

CHAPTER ONE

Finn wants to drive

Finn eased the car forward. Slam! He and his mother were thrown against their seat belts. "Stupid manual transmission!" The fifteen-year-old grabbed double handfuls of sun-streaked hair in frustration. "I'll never do this!" The car had stalled because he had let out the clutch too fast -- for the second time.

"Sure you will, Finn," his mother said. "If I can do this, trust me, you can. This time give a little more gas and ease the clutch more slowly." She held her hands at eye level palms down and demonstrated what his feet should do – right moved down while the left came up. "If the engine starts to fail, more gas." She brought her hands level again.

"Why can't I just drive the Audi?" Finn asked for the hundredth time. Dad's car was fast and normal, an automatic transmission but they were sitting in her old reliable Honda. Finn didn't hate the car, but it seemed entirely too much work. He glared his chocolate brown eyes at her.

"Because this is the car that's available. This or nothing." Her voice had a hard edge that

meant he'd better back off.

Finn sighed and tried again. Gently, gently. He gave a little gas and the car lurched forward but managed not to stall.

"Okay, second gear," called Mom.

Finn stomped the clutch and moved the stick down into second, eased the clutch and gave gas. Like a miracle, the car continued moving forward. They drove at a snail's pace to the Stop sign where Finn used both the clutch and the brake to stop.

"Great job! I knew you could do it!" His mother beamed at him.

He did feel pretty good about it, like the first time he'd managed to play his trombone solo straight through without a mistake. Just then a car honked behind him. Great, he was holding up traffic. Time for a repeat performance.

#

The next day at school, Finn was sitting with best friend Burrito at lunch, telling him about trying to drive the Honda. He and Burrito had been friends since preschool and over the summer, they'd had an amazing adventure in Germany where Finn was born. Finn had learned the truth about his father, who had died when Finn was a baby.

"So I'm almost to the main road and my mom's already freaking out because I stalled a few times."

Burrito grinned. He was a few months older, so he had his permit and had been

practicing.

"This squirrel runs into the road, stops in our path. I swerve to avoid it and it changes directions and runs in front of the car again! Suicide squirrel!"

Burrito snorted and shook his head.

"I hit the brake but forgot the clutch and the car stalls and stops short. Mom's airbag goes off and she face-plants into it."

Finn smiled now, although it hadn't been so funny at the time. "Powder flew everywhere. She was covered. When she took off her glasses, there was no powder around her eyes, so she looked like a raccoon." He shook his head picturing her.

"Wait, your airbag didn't go off?"

"Nah, she told my dad one of them must have malfunctioned."

Burrito was laughing out loud now, a laugh only he could manage. Known as 'The Donkey Laugh,' it originated way up in his nose while Burrito nodded vigorously. Heh, heh, heh, snort, heh, heh, heh. The laugh attracted attention from the table next to them. A pretty girl with long, dark, straight hair in a single braid down her back, looked over and shook her head.

Finn continued. "She made me get in the back, and although she'd almost been knocked unconscious, she drove us home."

"Are you in trouble?"

Finn shrugged. "No more driving lessons until after I pass the permit test. If I'm lucky, the Honda will be out of commission for a while and I'll get to drive the Audi."

#

The girl with the braid stood up. With her coffee-and cream skin and almond-shaped eyes, Finn thought she might be from India, like his dad's friend, Sekhar. Next to her, a six-foot-tall boy wearing a Vikings varsity football jersey also stood with his lunch tray. Had to be a senior, the boy looked like he could bench press the Audi. He 'accidentally' allowed the open milk carton on his tray to spill over as he passed, so Finn got a sudden cold river down his back.

Finn sprang to his feet. "Hey!"

The kid looked at him and smiled. His eyes glittered with the invitation, "Try me."

Burrito stood up, too and in the tense moment the air seemed to crackle.

The girl squared off in front of the football player and said, "aPOLogize."

Football blinked, looking from her to Finn.

"Or the deal's off," she continued.

Cursing himself as a coward, Finn stood there, unsure of what to do.

Football turned on his heel and marched away with his tray. The girl followed him.

Finn sat back down and wiped his neck. Burrito landed in his chair and said, "We coulda had him." Burrito worked out at the gym, played lacrosse, and was generally more ready for a fight.

Finn said, "I think he would kicked the crap out of us." Finn was fast and strong, but slim like many soccer players. The kid looked double his body weight. "Plus, did you see the rest of the team sitting there, just waiting for their chance to pound us?"

"You, maybe." He smiled to show he was just kidding. Burrito would never walk away.

"Come over after school. I just got the new Formula One game. It is insane."

"More racing, really? Yawn."

