

Race *to the* **Altar**

*Four Romances Come
Full Circle at Racing Events*

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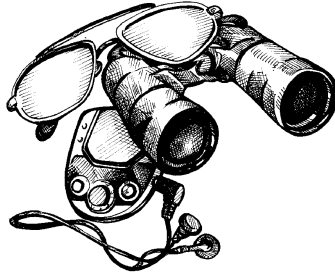
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Chapter 1



Why me?” Faith Wright tried to put just the right touch of astonishment into her question. She leaned back in her chair and hoped that the expression on her face looked unreservedly puzzled.

Maybe Emmett Grant would get the idea, on his own, that offering a job to her on his racing team was crazy. That way, she wouldn’t have to tell an old family friend—and one of the richest men in North Carolina—that she would never, ever again work within a hundred miles of a NASCAR racetrack.

I burned enough bridges three years ago.

Emmett peered at Faith for a few moments and then smiled slyly. “Well now, I can think of three possible answers to your question. For starters, I could say that a woman of your experience and temperament will add valuable capabilities to my staff.” His smile deepened. “Of course, we both know that would be an exaggeration. I currently have all the engineering talent I need on my team. Moreover, we both know how you feel about NASCAR.”

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“With good reason!” she said, before she could stop herself.

Whoops! No need to complain to Emmett. He already knows my whole story.

Emmett ignored the interruption and went on. “Or, I might remind you that your father worked with me for thirty years. . . that I feel a strong sense of obligation toward him. . .and that I’ve known you since you were a baby.” He gave a small chuckle that Faith thought sounded more like a grunt. “All of that would be true—but also irrelevant as far as offering you a job is concerned. My racing team is a business, and I never base important business decisions solely on friendship.”

He looked squarely into her eyes. She willed herself not to blink or be the first to turn away.

“Or”—he spoke louder—“I can simply tell you the truth. Tony Griffith needs a world-class spotter. You are the perfect person to do a disagreeable job that must be done well.”

“So you admit you’ve offered me a rotten job.”

“I said *disagreeable*, not rotten. Many of the jobs on a NASCAR team are unpleasant—like toting seventy-five-pound wheels during a pit stop or driving for three hours inside a race car that gets hot as an oven.” He made a face. “Tony’s spotter will also take a lot of heat. From Tony.”

She sat up straight. “Emmett, you have dozens of experienced people on your staff. Choose one of them to spot for Tony.” She added, “I can’t imagine why you think I’m right for the job.”

Emmett tapped his vast desktop with his index finger. “I know *you* know that a driver won’t make it through a full NASCAR race without the help of an effective spotter talking to him over a radio. That second pair of eyes high above the racetrack is

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essential for. . .” He hesitated. Faith noticed he no longer looked directly at her.

“A good spotter is a must for avoiding accidents,” Faith said, softly. “I’m a big girl, Emmett. I don’t mind remembering what happened to me.” She took a breath. “We both agree—spotters are essential. What’s your point?”

Emmett made a slow sigh. “Tony Griffith doesn’t feel that way. He mostly doesn’t listen to his spotter when he’s driving.”

“He sounds like an arrogant jerk.”

“Well, let’s just say that Tony Griffith is a special kind of driver who requires a special kind of spotter. Specifically, someone like you.” Emmett began to count on the fingers of his right hand. “Point one, Tony doesn’t seem to respect the other spotters on my staff. But he will respect you because you’ve had recent experience racing in the Nextel Cup Circuit—”

“I don’t drive anymore,” Faith broke in. “My. . .ah, accident was three years ago. I left NASCAR halfway through my rookie year. I’m a retired has-been—actually, a retired *never*-been.”

“True. In fact, your current status is my second point. Because you’re not an active NASCAR driver and apparently have no intentions of being one again, Tony won’t feel threatened by you—although he’ll have to admit that you know your stuff, particularly when he finds out you just earned a master’s degree in automotive engineering.” He wagged his fingertip to emphasize his second point. “Tony has a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. The pair of you should have lots to talk about.”

“Well, maybe. . .” She shrugged. “Keep going.”

“Point three, a good spotter has to be a good coach. You

have oodles of teaching experience.”

“Teaching at an engineering school doesn’t count.”

“I disagree. College kids are great at detecting phonies. You have a great reputation at Michigan State. I checked. Coaching skills are important when you spot for Tony. He started his racing career as an open-wheel driver. Tony became a NASCAR driver about two and half years ago, but he’s still burdened by lots of non-NASCAR ideas and philosophies.”

“What’s point four?” Faith was surprised to feel curious. There weren’t that many NASCAR drivers who’d begun their careers driving open-wheel Formula One cars. Tony Griffith might be more interesting than she’d imagined.

“You’re available. I know for a fact that you won’t start your PhD program and your new teaching fellowship until next fall. You sorely need a job for the next seven or eight months.” He grinned. “Would you like me to tell you your current bank balance?”

