Hot Wheels (Hardy Boys Casefiles #91)

Franklin W. Dixon

Chapter 1

”My BRAIN FEELS like it's frying in my skull!” Joe Hardy said as he stood just inside the entrance to the tent where the welcome session for the Suntex Solar Challenge was to be held. He paused and squinted outside at the heat haze hovering over the sun-baked scrubland near El Paso, Texas.

”It's ninety degrees even at six-thirty,” his brother Frank reported, checking the temperature readout on his watch. ”Of course, with all the reporters crowded in here, it seems even hotter.”

”I don't know if it's worse in here or out there.” Joe ran a hand through his newly cropped blond hair. ”El Paso must be the sun-

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stroke capital of the world. Even this late I actually *feel* the sun beating down.”

”Well, that's good for a solar car race,” Callie Shaw told him. Frank's girlfriend had her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail.

”You had the easy job out there,” Frank said. ”You and Teresa just wired up the telemetry system, but I had to haul all that heavy equipment around.” Frank's brown eyes twinkled as he grinned at her.

Callie laughed. She had recruited the Hardy brothers to help a team of students from the State University at Bayport, including Callie's cousin Teresa, build a sun-powered vehicle. They were to compete in the Suntex Energy Corporation's first Solar Challenge. For the next three days, their car would race on a

500-mile route from El Paso, Texas, to Yuma, Arizona.

”When your cousin first said they were building a car with an electric engine,” Joe said, ”I thought it would be like one of those hand-held radio-controlled racers.”

”That's not so far off,” Callie said. ”An electric car is light in weight—a lot lighter than a regular car. But the problem is how do you constantly power the engine. In regular cars you fill up with gas, but you can't plug a car into an electrical outlet. There's not an extension cord long enough.”

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”That's where the sun comes in,” Frank said.

”Right,” Callie agreed. ”With an array of photovoltaic cells on the roof of our racer, we capture the energy of sunlight and turn it into electrical energy. It runs the motor and can even charge the battery. The motor draws as much electricity as it needs to meet the speed set by the driver. If the motor needs more energy than is being supplied by the array, it draws on the battery pack. If the array provides more energy than the motor needs, the extra energy is stored in the battery pack.” She stopped and giggled. ”Well, I really rambled on there, didn't I?”

She fell silent as a tall, muscular whitehaired man headed for the microphone on stage. Frank recognized him as billionaire Kyle Harrington, the head of Suntex Energy Corporation. The reporters pushed forward to catch Barrington's words.

”Welcome, everyone, to the first Suntex Solar Challenge—especially our friends from the press who braved the heat to be with us today. As you know, at Suntex Corporation our middle name is energy—from oil to geothermal, atomic to solar power. We believe the future of our planet depends on young researchers and engineers like those represented

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here today. The race this weekend is to promote their ideas and dreams.”

”And to pick their brains,” a slightly wild looking, bearded man next to Frank cut in loudly. ”Barrington got rich off oil and gasoline. Now he wants a stranglehold on the next generation of power!”

Onstage, Kyle Barrington tried to ignore the heckler's comments.

”Our race has attracted many entries. Let me introduce our team captains. As I call out your names, will the captains please raise your hands so the press can see who you are. The Air Force Academy is represented by team captain Lawrence Gonzalez.”

Lawrence Gonzalez was a stocky young guy with short, curly hair. He waved to the press, and the crowd applauded.

”Mitsushomi Motors from Japan with their team captain, Taka Yoshida.”

Frank spotted a small, dark-haired man with a shy smile.

”MIT's high-tech wizards, headed by the twenty-three-year-old genius Jeff Pelman.”

A tall, blond man grinned and waved.

”The State University at Bayport—that's SUB for short—led by Scott Sanders.”

”Does that make me the SUB commander?” Scott joked in a loud, confident voice. He was a red-haired, bearded Viking, confined to a

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wheelchair because of an automobile accident he was in when he was a boy.

”Our own team from Suntex is led by Mack Wilkinson, head of Suntex solar research.”

Frank saw a tall, dark-haired man with a mustache saluting Barrington.

”The team from Santa Fe, New Mexico, headed by 'Mr. Ecology,' Elton Mossport.”

Loud applause broke out to the right. Frank glanced over and saw that the bearded heckler was Elton Mossport. He was surrounded by reporters at the front of the stage.

”The media will be all over Mossport,” Scott grumbled. ”He's *the* alternate-energy guru.”

Kyle Barrington's amplified voice cut through the hubbub. ”And finally, Professor Schmidt and his team from Germany. Each team is racing for a hundred-thousand-dollar prize. But that's only part of what's at stake.”

Barrington's eyes ran over the audience. ”In the future, every car company will need to meet zero emission pollution standards. Solarpowered cars can do that. The winner will have a blueprint for the car of the future, a design certain to receive millions from the auto industry.”

He went on to describe the competition itself. ”This is a race along Interstate Highway

10 and Interstate Highway 8. Each leg of the race will be approximately one hundred and

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seventy miles long. Near the finish line for each day there will be a camp set up at a motel on an access road. For the first time ever, solar cars will travel with traditional automobiles at their speed, on their highway. On arrival at each camp, the cars' times and battery reserves will be recorded. The prize will go to the car with the best overall scores at the end of the race.”

Frank saw that Mossport had led some reporters to the side of the tent. ”No one who made a dime off dirty oil should be allowed to profit from solar technology,” he said loud enough for everyone in the tent to overhear.

Barrington glared at Mossport and replied, ”I expect the Suntex team to win this race. Our goal is to put a Suntex-designed solar car on the road within two years.” He frowned. ”But to all participants, let's try to keep the race clean and safe, okay?”

”What was that supposed to mean?” Joe asked Scott Sanders, who had joined them.

”Every team has a great deal at stake, which means there could be pranks and psych-outs,” Scott explained.

”We'll have a press conference and dinner every evening of the race for the media and the competitors,” Barrington went on. ”Have fun.”

Everyone clapped and headed out of the sweltering tent. ”After all these weeks working

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on the SUB, I can't believe the race starts tomorrow,” Callie said as she and the Hardys joined the stampede and stood outside in a group. The SUB was what they had christened their car.

”I'm just glad we made it past the trials this morning.” Teresa Maddox, Callie's beautiful dark-haired cousin, smiled at Scott. She was in charge of telemetry, the electronic system that monitored the operation of the SUB and transmitted the information to the backup team in the support van.

”One more lap this morning and I thought I was going to get carsick,” the SUB team driver, Bill Little, burst out. Bill was similar in build to the blond, stocky Joe Hardy, and had a reputation for being a big prankster.

”I really want to thank you, Teresa, for letting us work with the team,” Frank said. ”I can't imagine a better summer.”

”Then you must really like fixing flats, steering rods, and solar arrays!” Bill cracked. The whole team laughed, remembering the weeks of work, lack of sleep, and the horrible fast food they had to endure to prepare their racer.

As the members of the SUB team wound their way around the tents housing the cars back to their motel, Joe noticed Jeff Pelman, captain of MIT's team, gesturing wildly to a young woman.

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”Who is that redheaded babe?” Joe asked! as they approached the pair.

”The 'babe' is Sharon Green from MIT,” Scott replied. ”Looks like she and Pelman are having problems.”

As he passed, Joe stared at Sharon Green and her piercing green eyes. ”Fine, I'm out,” he heard her say. ”But I won't just lie down and play dead, you know! Let's see how well you do when I'm the enemy!”

”What's this 'enemy' stuff?” Pelman said, trying to calm her down. ”The team just—”

”If your team has no guts, I'll find one that's not afraid to win my way!” Sharon shrieked, then stormed off.

”Nice taste in 'babes' you have,” Frank commented to Joe as they continued toward the motel.

Bill chuckled. ”I'll bet the ninety-plus degree temperature in his car tomorrow will seem cool to Pelman after that! Actually, all the drivers are going to roast and sweat pounds off tomorrow.”

”Don't think you can stuff yourself at the kickoff dinner tonight,” Teresa joked. ”Your hammock seat only holds one hundred and eighty pounds.”

They discussed the graphite body and eleven-pound engine. Lightness was the key. All

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told, the car and its driver weighed less than five hundred pounds.

”It's amazing how the donations came through for the car,” Scott said to Teresa. ”I still can't believe you sweet-talked that computer dealer into giving us the telemetry equipment for the SUB. Now we have a surefire way to keep track of how the car's consuming energy.”

”I didn't flirt—it was straight techno-nerd stuff,” Teresa protested. ”The guy was interested in the programs I'd written to keep track of power usage. He coughed up the computers because he was interested in field-testing my programs.”

”I wish I were going to be in the car tomorrow,” Joe said with a sigh. ”I loved the way she handled when I got to drive her.”

”Too lightweight for me,” Frank admitted. ”The problem with prototypes is that something always has to be sacrificed for performance. I'll wait for the perfected machine—something with a CD player and side panels.”

”And air-conditioning,” Scott joked. ”Joe, I think you'll be glad to be in the support van while Bill sweats.”

They continued to kid one another as they sauntered along the row of tents. ”I think Barrington was talking to you, Bill, with that prank warning,” Scott joked as they passed the

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last tent before the motel. A big banner outside identified it as the Suntex tent.

”He's one to talk! I heard he's the grand master prankster himself!” the driver scoffed.

Frank laughed, but then noticed an odd orange flash reflected in the chrome frame of Scott's wheelchair. He turned to find the source of the light and gasped. There was a fire inside the Suntex tent!

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Chapter 2

THE SUB TEAM RUSHED to the tent to find Mack Wilkinson aiming a fire extinguisher at a small mass of flames dancing amid some electrical equipment. ”Is your car okay?” Scott asked. ”The car wasn't hurt.” Mack wiped a stringy piece of dark hair from his face. ”It's just burning insulation from a computer cable.” ”How'd the fire start?” Frank inquired. ”Could be a short,” Mack said. ”Or this could be the beginning of prank season.”

Frank and some others stayed to watch Mack check over his car's incredible telemetry computer network. Frank couldn't help feeling a little jealous of the equipment and money the Suntex team had behind them.

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Mack's teammates, who'd apparently just heard about the fire, rushed in right then. They examined the ruined cable but moved away abruptly as a tall white-haired man entered the tent.

Mack held out the blackened wire to Kyle Harrington. ”The main cable on our telemetry unit was damaged. It'll make it difficult to get any feedback on the battery charge tomorrow.”

”We need to find out what happened here,” Barrington hissed. He twisted the burnt cable, scowling. ”There's too much at stake for any more accidents.”

Barrington suddenly seemed to realize that the SUB team was there. Immediately, he turned into the gracious host, explaining how Suntex had mapped the course three times and even hired weather analysts.

”We're working with the best,” he said. ”That's why we're going to win, or at least why Mack thinks we're going to win.” Barrington gave a hearty chuckle. ”Right, Mack?”

Mack laughed. ”I've got money on it.”

”Well, the show's over, folks. Thanks for coming, but I don't think we'll be able to keep you this entertained every night,” Barrington went on.

Still, Frank thought the man seemed oddly tense as he motioned for everyone to go. Frank

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stopped at the tent flap. ”Do you think the fire was a prank, Mr. Barrington?”

”Hey, aren't you one of the Hardy boys?” Barrington asked, regaining his composure as he shook Frank's hand. ”I met your father once. A fine man and an excellent investigator.”

”Thanks,” Joe said, joining in. ”But seriously, Mr. Barrington, should we expect more —occurrences like this?”

”Go ask Mossport,” Barrington replied as the brothers headed out.

The team headed over to the motel, walking in silence—except for the soft hum of Scott's electric wheelchair. The sun was setting, leaving the adobe-style motel on the outskirts of El Paso in shadow.

”Did you see that computer equipment?” Frank asked.

”I don't care how much money Suntex has sunk into their car,” Bill said quickly. ”In the end, it's every car racing against itself.”

”That's right. And every racer has a different strategy. All the teams had to follow a set of specs, but each car is so unique in design, I feel we have a chance,” Teresa added.

”But, boy, what I could have done with all of their money!” Scott said wistfully.

”I still want to know what Barrington meant by that 'ask Mossport' crack,” Joe wondered out loud.

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”Obviously, he thinks Mossport had something to do with the short—or whatever it was,” Callie replied.

”But why?” Teresa asked as she kicked a rock across the dusty parking lot of their motel.

”I don't know,” Scott said. ”Except I do want to make sure that no 'pranks' happen to the SUB. Maybe we should go check her out.”

”We'll go,” Frank said, speaking for Joe. ”On the way back, we'll see if anybody's still around, maybe talk to a few people and try to figure out what did happen in the Suntex tent.”

”Listen, Frank, you're my responsibility here. I don't want you and Joe playing detective and getting yourselves in some kind of fix.” Scott shook his head. ”We have enough to worry about!”

”Yeah, like that underdesigned suspension!” Bill joked.

”It'll take just a few minutes. We'll meet you at the dinner,” Frank replied.

”Okay,” Scott said. ”We'll save you seats.”

”What do you expect to see?” Joe asked as he followed Frank through the darkened parking lot toward the tents.

”Nothing, I hope.” Frank led the way into the SUB tent, turning on the battery-fed overhead light. It illuminated their support van and a tarp-covered mass—the SUB. Every car had

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been wrapped up in a blue tarp to prevent any tinkering.

Frank and Joe looked over the plastic zipties fastening the tarp. They were all in place.

They checked the bright yellow support van's doors to make sure the telemetry computers were also locked up tight.

”Okay,” confirmed Joe, ”everything looks great. Let's go.”

”In a minute,” said Frank.

”Oh, no, you're not getting one of your ideas, are you?” Joe groaned. ”Scott told us to check on the SUB and get back for dinner.”

”That's not you talking, Joe,” Frank scolded. ”That's a message from your stomach. We'll eat, but first let's check out the tent next to Suntex. Maybe someone there saw something before the fire. Then straight to dinner, okay?”

Joe sighed. ”Oh, all right. I hope no one's around.”

The Hardys walked toward the Suntex tent, where they could see a guard was now positioned outside the flap.

”I guess they're not taking any chances!” Joe muttered.

Frank stopped before the Suntex tent. ”Here. We'll just stop in and see if anyone's here.”

Frank and Joe stood in the open flap of the dimly lit tent and cleared their throats simulta-

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neously to gain the attention of the two men examining their own tarp-covered car.

One of them turned and smiled. Frank had seen him at the press conference earlier. ”Hello, I am Dr. Schmidt,” the man said in a thick German accent. ”And you are?”

”I am, I mean, we are Joe and Frank Hardy,” replied Joe.

”We wanted to ask you a few questions,” Frank said, ”about the fire next door. Could you spare a minute?”

”We were thinking of going to dinner,” Dr Schmidt said, then smiled. ”But surely.”

”Did you see anything strange before it happened? Anyone going in or coming out?”

”You are with the police?” Schmidt asked.

”Oh, no, Doctor.” The other man stepped from the shadows. ”These are the Hardys. from the SUB team. Their father is a famous detective, I believe I heard Mr. Barrington say in the Suntex tent. Ah, I am sorry, I am rude not to introduce myself.” He extended his hand to Frank and then Joe, saying, ”I am Gunter Hoffer of Dr. Schmidt's illustrious team.”

Gunter was a compact man of about thirty with white blond hair and gray eyes.

”I saw you two on television,” said Joe. ”Dr. Schmidt, you brought your car over from Germany in a suitcase, right?”

”Four suitcases, to be exact,” replied Dr.

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Schmidt. ”I bring one, Gunter one, and my two daughters bring one each. The car has been designed with a collapsible frame and detachable panels for easy transport.”

”Did either of you notice anything unusual before the fire?” Frank asked.

”We saw nothing,” replied Dr. Schmidt.

”Any voices?” asked Frank.

”Maybe two voices, but it was hard to tell,” replied Dr. Schmidt.

”Did you see Elton Mossport go near the tent?” Joe blurted out.

”Earlier, maybe, yes. He goes in,” said Dr. Schmidt. ”Have I been of help to you?”

”Yes, thanks,” answered Joe as they headed out of the tent. ”If you think of anything else, we'll be around.”

”Thank you for your time, Dr. Schmidt, and thank you, Mr. Hoffer,” said Frank.

The Hardys hurried toward the motel and dinner. They piled their plates from a lavish buffet with everything from caviar to steak, then joined the SUB team.

Joe glanced over the crowded room, which was decorated in a racing theme, down to the checkered-flag centerpieces on each table. ”The question is, who's going to win?”

”We are,” replied Callie as she leaned close to Frank and whispered, ”Isn't that Joe's 'babe' over there?”

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Sharon Green had walked in with Mack Wilkinson.

Frank's eyebrows rose. ”Looks like she's already joined the enemy.”

”What did you find out?” asked Scott as he moved his wheelchair closer to Frank.

”Dr. Schmidt says Mossport made a visit to the Suntex tent before the fire,” Joe said, attacking a large piece of roast chicken.

Frank shot Joe a look. ”We asked if he saw anything. But he said he only heard a couple of voices.”

”Oooooh, mysterious,” Callie teased.

Frank shook his head as Teresa reminded them of the six-thirty A.M. recharge time. Everybody groaned.

”Remember, the first team up gets the best recharge spot,” Scott said.

”The sun shines all around here,” Joe said.

”Better in some places than others,” Scott replied. ”And the closer to the starting line, the better.”

”I saw a great spot,” Teresa reported. ”Totally unobstructed and near our tent.”

”Fine.” Scott smiled. ”Now go get some sleep so we can get up early and win this race!”

They all laughed as Bill waved the checkered flag from the centerpiece at their table. ”And—we're off!” He dashed from the room.

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”Well, *he's* off.” Teresa giggled.

As they left the dining room, Scott paused to speak to some of the other team captains.

The Hardys walked Callie and Teresa to their room and said good night. Teresa went in while Callie lingered at the open door.

”Well, are you going to talk to Mossport?” she asked Frank.

”Not tonight,” He put an arm around her.

”We've got a dawn wakeup call and a race to win!” Frank hesitated for a moment, glancing at Joe.

”Oh,” he said. ”Good night kiss time. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone.”

Callie lifted her face, smiling. Suddenly, Frank heard Joe yell, ”What are you doing in there?”

