

ONE



She'd found bliss. Perhaps even true love. Behind the wheel of a '71 Dodge Challenger restored to Slant-6 perfection.

Fishtailing into turn two of a west side Tallahassee dirt track, Reggie shifted into fourth gear and pushed the car to its max, the thrill of the race electrifying her entire being.

The engine rumbled with authority as the tires hummed over the track, churning up dust as if to truly bury yesterday. Firing down the straightaway toward pinkish-gold remains of twilight leaking through the tall pines, the last thread of Reggie's lingering doubt flitted away on the cool September breeze.

This was what she'd been born to do—restore junked-up, forgotten old cars to their original, classic beauty. And it only took her twenty-nine years to figure that out.

Ha-ha. Come on, baby. Show me what you can do.

The boys at the finish line—Al, Rafe, and Wally—flagged her home with their hats in hand.

This was amazing. Simply amazing. She should've done this years ago. Jump from the corporate CPA ship onto the barely floating life raft of “pipe dreams.”

In the last six months, she'd endured more than her share of sleepless nights since she traded her business suits for coveralls

and entered into the car restoration business with Al, who was like a second father to her.

Restoring the Challenger was their first big job. And their first test.

Reggie checked the speedometer. The needle shimmied right at one hundred.

“Wahoo!”

She sped past the finish line. An air horn sounded. Male voices rose with hoots and hollers. She’d done it. *They’d* done it. And without leaving a trail of car parts littering the racetrack.

Downshifting, Reggie aimed for center field, whipping the car in a series of donuts, mashing on the horn, gunning the engine, letting the 440 breathe and have its say.

Oh mercy, building and installing this engine had given them fits. Those days were the ones most filled with doubt, when Reggie considered dialing her old firm, Backlund & Backlund, and begging for her job back.

One last spin around the infield and Reggie stopped the car and hopped out, letting the engine idle. Rafe swooped her up, whirling her around. “We did it!”

When he set her down, Al embraced her in his dark, teddy bear arms. “I’m so stinking proud of you, girl.”

“No, *you*, Al. It was your idea.”

“But you were willing to take the leap.” Al, a retired Marine master sergeant, and her daddy’s best friend all the way back in the ’60s at Sullivan Elementary School, was the brains and brawn behind opening the shop.

When Al had approached Reggie with the idea six months ago, she had nothing to say but “Where do I sign?”

Then he hired Rafe, a Marine who served with Al right before he retired. Rafe left the Marines after three tours in Afghanistan and hitchhiked from North Carolina to Tallahassee in search of “Sergeant Al.”

Ole Wally arrived at the idling car last. "I do believe she's plum beautiful. Reg, you drive better than Danica."

She threw her arms around the wizened old redneck with thin wisps of white hair sticking out from under his Jeff Gordon 24 cap.

"Wally, your engine work is the best in the business, and I'd bet my firstborn on it."

"Reg,"—Wally spit, an old habit left over from his Red Man chew days—"don't go banking money on an account you don't have. Got to find a man, go on a date, get married so's you can have a firstborn." Wally sauntered around the car. "Rafe, did you hear something pinging with the engine? Thought I heard it long about the eight cylinder."

Wally—the car whisperer.

"Let's listen for it on the ride back to the shop," Rafe said, leaning over the hood, listening for the ping.

The shop was an old red barn Al had found way out Blountstown Highway. It worked because it was big and airy with a solid roof. But mostly, because it was cheap.

"Say! Reg,"—a loud bass voice boomed across the infield with irritation—"what happened to seven o'clock?"

Reggie squinted through the long angles of light and shadow as Mark, her date for the evening, made his way toward her.

"Mark . . . hey . . ." Reggie tugged her phone from the pocket in her coveralls. Was it seven already? No, it wasn't seven. It was seven thirty. Seven thirty-one, to be exact. She was late. "I'm so sorry." She met Mark on the other side of the car, glancing back at Wally and shooting him a goofy look. "We had to run the car one last time. Wally heard a ping in the engine." *Well, he did.* "Danny Hayes is picking her up in the morning, and we have to be sure she's running at one hundred percent."

