year once they drop down into GT2."

"I still think it was a very harsh decision to let Sally Sharpe go just like that."

"Darling, are you defending Sally? Not too long ago, you were ready to push her off a cliff...?"

"Well, yes, but once we got to know her, she turned out to be a nice woman."

"Who wasn't your rival?"

"That, too," Kathleen said and leaned against Francesca's broad shoulder.

On the television, the camera picked up Fabio's Maserati as he turned right through Mulsanne Corner and began the trek up through the forest. The camera stayed with him as he drove through Indianapolis and the short straight leading up to Arnage.

Francesca took another deep breath and thrust her hands deep into her pockets.

As Fabio went through Arnage, the camera zeroed in on the Toyota and the people standing there. The despondency in their faces was clear to see as the black-and-turquoise Maserati MC12 blasted past them and up the curved straight that would take it to the first of the Porsche Turns - now in the lead of Le Mans.

Inside the Maserati pit, the guests erupted again, dancing around and chanting all sorts of things, but Kathleen and Francesca weren't among them.

Francesca's face gradually turned into a stoic mask that Kathleen knew acted as a defence mechanism for the anxiety brewing inside. Reaching down, she took the driver's cold hands and began to rub them to show her support.

Francesca gave Kathleen a wistful little smile and then leaned down to whisper a few words in her ear.

"Now the worst part begins..."

\_\*\_\*\_\*\_

'Fran, take it easy. We're leading by nine laps. No heroics, no dramas, no rush. Get ready. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... GO!'

Moments later, Francesca depressed the starter button and went off down the pitlane on a fresh set of tyres. When she reached the end of the pits, the blue light was flashing, giving her a warning that a car was close to overtaking her out on the track.

The GT2 Ferrari blew by her before she was up to speed but she caught up with it even before they reached the Dunlop Chicane. Not wanting to risk anything at such a late stage of the race, she decided to stay behind it all the way down the Forest Esses.

Once she reached the short straight leading up to Tertre Rouge, she ducked down the inside and overtook the GT2 car on the approach to the fast corner. Feeding the power in gently, she short-shifted in all the gears like she had been told, trying her best to save the car.

A short while later, she braked sooner than usual for the Nissan Chicane, moving cautiously into the bumpy right-left-right sequence. Upon leaving it, she checked the mirrors to see if she had anyone behind her who wanted to unlap themselves, but found that the track was clear.

Short-shifting back up to sixth, she let the car slide over to the right hand lane to have the best line for the Playstation Chicane.

---

'And there's the new leader, Francesca Carrara in the #1 Mediterraneo Maserati MC12. I won't say that she's cruising, but she's definitely not going to her full potential. More like 85%, actually,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'Yes, a wise choice now. Nine laps ahead of the nearest competitor, ten laps ahead of the team car... rushing things now would be sublimely idiotic and none of those people are idiots,' Derek Harrison said.

"You better believe it!" Kathleen said loudly, still staring at the television. She had decided to keep standing right in front of the screen for the remainder of the race so she wouldn't lose a second in case someone blocked her view.

Around her, the other guests had settled down a bit, sensing that the race could still throw a spanner in the works. Thankful for the respite, Kathleen sighed and checked her watch - twenty to two.

'God, an hour and twenty minutes to go... I'm going to get a heart attack before this thing is over...' she thought and wiped her damp brow.

'I know it's much too soon to call the race, but if Francesca Carrara were to win, she'd be the first woman ever to stand on the top step of the podium here at Le Mans. And apart from the war years, the race has been going on since, uh... 1923.'

'Well, I got to know Francesca quite well last year, and let me tell you something, Patrick... right now, she couldn't care less about that. She just wants to be the first Francesca Carrara on the top step of the podium.'

.\_\*.\_\*\_.\_

'Welcome back to Le Mans. It's a quarter to three and we're on lap 380. We have good news and bad news. The good news is that we've received official word from the hospital that Benito Guerrero, the driver who crashed so terribly just after Tertre Rouge, is basically all right. He's battered and bruised and he'll spend the night at the hospital for observation, but he doesn't have any injuries beyond that,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'That's not good news, that's great news, Patrick,' Derek Harrison said.

'Indeed. The bad news is that, unfortunately, we won't have a new distance record this year. Francesca Carrara will need to do another eighteen laps to reach that, but that's out of the question now. My prediction is that we'll get to lap 383, possibly 384 if the timing isn't quite right.'

'Last year, the Maseratis only made 377 laps so the pace has quite obviously been even hotter this year. We've had a couple of safety cars and that brief spell of rain during the night, but that wasn't enough to hinder their progress.'

