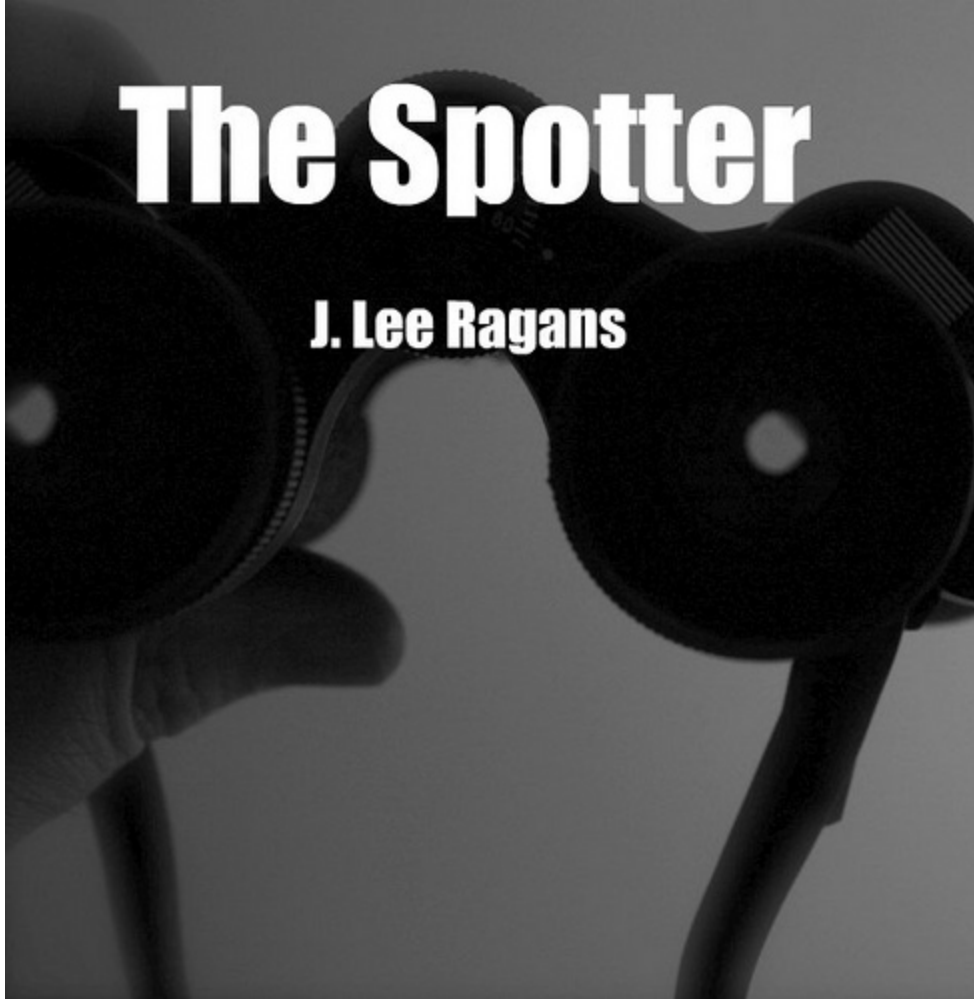


The Spotter

J. Lee Ragans



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By

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ONE - A STROKE OF LUCK

The sun beat down on the track and the fans. The worst of the heat gathered at the top of the stands. Above the luxury sky boxes the teams spotters sat in a row looking down on the track - sometimes with binoculars, but more often with just their naked eyes. Atlanta Motor Speedway was one of the nicer tracks for them in that they could see most of the track at all times without straining. Old Tommy used a spotter scope. He claimed it saved him and his sniper team in the war, and no one wanted to refute a true war hero. Of course Tommy was too old to have been in the last war, and would have been too young for the one before that. If most people realized the glaring problem of Tommy the war hero, no one spoke up, it was better to just pretend along with him.

Joe Colin watched the track with great interest. One would think that any spotter would have a great interest in what was going on, but to Joe it was like watching a mystery movie. From the time Joe was born he was struck with a most unusual problem. He could see the future and the past of anything he observed or touched. Because of this he liked to avoid places where bad things happened on a regular basis. A visit to a hospital was a horrid experience for him. A cemetery was surprisingly not a bad experience save for the sadness of most of the visitors. Folks were dead by the time they got there. Visiting the scene of a house fire or a battle, that was too much to deal with.

Joe kept his ability to himself. Because of this, most people thought he was stuck up at the least, or a full blown serial killer at the worst. People did not press him for details. Details were never forthcoming. He would say something that seemed reasonable, if cornered, and then walk away. He was very good at getting out of situations that he did not want to be in. Seeing the possible futures of his own actions made avoiding uncomfortable situations very easy.

Joe liked racing. It was complicated with lots of variables that affected the outcome. Because the heat of a tire on a certain lap could affect the outcome of a 500 lap long race, racing was one of the few things he could be surprised with. Life did not give Joe many surprises so he relished the few he could find. When the job of spotter came open, Joe used his abilities to make sure that he was in the right place at the right time. He moved up from janitor at the Martin race team headquarters to race team spotter in less than a week.

Today's race had managed to get into a comfortable groove. The spotter to Joe's left, whom he did not care for, said, "I hate it when nothing happens. The boys get sloppy out there." Joe realized it had been more than 5 minutes since he gave any instructions. Since his job was mostly to warn the driver about the position of other drivers on the track it meant that his driver was not advancing, but on the other hand it also meant he was not falling back.

Joe nodded and said, "Yeah."

Things starting to change a few minutes later. The pit window was getting close, as drivers prepared to get adjustments made and new tires along with a full load of fuel they shuffled around on the track. If you were trapped on the outside as the entrance to pit lane came up it could be a disaster, running out of fuel was the worst thing that could happen, but more likely one would just lose track position on old tires. The young driver of the 37 car, David, had a habit of getting stuck on the outside. He liked hugging the wall because it allowed him to remain on the accelerator longer, but he used more fuel this way. The endless lectures about trying other driving lines fell on deaf ears. David was comfortable with the wall inches from his right side and no amount of coaching was going to change that. Joe had long since given up suggesting other lines on the track. David did not care where other drivers were running.

As green flag pit stops started the shuffle on the track began.

Joe began to talk his driver toward the pits, "Inside. 3 laps to pit. Sixteen car is on the inside. Room after the 16."

As the 16 passed Joe knew things were about to go very bad. The sudden change of the simple future laid out in front of him was like a tidal wave in the rivers of his perception. He observed the vision for a second and then did not hesitate.

Talking quickly to his driver, "David, I need you to back off and take it to the bottom of the track."

Normally the crew chief would be issuing race orders, but Mr. Martin told David and the Crew Chief, Dan Ranfield, to let Joe give warnings. Mr. Martin did not really know what Joe could do, but more than once he had cautioned to do something, and by the time the orders were relayed to the driver, it was too late. All spotters can tell their driver to go low, or go high, or even give all sorts of encouragement. But telling a driver to slow down and get in line under good race conditions was a bit much and took a lot of trust.

Without complaint, the young driver lifted off the gas and slid down low on the track as ordered. He was below the yellow line seconds later as the Budweiser Dodge lost a tire and went up hard into the Safer Barrier at the start of turn 3. Instead of grabbing in and slowing down, the now wrecked car decided to ignore most of what the engineers learned in physics class and something gave way - or did not give way - sending the now crumpled Dodge down the track into traffic.

David slipped by the wrecking car and missed the pile up that stretched from turn 3 to its ending in turn 4. Most of the other spotters were furiously calling out instructions trying to help their drivers, while more than a few were tossing their headsets in frustration because their drivers were now out of the race.

David called up from the Number 37 Toyota saying, "Thanks Joe." There was a sound of relief in his voice with a touch of awe.

