

## Sweet Dreams...

"I'm not sure" she said, running the brush through her long, damp red hair. "My parts STILL haven't come in, so my Buick's still down. I definitely would like to go, but I'm at the mercy of the UPS. I do know this – if it gets here, I'll be at the track come Thursday!" Megan still cradled the cordless on her shoulder as she talked, then she laid the brush down and slipped into her jeans – finally finishing dressing after the hot shower that morning. Dan still slept, oblivious to the phone call.

"You feel ok to drive? I mean, after that last wild ride and all?" asked Sally as Megan put the phone back to her ear. Sally knew that Megan wouldn't back down from anything or anyone. But the near-wreck Megan was in just three weeks earlier would have made most anyone a little gun-shy about strapping himself or herself into a street legal racecar again. What a wild ride that was...

It happened at the big end of the track. Megan's WE4 had nearly finished her fastest run yet, certainly a very low 10 second high speed blast, when her left front tire blew out. The resistance from the blown Goodyear pulled her car violently left, across the lane, and nearly to be broadsided by the guy driving the SC'd Cobra that was hard on the heels of the Buick.

The 'Stang driver nearly lost control trying to avoid the black car that suddenly came into his path. Only her quick reactions and incredible driving by the Cobra owner saved the cars from hitting first each other, then her hitting the wall square, but the tires got flat spotted from the sliding stop and the left front Convo was ruined as well as the Goodyear. Cold sweat ran down her back as her realization of how close she came to buying the farm came full front. After she slid to the stop, all she could do was lean her head over onto her hands still tightly gripping the steering wheel... So close. So VERY close...

"Sally, you know that that was no big deal", lied Megan, buttoning up her blouse now as Dan stirred, opened his eyes and admired the view before him. Megan smiled wickedly as she left a couple of buttons open just for his wandering eyes...

The close call WAS a big deal, but in typical Megan style, it was forgotten. There was always tomorrow and tomorrow always meant you might get to race again. Racing? Now THAT is a big deal to Megan. She grew up in a family of NHRA-aholics. Her mom and dad both were avid drag racing fans, her dad a semi-successful bracket racer and her mom often telling about stop light shenanigans she would pull with the locals on her way to or from the mall or grocery store - in the family sedan no less. So, most would say that Megan came by it honestly.

"Well, if that order comes in, let me know" said Sally. "I can see if Harry wants to come over and we'll help you and Dan get the new doghouse put on." "Ok. I'll call you after the UPS man goes. Bye" "Bye".

The new parts finally did come in that afternoon and the four of them tore down the top end of the 3.8 to put them on. That was followed by an evening of Stuffed Crust pizza and some chilled Cokes in frosty mugs, mixed with loads of bench racing. Sally wanted to get her BB Camaro out, Harry still had his GN in the paint shop, and Dan – the only rebel in the group who was non-GM – bragged up his 12 second '98 Eclipse GSX. Thursday just couldn't come soon enough to suit Megan, but quietly Sally wondered what might happen. She couldn't help but worry if some of Megan's "edge" was dampened by the what-might-have-been of three weeks ago.

Thursday night...

The smell of spent high-octane fuel hung heavy in the warm spring air, noises of burnouts, the wafting of melting rubber, and the sounds of ongoing tuning in the staging lanes all were delicious things to Megan and her friend's senses. "Wish I owned the racing fuel distributor rights to THIS strip!" joked Dan. They were all in line, after having paid their \$10 to run during the Test & Tune night of their favorite track. Windshear Raceway was a dual-track facility, having both a very well kept quarter mile track and a dirt track for the roundy-rounders who loved to make dust. Tonight, only the straightliners were there, but they were there in full force. Every possible make of car and some that definitely did NOT come from the factory were there.

Of course, the Camaro/Chevy contingent was well represented, not only by Sally's fine 502 BBC powered '69 running spray, but many others. LT-1's, LS1's, BB's, SB's – you name it, it was there. There was the MOPAR segment, with Jon there as always with his black 440-6 Challenger, Samuel and his Hemi-powered Avenger that he just got back from the builder, and others. Even a guy had a mid '70's Li'l Red Wagon pickup truck with a built 383/727 combo in it that had ran 12's.

Certainly, the Mustang/Ford crowd was there, having all sorts of power beneath the hoods of their rides. The ever-popular 5.0/NOS/Flowmaster/Big-Little combo was epidemic, as was the Vortech Cobra group. One guy even had shoehorned a blown 5.0 into a late model ZX-2 but it wasn't dialed in. His hopes were 11's, but he had a LONG way to go to get out of the high 12's. A superstrong '70 Mach 1 with the 428/drag pack options was there tearing up the track and humiliating a lot of the modern muscle.