'That's right, although on one lap during the night, no less than four cars went off the circuit, including the current leader. Fortunately they were all able to continue. Right, we have time for one more ad break so we'll take that now. Don't go anywhere, we'll be right back.'

Kathleen folded her arms across her chest to stop herself from chewing on her fingernails. She was bopping up and down on her feet, trying to think of something else other than the race - like breathing - but failing miserably.

Her lips were reduced to two narrow lines in her face and she could feel that she had turned quite pale from standing up for such a long time, but she didn't care a bit about any of those things.

She checked her wristwatch for the umpteenth time in the last five minutes and sighed deeply when she realised that time wasn't going any faster just because she wanted it to.

---

'And there we have Francesca Carrara, about to go into the record books. She's going through the Porsche Turns now on lap 383, but it's still only a few minutes to three... Derek, do you think she'll slow right down now?'

'No, she won't. Don't forget that the rules clearly say that the last lap can't be more than seven minutes in total. If she slows down now, she'll exceed that.'

'Good point, Derek, I didn't think of that. All right, that means that we'll go to 384 laps in this race.'

As the leading Maserati went past the main grandstand to start the final lap, the crowd saluted it by waving large flags and by clapping and cheering wildly.

'Lap 384, Fran. Position one. Final lap. Easy does it. Plus nine laps to second place, plus ten laps to third,' Enrico Finotto said.

"Copy, Enrico."

'Fran, enjoy the flag parade. Well done,' Giampaolo said.

"Thank you, but we're not quite there yet," Francesca replied as she braked into the Dunlop Chicane. Checking the mirrors, she noticed that Luca DiLorenzi had navigated his way through the field to slot in behind her - Giampaolo had no doubt been busy orchestrating a formation finish.

Behind the two black-and-turquoise Maseratis, a handful of other cars, both GT1s and GT2s, had latched onto the train of cars that circulated around on the final lap.

As Francesca came through Tertre Rouge and went onto the Mulsanne Straight, all the corner workers came out to stand at the edge of the circuit, waving all the flags they had - yellow, blue, green, white and red.

It finally dawned on Francesca that she was on the verge of fulfilling the dream she'd had since she was a teenager - she was really there, leading Le Mans on the final lap. The mental fatigue, the physical strain and the emotions she had bottled up inside her caught up with her and she began to cry. Soon, tears started to run down her cheeks and into the balaclava.

Knowing that a veil of tears and driving at 100 m.p.h. wasn't a good cocktail, she flipped open her visor and dried her eyes with her gloved hand. Sniffing a few times, she responded to the flag parade in the time-honoured fashion of flashing the headlights repeatedly as she passed by the groups of marshals.

---

'And that's it, it's three o'clock and the Le Mans 24 Hours is over! The clerk of the course is waving the chequered flag... the first car to take it is one of the GT2 Porsches. Congratulations to the Mediterraneo Maserati team and to Francesca Carrara and Fabio Dell'Assandro, both first-time winners, and to Mario Balzani who scores his second Le Mans victory,' the Eurosport commentator said.

'All Francesca has to do now is to get back to the line. But believe me, she's going through all kinds of emotions right now. She's normally so stoic and cool, but I know another side of her, a far more emotional side that doesn't often come out. But I guarantee that it's out now,' Derek Harrison said.

---

At the old signalling pits down at Mulsanne Corner, some fans had found their way through the fence and into the restricted area, and they proudly waved Italian and Mediterraneo flags to show their support when the two Maseratis came past them. Francesca answered them by flashing her headlights and by putting her hand through the small porthole in the Plexiglas window.

Going up through the gears, she was soon cruising along at 125 m.p.h. on the section of the track where her race had ended the year before. As she passed the fateful second brow, she briefly looked to her left at the field where her car had landed, feeling thankful for the time she had been given with Kathleen.

Turning through Indianapolis and Arnage, she looked at the forlorn sight of the abandoned #7 Toyota, once again she thanking her lucky stars that nothing major had gone wrong this time.

---



In the pits, a man Kathleen didn't know pushed a bottle of champagne into her hands, but she refused to take it.

"Forza, prendi la bottiglia di champagne!" the man shouted at her. She couldn't understand exactly what he said, but she got the gist and just shook her head.

"No. Not yet. Not until she's back at the line. Keep it," she said and handed the bottle back to the unknown man.

When Fabio and Mario Balzani came into the pits, the guests roared and practically threw themselves at them, but Kathleen just scrunched up her face and turned her attention back to the television.

'... rsche Turns, not long to go now. She just has to go through the remainder of the sweepers and the Ford Chicane and then she'll see the flag. Oh, this is history in the making. Quite extraordinary stuff. In fifty years, people will be talking about this event that saw a woman being crowned the winner for the first time.'

