

## ***Off Ramp***

Joseph A. Beernink  
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Sgt. Jacob Perry left his patrol car running, parked next to the chain link fence, not a hundred yards from the off ramp. He had been here before, many times. Not because it was a good speed trap (it was), but because it was just that time again. March 24th. Shortly after five o'clock. The afternoon sun kept the Colorado air a perfect sixty-five degrees, still an hour from setting. The glare was not yet in the driver's eyes coming onto to the circular ramp, but it soon would be. That was the only explanation, Jacob told himself. Only, last year, it had been overcast.

He listened to the squawk of his police radio, and stirred his coffee by moving the travel mug in a circular motion, always keeping an eye on the exit lane. Traffic was heavy, as it always was on this corner on a weekday afternoon. Only last year had been a Sunday.

The presence of the police cruiser did cause a few brake lights to brighten, but the volume of traffic kept the speeders to a minimum. Jacob wouldn't have chased them anyway. He had more important matters to attend to. Today, he was just watching... waiting. He cracked his window to let the air flow through, but closed it immediately after catching a whiff of the foul stench of the nearby gas station.

Twenty-one years on the force had allowed Jacob to see many things that most people never saw. Mangled bodies. Drug busts. Shootings. He'd seen it all, and in one way or another, he could explain everything he saw. Well, almost everything. Everything but what happened on

this off ramp, each year, on March 24th. According to the patrol records, it had happened every year for the past twenty two. One year longer than he had been on the force. And every year, regardless of what division he was working, he somehow ended up here or involved after the fact. Twenty-one years ago, he had seen his first dead body on his first day on the job, on this corner. Since then, he had seen dozens – if not hundreds – on corners all around Denver and Colorado. But that first day never left his memory.

The second year, twenty years ago, he had insisted to his partner to go by this intersection on the anniversary, so he could deal with some inner demons. Something had stuck in his mind that year while attending to the victim, a young businessman. It struck like a cold breeze that went right on through him. A year later, standing just yards from the site, shortly after five o'clock, he had shivered, a long, violent shiver that penetrated his very soul. Seconds later, he heard the screech of tires, the blast of a horn, and the crumpling of steel. He turned to watch a car roll violently into the deep ditch on the outside of the off ramp.

Jacob reached the car in seconds, his partner close behind, already on the walkie-talkie to dispatch, calling for an ambulance. The car was still rocking, the dust of the highway crew's winter sand and gravel still airborne, landing around him. The green Pontiac was crushed. The driver, a young man in a business suit, lay halfway out the window, his arms twisted around his head at grotesque angles, blood pouring for a wound to the back of his head. There was nothing Jacob could do.

The crash investigation team told Jacob nothing he didn't already know. The victim's speed was only slightly above the posted limit, but not dangerously so. His brakes were functional. His throttle was fine. He had not been drinking. Their guess was that the sun had temporarily blinded him, and he simply lost control. Jacob replayed the situation in his mind a hundred

times, remembering how bright the sun had been, the position of his car, the condition of the road. Nothing made sense.

The third year, he had been the first car on the scene. He had been on his way back to the station when the call came through. The situation was the same. A young businessman, in a perfectly functional car, had rolled it into the ditch. The skid marks told nothing about how it happened. It appeared as if he had swerved to avoid a car merging in from the northbound turn lane, yet the witnesses saw no one there. Again, the sun was blamed. And again, it did not make sense to Jacob. And he noticed the timing, and felt the shiver. But he didn't talk about it.

The fourth year saw Jacob there by accident. He had already switched shifts, and was on his way home, approaching the off ramp, when he saw the dust cloud ahead. He knew before he got there, what had happened, but still was first on the scene. There was nothing he could do.

No matter how he avoided the area, he always ended up there. He even tried booking vacations for that day, and was called in for an emergency, and was there. Another year, he took his family to Mexico for a holiday. Still, around five o'clock Mountain Time, he felt the shiver. When he came back, someone had left the accident report on his desk. He became known as the officer in charge of the off ramp.

After twelve years, he finally convinced the state highway department to install a guardrail. It still wasn't enough. Cars crashed through it, or rolled over it. He had them replace the yield sign with a stop sign. Still, every year, on March 24th, around five o'clock, someone, somehow, would die on the off ramp. And every year, Jacob Perry would somehow be involved in the investigation. Five years ago, he began to stake out the ramp. Each year, he witnessed an accident which should have never happened. Three years ago, he stood as a flag man and slowed cars down. It still happened. Two years ago, he videotaped the accident, a morbid movie

he showed anyone who would watch. Last year, his camera picked up the terrified expression of the victim as they cranked on the steering wheel, trying to avoid something that wasn't there.

He glanced at his watch, wondering how long he should wait. He set the coffee mug down, and shifted the car into drive. He waited for the feeling, the one that shook his very being. The wait was excruciating, like the wait before the sixth ball drops in the lottery, and you have the first five numbers. His senses were tuned, his mind cleared of everything but the knowledge that the feeling would come. And it did. And Jacob did something he had never done before on March 24th. He gunned the engine.

Cutting off a gray Suburban, he flew from the parking lot and pulled a hard right onto the off ramp. He crushed the accelerator, sending a spray of loose gravel flying behind his cruiser. He covered the hundred yards in a few seconds, determined that this would be the last year. As he approached the merge, he felt the tingling get incredibly strong, and countered it with a forced rush of adrenaline.

In his driver's side mirror, he saw it. A sleek, black, Sixty-Five Camaro, tore along beside him at a reckless pace. Resisting the urge to swerve to the right, he pushed left instead, bracing himself for a crash that never happened. Slamming on his brakes, and keeping the car from spinning out, he screeched the car to a stop. Leaping out, he expected to see the Camaro flipping down the inner embankment. Yet there was nothing there, just the dust that he had stirred up and the smelt of burnt rubber from his tires and brakes. He jogged back to the merge to find only one set of tire marks. His. He shivered again. This time, though, the shiver was caused by the adrenaline, and he knew it. He crossed his arms and squeezed himself tightly, smiling. It was over, and he knew that too.

As he turned to go back to his car, he heard the blast of a horn. He turned quickly, expecting the worst, but only seeing an impatient young businessman, in the gray Suburban, urging Jacob to get his car out of the way. Jacob smiled, and waved to the man, got back into his car and drove slowly away. Five minutes later, as he pulled into the parking lot of the police station, he began to shake uncontrollably. He held tight to the steering wheel, and sat in his car, waiting for the episode to finish.

After a few minutes, he exited the car and entered the station. He walked straight into his Lieutenant's office, laid his badge and his gun on the surprised Lieutenant's desk, and walked out without saying a word.