

**RACING HEARTS**  
**By Marcia James**

**Chapter One**

"C'mon, Torque. The whole crew is worried. Give me a call, *dammit*."

Tom "Torque" Tyler deleted the voicemail from his cell phone, flinching at the sound of his stock car racing nickname. Yeah, he owed his crew chief and mentor a call, but he just wasn't ready to talk to him...hell, to anyone...yet.

Tom barely resisted throwing his cell against the wall. He'd already destroyed one phone, and he'd had this replacement for only two days. Asking his parents to get him another phone would just kick up their concern for him several more suffocating notches. At thirty-three, he hated that he was reduced to living in the one-bedroom cottage on his parents' Jenkins, North Carolina, gated estate—a historic mansion and landscaped grounds he'd bought for them with his stock car winnings. Now, his days of race purses, endorsements, and sponsorships were over, thanks to THE ACCIDENT.

THE ACCIDENT... Big, stark letters to symbolize the moment in March that his previous life ended and his current half-life began. All it took was a drunken ass T-boning his Corvette. It was so damned ironic. He'd survived six crashes on the race track, only to be permanently sidelined by a wreck in his own car on a two-lane road in Charlotte.

Groaning, he dropped onto his leather recliner. What a friggin' mess. All he'd ever wanted to do was race cars, so he'd gone from high school to stock cars and never looked back. And he'd been great at it. One of the top money-makers, he'd driven for the prestigious Clayborne Racing team. Now he had a medical diagnosis that killed his career—hell, his ability to drive *any* car—and his future was one fat question mark.

Three sharp knocks on his front door brought Tom slowly to his feet. More than a month had passed since THE ACCIDENT, and his cracked ribs were still mending. He had bruises on top of bruises. And while the ugly patchwork of black, purple, and yellow was fading from his skin, he still moved like he was half a century older than his actual age.

He started toward the door, sighing as three knocks sounded again. The last thing he needed was his mother dropping by to check on him every afternoon. She always asked him to join her and his dad for dinner, which made him feel like dirt for turning her down. But he needed time to himself...

No one but his parents knew he was here, so it had to be one of them. He opened the door, stunned to see an attractive stranger on his front porch.

"Hi, Tom."

There was something about her voice... *Jesus*. "Meg Klein?" Could this slender woman really be the gangly kid sister of his high-school girlfriend?

"Got it in one." She tilted her head, her long, light brown hair swinging around her shoulders. "I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

"I wouldn't have made it through French without your tutoring."

She grinned. "If you hadn't been lusting after Claire senior year, you would've had more brain cells available for your homework."

Tom laughed, the sound rusty after weeks of disuse.

Meg glanced past him into the cottage, then met his eyes. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Oh, sure." Embarrassed, he stepped back so she could enter.

Dressed in jeans and a light blue T-shirt, Meg looked young and fresh—especially compared to the grungy sweats and holey polo shirt he wore. She had to be around thirty now, but she looked years younger and had developed some interesting curves.

Meg paused several feet past the door and gazed around. What was she thinking about this place? It had been days since he'd done the dishes or picked up the clothes and newspapers he'd tossed on the sofa. But it wasn't like he'd been expecting guests, for God's sake.

The combination living room, dining room, and kitchen would have fit in the foyer of his Charlotte penthouse condo. And the bright, cheerful furnishings were a striking contrast to his dark mood. Toward the back of the cottage was the bedroom and bath. He was pathetically grateful those doors were closed, since his tub looked like a "before photo" for a tile cleaner and his bedroom was a disaster. But he hadn't been sleeping well and used the bed more as a place to stack the unopened mail being forwarded from his condo. Besides, the damn thing had a flowered dust ruffle.

He ran his hand down his chin. When was the last time he'd shaved? Tom grimaced. Why the hell was he worried what anyone thought of him or his temporary digs?

Meg crossed to the small dining room area. "Let's sit down and talk." She set her large bag on the oak pedestal table and settled onto one of the four matching chairs.

Now that the initial surprise and enjoyment of seeing Meg had passed, Tom was getting a really bad feeling about her visit. He walked to the table but didn't sit down. "Why are you here? My parents weren't supposed to tell anyone where I was staying."

"I'll answer your questions, but I'm not going to crane my neck doing it." She frowned, suddenly looking like the fifteen-year-old girl who had always had to drag his attention back to conjugating French verbs. "Sit down."

Amused at her bossiness, he did as she said, then spread his hands in an "I'm waiting" gesture.

"Your parents did tell me you were here. They're concerned about you....," Meg met his gaze, "especially because of your seizures."

Tom slammed his fist on the table, cursing as dread speared his gut. "That's my private medical information, and if you sell it to the tabloids, I'll sue your ass."

Crossing her arms across her chest, Meg shot him a disgusted look. "Do you really think this is about some sleazy tabloid story? I'm here to help you."

"No one can help." Frustrated, Tom scrubbed his fingers over his face. "Thanks to a drunk in a pick-up truck and severe head trauma, I now have epileptic seizures. And no doctor in this country or the world—and believe me, I checked—can do a damn thing about it except give me drugs and monitor my symptoms."

"I know. And I'm not here shilling some miracle cure, but there's definitely something I can do." Meg pulled some papers from her large bag. "Do you remember my Aunt Beth?"

