



Racing Hearts

By

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What starts as revenge soon flares to passion.

Italian race car tycoon Ronan Miller is on the cusp of achieving his elaborate revenge when he meets flame-haired back-up driver Georgia Trent. Intrigued by the beautiful and risk-loving beauty, he thinks he can use her as an instrument of his revenge, but after a spontaneous night of passion, he has other plans until fate knocks them both on a different track.

Georgia Trent has doggedly pursued a goal that has nothing to do with Mr. Tall, Dark, Seductive and Handsome. But one night she indulges her sensual, passionate and impulsive nature, never dreaming the consequences will be so permanent. Wanting to do the right thing, Georgia tracks down the elusive Roman who's disappeared after a family emergency.

Watching Georgia game her way into his office reminds him of all he's been missing, but Roman's always been business before pleasure. But business won't help him now. He is going to have to use all his seductive skills to woo Georgia back to his side, but has he waited too long?

Chapter *ONE*

Ronan Miller looked up from the papers his half brother had just handed him. He thrust the bundle back at Ethan as if the sheets were poisoned. “And you decide to tell me this now? They found our mother’s body last month, and you’ve only just gotten around to telling me?”

Bright blue eyes, the mirror of his own and their shared legacy from their remarkable mother, met his. “I only found out myself last week.”

They were of a same height, their gazes meeting exactly, both comfortably over six feet tall. They were leaning on the balcony of the best penthouse in the best hotel in Monte Stefano, waiting for the premier motor race of the season to get underway.

Ronan replaced his sunglasses and turned to the scene beyond the balcony, trying to get his mental bearings. The news Ethan had brought him changed his whole perspective, altered their lives.

In the bay, the rich blue sea supported a fleet of luxury yachts. Chrome rails glinted on the lenses of binoculars held by owners and guests, all gazes concentrated on the shore.

Ronan lifted his binoculars to his shaded eyes. The sun burned down on the ranks of cars below the hotel, the sponsor names emblazoned on the sides quivering in the rising waves of heat. A few moments ago, deafening sounds smashed through the air as hordes of fire-suited mechanics set the engines running. Once, the smells and sounds would have set his heart pounding with excitement, but too much had happened since those days.

Assistants held umbrellas over the TV interviewers and the officials who moved around. The drivers would come out soon, stand by their cars, do their personal checks and suffer the interviewers’ inane questions. He remembered them well from what seemed like another life, and another time. It was certainly another place. He’d made his name in the US. Few people had heard of him here. At least, not as Ronan Miller. If he’d used the

surname he was born with—Bianchi—they'd be agog. Once, Bianchi Motors had sponsored a racing team. It still made cars that were driven on roads all around the world.

So did he for that matter, but under his mother's name of Miller. One of her names, anyway. And his cars were specialist, custom-built sports vehicles. He'd abandoned one fortune and made another. Now he was back, to see his father rot in hell for what he'd done to his mother and baby sister.

But the man standing next to him, his half-brother Ethan Black, had just rocked his world.

"Why are you telling me now, just when I'm poised to get the revenge I've been working for?"

"Because you might want to change your mind, or amend your plans," Ethan said. "After you knew. I couldn't get to you yesterday, as I'd planned, because of the airline strike. But there's still time."

The sound from below faded as Ronan took in what his brother was telling him. "You mean I've been using a fake name all these years?" He shook his head. He'd taken his mother's name after he'd walked out of his father's palazzo the day he'd turned eighteen. "Our mother's name wasn't Evangeline Miller?"

The binoculars hung around his neck, forgotten, as Ethan turned to face his brother. "Just little Tracy Davis from the wrong side of Houston, Texas."

Ronan gave a humorless laugh. "Changing our names seems to be a family tradition."

But, really, it didn't matter what name he used. After he'd walked out on his father and left his heritage behind, he'd have been as happy to pick a name out of the phone book, just as long as it wasn't Bianchi. He'd spent the intervening years remaking himself anew. In a way he found ironic satisfaction in creating something from scratch. His business, his name... it belonged to him alone. Did it really matter what that name was?

Except the mother he'd known, the world-famous model, Evangeline Miller had been manufactured. She'd started as Tracy Davis, a girl from a trailer park in Texas. He checked the birth date on the certificate Ethan had handed him. And two years younger than he'd thought. Evangeline Miller

had run away to New York, made herself famous and married hotelier Dustin Black. After that, when her son was a year old, she'd dumped Ethan with his father, and run off with Mario Bianchi, an Italian billionaire. Ronan's father.

