

Motor Mouth

Chapter One

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

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

I was standing on the flat roof of the Homestead- Miami Speedway grandstand, getting a bird's eye view of the scrubby Florida landscape. Heat waves shimmered on the track below me, and the air was thick with fumes from scorched rubber, high-octane gas and the euphoria NASCAR brings to a race. I was with forty-two guys on the roof. I was the only one on the roof wearing a pink lace thong. At least I was almost certain I was the only one in a thong since I was the only female, but hell, what do I know? I was wearing tight black jeans and a Stiller Racing shirt. The shirt had short sleeves, was white with black and gold trim and the Stiller Racing logo was embroidered on the front. The embroidered name on the back was a garage joke. MOTOR MOUTH. I'm Sam Hooker's race day spotter. I'm the lip-glossed, bleached blond who whispers into Hooker's ear while he sweats his brains out in a black and gold fire resistant jumpsuit each week.

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

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

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

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

"No, they're about getting even."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened?"

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

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

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

"Shrin's still in his car."

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

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

"No. I heard him hit the wall, and then there's been nothing but silence. He's not saying anything."

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

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

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

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

Gobbles nodded but held tight to the rail.

"You don't look good," I told him. "You should go down and get out of the sun."

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

"It'll get better."

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

"That wasn't your fault."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?"

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

"Did you tell the police?"

"I couldn't do that. I'm in a tight spot. I couldn't get myself involved. And it's not like I know a name or something. I'm just telling you now because ...hell, I don't know why I'm telling you. I'm telling you everything. Cripes, I told you about the man in the boat. How embarrassing is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How much are we paying you?"

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

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

If the 69 car stayed in front, we'd come in second for the season. And in my book, second didn't count. Dickie Bonnano, also known as Dickwad, Banana Dick, Dickhead, and sometimes just plain Asshole, was driving the 69. Bonnano was an arrogant jerk. He was a mediocre driver. And he had a girlfriend who was equally disliked. She towered over Bonnano, had a preference for leather, lined her eyes to look like Catwoman, and she'd bought herself a pair of double D boobs that didn't jiggle, droop or have peripheral vision. The guys in the garage called her Delores Dominatrix. So when Bonnano wasn't being called Dickwad, Banana Dick, Dickhead or Asshole, he was called Spanky.

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

There were thirty-two cars left in the race. They were lined up in running order behind the pace car, and they were circling the track at 40 mph, waiting for the signal that the track was clean and ready for racing. They approached turn number four, the pace car exited onto pit road, and the flag went green.

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

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

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

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

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

"I can hardly wait to hear."

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

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

"No way."

"You would have been my date."

"I don't think so."

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

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

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

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

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

