

FINN'S CAR

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To my vehicle happy family, long may you roll

With many thanks to my Weaver friends who believed in and supported this project through all its twists and turns.

CONTENTS

Stupid manual transmission	1
Collisions	8
No passing zone	13
Smooth maneuvers	19
Sorrento Motors	26
Check the garage	33
Porsche hybrid	38
Track time	46
Test run	50
International competition	56
Race day dawns	64
Ready for Europe	71
High rollers play	75
Opportunity Favors the Prepared	86
Shocking Development	96
Anticipate the Curve	104
Green Flag	109
On the Beau Rivage	117
Epilogue	122

CHAPTER ONE



Stupid manual transmission

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 hair in frustration. “I’ll never do this!” The car had bucked and stalled because he’d let out the clutch too fast—for the second time.

“Sure you will, Finn,” his mother said. “If I learned, trust me, you will. Try again. Give it a little more gas and ease the clutch out more slowly.” She held her hands at eye level, palms down, and demonstrated what his feet should do – the right moved down while the left came up. “If the engine starts to fail, more clutch.” She brought her hands level again.

“Why can’t I just drive the Audi?” Finn asked for the hundredth time. His stepdad’s car was fast and normal, an automatic transmission; but they were sitting in her old, stick-shift Honda, entirely too much work. His chocolate-brown eyes followed the progress of a tricked out Volkswagen GTI crossing the intersection. *Sweet wheels.* He needed his own car. Girls like a guy with wheels.

“Because *this* is the car that’s available,” Mom snapped him back to attention. “This or nothing.” Her voice had a hard edge that meant he’d better back off. “Technically, you’re not even supposed to be behind the wheel yet.”

Finn sighed. Florida law allowed teenagers to get a permit at age fifteen, but he still needed to take the test. After much begging and pleading, Finn had convinced Mom to let him drive a quiet stretch of road outside of town. He took a deep breath and restarted the car. He gave a little gas, eased the clutch—*gently, gently*—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 out and gave it 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. And he exhaled.

“Great job! I knew you could do it!” His mother beamed at his success.

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 sat at lunch with Burrito. They’d been buddies ever since Finn’s real father died, and he and his mother had moved back to Florida from Germany. He and Burrito had shared many adventures, but the most extreme had been chasing a fortune in gold around Germany last summer, two steps ahead of a bad guy who believed the treasure should be his.

Munching a French fry, Finn told Burrito about his attempt to drive. “So I’m almost to the main road, and my mom’s already freaking out because I stalled a few times.” He took a sip from his water bottle and set it down on the table between the lunch trays.

Burrito leaned back in his seat and grinned. A few months older and wiser, he already had his permit and had been practicing.

Finn waved a fry in front of the drink. “This squirrel runs into the road, stops in our path. I swerve to avoid it.” He demonstrated zigzags with the fry and the water. “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. The car behind us taps our bumper. 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. We were covered. When she took off her glasses, she looked like a raccoon." He shook his head, picturing her.

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

"Nah, Dad said it must have malfunctioned."

"And you didn't get in trouble?"

Finn shook his head. "It was Crazy Dean from down the block."

"In the billion-year-old Chevy truck?"

Finn nodded. "His bumper fell off in the street. He picked it up and tossed it in the back of the truck. He didn't care."

Burrito laughed out loud, a laugh only he could manage. Known as "The Donkey Laugh," it originated way up in his nose and sounded like braying as 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 hair in a braid down her back looked over and shook her head.

Burrito grinned at the girl and turned back to Finn. "That's hilarious."

Finn finished the foolish French fry. "Mom flipped. I've never seen her like that. She drove home and made me sit in back. Well, the passenger seat *was* kinda trashed."

"What did your dad say?" Burrito meant Finn's stepdad, who had been Finn's father since his real dad had died when he was very young.

Finn shrugged. "I think he thought it was funny, but didn't dare laugh in front of Mom. He took away my phone. Mom said no more driving lessons until after I pass the permit test."

The girl with the braid stood up. With her coffee-and-cream skin and dark, almond-shaped eyes, Finn thought she might be from India, like his stepdad's friend, Sekhar. Next to her, a six-foot-tall, three-foot-wide hulk in a varsity football jersey also stood with his lunch tray. *Had to be a senior*, Finn thought. The boy needed a shave and 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 grunted, 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 have kicked the crap out of us.” Finn was fast and strong but slim like many soccer players. Football bulged muscles double Finn’s body weight. “Plus, did you see the rest of the team sitting there, just waiting for their chance to pound us?”

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

“Come over after school. I just got the new Formula One game. It’s insane.”

“More racing? Yawn. I’ll be at the gym.”

“Fine, then, don’t.” Finn would invite his friend, Axel, the only kid he knew who loved fast vehicles as much as he did.

Twenty-five ninth-graders fled through the lab area into the engineering classroom. As they sat down, people were talking and laughing, 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 imagined her from India, with the long, dark braid down her back, and burnt umber skin. 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, a voice boomed. The teacher, Mr. Lafferty, wearing a black Porsche t-shirt and graying hair pulled into tiny ponytail said, “Settle down, people. Let’s get started.”

Finn pulled his attention away from the girl.

“In this country, we love our cars.” On the overhead, Mr. Lafferty scrolled through a series of pictures, naming them. “A Model T Ford; a minivan; an enormous, jacked up, all-terrain vehicle; a Corvette convertible; and an electric golf cart. Here’s a hybrid.”

Ugly car, thought Finn.

Lafferty advanced to a Formula One race car. "This, my friends, is also a hybrid-electric vehicle, or H-E-V. Runs on carbon fuel and electricity. Interest in them rises when fuel prices spike. But also from a desire to decrease U.S. dependency on foreign oil and to protect the environment."