"Wally and Al can manage a *ping*, Reg." Mark swiped his finger across the dusty hood and made a grand gesture of checking

his watch. "Because you and I are late." He stared at her coveralls. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"Yes, it's all the rage in women's fashion this season in New York, Mark. Grease-stained coveralls." Reggie raised her foot. "But I am changing into a pair of fancy boots. Won't that look smart?"

"That-a-way to give it to him, Reg." Rafe nudged her in solidarity as he came around to slip into the driver's seat.

"Drive careful, Rafe. Get the car back to the barn and cleaned up, okay?" She unzipped her coveralls and stepped out. Underneath she wore jeans and a black, pleated V-neck top—perfect attire for a Wakulla County fish fry. Even if the guy hosting it was crazy rich.

Handing her wadded-up coveralls to Rafe through the window, she winced at the worrisome sound of "overbearing mother" in her words. Nevertheless . . . "White-glove the interior, the exterior, even the wheel wells."

"Gotcha, boss." Rafe grinned and gunned the gas while Wally hovered over the engine, ear cocked to the sound of the mysterious ping.

Al motioned for Reggie to step aside with him. "Reg—" His voice broke, and when he looked up, a dewy sheen slipped across his brown eyes. He sniffed, raised his chin, and drew a deep breath. "We done good, girl."

"Yeah, we did." A well of tears filled her own eyes. "I owe you, Al. Big. Now we just have to figure out where our next job is coming from. I was thinking—"

"Have a good night, Reg." Al grabbed her shoulders and turned her around. "I just wanted to tell you I was proud of you. Now, go. Have fun. Laugh. Enjoy your success."

"We are a success, aren't we?" She smiled.

"A one-car success, but yes, so far, so good."

"Al, say, what if we—"

"Girl, go have fun with your beau."

“He’s not my beau.”

“Fine. Just go. Enjoy. Miriam is waiting for me at home with the grandkids. It’s popcorn and Disney movie night for me.” Al’s bold laugh rang out. He was having the time of his life.

“Well, okay.” She patted her hands against her legs. “Off I go.”

“Good. Off you go,” Al echoed her intent.

“Look, now, if you need anything, call me.”

“Reg, what could we need at seven thirty on a Tuesday evening?” Al grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward Mark. “Have fun. That’s an order.”

“Yes, Master Sergeant Love.”

Walking with Mark toward his car, she exhaled, pressing her hand over her middle. She’d done it. They’d done it. Restored a whole car.

“We were down to the chassis when we started working on that Challenger,” she said to herself more than to Mark.

“Old Mr. McCandless is going to wonder where I’ve been.” Mark aimed his remote at the late-model Porsche sitting at the entrance of the track. “What about seven was so hard to do, Reg?”

“I was working.” She ran ahead of him, waving and cheering, chasing the Challenger as Rafe, Wally, and Al exited the track and headed for the shop.

“Let’s go,” Mark called.

Reggie met him at the Porsche and slipped into the passenger seat with confidence in her belly that she’d finally found her destiny.



A mellow Hunter Hayes melody played over Mark’s speakers, his Porsche buzzing toward the Gulf Coast.

Reggie nestled against the Italian leather and followed the brilliant red plume streaking the western horizon. Was it

possible for life to be perfect? Or almost? For the first time since Mama died when she was just a kid, life made sense. Didn't it? Sure it did.

Working on the Challenger, going into business with Al, steadied her, harnessed her restlessness. Her heart stopped wondering, "Is there something more?"

"I played golf with Eric Backlund yesterday." At thirty, Mark was one of the top real estate developers in Florida. He ate lunch with congressmen and played golf with CEOs, moving farther and farther away from the skinny, sad-eyed, latchkey kid living in a rusted-out trailer.

"Does he still have a seven handicap?" she asked. Her former boss took every occasion to let the office know how well he could hit a little white ball with a thin wooden club.

"He asked about you. Wants to know when you're coming back."

"When a blizzard buries Tallahassee." She powered down her window. The dewy air swept past her face and cooled the heat rising from the conversation.

"Reg, come on. You've got to be smart, think ahead. So, bravo, you restored a classic car." He raised his hands from the wheel for a short round of applause. "Proved to yourself and everyone else you could run with the big dogs. Now it's time to consider your future."

"Not quite with the big dogs yet. We restored one car, and I don't care for your sarcasm." Did he mean to exhort and deflate her in one single breath?