"Just lucky guess." Joe resounded coolly.

The field was brought to a halt on pit row under a red flag to clean up the mess. The number of cars involved and the damage to the Safer Barrier took an hour to repair. Unfortunately, that gave the television crew time to find video of the Number 37 car slowing down and dropping low 4 seconds before the wreck started. When the pit race reporter got to David sitting in his car things could have gone worse.

"David, how did you know to slow down and drop low coming out of turn 2?"

David smiled his brilliant capped teeth smile and said, "Joe, my spotter, saw something, and as a rookie, I listen to 3 people when I'm racing, Dan on the pit box, Joe my spotter, and my lord and savior, Jesus Christ."

The interview did not end there as Joe would have hoped.

"So what did Joe see?"

"I don't know. You would have to ask him. We have not had time to talk about it."

"This is not the first time slowing down has kept you out of a big wreck." The pit reporter said pushing the mike back through the window.

"No, Joe is good about warning me, and Mr. Martin says I am good at listening. If you want to know more just ask Joe."

"Thanks David. I will let you Get some more Gatorade in you so you will be ready when we get back underway."

Seconds after that exchange went out live over the air, Joe heard over his radio, "Mr. Martin says they want to see us in the big red hauler after the race."

The big red hauler, the mobile office for NASCAR, and the place where edicts were handed out and punishment delivered was the place race teams fear to go. Being called to it never meant anything good. No boss ever calls you into his office to tell you, "You're doing a great job, keep it up." The same was true for NASCAR. Never once has a driver or a race team been called in to meet because everything was okay.

TWO - BIG RED RECKONING

Looking around Joe could not decide which path was better at this point. If he refused to go to the hauler he would have to get another job. But the chance of discovery was nearly zero. On the other hand, the paths that lay ahead with him going to the hauler were interesting. One put him on the path for happiness. As much happiness as one can have when the ending of every story is known in advance. He chose that interesting path this time.

Mr. Frances sat behind the large oak desk. It would be at home in any large corporate office. Joe looked at the desk thinking like most others that the thing was so heavy it added to NASCAR fuel budget every time they moved it with the hauler. As if he were a mind reader Mr. Frances said, "Since you are here for the first time, Joe, and you are looking at the desk... this is the desk my grandfather used. It was put in the hauler because this is the real office of NASCAR. We may have that nice building back in Charlotte, and the fancy one in Daytona, but the real NASCAR business is conducted right here, in this hauler at whatever track we are at." Mr. Frances sat back and then said, "You are here for one, and only one question: Mark, did your team have something to do with the wreck in Turn 3?"

Mr. Martin did not hesitate as he said, "No, sir. No one on my team did a thing."

The NASCAR boss turned his whole body to face Joe and he asked, "Why did you tell you driver to slow down 4 seconds before the wreck started?"

Joe knew which answer would work best having tried all the others in his head. He settled on, "I could see the future. I knew that youngster was going to lose it in the next turn."

Mr. Frances laughed, then said with a big smile, "If only we could see the future."

He took a long breath then said, "All kidding aside. I have no fucking idea what you are up to, but we are going to tell the Media that you noticed something on the 9 car coming out of Turn 2. With a young driver, you chose to have him slow up. It was not like he was going to finish all that well anyway."

David started to protest but a stern look from Mr. Martin kept David's mouth shut.

Mr. Frances continued, "Now, I don't know how you did it and I don't know what you are up to. But if I get a hint that you are damaging another competitors car to get an advantage I will kick you ass all the way up I85 to your own shop and then kick you around that until I get tired. Do I make myself clear?"

Mr. Martin replied, "We are not cheating and we never will, Sir. We understand you perfectly."

They filed out of the hauler and slipped off to their separate ways home without another word said. Joe rode back with the team hauler. He was not a licensed truck driver but he kept the drivers company. It was a free ride, and he did not have to deal with bringing his own car to the track.

THREE - OUROSBOROS

The team hauler arrived at the race shop at 11PM. Joe made it home by midnight. He did not have to go to work until Wednesday, so he began his after race ritual. He made dinner, and then lay on the couch reading from a stack of well worn comics. He moved them their left stack to the right. It was a carefully alternated set of 50 comics that Joe preferred. Instead of putting comics of a particular story arc together he spread them out through the set separated by other comics. As he lay reading he listened to a shuffle of Jazz recordings from his iPod in its dock. The shuffle was never a surprise but then again neither were the comics. His large television hung on the wall dark and silent. It was only used for visitors. The overload of information from nightly news was too disturbing. He completed the stack by 4AM and fell deep asleep on the couch.

FOUR - WORK DAY

Joe was an exception on a race team. It was a rarity that he only had one job. Even more rare was that his one job was spotter. Most team members did at least 2 jobs: one on race day and the other back in the race shop. Some of the pit crew worked as low level mechanics or testers. The secondary jobs all had impressive names like "Chief Dynamic Testing Specialist" while in truth the job might be balancing tires for testing, or verifying that wheels were undamaged.

Joe's unique work arrangement angered many. Worst of all was Ted Mavery, the Jackman and website maintainer. In truth Ted was a big guy with an English Literature Degree, but he wanted to be seen as one of the guys. He was doing little more than a company newsletter on the web, but he took his second job seriously. As Joe walked by, he muttered to another team member, "What I don't get is why he is so special? How he can get away with just being a spotter."

Unknown to Ted, Mr. Martin walked around the corner just as he started complaining, "Ted, you just get those spelling errors fixed that I keep getting emails about. Not that it's any of your business, but Joe only gets paid when he's at the track. He makes half of what the rest of you guys do." Embarrassed, Ted did not have the nerve to reply. He tried to make himself small, hard to do for a man of his size, and went back to his desk in the outer office where his workstation waited for him.

Joe sat in the meeting, biding his time, knowing something interesting is about to happen. But using well practiced restraint he lets the talk of the last race go on. Near the end of the meeting a knock on the door signaled the start of the interesting. The receptionist said, "Excuse me, but there is a Detective here and she wants to talk to Joe." The woman who manned the phones and mail sorting for the racing team looked concerned and added, "She seems upset."

Mr. Martin looked at Joe and said, "I suppose I need to let you go talk to the nice lady. This meeting was about to wrap up. See those of you at the track that I don't see before then."

No one moved quickly from the conference room. They wanted to give Joe time to leave and start talking to the detective before they casually walked by to listen in and see what they could hear. Joe did not let this social norm play out. He just walked past the detective and strait out the door. He did not even make eye contact, but the woman in the cheap

pants suit knew it was him. She followed him yelling, "Mr. Colin I need to talk to you." As he kept on walking she yelled, "Do I need to arrest you to get you to talk?"

Joe turned quickly. Looking into her eyes as he spoke just loud enough for her to hear but no one else, "Do you expect me to cooperate with you after yelling at me like that in my place of employment?" Joe turned and walked on. He got in his car, and drove away, never looking back.

FIVE - SCATTERED, SMOTHERED, AND COVERED

Joe was sitting in the back booth of the Huddle House just a mile from the race shop. He was facing the door with his back to the wall. He was not a paranoid man, but found it easier to concentrate when he does not have to worry about who was behind him listening. He drank his coffee slowly and ate his hash browns knowing he would not finish them. He did not look up as the seat in the booth across from his became occupied with the beautiful woman in a cheap pants suit. She was not young, and her blond hair could have been cut or styled better. It was obvious that her makeup was functional like her hair. It was more a matter of not wanting to be distracting or stand out in a job that was dominated by men. If she looked too feminine she would be seen as weak, but if she looked too manly she would be thought a lesbian, and that would have other implications on her and on the people she investigated.