And, even a few more Turbo Buicks showed up tonight – one of them a dark gray T-Type that pulled the wheels easily with each launch yet seemed to fall over on the big end. But the one car that seemed to be drawing the most attention, was a very dark red, almost like dried blood, '86 Turbo Regal. This car had evil written all over it and when the guy fired it in the staging lanes, it had a hiss that made men stop the wrenching and look - and made the women and children shudder. There was something very, very dark about the soul of that car. The driver was a heavy set man, with dark, cold eyes that hid secrets behind them. He offered no words to anyone... no words, nothing...

Finally, the racing began and the first 12 cars lined up for the night's jousting. Megan and the rest were in lanes 3 and 4 so while they waited their turn, they decided to walk over and look at the cause of all the commotion – the blood red Buick which sat in lane 6. As they approached the crowd surrounding the car, the driver got out and yelled at everyone to "Get the Hell out of the way". Hmmmm – no personality there. Everyone just kind of slunk away, a couple of younger fans giving the guy the one-finger salute, but most just thought quietly to themselves (as did Megan, Sally and the guys) about what a jerk this clown is. "Probably a former ricer" joked Harry at Dan - which Dan didn't even get – at first. Then with a "Hey! I resent that!" they all laughed as they worked their way back over to their cars, wondering what the guy's problem was, not knowing his eyes followed them back to their area...

Finally, after about a half hour, the attendant – resplendent in his red Winston NHRA racing shirt and hat, plus his black ear muffs – waved for the rows 3-4 to fill up the two lines. The drivers were all in their cars and moving forward having each spotted who they would be running against. Sally drew a guy in a white GTP, Dan was lined up against a black 5.0 SC'd LX that sounded like it was on its last legs, and Megan was up against a BB Nova that sounded pretty healthy. All three of them worked their way forward and as Megan drew up the rear, she got to watch Sally and Dan run. Harry sat in the stands with the camcorder, recording the launches and runs for review later, wishing his car was here tonight.

Sally cut a great .422 light and nailed an 11.81, easily dusting the GTP. The car launched hard and straight with nary a bobble, and she didn't even spray. She certainly picked up where she left off a few weeks ago. Dan ran his best run ever, pulling an 11.93 against the Mustang that ran a meager 14.25. And so they went...

Megan was lost in thought for a moment – did I check the air pressure? Did I check the lug nuts? All kinds of doubts began to crazily run through her head. But as she pulled on out onto the apron of the burnout box, all those thoughts left.

Pull around the box... back into it so as not to get water on the front tires... back up just enough to moisten the rubber... pull back ahead and hit the line lock... bring up the rpms... bzzz-ZZZZZ the tires sung and white smoke poured out beneath the wheel wells... release the line lock and continue the burnout up to just shy of the beams... idle back down and now slowly pull into the prestige beam...

\*Blink\* PreStaged. She didn't even know where the Nova was. Nothing else was on her mind... just those yellow bulbs. Slowly, she rolled on into the Stage beam while power braking to bring up the boost...

\*Blink\* - Staged. The Nova had also pulled up and broken the Prestage beam. Now... lock the transbrake... massage the accelerator... watch the boost gauge rise slowly... 2psi... 3psi... 5psi... Still the Nova had not lit the Stage bulbs but she didn't care - all she wanted to do was unleash the Hell-hounds beneath her foot. Sssssss-SSSSSS... the –

61 turbo was sucking in huge volumes of air and compressing it, forcing it through the CAS Front mount and into the gaping mouth of the oversized throttle body...

*\*Blink\** The Nova was now staged and immediately, the ambers began to drop...

*\*First Amber\** Boost at 10 psi.... The Nova was a stick car, it's lopey cam now smoothing out as the driver was fast idling it in anticipation of the green.... Megan heard nothing, intent on watching the ambers dropping...

*\*Second Amber\** Boost still at 10. RPMS at 2700, just slightly over the stated stall speed. The racing converter was now multiplying the torque of the motor while the transbrake was holding it all from leaving the tailshaft. The car was straining now, like a thoroughbred does against the bit, only wanting to run and be free... The horsepower and torque gods were standing hand in hand at the rear of the car - pushing and twisting, all in vain as one small switch beneath Megan's thumb held it all in check...

*\*Third Amber\** Release! As Megan's gloved hand flipped the switch the laws of physics took over. The transbrake's gears now were in perfect alignment to allow the power to move on through the transmission - and it did so quickly. The several hundred pound-feet of torque immediately were transferred through the output shaft, the u-joints, past the drive shaft loop, into the pinion gear and onto the Ring gear. The ring gear then multiplied the torque even again and strained the huge heavy-duty splined axles which in turn twisted the wheel/tire assemblies, with both Drag Radials biting perfectly. The frame of the car was twisted as the multiplied force sought to lift the front end. The huge amount of torque forced the car to start to rotate upwards, and in less than a second, the front tires were clear of the tarmac while the Buick was lunging forward, finally free to run. The 60' time was a solid 1.44 but Megan didn't even know it yet. All she could do was to keep her eyes on the boost gauge and let the car loose, still trying to see the end of track, as the nose of the WE4 still was airborne, both tires a good 4-5 inches off the ground. Slowly, gently, the front tires began to descend and halfway to the 60' mark began their rotation toward the finish line.