She felt herself frown. How much had it cost Emmett, she wondered, to get around the laws that were supposed to protect her privacy?

“I’ll survive,” she said.

“Sure. By waiting tables or flipping burgers.” He smiled again. “Except—and this is point five—you’re a sensible gal. Much too smart to fail to take advantage of an exceptional opportunity.”

“Emmett, you say that you know how I feel about NASCAR. Well, I suspect that NASCAR feels pretty much the same way about me. I don’t think they’d give me a license to be a spotter.”

“Not a problem. I checked that, too. Everyone believes you

made a simple mistake two years ago—albeit a mistake that caused a serious accident. Drivers make lots of mistakes every Sunday, and sometimes people get badly injured—or worse.” He reached over and touched the top of her hand. “I’ve already started the paperwork to get your license renewed.”

Faith spoke as evenly as she could. “I did *not* make a mistake two years ago.”

“I didn’t say that you did. I said that’s what people believe.”

“What do you believe?”

“I *know* that Faith Wright is smart, skilled, and professional.” He tapped her hand again. “Come to work for me. You’ll earn a great salary, and we’ll give you an office one floor down, with a nice view of Concord. When you’re on the road, we’ll pay all your living expenses. You’ll share a deluxe motor coach with two other women who travel the circuit.”

“A motor coach?” Faith heard her voice squeak.

“Yep! Parked in the owners’ and drivers’ lot at each NASCAR racetrack.”

Faith couldn’t help but smile. She’d stayed in hotels during her rookie year. Only the owner, the crew chief, and the senior drivers qualified for palatial motor coaches parked in a private area at the speedways, a short walk from the cars.

Emmett continued, “I travel to the track by helicopter every Sunday, so I turned over my personal motor coach to Jessie McKnight, my car chief.”

“You have a female car chief?” Another squeak.

“Correct! She started three weeks ago. And also a female media relations manager.” He laughed. “So why not a female spotter?”

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Faith found herself thinking, *Why not, indeed.* She steeled herself not to give in to Emmett's charm. *Keep remembering that you don't want a racing job.*

Faith decided to change tacks. "You overlooked one important detail about me, Emmett. A spotter needs to develop a great rapport with a driver. These days, I'm not so swift in the relationship-building department."

"Glad to hear it. Tony doesn't need a new relationship. He has a serious girlfriend back in Oregon, so he won't get amorous with you." He winked at her. "And if you were my daughter, I'd tell you to stay away from the thousand other good-looking guys you'll see at the racetrack every Sunday. A woman with a good career can run into problems married to a man involved with NASCAR. He'll spend half his life on the road, away from home."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Emmett gave a disparaging wave. "Don't kid a kidder. You have to develop a coaching relationship based on trust with every student you teach. Do the same thing with Tony and you'll be fine. It may take awhile, but Tony will come to like and respect you." He added, "And while that's happening, you'll have my full support. You'll report to me, not Tony. And you make all the decisions related to spotting. He can ignore you, but he won't be able to order you around."

"Look, Emmett, I appreciate your thinking of me, but for the next four years, I'm a student."

"I agree. But you don't have to make a long-term commitment to Grant Racing. All I ask is that you join my team for seven fun-filled months. You'll work hard, travel to NASCAR

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tracks across the country, see some great stock car racing, and go back to school with a significantly fatter wallet. How can you possibly say no?”

“Well. . .” Her mind filled with images of NASCAR stock cars zooming around her favorite speedways. And she’d have the best seat in the house. Faith abruptly realized that Emmett was right. She simply couldn’t say no. Working for Grant Racing would be a godsend—a perfect way to rebuild her dangerously depleted savings account.

“Well. . .okay, I say yes.”

“Wonderful!” He stood up, marched around his desk, and gave her a big hug. “I want you to begin work next Monday morning. We’ll set aside a couple of weeks to get you up to speed with our racing program and to finish your paperwork. You’ll spot your first race on the first Sunday in April, at Martinsville Speedway, in Virginia.”

She began to smile. “I hate you, Emmett Grant.”

“Nah! It’s too soon for that. Wait till you’ve worked with me awhile.”

Faith felt a shiver whiz along her spine.

Oh boy, what have I done?



Tony Griffith reached deep into the engine compartment of the Dodge he would drive next Sunday and felt the armored hose that connected the oil cooler to the engine block.

“It seems in good shape,” he said.

“It *is* in good shape!” Larry Connors said, two notches louder than Tony. “In fact, it’s brand-new. My crew always replaces

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critical hoses before every race. It's Grant Racing policy."

"Still, it doesn't hurt to make sure."

"That's where you're wrong, Tony. You go over our work so often that my crew is becoming convinced that you don't trust us."

"Well, that's their problem, not mine," Tony blurted. He immediately looked around the huge, brightly lit garage to see if any of the mechanics were within earshot. Thankfully, the four other mechanics at work on other Grant team cars were more than a hundred feet away. They didn't give any indication that they'd heard an imprudent exchange between Tony and their boss. The soft hum of machinery, fluorescent lights, and overhead blowers effectively soundproofed the big room.