She was by all accounts a normal female police detective. Having dated police officers in the past, he knew what to expect from her, and he was not phased when she tried to put him off guard. Even knowing how the conversation would play out did not take the fun out of his game. Before she started to speak Joe held up a hand and began to scribble short sentences on a napkin. He used his left hand to hide his writing. When he was done he flipped over the napkin and slid it across the table. When she started to turn it over to read it he said, "Not yet."

He stared at her, unblinking.

The detective blurted out, "I am Detective Emily Heartwig with Charlotte homicide. I need your help."

"What makes you think a spotter for a race team can help a homicide detective?" He wanted to smile as the future played out in his head, but he didn't give in and smile.

She looked down at the table and whispered as if ashamed, "I saw the race. I talked to folks at the track. Sunday was not the first time you've told your driver to react before something happened."

"Are you asking me if I can see the future?"

She swallowed hard and said, "I am desperate."

"Homicide detectives are always desperate for answers. What makes you seek out a spotter that might be able to see the future? Why not a psychic, like the one at the mall?" He asked with a smile.

Emily looked up from the table and into his eyes and said, "If they had any real ability I would have a psychic by my side at all times, but you know they are bullshit. You aren't"

"I am flattered that you think my spotter skills at noticing a loose wheel will help you solve a crime, but... "

Emily slapped her hand on the table as if she were trying to get his attention but not draw the attention of the mostly empty restaurant and cut him off, "A mother of 3 is missing. I know she is dead. Her children are destroyed, her husband is a wreck, and there is a killer on the loose."

Joe did not react to her emotional plea. He just asked at a level just above a whisper, "What does that have to do with you? You probably have a dozen cases on your desk right now that affect more people, and are even more sad. Why is this so important to you?"

Emily leaned forward and looked down at the table, "I was at Walmart minutes before she was abducted. It could have been me at 2AM."

"What were you doing there alone at 2AM?"

"Not your business."

"You've made it my business."

She looked up and into his eyes, "I had just broken up with my boyfriend. I had to get a pregnancy test. I wanted to know if I need to make a doctor's appointment to get it taken care of."

Joe leaned back and said calmly, "Flip over the paper."

Emily looked at the words scrawled on the napkin. It read:

Emily Heartwig, Charlotte Homicide

I am Desperate

I would have a psychic at my side at all times

I know she is dead

I was at Walmart minutes before she was abducted

I broke up with my boyfriend

I had to get a pregnancy test

Emily stared at the napkin for a long time. She examined each sentence trying think how likely it was that he could have guessed the information and written it down in order. Who could have told him? She had no explanation for the perfection of the information. She looked up and asked, "Can you help me?"

Emily stared as Joe spoke, "She was abducted by a man in a hoodie. He can't be seen by most of the security cameras, but there is a security camera out of position in the women's bathing suit area. It is on on the main server but attached to an old VCR. The night security guard likes to look at the women showing their swimsuits to their friends. You did not get that tape when you asked for security footage. It will show him at 1:57 AM. This will lead you to him. He lives at 345 Spring Terrace, apartment 4. Before you try to catch him, you need to search off of Target Lock Road. He buried her body 3 miles from the gas station on the right, 28 feet in the woods . It will be difficult to find if you don't know where to look. Have the search team start in that area. Say that is was an anonymous tip."

Joe took a breath and then said, "Now this is the most important part. When you go to arrest the suspect, you need to shoot him the second his right arm starts to move. He will have a gun in his hand. If you don't shoot him, he will kill you."

Emily stared at him for a moment. It was obvious that she wanted to argue with what he just told her. Instead she suppressed the urge and simply asked, "How do you do it?"

Joe smiled and said, "I will tell you all about one day soon. For now, you need to pretend that this was a blind date that your friend set you up on. We will stand up in a second, you will give me a hug and you will walk out. Don't rush to solve this case. You will solve it by

the end of the day. I will see you on Monday at 2PM at the Longhorn on Mall Boulevard. Wear the red dress, and don't waste the time worrying about it - just shave your legs."

She started to protest and then realized she sought him out. She stood up and Joe joined her. She hugged him casually, and then hugged tighter like he had just saved her life. Emily said, "Thank you." And walked out of the restaurant.

The waitress said, "That date go okay honey, she did not even want to eat."

Joe thought for a second. Had he told her he was meeting a date? No, she assumed. He replied with the most correct option, "She had to get back to work. She is pretty sure I am not a serial killer now so she will meet me again."

"That's a good one sweetie. Huddle House is the place to go to make sure your blind date don't leave you in a shallow grave. We should make that our slogan." The waitress laughed and walked off to the back.

SIX - A FEW NUTS SHORT OF A WHEEL

The television was tuned to the local Fox station in the team hauler. Local to Charlotte, The satellite dish was technically located in Charlotte, North Carolina but it was currently sitting in Richmond Virginia. The advantage was that they still got to see local programming. It let the team feel more comfortable and let them keep up on local happenings. Joe watched as a press conference started. Everyone else in the hauler listened as the Police Chief started talking, "We have found the body of Misty May Alstot. Her presumed killer was shot and killed while we were attempting to take him into custody. We have the great detective work of Detective Sergeant Emily Heartwig to thank for this resolution. The investigation is not considered completely closed until we review the case, but at this time we are confident that the suspect who was killed was a lone actor and there is no fear that we have serial killer among us."

One of the tire changers tapped Joe on the arm, "Wasn't the lady detective the one bugging you?"

Joe said, "Yeah. We had a blind date."

The tire changer said, "Weird. She damn sure seemed to be interested in something when she was at the office."

"Yeah, bad joke. Her friend set us up, told her I was a suspect."

"That's a good one, man. Some friend." The tire changer laughed.

The police chief answered a question as to the identity of the suspect and said, "Pending notification of next of kin and the investigation we won't be releasing that right now."

As he stepped away from the podium the chief said, "I want to again recognize the work of Detective Sergeant Heartwig. Without her persistence a family would still be in limbo. They can now move forward, even with this awful news, and lay their mother and wife to rest."

Joe leaned back and tried to nap before the team meeting. He would need to be rested for the long day in the hot sun on the spotter stand.

At the spotter stand, Joe took his position and as the cars rolled off he said, "Pull those belts tight and get ready to race." It was a silly thing to say, drivers tightened the belts before they rolled off, and most were actually a little loose. They would tighten on impact. It was an old thing to say, but it felt good.

10 laps in David was complaining viciously that something was wrong with the right rear tire. The crew chief could not calm him down. Joe jumped in during a break in the conversation and said, "The tire is fine. Just hang on and Dan will get you fixed up on the first pit stop." David's complaints stopped. It was not so much that the spotter said something, it was that Joe never let anything bad happen to him. If the tire blew he would be fine and that was all that mattered.

On lap 4 a rookie over drove the corner and put a past champion and himself into the wall bringing out a caution flag. This was the chance to fix the tire problem David was feeling in the number 37. On back out on the track with 4 new tires David was happy to ride around for another 200 laps with no concerns on the half mile track. He was happy to stay on the lead lap and had no plans to challenge for a win. Most rookies caused wrecks on the short tracks, but David was happy to ride around and get points while he learned his craft.

Joe was relaxed. All of the future lines were simple and safe. No complexity, no danger. He was enjoying watching the race and acting as a "normal" spotter. He was constantly in the now and he enjoyed it. "Inside... inside... still inside. You are clear." Then, "Outside, outside, you are clear. " He felt almost normal.

That changed after the green flag pit stops around lap 250 of 500. He saw a reasonable chance of a loose tire from the Number 34 Kodak Printers car flying into the stands and killing someone. He waited a minute to see if it cleared up, but it got worse. Joe could not sit by and hope. As time passed it went over a 50% chance that someone was going to die. He could not going to sit by and let it happen.

"Be right back David. Gotta talk to the number 34 spotter."

"Roger" came back in a short clipped response. It was rare for a spotter to check out for a minute. The crew chief would take over automatically even though he was not in as good a spot to see the track. It was dangerous, but Joe was comfortable with his decision.