The Nova was left behind like an abandoned dog dropped on a country backroad. All the grizzled driver in the open face helmet could do was watch the huge taillights of the Buick leave him.

Megan was in her zone now. No thoughts of the near catastrophe from three weeks ago. Harry was filming the run and yelling at the same time. Never had he seen this car leave this hard and he knew this was going to be a personal best for Megan. His best buddy Dan had married Megan only the year before and still - he wished he had had the nerve that night to ask her out like Dan did. But Dan beat him to it and now, all he could do is think of what might have been. Sure, he and Sally got along great, but his heart always wondered about what might have been if he had only had the courage to get Megan's phone number at Indy (at the US Nats) the night of the Big Bud Shootout...

Megan lit the traps at 10.69/124mph. The Nova was almost 2 seconds behind her – an eternity for him.

As she pulled back up to the staging lanes, she saw Sally, Harry, and Dan all jumping up and down. Of course, she wasn't exactly quiet herself – her best run ever and still on the stock 3.8 block! She couldn't believe it!

And so the evening went... they each got in two more runs and then decided to call it a night. Since Megan and Dan only lived about three miles from the track, they always drove and didn't trailer. Dan's Eclipse had a disappointing evening though, never getting out of the low 12's other than that first run, no matter how he launched or adjusted boost levels. They were standing in the pit area looking under the hood of the Mitsu when they heard someone beep a horn. Turning, they saw Harry and Sally pulling away in their Dodge Ram pulling the Camaro and waved goodbye.

Then, they noticed that the guy with the blood red '86 was pulling up their pit road, very, very slowly and then inched to a stop right in front of their cars. It just sat there idling, the windows rolled up and dark from the tint. They couldn't tell if the driver was even looking at them or what. Megan felt a slight chill crawl down the skin of her back.

"What's he doin', Dan?" she asked. "I don't know", he answered, "but he sure is weird." Megan nodded her head in affirmation but just then, the window crept down and a deep voice came from within... barely audible above the sounds of Marilyn Manson's "Sweet Dreams". "Interested in one more race?" the driver asked, his blood red car hissing like a serpent, the idle even a little rough, no doubt from the cam package. It was just then that Megan remembered watching this car a few weeks ago! He ran a 10.50 something and only ran once that night before her blown tire. "Sweet Dreams are made of these... who am I to disagree?..."

She looked at Dan and then walked toward the open passenger's window. "Some people want to abuse you... some people want to be abused by you..." Manson whispered... "Hey, buddy, the track's closed and we're heading home," she said, bending over to try and see the guy's eyes. She only had caught a brief glimpse of him earlier during his tirade at the people near his car, but she knew this was some strange guy here.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" the words crawling off his lips. "You don't remember me, do you?" Still, Megan could not place the guy but that chill still danced upon her spine.

"You ran me two years ago at this track, just after you got that black car... You beat me pretty good, but I was driving a yellow LT1 Trans Am back then. But then in Indy you did something I never forgot... something, uh shall we say, "personal"? Remember me now?"

Trans Am? Then, as Dan came up behind her, the lights went on! This was the clown that she saw slapping his wife (or girlfriend?) around in the pit area at Indy and told the cops

about. He would have gotten arrested that day except for the fact his “partner” refused to press charges but still he got tossed out of the track. She had forgotten all about it, but obviously this guy never did.

"You know Missy, you shoulda kept your mouth shut that day – I got in a heap of trouble because of you. I always hoped I would see you again – just to tell you how wrong you were. And when I saw you in the lanes this evening, I knew it was you." Dan knelt to the ground now and looked straight into the car. "Look guy... you've definitely got a problem. I would be happy to 'talk' about this with you myself but why don't you just get on out of here - or things might get ugly." Dan could back up all he said too, being a black belt Tai Kwan Do artist.

"You got me wrong dude," bellowed the driver, now putting his tranny into neutral. "I ain't lookin' for no fight. I just want to run your girlfriend's car there. Everybody said that day at Indy that she had the car to beat. I didn't believe it then – I don't believe it now. Had she not gotten me tossed out back then, we would have met eventually at the tree. Then, she would have seen that she did NOT have the fastest car. She didn't then – she doesn't now. I beat every one of her times tonight by at least a tenth of a second, so I know I can kick that black car's ass. Tell you what – run me for money, ok? You name it. I'll even do it for two to one odds. You win; you get twice what you bet. I win, you pay straight up. How's that for fair?"

Megan looked at Dan. For a moment, she thought about saying no, but then again, she loved to race. And here was someone who was just begging for it. “Dan?” Dan stood up and moved close to Megan. "Honey, this guy's a jerk. Let's just move on." "No – I want to run him. Do you mind?"

"It's up to you. You know what you're doing", smiled Dan.

