



Overheated

By Barbara Dunlop

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All his life Larry Grosso has lived in the shadow of his well-known racing family—but it's now time for him to take what he wants. And on the top of that list is Crystal—breathtaking, sweet...and twenty-two years younger. Their age difference is creating animosity within their families, and suddenly their romance is the talk of the entire NASCAR circuit!

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Editorial Review

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Crystal Hayes was glad of the familiar chaos as the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series teams arrived for the race at Charlotte. The town was abuzz with activity, and the fast pace of track deliveries from Softco Machine Works kept her mind off the little things—like her bank balance.

Thursday morning, she swung the company delivery truck out the bay door of Softco's east shop. The complex had grown from its humble beginnings as a single bay garage to an impressive complex of three modern machine shops, two warehouses and a ten-person office. There was an apartment over the office, where Crystal had lived since her husband, Simon, died two years ago.

But she wasn't thinking about that today. In particular, she wasn't stressing about how long a twenty-eight-year-old woman could live above her parents' business without looking pathetic. Today, she was headed for the speedway in Charlotte and the Dean Grosso garage to be part of the pulsating hive of activity surrounding a premier NASCAR event.

She pulled the truck onto Deerborne Street and headed north toward the interstate. When she got up to speed, she popped a vintage Creedence CD into the player, in the mood to get nostalgic. Her father had played Creedence, Pink Floyd and Nazareth in the truck when Crystal was a child riding along on deliveries, and she still had a soft spot in her heart for classic rock.

She toured past the Rondal Bicycle Factory and the Pearson Furniture Warehouse before traffic increased and the landscape turned to retail businesses. The bright red, Treatsy-Sweetsy ice-cream parlor sign rotated slowly in the distance, its stylized, red *TS* towering above the surrounding buildings. Crystal could almost hear her childhood voice begging her dad to stop for a butterscotch cone.

She smiled to herself as Creedence rasped on about the calm before the storm.

She thought about the forty-odd dollars in her pocket. She'd planned to treat herself to a pizza on Saturday night, which would leave her with just enough for groceries until her next Softco paycheck. If she splurged on a cone, she'd have to compromise somewhere else.

A part-time job as a delivery driver, combined with the occasional advance check on her short stories, didn't exactly provide for a high lifestyle. But she wasn't touching Simon's military widow's pension and life insurance policy, not even to relive the childhood memory.

The rotating sign loomed closer.

She could taste the velvet smooth ice cream, the crisp waffle cone—made daily on site, as they had been for thirty years. She could feel the melting butterscotch oozing over her fingers in the hot, May sunshine.

Oh, to hell with the pizza.

She stomped on the brakes, gluing the unwieldy box of a vehicle to the hot pavement. The tires protested with a screech, but she made the corner, parked across four marked spaces in back of the lot and shut down the diesel engine.

She rounded the building and approached a small patch of garden between the street and the front entrance. There was a black Lab tied to a spindly shrub at one edge of the sparse lawn. Somebody had brought him some water in a Treatsy-Sweetsy ice-cream bowl, but he wasn't drinking it.

He was staring off down the sidewalk, twitching at the end of his lead.

He watched one car approach, brows up, ears quirked. Then it passed without slowing, and the anticipation leached out of his body. He moved onto the next car, growing alert, obviously expecting his owner to appear at any second. He had gray fur around his muzzle, and a chunk missing from one floppy ear, testifying to a long, probably less than pampered, life.

Crystal drew his attention, and he watched her with big, brown eyes. For a second, she was tempted to buy him a burger. But she quickly reminded herself that she was broke. She'd already compromised her Saturday night pizza. Plus, she reasoned, the owner might not appreciate random strangers feeding his dog.

The small Treatsy-Sweetsy dining room was a whole lot cooler than outside. It was also completely empty, so she walked straight up to the counter. She looked up at the menu board, debating between a regular and a large cone. She wasn't worried about the calories, only the price. She had a naturally thin frame, and a metabolism that was very forgiving of her abuses.

"Help you?" asked a young, ponytailed girl in a pink and white striped blouse and dangling white, plastic earrings.

"A large butterscotch cone."

The girl nodded and rung the price into the cash register. "Two seventy-five."

Crystal handed her a twenty and glanced back at the dog.

He was still standing at the end of the yellow rope, twitching at something he saw down the street, his expression hopeful.

"Your change," said the girl, and Crystal turned back.

"What's with the dog?" she asked.

"Animal Control's coming for him."

This surprised Crystal. For some reason, he hadn't struck her as a stray. He seemed intelligent and, well, dignified—if the word could be applied to an old dog with such a battered ear.