Reggie ignored the knock-knock of guilt, of wanting to please, to acquiesce. But doing what others expected and asked of her was what got her into the CPA business in the first place. Daddy thought it would be a good career for her. He was right. For a season. But she'd learned her lesson. Now was her time. To do what she wanted.

"A little sarcasm goes a long way in opening blind eyes," Mark said.

“Gee, it’s a wonder Jesus never used it as he went about doing good and healing. Look, Mark,”—she turned to him—“I’m not going back to Backlund & Backlund, even if restoring cars doesn’t work out. So get that out of your head. Or anyone else’s. I’d rather sling groceries at Publix.” She sat back and faced forward, her gaze fixed on how the headlights were cutting through the darkness, her comfort and sense of well-being evaporating.

“Fine, forget accounting,” Mark said, his voice gearing up for Plan B. She’d known Mark for almost twenty years, and he always had a Plan A and a Plan B, C, D, and E.

“But, Reg, for crying out loud, cars? Old cars at that? You’re too intelligent and talented, too gorgeous to be wearing coveralls all day and sticking your head in a smelly engine.” He slowed the car, leaning to see a blue rural street sign hidden behind a tree.

“You’re good with people,” he went on. “They walk right up to you and tell you their stories. Remember that woman at my office Christmas party last year? She downloaded her whole life story to you in the buffet line. She still talks about you.” He shook his head and hit the gas, craning for the next street marker. “What about being a politician?”

“Ha! Politics? I’d rather work for Backlund & Backlund, *Criminal* Public Accountants.”

“Har-har. Backlund is reputable and you know it.”

“Even if they weren’t, I’d rather work for them than be in politics.” She turned to Mark. “Do you *not* know me? After all these years?”

“I *do* know you. Maybe better than you know yourself. Reg, you’d be a good politician. You’d care more about people than your own power or wealth.” He slowed at the next street sign, then jerked the car left, leaving the road and hitting a soft, sandy driveway. He downshifted with a low growl. “McCandless develops million-dollar complexes. You’d think he’d pave his own drive.”

But he spoke too soon. The car broke into a clearing, easing

onto a curved, pebble drive that circled under a high portico to the front door.

Reggie peered out the windshield toward the second floor and the high-pitched eaves. "A palace out here in the middle of Wakulla County." She laughed. "I think I've seen it all."

"McCandless is a bit of an eccentric, but he knows real estate development."

"Let me guess. You want him to back you in something you're doing."

"A development over on St. George." Mark put the car in neutral as a red-vested valet scurried down the front steps. A second valet opened Reggie's door. Her stomach rumbled as she stepped into the potent aroma of frying fish.

"Valets," she said as Mark came around to her side, watching the man drive off with his car. "Hoity-toity. That's definitely not Wakulla County."

Wakulla County was rednecks, good ole boys and girls, her kind of folks. Not valets running down carved stone steps from the doorway of a . . . palace.

"All this?" Mark slipped his arm around her waist. "This is going to be me one day, babe."

Babe?

"Well, not me." Reggie shrugged out of his embrace and moved ahead of him up an illuminated path. Maybe she was being paranoid, but more and more it seemed Mark was painting her into his rich landscape. One in which she didn't belong. What was up with him? When did the air between them change? They'd been friends forever. *Just friends.*

Though they did have a "date" pact. If one or the other needed an escort to a wedding, Christmas party, work or family event, and couldn't scrounge up anyone else, the other would go. But Mark had a slew of girlfriends. The dating trail behind him was littered with gorgeous women.

“Ever hear from Monica?” Reggie said with a casual air when he caught up to her. Mark had met the dark-skinned beauty at a congressional luncheon, and Reggie didn’t see him for four months. “I thought maybe she was the one.”

“She went home and got engaged to her college boyfriend.”

“Already? That was fast.”

“I was her rebound and, frankly, I didn’t see a future with us.” Mark touched her elbow, lightly steering her down the path toward a white-haired, Colonel-Sanders-looking character—McCandless.

Reggie, on the other hand, had never been in love. Not that she didn’t want to be, but, well, she’d not met *him*. *The one*. The love of her life.

Besides, she didn’t feel she needed a man to carry on a happy life. She rather liked going to parties or weddings alone, meeting up with friends and family. If she really needed a date, she drafted her best friend, Carrie Mitchell, instead of Mark, because it always gave Carrie an excuse to buy a new pair of shoes.