She now leaned back over and looked square into the driver's face. "Tell you what, 'O.J.'... I'll run you on two conditions. One - no money and two -it won't be on the street – it will be here, in front of God and everybody. And I want the announcer to tell the crowd that it's a grudge match. But here's the deal – if I win, the announcer will get to tell everyone after the race what a pitiful man you are for hitting women and that that is the very reason we held this race. No cutting corners – everyone will know that you are a slime ball who hits women."

"And if I win?" he sneered. "What's in it for me?"

"You get to say that you beat the quickest Buick in Adams County. That's it. Take it or leave it. If you don't want to do it, then move on or I'm going to turn my husband loose on you. Make up your mind – put up or shut up." Megan was mad now.

"Ok. Set it up. Saturday night? During the brackets ok by you?" he leered at her.

"Sure - that's fine. And another thing..." - she paused-

"Yeah, Missy?"

"Beware the black Buick" she sneered back standing back up and crossing her arms – the chill that only moments before dragged it's bony fingers up her spine was now creeping down his....

Dan was puttering in the garage, trying to find the 8" extension to get that #6 plug out of Megan's car when the phone rang. He picked up the cordless and clicked the "Talk" button.

"Hello?" he said, still wishing that Megan would put the tools back in the SAME drawer she took them out of. Now if he did that in the kitchen, she would have a cow, but the garage was different to her... She used to be good about it but lately, it's like her mind was somewhere else.

"Dan? It's Harry. You guys ready for tonight?"

"Hey, Harry. Yep, I'm changing the plugs and the O2 sensor for Megan now because she ran in to town to pick up some Cam 2. She's definitely ready and this car is just about as ready as it can be. I just hope it's enough...", his voice trailing as he spotted the elusive extension - in the pliers drawer!

"Megan..." he muttered, only to be answered by Harry's "Dan, I said this was Harry! I don't sound like your wife do I?" Harry laughed as Dan explained the whole reason for his distraction.

"OK - so we're meeting you there at 6?" asked Harry. "Yep. Be there - it's gonna be a good one. I hear that Kenny what's-his-name has turned up the wick on that car of his. Earl was telling me just yesterday that HE heard that the guy put in a better front mount Intercooler from CAS, plus a thumbwheel setup. Then, he's supposedly added Alcohol too, but I don't know if that's true or not. It's just what's going around." Harry was shaking his head quietly...

Dan continued - "Harry, if she loses this race, it's gonna be all over town before we get home and I don't want that to happen. She wants this one - real bad."

"Damn!" exclaimed Harry, "and Megan's car is just like it was? There's no way she can hang in there if that other guy's added all that, is there?"

"I don't know Harry... She seems to think so, but between you and me - I'm worried. She might be in way over her head on this one. But I did have the car up at Janis Transmission this week while she was at the real estate seminar. She doesn't know it - it's an anniversary surprise and she just got back yesterday so she's gonna be surprised.

Maybe that will help some. You know how Vince builds his stuff - top drawer. It shifts great now!"

"Well, it sure won't hurt none - how about the converter - change that too?" asked Harry as he pulled open the fridge door, looking for the left over pizza from last night. "Yeah," winced Dan as he pinched a finger against between the wrench and the firewall when the plug broke free. "Vince rebuilt the stocker and massaged it a little", continued Dan, sucking his sore pinky.

He spoke again, "Well, if anyone can do it, it's Megan. We'll know soon enough... Hey, I've got to run, see ya tonight, ok?"

"OK, Dan. Later - but there's something else we need to talk about."

"Can it wait Harry? I'm kinda busy here. Catch me at the track - we'll talk then, ok?"

Harry just mumbled "OK, Dan... whatever you say." What Harry needed to talk to Dan about needed some time. The track wasn't the place to do it - but Harry needed to talk to Dan soon. Before he lost his courage...

That evening at the track...

It was another perfect night for the bracket racers and the crowd was out. Dan and Megan hooked up with Harry and Sally in the pits and the tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. No one said much and each one of them kept looking for the blood-red T-Type, but the place was so packed they could have overlooked him. Harry and Sally didn't bring their cars - tonight was all about the grudge match so they wanted to be there to help in any way they could...

Then, just as Megan looked back up from under the hood of her WE4 she spied him. His car just pulled into the back of the staging lanes and then off to the side and stopped, about fifty yards behind and off to the side of Megan's car. She watched the heavy set man slide out the door, stand and look around - obviously looking for Megan's car. But since there were two Grand Nationals there this night, he had to work his way around before he saw Megan and her peeps. He began to slither towards them... a sickly sneer curled the lips on his colorless face as he waddled by the rear fender.

"Ya ready, Missy?" he snorted, sounding like he was out of breath. "You ready to lose?" He laughed at his own stupid joke while the fearless foursome just looked at him stonefaced. "Oh, there'll be some losing tonight," quipped Sally "but it won't be the black car."

"Didja tell the announcer about our race agreement or do I need to go do that?" asked Kenny, his tone softening some. "It's taken care of" said Dan, moving between Megan and Jaba the Hut. "You two are squaring off at 10pm. So, you've got about an hour and a half to back down before you get embarrassed here in front of all these nice people.