And apparently there was even more to her story.

"Do we know why she did it? Left Houston, I mean?"

"She had an abusive husband. My guess is that she needed to get out of town before he killed her. They found the divorce certificate in her flat in London, and the reason for it. Since she had nobody to look after her, she had to take care of herself."

Ronan's head spun. His mother the supermodel who had taken the world by storm had started life in a Texas trailer park? When he'd known her, she'd been exquisite, with a clipped, upper-class New York accent. She'd shucked any trace of her origins. He'd had no idea.

"Now you know about her, are you still going through with your plans?" Ethan queried.

Ronan lifted a brow. "What do you think? That I'm going to give up years of planning just because our mother used a different name?" Even more reason to get this done.

Because, between them, his parents had killed his baby sister. His mother's typically impulsive behavior, flinging herself into the night once she'd discovered her husband's string of infidelities, taking Catalina with her, had resulted in tragedy when she'd gone over the cliff in a car she couldn't handle.

She'd taken Catalina, but left him behind. That had hurt Ronan terribly at the time, but not as much as what they discovered the next morning.

The police had found the twisted, wrecked body of his little sister. His mother's body had never been found. Eventually the authorities presumed it was lost in the sea beyond the cliff and pronounced her legally dead.

"Why didn't she contact anyone? Why didn't she come back?" he demanded.

Why had she abandoned him, her five-year-old son? The question reverberated around his head, but he had no answers. When he'd thought

she'd died in the accident, his plans had been easier, more clear-cut. The way he liked them. But she hadn't died in the crash, she'd died much later. Earlier this year, in fact, in a sordid one-room flat in London. He couldn't get his head around this.

When she'd left Ethan with his father, Ethan had been a baby. He'd never developed the ties with his distant mother that Ronan had in the five years he'd known her. Losing her had hurt. Knowing she had lived all those years without returning home hurt even more, those remembered childhood days destroyed forever in his memory.

Ethan shook his head. "I don't know for sure. But when they found her she had scars. They must have been pretty bad after the accident. She could never have gone back to being the beauty the world fawned over, so maybe she didn't want the pity. Or maybe she had amnesia and only got her memory back later. That happens with head injuries." He shrugged. "And Catalina died, so maybe she felt guilty." He sighed. "It must be somewhere in those papers. She died a hoarder. There were sacks full of papers, albums, magazines. The police wanted to toss them out, but I asked them to put the stuff into storage, and now I've put a company who specializes in untangling lives on to the job. We'll find out the rest, but it'll take some time."

"Hmm. She didn't believe in computers, then?"

Ethan shook his head. "She didn't even have a phone. She spent her last years as a total recluse, living off social security. I think she changed her name this time so she could claim benefits she wasn't entitled to. She had a false British birth certificate, too."

His mother had never come back for him. That hurt. Nothing replaced the hollowness inside, the loss of his beautiful, charismatic mother who had blazed through the world like a comet and died just as quickly. Or rather, Evangeline had died. Tracy had lived on with yet another name, Julie O'Connor. Changed her name again, cut ties, moved on.

"She must have known we both had money. We could have given her something."

Ethan's features clouded. "I know. I don't have an answer for that, not

yet. But we'll find out."

The pungent aroma of gas and oil floated up to them, familiar and comforting to Ronan, who'd lived with that smell most of his life.

Ronan had made his reputation in racing the hard way—not with glamorous scenes like the one below, but working up from filthy, badly equipped dirt circuits, right to the biggest race in the States. With that seed money he'd become a designer of the most prestigious sports cars in the world. Everybody wanted one but only a few ever got their wish. Now he had money and influence of his own. And he'd used it to punish his father the best way he knew how.

Mario Bianchi had allowed Ronan and Ethan's mother to storm out into the night and take a car that was unfit for the road. Ronan blamed his mother for taking Catalina, but he blamed his father more for standing by and letting her do it. He'd heard the shouts from his bedroom upstairs and had come down to discover his mother screaming at his father, blaming him for a string of infidelities. That was why she'd gone. That was why she'd died. Or rather, his baby sister had died. That made his current plans just as necessary as they'd been before he'd discovered this mess.

"Damn right I'm going through with my plans. I've been working toward this for too many years to call it off now."

Ronan never lost. Just this last step and he'd have his father exactly where Ronan wanted him. Under Ronan's shiny, hand-made Italian shoe.