Frank whirled around to see Joe about four steps from their room. Their door was open wide, and someone was racing away, down the hall.

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Chapter 3

JOE CHASED the baseball-capped intruder into the stairwell. Callie and Frank checked out the motel room to see what damage had been done. The room was a mess. But, Frank reminded himself, it had been a mess that morning when they'd scrambled up at six to reach the trials on time. Frank saw nothing missing,

Joe returned to the room, laughing.

”Well, I caught her,” he said.

”Her?” Callie asked, ”A female admirer? Sharon Green?”

”I wish,” Joe answered. ”This 'her' is thirteen years old and wears braces.”

Joe went on to explain that he had caught up with the culprit in the stairwell. It seemed that Professor Schmidt's daughter Renata had

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mistakenly received the Hardys' room key from the front desk. She'd realized quickly that she was in the wrong place, started out of the room, then spotted the Hardys. Embarrassed, she'd started running.

”She speaks English pretty well but has never gone with her father to a race before. She's really excited to be here in America,” Joe said with a smile.

”I bet she was scared to death,” Frank said. Callie laughed. ”I know I'd be scared if some big lug chased me into a stairwell.”

”Nah, she got over it pretty fast—especially when I took her over to the office and got her the right key.”

”Well, that's enough excitement for one night.” Callie glanced at Frank. ”Or nearly.” ”Where are you going?” Joe asked as Frank followed her out the door. ”Unfinished business,” Frank said. He returned smiling a few minutes later and helped Joe neaten up the place a bit before bed. They talked about their suspicions of Mossport.

”We're also going to have to keep an eye on Bill Little,” Frank said. ”He may decide on a preemptive practical joke.”

Joe told Frank a story he'd heard about one of Bill's exploits the year before at the EcoSun Race. Bill had cross-wired an opponent's

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solar array. The stunt had gone undetected for two days while it effectively sapped a quarter of the opposition's power.

”I heard about that,” Frank said. ”But they got back at him by cutting his car's hammock during the night. Scott told me Bill almost got badly hurt when the hammock gave way.”

Frank turned out the light. ”It's like a giant jigsaw puzzle,” he muttered into the darkness.

”What?” asked Joe.

”When you face a mystery, you wonder how everything fits together. You're not even sure you have the right pieces,” Frank said.

”I don't know what you're talking about,” Joe half groaned. ”I think what happened in the Suntex tent was a prank or a short—everybody thinks so.”

”Not so fast,” Frank went on. ”Look at today. First there was that run-in between Mossport and Barrington at the press conference. Obviously, there's some history between them. Then came the Sharon Green-Jeff Pelman blowout, followed by the Suntex fire.” Frank thought for a moment, then added, ”And we have a new connection between Sharon Green and Mack. Lots of pieces, huh, Joe?”

The only answer he got was a snore.

By eight-thirty the next morning, Frank and Joe had been up for two and a half hours.

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After a predawn wakeup call from Scott, they'd joined the rest of the SUB team for breakfast, then rushed off to their tent, waiting for the officials to unwrap the yellow and black SUB at six-thirty A.M.

As soon as the tarp was off, Frank, Joe, and Bill unsnapped the hatch on the racer's body so a judge could check that the six twelve-volt batteries were still in place. The power cells had been stenciled in tamperproof ink so no one could sneak in a set of fully charged batteries.

The hatch slid off, the official completed his inspection, and then Bill, Frank, and Joe pushed the SUB into the intense El Paso sunshine. The lightweight vehicle rolled smoothly on its bicycle tires to the spot Teresa had picked for recharging. They all angled the array of solar collectors on the hatch to catch the most direct light.

As Scott and Bill tightened up a few bolts on the suspension, Callie and Teresa doublechecked the teiemetric monitors that would send reports on the SUB's performance to the backup van. Frank and Joe finished prepping the van and had already pumped up a supply of extra bike tires for the SUB.

”Hey, Scott,” Joe asked, wiping his forehead. ”Okay if we check out the competition?”

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At Scott's nod, the Hardys went to see the rival racers being prepared.

The other teams were all recharging also. Their cars were all over the motel parking lot, except for MIT's Nexxus, which sat on a small hill at the side of the motel, overlooking the starting line. With their black solar panels and curved bodies, Joe thought the cars looked like a colony of strange insects soaking up the sun.

Spectators and reporters milled around, taking pictures and asking for autographs. The sleek gold and black Suntex entry was charging up only a few feet from the SUB. Beyond it lay Mossport's green and gold entry, the Solar Terra. It had been designed to take advantage of the wind, with its solar array shaped like a sail.

Joe heard the ecology team, all in green T-shirts, chanting as they worked on the car.

”Is Mossport around?” Frank asked a young blond girl, hoping to question the team captain about the night before.

She shook her head, continuing her chanting. ”Does that help the car?” Joe asked, intrigued.

”Clears away bad vibes,” she said briefly.

Joe blinked. ”But how can you tell if the car has bad vibes?”

”If you don't know, I can't tell you,” she responded, going back into her chant.

The brothers turned and started up the hill

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at the edge of the parking lot to take a look at the MIT entry—a sleek, low, golden racer that looked as if it had been broken hi two. Its topside solar array was also aimed directly toward the morning sun. Jeff Pelman and his crew members crouched over charts and readouts, making last-minute changes in their plan of action.

Joe scanned the group. ”I don't see Sharon Green. I wonder where she is today.”

”No telling,” Frank replied, sauntering toward Dr. Schmidt's blue and black entry, the Sonntag, parked downhill from the Nexxus. The Sonntag looked almost like an overturned boat with smooth curves and a sloping front end. Renata and her sister were helping Gunter and Dr. Schmidt adjust the hinged black hatch that was like a big bug eye. Schmidt had designed his racer to hug the ground, powering it partly with infrared heat collectors on the car's belly.

Joe waved to Renata and said, ”How are you doing?”

Renata broke into a grin, responding in a lightly accented voice, ”Fine, thank you.”

”I think you've found your babe, Joe,” Frank teased.

”Give me a break, Frank, she's a *baby,* not a babe,” responded Joe.

The Air Force Academy's car, the silver and black Mission Ray, was shaped like a wedge of

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cheese. While their solar collectors recharged, Lawrence Gonzalez, the team captain, helped his crew members tighten the lock bolts necessary to bring the car within the official safety code.

”Good morning gentlemen,” said Gonzalez, mock saluting Frank and Joe.

”Good morning to you,” said Joe.

The next car was the Mitsushomi Motors entry, the black and red Rising Sun. It had the appearance of a long, flat wing sitting on one end. This design would allow the car to slice through the air, but still provide enough surface area to pick up sunlight. Taka Yoshida and his four-person crew were testing the new ventilation fan they'd installed over the batteries.

Joe had heard that during the test runs the old blower had been so loud, Taka's driver couldn't hear messages from the team support van, even wearing a headset. The problem was, they needed a fan to avoid a buildup of toxic fumes from the batteries.

Frank and Joe arrived back at the SUB just as the teams began to line up their cars for the race. The results of the trials the day before determined the order in which the entrants would start the race. First would be Suntex, with the SUB second, Mossport's Solar Terra third, MIT's Nexxus VII fourth, Dr. Schmidt's

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blue and black Sonntag fifth, the Air Force Academy's entry sixth, and the Mitsushomi Motors' black and red Rising Sun seventh.

Each car would leave five minutes after the one proceeding it. A support van followed each car and provided information and coaching to the driver via two-way radio. The vans also carried spare parts and tools in case of mechanical problems. A chartered helicopter scouted in front of the caravan and sent back reports about road hazards or traffic conditions. After all, this was a real highway with real vehicles. Another copter carried race officials, while yet another was earmarked for Kyle Barrington. Highway patrol cars rode in front of and behind the convoy along with the members of the press.

Joe noticed that the heat from the highway rose like a wave of steam on the horizon. It was nine A.M. and already ninety degrees.

The Hardys helped lift the solar array into position. They headed for the support van, but Frank remembered something and returned to the SUB. Bill was inside the car working on his ”drink invention,” a long plastic tube stretched from his driver's helmet to a container of a lime-flavored high-energy drink called GOGET-EM. Anytime he was thirsty, he could sip on this extended straw. ”Bill,” Frank said as he leaned on the roll

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bar over Bill's head, ”tune your radio to fifteen hundred. That's the frequency for radio contact. They told us earlier, but I forgot to pass it on.”

”No problem,” Bill said. ”Don't tell Scott, but I'm holding off putting on that iron mask of a helmet. It needs an air conditioner, not a drink tube.”

”There are still a few minutes. Joe and I'll be back to help get the hatch on.” Frank headed back to the support van to doublecheck the telemetry reception with Callie and Teresa. With the radioed information, they could advise the driver on how to conserve energy.

As Frank neared the van's rear door, he noticed MIT's Nexxus VII beginning to descend the hill directly above him to get in line for the race.

”Those show-offs don't mind wasting a little juice,” Frank muttered, watching the gleaming car roll down the slope.

Frank's eyes widened as the Nexxus started picking up speed. Suddenly it swerved. Now it was barreling down the hillside, headed straight at him!

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Chapter 4

”HEADS UP!” A hurtling form caught Frank in a football tackle. Both he and the tackler tumbled just barely clear of the onrushing car. When Frank got to his feet, he saw his rescuer was Lawrence Gonzalez, the captain of the Air Force Academy team. Together, they ran after the MIT car, which crashed into the side of an empty media bus parked near the Suntex car.

The driver, Jeff Pelman, was frantically banging on the hatch of the Nexxus VII to open it and get out. The impact had damaged the solar array, apparently jamming the hatch into place.

Frank and Lawrence finally unsnapped the top of the car and helped Pelman out.

”What happened?” Frank demanded.

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”The steering rod seemed to snap,” Jeff Pelman cried. ”I couldn't control her.” He looked down at his damaged creation with horror.

The MIT crew arrived at a run to see if a quick fix could get the car going again. One glance told them too much damage had been sustained. As Frank and Lawrence watched the support team's efforts, Frank noticed that Sharon Green wasn't with them.

Jeff Pelman climbed out of the car. ”You guys sure you're okay?” He shuddered. ”When I think I nearly ran you over ...”

”No harm done.” Frank said. Then he remembered the condition of the car and added, ”At least, not to *me.”*

At that moment Kyle Harrington rushed up with two race officials to inspect the damage.

”Nice tackle,” Frank told Lawrence Gonzalez. ”You going out for varsity?”

Lawrence laughed, then frowned, looking at the ruined racer. ”Right now, I want to triplecheck my car before we have to roll.”

”Look at this!” Frank heard somebody from the MTT support team exclaim. ”Someone weakened the steering rod by sawing it halfway through.”

Pelman looked sick. ”Then it was sabotage.”

”If I didn't know better, I'd swear this was an air force job,” another crewmate commented darkly.

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Barrington and the officials all glanced at the air force team captain.

Lawrence stiffened. ”There's no way you can pin this on me or anybody on my team,” he said, then turned away.

Lawrence shook his head as he walked off with Frank. ”The Air Force Academy team has always had a reputation for practical jokes,” he explained. ”That's just our way. But this is more than a joke.”

”By the way, I should thank you for saving my life. I'm Frank Hardy, working tech support for the SUB team.”

The cadet shook Frank's hand and said, ”You owe me one, Hardy.”

Before they split up to head to their respective cars, Frank stopped. ”What do you think really happened back there?” he asked.

”Well, it was no design problem. Jeff Pelman has been building solar cars since he was a kid. And since he hooked up with Sharon Green, they've been the team to beat. She can make a toaster sing, she's such a wizard with electronics. But they had a major split-up last night.”

”You think she sawed that rod?” Frank asked.

”She had the opportunity and maybe a motive. But would she actually do it?” Lawrence shrugged, then glanced hard at Frank. ”What's

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with the twenty questions? You a detective or something?”

”Or something,” Frank said as Lawrence walked off.

On the way back to the SUB, Frank passed the Suntex car. The team was in the middle of positioning the solar array on the sleek machine. Mack Wilkinson was inside. Leaning over the car, talking to him in a hushed voice, was Sharon Green. Frank noticed that she had a Suntex T-shirt on.

”Well, well, well,” Frank muttered as he reached the SUB support van.

Joe appeared at the back door. ”Some people will do *anything* to avoid last-minute chores. But getting yourself run over may be too much.”

”From the way you ran over to help, I can tell you were really concerned,” Frank said.

”I didn't see it happening because I was doing my work,” Joe replied virtuously. ”I only heard about it now. So,” Joe asked expectantly, ”what went on?”

”Somebody took a hacksaw to the Nexxus's steering rod,” Frank said.

Joe frowned. ”That sounds like real sabotage, not a joke.”

”It also puts last night's fire in a different light,” Frank said. ”When the Suntex computer telemetry cable went up, Mack Wilkin-

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son said it could have been a short or a prank. What does it look like now?”

Joe whistled.

”That's right,” Frank said. ”Sabotage.”

”We'd better keep a close watch on our car,” Joe said, ”and see if we can nail the saboteur.”

Frank nodded. ”So our first question is, who would benefit most from sabotaging the other racers?”

”Suntex,” Joe said promptly. ”They've got a gazillion dollars invested in their car.” Frank shook his head. ”Suntex can afford it. This race isn't that important to them.”

”It means prestige,” Joe argued. ”When you come down to it, the whole Solar Challenge thing is just a thinly veiled publicity stunt for the Suntex car. That's a pretty good motive.”

”It is a good motive,” Frank agreed. ”But how does it fit in with Suntex being the first to be sabotaged?”

Joe stood silent for a moment, thinking. ”Maybe our first question shouldn't be who gains by the sabotage but who suffers.”

Frank smiled. ”I see. If we can find some kind of common denominator among the teams being sabotaged, it will help us identify the culprit. Although I already have one semisuspect.”

”That's quick,” Joe said. ”Who?”

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”Lawrence Gonzalez.”

Joe stared. ”The guy who saved you?”

”The air force cadets have a reputation for pranks. And wasn't it lucky that their captain just happened to be on hand to save me?”

”Like he was ready to save anyone if the steering thing got out of hand,” Joe said, nodding slowly.

”Hey, guys.” Callie popped her head out of the back door of the van. ”It just came over the radio. They've pushed back the start-off because of the MIT accident. There's going to be an investigation.”

”Let's go tell Bill Little,” Frank said.

They arrived back at the SUB to find their driver still tinkering with his ”drinking invention.”

”A delay? That's cool,” Bill said. ”I'll go enjoy the air-conditioning in the support van until it's time to start. It's like an oven in here already.”

The Hardys helped Bill out, and then they all headed for the van. No sooner were they inside than Scott Sanders gave them the latest news. ”It's official. The MIT entry has been scrubbed. The team's heading back to Boston.”

”Bummer,” Bill said. ”I can't imagine coming this far and not getting to race.

”At the drivers' briefing Kyle Barrington gave us a long lecture about cheating, pranks,

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and fair competition,” Bill said. ”I thought it would never end!”

Frank's dark eyes glinted with speculation. ”They were worried about the drivers being honest?”

”Oh, yeah. They even told us that tickets would be given for reckless driving,” Bill said. Scott frowned.

Leaving Bill to enjoy the relative coolness of the van, the SUB team returned to the racer to double-check everything.

A few minutes later Bill emerged from the support van. ”Okay,” he called, ”they're starting up again.”

Team members swarmed around the Suntex vehicle. As the officials gave the signal, Mack Wilkinson started his engine. It whined quietly, like a blender on wheels. Kyle Barrington stepped forward, smiling for the press.

”I'm proud to be here today, officially starting the First Annual Suntex Solar Challenge,” Barrington began. ”Our company is thrilled to be sponsoring the race. Solar-powered cars are the wave of the future!” He held the starting pistol in his hand and fired it into the air. The crowd cheered as the Suntex car drove off.

”Well, that's one down and six to go,” Bill said as Frank and Joe lifted the hatch at the top of the SUB.

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”Five to go,” Frank corrected. ”MIT is out, remember?”

”Oh, yeah.” Bill grimaced, then his usual grin appeared. ”Well, boys, if you'll just dump my little solar hatch in place, I'll don my helmet and we'll get started.” He took a sip of his GO-GET-EM.

”Stuff looks like antifreeze,” Joe muttered as they hoisted the solar array into place, then snapped the hatch into position.

”Okay, Bill,” Frank said loudly through the roof of the hatch. ”Once we get back to the van, we'll call to make sure the communications system is working.”

Bill held up his thumb and index finger in an okay signal, and Frank and Joe rushed back to the van.

As they ran they saw Barrington and Sharon Green climbing aboard one of the choppers.

”What do you think your babe is up to now?” Frank asked Joe.

”Off to new heights, I guess,” Joe replied with a grin. ”It sure looks like she's got new friends in high places. Maybe Jeff made her so mad she's joined the Suntex side.”

”I don't think Suntex needs her help,” Frank observed. ”Barrington thinks he's got this race in the bag.”

Frank opened the door of the van as Scott

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turned on the intervehicle communications system.

”Hello, Bill?” Scott spoke into the microphone on the radio console in the back of the van. ”Can you hear me, Bill?”

Scott checked the radio frequency and volume to make sure they were correct. But there was no response.

”Bill, are you there?” Scott turned to Frank and Joe. ”Maybe you'd better—”

He was interrupted by a scream of pain coming through the speaker—a scream that could only have come from Bill Little!

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Chapter 5

FRANK AND JOE BOLTED out the back of the van and dashed for the SUB. They could hear Bill screaming even through the closed hatch. In less than six seconds they had the hatch off and Bill was out tearing off his helmet. He held his head in shaking hands, gasping.

As Joe went to help Bill, Frank picked up the helmet. A wire had been stripped of its insulation and was shooting sparks right at ear level.

Teresa and Callie joined them, Callie carrying the support van's medical kit. Frank pulled Joe aside as the girls went to care for Bill. ”Do you think Lawrence Gonzalez could have done this?”

Just then Scott pulled his wheelchair up to

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Bill, Teresa, and Callie. ”Bill's in pretty bad shape,” Teresa reported.

”Did somebody call for an ambulance?”

Scott yelled out.

