

Overdrive
CHRIS FABRY



SYNTHESIS

OLOGIO

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Overdrive

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***This book is dedicated to Colin Fabry,
who provided expert technical assistance
on the subject of diabetes.
I'm proud of you.***

***“The winner ain’t the one with
the fastest car. It’s the one who
refuses to lose.”***

Dale Earnhardt

***“Auto racing is boring except when
a car is going at least 172 miles per hour
upside down.”***

Dave Barry

***“There are only three sports: bullfighting,
motor racing, and mountaineering;
all the rest are merely games.”***

Ernest Hemingway

**DAYTONA INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY,
FOUR MONTHS EARLIER**

THE RACE WAS nearing the start when the woman returned to the stands with the young girl. “Come on. We’re going to miss it.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Jenna said. “Can we get something to drink?”

“That’ll just make you go to the bathroom again. Let’s go.”

The two wore #14 shirts and hats, as did the man at their seats, who welcomed them. He gave Jenna a drink of his Coca-Cola as the pace car pulled out. In the sea of people, these three were simply specks.

The man leaned over, and the woman pulled out one earplug. “I just heard Maxwell is having spotter trouble.”

“What’s wrong?” she said, then dipped her head to hear him over the engine roar.

Prologue

“Not sure, but there’s somebody new up there.”

The woman stared vacantly at the track, and lines of worry formed on her forehead.

“You okay?” the man said.

“It’s Jenna. She’s going to the bathroom constantly. And she’s not faking it. She really has to go.”

“Maybe it’s an infection,” the man said, looking past his wife at his daughter. Jenna wore headphones, tuned to Dale Maxwell’s channel. “She’s lost a lot of weight, and she didn’t have much to lose to begin with.”

“I can’t get her to eat much of anything,” the woman said. “She used to dream of corn dogs and mustard but not anymore. Only thing she likes is eggs.”

The man leaned over and pulled a chocolate bar from the cooler. “Jenna, you want some?”

Her face was pale and her eyes droopy. Her skin clung to her cheekbones and she looked tired. No energy. “No, Daddy. I’m not hungry. Besides, that hurts my tummy.”

The dad stood and stared at the race as the pace car veered away and the cars approached the start line. The crowd rose, and the cheering almost drowned out the noise of the engines. Almost. But the noise couldn’t drown out the worry etched on the man’s face.

The man focused his binoculars on the Maxwell war wagon and Maxwell’s crew chief, T.J. Kelly, sitting at the helm.

The woman stood and leaned close. “She’s talked about this day for months. Her first Daytona.”

“It was so cute how she saved her allowance money for souvenirs,” he said. “We have to get her into the doctor this week.”

“Tomorrow,” the woman said. “I’ll take her tomorrow.”

Jenna sat back and put her head on the back of the seat.

The man traded seats with his wife and leaned down to Jenna. “You want me to hold you on my shoulders? You’ll be able to see better.”

Her face told the story. She shook her head and winced, putting a hand on her stomach. “I don’t feel good.”

He patted her head. “It’s all right, pumpkin. Just rest.” He turned back to his wife. “Something’s definitely wrong.”

The woman nodded. “I’ll call the doctor first thing in the morning, and we’ll get her in for a checkup.”

The race took on a life of its own as the husband and wife watched Dale Maxwell move from the middle of the pack. A girl named Jamie was the spotter.

The woman turned to the man. “Doesn’t Dale have a daughter named Jamie? Could that be his daughter?”

She spoke as if she knew the family—and she did,

from afar, of course, just like the rest of the fans. She had followed Maxwell for years and appreciated his character, his clean driving, and the fact that he put family and faith first.

When the first caution came out, the woman leaned over to see if her daughter had seen the accident. She touched Jenna, but the girl didn't stir.

"Honey, she's not responding!" the woman yelled.

"Jenna!" the man said.