Twenty-five years ago, his father had come back from the police station, gone upstairs, and closed his bedroom door. He hadn't come out for a week, and after that he never mentioned the name Evangeline again. Leaving his bereft son to mourn on his own. "They're sure it was Evangeline? Positive?"

Ethan nodded, his mouth set in a straight, flat line. "That's how I got involved. The authorities asked me for a DNA sample to rule out the connection. Unfortunately, the tests ruled it in. The woman who died in that filthy apartment was our mother."

Ronan scrubbed a hand through his short, black hair. "Shit."

Ethan asked a question of his own. "So how come your father accepted her death when the body was never found? Why didn't he carry on looking

for her?" He thrust the papers into the leather portfolio he'd brought with him with more violence than the simple task needed. So he wasn't as unaffected as he seemed.

Ronan didn't even have to think about that one. "After she closed the door on us, he told me to forget her. He said he'd get Catalina back, but Mother was gone. She was dead to us, he said. That was before they brought us the news of the accident. And what could we do? Beyond that cliff was the sea. It seemed most likely that she was flung out of the car into the ocean, and it was the easiest way. Maybe my father wanted it done with the least fuss and back then, around that part of Lombardy, his word was law." He shrugged. "That's Italy for you. Airline strikes and bribes."

"Trust me," Ethan said, "I'll get this done."

"I want in," Ronan told him. "Every piece of paper, every report."

"Don't you trust me?"

"You're the only person I trust. I just want to be kept in the loop."

Ethan gave a short, terse nod. "Same," he said.

Neither of the men had reason to trust anyone, but after Ronan had moved to the States, they had grown close. Although they had grown up an ocean apart, they had kept in touch, sometimes clung to each other in the storm of media attention anyone connected to Evangeline Miller still evoked. Ethan had trusted him with a story that was a gossip columnist's wet dream, knowing Ronan wouldn't pass on the information.

But Ronan didn't trust anyone else.

Every suspicion, every night he'd lain alone wanting a friend, a parent, it all came rushing back. The child still lived in the man, and he found life easier to cope with if he worked from a position of little trust. More often than not, he was right.

Ethan glanced behind him. "I need a drink."

Taking the sheaf of papers with him, he disappeared into the darkness of the suite. He came back without the portfolio, but with two cut crystal tumblers holding Scotch.

Ronan needed the time to shove the pain and grief away. He couldn't afford to indulge in them, not today. Later, he'd give himself time to absorb

all this. But not today. Taking the glass with a word of thanks, he lifted it to his nose, sniffing appreciatively before taking his first sip and letting the flavor fill his mouth. “This is a great Islay,” he commented.

His brother nodded. “Isn’t it? I was investigating hotels in the Highlands last year when I came across this distillery. They don’t make much, certainly not enough to supply every hotel in the Noir group. But I bought what I could.” He tipped his glass to Ronan in a mock toast. “I’ll send you a bottle.”

“Thanks.” He savored another taste of the smooth, smoky liquid.

The heavy silence covered a world of regret. Ronan lifted his drink. “May she rest in peace, finally.” Ethan clinked his glass to Ronan’s in silent agreement.

She was gone. Enough of the past. The future loomed large in his mind.

Ronan couldn’t afford to think too hard about anything, except what was happening tonight.

He wouldn’t lose now.

“How did you manage to get a majority share in Bianchi Motors?” Ethan asked him.

Ronan bared his teeth in a feral grin. “I’ve been buying shares for the last five years under umbrella companies, but I needed the final few to get parity with dear old Papa, and he wasn’t selling. I saw my chance when the old man offered to become the major investor in Team Trent. He’s always hankered to get back into the racing world. Back in the day, Team Bianchi won every trophy going. Team Trent is hanging on by a thread, ripe for takeover, but they’ve always held off up till now. It’s run by one man and his daughter.” With a jerk of his dark head, Ronan indicated the scene before them. “I drove the price up with a counterbid and he had to sell the shares I needed to make up the extra. I have one percent more than him, once all my holdings are added up. My father’s precious company will belong to me. Whatever our mother’s name was, she didn’t deserve to be forgotten like yesterday’s old tie. And our sister...” He let his voice tail off.

The memory still choked him, even today.

Ethan tossed back his drink before looking at his glass regretfully. “Now look what you made me do. This stuff is for savoring, not knocking back like

cheap bourbon.” He put the glass on a nearby table and fixed his gaze on Ronan. “What will you do with the company?”