Teresa cradled Bill's head in her arms while they waited. Within minutes, an ambulance screamed up, and two copters touched down beside the SUB. Kyle Barrington emerged from one, followed by race officials from the other. One of them took the helmet away to examine as the medics carried Bill away.

”What's going on here?” Barrington demanded.

”That's what we'd like to know!” Scott retorted. ”A couple of pranks are one thing, but these last two stunts could have gotten someone killed! I want to know who did this.”

”I can assure you we'll make every effort to find out,” Barrington told Scott, with a critical eye on the officials examining the helmet.

Press people ran up to get a statement from Barrington, but he was speaking to Scott. ”Get your alternate driver ready, if you're still racing, that is.”

”We're racing, all right. Just give us three minutes!” Scott barked. He was fuming as he gestured for Frank, Joe, Callie, and Teresa to join him back in the support van.

Barrington turned toward the reporters, but the words he spoke through the bullhorn slung

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round his neck were for general consumption. ”This is Kyle Barrington speaking. I urge all team captains to stop all pranks now! I will not tolerate any more practical jokes. Now, let's get back to the race!”

Barrington maintained a gracious smile as he walked briskly through the crowd of reporters and boarded his helicopter.

Scott steered his wheelchair up the ramp at the back of the van. As he did, Joe turned to Frank and said, ”Lawrence Gonzalez is probably at it again.”

”You were hot on Mossport before,” Callie snapped. ”Lawrence saved Frank's life.”

”It could be either one, or maybe both,” Frank pointed out.

”Whoever it was pulled a neat trick.” Scott frowned. ”We triple-checked the car but left the helmet.”

Scott nodded. ”The new driver had better be extra careful out there.”

”And who will that be?” Teresa asked as she turned from the telemetry control board. ”I'm out—I need to be here with the computers. How about Callie? We'd have to add weights to make up the difference between her and Bill.” She caught Joe's puzzled expression. ”Our driving plan is based on the SUB carrying a hundred-and-eighty-pound payload.”

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”If there were no problems, it'd be fine for Callie to race,” Frank spoke up. ”But with this sabotage I think she'd be too vulnerable.”

”Thanks for your vote of support,” Callie protested.

”Look, guys,” Scott interrupted, I'm the captain, so I decide which one of us goes.”

Scott looked at Callie and said, ”Sorry, but you're trained in battery usage evaluation. We need you in the van.” He then turned to Frank. ”We didn't rig the SUB or the van for my legs, so I need *you* to drive—”

”No fair!” Joe interrupted. ”I've driven the SUB.”

”As I was saying,” Scott continued sternly, ”Frank, I need you to drive the van, and Joe, you'll drive the SUB. But, please be careful out there!”

Joe did a little victory dance, pulling down his elbows and thrusting up his knees as he chanted, ”Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Teresa grabbed his arm. ”Now listen. Just keep the speed even for the first hour. No heroics, okay?”

”And make sure you stay in the sunlight,” Scott added. ”Take the middle lane if you can. Trees, brush, and small hills near the road can block the sun.”

”I know about catching rays,” Joe told them.

Scott dug out the spare helmet. ”Check this

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out for tampering before you put it on—and then get out there.”

”Right, Captain!” Joe gave a mock salute, grabbed the new helmet, and jumped out the back of the support van. ”Too bad I can't bring some tunes with me. I saw Mack pack a humongous boom box—”

”No way,” Teresa cut in. ”You'd never be able to hear our audio commands.”

”Teresa's right,” Scott said. ”We need you to pay attention to the road and our readouts, not the next song on your CD player.” He turned to Frank and Callie. ”You'll have to help with the hatch. And be sure to doublecheck that suspension.”

”I want you to be careful,” Frank said as he and Callie escorted Joe to the SUB.

”Hey,” Joe responded. ”I'm always careful.”

”More like *never* careful,” Frank replied. ”Don't try to solve this case from behind the wheel of the SUB, okay? I'll be backing you up in the van, but I can't control what's going on ahead of you.”

”No,” Joe said with a grin, ”that's telemetry's job, right, Callie?”

”Well, we didn't have scouts drive over the course three times like the Suntex people did, and we don't have information from military satellites like the Air Force Academy team

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has”—Callie gave a little shrug—”but we're the best you've got.”

Frank frowned. ”I mean it, Joe. Someone is playing rough, and going out there makes you a target. Stay away from Mossport.”

”And Lawrence,” added Joe as he carefully climbed into the SUB and sat down. The interior looked like a fighter cockpit. Joe sat in a suspended hammock made of nylon fibers, much like a lawn chair. It was a very close fit, even without the hatch closed.

”Nice smell in here,” Joe said. ”Hot metal and sweat.” He fastened the three-way safety belt over each shoulder and between his legs, then double-checked the new helmet for loose wires. Finally he put it on. Frank and Callie lifted the solar-array hatch over the top of the SUB, slid it into its grooves, and snapped it into place. Then they ran back to the support van.

Frank got into the driver's seat beside Scott, and Callie joined Teresa in back with the telemetry gear.

”Hello,” Scott spoke into the microphone to Joe. ”Joe? Are you there?”

Joe moved the helmet microphone in line with his mouth and spoke. ”I read you loud and clear, Captain.”

”Good,” Scott replied. ”And you're coming in loud and clear here, let's check a few of

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the gauges before we start. Flip on the power switch.”

Joe snapped the power switch. The dashboard gauges flickered, feeding off the six twelve-volt silicon batteries stored behind his seat. The switch also started the blower, which cooled the batteries and dispersed their fumes. Air began to circulate inside the SUB. There were no windows—just a windshield with a mirror mounted on the top for a rear view.

Although he was very familiar with the car, Joe felt slightly claustrophobic every time he got in. He knew the feeling would go away once he got moving, but the heat would not.

”Now check the amp hour meter marked AHM. We've got a full charge on our batteries from this morning, so that should be set at zero.”

”Right on the mark,” Joe replied. ”And if I get more energy, it should go into the negative numbers and flash green, right?”

”Right,” Scott responded. ”Next, check the turn signals, first right, then left.”

Joe did.

”Okay,” Scott went on. ”What does the temperature gauge read?”

”It says one twenty.” Joe groaned.

”It will cool down once you get going,” Scott said, consoling him. ”Take a look at the volt meter. What does it say?”

”Seventy-two.” Joe sighed.

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”Fire extinguisher?” Scott asked.

”Check,” Joe replied, ”I'd use it now if it would cool me off.”

”Try some of the GO-GET-EM,” Frank suggested. ”Maybe your own voltage is a little drained.”

”Has this stuff been tested?” Joe asked.

”It came right out of the free case we got when we joined the race,” Scott said. ”Now, let's try the regenerative braking as you move into place. Turn the knob to send a little current through the controller. It puts the motor into regenerative mode, running it backward so it actually becomes a generator and feeds energy into the batteries. Okay, that's it. Testing's over. Now let's win this race!”

As the SUB moved into position some ten minutes late, one of the officials held up a checkered flag.

”What happened to the gun?” Joe asked.

”I guess Barrington reserved his big bang for Mack's send-off.” Scott chuckled. ”Look at it this way—a flag is a lot safer.”

”We're right behind you,” Frank said. ”You okay?”

”Sure.” Joe grabbed the tubing that Bill had rigged to connect the jug of GO-GET-EM to his helmet and sucked on it. ”This green gunk isn't half bad.”

The flag rose, then dropped suddenly, and

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Joe headed straight for the ramp that led onto the highway. The crowd cheered the SUB on its way.

Joe accelerated. The asphalt rushed by inches beneath him. He was relieved to feel some air movement around him and began to feel a bit cooler as the SUB picked up speed. Then the steering wheel seemed to resist him.

”Something doesn't feel right here,” Joe said into the microphone.

Before anyone in the van could respond, Joe felt the front tires jerk to the right, away from their intended course. As if possessed by demons, the SUB veered straight toward a concrete embankment!

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Chapter 6

JOE FOUGHT the steering wheel with all his strength. He pulled frantically to the left to avoid the deadly obstacle rushing toward him.

Muscles straining, Joe wrenched the wheel, and it was good enough to avert disaster. Mere feet from dashing itself against the concrete wall, the car pulled out of its trajectory. He heaved a sigh of relief as he got the car back on course.

”For crying out loud,” Scott's voice blared over the radio. ”What are you doing? Remember, the torque is different in the SUB. You press the accelerator too much and you fly!”

”I barely touched the pedal,” Joe gasped.

Scott calmed down a little. ”Take it easy, okay? We can't afford to lose another driver.”

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”So far our real-time telemetry readouts are on target,” Teresa said into her microphone in the back of the van. ”Today's leg of the race heads north. In a couple of miles you'll be out of Texas and into New Mexico. You'll cross the desert to Las Cruces, then turn west to Lordsburg, near the Arizona-New Mexico border. It's about a hundred and sixty miles. At the speed limit, that route should take about three hours. I'd like you to keep the SUB at fifty-five miles per hour for two hours, then take her up to sixty-five for the last lap. Do you follow me?”

”Got it,” Joe said.

Through the first half hour of the race, the support team went over the readings on the gauges with Joe and monitored the telemetry readouts inside the van. Joe responded to their cues and took occasional sips of GO-GET-EM. His eyes were constantly scanning the rolling, sandy horizon for trouble.

”Where are we?” Joe asked.

”Almost to Las Cruces, New Mexico,” Teresa replied.

”Do people live out here? I mean, it looks like desert.”

”That's because it *is* desert.” Scott laughed.

”We'll hit some greenery soon,” Teresa

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added. ”There are irrigated farms around the town itself.”

”What's the matter, Joe, are you hot?” Callie teased.

”You better believe it,” Joe answered. ”It's bad enough wearing a space helmet and having the sun beat down on the roof. But I'm even catching heat coming up from the highway through the wheel wells!”

”At least the suspension is okay. Right, Joe?” Scott asked.

”Fine, I guess,” Joe said. ”But it is pretty weird, doing fifty-five miles an hour six inches above the ground.”

”Hey,” Scott said, ”the lower you get, the less wind resistance.”

”If you say so,” Joe responded.

”I sure hope Bill's going to be okay,” Teresa commented.

”All we can do is hope,” Scott replied solemnly. ”He'd have wanted us to go on with the race. I'm sure of it.”

For a moment no one said anything, but then Teresa spoke up. ”We should be coming into Las Cruces very soon.”

As the caravan approached the town, the SUB team saw a crowd lined up on either side of the highway. They were all holding banners wishing the teams good luck.

”At least they're keeping their banners well

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back from the road,” Joe chuckled. ”Wouldn't want them blocking my solar panels.”

Joe took the westward curve in the road and didn't go right into the town. Soon he was in parched scrubland again. ”This scenery is boring,” Joe announced over the radio.

”Maybe we could entertain Joe by going over the suspects in this case,” Callie proposed.

”As long as he keeps the SUB on the straight and narrow,” Scott warned.

”If I were doing these things,” Frank thought out loud, ”I'd try to divert attention from myself by sabotaging my own car—a little. What do you guys think?”

”Sounds possible,” Joe commented.

Teresa's fingers were flying over a calculator as she rechecked her figures for speed over the remainder of the day.

Callie suddenly glanced at the open mike. ”Is this channel secure?” she asked. ”Can anyone else listen in on our conversation?”

Frank shrugged. ”Each team has an assigned frequency. There's really no reason to eavesdrop, unless—”

”Unless someone is worried we're going to solve this case,” Joe interrupted. ”Hey, who's that up there?”

Beyond Joe, just disappearing around a slight bend in the road, was a gold and black

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support van. He took the curve. Ahead he saw the van again, led by the Suntex car.

”I can see the Suntex car. Can I take him? We've been such good little kids, just tooling along at fifty-five. Give the go-ahead, Captain,” Joe begged.

Scott glanced back. ”What do you think, Teresa?”

”I think the only way we're going to win this leg is if we actually come in first.” Teresa frowned over her calculations. ”We just don't have the battery reserve Suntex has, so the only way to win is to outdrive them.” A determined grin lit up her face. ”I say put the pedal to the metal!”

Joe scanned the horizon. For the moment he and the Suntex team were alone on the road— he couldn't even see the highway patrol cars that were in front of the pack. He took a deep breath and signaled, then passed the Suntex van. Adrenaline rushed through him as he sped up, preparing to overtake the Suntex racer next. He felt as if he were flying now, the landscape a blur around him.

As he pulled ahead of Mack, a blaring bass beat penetrated the SUB's sealed cabin, drowning out even the hum of Joe's own engine. ”You hear that?” Joe said into his mike. ”Mack must have some boom box. I don't

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know how he can hear himself think with the volume up so high!”

Scott and the others laughed. Frank leaned toward the radio. ”Didn't you say you wished you had some music to keep you company?”

”That wasn't music,” Joe responded. ”That was noise, pure and simple.”

Joe finished passing followed by the SUB support van.

Frank glanced in the rearview mirror to spot a wedge-shaped, black and silver vehicle surging down the left lane to pass the Suntex team. It was Lawrence Gonzalez in the Mission Ray.

”Don't look now,” Frank radioed Joe, ”but you're about to have some company.”

”Joe,” Scott warned, ”don't play Road Warrior. Let him pass.”

”I'm not at full speed,” Joe protested. ”Let me take her up to sixty-five, and we'll see if the air force can really fly.”

”No,” Scott commanded, ”not on these curves. I need you to keep her at sixty. It's test enough.”

Suddenly static filled the van, and a new voice came onto the SUB's frequency.

”May the best man win,” the voice mocked.

”Hey, that's Lawrence!” Joe cried.

Lawrence waved to Joe as he took the lead. The sound of the Mission Ray's engine fill Joe's ears.

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Back in the van, Joe's voice came over the radio. ”I wonder how long he's been on our frequency?” he snapped.

”And do you remember what we were just saying about who'd want to eavesdrop?” Frank said.

”Each car radio's frequency is supposed to be secret,” Scott said. ”But, Joe, I don't want you brooding over the breach in security. Just keep the speed below sixty-five, and watch your temper. I'll take it up with the officials when we get to Lordsburg. Frank, you can— What is it? Somebody else trying to pass?”

”In a way,” Frank said, his eyes locked on the rearview mirror. The air force support van was now neck and neck with the Suntex racer. Frank had been watching so he could get out of the way if Mack Wilkinson decided to fight for the lead. But now another party was coming in—not on the road but *over* it. A helicopter swooped dangerously low over the Suntex racer.

Scott craned his neck out the window. ”What frequency do we use to contact the officials? This is ridiculous!”

Scott tried to radio the officials, but all he got was dead air.

Callie and Teresa cried out, staring through the tinted back windows of the van.

Frank scanned the road, then glanced in the

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rearview mirror again. The helicopter was buzzing the Suntex van and Mack Wilkinson's racer.

Even in the loaded van, Frank felt the downdraft of the chopper rotors, but the effect on the lightweight Suntex car was much worse.

The racer tilted, then flew off the road!

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Chapter 7

THE SUB SUPPORT TEAM stared at the scene behind them. Mack had vaulted from the Suntex car, checking the solar panel for damage. His teammates poured from the support van. Before Frank lost sight of them, he saw Mack hopping back into his car.

”Guess the Suntex racer's okay,” Callie said.

”Mack probably never even heard that chopper coming.” Joe laughed over the radio when he'd heard the story. ”His boom box would drown out the sound of the rotors!”

”It looked like an air force copter to me,” Scott said. ”Holloman Air Force Base isn't too far from here.”

”Really?” Joe said in a fake shocked voice. ”You mean Captain Lawrence might be pulling *pranks?”*

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”It looks that way,” Frank admitted. ”But then, looks can be deceiving.”

”If the air force wasn't behind it, then who was?” Joe argued.

”I'm going to report this to the race officials,” Scott cut in. ”And I'd like to know where their chopper was when it happened.”

”Now, less arguing and more driving,” Teresa said. ”We're about to enter a heavily wooded area. Joe will need to do some incredible driving to keep the array in the sun.”

The land outside the windows had changed as they'd driven on. Instead of desert, scrub grass had appeared, burnt almost brown by the sun. By noon, the SUB was approaching Deming, New Mexico, and the forests of Rock Hound State Park. Joe was still in second place behind Lawrence. Teresa and Callie constantly checked the telemetry equipment to monitor the state of the batteries. Frank kept an eye in the rearview mirror for the next move from the Suntex team or another airborne surprise. Instead, he saw Dr. Schmidt's racer pass the Suntex car.

”Go for it, Dr. Schmidt!” Frank cheered.

Scott immediately radioed the news to Joe and began discussing the most effective driving cycle for the car to achieve the best efficiency.

Teresa's and Callie's calculations were clear. Driving at sixty, the SUB could cover forty more miles and still have enough of a charge

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in the batteries to win this leg of the race— provided the air force car wasn't as efficient. The problem was that Lordsburg was more than sixty miles away.

”You'll have to take it back to fifty-five miles an hour, Joe,” Scott instructed. ”And get in the left lane. You'll have a better shot at the sun from over there.”

”Gotcha,” Joe said, shifting lanes. ”It's still a bit shady. Any more ideas?”

”He could push his feet through the bottom and run,” Callie suggested with a grin.

”No human power allowed.” Teresa laughed, shaking her finger. ”It says so in the rules. But we might have a little help from the local geography. If I'm reading this map correctly, we'll be hitting a nice, long downward incline. You might be able to make up a little power.”

”You need to keep up your fluid intake,” Callie said. ”How is your GO-GET-EM supply holding out?”

Joe glanced at the plastic bottle wedged against the cockpit. Bill's drinking invention had worked out well, and there was still plenty of fluid in the large plastic container.

”It's fine,” he replied. The SUB topped a small hill and started on the downslope. Beyond the windshield, the gray-green forest spread all around the highway. ”It's beautiful here.”

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”See?” Frank said. ”If you'd just stop complaining, you might actually enjoy the drive!”

”Yeah. Too bad I can't pull over for a nice picnic lunch,” Joe kidded. ”Tomorrow I'm going to dress more appropriately. Either a swimsuit or a pair of shorts.”

”Oh, great!” Scott laughed. ”Then if the highway patrol pulls you over, they can nail you for indecent exposure as well as driving without headlights.”

”Hey!” Joe realized, ”That's right! We don't have lights on this thing. What happens if I get pulled over?”