Walking 20 feet down on the hot roof of the luxury boxes Joe found the Number 34 spotter. He did not know his name but he said, "Your man has a loose right front wheel. 3 or more lug nuts are missing."

"Bullshit" The 34 spotter shot back.

"No bullshit. Why would I lie."

The spotter did not look up as he said, "There are 43 potential liars here every race."

Joe snapped, "Your boy is 2 laps down and behind us. If you don't do something it will be bad."

Just as Joe's words finished the tire inner rim let loose. The wheel bounced up the track at over 100 miles per hour and crashed through the fence into the lower Grandstands. Joe snapped, "You are a fucking idiot." As he turned and walked off.

Five people were injured in the stands. One of them lost his life later that night due to massive brain trauma. The other spotters watched as Joe walked back. No one said a word. Joe sat back down in his chair and found the number 37 rolling around the track in line under the yellow flag. He said, "I'm back David. Sorry about that. Might as well get ready for a red flag. The fence is damaged."

David replied, "I thought those things could catch a tire?"

"One in a million chance. Looks like it hit a pole."

"Does it look like anyone is hurt?"

"Yeah... there are people hurt." Then he added, "It is bad."

"Shit." Was all the driver could say.

When the race finally ended in the early evening due to the 2 hour red flag, the spotters gathered up their coolers and chairs and radios and made their way to the stair case to get to an elevator. The trip to get all the spotters back to their team haulers would take most of an hour. Most tracks had staircases that went all the way down but not Richmond. For some reason in the reconstruction years ago, they neglected stairs that could get people from the roof to track side.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs Joe felt a hand on his shoulder. It was the spotter for the 34 car. He had a tear in his eye and he said, "I should have listened."

Joe knew that he should have said something comforting, but all he could say was, "Yes, you should have."

He walked off angry but he knew that he had tried. Sometimes you can't change the future, no matter what you do.

SEVEN - LUPPER DATE

Joe lay on his couch reading comics again, and half napping. The knock on the door did not surprise him, but he let it be a shock to his senses. It is nice to let things happen without analysis. Emily was standing at the door in a sleeveless red summer dress that came 3/4 of the way down her thighs. She would have looked less uncomfortable if she were naked in the doorway. Joe stepped back and waited.

"Sorry. I should have met you at the restaurant, but I wanted to be sure you were going to be there, so I came to your apartment. But I guess you already knew I would."

Joe smiled, "Yes."

Emily said, "I am on administrative leave for a week until they finish the investigation."

"I know."

"There is not a lot of mystery in your life is there?"

"None what so ever."

"Knowing everything must be awful."

"I don't know it any other way. When I was a kid they thought I was autistic."

"Why?"

"I couldn't communicate." Joe pointed his hand toward the couch and she took a seat.

Nervously, Emily admitted, "Shaved my legs." And she laughed.

"They look very nice. You shouldn't hide them all the time."

She actually blushed. Emily felt the rush of red taking over her neck and face. She was a grown woman acting like a teenager on a first date. She blurted out, "You know what you can do, and what you can't. You don't even have to ask."

"Something like that."

"I hope you are a gentleman."

"I am indeed." He smiled.

Emily knew that she had no resistance to Joe. He was honest and would never threaten or question her. He knew or would know everything she would do. There was no hiding it. The thought that she had to be monogamous or lose him was pleasant. She had daydreamed all day Sunday that, for once, she could be a good girlfriend. Maybe even a good wife.

"I was saying, they thought I was autistic. And in a sense I was. I felt, smelled, saw, and heard the past and present as well as all the possible futures."

"That must be horribly confusing."

"It is, but I am used to it now. Some situations overwhelm me. When that happens some people think I am drunk, but I never drink."

Emily smiled and touched his leg, "I think you of all people have every reason to drink."

"I can't. It's horrible to lose concentration."

Emily looked at the stack of comics. She noted how well worn they were. She asked, "Are these your favorites?"

"I suppose. I like the way the stories play out. Before you ask, I don't read a lot of other things. Or watch live TV. I listen to Jazz and read this stack of comics until I fall asleep."

Emily tried to smile, but she felt sad, "That's an interesting habit."

"I don't have a lot of options. Television sends me into fits when I see all the possibilities of each news story played out. I sometimes watch a movie, but never on broadcast TV. I hate the risk of live events breaking in. I can't relax with all the possibilities swirling around in my head. Live television at work is a massive distraction for me."

She touched his hand, and said, "I thought your skills were a gift, but it sounds more like a curse to me."

"I won't argue that assessment."

She waited a moment trying to get her courage up and finally asked, "So have you been dating someone?"

Without hesitation Joe blurted out, "I don't date. It is not fair."

"So you don't like sex?" Emily said bluntly. Then she realized that she might have overstepped some social norm. At work she was surrounded by guys and thought nothing of talking about sex.

"I didn't say that. I prefer professionals when it comes to that. Strippers - Escorts."

Emily wanted to be offended, but she knew there were plenty of cops who did the same. It was illegal, but it happened. Thinking about it for a second she said, "You can be honest. I understand that you don't feel like you have tricked them."

"I think you see where I am coming from."

"I do." Emily looked around nervously, and then asked directly, "So if you had a girlfriend would you still be using professional help for some tasks?"

Joe smiled, "You get right to the point. And, no, all I want out of my life is honesty, which is damn hard to find when you can't tell people the truths that you know."

They sat in silence for a few seconds and then Emily asked, "Will you help me on some other cases?"

"I can't."

"I have to ask."

"I know."

"What if I offer you whatever you want?"

Joe smiled, "I still can't. It ends badly."

"You have done this before?"

"No, not this, but when I try to interfere too much, things go bad. It's like the universe snaps back to the way it wants to run. No matter how many paths I try to take, I usually end up in the same spot."

"I don't understand." She stated.

"The best way I can put it is that I can move small things, like speed up the discovery of the serial killer, but I can't make him not kill." Joe thinks hard and continues, "He was

going to kill. If I foiled him at the Walmart, he would have killed later and maybe not have gotten caught. You were going to catch him. In fact you were going to notice the camera at Walmart in 2 weeks, when you were buying a new bikini."

Emily blushed again, "I don't need one. I was not dating anyone until I met you. Are we dating?"

Joe ignored the question, "This is the part that will bake your noodle. We were going to meet anyway. In a week one of the guys in the race shop was going to take me out for dinner, and we were going to meet in the bar waiting for a table."

"But you don't drink."

"I can hang out in bars to meet ladies."

Emily held her head in her hands and said, "I think this is giving me a headache."

"I get those a lot. I take Anacin."

"Do they make that anymore?"

"Yeah. It is there. You just have to look to the right of the big Advil bottles."

Emily adjusted her dress and asked, "Since you obviously know what is going to happen, do we date?"

"Yes."

"Am I going to be happy?"

"The happiest you have ever been."

"That is not saying a lot."

"Will you be faithful to me?"

"Yes. How do we end?"

"You don't want to know right now."

Joe knew that she was scared right now. If she knew their future, she would be catatonic. She feared marriage above all else, and when he forgives her for almost cheating on him in a few months, she will not know what to do. But she will accept his marriage proposal. Telling her they are going to be happily together for decades to come, would be a bit much for a first date. He did not want to push it.

She seemed to think over his answer and then decide it was acceptable. After her contemplation she said, "Then take me to lupper, mister."

"Lupper?"

"If brunch is between breakfast and lunch, then lupper is between lunch and supper. You didn't see that coming?"

Joe looks pensive and replied "I didn't look for it."

They walked out of the apartment, and headed out to eat. Joe stumbled for a moment but recovered before Emily noticed. He had been putting on his best "normal human" impression, and the strain of his constant concentration on the present was wearing him down. As they got to the parking lot he asked, "I hate to ask a lady to drive on a first date, but I am not sure I can steer straight right now."