"Fine, then, don't." Secretly, he was a little relieved. His friend Axel was coming over and those two didn't really get along.

#

Twenty-five ninth-graders filed through the lab area into the engineering classroom. As they sat down, people were talking and laughing while opening backpacks to take out notebooks and pens.

Finn took a seat next to one of the few girls in the class, the one from the cafeteria. She smelled of jasmine. Again he thought she might be from India, with her single dark braid down her back, cappuccino skin and almond-shaped eyes. He didn't know her name because she never talked. Finn thought Indian people either had complicated names or they were called something that didn't fit at all, like Joe.

Over the commotion, in an amazingly loud voice, the teacher Mr. Lafferty said, "Five extra credit points for the best answer to this question."

On the screen at the front of the room they read: Q. How many first year engineering students does it take to change a light bulb? As the class quieted, he continued. "Write your answer on a piece of paper and pass them forward. I think you'll like what we're doing today. Let's get started."

A series of pictures of brightly colored cubes flashed by. Each looked like an unsolved version of Rubik's cube.

"Imagine you work for a toy company," said the teacher. "We're going to be designing these puzzles, building them out of wood, plus creating the drawings to manufacture them."

He held up a cube, three by three inches, and disassembled it. "You'll be able to take your cube apart into five pieces." He put down all but one of the pieces, which he cradled in the palm of his hand. "Each puzzle piece consists of three or more little cubes stuck together. The object is to take the cube apart, jumble the pieces and reassemble them. Only one solution should be possible."

Finn glanced at the girl he now thought of as Sekhar's daughter, who was staring at the puzzle like she was solving it in her mind. A little line of concentration drew between her brows, the only mark on otherwise flawless skin.

The teacher interrupted his thoughts. "First, you'll design your puzzle using one by one inch blocks." He pointed to the overhead which now displayed a computer rendered schematic of the cube. "You'll draw three layers of the cube on cubic graph paper. Next to that, you'll show the cube's five puzzle pieces." The screen switched to an example of the layers and the cube separated into its components.

"On regular graph paper you'll draw three views of each piece, from the top and two sides." On the screen were fifteen views of the puzzle pieces. Finn's head was spinning. He followed what Mr. Lafferty was saying, but doubted he could do all this. The girl nodded like it was all obvious. Was he in the wrong class?

"You'll take your drawings and render them with the software." He used his remote to advance the projector through five computer-generated pictures labeled with measurements. "These CAD drawings would show a manufacturer the specifications of making each part of the puzzle. Next we have the Explosion."

"Finally we get to blow things up," a boy called out.

"Just the opposite, I'm afraid. The explosion shows how the five puzzle pieces fit together to form the cube."

A new printout appeared on the screen. "Your last CAD drawing will show the cube in three dimensions along with two dimensional view of the top and two sides." Mr. Lafferty turned off the projector.

"We'll be working on this project for three weeks. Each step builds from the previous ones, so it will be important to keep up." He held up a bag of little wooden cubes. "John, would you distribute nine to each person? Deysi, would please give everyone a bottle of glue?"

John and Deysi passed out supplies. "We'll start by building our puzzle. For this stage of the project, you may work in pairs with the person sitting next to you."

Finn turned to Shaker's daughter, who glanced away as soon as he caught her eye. Stuck up, he thought.

"I guess that's us," he said.

The girl forced her eyes back to his for a brief moment, nodded, and looked away.

John counted out nine cubes for each of them and moved on.

Finn tried again, "Do you know what to do?"

She pursed her lips and nodded. She stacked the cubes to form one large cube three by three.

Finn did the same. "So that's the easy part. Now what?"

She lifted her eyebrows and cocked her head. Finn remembered learning to play volleyball and how everybody turned to stare at you when it was your turn to serve but you didn't know what you were doing.

"Five parts." Finn started messing with the little cubes randomly on his desk, not accomplishing anything but putting them into five piles. "Nine parts would be easier." Finn scowled at the desk.

"Nine parts would be pointless."

Finn was so startled to hear her speak, he looked up. "I guess so. I'm Finn, by the way."

"The soccer player," she said.

Finn glanced down at his jersey. Ever day since he'd made the school team, he'd worn some kind of soccer shirt. Today, he wore Manchester United, a team in Great Britain. "You follow soccer?"

"My brothers and father are fanatics." For some reason Finn could not name, he suddenly wished he were wearing something else.

"So, the puzzle," he said, opening his glue. "Just start gluing?"

"Parminder." The girl turned back to her cubes.

"What?" asked Finn, distracted.

"My name is Parminder. Don't call me Mindy."