”Kyle Harrington and company have supposedly squared away those details with the local law,” Scott replied.

”Speaking of getting pulled over,” Frank said, ”look out behind!”

Two New Mexico Highway Patrol cars appeared at the crest of the hill behind them. They were hitting at least one hundred miles an hour. Scott, Callie, and Teresa turned to see the cars as they roared by Dr. Schmidt's car and headed straight toward them and Joe.

”Joe, get in the right lane, NOW!” Scott shouted. ”And hold tight!”

Joe switched lanes just in time for the two patrol cars to whizz by.

”Hey!” Joe finally responded when the cars were past. ”Where's the fire?”

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”I don't know,” Scott replied, ”but the officials should have sent us a message to expect them.”

”Unless they *can't* send us a message,” Frank suddenly suggested.

”Right!” Scott turned to the mike, his voice grave. ”Joe, something big must be going on down the highway. Slow down, and keep your eyes open!”

”We're approaching the steep downhill section,” Teresa announced.

”Okay, Joe,” Scott said, ”we still have a chance to win this race if you drive smart. Use your brakes all the way down this slope. But watch out for what's ahead, okay?”

”Right, Cap'n,” Joe replied. ”Regenerative braking on—and whoa! I'm hitting the brakes!” The road curved on the slope, and as Joe went around the bend he saw signs of an accident—a big one.

”Got a bad wreck on the left side of the road,” Joe reported. ”Maybe a gasoline truck. Something leaked, and there's a fair-size fire. The highway patrol is trying to get the driver out.”

”What's the mile marker?” Scott questioned frantically. ”Get the mile marker so I can radio a warning to the other cars before we have another accident.”

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”I don't see one,” Joe replied. ”I think the truck hit it.”

”Scott,” Frank asked, ”How can we get the frequencies for the other cars?”

”Where are the officials—they don't seem to be around!” Scott glanced unhappily at Frank. ”And we can't get to the other teams. We don't know their frequencies. Tight security, remember?”

”Then how did Lawrence know ours?” Callie asked.

”I'd love to know—especially since he didn't radio this news to us.” Scott turned to the radio. ”We'll just try every frequency until we reach Dr. Schmidt. We've got to get through and give him some warning.”

Scott began to run through every frequency on the dial searching for Dr. Schmidt's team.

Up ahead, Joe was just passing the accident site. How ironic, he thought. Our solar cars are driving past this fossil fuel nightmare.

He tried to reach the support van with more details, but only got static on his radio. Then he remembered Lawrence Gonzalez's eavesdropping on their frequency. ”Hello?” he said into his mike. ”Lawrence? You still out there?”

”No,” answered Lawrence, ”I'm on my own frequency where I belong.”

”Then how are you talking to me?” Joe asked.,

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”Military secret,” Lawrence said, chuckling.

”Did you get past the truck okay?”

”Barely,” Lawrence's voice got tight. ”He skidded out of control just as I went by. A close call.”

”Did you notify the officials?” Joe asked.

”What officials?” Lawrence laughed cynically. ”I sure haven't heard from them. As far as I can tell, it's every man for himself.”

”At least you have contact with your support van.” Joe put a hand over his mike. ”Which is more than I've got.” He suddenly felt very isolated.

The SUB hummed softly as Joe looked back and saw the patrol cars clustered around the flipped-over truck.

He saw his support van pass the wreck on the right and breathed a sigh of relief. Then, in a flash of black and blue, Dr. Schmidt's Sonntag approached the scene of the accident. Joe hoped that Schmidt had received some kind of warning about the dangers ahead. But as Schmidt got closer, Joe noticed that his car was drifting in the wrong direction to avoid the wreck.

The SUB support van began honking its horn and blinking its lights.

As Joe stared in horror, the Sonntag began an uncontrollable skid toward the wall of flames.

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Chapter

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FRANK SEARCHED FOR A SPOT to park. He wanted to go back to help, but he knew he couldn't leave the van where it would block an ever-shrinking route past the wreckage. Besides folding itself in two and flipping over, the huge tanker truck was leaking an oil slick across the highway.

Frank had been far enough over to avoid it. Schmidt, however, hit the edge of the slick. For a second it looked as if he was headed right into the flaming wreck, but then his car spun again, flipped, and tumbled away.

Frank stopped the SUB support vehicle and opened the door. At least Dr. Schmidt's van had avoided the oil. It whipped across the road to park near the Sonntag, the team scurry-

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ing out. Highway patrol officers and the driver of the truck, who got out of the wreck, ran to help turn the Sonntag over. Frank saw Schmidt's daughter Renata pull frantically on the crushed overhead solar panels to free her father. Dr. Schmidt climbed out of the car, his hands raised to show he was all right. With a sigh, Frank got back in the van and continued on. The wail of an ambulance siren came from the distance.

”Well, that was a definite accident,” Frank said. ”No one could have planted that gasoline truck.”

”But why didn't anyone radio a warning about the wreck?” Teresa wanted to know. ”One of the race helicopters, the highway patrol—even that air force chopper had to have passed this mess. Why didn't we hear anything?”

”Maybe someone didn't want us to know about it,” Scott answered. ”Or about anything else that might happen along the way.”

”Radio jamming?” Callie said.

”That's a pretty long stretch,” Frank said. ”But I don't like all these communications problems, either.”

They hurriedly contacted Joe to make sure their radio equipment was working and to explain what had happened.

Joe answered them anxiously. ”Where have

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you guys been?” he asked. ”I've been talking to the enemy out here.”

”What?” Scott asked. ”Are you all right?”

”I'm fine,” Joe responded. ”When I couldn't contact you, I talked with Lawrence.”

”We were off the air for a few minutes, trying to find Dr. Schmidt's radio frequency,” Scott explained. ”We were pulling over to wave him down when he came zooming past.”

”He had to be doing sixty-five,” Teresa added. ”I guess he wanted to make the most of this downhill slope.”

”We tried to warn him, but it was too late to stop the accident,” Frank said.

”Is Schmidt okay?” Joe asked. ”The last I saw, he was headed straight into the fire.”

”His guardian angel was busy today,” Scott replied.

”You mean he's still in the race?” Joe cried in disbelief.

”No way.” Frank picked up the story. ”His array is totally crushed.”

”How does your AHM read?” Scott said, changing the subject.

Joe looked at the amp hour meter and saw the green light flashing.

”Good news here,” Joe replied, ”we're in the green!”

A moment later, however, his triumph went sour. The Suntex car came barreling along at

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over seventy miles an hour on an uphill grade. The mild solar hum of the SUB's engine was drowned out by the loud thump of bass guitars from Mack Wilkinson's boom box.

Teresa frowned, her fingers flickering over her calculator as the Suntex support van roared past. ”Even with his extra battery efficiency, I don't see how Mack can use this kind of power to take the lead. He won't have enough of a charge left to meet the battery reserve rules.”

”Then why is he doing it?” Joe asked as Mack waved to the beat of the music.

”His batteries will be bone-dry by the time he gets to Lordsburg,” Scott complained.

”So,” Joe asked, ”if I were to follow suit, what would happen?”

”I'd run you down with this van,” Scott warned. ”No hotdogging. I don't want a dead hero on my hands. Just do what we tell you, and we'll come out fine.”

”Remember, we get points for conserving power,” Teresa said. ”Suntex has blown a lot of theirs by taking the hill at such high speed. We, on the other hand, have”—she glanced at the telemetry monitor—”sixty-two percent of our power. Factor that in, and we could even let a couple of other cars pass us and still end up in second, maybe even first place for this lap.”

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”Maybe Mack is just more concerned about this part of the race than tomorrow's leg,” Frank suggested.

”That's possible,” Teresa admitted. ”With all their incredible telemetry, road scans, and weather reports, maybe Suntex knows something about tomorrow's leg that we don't.”

”I can't run my race on someone else's telemetry,” Scott confirmed. ”We'll just have to do what makes the most sense for us. Joe, are you still there?”

”Yes,” Joe answered over the radio. ”I'm still here, poking along at fifty-five. In third place and still sweating.”

The SUB support team continued to discuss the battery reserve ratio needed to win, to compensate for not arriving first.

”It's hard to tell what the actual average will be,” Teresa said. ”But my educated guess would be the battery reserve should be somewhere between sixty-five and seventy percent for the winning car, unless they have a secret weapon of some kind.”

”Like what?” asked Frank.

Teresa shrugged. ”Using some other kind of energy to fuel their car. It would be against the rules, but it's been done before.”

”How do you police that?” Frank asked with a sigh. ”There must be at least a million

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ways to cheat in one of these races if you really want to.”

Scott nodded. ”But it's a lot easier to sabotage other people than it is to cheat,” he added darkly.

”Let me see if I've got the bottom line, though,” Joe said. ”If Mack uses up too much of his energy reserve, he'll never be able to recharge enough tonight and tomorrow morning to get back in the race.”

”That's it in a nutshell.” Scott was checking Teresa's calculations. Suddenly he raised his head with a grin. ”But you know, it doesn't look good if we come in too far behind. So what do you think, Teresa? Can't we use up a little bit of juice to catch up a tad?”

”Actually, now would be a good time,” Teresa admitted. ”From here on, we've got a gradual downhill slope toward Lordsburg.”

”Okay, Joe,” Scott said, ”go ahead and goose her up. But be careful, and stay in contact.”

”All right!” Joe responded enthusiastically.

He gently pressed the stainless steel accelerator pedal down, and the car shot forward. The SUB could accelerate much faster than a heavier vehicle. There was much less inertia to overcome.

On the other hand, a heavier vehicle had certain comforts, like room to stretch and air-

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conditioning. As he shifted on the nylon hammock, Joe was surprised at how quickly he'd gotten used to something he'd once described as a rolling sweatbox.

Joe peered through the windshield at the passing scenery. The rolling hills around Lordsburg reminded him of home. He remembered the late nights they'd spent fine-tuning the SUB. He'd learned a lot this summer, more than he ever imagined knowing about solar cars.

Joe took in the quiet purr of the SUB as it flew down the road. He suddenly became aware of another sound—the siren of a highway patrol vehicle close behind. His speed had creeped up a bit over the legal limit. That's all he needed—a speeding ticket.

”Hello,” Joe spoke into the microphone. ”Come in, SUB! Frank? Scott? Hey, somebody, come in—what's going on?”

In his rearview mirror, Joe caught the red flash of the police vehicle's dome light. ”Guys, it would be nice to have some help here.”

Joe's earphones were full of static. ”Great,” he muttered. ”What a time for my radio to go dead!”

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Chapter 9

FRANK NOTICED the emergency indicator on the dashboard-mounted radio first. He knew this meant the radio was out of commission.

”That does it.” Scott exclaimed when Frank pointed to the light. He grabbed a screwdriver and began to dismantle the radio.

”What are you doing?” Frank yelled.

”Cool it. I'm checking to see if there's a little surprise in here somewhere,” Scott explained.

As he spoke, he produced a small device that looked like a wristwatch without a band. The time on it was set for right around the time when the radio had gone out.

”Looks like military equipment,” Scott said m a dead voice. ”I've seen these before in elec-

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tronics catalogs. It's a timing device to shortcircuit our communications system.”

The van was silent for a moment, then everyone said simultaneously, ”Lawrence!”

Frank looked down at the disassembled radio. ”Can you put that back together again?”

”I'll not only put it back together, I'll fix it,” Scott affirmed. ”Want to see?”

He immediately began reassembling the radio, screwing the components back together and rummaging through the makeshift desk on his lap for the pieces.

In no time at all, Scott had the radio back together again.

”I'm impressed,” Teresa commented.

”But will it work?” Frank asked.

”Better than ever,” Scott assured him.

Joe had tried over and over again to reach the SUB support van, but to no avail. He had slowed down to the sixty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit before the highway patrol car reached him. It passed, and as it sped over the next hill, Joe breathed a sigh of relief. He wouldn't get a speeding ticket after all—but somebody up ahead would.

That cruiser sure was in a hurry. I wonder if there's been another accident, Joe thought.

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The highway signs welcomed Joe to Lordsburg, a small town located in the pass between the Pyramid, Cedar, and Burro mountains. It was just past one when Joe arrived, and the sun shone brightly over the mountains in the distance.

As he passed the checkpoint and clocked in, Joe began to feel the 110-degree heat in the small, cramped space. Frank's voice interrupted his moment of heat fatigue.

”Joe,” Frank asked, ”Joe, come in!”

”Caught me just at the finish line,” Joe answered. ”The question is, where have you guys been?”

”We had a little problem with our radio,” Scott said. ”And his name is Lawrence.”

”Oh, no!” Joe kidded, ”not Frank's hero!”

”It seems that he may have been involved,” Frank admitted. ”But that's something we still have to confirm.”

”Joe,” Teresa interrupted, ”Please wait next to the car for the officials to check the battery efficiency level.”

”Yeah,” Scott joined in. ”With the way Mack was driving the Suntex car, you may still have a shot at number two!”

Joe steered toward the Solar Challenge official check-in situated on the tent-covered parkmg lot of a motel complex painted bright pink. The restaurant in front had a huge neon sign

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in the shape of a cowboy boot. To the right of the check-in site was a large stage surrounded by members of the press and spectators. Beyond it, Joe could see the choppers resting on the asphalt like three big flies. There were a few trees on two sides of the lot, and a low bank of units with rocking chairs out front bordering another.

As he pulled to a stop, he could hear the sound of a thumping bass beat coming from the portable stage. He shook his head. Where there's music, Joe thought, Mack Wilkinson must be close by.

On the stage stood Kyle Harrington and Mack, posing for the cameras of the assembled news teams.

Scott's voice came over the headset. ”Have you seen the SUB position yet?”

”I've just arrived now,” Joe responded. ”What do you want me to do?”

”Stick to the car like glue and double-check every number the race officials write down until we get there,” Scott instructed. ”We're stuck at the light you made it through just off the highway.”

”Aye-aye, Captain,” Joe said. ”But can I at least stand in the shade?”

”Stand anywhere you like,” Scott replied. ”Just make sure it's by the SUB.”

The race officials surrounded the SUB as it

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slowed and then stopped. They waited for Joe to remove the hatch himself, to ensure it could be removed in the allotted ten seconds. Joe pushed up the solar array with his last ounce of strength and took a deep breath of fresh air.

”Freedom at last!” he said as he leapt from the SUB and stood next to it. He removed the helmet and shook the sweat from his hair.

”What do you think? Is it a look?” Joe jokingly asked one official as he ran his fingers through the damp and tangled strands.

The official laughed but continued to measure the SUB's battery reserve.

”So how does she look, gentlemen?” Joe asked. The officials had finished taking their readings.

”You're sitting at sixty-eight percent,” one of them replied.

Just then Frank, Scott, Callie, and Teresa came up.

”We got a sixty-eight!” Joe exclaimed to the team. ”Reminds me of my first algebra test.”

”In this case, that's a better than passing mark,” Scott said. ”Still, everything depends on how the air force and Suntex did.”

One of the officials wearing a badge that identified him as John Savriano overheard and said, ”The SUB's third. Air Force came in second at sixty-eight percent, too. Looks like you guys have a similar strategy. Now the real

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mystery is Suntex's gallium-arsenide batteries. They're amazing—I can't believe the reserve on the Suntex car. It's almost as if she never left the parking lot.”

”What kind of numbers did Wilkinson get?” Scott asked.

”He's sitting right at eighty percent!” Savriano told them.

”That's impossible! Are you posting each day's results somewhere?” Teresa asked the man.

”There's a board in the officials' tent,” he replied.

”Where's Harrington?” Scott demanded. ”I want to talk to him about the communications problems we've been having.”

”He's finishing up a press conference.” Savriano glanced at his watch. ”But he's due in the officials' tent in ten minutes to discuss what happened to the radios today.”

”What *did* happen?” Scott pressed.

”Everything possible,” the man answered, ”First they went dead, then they only picked up incoming messages, but no outgoing ones, and finally they just went dead again.”

”This keeps getting weirder,” Scott said in disgust.

”Scott,” Frank interrupted. ”We're going to stake out our recharge zone before the thundering hordes arrive, okay?”

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”And Callie and I are going to look over the charts to see how our figures compare to the ones logged by Suntex and the Air Force,” Teresa said.

Frank and Joe headed off on their scouting mission. ”This looks pretty good,” Joe said, squinting up at the afternoon sun. ”Sunset will be thataway,” he said, pointing westward, ”and there'll be no obstructions to cause shade.”

Frank pulled a piece of yellow chalk from his pocket and drew the letters *SUB* on the hot asphalt. ”That ought to do it,” he said.

Joe rubbed his hair again, shocked to find it already dry. ”So,” he asked, ”do you still think Lawrence is innocent?”

”I think there's room for doubt,” Frank answered.

Frank and Joe could see the Air Force Academy team preparing their solar array hatch for charging time at half past three. Until then, competitors were free to fix problems, discuss strategy, talk to the press or, in the case of the Mossport and Mitsushomi teams, reach the finish line.

”Well,” Frank said, ”let's get the SUB over here and ready for recharge, okay?”

”Fine,” Joe answered. ”But then can I go get a shower?”

The Hardys walked back toward the SUB,

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where Scott was still talking to one of the officials.

”Don't leave the car alone,” Scott warned, as he and the judge moved toward the officials' tent.

”Don't worry,” Frank assured him. ”Someone will be baby-sitting her every second.”

Frank and Joe reattached the hatch and pushed the SUB toward the chalk marks. Once they were in position, they removed the hatch and sat it on its side facing the sun.

”You may want to angle it up a few more degrees,” Teresa suggested as she and Callie returned with the telemetry data from the SUB van.

Teresa dropped to one knee, squinting as she glanced upward. ”I think we can get a better draw on the sun with a slightly different slant,” she said, helping Joe and Frank adjust the angle of the hatch.

”Now all we have to do is wait for threethirty to hook her up to the batteries,” Teresa said with a quick smile. ”Them's the rules.”

”So, until then, our telemetry crew can tel us what they discovered,” Frank said.

”We ran the numbers three times,” Callie informed them. ”And there just isn't any way that Suntex could have gone the speed they did and end up with an eighty percent reserve.”