Emily stepped closer to him concerned, "What's wrong?"

"I am putting on a good face for you."

"What do you mean?"

Joe closed his eyes, "I have to concentrate to stay fixed on the present. It gets tiring."

"And you are doing that for me?"

Eyes still closed Joe leaned on the hood of Emily's car, "Yeah, and I am not doing a good job of it."

Emily took him by the arm and said, "I'll drive. You relax. Put on that human face when we get to Longhorn's "

Joe's guard fell down and the past and futures flowed over him. He knew they were driving. He knew she was not talking. He knew how she smoked a cigarette in the storm drain below the road they were driving on when she was 9 years old. The sensation of her coughing made him cough. She looked at him but did not react. He thought it better not to tell her how much he knew about her already. That did not seem to go well in any of the possible futures. He almost dozed off in his maelstrom of time.

He recovered his composure as they walked into the restaurant, passed the faux cowboy style, and sat in a small booth. Instead of sitting across from him, Emily sat on the same side. As they settled in, his composure grew stronger. The feel of the nearness of this woman he barely met but would know for a long time calmed his brain. No, it was not his love for her, but his lust. Like most women think of men, Joe was no exception, as his hormones went into overdrive he became less cerebral and more instinctive. Most men thinking with their hormones got less social, but for Joe it was the only time he was almost a normal man.

They enjoyed a nice meal and an almost normal conversation. Emily drove him home and stayed the night. She thought that people would judge her badly but with Joe there was no pretense of relationship. The moment they started talking she knew there was something special between them, and she knew that Joe knew everything about her. She was a woman who took action when opportunity presented itself. She thought that walking to her car and driving home like a school girl would be an insult to Joe and to her own desires. With his complete lack of pretense she was comfortable being unjudged. From what she had seen so far, Joe was the least judgmental man who ever lived.

EIGHT - SURFING

The weekly meeting Joe is forced to attend ended early. The meeting quickly broke down as the tech guys wanted to have a long, in depth discussion of hot dog type to stock in the race hauler fridge for the track. Everyone else agreed that brand choices for food were best left to the person or people doing the shopping the day the hauler was loaded. They called the bluff of the tech guys who never wanted to lower themselves to do the shopping, and in the end the tech guys got what they wanted. They volunteered to do the shopping.

Mr. Martin signaled Joe to come to his office and, without delay, Joe followed. He knew almost everything that was about to happen, but was ready to enjoy the details.

Perched on the edge of his desk in front of Joe in the guest chair, Mr. Martin said, "I have no idea what you can do, or what you really are. I have never asked, but folks are asking me."

"If I'm a burden, I'll resign right now, Mr. Martin."

"Stop with the Mr. Martin stuff, he was my father. I am Mark."

"Sorry, Mark." Joe replied softly.

"I won't take your resignation! I think you are a gift from God and I won't look that gift horse in the mouth. You are an angel on this Earth. If you think we need to, I will hire someone else to sit with the spotters so you can do your thing from anywhere you like."

"Wouldn't that be a waste of money, Mark?"

Mark laughed, the lines cracking in his face, "I spend more on food for the hauler than on your salary. No offense, but you work damn cheap compared to those engine guys."

Joe starts to say something when Mark cut him off, "You think I'm dumb! Well I know

you see visions. Just like I know Larry smokes pot, and George is drinking whiskey with his coke right now. I will take care of them if they become a problem. But you - you I will protect until I can't. Then I will throw my body in the way while you run from whoever you are hiding from, so you can get away."

Joe stands, shakes Mr. Martins hand, and walks out without saying a word. As he reaches the door frame he is flooded with images of a fire at the race shop and Mr. Martin dead at his desk. It is so overwhelming that he does not take the time to look and see how likely it is to happen. Visions of those possible futures happen all the time and rarely come true.

Instead of going home, Joe drove to the mall. It is late afternoon and school is out. The mall is packed with young people: Girls wanting to shop, boys wanting to meet and see girls, girls wanting to be seen, mothers wanting to be seen as young as their daughters, and a few fathers aggravated that they are at the mall instead of anywhere else.

The race spotter gets a Coke Icee and a cup of pretzel bites and takes a seat near the middle of the mall. The wave of possible futures flows over him. There are so many images that his senses are overwhelmed, but not like when he loses concentration. The flood of happiness and sorrow surrounds him like a symphony. He could stand up and change the future for one or another of the folks passing by, but he just sits and eats in the middle of the storm. All the rain drops of the future are swirling around him and he never gets wet.

NINE - PILLOW TALK

Emily rolled over and pulled up the sheets, not out of shame but the air conditioner was blowing on her side of the bed. She asked, "So you knew all this would happen?"

In the dark she saw the outline of his face as he answered, "From the second I met you."

"That has to be rough."

"It is. Sometimes."

"What is it like?"

"Confusing."

The detective in her kept asking questions, "How so?"

The shadow talked, "I sense the future and the past all the time - mixed with the present. There is no limit how far ahead I can see the threads of the future or how far back I can see the woven threads of the past. The past is solid, but the future gets murky."

"That makes sense. The past being solid and all."

"Well, not when you think about it."

She sat up excited, crossed her legs, and faced the shadow of her boyfriend, "Explain it to me." Emily loved to fall asleep watching the Discovery channel at night, and she knew just enough to know that what Joe could see was breaking all the laws of nature as we knew them.

Joe lay still and started his explanation, "There are theories involving quantum mechanics that allow a universe to be created for each decision we make, for each random outcome. It is only theory but from my empirical evidence it seems to hold true. Though, strictly speaking, I should be able to see different possible pasts as well. As near as I can figure, I am only able to see the past that lead to this present. The others would be inaccessible since the threads linking them to this present are severed when the decision is made that causes this present to come into existence."

"I want to say I am following you."

Joe laughed, "Don't worry, it is difficult. Basically I can see the past that lead to now, but I can see all the possible futures because we are not there yet. Like roads laid out before us."

"So can you still see the other futures after they have passed?"

Joe laughed, "No. That is a great question. A physicist I talk to via anonymous email never thought to ask that. You have put one of the great minds of our day to shame."

"I aim to please." Emily smirked in the dark.

"Now the future is a set of paths - or roads - or threads, but many of them go to the same place. I can see all of them, even the unlikely ones."

Emily lay back down facing him, "How can you tell how likely they are?"

"The roads are bigger."

"Huh?"

"I know, it is hard to understand. It is like trying to explain how you see blue, or what cold feels like. Sure you can use lots of words, but you have to see it for yourself. When I sense these things it is just like sensing now."

"You said sense, not see."

"Yes, I hear, smell, see and feel it."

"Oh, gawd. That is awful."

"Sometimes."

"When could it be good?"

"There are nice things one wants to experience again and again."

Emily put her hand on his chest and asked, "Wait. You can sense my past?"

"I could. If I wanted to."

"So to sense the past you have to try, but what about the future?"

"The past sometimes requires concentration and effort, the future is always trying to run me over."

Emily took a deep breath and asked, "So you know all the bad things I have done."

Joe answered truthfully, "Yes. I know all the things you think are bad, and all the things you think are good. I hate to sound soulless here, but I am kind of outside of morality."

"I have reasons for everything." Emily blurted. Then she realized that there was no need to explain. Joe knew. He knew about the married men she dated, and the one woman professor she dated for a week to get a much needed A in her class. He knew about the lies she told about her step mother to cause a divorce. He knew all the bad, and yet there he was. She was a ruthless bitch in the eyes of most people, but in his eyes she was just Emily. She tried to stop herself but it was useless, she was crying. Sobbing on his chest in the dark.

Joe put his arm around her and held her. She cried, he held. He held, she cried. She kept trying to talk, and he kept putting his finger over her lips as if to say not now. When she was done she asked, "Am I going to screw this up?"