"Right," he said. He watched her long, slender fingers selecting cubes and gluing them without hesitation. "Have you done this before?"

"This summer my parents sent me to engineering camp. Talk about a room full of nerds. Possibly the worst two weeks of my life." Finn noticed the underlying sing-song of her speech and the very subtle way her t's sounded a little like d's. He liked it. Her pieces were now glued together. Finn started gluing.

"So if you hate engineering, why are you in here?"

Circling the room, Mr. Lafferty checked their work. "Very good, Parminder. Very quick, too." He glanced at Finn's work, which didn't look like much. Teacher moved on.

Finn frowned. The cubes weren't cooperating, preferring to slide off one another.

"You're using too much glue," Parminder said.

Finn used his finger to wipe off some glue and tried again.

Mr. Lafferty said, "Okay, back to more important matters, our joke. The winning answer to today's joke is from Karen. Question: How many first year engineering students does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: None. That's a second year project.

"Announcement: The Engineering Club meets Wednesday afternoons starting this week. Instead of our usual robotics project, we're doing something very special, building and racing a hybrid go kart."

Finn and Parminder exchanged a glance. Finn would love to work on a racing kart like his Axel drove. He had loved vehicles his whole life. He would definitely check out the club and he was pleased to see Parminder might be there, too.

#

Finn jogged around the soccer field slowly. He was early for tryouts, needing to warm-up and stretch thoroughly if he were to avoid re-injuring the hamstring that had bothered him repeatedly since the summer volleyball season. As he ran, another thirty boys arrived.

At the opposite end of the pitch, he saw someone who had to be the coach wearing a baseball cap and carrying a net bag full of soccer balls. Standing next to him with clipboards in their hands, two girls laughed. At this distance, one of them looked familiar. She tossed her head

and he saw a thick braid of hair swing behind her. It couldn't be.

He ran a quicker pace back to the meeting point. Parminder and the other girl were writing numbers in black marker on everyone's arms corresponding to a list on their clipboards.

"I'm Coach Dan and these are my assistants, Parminder and Dani. I coach them both on Viking Girls' Varsity."

Parminder nodded slightly and looked steadily at the boys. Dani smirked.

"Time to warm up," said Coach. Finn found Burrito and stood next to him.

Parminder shouted, "Twenty right and left, elbow to knee. Go!" She counted and the boys exercised. Her commands directed them through the exercises, jumping jacks, scissors, squats, toe-touches. "Twenty trunk twists. Go!" They twisted. "Once around the field. Go!"

They ran, Finn matching Burrito's pace. "That chick is my lab partner in engineering."

"The screaming one?" Burrito said. "Poor you."

They had run three-quarters of the way around the track. Coach blew a whistle. "Pick it up, gentlemen."

It was a foot race back to the coach. They arrived panting, but tried not to show it.

It got interesting. The sprints from one end of the field to the other, back and forth at top speed were endless. At the water break, Finn thought he might throw up. Maybe he needed more conditioning. He looked around. Everyone was panting hard and sweating stains through their clothes.

Meanwhile, the girls and the coach chatted.

Next, they split into groups and went through shooting, passing and defending drills. The girls made notes.

#

After tryouts, Finn made his way over to Parminder. "So, you actually play soccer."

"Never said I didn't."

Dani walked over. "Awkward!"

Parminder looked at her. "How so?"

"Never mind." Dani grinned at Finn. "You play travel?"

"I did one season. I'm just doing rec right now."

"That's cool. You played in middle school?"

"Yeah. Are you a freshman?"

"Excuse me, I'm a Junior. Mindy is our only freshman. She's so cute!" Dani made a display of pinching Parminder's cheek. Parminder rolled her eyes.

"Oh, so she's allowed to call you Mindy."

Parminder cocked her head to one side.

"And I'm not." Finn persisted.

She smiled and lifted her eyebrows, daring him to push it.

Burrito dribbled a ball their way. "Hello."

"This is Burrito," Finn said.

"Parminder."

"Dani."

"Hey, what's up." Burrito spoke to Finn, "My mom's here."

"See ya, Dani. Later, Mindy." Finn grinned at Parminder.

"We'll see what you call me when you need help in the lab."

"C'mon, Finn." Burrito started nudging toward the parking lot. "Nice meeting you."

As they walked to the parking lot where Burrito's mom was waiting in the car, he said,
"She didn't seem that bad."

"What? She's constantly teasing me."

"It's so much fun."

"Yeah, you're a pain, too."

When they got to the car, Burrito's mom greeted them. "Hi, boys. How was practice?"

They both replied, "Good."

As Finn stowed his gear in the back of the car, he said, "Where's my phone?"