Waddaya say? Taco Bell is still open - you can go have your way with a bag of Chalupa's and we won't say a thing" sneered Dan right back at him, knowing there was no turning back.

Kenny just chuckled. "You guys got me figured all wrong. And that day at Indy? You don't know the whole story about that either. Remember - never judge a book by it's cover, and never go by what only you see. You're just setting yourself up for a surprise if you do."

Kenny turned and walked away, still chuckling, which made the four wonder what planet he was even from.

Harry pulled Dan aside. "Got a minute Dan? We really need to talk."

"Not now Harry. After the race, ok? I mean, it can't be THAT important can it?" joked Dan, but noticing the serious look in Harry's eyes.

"I guess it can wait...Ok..."

Something in Harry's tone bothered Dan. He didn't know what was eating at his buddy, but he hoped it wasn't as serious as Harry was acting. That tone in Harry's voice was something Dan had never heard before... and that really, really bothered him. What could it be?

A little before 10 the PA speakers blared. "Ladeeees and Gentlemen... tonight, we have a special grudge match that the two participants have set up with Windshear Raceway Park. It's between two Turbo Buicks and most of us are familiar with one of the cars. It's driven by Megan Clark. The other is owned and driven by Ken Sheeley but he didn't supply any info on the car other than that's it's nobody's business. Hmmm... a quiet guy I see" joked the announcer, causing chuckles throughout the crowd.

The lights had been on over an hour now and the moths and insects all fluttered about in them. It was a warm night, a little warmer than it had been yet that season, but still great for racing. But for a lot of people, the best race was still to come - the two Buicks. Some people knew about the confrontation because Megan was popular and Dan wasn't quiet about the race. Well, and Harry and Sally had mentioned it maybe a "time or two". Actually, all the gearheads in town knew about it. What was surprising though that there were several people who hoped to see the black car lose - because they had seen that car's taillights way too many times. They liked Megan well enough - but they hated that damn WE4. But then again - most losers hate everything.

The PA broke the noise once more. "All racing will stop in five minutes so we can have our special for the evening. Would the two combatants bring their cars to the prestaging areas behind the water boxes at this time? The grudge match is set to go down."

Megan's car as well as that of Ken's were already just outside the prestige area and had been for nearly a half hour. Every tweak that could be done was done. New plugs. New O2. Boost set at a solid 25 psi. Per mutual agreement, when Megan and Ken both ran their two test runs, only their time slip had the time/speed on it. Nothing was on the board

so neither knew what the other had done. Megan was thrilled with her times and noticed the changed tranny behavior when they backed her car off of Harry and Sally's trailer. Dan got a smooch right off the bat and a naughty wink too. Yep - he made some points with that gift.

But now - all was forgotten. Megan pushed the key into the ignition, hearing the chime begin "Ding... Ding... Ding..." until she closed the door. Click... the key went to the accessory notch and the needles jumped to life as she waited for the fuel pump to pump up to the correct pressure reading on the hood mount gauge. "Whirrrrrrrr" then "Click" as the pump ceased. She then turned the specially made black key that Harry had given her a year ago and the 3.8 fired on the first turn of the starter.

She let it idle for a few moments and then heard the other Buick fire up, it's idle much more lopey than hers, it's turbo whine noticeable even now. Even over her open dump tube, the spent gasses turning the wheel on the compressor before being sent on out the ATR Stainless Headers and down the THDP. Every time she started this car, the noise was a symphony of bad intentions for anyone she lined up against - and she loved the music.

Slowly, she slipped the T-Bar shifter handle back into "D". The car's mood changed immediately - the Janis prepared tranny was absolute about letting you know it was in gear. The torque multiplication caused her Buick to sit up and take a more aggressive stance. It wanted to go and go now, not be held back by the brakes.

Just as she was about to allow the car to move forward and through the gate out into the prestige area, she pulled her helmet strap tight once more. Her Simpson suit that Dan insisted she wear was too warm but she wanted him to know she was safe if the worst ever happened. Even the fireproof gloves seemed like overkill to her, but when are things ever "too safe"? Besides - if anyone could make a racing suit look GOOD, it was Megan.

As she started to pull ahead, Harry walked up to the side of her car and gave her a thumbs up. Dan and Sally were just behind him and they did the same, but were interrupted when Ken blew his horn at them. Seems they were standing right where he wanted to drive. Sally immediately turned and changed her thumbs up to a middle finger up. But Ken didn't care - they would know in less than a minute who the real big dog was in this town...

"Ladeeeeeees and Gentlemen - have we got a treat for you tonight" swooned the announcer. "Tonight, we have a grudge match that it seems everyone in Adams County has been waiting these past few weeks to see happen. Well, tonight is the night. We have before us what many say are the two quickest street legal cars in this area. Megan Clark in her '87 WE4 and Ken Sheeley in his '86 T-Type. It's a match that has been rumored to have some special significance beyond the race itself. I'll explain more on that later. For now - LET'S RACE!!!" Thunderous applause rose in the stands as both Buicks slipped through the entry gate and out onto the track, Megan in the right lane (determined by a coin toss that she lost) and Ken in the left.