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”In that case,” Joe said slowly, ”you're saying Suntex is cheating, right?”

”No,” Teresa corrected him. ”We're just saying we can't figure out how they did it.”

”Can we get out from under the sun for a while?” Joe asked, suddenly dizzy from the heat.

The SUB team members moved to the shade of a nearby tree. They were still talking about battery reserves when they heard the hum of Scott's chair.

”Our captain returns,” Joe commented.

”How's it going, crew?” Scott hailed them. ”I come bearing interesting news and drinks for everyone.”

Scott offered everyone a cold can of GO-GET-EM.

”No, thanks,” Joe said, waving his hands. ”I've had enough of that stuff. Maybe I'll go get a drink of water instead.” He headed for the refreshment tent.

”News about the radio problem?” Frank asked.

”Yes,” Scott confirmed, ”It seems even Barrington is starting to get concerned about the high jinks in this race. He's hired official escorts to be assigned to each team.”

”Are they going to watch over us,” Joe asked as he returned with a paper cup of water in his hand, ”or just watch us?”

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”A better question,” Teresa interjected, ”is *how* are they going to watch, period.”

”We don't have much room in the van,” Callie observed.

”And there sure isn't any room in the car,” Joe joked.

”They'll ride in an additional chase vehicle behind the SUB support van,” Scott told them. ”That way, if there's any trouble and our radios go out again, at least the escorts will be able to communicate with one another.”

”But what's to keep someone from sabotaging their radios as well?” Frank asked.

”Speaking of sabotage,” Scott added, ”the officials said that Suntex's radios maintained perfect working order the entire first leg. In fact, the only problem Suntex has is in their telemetry—the cable that shorted out last night.”

Teresa gawked. ”Are you telling me that with millions of dollars in equipment and some of the best telemetry minds in the world, that team can't fix a simple cable? That doesn't add up.”

”Spoken like a true mathematician,” Scott remarked.

Frank watched his brother gulp down the last two mouthfuls of water from his cup. Beyond Joe, he heard someone cry out near the air force tent and caught a glimpse of some-

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thing moving toward them through the grass— although he couldn't quite make out what it was.

”You'd think these people had never seen a lizard before,” Frank said as the rest of the team turned toward the commotion.

Just then someone shouted, ”Watch out!”

At the same instant Frank got a better look at the ”lizard” he'd been chuckling over.

It was a six-foot-long rattlesnake, and it was slithering right toward them.

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Chapter

**10**

JOE SNATCHED UP the only thing handy—a heavy clipboard Teresa was holding. He raised it over his head, ready to smash it down on the rattler.

Then Lawrence Gonzalez came running toward him, yelling, ”Whoa! Take it easy! That's my snake—Eerie, come here!” Lawrence scooped up the snake, then began to laugh, ”No fangs, see?” He showed them the large, toothless mouth of the snake in his arms. ”Hope he didn't scare you. I was showing him to a cute reporter when he slipped out of my hands. It scared the daylights out of her! I better go back and make sure she's all right. Eerie, you're staying in your cage for the rest of this race.”

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He glanced at Joe, standing frozen with the clipboard. ”Now there's a weapon,” he teased.

Joe slowly lowered the clipboard as Lawrence headed back to the air force tent. ”That guy's a real card,” he said sarcastically. ”Look, would you guys mind if I skipped out to take a nap, and then shower and change?”

”Fine with us,” Scott replied.

Frank watched Joe cross the lot in the direction of the motel office. About twenty yards away, he spotted Mack Wilkinson and Sharon Green standing outside the Suntex tent.

”So it looks like Sharon Green is definitely hanging out with the Suntex team now,” Frank observed to his teammates. ”Doesn't that seem a little odd?”

Scott shrugged. ”It's a good career move for her—she's graduating next spring.” He glanced at Frank. ”We have other concerns. I think you should ask Lawrence about our little radio problem.”

”Glad to,” Frank replied. ”I'd be interested in hearing what he has to say. I'll do it at dinner.”

Scott grinned up at Callie and Teresa. ”You two are off duty, as far as I'm concerned. We'll stay with the SUB.”

”Great,” Teresa responded.

”I could use a shower, too,” Callie said.

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”We'll see you guys for dinner at seven o'clock, okay?”

Frank and Scott watched them go, then moved back into the shade near the SUB watching spectators and reporters mill around the tents. ”Why don't you go ask Lawrence to join us for dinner—that way we'll have him captive.”

Frank rose and took a step toward the air force tent. ”I'll be right—”

He was interrupted by a visitor. ”Gentlemen,” Elton Mossport said, his expression grave. ”I have a warning for you.”

”A warning,” Scott repeated, narrowing his eyes.

Mossport nodded. ”In my ecology work, I've made some odd contacts,” he said. ”So I've caught a rumor that the Del Carlos Indian Reservation plans to protest the race tomorrow.”

”How can a protest affect us?” Scott asked.

”I have it on very good authority that the residents of the reservation, as well as ecology enthusiasts from this area, are upset about Suntex gaining positive press from this race. The people of the reservation have had many run-ins with Suntex over the years. They know, all too well, how little respect Suntex has shown for anything that gets in the way of its oil drilling and exploration. Many of their

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smaller communities have been bought out or pushed out to make way for Suntex oil rigs.”

Frank frowned but said nothing.

”I heard that this was a possibility several days ago, but I've just gotten definite word. So I thought I should warn you and the other teams.”

”I can't imagine the tribe would do anything to harm the cars,” Scott said. ”It sounds as if it's Suntex they're after.”

Mossport glanced from Scott to Frank. ”Anyway,” he said, ”it's in your hands now.”

At about six-thirty Frank headed off to his motel room. The SUB was shrouded under the blue tarp, and the van was parked inside the tent.

During the afternoon Frank and Scott had checked over the SUB thoroughly, then sat with it while it recharged. Frank had gotten Lawrence Gonzalez to promise to join him for dinner, and Scott had spoken with Bill, still in the hospital in El Paso. Fortunately, he was doing okay. The doctors had told him that he'd be released the next day, and Bill was hoping to meet the SUB team in Yuma at the end of the race.

After getting a key at the front office, Frank made his way to his room. He found Joe in the shower. He tried to give him a quick report

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about Mossport's warning, but with the running water Frank wasn't sure his brother caught any of it.

”You hear me, Joe?” he yelled as the bathroom door opened to reveal Joe.

”Chill, Frank,” Joe said. ”I heard. Maybe you need a nap. Mine was great. I dreamed I won the race and—”

Just then someone knocked at their door. It was Callie. Her hair was wet and she held a hair dryer in her hand.

”Can either of you guys fix this?” Callie asked. ”I'm starving and want to get to dinner. But I don't want to go looking like a drowned chicken.”

Frank checked out the dryer and said, ”Sure, it's just a bad connection on the cord. Can I fix it later, though? I really need a shower. Joe will lend you ours.”

Frank handed the hair dryer back to Callie and excused himself to shower. Joe and Callie stood talking in front of the mirror while she used the boys' dryer and Joe put on some cologne.

”I'm so hungry, even that smell can't take away my appetite,” Callie remarked.

”Me, too,” Joe replied, ignoring the comment. ”I can't wait to see what the spread will look like tonight.”

”Just don't stand upwind of me, okay?”

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”Food, food, food.” Frank emerged from his swift shower, toweling his hair with one hand and buttoning a shirt with the other. ”I expect it from Joe. Give him a meal and a girl like Sharon Green to flirt with, and he's happy.”

”I haven't said a word to Sharon Green,” Joe protested.

Frank ran a brush through his damp hair. ”I'll fix the dryer tonight,” he assured Callie.

”Great, because I'll need it tomorrow evening,” she replied. ”I want to look my best for the big final party, and yours doesn't work all that well.”

”Ingrate,” Joe replied.

Grinning, she jerked a thumb at him and headed for the door.

”Hey, you guys should be nice to me,” Joe jokingly complained. ”There I was driving that car and sweating all day long. And what thanks do I get?”

”Thanks.” Frank and Callie said in unison.

”And what did you deduce about the pranks while you were driving the car?” Frank asked.

”I spent a long time going over the stuff that's happened trying to see how it fits together. But before I tell you guys anything, I need food, food, *food!”* Joe screamed as he ran down the walkway toward the restaurant.

Frank and Callie walked arm in arm, reaching the door to the restaurant well after Joe.

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The hostess pointed them in the direction of the banquet room at the rear.

The room was filled with the race teams, along with the officials and press. Schmidt's team was heading back to El Paso and MIT had dropped out, so the crowd was smaller than it had been the night before. Still, the mood was upbeat despite all the strange events that had occurred. Everyone on the Suntex, Air Force, and SUB teams knew they had a chance at winning the race.

As they were waiting in line for the buffet, they overheard Kyle Barrington laughing. He slapped Mack on the back and talked about winning a bet. It seemed Mack had wagered with Barrington that the Suntex car would withstand any wind and stay on course. Barrington had instructed the pilot of his helicopter to buzz the Suntex car to see if it could stay on the road under the force of its draft. Mack didn't look happy, but he gave Barrington a ten-dollar bill to pay off his loss as photographers snapped their photos.

Callie turned to Frank and said, ”So it wasn't an air force chopper. You can cross that prank off your list now.”

As they loaded their plates, Joe spotted Mack Wilkinson moving toward Sharon Green, who'd been sitting alone at one side. He bid Frank and Callie goodbye and headed off to

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join them. Frank and Callie wondered briefly what he was up to as they joined Teresa and Scott, who were sitting on either side of Lawrence.

Lawrence seemed a bit sheepish about the snake and his unauthorized broadcasts on the SUB radio. But he shrugged these off with a boys-will-be-boys attitude. Scott pointed out that the other pranks could have been deadly.

Frank recited the list. ”The Suntex fire, the MIT steering rod, Bill Little's helmet, the tanker accident on the highway ...”

Lawrence interrupted, saying, ”I had no hand in the Suntex short, the MIT steering, or your driver's helmet. And the tanker accident nearly caught *me.* I tried to radio a warning about it to the officials, but no dice. Even the copters and highway patrol cars running interference ahead of us had communications problems. From what I heard, so did Dr. Schmidt's car.”

”Funny thing about those radio problems,” Scott said, reaching into his pocket. ”We found what caused ours.” He held out the shorting device he'd discovered. ”It's a piece of military equipment.”

All eyes at the table were on Lawrence now.

He pushed back his chair and looked down. When he raised his head again, there was a grin on his lips. ”Okay, okay,” he said. ”So I tapped into your radio. But that doesn't make

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me a criminal. It was just a little prank.” He raised his hands in the air. ”I guess I just can't help myself.”

Frank stared at him. ”So why should we believe you about the rest?”

Lawrence got serious again. ”Because I'd never do that kind of stuff. I'd get drummed out of the academy if I did. Someone else is involved—I swear!”

”I believe you,” Frank suddenly said. ”And I hope you'll help us nail whoever is behind this sabotage.”

”You got it,” Lawrence promised, rising from the table. He glanced over to where Sharon Green was sitting with Joe and Mack. The beautiful red-haired girl laughed and patted Mack on the shoulder.

”I wonder what's going on between those two,” Lawrence said. ”Sharon has certainly been Mack's good-luck charm since she started hanging around him. I can't tell you how surprised I was to come in second today.” He smiled crookedly at the SUB team. ”About as surprised as you were, I bet. We both tried the same tactic—running a little slower—expecting our power reserves would beat out the Suntex car, even with its super batteries.” He stared at Sharon. ”She must know something we don't. She likes to win—and on this lap anyway, she sure picked the winning team.”

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Callie looked at Frank and mouthed the words, ”Add her to the suspect list!”

Joe had barged in on Mack and Sharon because he wanted to find out how the Suntex car could blow off enough electricity to top sixty-five miles an hour and still maintain a winning energy reserve. Mack was unwilling to talk shop. He just sat with one arm over the boom box, which was lying on the table between him and Sharon. For once, it was turned off.

”You must really like the Crows,” Joe said, referring to the band whose music had thumped out of Mack's speakers during the race.

Mack shrugged. ”I don't think about them much—I live in the city.”

Sharon laughed, patting Mack on the shoulder. ”He's talking about the *band* called the Crows, silly. You were listening to their music all day!”

”Oh.” Mack glanced at Sharon. ”She picked that tape. Said it was good traveling music.”

”And wasn't it?” Sharon said smugly. ”You came in first. Keep playing it, and you'll sweep this race!”

Joe excused himself and returned to his table to find the group breaking up. Teresa and Scott were going off to work on strategy.

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”It's an early call again tomorrow. Take it easy. And be careful, okay?” Scott warned.

Frank, Joe, Callie, and Lawrence left the restaurant to check on their cars one last time before turning in. As they walked across the parking lot, they noticed a faint green glow coming from the tent housing Mossport's racer.

”What's that light?” Callie asked.

”Maybe Mossport's decided to use atomic energy now,” Lawrence mocked.

Joe laughed at Lawrence's joke—until the glow abruptly flared. A blinding green light seemed to cut right through the tent. A woman screamed.

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Chapter

**11**

FRANK, JOE, CALLIE, AND LAWRENCE rushed to the tent, where they now heard the sounds of a struggle in addition to the screams. They plunged through the opening and stopped dead in their tracks. Kyle Barrington and Elton Mossport were rolling around on the pavement, grappling. Members of Mossport's team were standing around them, horrified.

Barrington tore free and both men lurched to their feet. He threw a wild left, his fist landing a glancing blow to his opponent's chin. As Mossport reeled back, Frank and Lawrence stepped in, each grabbing one of the men. Kyle Barrington broke away from Frank and stalked out of the tent without a word.

”Thanks for breaking that up,” Mossport

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gasped, struggling for breath. ”I don't know how things got so out of hand.”

”Are you all right, Mr. Mossport?” Frank asked. ”Is there anything we can do to help?”

”Like call the police?” Lawrence suggested.

”No, no!” Mossport shouted. ”Any more people and the ritual is ruined!”

”But Mr. Barrington did attack you, didn't he?” Callie asked.

”Kyle Barrington has mocked me for the last time!” Mossport cried, storming off.

As Mossport left his tent, a young blond woman dressed in a green togalike garment started to cry. In a voice full of anguish she said, ”It isn't right for brothers to hate each other. Even if they're only half-brothers, Kyle should find love in his heart for his mother's! other son. And Elton should find it in himself to love his older brother.”

Callie gawked. ”Mossport and Barrington are brothers?” she asked incredulously.

”Yes,” the woman in the toga said. She dried her eyes with the sleeve of her garment, held up a crystal that glowed with an unearthly light, and started chanting. Frank couldn't identify the language, though it sounded vaguely Arabic. The other members of Mossport's support team joined in, holding hands in a circle around the car.

Mossport opened the tent flap and motioned

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for Frank, Joe, Callie, and Lawrence to join him outside. Apparently, he'd regained his breath.

”Our battery reserve was so low after the first leg,” Mossport explained, ”that we need to focus all our energy on the car to absorb the morning light. That's why we're performing this ritual.”

”Ritual?” Lawrence echoed. ”You're doing magic to help your car?”

”The chant comes from an ancient Egyptian healing text. I tried it once during a race in Hawaii to help with a solar panel that kept losing charge.” Mossport shrugged. ”It worked! We use it now whenever we have similar problems.”

”I see,” Joe said blandly.

”Barrington interrupted us, and then mocked us,” Mossport exploded. ”I'm sick of his meddling in my life. I tell you I won't take it anymore!”

Mossport stormed off in the direction of the motel. Frank, Joe, Callie, and Lawrence looked at one another, baffled.

”Talk about mood swings,” Callie remarked.

”Was that weird or what?” Frank asked.

”Well, that's enough fun and games for me for one day.” Lawrence yawned. ”I'm off to find my team and get ready for a five A.M.

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wakeup call.” With that, he walked off toward the air force tent.

Frank looked at Callie. ”It's a pretty night. Want to go for a walk?”

”What I want to do right now is crash,” Callie said. ”What I'm going to do is find Teresa and Scott to see if I can help with the plans for tomorrow.”

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. ”See you in the morning.”

”Just you and me,” Joe said, giving in to a mighty yawn. ”And I know where I want to go.” Together, they checked on the SUB, then headed for the motel.

Joe dropped right into bed as soon as they entered. Frank, however, snapped on several lights at the desk, dug out a tool kit from his bag, and began to attack Callie's hair dryer.

The repair work didn't go easily. Frank muttered as his screwdriver slipped and gashed the tip of his forefinger.

”Why don't you give it up for the night?” Joe asked, watching his brother suck on his injured finger. He sat up in bed. ”Okay, what's up? Every time you get into one of these frenzies it means you're stumped.”

”I just can't deal with another curveball in this case. I can't believe those two are brothers,” Frank said.

”Oh, come on!” Joe shrugged. ”It sure ex-

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plains that nasty little encounter at the first press conference. Brothers have a natural right to gripe at each other.”

Frank smiled in spite of himself. ”It's just that this race seems to attract solar-powered tempers. Sharon Green flies off the handle with Jeff Pelman, Kyle Barrington bites off people's heads. And now Mossport freaks out. The calmest people in this race seem to be the racers from Mitsushomi.”

Joe frowned. ”They've been keeping a very low profile,” he said slowly. ”Maybe we should check them out.”

”Just what we need,” Frank sighed. ”More suspects.” He stretched, stood up, and moved over to lean against the window, staring out.

In the moonlight Frank could see Callie running back toward the motel from the SUB tent. He left the window, headed for the door, and stepped out onto the walkway.

”Whoa!” she said, skidding to a stop in front of him. ”You startled me.”

”What's up?” Frank asked. ”I thought you were with Scott and Teresa.”

”I had an idea,” Callie answered, ”a simple, beautiful idea, and I thought I'd check it out.”

”Want to let me in on it?” Frank asked, coming closer.

”I'll have to tell you tomorrow,” Callie promised, heading for her room.

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Shrugging, Frank returned to his room to find Joe sitting at the desk, tinkering with Callie's hair dryer.

”I'm just doing this in self-defense,” he said. ”The sooner it's done, the sooner the lights go out.”

Frank chuckled as he got ready for bed. ”How did your chat with Mack and Sharon go?”