'Yes, but like I told you before, that doesn't matter one iota to her now. All she's looking for is that black and white tablecloth the clerk of the course is waving.'

"Come on, Francesca, come on..." Kathleen said, constantly shuffling left and right and holding her hands close to her heart.

After what seemed like ages, the #1 Maserati finally came through the Ford Chicane and went onto the pit straight. The main grandstand erupted with klaxons blaring all over the place and thousands of flags being waved, and the guests in the Maserati pit became more and more unruly by the second.

By the time the black-and-turquoise car finally crossed the finish line, Kathleen was so spent that she didn't even have enough energy left to let out a cheer - all she could do was to sit down with a bump on the lawn chair and cry into her hands.

Someone close to her pulled the cork out of the bottle of Champagne and began to spray it everywhere. The sticky liquid rained down on her, getting into her hair and soaking her Maserati team shirt, but she didn't even notice.

---

The flag marshals formed a line across the track and waved the cars into the pits, making them go into what had just been the pit exit.

Francesca slowed right down and opened the driver's side door so she could wave to the crowd in the main grandstand - the mob all responded by cheering and chanting her name and by waving all sorts of flags even more frantically.

When she reached the line of flag marshals, she turned the steering wheel as far right as it would go, trying to make it through the 180-degree turn without getting stuck on the inside wall of the pitlane.

Even as she entered the turn, she knew the steering wheel didn't have enough lock for the car to complete the manoeuvre, so she waved at the marshals to come and give her a helping hand.

With their help, she was able to complete the turn and drive into the pitlane. Once inside the pits, she was led into Parc Ferme by a marshal who was running ahead of the car to show her where she should park.

After she had parked in the slot marked #1, the marshal gave her a thumbs-up and ran back out to help the other cars. As the incredible heat from the engine came forward, Francesca quickly unbuckled her seatbelts and stepped out of the car, suddenly feeling an irresistible urge to find Kathleen and give her the kiss of a lifetime - unfortunately, she knew it would be a while before they'd have some privacy.

Taking off her gloves, her helmet and the HANS-device, she put them on top of the car. After zipping down her race suit, she put her index finger inside the balaclava and whipped it off, making her short hair shoot out in a dozen different directions.

"Eccellente lavoro, Francesca. Congratulazioni," Giampaolo said and put out his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Razotti. Likewise. This was a team effort."

"It certainly was. Wait here, the shuttle will soon take you down to the podium. Errr, you might want to comb your hair first," the team manager said, adding a sly little wink.

"I know, I know," Francesca said, trying to smooth down her damp hair.

"Ben fatto, Carrara. Well done. I'll beat you next time," Luca DiLorenzi said, patting Francesca on her back.

"I doubt it, Luca. I've won three times in a row now. I don't think you've won at all this year... have you?"

"Oh, ha, ha, very funny. This championship isn't over yet and we have some of my favourite races coming up. I'll beat you, don't worry," Luca said, whistling.

---

Seven minutes later, the shuttle bus drove very slowly through the massive crowd that had assembled in the pitlane. Even though the driver had the hazard lights on and was honking constantly, the speed never rose above walking pace.

Francesca chuckled and used the sleeve of her driving suit to wipe off her sweaty neck. She felt unusually drained, but a quick look at the other two drivers that were sharing the bus with her - Luca, who was busy waving to the crowd, and Miguel Gomez, the driver of Jonno's Ford GT #5 - confirmed that they were all wearing the same, dead-tired expression on their faces. The young American in particular appeared to be almost shell-shocked as he was sitting like a statue, practising his 1000-mile stare.

A strong scent of sweat soon filled the small shuttle bus, and Francesca chuckled again and waved her sleeve in front of her nose.

"Oi, gov'nor, would you mind if I rolled down the window a little bit?" she said to the driver, but his only response was a Galic shrug and a shake of the head.

"Right. Never mind," Francesca said and decided to go for it anyway - but when she tried to turn the lever, she discovered that the window couldn't be opened.

"Aw, terrific. We've survived twenty-four hours but now we'll choke on our own exhaust fumes."

"Maybe we should just get out and run. I'm sure it'd be quicker," Miguel Gomez said, breaking his silence.

---

When the bus finally arrived at the bottom of the staircase leading up to the podium, the driver pressed a small button on the dashboard that made the door slide open.

Luca, Miguel and Francesca bounded from the shuttle bus, eager to get out into the fresh air. Francesca looked everywhere she could, but she was unable to see Kathleen's white-blonde mop of hair anywhere. With a grunt, she followed the other two up the stairs.