Ronan lifted one shoulder. “Bianchi’s has been running on fumes for years. If there’s anything worth saving, I plan to roll it into Miller’s. It’s time I branched into Europe.” He turned the corner of his mouth in a wry smile. “Making my father watch the transformation of his company, knowing he can’t do anything about it will be the best revenge. I’ll make him helpless.”

He turned his mouth in a mirthless smile. “And there’s a bonus, a little personal touch. He wants the daughter of the race team owner, Georgia Trent. I’ve watched the social media. If he has his way, she’ll be his latest conquest.”

“You can’t know that.”

Ronan made a sound of derision. “You think I haven’t seen it before? Every time I came home from boarding school I found a beautiful woman living at the palazzo. Then he’d see another one and he’d dump the first one. When I got to fourteen, they started hitting on me. I never took them. I prefer to choose my own bed partners, but this time I’ll make an exception. I’ll leave him with nothing. We Italians are good at revenge.”

“I was thinking of making a play for Georgia Trent myself.”

Ronan shrugged. “Feel free. As long as my father doesn’t get his nasty paws on her. Her choice.”

“You’re as much American as you are Italian,” Ethan observed with a wry grin.

“I guess. But I’ve waited a long time for this, and nothing’s going to stop me.”

He understood his father’s attraction. He’d seen her online, dressed up for the cameras at some fund-raising event or other. Georgia Trent was spectacularly beautiful, with a redhead’s creamy skin and mane of flaming hair. He preferred cool brunettes but every man needed a change from time to time. It wouldn’t be any hardship to romance her a little, woo her away from his father’s side—if she was willing. Women he set his sights on always came to him willingly. If she didn’t, no shame, no blame. Team Trent wouldn’t suffer from this. He’d leave them as he found them, no better, no

worse.

His plans were made and everything was set in motion.

Ethan whistled between his teeth. “You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?”

“Yes, and I can’t wait for tonight—”

Breaking off abruptly, Ronan leaned farther over the balcony, trying to catch sight of something, or rather someone, below. Lifting his binoculars, using the single-mindedness that had made him wealthy, he let his senses concentrate on the scene before them.

“Who’s that?” Lifting his binoculars to his eyes, he watched the distraction below.

A baseball cap skittered across the track. A small person in a white fire suit chased it, a wealth of red-gold hair flowing down her back. The woman shook her mane from her face, combing it with her fingers. She bent, displaying the deliciously ripe curves of a pert bottom and picked up the baseball cap.

Arousal roared through Ronan, sending him into full sensual alert. He drank in her features, watching the way she moved so fluidly, belonging in this place as he didn’t.

Instinct took over, and he let it, waiting to see where it would lead him.

Straight into tight, hard desire...

She could only be one woman since she wore an embroidered Union Flag and a stylized T on her fire suit, the insignia of Team Trent.

She sauntered back with exquisite grace, as if she wore a handcrafted designer gown rather than a fire suit that should have hidden every curve on her body. But it didn’t. Ronan took in the way her breasts brushed against the front of the garment and the gorgeous dent of her waist. Just where his hands would fit.

As if she knew someone watched her, she hesitated, lifting her head to look up, giving Ronan his first real-life sight of her lovely face.

Georgia Trent, the only female driver on the circuit. The delectable shape and the clean lines of her features hit him like a punch to the gut. He’d never felt a zing of instant attraction so powerfully before. Even without

makeup she put the other women down there in the shade. He wanted to stroke her, to take her, spend hours in bed discovering her secrets. He could see it, taste her as he made her his.

He lowered the binoculars and they shared a single, fraught moment out of time, gazing directly into each other's eyes.

"You said you wanted to get acquainted with Georgia Trent?" he said to his brother without taking his attention from her. "You can forget that. She's mine." Ronan unclipped his mobile phone and without looking away, speed-dialed his PA. "I want flowers and a message sent to Georgia Trent," he said when she answered. "Two dozen cream roses. Make sure they remove the thorns."

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A movement above caught Georgia's attention. Two men stood at what must be penthouse level, blatantly ogling her. She shivered. She felt naked, as if they'd stripped her bare. In this most macho of sports, she'd learned to take the ogling. Usually she ignored it or gave back as good as she got, depending on the circumstances. Not this time. Especially the dark angel with the binoculars, his powerful body a silhouette against the bright sun above him.

The sound of the cars, the chatter of the media, and the announcements through the speakers all faded as she stared at him.

The noises bled back along with her dazed senses.