"Not possible."

"Because I won't, or because you have already forgiven me for the mistakes."

"I am a bit outside the bounds of normal relationships. It is really difficult for me to see what the mistakes are."

"So when I fuck it up drinking and screw some guy in a bar you will take me back."

"You won't do that."

Emily choked back snot and said, "How can you can tell me that I won't cheat on you. I always have before."

"I would know. You won't do it just for that reason. If for no other."

Emily found a tissue, blew her nose and said, "I guess romance is out the door now. Next I will be peeing with the bathroom door open."

Joe laughed.

"I just met you Joe, and you act like we are married and will be married forever."

"Sounds like a good idea, though I tell you, my lifestyle does not lend itself to normal relationships."

"I will call my mother tomorrow and let her know. When should we schedule it."

"Whenever you like. Tell me when to show up at the courthouse." Joe said even though he knew that she would never call her mother, and would never schedule a date at the courthouse. They would never be married. He would never bring it up again, and she would not either. She slept, and he enjoyed holding her. Her closeness let his animal side take over his mind so he could block out the future. At some point he fell asleep with his arms around her.

TEN - RECORD PROBLEMS

Joe ascended to the spotter stand. It was a hot day in Kansas and the spotters were all in place for practice and then qualifying. Most just sat up there all day rather than go up and down the ladder. It seemed to the world that the spotters had their own club. Some brought small grills on qualifying day and cooked out when they were not watching over their drivers. Some brought books to read, and others watched movies or listened to music on their iPods. For all intents and purposes they were trapped on the hot roof with access to only one bathroom for all 43 spotters for 8 hours. First practice, then qualifying. Some of them were spotters for the Truck or Nationwide series. They got to do it all day and maybe spot for a race at night for one of the lower series.

Joe was lucky. His job was to spot for David and the 37 team. They were a small team compared to others, but with enough success and decent sponsors they made money for Mr. Martin, and they all kept their jobs. As David climbed into his car Joe already knew things would go badly. He wanted to warn David to not take his qualifying run, but Joe knew he would survive. It was going to be messy, but it was going to be necessary in the end.

"Hey Joe, you ready to go?" He heard David crackle over the radio.

"Are you ready to set a track record?" Joe responded.

"Why not. I would be happy to at least qualify."

"Well how about both? Now go ahead and check those belts and your head restraint."

"Already done, Joe."

Joe watched as the number 37 rolled off of pit lane onto the now empty track. David was the 4th car out. The first 3 cars had already set track records of 226 mph. This was unheard of on a one and a half mile oval. Changes to the the aerodynamics package combined with improved engine technology allowed the cars to hold more speed in the corners of the Kansas Motor Speedway's configuration.

As David took the green flag for the start of his two runs he was holding at 230 miles per hour. He crossed the start/finish line of his first lap with a track record of 235 mph. Then, in the long turn one to turn two stretch the car drifted into the outside barrier, careened off the wall, and started sliding sideways. It was obvious to all watching that the car was not under David's control.

Joe called over the radio, "Get the fire trucks rolling... David is out."

Race control monitors all of the race radios as best they can. During qualifying it was much easier since only one team was on the track at the time.

Fire trucks were rolling almost as soon as Joe called for them, but the on-track wreck was far from over. Sliding sideways the car deployed its roof panels to keep it from flipping, but the panels had the undesired effect of sending the car straight down the track spinning backward. If David had been awake he could have easily controlled the spin, and avoided what happened next. But right now the car might as well not have had a driver in the seat. The Number 37 spun into the inside retaining wall, still going over 150 miles per hour, and flipped over the short wall. The car landed upside down in small bit of infield grass. It had shed most of its kinetic energy by giving up pieces and panels to anything it came in contact with. All that was left was an exposed drivers cage on one side with an upside down driver strapped in to his seat and just beginning to regain consciousness.

"Wha... What the hell?" Joe heard over the team radio.

"You all right, buddy?" Joe asked.

"I think I am in one piece but... what?"

"You blacked out. Like a fighter pilot."

Joe got quiet as the crew chief took over, "You all right there David?"

"Yeah, chief. Just blacked out I guess. Tell the guys I am sorry about the car."

"You just sit tight and help those firemen get you out of the car. We have a backup."

Joe knew his day on the roof was over. By the time he got to the race hauler, qualifying was red flagged. It seemed race control did not know what they wanted to do. One of the other drivers who qualified earlier reported a blackout, but it was not as severe as David's. Stepping into the race hauler Joe was set upon by the owner before he could make it through the door completely.

"This is like Texas back in the CART series years ago." Mr. Martin said.

Joe remembered the reference, but had no memories or visions of it. "Yes, sir."

"I have one question for you Joe. Will people die if we race on Sunday?"

"If they don't change the aero package, or put on restrictor plates, Yes."

Mr. Martin said, "Thank you Joe. I have to go make a big fuss and make sure that no one dies."

Without another word the owner took off leaving the team sitting in the hauler. David was still shaken, but seemed more upset at looking foolish than being injured. Joe took his usual seat on the couch and waited in silence like everyone else.

An hour later Mr. Martin put his head in and said, "They are going to call for an equipment change to super speedway restrictor plates and set qualifying by owners points. And oh... David, your track record stands." He smiled and added with a sly grin, "It damn well should, it cost me \$200,000 worth of car."

Everyone laughed. Then the crew chief barked, "Get the backup car unloaded, and someone get over to race control to get the issued restrictor plate when they finally hand it out."

Eventually it was just Joe and David in the hauler. Sitting on opposite ends of the couch both looking at but not watching the speed channel on the large TV. Looking around to be sure they are alone then resting his eyes back on the television David says, "You knew I was going to wreck"

"Yep." Joe did not look away from the television now showing a commercial for a miracle car cleaning product.

"You knew I was going to be okay." David said softly.

"Yep."

"Why did you let me take the second lap?" David asked still not looking away from the television that had moved on to a commercial for a show about people racing their own cars for ownership of the cars.

"If I didn't, someone would have died."

"So you let me serve as an object lesson so NASCAR would come to their senses."

"You can say that if you like. I let a car get destroyed so no one would lose their life Sunday." Joe answered, still staring at the Television. The show detailing the breakdown of a racing engine was back.

David looked at Joe, "It must be hell for you."

"It is not easy." Joe did not look over.

They sat in silence for another hour before one of the shop guys came to drive David to the hospital. NASCAR officials wanted a second set of tests before they would clear him to drive again. Joe sat in the hauler and waited. The changes pouring out of race control were expected, and Joe could not see any dangerous events ahead. With David being checked out and the mechanics busy getting the backup car ready Joe took the opportunity excuse himself and meet Emily who had traveled with him.

ELEVEN - RACE DATE

They walked up the hallway decorated with dated carpet to a door that was in need of a coat of paint. The pair fell on the bed stomachs full of what passed for country cooking in the Kansas City suburb, and they both lay in silence for minutes. They could hear someone yelling in the next room and both laughed. Joe lay on his back, "Sorry about the accommodations. Race teams don't get great hotels. The driver stays at the track in his RV, but we tend to stay in a cheap motel."

Emily laughed, "I don't know what you think cops are used to, but this is better than any place I ever stayed while training."

"I know cops pretty well." Joe said to the ceiling.

Sitting up on her elbows Emily looked over interested, "Well, now I find out something about you. Mr. I know everything about you, but won't tell you a thing about myself."

"Yep."

Seconds passed and Emily could not let it sit, "So? How do you know cops so well?"

"I dated a police officer years ago."

Emily fell back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She waited, and after a few minutes Joe spoke, "Her name was Karen. She worked in Embry. Just a beat cop, or what passed for one in a town of 500."

"Did she know what you can do?"

