

BONNEVILLE

Roscoe found God at 436.8 miles per hour.

"We've got a baby coming, you dickhead!" Shirleen's words echoed in his mind when the right rear tire blew. Over a dozen 360° spirals later he drug his vomit covered body from the intact vehicle. Ten years later he still held true to his promise. Shirleen was dust in the wind like pretty much every other woman he'd encountered, But Casey? Casey was a keeper. If Roscoe had one good thing in his life it was his son.

"A promise is a promise" was something his dad had spouted pretty regular, words being easy and all. Roscoe's dad left little pieces like that strung behind him. Roscoe was one. When it's God, though, shouldn't that mean something? No matter how much the owners cajoled him, he never stepped into the cockpit of another race car. Rumors abounded that he had lost his nerve. Maybe. He had definitely lost his need for speed.

Casey terrified Roscoe. Some kind of genetics had to be working there. When Casey went to his first carnival at four years old, he darted right past the merry-go-round to the little fiberglass cars with numbers on the side. A couple of years later it was bumper cars.

"Please, daddy, drive me, please!" His little eyes shined like blue steel bearings, spinning Roscoe back to his childhood. "Just one time, Daddy, can you let me drive it?"

It wasn't but a few years later he ran across Mona, not really his type, but he was intrigued. Her name fit her so well. It damn sure wasn't love at first sight.

Roscoe could give up racing but even God knew better than to ask him to give up cars altogether. He fit right in at the car rental agency. His brush with fame didn't hurt, having taken a

shot at the land speed record. It wasn't long before the entry level grunt managed his own branch of the agency. The money was okay. The perks were outstanding. The best part about it was the travel. The company was okay with him taking his son along on transfers when one of their specialty cars went to a satellite branch.

They were loaded up with pork rinds and Dr. Pepper on Highway 7 southbound from Fayetteville, Arkansas after switching the Lamborghini for a Hyundai Accent. Casey was still pumped.

"Dad, why didn't you open that baby up when we had it. I know it'll break 200. I Googled it."

"My job maybe, the thing that buys the pork rinds which, by the way, are perfectly okay to eat in this Hyundai."

"How fast will this car go?"

"Fast enough to get a ticket. You have to be on the racetrack to race."

Casey seized up. But not enough to keep him from scarfing down most of the pig skins, and not for long.

"Dad, check that out! We've got to stop!"

Roscoe had let the tight curves of the mountain road take him back to another time. He'd failed to notice the handwritten plywood sign stating "Fastest Go Karts in Arkansas" leaning against a barbed wire fence, but Casey was on it. "It's a racetrack, Dad! You said, remember? I'll race you!"

It's interesting how the rules get interpreted, but Roscoe had a lifetime of experience with this. "I didn't say we *would* race, just that you had to be on a racetrack."

"So can we?" Casey was unfazed.

"Whatever," Roscoe's said. He needed a pee break anyway. "If they're open." It was only go-karts, how bad could it be? He pulled into the red dirt drive, past the ancient, pine tree sequestered Airstream and parked by a converted stable. An asphalt track had been cut through the woods and piles of old tires lined the turns. As Roscoe was preparing to declare it a death trap, he heard the door of the Airstream slap shut. The woman who ambled toward him wore jeans stuck partway down in square toed boots, a black biker tee shirt and a large caliber pistol that hung low on her rather wide hips. A red doo-rag held back hair that cascaded down her shoulders like rivulets of used motor oil. Latina? Native American? Gypsy? Roscoe wasn't sure. It didn't really matter.

"Hey boys, y'all wanting to drive 'em?" Her accent had a Cajun flavor.

"Maybe," Roscoe said, "What's the deal?"

"Five bucks each plus a dollar a lap. You sign this release. I fire 'em up." She pulled some folded papers from her hip pocket. "I'm Mona by the way."

"I'm Roscoe and this little guy is Casey."

Casey shot his dad an angry glance. "I'm almost 10."

"He'll be nine next month. Probably he'll need to ride with me."

"Your call, you sign, you drive. If you can reach the peddles, you're in."

"So, how can you advertise the fastest cars?"

"My brother built these back in the eighties. Some German rotary engines he picked up called a Wankel. They have a wide power band and a shitload of torque. Clocked 'em at 75 over straight road. See that electronic timer on the back straightaway? It's got radar. Couple local guys can break 50 on that little chunk of track. That's pretty damn fast when you're 2 inches off the ground."

"That sounds a little extreme for a kid." Roscoe got that look again.

"We got helmets."

"See, Dad, we'll be fine. We've got to do this. We might never get another chance. Besides, you wouldn't even open up the Lamborghini."

If y'all have a Lambo this might be a little tame," Mona said.

"It's not mine. I just delivered it," Roscoe said. He looked over the legalese with a furrowed brow.

All that means is if you end up dead or dismembered my brother or me don't get sued."

"I doubt this is binding."

"Maybe not, you still got to sign it. He's already in jail and if you look around there ain't much point in suing me."