If the two had been at church or a baseball game or a hundred other places, they would have disturbed the people around them, but not here. Few noticed the man picking up the young girl and hurrying to the paramedics. No one in the crowd of more than 160,000 glanced at the ambulance as it pulled away from the venue with the woman in the back with the girl, rubbing her arms and speaking comforting words while the EMTs put an IV in her arm.

Nor did they see the man running to the parking lot, searching for his car, turning one way, then another, tears streaming. He stopped at a line of portable bathrooms, pulled out his cell phone, and dialed. His face strained, his body shaking, he leaned against a chain-link fence.

"Pastor, there's something wrong with Jenna. I need you to pray."

**SKYLAR JENNINGS EXPERIMENTAL DRIVING
SCHOOL, PRESENT DAY**

JAMIE MAXWELL'S MOUTH fell open, and she stared at Bud Watkins, the grizzled old guy in charge of the driving school. She couldn't believe what he had just said. After coming up with the money for the school and setting her heart on finishing, he'd told her to pack her bags and leave.

As far as she knew, she hadn't broken any of the rules. She hadn't smoked, rubbed snuff, consumed alcohol, or done any other prohibited things. She hadn't even eaten the calorie-filled pizza at the restaurant in the lobby of the hotel.

"Just go on back to your room and I'll call your parents to come take you home," Bud said.

Chapter 1

The Test

Jamie's mind spun as she grabbed the doorknob. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run from this place and never come back. But something stopped her. She let go of the knob, the door opening.

"Go on," Bud said. "Get out of here."

Jamie turned back to him. "I know you're the king of this place and you have the power to send me home anytime you want. I'm okay with that. But I sold my race car to come here, and I put my future in your hands. Now you take all that away—plus the chance to realize a dream—"

"What are you saying?" Bud said, his face pained.

She took a breath. "I'm saying that I at least deserve an explanation. Why are you kicking me out?" Her voice was strained and her face felt flushed. She was sure there were veins sticking out of her neck. "I've done everything you asked. And all I want is to be treated fairly."

Bud looked hard at her and bit his lower lip.

When he didn't say anything, Jamie shook her head. "So why am I being kicked out?"

He put on his white Stetson and stood, waving a hand. "All right, you passed. Go back to the hotel."

Jamie squinted like she hadn't heard him correctly. "Say that again. I passed what?"

He shoved his car keys in his pocket. "If you read

the fine print of the contract, you'll see that there is a bunch of tests—and not just on the track. Some people here are too timid. Good drivers but they don't stand up for themselves.”

“And that was the rap against me?”

“That's the rap against your old man. Nice guy. Works hard. But he lets others push him around.”

“Like Devalon,” she said.

“Yep.”

Jamie blew out a breath. “And if I'd have walked out of here, you would have let me. Game over, just like that.”

“Listen, Jamie. You gotta *want* what's here. We're not giving it away. You have to reach out and take it. If you're willing to walk away without a fight, that only proves what people say is true.”

Jamie narrowed her eyes at him. “I'm going to be the first woman to win the cup, and my dad isn't a pushover.”

Bud shrugged.

“And the name's Maxwell. You call all the guys by their last names. I expect the same for me.”

He stared at her. “Fair enough, Maxwell. You should know that we're extending the school into July. The board made the decision last night.”

“But won't that be hard—I mean, I don't think I have enough money for room and board.”

“The extra time is being covered. That is, if you want to keep learning.”

Jamie nodded. “I want that license. I’ll be here.”

She almost slammed the door behind her, but she didn’t want to go too far. Now she knew what to expect—and that was just about anything.

She jogged back to the hotel, feeling 10 pounds lighter and ready to drive again.



CHRIS FABRY is a writer, broadcaster, and graduate of Richard Petty Driving Experience (top speed: 134.29 mph). He has written more than 50 books, including collaboration on the *Left Behind: The Kids*, *Red Rock Mysteries*, and the *Wormling* series.

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