"Not really. She never asked. I never told. I was doing my best to be normal."

Emily still staring at the ceiling, "You said, was. That denotes she is dead."

"Not much gets by you."

Emily did not want to look over and see emotion on his face while she grilled him about an ex-girlfriend, certainly not about a dead ex-girlfriend. She kept staring at the ceiling and asked, "So how did she die?"

There was only a little discernable emotion in his voice as he said, "In a hospital. She was in a permanent vegetative state for 3 years after an accident."

"What happened? Emily was searching her mind for all the police funerals she had attended or heard of. She could remember none from Embry, though it was 200 miles across the state. It would have been rare to travel that far for any police funeral, much less one that died years after whatever incident caused it. She waited and listened.

Joe coughed then said, "She was doing a routine traffic stop for speeding when a drunk driver hit her police cruiser. She was slammed between her own car and the speeder's car."

"You could have stopped it. You could have told her not to stand between cars. You could have done something." Emily rolled over and stared at Joe.

"No, anything I could have done would have only made it worse. A month later she was going to be caught up in a scandal that would have sent her to jail. She would rather be dead than a disgraced cop. She was like that."

"You can't know that for sure." Emily snapped.

"Actually, I can. She would have killed herself while waiting trial. This way she died a hero doing her job. Another statistic that might make police thing twice about safety during a traffic stop. The other way, she would have died alone, a suicide victim taking responsibility for theft of money from the police department that she had nothing to do with." He finished.

Emily looked at him for a long time then she said, "How close were you?"

"We lived together."

There was silence then he said, "I let her walk out the door that morning. Not even a kiss, no good luck. She didn't like thinking that she would not come home." It took a moment but he was crying.

Emily rolled to him, putting her arm over him, and asked, "Are you going to let me walk out the door to work one day and never see you again?"

Joe choked back more tears and said, "No. You will die of old age."

"Will you be there?"

"Yes," was the answer Joe gave. It was far better and less complicated than the truth. It was what she wanted to hear, and, if she had an immortal soul, she would forgive him the lie. Her life was a complicated tangle with thousands of points that could let her die. There was one path and only one path that had her dying at a reasonable age. He was not sure if she would take the offer, the chance of it seemed remote. But he would let it play out.

Emily knew that she had learned all she could right then. She was going to nose around public records when she got back to work, but she would let it drop for now. She fell asleep for a few minutes then woke up in that foggy state you exist in between awake and sleeping. Joe was awake and seemed to just enjoy holding her. She was happy. But she had to ask something that bothered her, "Why a race spotter? Why not a professional poker player?"

Joe laughed and said, "That is two different issues. Racing is complicated and the outcomes are hard to discern. I can only see the winner of a race about 40% of the time. For me, that feels almost completely random. Other sports are easier to discern. I like racing, it is one of the few things I can enjoy."

Emily was waking up more. She prodded, "So why not a gambler?"

Joe laughed, "Well the guys in Vegas are very good at spotting cheaters. They may not know how you are cheating, but when your winning differs from the norm they know you are up to something. I could do it for a while, but frankly it is more work than it is worth. And don't ask about the stock market. They are not as good at catching cheaters, but it is a pain to keep my gains at less than 10% so even the inept Securities and Exchange Commission folks don't notice."

She snuggled closer, "You never even played the lottery?"

Joe smiled big, "Once, just fifty thousand dollars. I have invested it well, and that is my

emergency living money."

"So you don't need a job?"

"Well I have to do something. I like where I am. Even though it is all going to change soon." He slipped. He was good at not letting people into his world. This woman had walked in, and was now inside before he knew it.

"Change?" She looked up at him and then closed her eyes settling back down on his chest.

"Change. It will be more fun if you let it play out."

She took his word for it. They drifted off to sleep.

TWELVE - AFTERMATH

The uneventful race ended in Kansas. At the end of the race the Number 37 team finished a respectable 5th. There were no incidents and it was an amazingly boring race for all involved. The reduced power engines let the drivers keep the throttle wide open and, unlike most races at mile and a half tracks, there was little in the way of jockeying for position. It was like a mini super speedway race but without the room to pass.

Joe lay on his couch reading the stack of comics thinking that he was going to have to acquire a new stack soon, pages were starting to fall out. And Emily was going to want to change that habit of his. She would want to change a lot of things and he would comply to make her happy, but it did not matter to him.

The door opened without a knock. Emily walked in and said, "You should lock that."

Joe lay down the comic and stared at her. He was in his autistic mode. Being human by concentrating on the present was tiring. He did not even put in the effort to try. This was going to play out. She had to see it now and understand him for what he was.

She chuckled, "Well maybe you don't have to. You know what is on going to happen at all times."

Joe sat up and listened. Emily stood over him and let loose, "You have to help me solve these cases. We have a stack of cold cases that can't be ignored. You will say you can't, but you can. I have seen you interfere. You interfered with my case and it turned out okay. Why not speed some of these up? You are not god."

Joe snapped, "But you want me to play as a god."

"No, use the gift you have for good." She pleaded.

Joe stood and put his arms at his sides, "No. It is more complicated than you think. I can't be your personal time machine. Choices have consequences. I can make some things better, but not everything. There is no perfect world just waiting for me to push the pieces into place."

Emily yelled, "You are a fucking coward. You are just afraid of getting found out."

Joe stood emotionless, "You found me."

"You let me find you."

"Yes."

She stomped her foot like an angry five year old, "So you are not a coward, and you can't be caught. Then why won't you do it?"

"I can't."

She snapped, "You are not going to change your mind."

"I can't."

Then the real issue came to light, "How could you let her die?"

"She was going to die. I let her die in the way that was best for her." He said without a hint of emotion.

"Are you going to let me die like that?"

Then with the same emotionless voice, "No, I will destroy the world before I let that happen."

She was crying. He did not move. She stared at him and said, "You really don't have emotions. You just fake it."

In the same calm tone, "I have them, I just get overwhelmed and exhausted. When that happens no emotion comes out."

"This is what life with you is going to be like?"

"Most of the time."

"Are you going to leave me?" She asked.

"Never."

"Am I going to hurt you?"

"No." He lied, but he already knew her true personality. She was going to act out like an angry child only to beg forgiveness later. It was not pleasant, but it was the future, and nothing could stop it.

Joe sat down and waited. Emily would walk toward the door and then turn back. She would do it three times then sit on the couch next to him and hold his hand. Touching her would calm the oracle in him and let him be a man. They would talk. She would be happy.

THIRTEEN - FLIGHT OR RIGHT

The shop was empty, everyone had gone to breakfast, Joe would find that out later but he knew it now. Instead of looking around he took his seat at the conference table. Still no one around. He knew to sit there and wait. In 30 seconds it would begin. He could run, but Emily would be miserable and would spend years of her her life looking for him. He pondered in the now remaining 20 seconds why he had to run if she mattered that much to him. She knew his secret and allowed him to feel normal. He could hire someone to do that, but it was not the same. She was there for him. He was happy, as happy as a man who knew everything could be.

The door opened behind him and Mr. Frances walked in followed by a large security guard. Joe struggled to avoid seeing the security guards past. It was so violent that it washed over the room like a flood gate opening. Walking up to Joe, Mr. Frances extended a hand and said, "Mr. Martin was nice enough to take the team out to breakfast so we could talk in private."

As the boss man of NASCAR talked, the security guard stood behind Joe. The sudden flash of violence in this big man's past shot through Joe's senses. The smell of sweat and the sound of fists beating on flesh. Despite his best efforts to avoid it, Joe looked into the guard's past. He saw the man, younger, being beaten while tied to a chair. The man doing the beating was in shadow, but was in an older military uniform. They were in the Middle East, the security guard had been a prisoner of war.

Joe turned from the big bossman and said to the guard, "Thank you for serving. I am so sorry that happened to you."