"What about insurance?" Roscoe asked.

Mona snorted. "Maybe y'all ought to just forget it."

Casey saw the deal heading south. "Come on, Dad. I'll be careful. You can pace me."

"You got a bathroom?" Roscoe asked as he pulled out his wallet.

"In the trailer, but you can just pee behind the barn if that's all you need." She took the money. They headed for opposite sides of the barn.

When Roscoe came back around to the business side of the building he saw a few dozen flat pan carts in various stages of disassembly. Half a dozen were in the pit area. Mona pushed a couple onto the track, checked the fuel and started them with a pull rope. "Gas on the right, brake on the left," she said. "Let 'em warm up for a minute then y'all can have a free practice lap" She turned on the scoreboard. "You know, Roscoe, you look real familiar to me. Could I know you?"

"I doubt it. I manage a car rental agency in northwest Houston. I have one of those faces I guess. I get that a lot."

The car was the perfect size for Casey. Roscoe had to stuff himself in. He took a practice lap with Casey hugging his bumper. The machine did have some balls. When he punched it coming out of turn four onto the straightaway, the drive wheels broke traction. His first official lap the radar read 38 miles per hour. Casey was still on his bumper. An increase in heart rate was pounding the adrenaline through his body. He held tight in the groove on the turns making sure that Casey couldn't squeeze by but allowed a little freedom on the straightaway. The little Wankels were singing harmony, 43 miles per hour on lap three. Casey was pumped too. Roscoe took turn one wide coming out of the straits and Casey almost slipped inside. Roscoe panicked and broke traction but darted back in the lead at turn two. *So this is how it's going to be*, Roscoe thought. He braked checked Casey causing them to tap bumpers. He heard an explosion. When he looked over he saw Mona with her pistol in the air, shaking a finger at them. They both

backed off. Lap three's speed on the straight was only 32. Mona folded her arms. Roscoe kept the turn tight coming out of the strait but Casey fishtailed around the outside and gunned it for the sweet spot in turn two. The kid came in low, but too fast, and went into a skid. Genetics took over. He turned into it. Although he clipped the barrier, knocking a couple of used tires into the woods, he pulled ahead and was gone. Roscoe spent the rest of the six laps trying to catch up, ending 1/2 lap behind. When he came into the final straightaway he realized that the 58 miles per hour that flashed on the radar board wasn't him.

Roscoe extricated himself from the little machine while Casey spun around him in a victory dance.

"The kid dusted your ass," Mona said. "He set a new track record by 4 miles per hour. You've got a driver here."

Roscoe's fingers were still tingling from gripping the steering wheel as Mona handed Casey an honest to God checkered flag. "Can I get his picture by the scoreboard? These hillbillies around here ain't going to believe this kid out raced them."

"What the hell was that with the pistol?" Roscoe's mind was on other things. "You could have killed one of us!"

"Not with blanks." Mona held the pistol out for Roscoe's examination. "Let me fix y'all some dinner. I've got some boudin from last time Mama came up. Besides, I done figured out where I know you from."

A man sized portion of the spicy sausage and rice left Casey's head lolling towards the arm of Mona's couch. The sun was giving way.

"We better get going, but thanks for the meal. I've still got some miles to go," Roscoe's said.

Mona shook her finger at him. "Nonsense, that couch makes into a bed. You'd have to stop somewhere anyway."

Roscoe saw that Casey had given in to the sandman. "I'd never argue with a woman packing heat."

"Good. I want to show you something anyway." She went to the back of the trailer and came back with blankets and a tattered scrapbook bulging with yellowed newspaper clippings. "My daddy was a flat track racer on the Gulf Coast circuit. They called him the Dirt Track Demon. I was nine when he ate a wall. My brother was 13. He really took it hard. Me too, I reckon. Mama collected up all the news clippings she could find and stuck 'em in here. My brother added just about everything he could find on racing and fast cars. He tried to race but I think Daddy dying like that made him skittish. Not me though, I was like Daddy. He always said 'It's better to flame out than get old and decrepit.' I like speed but they didn't let girls race when I was coming up. It's kind of late to start now." She plopped down on the sagging couch and motioned Roscoe to join her. When she opened the scrapbook it caught Casey's attention too. She pointed out a few highlights of her dad's career then flipped toward the back of the book. "So, who's this guy?"

Roscoe was looking at a younger, thinner version of himself sporting a black mustache and a red, white and blue fire suit. He was standing on the salt flats next to the American Arrow, the vehicle he had long ago sprayed with his gastric juices. The caption left nothing to the imagination.

Casey was wide awake now. "Holy crap, Dad, is that you?"

"That was before you were born."

"But, Dad, the land speed record? Shit, that's awesome!"

"Language, son. There's a lady present."

Mona snorted. "That's your dad. You didn't know?"

"Look, that's old news. I never thought it was important."

"It's the land speed record!" Mona and Casey said in unison.