A little further along the next balcony movie stars and their retinues were crammed into the small space they'd rented. She could almost hear the clinking of champagne glasses. The sound could deafen a person, were it not for the noises of racing teams preparing for the contest. The hiss of hydraulic jacks, the purr of machinery, and the people scurrying about, cooling the engines, testing the equipment yet again, and the crackle of onboard comms devices, all that was music to her ears.

He lowered his binoculars, but his gaze was still intent on her, as if nobody else existed. And how on earth did she *know* that? She could hardly see the expression in his eyes, or even their color, since his face was in shadow and he was high up. She couldn't see if his attention was fixed on

her. But she felt it.

For a frozen instant, nothing else mattered. The sights and sounds faded away as she lifted her hand to shade her eyes. He was watching her. Why, when so many beautiful, designer-dressed women were sitting in the stands and partying on the balcony next to him wasn't he looking at them? She wasn't made-up—and in a Team Trent fire suit, not the most flattering of garments.

He raised a hand. Was he waving? She almost raised her hand in response, until she closed her eyes, blocking out her own stupidity. When she opened them, the sun flashed on the phone he'd raised to his ear. But he didn't look away. They stared at one another as if they could learn everything just by looking.

Heedless of the other people milling around her, she stood her ground and stared up at this miracle of manhood. She was vaguely aware of the man standing next to him, but she didn't *notice* him the same way. A spell held her fixed, unable to look away.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Forcing a smile for Team Trent's chief mechanic, she twisted her hair into a rope and shoved it back under the cap. "Right after this race, I'm getting my hair cut short," she said bluntly.

"That'd be a shame," Larry said, her best friend and the chief mechanic for Team Trent. "It's your best-selling point." They exchanged wry grins.

Georgia concentrated on the thrill of watching the preparation for the big race. The sight never got old, even when her senses were still occupied by the man above their heads.

She liked to walk around and take it all in, but she always took care to bundle her distinctive hair away and wear an anonymous fire suit, as well as keeping out of the center of the action. Without those, she was just another mechanic. Drivers one and two would take exception to her stealing their thunder. She was the reserve driver. She should be in the garage.

But the press had spotted her when her cap had blown off. They surged toward her, leaving the current world champion gaping. Before the first reporter reached them, she elbowed Larry hard in retaliation for his

comment, leaving him laughing. Then she had to behave herself.

“Georgia, are you driving today?” “Georgia, can you spare a minute?”
“Look this way, darling!” Cameras flashed, making her blink.

Now they’d found her out, she’d give them a moment. The publicity would be great, so the two Team Trent drivers would have to suck it up. The stewards would be clearing the track soon and she could get back to the team garage, where nobody took much notice of her.

Larry was talking to her, leaning close to murmur in her ear. She caught his last words. “Your father’s coming.”

Damn. He wouldn’t be pleased she was out here.

She forced a smile for her colleague. Her father didn’t look happy. His thin mouth turned down at the corners and a deep frown scored twin lines between his thick brows. What her father lacked in height he made up for in personality. Nobody turned away from Dennis Trent or rather they didn’t do it twice. Georgia’s father wasn’t into second chances.

“What’s up?”

Taking her elbow her father dragged her away from the press, and moved closer to speak to her privately. “You’re on,” he snapped. “Get back to the garage now and get ready. We don’t have long.”

Did this mean what she thought it meant? Was her father serious? With the team running into financial difficulties, her dad had appointed her one of the spare drivers, but she’d never expected to get a drive. They had their two main drivers and a young, keen, up-and-coming backup driver, Andy Laithwaite. She was behind those three. The second driver had broken his ankle and was off for the next few weeks and Andy had stepped up. So what had happened now?

He hurried her back to the small garage. With only a lingering thread of regret for the man on the balcony, Georgia turned her attention to the task at hand. Excitement simmered inside her, building to a slow burn.

While the place wasn’t exactly an oasis of calm, at least they could talk freely. As long as they kept their backs to the door, then nobody could lip-read. It wasn’t paranoia, it was plain, hard fact.

“Laithwaite isn’t answering his phone,” her father said in a terse, low

voice. "He's skedaddled. I thought the Germans were after him. I'll sack him on Monday, but he can yell for the rest of his money. Get your gear on, you're driving."