They both sat there for a few seconds continuing to idle as the track attendant swept away the rubber debris and then watered down the burnout boxes, finally motioning for the both of them to pull around and back into the water. Since both had treaded tires they didn't want to just drive through and maybe drag water up to their starting line.

Megan now closed out the world to her senses. She and the Buick were alone as far as she was concerned and as she shifted from "D" to "R" she smiled to herself as the car again complained against the breaks. She backed into the box, snicked the shifter back to "D". After power braking it and letting huge plumes of white smoke billow out from beneath the rear fenderwells, she pulled ahead, the compressed air chortling the familiar gobble sound as she removed her foot from the accelerator and the boosted air vented back through the sneeze valve.

She wasn't even aware that the blood-red car had done the same, almost as if in a mirror to her car. And they both began to inch toward the beams for "Prestage"...

Harry, Dan, and Sally had headed for the stairs after Sally had saluted Ken. Dan had noticed the serious look on Harry's face all evening and especially wondered what it might be. Maybe Dan was having some trouble with his investments since the market had tumbled and wanted some advice. Harry had always been a risk taker, and with money he was the same. He had made a LOT of cash on some IPO's but he knew that Harry was heavy into the tech's and right now, NASDAQ was bleeding from an artery cut. That had to be Harry's problem...

The three of them watched the Buicks pull to the prestage beams. Sally wondered if Ken had someone there with him; someone cheering for him that cared as much about him as they all did for Megan. If she only knew...

Ken smiled to himself as he pulled out of the burnout area and up to the prestage beam. He pushed the power button on his CD player and waited. He never prestaged without his song being played - "Sweet Dreams", Marilyn Manson style. He especially loved the line "Some of them want to be abused". Oh yeah - he knew the lines well.

He pulled ahead, not waiting for the chicky to go first. He had his routine down too, just like Megan and his concentration was now focused squarely on the lights, his boost gauge and the movement of his feet.

\*Blink\* He lit the Prestage bulb and Megan did the same almost simultaneously.

\*Blink\* Megan lit her Staged bulb and Ken broke the beam a couple of seconds afterward. All eyes were now waiting for the tree to start the drop.

Once in while, things slow down to a suspended state when very emotional events occur. Voices begin to sound distant, music disappears, tunnel vision happens because you are so damn focused on the immediate. This was what was happening to everyone in the

stands at the same time. Everyone saw the first yellow lights come on as the tree began its descent...

Usually, the crowd is hushed as the tree drops but you can still hear children laughing or benchracing going on, maybe even some gossip being tossed about. But not at this race. It was dead silent except for a distant screech owl's call and the rumble of the CSX freight train in the distance, its horn wafting lazily far away in the night air. Only the sounds of two ultra high horsepower turbocharged engines were heard and the shriek of the turbos straining to build boost was eerie. Both cars were hunched up as the intakes were chared now with nearly an identical 12 pounds of boost, yet the horsepower still tethered by a Batbrake on Megan's car and StageRight Transbrake on Ken's.

\*Blink\* The first bulb lit...

\*Blink\* The second bulb lit... the tree was about to allow the earth's rotation to be altered ever so slightly...

As the third yellow bulb lit, both drivers snicked off the transbrakes and things began to happen fast...

The crowd all seemed to hold its breath as the tree dropped. Blink... Blink... Blink... The demonic whine of highly compressed air dancing about the turbos and out the exhaust caused some to plug their ears. Harry, Dan, and Sally just sat and watched, not knowing what was going to happen in about 10 seconds or so... but each one hoping for the same thing.

As the electronics were engaged inside the transmissions and both cars were freed from restraint in the few hundredths of a second by the release, they both reacted almost identically. The enormous torque caused hundreds of pound/feet of force to try and twist the car free of its frame. Both cars having performance suspension setups helped but still both lifted the left front wheel first with the right coming off the ground barely a second later as they hurtled away from the line.

Sally watched the light and when the third was about to illuminate, she floored the go pedal, just as Ken did his. And when she released the transbrake, she was hammered back into the seat, the fivepoint only barely loosening over her form. God, she loved the launch - it was to her, the best part of the race. Sure, she loved to win, but she absolutely loved a high boost launch. Shuttle astronauts had nothing on her thrill ride...

Both cars pulled away from the line clean, no red light from either. Now, it was going to be simply a matter of horsepower. No wheel spin was evident because - there wasn't any. Both cars hooked perfectly...

Ken felt the huge rush as his T-Type was now free and sought to shove him through the back of his seat. 26 psi of boost through a Stage II motor was definitely something anyone could fall in love with.