The guard asked, "What are you talking about?"

"The beating the Iraqis gave you."

The guard looked at him for a minute and said, "Sure... thanks. I guess."

Mr Frances started to speak and Joe held up a hand to stop him. He scribbled on the

back of a chinese take out menu left on the table for a moment then slid it across the table to Mr. Frances saying, "Don't turn it over yet, that would spoil the surprise."

The big bossman was not accustomed to being dictated to, especially when he called the meeting and was intending to do some yelling. He complied.

Mr. Frances looked into Joe's eyes and said, "I know Mark. I have known Mark most of my life. I have been in this business for... Hell! I was born into it. My father and my grandfather built NASCAR. This is a people business. It is built on trust. I trust Mark. He tells me you are something special. I don't have to trust you though." He took a deep breath.

The berating continued, "I have watched you for 2 years. You came in with no experience and proved yourself as a spotter. David trusts you. Mark trusts you. The team here has no idea what to think of you, but here you come out of nowhere and suddenly your team's serious wreck involvement drops to near zero, with the exception of that little incident in Kansas."

"Yes." Was all Joe chose to say.

"I don't know if you are cheating but it damn well looks like you are."

"How could I cheat wrecks?"

"You see, that is the part that bothers me. I don't see how you could."

Joe smiled, "Unless I can see the future."

"That is a load of horse shit. People can't see the damn future, son."

Sitting forward Joe leaned in and asked just above a whisper, "What was the name of your childhood imaginary friend?"

"Huh?"

"The name."

"Wiggles."

Joe leaned back and said, "turn the paper over."

It read:

No experience and proved yourself as a spotter.

that little incident in Kansas.

I don't see how you could.

People can't see the damn future, son.

Wiggles.

Then it read below:

What's this number?

1.7 million.

Mr. Frances stared at the paper for a long while playing the conversation over and over again in his head. Joe had done this only a few times in his life, but it was his favorite trick. Mr. Frances was taking it very seriously. Looking up from the scribbled on menu he said, "So how does it work?"

"I sense all the possible futures, and I see the past all at once. I have to concentrate to keep up with the present and cull it out from the noise." Joe said.

"So you can change the future?" Mr. Frances asked.

"I can suggest a path for others. I can choose a path for myself. I have an idea of what will happen, but no guarantees."

"That is how you had David avoid the wreck in Atlanta."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Frances scratched his chin and then asked, "So why did you let him wreck in qualifying at Kansas?"

"I knew he was going to survive. No one was going to be hurt, but if it didn't happen, someone was going to die during the race on Sunday." Joe said in a flat monotone voice.

"You make these kind of choices all the time? Then why are you here? You knew we were going to grill you."

"There is only one answer to that." Joe said.

"You wanted this meeting to happen."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Frances waved for the guard to move. The large man with the violent past walked over and took a seat at the table. Joe was no longer a suspect. The business part of the meeting was about to start. Mr. Frances did not hesitate when he said, "I want you to be my director of race security."

"You already have one."

"And he will keep doing his job. I want you to tell him when to throw a yellow or to red flag the race."

Joe tilted his head to the right, "That is going to change competition."

"We will work out what you will allow, but I never want another dead driver or fan. None. Can you do that?" His face was earnest. He was willing to use whatever he could to make racing safer yet still preserve the sport.

Mr Frances then asked, "So what's this number?"

"That is what you are going to pay me per year."

"I think you are easily worth that. Hell, you are worth a hundred times that. Why so little?" Mr. Frances asked.

"That is all I need to do anything I want for the rest of my life."

The NASCAR big boss man looked into Joe's eyes and asked, "So how long will you do this for me?"

"For the rest of my life if you can make sure no one knows what I can do." Joe responded.

Mr. Frances looked at his personal body guard to cue him to speak.

The security man spoke up, "It is my job to make sure you get what you need, and to insure that no one will find out what you do. Can you tell me what you need for that to happen?"

"I need a personal security guard." Joe had come to the real reason he stayed in the seat. He had to change Emily's life. He was not going to walk away and let another woman who cared for him die. He could fix her life.

"I can get someone who will keep their mouth shut." The personal security guard said.

"I have someone."

"Can he do the job?"

"Yes she can."

FOURTEEN - THE RACE LIFE

Emily pushed the door closed and locked it with a newly installed deadbolt. Like the rest of the off track staff, she and Joe wore matching NASCAR race official polo shirts and badges that let them pass through all the check points. Instead of going to race control they were in a large private suite that was originally designed to hold 30 people. Along the front of the suite there were 25 monitors showing all the raw feeds from the television truck, and a feed from inside race control. A pair of large recliners were positioned to see all the screens. Joe sat down and Emily sat to the right.

He said, "I told him I could just sit in race control or in a truck, but he wanted me to be able to see the track if there were a power failure."

Emily rolled her eyes at all the screens and said, "You know I hate racing, right?"

"Yeah, your step-dad loved it, so you hate it."

She looked at him for a long moment as he studied the screens. It was an hour before the start of the race. The race control radios they carried were mostly silent save for the occasional squawk of someone needing to move a vehicle or asking where someone was.

Joe had the radio in case of an emergency. He would be able to could just call out debris on the track if absolutly necessary. The plan was to have for him use a phone to be as subtle as possible. Just like everything else NASCAR did for safety, it was overkill. Mr. Frances had 2 phones installed on the table next to the recliners and a cellphone.

Emily said, "You know everything about me. And yet you still want me around."

"You sell yourself short."

"So, have you seen everything in my past?" She prodded.

Taking her hand he said, "No, I have avoided some things."

"Like what?"

"Old boyfriends. There are some things I don't need to see."

She let go of his hand and pushed his shoulder, "You are jealous. I love that."

"Why?"

She smiled broadly and took his right hand in both her her hands, "Sweetie, with what you can do, you could have any woman, or at least prettier women than me, and you decided to date this plain old former police detective."

He fired back, "You are not old, and you are most certainly not plain."

She leaned over, kissed him deeply, then said, "And you are a fantastic liar."

They sat side by side in the chairs. He never told her to, but Emily did not touch him or talk to him while the races were running. She knew instinctively that he needed to be alone to let the storm flow over him. As the race went on, she walked around the sky box watching him. Today was uneventful.

They repeated this scene at every race track. Joe was in his chair during every practice lap, every qualifying lap and every lap of every race for all 3 racing series. The repetition took on a tone of normalcy.

With 3 races to go, Emily began to wonder if they were going to fire them if Joe did not do something soon. Almost as soon as she thought it, Joe stood and walked to the phone. He did not have to dial but was connected to the race director. Joe said, "Warn the 22 pit. He has a loose hose that is going to let loose and start a fire that will seriously injure him and the firemen who save him."

Joe walked back to the chair. Emily just stared.

The main television feed showed a yellow flag and the announcers said, "Someone spotted oil on the track coming from the 22 car, but we don't see a thing." The talking heads bantered about how NASCAR could see things from their vantage point you just don't see on television.

The 22 car rolled to its pit stall, and the oil line let go. The pit crew was able to put the fire out and the driver got clear. No one questioned how race control knew there was a problem coming. The drivers assumed it was an advanced form of telemetry or just good luck.

No one ever asked what all the televisions were for in the private box set aside at each track. Stories were told but no one ever guessed it was anything other than an eccentric millionaire with a secret deal. No one ever died while Joe spotted for all the racers. In his career he stopped 214 serious accidents and sent security to aide dozens of heart attack victims before the first sign of symptoms. On race day, the safest place to be was on the track or in the stands.

Joe and Emily enjoyed their life, he enjoyed the honesty he could live in and she enjoyed the comfort he provided. They never married, but had 4 wonderful children. Three of them grew up to be perfectly normal, but neither Emily or Joe were bothered by the extra time they had to give to their one autistic son.