”I got nothing, except that Sharon has lousy taste in music. That Crows tape Mack's been playing came from her.” Joe shook his head. ”When I tried to talk about the race, I got stonewalled, plain and simple. He's giving no explanations about how he maintained a battery reserve of eighty percent.”

”Maybe that's because he can't give one,” Frank said, pulling back the covers on his bed.

”Even if he got a tow from his support van for part of the way, he couldn't rack up those numbers,” Joe said. ”Take the rate of speed, the conversion factor, and everything else into consideration, and the only way to end with a reserve that big would be to use a gas engine.”

”Lawrence thinks Sharon Green knows something about the Suntex success,” Frank said.

”Oh, Mr. Innocent. Right,” Joe said. ”Hasn't anyone ever told him about people in glass houses not throwing stones? What did

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he have to say for himself about the radio sabotage?”

”He planted the shorting device all right. But he says that's all he did,” Frank said, then frowned. ”He may be a prankster, but the scary stuff, like sawing through MIT's steering shaft, rewiring Bill's helmet—I think that requires someone with a warped mind, someone really over the edge.”

”So who's your candidate?” Joe asked. ”Mossport?”

Frank shook his head. ”Wild mood swings don't make a man guilty.”

Joe laughed. ”Besides, judging from tonight's ritual, he wouldn't stoop to sabotage. He'd put a voodoo curse on the competition.”

”The only way to unmask the saboteur may be to catch him in the act,” Frank said.

”Well, I can tell you, I'm not looking forward to getting into that car in the morning,” Joe said. ”Who knows what can happen?”

”Well, I think Lawrence is on our side,” Frank said.

”I'm glad he has your complete confidence, and I'll remember that if he starts shooting at me tomorrow.” Joe fell onto his bed. ”He's still my choice.”

”My money's on Mossport,” Frank said. ”But I'm not sure.”

”Well, we have two more days to figure this

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thing out,” Joe replied, settling under the covers.

”As long as we keep you alive that long.”

”Good night, Mr. Optimist.” Joe laughed.

”Good night, Joe,” Frank said as he turned out the bedside lamp.

It was time to recharge his body—like the solar car that he drove. As soon as his head, hit the pillow, Joe fell asleep.

For a while, Frank kept thinking, but at last he, too, dozed off.

Darkness washed over him, and he was conscious of nothing—until the bomb blast two hours later that flung him from his bed!

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Chapter

**12**

FRANK FOUND HIMSELF on the floor, coughing. The door to their motel room had been blown off its hinges, and pieces of plaster were drifting down from the ceiling. He and Joe scrambled to the walkway outside the room.

Other people were emerging—members of the teams, race officials, and the press. Frank was relieved to see Callie and Teresa in one piece. Still somewhat dazed, he carefully approached the rooms at the end of the walkway. Joe was at his heels. In the front wall of one of the units, he saw a hole the size of a large car engine.

”This was definitely *not* an accident,” Callie said as she and Teresa caught up to the Hardys.

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”Where's Scott?” Joe asked Teresa.

”Here I am,” Scott answered, driving his wheelchair to the area where the SUB team had converged. They stood together and watched as the motel manager rushed out of the office. He stopped in his tracks when he saw what had happened, then spun around and ran back.

”I bet he's calling the police,” Joe commented.

In just a few minutes two patrol cars pulled into the parking lot, their tires squealing they stopped in front of the damaged rooms.] A handful of officers got out as the manager reappeared on the scene, looking distraught.

”We were lucky,” he explained to the loc chief of police. ”Suntex Corporation had these rooms, but they were in the banquet] room conferring with Mr. Barrington when the blast went off.”

”So you had a whole team in these units?” the chief asked.

”Just about,” the manager replied. ”Except for Miss Green. She'd originally been with another team, so her room was at the far end of the motel.”

”We'll need a complete list of everyone in the race so we can question them,” the chief said.

”Here are our registration records, and I've

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asked the race officials to come up with a list as well,” the manager replied.

”Thanks.” The police chief moved through the crowd, reading people's names aloud and asking them to speak briefly with him in the motel lobby before going back to bed.

The bomb had gone off outside the room where Kyle Barrington was staying. The police chief sent for the Suntex executive, but his deputy returned with one of the racing crew members.

”We wondered what the noise was!” the short, balding Suntex crew member said to the police. ”But Barrington didn't think it was anything important.”

”Where is Mr. Barrington now?” the chief demanded.

”He's still in the banquet room, yelling at the team. My telemetry crew was having trouble getting valid battery reads during the race. We had a bit of a fire last night when a cable shorted. I didn't think there was much damage, but it turns out I was wrong.” The man grimaced. ”So now I'm the *ex-head* of Suntex telemetry, and Barrington is talking about bringing in some college kid. He's breathing down everybody's neck to make sure it'll be fixed before race time tomorrow. As far as I'm

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concerned, it's too bad he wasn't in that room when the explosion happened!”

”Barrington will be along in a moment,” the deputy explained.

Frank and Joe were still waiting for their turn with the police when Barrington burst through the door into the lobby. Immediately several reporters, dressed in robes and pajamas, swarmed around him, asking questions. He was wearing his best smile and oozing charm even though it was the middle of the night.

He spoke with a few of them, then pushed through the crowd and approached the front desk. ”I want to make sure everyone has a warm, soft bed to sleep in tonight,” he told the manager.

The man looked flustered, but said. ”We can handle it. Your Suntex people can take the rooms I reserved for the teams that dropped out.”

”Good,” Barrington barked.

”Mr. Barrington, sir,” the police chief interrupted. ”I need to ask you a few questions.”

”Well, of course,” Barrington answered. ”I'm completely at your disposal.”

”We understood, Mr. Barrington,” the chief continued, ”that your crew was with you in the banquet room at the time of the explosion.”

”That's true,” Barrington replied. ”Every-

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one but my driver/team captain and my new telemetry chief.”

As if on cue, Mack and Sharon Green pushed through the front door, talking to each other in hushed voices. Frank and Joe turned to stare at them as Kyle Barrington rushed toward them with his arms wide open.

”There you are!” he said, glancing over his shoulder at the police and everyone else. ”I was worried sick.”

Sharon smiled smugly. ”We were taking a drive.”

Barrington took her hand. ”I've made the announcement about your taking over the telemetry. You should get right to work on that equipment problem.”

Joe acted as if someone had just whacked him in the head with a hammer. ”Sharon Green is the new head of Suntex telemetry?”

Frank motioned for Joe to be quiet as Barrington put his arms around Sharon and Mack and steered them back toward the door. The chief ran to catch up with him.

”Mr. Barrington,” the chief persisted, ”it looks as if the blast was targeted at you. For your own safety—”

”I appreciate your concern. I'll be back in just a few minutes,” Barrington said over his shoulder. ”First, I want to get Sharon to work.”

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”But, Mr. Barrington,” a reporter called out, ”what do you think happened out there?”

”We'll leave that for the authorities to determine,” he said affably, then left.

It took about another half hour for Frank and Joe to give their statements to the police. They ended up sleeping with Scott that night, because their door couldn't be fixed right then.

”I can't believe that Sharon has officially joined Suntex,” Joe said as they were getting ready to hit the beds. ”I mean, she's been hanging around with Mack—but telemetry chief? What's going on here?”

”She has the ability,” Scott admitted. ”Sharon can handle anything electrical.”

”I've been wondering,” Joe said, frowning. ”None of the other teams seemed to know about the Suntex meeting. Which, of course, leaves a big question. Was the bomb supposed to blow Barrington up?”

Frank nodded. ”Or was it set up purposely to miss him?” he finished for his brother.

Scott rubbed his tired eyes. ”Either way, we're not going to find out tonight. And thanks to that bomb, we've got only a few hours left to sleep.”

”Don't remind me,” Joe groaned, yawning. They turned out the light and tried to reclaim a few hours of precious recharge time.

\* \* \*

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As dawn broke over the Burro Mountains to the east, Frank, Scott, and Joe packed up. They had a quick breakfast with Teresa and Callie, then made their way to the SUB tent by six A.M. to get in their morning recharge time prior to the nine o'clock start.

At a quarter to eight, Joe attended his drivers' meeting. He arrived back around eight-thirty to report to the SUB crew.

”Well,” Joe said, ”the drivers get the best doughnuts, that's for sure. There must have been over thirty different kinds.”

”Did the police show up at the meeting?” Frank asked impatiently.

”No, they must have their own doughnuts,” Joe kidded.

”Why do all drivers turn out to be clowns?” Scott wanted to know.

”Maybe those helmets are too tight for their heads,” Callie suggested.

”All right, I'll be serious. There were no cops at the meeting, and no Mack—until the very end.”

”What did the officials say?” Scott asked.

”In summary, that we need to be careful.” Joe shrugged. ”They told us that things are getting dangerous and they're doing everything they can to keep us safe. But they can't prevent every problem—which sounds like an understatement, considering their track record.”

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A small crowd had gathered at the starting area for that day's leg of the race. Joe waved to the crowd after the recharge and climbed into the hammock. ”Let's get going,” he announced. ”I've got a race to win and a mystery to solve—in that order, I think.”

The Hardys had gone over the racer with a fine-tooth comb. Teresa and Callie triplechecked their readouts after hearing of the Suntex telemetry problems.

”Could they really overhaul their computers overnight?” Teresa wondered. The SUB backup team was ensconced in the van now, and Joe was waiting in the racer, preparing his GO-GET-EM supply for the day.

”And if they were really having telemetry trouble, how could they have possibly ended up with an eighty percent reserve yesterday?” he said over the radio.

No one had an answer for him. Instead, the air filled with the sound of whipping helicopter rotors as the three copters accompanying the racers took off. Two highway patrol cruisers had already headed out to clear the road ahead for the Solar Challenge cars.

”Is that our official observation car?” Callie asked as she watched a blue sedan pull up behind the van.

”You got it,” Scott replied.

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”Wonder if they'll be able to keep up with us,” Frank cracked.

The race began with the Suntex car in the lead. The Air Force Academy's Mission Ray started second, followed by the SUB. Following up the front-runners were the Mitsushomi vehicle and Mossport's.

Scott asked Joe to take the lead if he could manage it. ”The traffic around Tucson may be a little heavy, so watch out. Because we're covering about forty miles more than yesterday, we'll be taking a two-hour lunch break just west of there. Then we'll take off for Casa Grande for the night.”

The race began as it had the previous day, each car's starting time staggered by five minutes. Joe gave one last wave to the crowd as the checkered flag dropped, then punched the SUB's accelerator pedal, remembering to keep a tight grip on the steering while the car sped up. Within a few minutes he was up to speed and cruising along the interstate, the pavement flashing beneath him.

On the outskirts of the town of Willcox, Arizona, Scott's voice boomed over the radio. ”Lawrence's observation vehicle spotted a dust devil at three o'clock, about two hundred yards from the road. Be careful. Those things are like minitornadoes. They can pick up a light-

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weight car and flick it across a mesa like a matchstick.”

Joe turned to the right and saw a funnel of wind and sand. It was nearing the shoulder of the interstate, spewing so much dust he could barely see beyond it. His heart beat furiously as he approached it. Instinctively, he veered to the left just as the whirling maelstrom spun toward the middle of the road. Sand pattered against the SUB as it darted by.

Miraculously, the car wasn't blown off the road. Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

”Thanks for the warning, Scott,” he said into the microphone.

”Just doing my job,” the SUB captain replied.

Between Willcox and Tucson, Lawrence's car fell behind, giving Joe an easy shot at passing it. From there on, he and Mack were neck and neck. They crossed the line at the highway rest area on the western edge of Tucson, where they were to stop for lunch at the same time, each clocking in at sixty miles an hour.

Joe felt great, especially when he learned that the Suntex battery was at seventy-five percent, while the SUB was at seventy-eight. The SUB team had won the first part of the day, with Suntex coming in second. The air force team was a close third, and the Mitsushomi

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team was fourth. Mossport's car had yet to arrive.

Lunch was served from a refreshment truck. The SUB team claimed a picnic table in the shade and sat down. ”I'd like to propose a little toast.” Joe's face was flushed as he raised a container of GO-GET-EM. ”We started this race as a small team from Bayport without much money behind us. But we've got a shot at coming out stars. Not only are we in contention, we've won a leg, people!”

They clinked drinks. ”You're doing fine, Joe,” Scott said. ”There were a couple of hairy situations out there in the heavier traffic, but you've been driving so well that we could actually win.”

They devoured the simple lunch of sandwiches and chips, laughing at the difference between the lavish Suntex dinners, when the reporters were around and what the racers were fed away from the public eye.

Joe told Frank, ”I was so close to Mack, I could hear him breathe.”

As their excitement subsided, the team members began to discuss their strategy for the next leg through the Picacho Mountains.

”The terrain will block your sunlight, so conservation will be important,” Teresa warned. ”I suggest we keep the speed at forty miles per hour, tops.”

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”Can you keep her reined that tight, Joe?” Scott asked.

”Right now, I feel like I can do anything, Cap'n,” Joe replied.

The two-hour lunch allowed many of the crew members to catch quick catnaps. Frank, Joe, and Callie spread out the SUB's blue tarp on a grassy area near the picnic table and were relaxing under the shade of an old mesquite tree.

”What were you up to last night?” Frank asked Callie.

”I was checking out an idea I had,” Callie replied.

”And what was that idea?” Joe prodded.

”I wondered what kind of reserve the twelve-volt battery in our van had left last night,” Callie answered.

”And how does this fit into our puzzle?” Joe asked.

”I'm still working on it,” Callie answered.

The time came for the second leg to begin, and Joe wore the victor's smile all the way to the starting line. Because the SUB had come in first that morning, he got to leave first, followed by Suntex, Air Force, Mitsushomi, and Mossport, in that order.

Before he hopped into the car, he noticed Taka Yoshida, captain of the Mitsushomi team, conferring with his driver. The two men didn't

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look pleased. Given their standings, Joe could understand why.

Just then, the flag was waved, and he stepped on the accelerator, steering the SUB back onto the highway. Traffic was sparse as the terrain got rough and the cars headed into the mountains. Then Joe saw thick clouds of smoke gathered on either side of the road. Near them, people held up banners bearing slogans decrying the destruction of the land by Suntex Corporation.

”Where there's smoke, there's fire,” Frank's voice came through Joe's earphones.

”Looks like Mossport wasn't exaggerating,” Scott exclaimed. ”This must be the Del Carlos protest.”

The residents of the reservation and a few ecology warriors had built bonfires up and down the pass. Federal marshals and fire fighters were also on hand, trying to put out the flames. But they weren't having much success.

”The smoke's going to create a big drain on energy reserves,” Scott commented.

As the cars cleared the smoke-filled pass, Teresa's voice came over the radio. ”We've got a long downhill slope to Casa Grande. That means the coefficient of drag rating will be the make-it or break-it element in winning today's leg.”

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”You mean how well the car cuts through the air?” Joe asked.

”Right,” Teresa replied. ”The SUB's coefficient of drag is very low. We should be able to gain some time here.”

The Suntex car had passed Joe in the smoky haze of the pass, but he could still hear Mack's boom box blaring. The Crows were thumping away.

”What do you think?” Joe wondered out loud. ”Does the music help him drive faster? Or is it a good-luck thing?” He shrugged in his hammock. ”Maybe we have a chance on a downhill race. Want me to switch on the regenerative braking?”

”Ye—” Teresa began.

”Whoa!” Frank cried out. ”Better watch out, Joe. Lawrence just tore around us like a horse out of a burning barn. Who knows where he left his support van and observation vehicle.” Frank shook his head as Lawrence gave him a thumbs-up sign before completing his pass.

”He's just burning up his reserve,” Joe replied knowingly. As he spoke he noticed a shimmy in his right front tire and prayed it wasn't a flat in the making. The events of the race kept running through his mind. Was there a progression here? Pranks, more blatant sabotage, then the bomb? Things kept getting more

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dangerous. Even though the SUB team was doing well, Joe felt uneasy about what lay ahead.

He tried to imagine what might happen hi the next leg, or even just tonight, when his thoughts were shattered by the violent screech of car tires behind him.

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Chapter

13

JOE'S EYES WHIPPED UP to the rearview mirror just in time to see Lawrence's Mission Ray get sideswiped by a late-model green van. The van banged into the air force racer, forcing it dangerously close to the center line.

Joe could tell that Lawrence was struggling with the wheel. Just then, the van veered off the highway, bouncing onto the access road and then off to the north. Hard as he tried, Joe couldn't see the driver through the van's tinted windshield.

”Hey, guys!” he said into the microphone. ”Did you see that?”

”Sure did,” Frank replied. ”Even got the license number. Callie wrote it down.”

”Looks like Lawrence is all right,” Scott said

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with relief. ”But that was awful. Plain sabotage. If you ask me, this race is getting out of hand.”

Moments later Joe pulled up to the official finish line. The end of the second leg was another motel parking lot at the edge of town, just a mile or so beyond the site of Lawrence's near miss.

The SUB's batteries were at sixty percent, but Joe felt confident he'd do well, considering the breakneck pace Mack had set in the pass.

Lawrence crossed the line next, followed by the SUB crew, the air force support van, and observation cars. Both teams got out of their vehicles. Lawrence, sporting a few bruises and cuts from his jouncing around, approached the officials and told them of his mishap.

”You know how they say you never even notice the one with your name on it?” Lawrence winced as a member of his crew applied disinfectant to a cut. ”That van just came out of nowhere. One moment I'm driving along, the next she's on top of me.”

”We saw what went down,” Frank said. ”It seemed like the van just waited on the shoulder for the right moment to pull out.”

”And the right moment was when I came into view.” Lawrence gingerly tested a bruise. ”Maybe she just wasn't thinking—”

”I can hardly believe that,” Frank cut in.

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”The whole thing looked intentional to me. I'd say we've got a new addition to the list of pranks and sabotage.”

”Why do you keep referring to the van as 'she'?” Joe asked.

Lawrence turned to him, perplexed. ”I do?” He shrugged. ”Look, I've got to get back to my car.” His voice was tense with worry. ”It looks okay from the outside, but I don't know— that was quite a bump we got.”