Someone shoved a pair of fireproof gloves into her hands. While she pulled them on, Georgia listened to her father's instructions, trying to quell her mounting excitement. "All you need to do is finish. Place if you can, but don't take too many risks. That's what Friedrich is for." At least the first driver hadn't abandoned them. Laithwaite had threatened and cajoled all season, but he knew the rules. The first driver, the one who had the best chance of climbing the ranks, got the perks. Friedrich Kaspar was so good that Team Trent was in danger of losing him soon, to a bigger team that could afford the salary he thought he deserved.

"We've got the party tonight." Her father clapped her on the shoulder. "So don't get too dinged up."

While she was wearing a Team Trent suit, she was just another one of the team, and her father treated her that way. She wouldn't have it any differently.

He'd need her to make nice to potential sponsors tonight. While she understood the necessity of the schmoozing, she hated every minute. Being the only female driver on the circuit made her a target. She'd fought for her place, but nobody believed it.

While most people might not recognize the humor under the brusque behavior, Georgia did. Her father disliked that part of their business as much as she did, but they had to do it. So she grinned at him, drawled, "Yeah, Dad," and left him staring after her as she headed for the car, his sharp laugh following her.

The warning expressed his concern for her. The party wasn't the reason he didn't want to get her to get dinged up. Racing was safer than it used to be, but that didn't mean that hurtling in a tiny capsule around a course, especially one that was normally a series of streets, wasn't without danger. But Georgia loved it. The hurtling, the capsule, everything.

Nobody survived for long without sponsors. She'd been nice to some people she wouldn't give the time of day to, given the choice.

She'd do a lot more than wear a rented evening gown and jewelry, dancing with men who didn't want to do anything except peer down the front of her dress while they held her far too close. Georgia was a rarity, a woman driving for one of the teams, and much though they'd love to deny it, sexism still ruled in this sport. That and her flaming-red hair made her distinctive in the world of motor racing. Much to her chagrin, she was known more for her hair than her driving, but she'd get there.

She listened as her father outlined the strategy he wanted her to take. Behind her, Larry was wiring her up, getting the telemetry devices hooked in, and fixing the mic in her helmet. Andy was a lot taller than her, so the car wouldn't be ideal, although the guys would do their best. At least the car was beautifully tuned.

She'd helped to set it earlier. "Am I taking Andy's car?"

"What?" Her father shook his head, grimacing. "We can't get everything ready in time. The spare is set up for you. It's closer to your size."

But the spare car was on its uppers. They only kept it because they had to, because the regulations required them to have one. "I can't do much in that. The guys are brilliant at what they do. They can fix the second car. If you want me as your second driver, then we'll have to do it sometime."

"That depends on how you do today." Her dad fixed her with a steely glare.

Only he wasn't her father now, he was the head of Team Trent and she was just another of his staff. If anybody thought she got extra attention because she was his daughter, they'd better think again. Georgia worked as hard as anybody else. She was good, but she was in the team to save money. Her father hated her driving, but he trusted her to get on with the job.

He could have used another grease monkey, he said, and there were a few women in the garages already. Not that many of the team actually got grease on their fingers these days. They wore latex gloves, not from choice, but because of yet another regulation in this increasingly hidebound sport.

Georgia had spent her childhood under one chassis or another, only breaking off to go to school when she remembered to, and when she couldn't

get away with not going. That was until her father had told her she'd better pass her math and physics exams or he couldn't use her on the team. Then she'd knuckled down, because he'd locked the door of the garage and told her to keep away until she'd done her homework.

"We just need to finish," her father said. "It's really hot out there, hotter than normal. That will put a lot of the metrics off. The teams won't be as sharp as usual. All we need is a few seconds and we can place. But don't push it. If somebody wants to pass you, don't fight them off. Let them do it. Just keep going." He paused. "Our new sponsor will be here tonight."

Her thoughts went immediately to the man on the balcony. Not him, but she wished it was. "We haven't signed anything yet."

"No, but I've had his verbal consent. We'll see him tonight at the party."

He wouldn't mention the name because of the people listening, the long-distance mics and other people who hung around the garages, waiting for secrets to pour out. But she knew who it was. Mario Bianchi, owner of Bianchi Motors. He'd owned a racing team once and it looked like he wanted one again. Heaven knew Team Trent needed a new sponsor.

That made her even more determined to do her best. Like hell would she let anybody overtake her. She'd defend her place against all comers. She'd received too many sneers and insults from the drivers to give up now. Not from the leaders, comfortable with their abilities and teams, but the ones lower down, the ones jockeying for position and places. Georgia had something to prove.