Tom nodded. "She's the Klein family black sheep, right?"

Meg smiled, and for a moment Tom almost forgot he was dreading why she'd dropped by. "She was when she was younger, and Beth's still an original." Her pride and love for her aunt was clear in every word of that statement. "Thanks to her talent and determination, we started a company called Klein's K-9s."

For the first time, he noticed the Klein's K-9s name on her T-shirt, the words curving over a drawing of a paw clasped in a human hand. The logo rested just above the swell of a very nice breast. Tom jerked his gaze back to her face.

Meg continued as if he hadn't just ogled her chest. "We train and place therapy dogs, including seizure response dogs."

Tom leaned back in the chair. His doctor had mentioned something about therapy dogs, but he'd stopped listening to the man after being told he might never drive again.

She pushed a brochure across the table. "This explains the role of these dogs in detail, but basically they alert a family member or 911 when their owner has a seizure."

He shoved the brochure back. "I can barely take care of myself, and you want me to take on a dog, too?"

Eyes narrowing, Meg picked up the brochure, reached across the table, and slapped it down in front of him. "Yes. Not only will a dog help you, but it would give you something to think about beside yourself."

*What the...?* "Are you suggesting I'm sitting here feeling sorry for myself? Lady, I had a serious brain injury and two surgeries so far to repair the damage." Turning his head, he pointed to the shaved area of his scalp where the doctors had cut through his skull, then stitched it up.

She took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly as if counting to ten. "I know what you've been through, your prognosis, your physical therapy, everything. Your parents gave me the details so I could pair you with the best therapy dog for your requirements."

A sickening feeling of betrayal sliced through him. "They had no right giving you that information."

"They have medical power of attorney—remember, you signed the papers before you started racing?—and they're trying to do what's best for you. Besides, Klein's K-9s will keep your health records confidential."

"*Shit*. I never should have come home to heal." Disgusted, he glared at Meg. "Instead of being in backwater Jenkins, I could have been recuperating at a four-star medical spa in the Cayman Islands."

"Well, you're here, so give our therapy dog a try. What do you have to lose?"

Dammit, there was a tiny, shameful part of him that was scared of the seizures, something he'd never told his doctors or his parents. Maybe having a dog that could alert him before a seizure so he could take the medicine he'd been given would be okay. Suddenly too tired to argue, he caved. "One week. That's all I'll agree to."

Meg's expression brightened like he'd offered her an all-expenses-paid Hawaiian vacation. "I have your dog in my truck. I'll bring him right in." Before he could reply, Meg was up and headed out the front door.

Maybe having a dog around the place wouldn't be a bad thing. His family had always had dogs—mostly Labrador and Golden Retrievers. The only reason he currently didn't own a pet was his heavy travel schedule. Well, there was no reason to travel from racetrack to racetrack anymore.

The cottage door opened and Meg walked in carrying a small pink leather bag with mesh panels, which she set on the floor near his chair.

Confused, he asked, "You keep the dog's food in a purse?"

Grinning, she crouched by the bag and unzipped the top. A head popped out, wispy white hair framing a long-nosed face and big ears.

Tom pointed at the animal. "What in hell is that?"

Meg slipped her hand into the bag and lifted out something that resembled a tiny dog, but it was wearing gray sweatpants and a pink-and-gray striped shirt. "This is a Chinese crested hairless dog and a very talented service animal."

He held up both hands. "No. No way am I keeping a mutt that looks like a rabbit had sex with a rat."

Meg straightened to her full five-foot-nine-or-so height and, with her fists on her hips, stared him down. "I knew you'd react like this. Stop being such a *guy* and listen. You're incredibly lucky this dog was available. His elderly owner passed on recently, and she left him to us because we trained the dog for her. Not only is he a seizure response dog, he's a seizure *predicting* dog, which is very rare and a skill that can't be trained."

He stood, towering over Meg in the hopes of intimidating her. "I won't be seen in public with that ridiculous excuse for a canine."

"Tell me, Tom, when was the last time you left this cottage, much less your parents' estate?"

Okay, that shut him up. He hadn't exactly been cruising around Jenkins since arriving back in his hometown.

Meg continued. "We don't just train German shepherds. Some of our clients prefer medium-to-toy-sized dogs, or they live in small apartments and can't have a large dog."

"Well, I have plenty of room, and the estate grounds are walled in. Give me one of your bigger ones."

Ignoring the bickering, the dog, if you could call something that was smaller than his high-top sneakers a dog, began exploring the cottage.

Meanwhile, Meg practically had steam pouring from her ears. "Right now, we only have one dog trained to aid with seizures, so you're stuck with Baby."

"B-baby?" Tom sputtered. "No self-respecting male mutt deserves to be called 'Baby.'"

At the sound of his name, the canine in question trotted over and stared up—*way up*—at Tom. Baby sat and lifted a paw, waiting expectedly. A sucker for any type of dog, Tom bent down and shook the offered paw.

Meg smiled. "You promised to give it one week, and I'm holding you to it. I'll get his things."

As she left the cottage, Tom called after her. "Okay, but I'm calling him 'Bob' instead." Sighing, he sat on the floor and stared into the soft, brown eyes of his tiny, temporary roommate.