Burrito lifted his shoulders and shook his head. "No clue. Did you bring it to practice?"

"I had it at school today."

Burrito's mom, watching them in the rearview mirror, asked, "What's wrong?"

"He doesn't know where his phone is."

She got out of the car. "Did you check your soccer bag? Your backpack?"

"Oh, my backpack."

Burrito said, "I bet you left it in the locker room."

"Go check, Finn. Brian, why don't you go with him?"

The boys ran back to the school, but the door was locked. They ran around to the front of the school but no one was in the office. At that moment, Coach came out with Parminder and Dani. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I left my bag in the locker room, Coach. Can I go get it?"

Coach sighed. "Okay. Thanks for your help, today girls. See you tomorrow. C'mon, Finn, let's go."

Dani said, "See ya, Coach. Bye, Burrito. Bye, Finn."

Parminder shook her head. "See you tomorrow."

#

After school Finn was home alone playing a soccer video game when Axel texted, "Leaving my house in 5."

Finn answered, "OK."

Finn pictured Axel climbing into the driver's seat beside his mom. Axel was a few months older, so he already had his learner's permit, which meant he was allowed to drive with an adult. He had half-mast eyes, a hazel gaze that came from beneath his long eyelashes. His slim build, fair skin and streaky ash-blond hair were a perfect mix of Swedish mother and dark-haired American father.

Ten minutes later, Finn heard Axel's car honking in the driveway. Going outside, he discovered Axel behind the wheel, alone in the car.

Finn's mouth dropped open. "You're driving on your own?"

As one of the best kart racers in the country, Axel drove very well and never took

unnecessary chances. Except for the chance he was taking now, driving without a parent. "Mom and dad are out of town and the keys were in the ignition."

Within moments Finn had jumped into the passenger's seat and they were cruising along a winding stretch of road, top down, tunes blasting. Finn doused his brief pang of guilt with the knowledge he was not driving without his parents -- specifically forbidden -- but riding shotgun. Sun shone, waves called.

His joy was complete when he recognized the jeep ahead of them, one he'd spotted in the school parking lot which generally transported two of the hottest senior girls.

Finn leaned out the window and waved to them, calling, "Hey, girls!"

The car slowed and the girl in the passenger seat turned around to him. She caught her hair at the base of her neck to stop it swirling around her face. She lowered her chin and raised the other hand to shield her sunglasses eyes in a classic 'who's that?' gesture.

Failing to recognize them, or worse, having recognized them, she turned around in her seat and said something to her friend, the driver. Their car sped up. Axel gave chase.

Finn glanced at the speedometer. It cruised past sixty, hovered at seventy.

As they approached the traffic light, it turned yellow. Finn noticed a cop, semi-hidden on the side road. Before he could say anything, Axel slowed the car, but the girls charged through the light. Axel honked twice and the other driver shot a rude gesture back at him. Poor timing. In the road beyond the intersection lurked a traffic island, low and deadly.

The top-heavy jeep caught its left wheels on that curve. Finn and Axel watched as the car went airborne and flipped completely.

Axel put the car in park and both boys hopped out of their car and ran to girls. The jeep's

tires were still spinning as the policeman ran to the overturned vehicle.

"Stay back, boys." Axel and Finn hovered nearby. Finn remembered that it was important to remove crash victims properly, to avoid further injury, but he clenched his hands into frustrated fists.

Remarkably, it seemed the rollbar had done its job. The officer unbuckled and helped both girls out of the jeep to sit on the pavement.

"Just stay with them a moment." He said to the boys before running back to his car.

He pulled his police band radio through the window to his mouth and spoke into it. After a moment, he returned to the kids. The girls were leaning against each other, their eyes filled with misery.

"It's gonna be okay. You're all right. How many fingers?" He held up his hand outstretched.

"Five," the driver answered him.

"And you, what's your name, sweetheart?" He spoke to the friend.

"Jessica."

The cop turned to the boys. "Do you boys know these girls?"

Finn answered. "They go to my school."

The cop looked hard at Axel, who was about a head shorter than Finn, doubtless trying to decide whether to ask for his license. "I don't go to their school, sir."

The officer looked at Finn then back at Axel. "You okay to drive?"

Axel returned his gaze calmly. "Yes, sir."

"I do believe you are," said the officer. Well, I guess we've all had a little scare today, so

I'm gonna cut you the biggest break of your young life. Get back into your car and drive your friend home."

Axel drove Finn home following the letter of the law.

In the driveway, Finn said, "You wanna come in?"

"I probably need to get home."

Finn nodded.

Axel shut off the car engine. "Maybe I'll use your bathroom first."

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