A split second after she had set foot in the ceremony room on top of the pit complex, she was tackled by Kathleen who came flying at her like a blonde Banshee.

"Oh, God!" was the only thing Francesca managed to pick up of the many, many things the sobbing Kathleen howled into the side of her neck.

"Shhhh, I've got you... I've got you," Francesca whispered into Kathleen's ear, lifting her off her feet and returning the crushing hug. She swayed back and forth, hoping to get Kathleen calmed down before the official ceremony started.

The clerk of the course, a distinguished gentleman in his late sixties, entered the ceremony room and began to shake hands with the drivers.

"If you're ready...?" he said, looking at the emotional scene just inside the door.

"I'm ready, Sir," Francesca said and lowered Kathleen down onto the carpet.

"I love you, Francesca," Kathleen said, wiping her nose on a completely soaked hankie.

"I love you, too, darling. Please sit down before you fall down. You're so pale..."

Outside, an emcee turned on his microphone and began to introduce the drivers from the third placed team. Luca, Donny Zorzi and Carlo del Bello all walked out onto the podium and began to wave to the crowd.

"I have to go, Kathleen. Please sit down..."

"I'm all right. I just got so... God, so emotional."

"I'll say!" Francesca said, kissing Kathleen's forehead.

"I'm all right... just go. I'll be waiting for you in here," Kathleen said, sniffing.

Someone whistled at Francesca and she looked up - it was Jonno, giving her a big thumbs-up just before he went onto the podium with Miguel Gomez and Franklyn Wilds, their third driver. She winked at him and then placed Kathleen in a chair that one of the officials had provided for her.

"And in first place... Mario Balzani... Fabio Dellassandro... and... Francesca Carrara!" the emcee said, holding out his arm to let the three drivers know that they should step outside.

Francesca came out last and was met by a massive cheer from the tens of thousands of people that had gathered down in the pitlane. The podium, built on top of a metal gantry that spanned the pitlane, was already quite full, and when several photographers came out after Francesca had taken her place on the top step, she suddenly got worried that it might collapse under the weight.

Behind the nine drivers, three large flags were hoisted up on tall flagpoles; Italian flags for the winners and the third placed crew and the Stars & Stripes for the second placed car. Moments later, the Italian national anthem began to play over the loudspeakers.

The grandiose fanfare at the start of the anthem was enough in itself to make Francesca choke up, but when the tune segued into the main part, she could feel the dam threatening to burst for real. Trying very hard to take her mind off the tears and to keep up appearances, she clenched her teeth and grunted along to the lyrics, but the words that escaped her lips never made much sense and certainly didn't follow the anthem.

Once the anthem ended, she raised her arms in the air and waved to the cheering crowd. After throwing her Maserati cap down into the pitlane, she leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees so the crowd below wouldn't see the tears - but then she realised that all the other drivers were tearful as well.

Looking towards the windows of the ceremony room, she quickly spotted Kathleen who was still bawling like a little child. Francesca chuckled and blew her partner a kiss that Kathleen seemed to intercept with her lips.

---

Five minutes later, all the drivers were running out of adrenaline and wanted nothing more than to sit down in the ceremony room. When they were finally released from the podium, Francesca hoisted up in her laurel wreath, her huge, golden trophy and the nearly empty bottle of champagne and walked on leaden legs towards the door that would take her back to Kathleen.

Once she had returned to where Kathleen was waiting, she put the laurel wreath and the heavy trophy down on the carpet and then sat down with a bump in one of the leather chairs. Resting her head on the chair's backrest, she let out a long, slow, dead-tired sigh.

Kathleen tried to smile, but all the crying had made her cheeks ache so much that it only turned into a faint crease. She got up from her own chair and almost fell into Francesca's arms, despite the driving suit being soaked with champagne and sweat.

"I love you, Francesca. I'm so proud of you. Congratulations..." Kathleen whispered.

"Thanks, darling. I love you, too. We finally did it."

"You did it..."

"No. We did it. I couldn't have done it without you. You've been my rock-solid foundation over the last year, and... and... I owe you so much."

"God, Francesca... I didn't do anything..."

"You were there and you loved me. That was enough."

"But..."

"Shhh... no more words. Let's just enjoy the moment," Francesca said and gave Kathleen a little squeeze.

After pausing for a few heartbeats, Kathleen nodded. Closing her eyes, she leaned into Francesca's firm embrace, just enjoying the feel of the driver's strong arms around her body. Snuggling down, a contented smile spread out over her features and she let out a slight purr - she was exhausted, but very, very happy.

\*

\*

**THE END.**

**Norsebard's Scrolls**  
**Index Page**

---

---