“Before we get too deep into this party . . .” Mark slipped his hand into hers and suddenly tugged her off the path. A wash of dread caused her to shiver.

Mark, don’t . . .

“We’ve been—”

Reggie’s phone jingled from her jeans hip pocket. *Thank goodness*. She jerked her hand from his, reaching back for her phone. Saved by the ringtone. She never loved the Florida State University fight song more.

“It’s Al,” she said, turning the screen for him to see. “Hey, is everything all right?” Reggie laughed low, relieved to be away from Mark, shaking the heat of his hand from hers. “Please don’t tell me you wrecked the Challenger.”

“Reg, please . . . The Challenger is fine. Rafe has it spit polished and gleaming. I’m calling ’cause I thought you’d like to know we just might have our next job.”

“What? Who?” Her heart pummeled her ribs. *This is great!* “A Starfire #89?” She laughed. “I’ll walk on air all the way home if you say yes.”

“A Starfire #89? Girl, are you out of sound mind?” Al’s laugh boomed. “Now, how do you suppose the rarest car on planet Earth would make its way to Dixie? And to our little shop no less?”

“A girl can dream, can’t she?” Why not? Dreaming, with some unction, was what freed her from Backlund & Backlund.

Dreaming inspired her first car restoration. Al might have dreamed up the shop, but Reggie was the one who talked Danny Hayes into giving them a chance with his Challenger.

So there was nothing wrong with a little dreaming. She’d get her a Starfire #89 one of these days. Okay, maybe not, but she’d at least sit behind the wheel of one. Someday.

“There’s dreaming and then there’s ridiculous, Reg. If ever a Starfire #89 comes across my path, I won’t call you but walk on air to tell you in person. And you’ll know what I have to say before I open my mouth because my beautiful black face will be as white as a ghost.”

She laughed. “I’ll look forward to it. So what car *do* we have?”

Al was right. Best be realistic if they were going to be in the restoration business. Only seven Starfire #89s—one of the world’s first race cars commissioned by the Grand Duke of Hessenberg in 1904—had ever been made. Six were known to exist. Four were in museums. Two were owned by billionaires. One, the original, was lost in time. Perhaps destroyed by wars, or rain and snow, or someone looking for scrap metal. Who knew? Or maybe the car was waiting somewhere for someone to rescue it.

“I got the next best thing to a Starfire, Reg. A Duesenberg.”

She exhaled every ounce of breath. “Al, no . . . come on . . . you can’t be . . . a Duesy?” The air around her swirled, swift and cool, scented with fried fish, and for a moment Reggie thought she was

floating. “You’re kidding. No, you’re not. You wouldn’t kid about a Duesenberg!” She trembled. “H—how? Wh—who? When?”

“A Marine buddy—”

“God bless the Marines.”

“—retired sometime back, went on to make good with a second career, and bought himself a 1933 Duesenberg Touring Car. He called to ask if I knew anyone who might be qualified to restore it.”

“We. Me. You. Us.” Reggie slapped her hand to her chest. “Did you tell him we could, Al?”

Mark tugged on her sleeve. “Reg, you’re on my time. Call Al later. McCandless is on the move and I want to introduce you.”

She shushed him, waving him off.

“Yeah, but this is a pretty special car. Our credentials might be a bit shallow, but we’re friends and he trusts me. He’s going to think about it.”

Reggie snapped her shoulders back. “What? You call me with a think-about-it Duesy? Get on the phone. Tell him *we* are the ones for the job.”

“Let’s not look overeager, Reg. Let’s give him a day to think about it. He’s just dropped six million dollars on a car. He’s not going to rush. We push him, he’ll lose confidence.”

“Right, right . . .” Six million dollars. Reggie’s CPA brain calculated the weight of a six-million-dollar investment and her excitement iced a bit. “W—we can do it, right?”

“Yes, but very carefully. We’ll have to do a lot of research and work to get all the right materials and parts, fabricating to exact specifications what we can’t find or buy. But yeah, Reg, we can do it. One day at a time. One piece at a time.”

When Reggie ended the call, she saw Mark still waiting for her on the edge of the lighted path.

“It’s not going away, is it? You and this car business?”