Both cars left as if connected one to the other, the boards showing identical .44 R/T's. People pointed down track at the brightly lit times, shook their heads and could only watch as the two Buicks broke the 60' beams in under 1.5 seconds. Low tens' maybe - for both of them?

Harry sat and watched Megan launch, his heart in his throat. He hoped that everything else tonight went as well as the launch...

Megan and Ken now were really just pilots... pilots keeping earth bound aircraft going in a straight line for a few more seconds. Neither one noticed that the other was still at their door, it was that close.

People now stood in the stands, watching to see who might be pulling a lead, but no one could tell. Dan and Sally stood - but Harry didn't want to see what he worried he might see. And, he was still wondering how to tell Dan what he knew that he had to say. Even in the midst of the cacaphony from the race - his mind was racing it's own race. Truth or dare - now it was truth time...

Ken had indeed put a new front mount intercooler on his car - barely a week ago. It was a thing of beauty, one of Charged Air's finest pieces of work as always. The welds were perfect, the polishing and fit/finish were flawless, and the performance was second to none. In his mind, no one builds stuff like Tony does and most everyone would agree - CAS is first rate. But a product is only as good as it's installation... and if corners are cut, things may not go as well as hoped for.

Ken didn't know it, but even as his car was passing the 100 mph mark, he was losing horsepower. A clamp on the outlet hose from the turbo that he had broken and replaced with a lesser grade one wasn't as tight as it should have been. With each passing nano-second, a microscopic gap was beginning to develop and compressed air was trying and then beginning to escape through that gap. Ken didn't know it - but he was losing horsepower.

His MAF was reading correctly, the amount of air the turbo was sucking in was just as it read. The problem was that not ALL of that air was making it to the throttle body and he was beginning to run rich. Sure, it was completely imperceptable at first, but even a few horsepower could make all the difference in a race this tight. Even just a few...

With less than two hundred yards to the finish, both cars were fender to fender. Then, even though neither driver knew it, one of them began to fade back, just a few inches - maybe a bumper's width. Even the people standing at the starting line couldn't tell. To them, it was a tie. To them, both cars crossed the line at the same time! But then - they looked up at the Winston Boards and saw the truth - 10.16 to a 10.25. It was not a tie...

Harry heard the crowd roar. He stood and looked at the boards in disbelief. It was impossible to absorb what he just saw.

Sally reached up and grasped Harry's shoulder, tears in her eyes. Dan was stunned too, his eyes wet as he now fully realized what had happened, seeing the brake lights of both cars disappearing as they turned down the return road, approaching the timeslip shack.

Megan had no clue. Ken did not know either. It WAS that close.

The crowd was now nearly silent again. A couple of cars began to fire in the staging lanes again, money changed hands as bets were paid, conversations began anew, and this small microcosmic world of drag racing began to move forward once more. More racing was yet to come, yet everyone still seemed mesmerized by what they had just seen.

Megan pulled up to the shack and reached her gloved hand out to take the slip. Nervously she looked down to see the "W" in a column she did not expect to see it in. Tears welled up in her eyes too...

Ken was behind Megan and even though he was thinking about the race, he was also trying to listen to his car. Something sounded different, some new noise was coming from under his hood that he had not noticed before.

He pulled up to the shack and took the slip. Now - it was his turn to be surprised. "Sweet Dreams" was still playing as he pulled away - from a race that he had been waiting for for a long, long time and yet, now made him sad it was over.

Ken had won.

The blood-red Buick had done the impossible, even while not at 100%. It had beaten the quickest Buick in Adams County, and for some strangely emotional reason, doing so made him surprisingly sad. There was no happiness in the victory. Not what he thought it would be. But then again, revenge is never as good as you think it will be - it makes you smaller, not bigger. And it's never worth the price...

Barely, by the slimmest of margins - he had won. Fair and square.

Ken - had won.

The two cars pulled up to the pit areas and stopped. Megan slowly unbuckled her harness as Ken did the same, both of them not hearing what the announcer was saying...

"Ladeeeeeees and Gentlemen... The winner of tonight's grudge match race is Ken Sheeley in his '86 T-Type. Now here's the surprise... per the agreement between the contestants if Ken had lost he was supposed to read a statement. But since he won he doesn't have to do that. However - I've just been informed by someone that he still would like to address the crowd. As soon as we can get Ken up here, I'll let him say his piece. He won it, he earned it. Please stand by for just a few moments more. And go check out the concession stand while you're waiting..." he continued.

Ken now stood quietly outside his car as Megan lifted her helmet off her head and shook her hair free. She then immediately stode over to him and extended her hand. "You won. I don't know how, but you won. I still think you're a slimeball for beating your wife, but you still beat me on the strip and that was our agreement. You can go now."

"No - I can't go. There's something I want to read to the crowd first. But I want you to see it first, ok?" He handed her a paper he pulled from his shirt pocket and watched her bite her lip as she read it. She looked up at Ken and her eyes finally saw what was there. It wasn't at all what she thought. This book's cover wasn't anything like she believed it was - but then again, most aren't.