After he left, Scott and Callie stayed with the SUB while Teresa scoped out a recharge site for the afternoon. Frank and Joe went in search of a highway patrol officer to report the license number of the van,

”You're sure it was an Arizona plate?” the man said after calling in the number to headquarters. ”I'm afraid our computers are down right now. We won't be able to track the owner until some time later.”

”More computer problems!” Frank gasped in frustration.

A voice sounded through a bullhorn.

”Attention, this is Kyle Barrington speakingSuntex has been announced as the winner of today's race!”

The Hardys jerked around as the voice went on. ”The press is invited to the air-conditioned Suntex tent for refreshments and interviews.”

Frank and Joe rushed to the officials' tent.

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There they learned that the SUB had come in second, with Lawrence third, and that the Suntex battery reserve was listed at seventy-eight percent. ”That's *impossible,”* Joe said flatly. ”We really have to find out how Mack's getting those numbers.”

As Frank, Teresa, and Joe set up the solar array for recharge, they brainstormed with Callie and Scott. ”Somebody's got to get close enough to Suntex to find out how they're pulling in such high battery reserves,” Joe complained.

”Suppose I give it a shot?” Callie offered.

”Callie Shaw, femme fatale,” Joe teased.

”How about talking to their ex-telemetry chief?” Scott suggested. ”He didn't seem afraid to speak his mind about Barrington—or anything else.”

”Let me escort you, Mata Hari,” Frank suggested as she headed toward the big green Suntex tent.

”No need,” she said over her shoulder.

Ten minutes later she was back. ”I found him,” she reported victoriously. ”His name's Guy Riley, and he's really nice—but pretty bitter about getting demoted.”

”So he *wasn't* fired,” Frank said.

”No, but now he's a go-fer for Sharon Green,” she explained. ”I bet Barrington is

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keeping him on the team to try to keep his mouth shut.”

”Did he tell you anything?” Joe asked eagerly.

Callie shook her head. ”According to Guy, he got replaced because the telemetry kept going haywire. He said the readouts would be fine one minute, then just explode with energy. Guy couldn't figure out why it was happening. At first he thought it had something to do with the cable fire the first night, but afterward it seemed to him that everything checked out. He talked to Mack, but couldn't get much more than loud music out of him.” Callie grinned. ”According to Guy, the Suntex crew really hates that boom box—except for Sharon, that is.”

”So, is their telemetry fixed now?” Frank asked.

”According to Sharon it is,” Callie answered. ”But Guy says he wouldn't know because she's not letting anyone else near it.”

”You know,” Joe said, ”I think I'll go congratulate Mack. Maybe I can pump him a little while I'm at it.”

He found the Suntex team captain and driver just outside the company's tent. Mack was talking excitedly into a cellular phone.

”Have you gone nuts?” Mack hissed into the

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phone. ”I just heard—you can't pull any more of these tricks! Just stay put!”

Mack caught a glimpse of Joe and turned, smiling. His voice was much smoother as he said, ”Sure, just let me know when and I'll be there. Look, I've got company now. So long!”

Mack put away the phone and walked toward Joe with an outstretched hand.

”Good racing today, Hardy,” Mack said, glancing around for any other unwanted visitors.

”I'll say,” Joe answered, shaking Mack's hand. ”I don't know how you pulled it out.”

Joe looked around for Sharon and the boom box, Mack's two constant companions. They were nowhere to be seen. Mack took advantage of that momentary lapse in the conversation to walk away. Joe stared after him. What was this guy hiding?

That afternoon a big bank of clouds moved in, forcing the SUB team to recharge their car in spotty sunlight. The SUB's batteries got considerably less juice than usual by the time the officials arrived to wrap it up for the day. Joe managed a reasonable smile in response to the judges' congratulations on coming in second. Then he and the others headed for the motel across the parking lot.

The hum of Scott's wheelchair reminded Joe of the racer's engine as the team—hot, sweaty,

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and exhausted, from lack of sleep—moved toward the air-conditioned oasis ahead.

”We'll meet back in the lobby in an hour,” Scott said.

Everyone saluted, then headed to their rooms. Both Hardys were deep in thought as they changed clothes after their showers. When they met the rest of the SUB team in the lobby, Scott decided that he and Teresa should eat in the tent. ”Just to be safe,” he said. He sent Joe, Frank, and Callie to fetch their dinners.

As they walked down the corridor to the restaurant, Joe spoke up, ”Do you still think Lawrence is behind all this?”

”No,” Joe answered, simply.

”Do you have a new candidate?”

”I might,” Joe replied. ”But I have until tomorrow to prove it, right? I mean, our culprit could still be caught in the act during the last leg.”

”I'm pretty suspicious of Mossport,” Frank speculated. ”The fact that he's Barrington's half-brother is pretty weird.”

They paused near the door to the restaurant. ”Maybe I'll try to find Mossport before dinner—you know, have a little chat,” Frank went on.

”Good idea,” Joe replied. ”Meanwhile, I think I'll track down that highway officer to

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see if he's got any information on the license number of that van yet.”

Both brothers looked at Callie, but she only smiled. ”Stop staring at me, you two. I'm still tinkering with my theory. But I could use a little extra time to work on it.”

They decided to meet back at the SUB tent in a half hour to compare notes before they ate. Callie went to get the food for Teresa and Scott.

Frank sought out Mossport. There might be a motive in the fact that he clearly hated Barrington, he thought. That might explain the Suntex fire and the bomb outside Barrington's room. But then, where did the pranks and sabotage fit in? It wasn't as though Mossport's car was even in the running. He'd consistently come in last. Short of blowing up all the cars, he didn't even have a chance. Unless, Frank thought, the attacks on the other teams were just intended to distract everyone from the main thrust at Barrington.

Frank remembered the toga-clad woman from the night before. She'd seemed very upset at the brothers' brawl. But what if she came down on Mossport's side? Or had decided that winning the race was a better revenge? That could explain who'd been driving the van.

Frank knocked on the door of Mossport's

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room, but there was no answer. Then he decided to check outside by the tents.

”Don't bother tracking down the green team,” said a bored-looking reporter sprawled out on the grass by the lot. ”They haven't even made it in yet. Must be bad vibes in Casa Grande.”

Joe was walking through the restaurant toward the banquet room beyond when an unpleasant possibility hit him. He'd struck Lawrence off the suspect list, but what if the incident with the van was a setup, something to get him off Lawrence's tail? Lawrence kept referring to the driver as ”she,” although he claimed not to have seen anything. It could be that Lawrence knew more than he was saying, or even that he was lying.

Just then he spotted the officer in a small group around the buffet coffee stand. He'd been afraid the man had gone off duty, but apparently not.

”Hi, Officer,” Joe said.

”The man smiled. ”You're the fella who gave me the license in that sideswipe case.”

Joe nodded. ”Anything on it yet?”

”Strangest thing,” the officer said. ”Our whole computer system has gone out of whack. The boss thinks one of those hackers got into the system trying to erase his bad driving rec-

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ord or something. Anyway, I won't have squat on those plates until tomorrow sometime.”

Both brothers arrived at the rendezvous feeling only more confused. But Callie appeared,, smiling like the cat that swallowed the canary. ”How's it going, guys?”

”My theory still isn't firm,” Frank admitted.

”And mine hasn't gelled,” Joe joked.

”How about yours, Callie?” Frank asked.

”My theory is alive and very well, thank you. Now how about dinner?” She led the way from the SUB tent jauntily.

”Come on, Callie,” Joe said. ”Let us in on it.”

”Okay,” Callie said, as they approached the Mitsushomi tent, ”the saboteur is—”

Her words were cut off as a figure burst from the tent and fled into the twilight.

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Chapter

**14**

JOE RAN AFTER THE PERSON but tripped and lost whoever it was in the gathering shadows. He returned to find Callie and Frank with a security guard. ”Can't let anybody inside until the team gets here,” the guard said, blocking the tent entrance. Frank gave a small exclamation as he bent to pick up a tiny green crystal off the ground.

”Look familiar?” he asked, showing his find to Callie and Joe. ”This looks like the same kind of crystal Mossport used in his ceremony.”

”So,” Callie suggested, ”maybe the toga lady dropped it.”

”Exactly,” Frank exclaimed, as he put the crystal safely in his pocket.

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”You don't think Mossport and his bunch are responsible for the troubles?” Joe inquired.

”You have a better suspect?” Frank responded.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Taka Yoshida and his teammates, speaking excitedly in Japanese. They disappeared into the tent, and the noise level quickly rose. But none of the Mitsushomi team came out.

”I think we've done everything we can around here,” Callie finally said.

”Yeah,” Joe agreed. ”We can talk to the Japanese later. Let's eat!”

”Why not?” Frank said. ”The guard knows who we are if anyone has questions, and I'm starving!”

They told the guard where they'd be, then headed for the main meeting room of the motel, where a lavish spread was waiting for them. As they settled down at a table, Frank turned to Callie. ”Now, after being so rudely interrupted, you were going to tell us who 'dunnit.' ”

”I have every reason to believe the culprit behind these events is on the Suntex team,” Callie informed the boys. ”None other than Kyle Barrington himself.”

Frank's eyebrows rose and Joe choked on his food. Callie went on. ”Only Suntex has the equipment, money, and personnel to pull off

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the events of the past few days. They've made a major public relations push with this race. They've got the most to lose if they don't come in first.”

”So you think Kyle Barrington bombed his own room and sabotaged his own telemetry system to win the race?” Joe questioned.

Callie shrugged. ”Everybody else suffered problems with their cars or drivers. Suntex had a nonfatal telemetry glitch. And don't you find it interesting that the whole Suntex team just happened to be absent when the bomb went off?”

”But Suntex can buy whatever design wins, so Barrington will come out on top no matter what, right?” Frank asked.

”You are trying to confuse me,” Callie complained, ”but I believe I'm on the right track.”

”Let's check in with Teresa and Scott,” Frank suggested. ”I want to tell them about what happened at the Mitsushomi tent. Then we should see what's up with the Japanese. If the person we saw there committed another act of sabotage, the Mitsushomi team should know by now.”

”Right,” Joe said, yawning. ”Then I think I'll call it a night.”

After reporting to their teammates, the Hardys and Callie stopped by the Mitsushomi tent. The scene was hectic, with team members hud-

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died around their racer. Frank tried to get Taka Yoshida's attention, but no luck. Figuring they'd find out what had happened the next day, the threesome moved on, stopping at the door to Callie's room.

”Want us to check for bombs or anything?” Joe asked.

Frank gave his brother a dirty look. Callie would be sleeping alone that night, since Teresa was staying on guard with Scott in the SUB tent.

”I just thought, after she'd unmasked Barrington's guilty secret—” Joe teased.

”Leave her alone, you lunkhead,” Frank said, then kissed Callie lightly. ”See you in the morning,” he went on.

When the Hardys got back to their room, they were happy to see their beds. After the last couple of days, they were close to total exhaustion.

”Well,” Frank said. ”Tomorrow's the last day of the race.”

”Right,” Joe grumbled as he pulled back the covers on his bed, ”and tomorrow I figure out how to win it.”

”We might be better off concentrating on whoever's trying to screw up the race,” Frank said. ”I hate to say it, Joe, but it looks as if Suntex has this competition in the bag.”

”They have the lead,” Joe corrected. ”They

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haven't won the race yet.” He frowned. ”Remind me in the morning to check the tires. I think one is going flat.”

”A flat tire would be the least of our concerns,” Frank said. ”I'd worry about someone sideswiping the SUB *if I* were you.”

”Could it have been a woman driving that van?” Joe suddenly asked.

”You mean because Lawrence keeps using the word *she?”* Frank shook his head. ”He says he didn't really see anyone, but maybe he had a subconscious peek.”

With that, Joe rolled over and drew the covers over his head.

Just before Frank got into bed, he retrieved the crystal he'd picked up outside the Mitsushomi tent from his pants pocket. For a minute, he held it up to the light and watched it gleam.

The last leg of the race was on U.S. Highway

8 between Casa Grande and Yuma—more than a hundred and sixty miles. It would take them approximately three and a half hours to complete it. Almost as soon as the SUB crew had assembled at their tent, John Savriano, the race official they'd talked with the day before, stopped to tell them more bad news. As it turned out, the sideswiper had done real dam-

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age to the air force car. Mission Ray had a fatal body crack and was leaving the race.

”That's terrible,” Callie cried.

”There goes your suspect, Joe,” Frank said gloomily.

”I guess so,” Joe replied, clearly puzzled. ”If I see Lawrence, I'm going to tell him how sorry I am. This is really rotten luck.”

The SUB team got down to work. Because the afternoon sun had been blocked by clouds the day before, the morning recharge was extra important.

Support crews repositioned their cars to get the best rays of the morning light, and tempers ran high. One of the crew members from Mossport's team accused Joe of purposefully blocking their array—just by walking past on his way to the drivers' meeting.

At eight-thirty, Scott called Callie and Frank away from their tasks to show them something special.

”This is my talisman,” Scott said, pulling a chain from around his neck. At the end was a small car carved in ebony. ”I had this with me when I survived the wreck with my parents. My dad was a race car driver, and he knew his stuff. But he didn't know how to handle a drunk driver plowing straight into his family's automobile at eighty miles an hour. I was just

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ten years old, and this baby was what saved me.”

He tucked the charm back in his shirt and went on, ”When I grew up, I swore that I'd devote myself to making a difference in the way we approach driving. That's why I'm here now. I may act like this race is no big deal, but it's important to me. We're close, and we've got only a few hours to make this race ours.” He smiled broadly and thumped Frank on the back.

”Of course, there's one thing my little talisman can't do for us—drive this car! I want Joe out of the drivers' meeting as soon as possible,” Scott told Frank, Callie, and Teresa. ”This is no time for eating doughnuts. Go get him for me, okay, guys?”

As Frank and Callie passed the Mitsushomi support van, they found the crew moving around like zombies. Taka Yoshida stood talking to one of the officials. It seemed that something had gone horribly wrong with their computer, and they'd been up all night trying to fix it. Apparently, they hadn't been successful, which meant that they, too, were out of the race.

Taka Yoshida turned desperately to Frank as he passed. ”You seen green?” he asked in a heavily accented voice.

Callie and Frank exchanged glances, trying

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to understand what he was asking for. ”You mean this?” Frank took the small green crystal he'd found the night before out of his pocket and held it out to the Japanese team captain.

Taka acted confused, but then continued, ”You were the ones outside our tent last night?” Taka asked. ”You saw someone inside?”

”We saw someone run out of the tent and reported it,” Frank said.

”Man or woman?” Taka asked.

”That's hard to say,” Frank said. ”I found this near the entrance to your tent. It looks like the crystals I've seen the Mossport crew carry. Some people call them the green team.”

Taka shook his head in frustration. ”No, no,” he said. ”Green I want is Sharon Green. I work with her last year, using same kind of computers. She could fix, I'm sure.”

”I haven't seen her—” Frank paused, trying to remember the last time he'd seen Sharon Green. ”I guess it was after the bombing the night before last. But I'm sure Mack Wilkinson would know where she is.”

”Is your computer problem because of the person who was in your tent?” Callie asked. ”Was it sabotage?”

Taka didn't answer. He was already running off toward the Suntex compound in search of Sharon Green.

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Frank studied the crystal in his palm. ”I'm going to show this to Mossport and ask him what went on at the Mitsushomi tent last night!” He turned to Callie. ”Want to come?”

”I'm with you,” Callie answered. ”Anyway, I just saw Joe headed toward the SUB.”

As Frank and Callie approached the Mossport area, they noticed small green crystals positioned all over the racer as it recharged in the sun. They were on the hood, the windshield, even the solar array. The support team stood in a circle around the car, chanting.

Guy Riley, the red-haired Suntex crew member, stopped to stare, too. ”You know you're blocking your power consumption with those crystals,” he said.

”We are directing the car's inner light,” the woman in the toga responded.

”You'd be better off if your car had an inner generator,” he shot over his shoulder.

She ignored his comment.

Frank went up to her and asked, ”Where's your captain?”

”He was talking to a race official the last time I knew,” she replied.

It occurred to Frank that he might get more out of this woman than Mossport. Pulling the crystal he'd found the night before out of his pocket, he said, ”You recognize this?”

The woman moved closer and inspected it.

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”It doesn't look like one of ours. Not with that gold fitting on it—it must have been attached to a chain. Where did it come from?” ”Oh,” Frank said vaguely, ”I found it—” At that moment Mack Wilkinson walked by. When he saw Frank and the woman on the green team, he stopped dead in his tracks, his face blanching as if he'd seen a ghost.

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Chapter

**15**

FRANK MOVED toward the captain of the Suntex team. As he did, Mack turned on his boom box and walked away.

”What's his problem?” Callie asked Frank as Mack disappeared into the Suntex tent.

”I don't know,” Frank replied. ”But I get the feeling he doesn't like us.”

”Weird,” Callie said. ”You know, that boom box just doesn't fit. And he's playing the Crows again. Remember Joe telling us that Mack didn't really even know who they were?”

”He takes that thing along when he drives,” Frank added. Suddenly he blinked. ”What if the boom box has something to do with Suntex's unbelievable performance?”

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”How—sound power?” Callie questioned. ”It's not big enough to hold much battery power. And it obviously works like a real boom box.”

”What if he—” Frank was cut off by Scott.

”Come on, you two,” Scott shouted. ”Let's get this race going! You can chitchat later.”

With a shrug, Callie and Frank resumed their duties. Once the morning's recharge was completed, the drivers prepared for the last leg of the race. Teresa, Scott, and Callie inspected all the equipment, especially the computers, for problems.

”Your talisman must really be a lucky charm,” Teresa told Scott. ”We've escaped the computer doom that's hit everyone else!”

”What is Joe doing with the tires?” Scott asked. ”He's checked them four times now.”

”He was worried about a flat,” Frank explained.

”Joe,” Scott said, ”leave the tires alone and come over here so we can talk strategy.”

The team began to discuss their plans for the final leg of the race. It could be described in one word—speed. They were only three and a half hours from the finish. If they kept the SUB at a straight sixty-five, they would be able to maintain battery reserve and hopefully stay in a lead position.

Frank noticed a bank of dark blue storm

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clouds gathering. ”I don't like the looks of the sky,” he said. The team members all turned to see the northwestern sky turn purple and green.