“No, it’s not.” She stood next to him, tucking her phone into

her hip pocket, replaying Al's call in her head, reviving her excitement. "Al's friend bought a Duesenberg. He's looking for someone to restore it."

Mark whistled, then, after a pause, said, "Reg, just so you know, I'm not going away either."

She looked at him through the glow of the golden, flickering finger-flames of the party torches. Mark was handsome and sweet, if arrogant. His man's-man confidence was tempered only by the remnants of the lonely little boy who waited under the bare porch light of a broken-down, cold trailer for his mama to come home. In many ways, that's how Reggie still saw him. The kid who needed a friend. Who needed to belong. And she loved him. But only as a friend.

"I mean it," he said, stroking her jaw gently with the tips of his fingers.

"Mark,"—she lowered his hand away from her face—"you are one of my best friends—"

"Stop." He flashed his palm past her gaze. "I'm hungry. Let's eat. My mouth's been watering for some of that fish since before we got here." He grabbed her hand. "Let's say hello to McCandless."

"Not letting me say it doesn't change anything, you know."

He stopped midstride and faced her. "We're alike . . . you and me. Wounded in some way by life. Me with my dad walking out and Mom working two, three jobs to keep food on the table. You with your mom being killed when you were twelve. Yet we've made something of ourselves. At least you did for a while. Until this car business. I count it as some kind of young life crisis—"

"I'm not in a crisis. Mark, you don't listen. This is the life I want. I followed Daddy's advice for my education and training, but that season is over. Now I'm following my heart."

"Old cars? Are you kidding me?" He reached for her. "We'd be a power couple, Reg. Your knack for numbers and dealing with people, my gift for sniffing out good investments and deals."

"Does love factor into your equation at all?" She brushed past him, heading for the food table. He could greet McCandless on his own. Not with her in tow as part of his future power couple.

She was right earlier this evening. She'd found bliss, even a bit of love, behind the wheel of a '71 Dodge Challenger. And for now, that's where she'd keep her heart.



March 2, 1914

Meadowbluff Palace

It's been a year since Father's untimely and sad death. Mamá, Esmé, and I are still lost without his large, comforting presence, but we have some joy and laughter again.

Mamá keeps busy with her duties as does Uncle Francis, the reluctant duke, as Mamá calls him.

He is rather fond of me as I am his heir apparent. Mamá worries his affection and desire for me to be Grand Duchess has kept him from choosing a bride and siring children. But I believe he never married because he still loves Lady Rosamond.

Uncle never speaks of it, but I believe she crushed his heart, turning down his marriage proposal the way she did, then dying so soon after. Poor Uncle!

So he dotes on me, as well as Esmé. He's done so ever since I can remember, long before he was the Grand Duke of Hesseberg.

I do believe he's missing Papá and Grandfather as of late. He seems quite troubled after his goodwill tour to Russia and Germany to visit Cousin Nicholas and Cousin Wilhelm. Since his return, I sense his heavy heart. He walks the halls with his head down, his hands locked behind his back. He used to be so merry, full of gaiety, coming around for Esmé and me to listen to his beloved ragtime on the Victrola.

He's retained a new scribe, a young university chap, Otto Pritchard.

Not being able to read and write troubles Uncle more than Lady Rosamond's rebuff, I do believe. Though he never speaks of either.

This morning he sailed to Brighton to meet Cousin Nathaniel, then on to London to see Cousin George.

Mamá whispered to me over tea that Lord Chamberlain believes war is brewing. She's been rising early and taking a carriage to St. John's Chapel. In the afternoons, before tea, she sits by the parlor fire with her Bible in her lap, rocking, her lips moving in silent prayer. Uncle believes faith is for the weak. Mamá says faith is for the strong because it takes a hearty heart to believe what is unseen. The eyes of our hearts tell our minds what the Spirit is saying.

As for me, I'm burdened by the load Uncle and Mamá carry, but I continue in my studies at Scarborough. Uncle insists Esmé and I have our education so we can "run with the lads," as he likes to say. Mamá thinks him too progressive, but I rather like scholastics and am doing quite well in Mathematics.

I suppose I'll end writing in my journal here. The aroma of Berta's fresh cakes reaches my room, and now I'm famished. After all, it is teatime.

Then I must study. French is giving me such a bother!

Alice