"If you want to read it, go ahead. But you don't have to. We agre-" He cut her short. "No - I have to do this. I owe someone else." With that, he started to walk to the announcers stand.

Almost in unison, the three others moved over to Megan and asked "What was that all about?"

"Just listen... you'll see" was all she could say, feeling worse by the minute.

Megan leaned back against the car and looked at Dan, then at Sally, then at Harry. Her three best friends in the world. No one knew her better than those three. No onw would stand up for her more than those three. But she had let two of them down and now, it had to come out.

"Did you talk to him?" she asked Harry. "Not yet" he mumbled. I've been trying to, but it hasn't worked out yet."

Dan felt a chill run down his spine because not only had his wife lost what he thought was her most important race ever, her voice seemed to be from someone else. He had never heard that voice before - and that scared him.

"What Harry? What do you need to talk to me about? If it's about the stocks, I can help you. It's not that big of a - " Harry cut him off with an upraised hand. "No Dan. It's far more serious than that. "It's not what you ever might imagine. It's abou-"

Harry's voice was interupted by the announcer. "Ladeeeees and gentlemen... Ken Sheeley has a statement he would like to read to you. Immediately after his statement, we'll resume racing. Mr. Sheeley? The mic is yours..."

The shrill whine of a mic being pulled to close was heard, along with the clearing of a man's throat. And then he began to speak...

"I'm not much of a speaker. Hell, my wife says I hardly say much at all. And I am a quiet man most generally. But there's something I want to say to Miss Megan Clark and I want everyone to hear it."

The stands, the pits, the staging lanes, and even the starting line was hushed...

"A few years ago, Megan saw me and my girlfriend at the time having a tussel up at Indy. She saw me slap the lady and reported me. I got tossed out of the gate and admonished that I was lucky I wasn't arrested. But it seems that no one took the time to ask the details. All she saw was a big man hitting a woman. I did it. And I am ashamed of it. She didn't see the woman hit me first with her fist. But it doesn't matter - I should not have hit her back. There is no excuse for a man hitting a woman. I should have walked away. She could not have hurt me even though it stung. But I just reacted and slapped her and that was when Megan Clark saw me."

People looked hard at the speakers as if to pull more details and words out of them and thus learn where this speech was going. The pause was deafening...

"Megan was right in doing what she did. I was wrong. I was supposed to only tell you this IF I had lost tonight. But I learned something a while back. I learned that people aren't always what they seem. I learned that it's never too late to learn something new. And I learned that the only one who can change you is yourself."

Pause...

"So, I realized that I had an anger problem, that I was in the wrong relationship, and that I was unhappy. I got help, went to some counseling, and am a better man for it. I married a wonderful woman last year and tonight is our first year's anniversary. Her name is Donna and I love her like none other. But I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Miss Megan Clark. Why? Because she made me look at myself in a way no one else did. And it changed my life. Thank you Megan. To me, YOU are a winner, regardless what the Win Light said. Good night."

Megan was crying again, realizing just how wrong she had judged Ken. She and Dan and Sally and Harry had completely missed the boat about him. No... Ken was truly a winner, because he saw the mistake, he corrected it, and he apologized. He was nothing at all like they thought he was. But then again... who is?

Dan turned to Harry, the sounds of the lanes becoming busy again. "OK Harry, out with it."

Harry looked at Megan. He looked at Sally. He looked at Dan. And he began...

"Dan... Sally... I don't know how to tell you this. I don't know how it happened. Or why it happened." Dan felt ice water being poured down his back with each word that Harry spoke...



"Dan? You thought that Megan was at a real estate seminar this week, right?" Dan nodded his head, then asked "So?"

"And, honey? Sally? I told you I was in Indy this week working on the Kofax account didn't I?" Sally also nodded her head but it was as if someone nodded it for her.

"What's going on Dan?" asked Sally, worried now. "Are we broke? Did we lose it all in the Stock Market tumble?" Deafening silence in the midst of the four musketeers...

"No Sally. Actually, we've recovered most of it in the last week. What's wrong is that I lied to you. And Dan? Megan lied to you but she couldn't tell you. She asked me to tell you."

"About what?" asked Dan, the ice water he thought he felt earlier he now realized was cold sweat trickling slowly down his spine. He clenched his fists nervously, the knuckles whitening...

"I don't know how to tell you this - but Megan and I were together this week. In Indy. We are in love and have been since we first met. I know this is a huge surprise to you but..." his voice trailed, "...but, it's the truth. We've been having an affair for nearly 4 months now - and you have to know.... I'm so sorry, Sally. Dan - I'm so very, very sorry..." Harry couldn't look at either of them. Megan could only stare at the top of her helmet cradled in her arm.

Nobody said anything. But everyone heard Sally's tears begin to fall upon the pavement...

Sometimes the truth hurts... and even winners can be losers in the harsh light of the truth. Life is that way sometimes - it often never turns out like we expected...