"Is he lost?" she asked.

The girl shook her head, jiggling her plastic earrings and swaying her ponytail. "There was a car accident this morning." She pointed. "Old man hit the tree."

Crystal stared back, seeing the white gash in a stately, old oak.

"Old guy was killed. Dog was fine."

Crystal's heart instantly went out to the poor dog, and her chest tightened painfully. His owner wouldn't be coming back. And the city pound would...

She swallowed, not allowing herself to think about what might happen at the pound.

"Did he have relatives?" asked Crystal. Maybe there were children or grandchildren who'd take the dog.

"The dog?"

"The man."

Another shrug. "Didn't know his name. Came in here alone a lot." She took a sugar cone from the stack and opened the ice cream bin.

Crystal watched the girl form a scoop of the swirled butterscotch, feeling like a heel for indulging in something as silly as ice cream when the poor dog was probably about to be put down.

It's not like somebody was likely to adopt him. The pound was full of bright, lively puppies. Who would choose an old, gray-whiskered dog with a bad ear?

The girl balled up a second scoop, while Crystal felt an impulse growing within her.

"If I give you my name," she said, half her brain telling her to shut up, the other half urging her on. "Will you tell the pound people I've got the dog?"

The girl stopped mid scoop, staring blankly at Crystal.

"I'll take care of him until they check for relatives," Crystal explained. How sad would it be if somebody put the dog down, then a relative showed up later? She knew the pound didn't keep stray animals for long.

"You're taking the dog?" the girl asked, clearly confused.

Crystal nodded. "Do you have a pen?"

The clerk seemed to remember she was in the middle of making a cone. She added the second scoop and handed the cone to Crystal. Then she pulled a pen from under the counter.

Crystal quickly jotted down her name and number on one of the Treatsy-Sweetsy napkins and handed it to the girl. "Tell them to call me if they find a relative."

The clerk nodded bemusedly, while Crystal turned for the exit, telling herself she hadn't lost her mind. There was nothing wrong with occasionally being a Good Samaritan.

Out on the hot sidewalk, she gingerly petted the dog. He sighed and gazed up at her, giving his tail only a cursory wag. But his round eyes closed while she scratched between his ears.

Okay. That was one question answered. It didn't look like he'd bite her.

Carefully balancing the melting cone, she untied the rope from the shrub and coiled a few loops around her free hand.

"There we go, doggy," she crooned. "You want to go for a car ride?"

Predictably, he didn't answer, but stared silently up at her with an expression of benevolent patience. He seemed confused when she started to walk. But after a moment, he came willingly enough.

Across the parking lot, she opened the passenger door. Again, he gave her a curious stare.

"Up you go," she prompted.

He jumped onto the floor of the truck.

Crystal patted the seat.

He gave her a look that questioned her wisdom, his brows knitting together. But when she patted it a second time, he gamely hopped up, curling into a little ball.

She shut the door, refusing to examine the logic of her actions. It was a temporary fix, just until the old man's family could be contacted. And if no relative showed up, well, she'd deal with that later.

On the way around the cab, she licked a dribble from the back of her hand, then she swiped her tongue across both scoops a few times, making her way down to the solid ice cream before hopping into the truck.

She turned the key in the ignition.

"Okay, dog," she said aloud, with a forced note of bravery in her voice. "Looks like it's you and me for a while."

She gave the dog the rest of her ice cream, then put the truck into Reverse.

Rufus, as Crystal had decided to call the black Lab, slept soundly on the soft seat, even as she maneuvered the Softco truck in front of the Dean Grosso garage. Engines fired through the open bay doors, compressors clacked and impact tools whined as the teams tweaked their race cars in preparation for qualifying.

As always, when she visited the garage area, Crystal experienced a vicarious thrill, watching the technicians' meticulous, last-minute preparations. As the daughter of a machinist, she understood the difference a fraction of a degree or a thousandth of an inch could make in the performance of a race car.

She muscled the driver's door shut behind her and waved hello to a couple of familiar team members in their white and pale-blue uniforms. Then she rounded to the back of the truck and rolled up the door. Inside, five boxes were marked Cargill Motorsports.

One of them was big and heavy; it had slid forward a few feet, probably when she'd braked to make the Treatsy-Sweetsy parking lot entrance. So she pushed up the sleeves of her canary-yellow shirt, then stretched forward to reach the box. A couple of catcalls came her way as her faded blue jeans tightened across her rear end. But she knew they were go...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dorothy Pierce:

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