"I didn't break it. I didn't even come close, plus, I nearly died."

"Better to flame out." Mona said.

Casey read the caption again. "437 miles per hour! Oh my god! That must have been awesome."

"I guess I thought so at the time."

They looked at a few more clippings related to the Bonneville salt flats. It was a couple of years later before the record was broken and the American Arrow had been retired by then. Mona pulled out the couch so Casey could stretch out while the adults sat at the kitchen table drinking beer and telling racing stories. Around midnight, when Roscoe excused himself, Mona grabbed his hand. "It's more comfortable back here," she said, nodding toward the bedroom.

"What about Casey?"

"He's not invited."

"No, I mean ..."

"I'm not going to tell and you're obviously pretty good at secrets." Mona was looking good through his beer stained eyes. He craved being tangled in those long black locks.

Like most of the women he'd been with, she took control of the situation. Like very few of the women he'd been with, she took great pleasure in the endeavor. Somewhere beyond exhaustion he put on some of his clothes and stumbled back to the couch.

The boys wakened to the smell of drop biscuits and homemade ham gravy. "Before y'all head out I was hoping to let Casey on the track solo so he could take a crack at his own record without any interference," Mona said.

The glaze of sleep vanished from Casey's eyes. Roscoe was uncommonly pliable. "Sure."

"Then I want to race you," she said. Her dark eyes spun him around. He would have agreed to anything.

"Sounds like fun." He dug into a breakfast with an unnatural hunger.

Casey broke 50 miles per hour on four of his five laps but never matched the 58 from the previous day. Something about human competition? Maybe.

Mona and Roscoe lined up side by side to start. Mona had the pole, her track. She got the jump on him and it was into the second lap before he had his chance. She was riding the sweet spot when he came in from behind, high and outside. He punched it and nosed to the inside, tight between her and the rail. Just as he passed he broke traction and slid toward the wall, almost clipping her front bumper. She nosed inside but he kept the pressure on and had her by half a length when they cleared the curve. He never gained much more. They screamed through the

straight at 54 with her jockeying for the inside. He pinched her out. She tried pulling around the outside but he was deep in the groove.

On the final lap he rode a couple of the turns high. She easily snuck inside and took the lead but he was on her back door in the straight, screaming at 56 miles per hour.

She took a victory lap. Casey gave her temporary custody of the flag. She stomped toward Roscoe.

"You suck! That was some sorry-ass shit! I didn't ask for that. You don't throw a race. What sort of message is that for Casey?"

"Hey, we're just having fun here."

"I don't *need* to beat you. I don't *need* anything at all from you. Just get out of here!"

"Hey, easy!"

"Leave now! Get your shit and go. I can't believe I... I overestimated you." She spun on her heel and stomped off, slamming the door behind her.

"I guess we should go," Roscoe told his son. Casey rolled the flag around the stick as they got in the Hyundai.

Miles of silence passed before Casey asked, "What was that all about. I thought you guys were getting along great."

"I screwed up. I let her win. You never know with women, at least I don't."

It was four months before Roscoe finagled a trip up Highway 7 again. The trailer was there but the sign was gone. He pulled in the driveway and found the track grown up with weeds. The pickup she drove was still there. A man with a gold earring and a spider web tattoo on his neck stood in the doorway.

"Is Mona around?" Roscoe asked.

"Nope."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"Nope."

"Can you tell her Ros...."

"I know who you are. She moved back to Louisiana to take care of some family business."

"So you must be her brother."

"Yup."

"Can you tell me how to reach her?"

"Nope, but I'll tell you what, next time I talk to her I'll tell her you came by."

"Cool, here's my card."

Spiderweb snorted and took the card. "Card, huh? Figures." The door closed, a bit more forcefully than was necessary.

The next spring Roscoe was going over first quarter receipts when his assistant came in. "Sir, a woman out here wants to rent the Lamborghini," she said.

"Lambo's out."

"I told her that but she wants to talk to you."

"I can't do anything. It's due back Monday."

"I've told her. She wants to see you. She asked for you by name."

Roscoe exhaled. "Fine, tell her I'll be out in a minute."

"She's dressed like money."

"Okay, okay, just a minute."

The hips gave shape to the little black dress but the large hat and Ray Bans threw him for a minute.

"My brother says you're looking for me," Mona said. Her full lips were not smiling. Her hands were supported by those fabulous hips.

"Yeah," he swallowed as his employees froze in place. "I am, I mean, I was. I mean... hey."

Mona shook her head. "Still the silver-tongued devil, I see." She opened her arms. "How about a hug."

Roscoe stepped into her arms and whispered, "Does this mean we're okay?"

"We'll see. What about that Lambo?"

"Next week?"

"I'll be in Daytona next week. What else you got, and don't try to put me in no Hyundai."

"Best I can do is an LT3 Corvette."

"I never drove one. Can you come with me and show me how?"

"What, to Daytona?"

"Yeah, but I'm driving."