Even more since she'd used what she had; her sexual appeal, to draw attention to Team Trent. She wasn't proud of it, but needs must, and nothing got between Georgia and her fierce ambition to drive.

But she kept her resolve to herself. Her father would go ballistic if he discovered she planned to fight her way up to top driver. He was stressed enough, with one driver in the hospital and the other mysteriously absent.

She kept still while Larry finished hooking her up and nodded to her dad. "One day I'll win a race for you."

He clapped her on the shoulder. "But not today, Georgia. Behave just for once, do as you're told."

Georgia clenched her teeth in exasperation as she pulled the balaclava over her head, careful not to dislodge her earpiece. If she made a splash here, instead of tamely taking the car around the track, she could win a place. If Bianchi saw her, he'd take note. Drivers needed to take risks to succeed. The earpiece wasn't as comfortable as it could be, since it hadn't been molded to the shape of her ear, but the helmet should keep it in place.

Her father was rattling off instructions. "When you're done and the officials have finished their checks go to our hotel and change. I've ordered an evening gown for you for the reception. The Prince of Monte Stefano is coming, and Ethan Black, the CEO of the Noir hotel group. And our potential new sponsor. Mario Bianchi promised to sign on the dotted line tomorrow."

The party was being held at the hotel where she'd seen him, the man who had held her attention for a full minute. Before that, she'd have sworn nobody could have torn her away from the pre-race spectacle. He'd proved her wrong and she didn't even know his name.

Perhaps she'd see him tonight. He'd been standing on a balcony high up, so he was either a guest at the exclusive penthouse or he was a member of staff preparing for the party. Either worked for her.

The car was driven forward. This close the scratches and bumps were obvious. But nobody would be concentrating on those. Under the hood was an engine that was the best Team Trent could produce. Well, the third best, anyway. On its uppers the chassis might be, but the engine was tuned and ready.

With her heart in her mouth, Georgia stepped forward and the mechanic hopped out. She took his place and let the guys do their jobs. Several touched her shoulder or waved at her, some giving her the thumbs-up. Despite her reputation as the daughter of a team owner, she'd won them over by sheer hard work and willingness to do the nastier jobs involved in prepping for the races. Without another sponsor who could front the kind of money needed to boost the team up the ranks, they'd all be out of a job at the end of the season.

So, she'd do them another favor and go to that party tonight, smile, and

look decorative. Even flirt, if she could bear it. And maybe meet the man.

Him.

She forced him out of her mind. She couldn't afford to think of anything but the race now.

In response to the audio request, she spoke a few phrases into the mic set into her helmet. The comms were working fine.

Following instructions, she slowly moved out of the garage. She would barely be able to make her place, but since it was near the end of the field, she could do it in time. Otherwise, she'd have to start from the pits. She could hardly hear her father's voice over the earpiece, the blood pounded in her ears so hard. Her heart threatened to burst from her chest, she was so excited. This race was the premier race of the year, and she was making her debut here. Excitement coursed through her, priming her body for the race ahead. The guys checking the telemetry would be able to see her tension. There was no way she could hide anything going on in her body right now.

Recalling her training, she forced her mind to the drive. Nothing else mattered. The politics, the funding, the heat, nothing. Except the memory of one face remained with her and left her last.

The signals glowed, the cars' engines revved, and the green light glowed above.

This was it. The test of her lifetime.

* * * * *

The sun flashed on the bright colors of the cars as they passed the hotel, the aggressive roars deafening Ronan in an utterly familiar way. He concentrated on the white car at the back. Ethan had switched on the TVs positioned on each side of the balcony, so he'd heard the excitement when the announcers told the viewers about the change in drivers. Both men had donned sunglasses to ward against the scene below and the dazzle of the sun off the sea in the bay beyond.

The TV guy did his thing. "Georgia Trent is not only the daughter of the owner of the team, she's a reserve driver. Is she a great driver, or was she promoted to fill a vacant place? Since she's never driven in a race before,

we're about to find out. We've seen her in practice, now let's see if she can cut it in reality. Team Trent is short of money, but then every team below the top rank always claims that. There are only so many sponsors to go around. We've seen great teams fail for the lack of sponsorship, but Georgia's participation adds that extra attraction. Will she accept the offers of modeling that must be pouring her way?"

A photo of Georgia hit the screens.

Ronan slid his sunglasses down his nose to get a good look at it. In the picture, Georgia was posing on some red carpet somewhere. She wore a white dress that screamed virginal purity, all pleats and gathers. A single diamond hung around her neck on a slim gold chain. Despite her lack of extravagance, she was gorgeous. Her skin gleamed with health, and her blue eyes sparkled.