”I bet that's what people down here call a great blue northern,” Teresa replied. ”I read about them when I was programming the weather components into the telemetry system.”

”What's so 'great' about them?” Scott tried to joke.

”They can mean major problems. When they come, the temperature can drop twenty degrees in ten minutes. Sometimes they bring thirty- and forty-mile-an-hour winds. You can wind up with tornadoes and hail.” She peered up at a bank of greenish clouds. ”I'd say that looks like hail.”

Scott looked sick. ”Then we'll have to outrun the storm. The SUB's solar array will never survive a bombardment of hailstones!”

The team turned to the weather radio station. Teresa was right, a possible hailstorm was predicted. Speeding ahead of the storm became a necessary strategy for the SUB's survival.

As the race began, Frank and Callie noticed Kyle Barrington pacing outside the Suntex support van. Guy Riley was talking to him and

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gesturing wildly. As Harrington stomped off, Frank and Callie exchanged looks.

”What do you think that was all about?” Callie wondered.

”More troubles in paradise,” Frank said.

”Maybe Barrington is concerned about the storm ruining the press coverage for the race.” Callie suggested.

”Well, he's probably not worrying about his car outrunning the storm,” Frank said. ”So far, Suntex has racked up the fastest speeds.”

”I don't know if any of us can run away from that storm.” Callie cast a worried glance toward the sky. ”It looks more like we'll be driving into it.”

The Suntex car was first. Before it blasted off, Barrington spoke into his bullhorn. ”This is it, folks—the last leg of the Suntex Solar Challenge. We've had some troubles along the way, but I want you all to know that we're going to check into everything. Unfortunately, Air Force and Mitsushomi have had to drop out, but we'll see them at the party in Yuma. Meanwhile, we've still got three strong competitors—Suntex, the green team, and the SUB. There's dangerous weather up ahead, so I want everyone to be careful. Now—on with the show!”

The checkered flag dropped, and the Suntex car headed onto the ramp that led to the high-

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way. The three copters took off immediately afterward.

”Break a leg,” Callie said as Joe slid into the SUB.

”That goes double for me,” Frank added, snapping down the hatch with Callie.

Joe gave them a thumbs-up sign through the windshield. When his flag went down, he took off for Yuma.

Five minutes later Mossport had a slow start in third position.

The road for this leg of the race snaked through the mesas and valleys, alongside huge cactus and strange, exotic desert flowers. As the weather worsened, the canyons became wind tunnels. About an hour into the race, Joe found himself approaching a dangerous curve while fighting forty-five-mile-an-hour winds. He adjusted his speed so he could steer into the wind. A little later, however, he got a radio report of disaster. Mossport's driver hadn't reacted as quickly. The ecology car had been blown off the highway, bending a tire rim.

”So, big green is down,” Joe said into his mike. ”Does this mean Mossport is not our master of disaster?”

”Looks like it,” Frank replied.

Joe could see the gleaming gold of the Suntex car and support van up ahead. He knew this was his shot for glory, and he was ready

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and able to meet the challenge. The SUB support crew agreed that it was now or never.

Joe accelerated to pass the Suntex car. They'd had a decent recharge that morning—the sun had been bright before the clouds gathered. So, with a burst of speed—and a strong tailwind pushing him down the valley—Joe swooped into first place with no battery drain, even while hitting sixty-five. He felt the power of the light automobile and realized he could win. As he imagined the hero's welcome he was about to receive in Yuma, he heard Mack's boom box beginning to blare the heavy bass-driven noise of the Crows.

”Uh-oh,” Joe reported into his mike, ”I'm getting a concert from Mack again.”

Suddenly the Suntex car burst forward, easily passing Joe.

”How can he do that?” Joe asked over the radio.

”Maybe Mossport's people used the wrong magic,” Callie suggested. ”They should have gone for noise, not crystals.”

”Or maybe,” Scott said, ”that blasted boom box is his talisman.”

They were brushing the edge of the storm now, and heavy rain began to fall. The sealant Joe had applied to the windshield was repelling the water, but the SUB's wiper was hand-operated.

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Winds began to lash at the vehicle, and the chill Joe felt wasn't all because of falling temperatures. He and the SUB were in deadly danger. One good gust could easily blow the ultralight car off the road, as the dust devil had almost done the day before.

At least I was able to watch out for the dust devil, Joe thought. It won't be so easy to anticipate the wind. To push his thoughts away, he began reviewing the events of the previous two days with Frank.

”Okay,” Joe began. ”In the beginning there was Mossport and Barrington.”

”Then came that awful fight between Sharon Green and Jeff Pelman,” Callie added. ”Talk about a breakup! I thought she was going to kill Jeff.”

”What did she say? Something about finding a team captain who'd win the way she wanted?” Frank said.

”Whatever,” Joe interrupted. ”Then came the short in the Suntex telemetry cable. That was followed by Dr. Schmidt's daughter getting our key—”

”That was an accident,” Frank commented.

”Then the MIT crash, and the sabotage of Bill's helmet. By the way, have we heard anything from old Bill lately?” Joe asked.

”He called from the airport,” Scott answered.

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”He's up and around, and will meet us in Yuma—if his plane makes it.”

”He'll make it,” Joe said. ”Now, where was I?”

”You were driving the car in a dangerous storm,” Teresa pointed out, ”and you weren't paying attention to the road.”

”Joe's nervous,” Callie explained. ”He often rambles when he wants to clear his head.”

”Okay, Joe, continue our trip down memory lane,” Frank said.

”Then the Suntex car got blown off the road by Barrington for a bet, followed by the afternoon of dead radios and Dr. Schmidt's crash. And somewhere in between Lawrence barged onto our band. Next we had the fight between Barrington and Mossport, the bombing, and Lawrence's close encounter of the van kind, the Mitsushomi computer problem, and—then what?”

”And then you were trying to drive the SUB through a dangerous storm,” Teresa repeated, ”and you weren't paying attention to the road.”

”Don't forget about the green crystal,” Frank said. ”It may be important.”

”To someone,” Joe replied. The rain seemed to come straight at him now, as if someone had aimed a hose at his windshield.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and Joe hun-

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kered down to drive. Fragments of the conversation ran through his mind: the boom box, the green crystal, Sharon Green's anger—

He smiled. If you could harness her energy, you wouldn't need solar power, wouldn't need electricity

The world disappeared in a blaze as a lightning bolt struck!

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Chapter

**16**

THE FLASH BLINDED JOE, and the SUB swerved. Red and yellow afterimages danced in Joe's retinas as he got the racer under control. The bolt had struck just a few feet from the shoulder of the road, hitting a huge cactus.

The radio crackled, more staticky than usual thanks to the electrical storm. ”Joe!” Frank yelled, ”are you all right?”

”I'm fine,” Joe replied. ”The lightning missed.”

”How does that AHM look?” Scott asked

Joe.

”It looks red, fire red,” Joe said into his mike. ”I sure miss that green-eyed flash.”

”Green eyes,” Frank muttered. ”And an angry woman.” Shaking his head as if to clear

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it, Frank dug the green crystal from his pocket. ”It would take someone with incredible knowledge of computers, wiring, and electronics in general to create the problems that have been happening around this race.”

”Someone,” Teresa added, ”who wouldn't necessarily be missed—say, someone who'd quit her team.”

”Scott,” Joe asked slowly, ”Could you hide a generator—one that could produce enough electricity to increase a racer's energy reserve—in a small box?”

”Sure,” Scott replied. ”They make incredibly portable generator systems now. The trouble is, the whole thing would be very loud.”

”So loud,” Joe continued, ”that it would take a lot of noise to mask the sound? Say, a lot of boom around the box?”

”A lot of—” Then Scott realized what Joe was suggesting. ”Yeah. That would explain how the Suntex car arrived with so much battery reserve the first day.”

”Ah-hah,” Callie cried. ”Eighty percent! Remember when I checked on the van's battery. It was brand-new when we started. When we finished the first leg, it was running at eighty percent, too. That means that it used up the same amount of energy as the Suntex car. You'd need a gasoline-powered engine like the

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one in the van to maintain the power that the Suntex car had at the end of each leg.”

”A truly amazing thought,” Frank admitted. ”I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention back there.”

”So it looks like Suntex could have been getting a little extra oomph from a generator system hidden in Mack's box,” Scott speculated.

”Right,” Joe chimed in over the mike.

”How are we going to prove it though?” Teresa asked.

”Let's just make it to Yuma,” Frank replied, ”and we'll take care of it there.”

The SUB reached Yuma second, behind the Suntex car. Joe had run through the storm on his way in, but now the clouds were moving in again. He felt disappointed for a moment that he couldn't bask in the glory of a first-place finish. But he quickly returned to the thought that had been burning in his mind for the last hour of the race.

Joe parked the SUB at its designated tent and raced to the tent where the Suntex car was parked. The battery reserve had already been measured, and Mack and his crew were off to celebrate. Joe reached inside the Suntex car and found what he was looking for.

”What are you—?” Joe turned to face the highway patrol officer he'd spoken to the night

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before. ”Oh, it's you,” the officer said. ”But what are you doing with that?”

”Evidence,” Joe said briefly. ”I may need you in a couple of minutes.” He started back to the SUB, then turned. ”Did you ever get the make on that van?”

”Just a little while ago,” the patrolman said. ”It's owned by S.T. Enterprises.”

Joe frowned. ”Should that be familiar to me?”

”It would be if you came from around here.” The officer chuckled. ”S.T. stands for Solar Tex, a subsidiary of Suntex here in Arizona.”

”And do we know who was driving the van?” Joe asked expectantly.

”I was just following up on that. The van was checked out of the corporate fleet by a woman named Green,” the man replied.

Joe ran for the SUB. Right now he had all he needed to win this race.

The support van arrived just before the storm hit. As the clouds gathered overhead, the team frantically assembled the things they needed for the little demonstration they'd planned over the radio. Callie unpacked the hair dryer Joe had fixed for her. Frank dug out his tool kit while Scott and Teresa checked out the item Joe had retrieved from the Suntex car. Scott took a screwdriver from Frank and

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started working on the back of the boom box. In no time at all he had it off.

”My, my. What do we have here?” Scott asked with a grim smile.

”Two thirds of the speakers are gone—no wonder all you heard was the bass!” Teresa said. ”This looks like an electric motor—no, wait. What's this?”

”A minigenerator system,” Scott said.

”So how do we hook it up to the hair dryer?” Callie asked.

Scott inspected some wires. ”We'll have to make a connection through the headphone jack,” he said. ”I guess Mack connected a special jumper cable to the batteries in the Suntex car. Give me a couple of minutes—”

He went to work on the dryer plug and the boom box wiring. ”Presto! We have a magic hair dryer that seems to run on music.”

Running just ahead of the rain, they took their improvised gizmo into the big circus tent that had been erected by the finish line. Inside, the press and spectators were still standing around the stage where Barrington had just finished delivering his victory speech. Frank noticed Lawrence at the far end of the tent talking with Taka Yoshida. Refreshments were being brought in, and a victory party was about to get under way.

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Joe spotted Kyle Barrington with his arm around Mack Wilkinson, posing for pictures.

”Joe Hardy!” Barrington called, beckoning Joe into the picture. The Suntex executive was playing the role of generous victor to the hilt. ”A fine race—you stayed in competition right to the end!”

”Oh, I think we're still in competition,” Joe said boldly, stepping in front of the reporters.) ”My team has a little demonstration we'd like you to see.”

”I really don't think now is the time for another prank,” Barrington responded.

”They never were our pranks,” Joe replied. ”Were they, Mack?”

Mack Wilkinson tried to maintain a smile, but his eyes were worried. He kept glancing around as if he was afraid of seeing someone. He grew more and more unhappy as Joe led the way back to the stage.

”Chill out, Mack,” Joe said. ”We're playing your song.”

Mack's face went pale when he saw the boom box Joe placed on the stage. ”I don't have time for this,” he said, trying to walk away.

Kyle Barrington, however, realized that something was up. ”You stay put, Mack.”

Barrington turned to the SUB team. ”I'll give you five minutes.”

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Up on the stage, Frank knelt by the boom box as the group of reporters who'd followed Barrington and Mack crowded round. He slipped a cassette into the boom box tape player. ”We've been hearing this music a lot during the race,” he said, pressing the play button. The bone-rattling thump of bass guitars filled the tent.

”Please turn that thing down!” Barrington barked.

As Scott turned on the switch concealed in the back of the boom box, another sound began, barely detectable over the music. It was the sound of a minigenerator, drowned out by loud twangs of a guitar.

”But if we turn the music off,” Joe yelled, ”you'll hear the generator.”

Frank's finger stabbed down. The music died, but the sputter of the minigenerator system went on.

Callie brought her hair dryer from behind her back. It was already wired into the earphone jack. ”If this generator can run my hair dryer, it can help run a solar car.”

She flicked the switch. With a whine, the hair dryer ran! Scott cut off the generator, and the dryer ran down. The crowd was aghast, completely silent.

Kyle Barrington went almost purple with rage. The cords in his neck stood out as he

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whirled on Mack. ”I gave you a second chance, Mack, and you've blown it. After that race last year when you were caught forging the reserve results, I should have fired you. But I let you hang on, and what did you do?”

”I won,” Mack replied defiantly.

”You cheated,” Joe corrected him.

”I specifically hired Guy Riley to come on this race to keep an eye on you. Guy knew something was up, but he couldn't figure out how you were doing it.” Barrington shook his head. ”Now we know. I should have listened to him.”

”That's just a part of it,” Frank spoke up. ”There's still the matter of all the mishaps and injuries.”

”We know it was a Suntex van that ran into Lawrence Gonzalez—and we know Sharon Green was at the wheel,” Joe said.

”Ten to one, she and Mack were at the root of all the computer and communications problems,” Teresa added.

”I didn't want to do it,” Mack said in a hoarse voice. ”But when we moved the telemetry equipment to El Paso, something went wrong. It's expensive, and intricate ... and something broke. I couldn't tell the press or Barrington that our system had totally collapsed. So I set the fire to mask it. It was easy to make it look like a short.”

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He licked his lips. ”But I still wanted to win—I didn't need the telemetry to do that. Then Sharon Green turned up. She'd had a falling-out with that wimp Pelman and agreed to help me. I'd thought of the minigenerator system, but she got the idea to hide it in the boom box. For a while our messed-up telemetry kept the crew from figuring out where the power bursts were coming from—and then Sharon helped out by making the computers really go crazy.”

”I bet she even got into the highway patrol's system, which is why it took them so long to track down the license number of the van she used to sideswipe Lawrence's racer,” Joe speculated.

”So you and Sharon are responsible for all of the accidents?” Barrington stared in horror at his research head. ”Mack, I can't believe you'd do this!”

”No,” Mack insisted ”Those stunts were all Sharon's ideas. She'd apparently brought a whole bag of dirty tricks along with her. She wanted revenge on Jeff Pelman, so she cut through his steering rod. She was the one who hot-wired the helmet to shock Bill's ear. Nothing was going to stop her from being on the winning team. When I tried to stop her, she set that bomb outside your room, Kyle—mostly to prove to me that she was deadly serious. After

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that, I was afraid. Sharon was willing to kill to win. She's one messed-up lady.”

Mack's face turned ash white as Sharon Green cut through the crowd gathered by the stage. Frank grabbed her by the arm before she could lunge at Mack. Callie ran for the highway patrol officer.

”I'll get you, you jerk,” Sharon screamed. ”I should have messed up your radio the other day so *you* would have crashed into that truck instead of Schmidt.”

Her beautiful features were distorted with rage, but Frank hung on to her. Just then, Callie returned with the officer who handcuffed Sharon. She whirled on the crowd as he led her off. ”You all make me sick!” Sharon raved. ”You're all useless, all of you! You don't know a thing about power, *real* power, more power than you'd ever even be able to imagine.”

”I hope those cuffs are good and strong,” Mack said as another man appeared at his side. ”That lady is deadly. She was always a little off, but after she lost her good-luck charm—”

”Is this it?” Frank asked, holding out the green crystal.

”Yeah,” Mack said, ”that's it. When she lost her crystal, she went totally berserk. I begged her to stop. We were winning, we didn't need anything more. But she was really over the

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edge. Just don't put me in the same cell with her,” he finished, as he was handcuffed and led away.

Everyone remained silent for a moment. At last Kyle Barrington cleared his throat, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a check made out for $100,000. Slowly, he mounted the stage.

”Ladies and gentlemen of the press,” Barrington began, ”I don't know what to say— except that I apologize from the bottom of my heart for what's gone on during this race.”

He was clearly chagrined. But when he lifted his head again, he was smiling. ”I have a check here, and we all know who it really goes to. I am honored to present this to the winner of the first annual Suntex Solar Challenge, Scott Sanders and the State University at Bayport team.”

Reporters rushed the stage as Barrington walked over to Scott and handed him the check.

”And I'd like to remind Captain Sanders,” Barrington continued, ”that this is only one of many checks to come for the excellent design and engineering of his car. Congratulations.”

Scott and Teresa stared in disbelief and joy. He looked over at his team members with tears in his eyes, then faced the audience. ”I'm a little stunned,” he said slowly. ”But I have to acknowledge that our success is because of

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three teenagers who are hard workers—and even better detectives.”

The speech was interrupted by a familiar voice from the back of the tent. It was Bill Little. His head was bandaged, but he looked fine as he walked briskly to the front of the stage.

”I have one more award!” Bill shouted, ”Something for the winning driver.” He jumped onto the stage and handed a plainly wrapped package to Barrington.

”Perhaps you could present it,” Bill suggested with a wink. ”It would mean a lot.”

”And what is the name of this award?” Barrington asked dubiously, afraid of another prank.

Bill grinned. ”It's the Solar Talisman.”

With a shrug, Barrington cleared his throat. ”It seems we have one more award.” He turned to Joe. ”I hereby present the prestigious—at least, I hope it's prestigious—Solar Talisman Award to Joe Hardy.”

Joe took the package, smiled, and shook Barrington's hand. Then he ripped the paper away to reveal a glass box with a regular C battery inside. Laying on top of it was a sign that said: IN CASE OF CLOUDS, BREAK GLASS.

As laughter and applause broke out, Joe held the award high over his head and smiled.