Tony scolded himself under his breath. It was incredibly dim-witted for a driver to offend his team's chief mechanic. But these days, for some reason, he often felt on edge. He frequently started fights with people he wanted to keep as friends.

You know better. Stop being a jerk!

Tony smiled at Larry. "I promise—I'm not trying to insult your crew. I only want to be certain that I don't have any problems on race day. I've had bad experiences with exploding hoses."

"Sheesh, Tony! Last year, you had *one* lousy water hose pop during a race. It wasn't anybody's fault; the hose had an internal flaw that was invisible when we installed it. You coasted into the pit, and we replaced it in less than two minutes."

"I finished in forty-second place because of that broken hose."

"Yeah? Well, that's the thing about NASCAR racing—sometimes you're lucky, sometimes you're not."

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“Luck is for people who don’t work hard.”

“What? That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard come out of the mouth of a NASCAR driver.”

“Whoa!” Tony took a step back from the race car. “Seems I keep putting my foot in my mouth this morning. What I meant to say is that the best way to lose a NASCAR race is to rely on luck to overcome sloppy work. A winning driver needs more than luck. He needs a solid commitment to avoid mistakes—from himself and from his entire crew.”

Larry let out a noisy sigh and then began to chuckle. “Tell you what, Tony, it won’t bother me if you personally squeeze every hose and pipe in every race car we operate. However, I have to get back to productive work.”

Tony watched Larry walk away, across the spotlessly clean floor, and head to his office. *I have to be more careful when I speak to Larry. I need him on my side.*

“Just the man we want to see.” A commanding voice behind Tony caught his ear. He spun around and saw Emmett Grant walking toward him accompanied by an exceptionally attractive woman. She looked to be in her late twenties, with short, curly, ash blond hair, a compact athletic build, and large brown eyes that stared at Tony with unabashed curiosity. She moved in an unhesitant way that signaled her total self-confidence.

I wonder if she’s married. . . or has a boyfriend? Tony pushed the question from his mind. What difference did it make if a pretty girl was available or not? Everyone at Grant Racing knew that he was committed to Kathy Mullins, who lived nearly three thousand miles away in Medford, Oregon.

“Good morning, Emmett,” Tony said, cheerfully. “What

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brings the boss to the garage?”

“The fact that you spend most of your spare time in and under my race cars. I assumed you’d be here—and I was right.” Emmett gestured gallantly toward his companion. “Tony Griffith, meet Faith Wright, your new spotter.”

Tony felt a jolt of disbelief that morphed into an ache of astonishment. Emmett had done it! He’d followed through on his threats to hire a new spotter—without asking for Tony’s input.

“Faith is an engineer, like you,” Emmett said. “Plus, she has NASCAR driving experience. She’s the perfect spotter for you.”

Tony groaned inwardly. Emmett had acted precipitously, outrageously. So what if Tony had dragged his feet a bit? So what if he hadn’t looked for a spotter himself? Big deal! Grant Racing had plenty of people who could serve as spotters. What was the rush to bring in an outsider? He didn’t need, or want, an assigned full-time spotter.

I won’t put up with it! Tony focused his mind and began to choose the words of protest he would deliver when his boss was finished talking.

Emmett went on, “I searched high and low until I found Faith. Her qualifications for the job are remarkable. I know that you and she will get along splendidly.”

Tony opened his mouth to speak. . . then snapped it shut. It wasn’t so much what Emmett said, but the way he said it that changed Tony’s mind in an instant. The commanding tone of his boss’s voice—coupled with the forcefulness of his expression—convinced Tony not to argue. Instead, he made himself smile.

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One day, when he'd won a Nextel Cup or two, he'd have enough clout to give the orders, but today he had to be a good soldier. Too many other good drivers would love to have his job. It would be foolish to give Emmett a reason to fire him.

"Welcome aboard, Faith," he said calmly as he extended his right hand. "I look forward to working with you."

Faith shook his hand and returned his smile. "Same here." Tony saw a glint of uncertainty in her eyes that matched the way he felt about her.

She doesn't want to be my spotter.

"Where did you get your engineering degree?" he asked.

"Bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at Penn State, master's in automotive engineering at Michigan State."

"I'm impressed," Tony said, really meaning it. "And you were also a NASCAR driver?"

She nodded. "But I never got beyond my rookie year."

"In what division?"

"Winston Cup Racing, before the name changed to Nextel Cup."

"Now I'm more impressed—in fact, I guess I don't understand why someone with your training and experience wants to be a spotter."

Emmett jumped back into the conversation. "Save your answer for later," he said to Faith. Then he turned to Tony. "You'll have plenty of time to get acquainted with Faith this afternoon. Right now, she has to meet with the folks in human resources."

Tony acknowledged their departure with an unenthusiastic wave. Faith seemed pleasant enough. . .and her lack of