Ronan let his gaze slide over her lithe figure before, annoyingly, the commentator returned to the race. "Is she more than a red-carpet babe? Can Georgia Trent become the first woman to place in this historic race?"

The man making the comments was all but drooling over her. That didn't sit well with Ronan. Sure, she was gorgeous, but that wasn't why she was here. And, yes, he'd use what he could to humiliate his father later, but here, now, she was another figure in a race suit, ready to take on a challenge she'd need all her concentration to complete. He wanted her to win.

"Shouldn't he be concentrating on the front runners?" Ronan mused.

Ethan laughed. "They're not as gorgeous as Georgia Trent."

Ronan was indignant on the woman's behalf. She could be a fantastic driver and they'd still drone on about her sexiness.

The tone in the engines heightened and tension reached fever pitch. In the old days they'd have dropped a flag. These days, lights above showed red, then yellow, then green, like a super-competitive traffic light.

A roar went up from the crowd, the ones gathered on the balconies of the hotels lining the routes and the bleachers put up for the race.

The lights changed color. When the red turned to green they were off in an explosion of fumes and burning rubber. Ronan held his breath. His own

short but glittering career made him only too aware of how dangerous a start could be. One slip, one swerve, even a car failing to match the speed of the one in front and disaster could happen in a split second. He let out his breath as Georgia burst out of the tracks, overtaking a car before she'd reached the ten meter mark. He watched them until they entered the long tunnel, then followed the action on the TV.

By the end of the first lap, she'd gained another couple of places. Georgia steered her vehicle with growing confidence, taking more chances as she swept around the bends, taking the perfect line when she could, not letting it faze her when she couldn't. He knew how good she was—he'd once been that good himself.

"She's gunning it," Ethan murmured. So he was watching her too.

"She knows what she's doing. She's handling that car well." He watched, his heart in his mouth. "The trouble is, not everybody around her is as good as she is. She needs to get up the ranks. Oh, wow, she gained another place. Did you see that?"

The cars swung into view, roaring past the excited crowd. Ronan didn't even pretend to be neutral. This race was bringing everything back, including the tightening of his stomach muscles, the heightening of his senses. At times like these, he really missed the buzz. But once he'd decided to go, he'd made a clean break. No sense dicking around the lower races when he'd known what it was to be the best.

For the first time in years, his burning desire for revenge receded, and he let something else in. He wanted her to win. The joy of driving caught at him, and he imagined he was in the car with Georgia, making instant decisions, steering with accuracy and grace.

She whipped past. He cheered her on, waving a hand in the air. Ethan laughed, a full-bodied, hearty roar of appreciation. Ronan caught his gaze and grinned.

As the cars ate up the laps, Ronan's appreciation for the drivers rose. The lead cars had no problem stretching away, leaving the others to take the places lower down. But one day they would give way for a newcomer, as they always did. Why couldn't it be Team Trent? Ronan's father would never own

them now. Maybe Ronan should take up the challenge.

Georgia's white car turned the corner, perilously close to the blue-and-red car in front. She touched the steering wheel, moving out of his slipstream, preparing to overtake. "Not there," he muttered. "Not in the tunnel."

The tunnel had no safety barriers, nothing to cushion the results of a crash. Only a thin layer of old tires separated the cars from the cold, hard wall. Even he wouldn't have considered a risky move in at that point, and he'd been plenty reckless in the old days.

As they neared the tunnel, he wished he could be in touch with her. Whoever was in contact must be screaming at her, "Drop back!"

Perhaps she'd listened to them, because she slackened her speed a fraction. Ronan sighed with relief.

Until the car behind failed to match his speed to hers. He slammed on the brakes, and slewed sideways. The rear end of his car caught Georgia's very slightly, but slightly was all it took.

She spun, catching the car coming up behind. It skidded like the first one and hit the wall.

Carnage happened before Ronan's eyes and there was nothing he could do. He slammed his fist against the balcony, crying out, as people rushed to the scene and the safety car came out. People in the crowd screamed, some surged forward, the officials forming a barrier to stop them rushing into the scene. White-clad figures raced across the road, carrying fire extinguishers and rescue equipment.

Ronan's heart rose into his mouth and he gripped the balcony, his knuckles white, his hands numb.

Somewhere in the middle of that pile of cars was Georgia Trent. Was she even alive?