The Indian girl raised her hand. "What do you mean 'dependency on foreign oil?' The U.S. has plenty of resources, only a political unwillingness to tap them." Finn regarded her, noting the little line of concentration furrowed between her brows, the only mark on otherwise flawless skin.

Lafferty shook his head. "Not enough available today to feed our current rate of consumption. We need to be more creative in tackling the problem. Fuel efficiency is one answer." He advanced to a new image, a high performance go-kart like the one Axel had recently acquired. "Our semester project will be to take a gas powered kart and combine it with an electric motor to build the fastest possible, fuel efficient hybrid go-kart in the world."

Finn was startled. The project sounded amazing, but also like an amazing amount of work. He'd seen the progression of Axel's homegrown karts over the years, countless hours wiring, welding, testing and tweaking. Meanwhile, the girl at his side nodded like it was all obvious. Was he in the wrong class?

As if voicing Finn's worries, John asked, "Can we do that?"

"We'll be studying the electric motor in this class and learning about the internal combustion engine. The fun part will be combining the two and building the kart." He grinned. "To do that, you'll have to join the afterschool Engineering Club."

A bloated silence filled the classroom like a water balloon. Finn looked at his neighbor, whose tiny smirk mirrored his own skepticism.

"As an incentive, we'll be running the karts at the first annual Grand Prix of Palm Beach." Lafferty continued as murmurs chased around the room. "So far, a team from Germany and one from Japan have already accepted my challenge."

"No way!" Finn blurted.

"Freakin' awesome!" said a kid on his right.

Someone in the back called out, "Bring it on!"

Lafferty laughed. "I thought you'd like that." The projector showed a homemade kart built of scrap and spare parts. "Our vehicle will be more sophisticated, but these simple images will get you thinking about hybrid design."

He used a laser pointer to highlight. “The electric motor will be powered by batteries. When these batteries lose their power, the gas motor will be activated and used to propel the kart, and also charge the batteries.”

The room was quiet as he explained, ponytail bobbing with excitement. “So, the batteries will be charged by using the electric motor as a generator whose shaft is rotated by the gas engine. Once the batteries contain enough power to sustain propulsion of the kart, the gasoline engine will be deactivated and the electric motor will be reactivated.”

Lafferty continued. “Let’s look at a simple wiring design for a gas powered kart engine plus electric motor. For this stage of the project, you may work with the person sitting next to you.”

Finn turned to his new partner, who glanced away as soon as he caught her eye. *Stuck up*. Finn groaned inwardly, but attempted a cheerful voice. “I guess that’s us.”

She met his gaze with wide, dark eyes, nodded once, and looked away quickly again.

Shy?

The teacher handed out wiring diagrams. “Fill in the blanks with the list of vocabulary words on the left hand side of the sheet.”

Finn scanned the worksheet and read aloud. “Voltmeter, battery, motor-generator, and gas engine. Do you know about this stuff?”

She pursed her lips, nodded, and filled in a few blanks, keeping her eyes on the worksheet.

Finn copied her answers. “So, that’s the easy part. Now what about ammeter, armature, field, and voltage regulator?”

She turned to him, 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.

Finn pulled out his phone and started typing. “I’ll just look up some of these words.”

“Make yourself useful, so to speak.”

Finn’s face burned. He kept his eyes on his phone. “I’m Finn, by the way.”

“The soccer player,” she said.

Finn glanced down at his jersey. Nearly every day, he wore some kind of soccer shirt. Today, he wore Manchester United, a team in Great Britain. “You follow soccer?”

“My family are fanatics.”

For some reason Finn couldn't name, he suddenly wished he were wearing something else. The teacher circled the room.

She asked him, "Why would we need an ammeter *and* a voltmeter?"

Mr. Lafferty answered, "The voltmeter shows battery voltage during charge and discharge mode; the ammeter shows rate of discharge during electric motor mode, and rate of charge during gas engine mode."

"Oh. Stupid question." The girl turned back to her worksheet.

Finn wondered what they were talking about.

"Parminder." It sounded like, *Par-MIN-der*.

"What?" asked Finn, distracted.

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

"Right," he said. He watched her long, slender fingers gripping the pencil and filling in blanks 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 subtle way her t's sounded a little like d's. In spite of himself, he liked it.

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

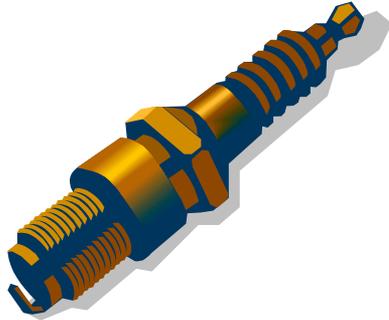
Circling the room, Mr. Lafferty checked their work. "Very good, Parminder. Very quick, too." He glanced at Finn's work, half the sheet completed.

The teacher moved on. "Okay, back to more important matters. The Engineering Club meets Wednesday afternoons starting this week. Like I said, instead of our usual robotics project, we'll be building and racing a hybrid go-kart. I hope to see all of you there."

Finn would love to drive a racing kart like the one Axel drove. He would definitely check out the club. His eyes slid over to Parminder, who scribbled the word "Wednesday" in her notebook.

He was pleased to see Parminder might be there, too.

CHAPTER TWO



Collisions

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 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 picked up the pace back to the coach. The girls 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 Finn. 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 asked. "Poor you."

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

The boys raced 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 sweat stains soaked through their clothes.

Meanwhile, the girls chatted with the coach.

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 nodded their way, then 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 him toward the parking lot. "Nice meeting you."

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

“What? She’s constantly teasing me.”

“But 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 searching used car websites on his phone when Axel texted, "Leaving my house now."

Finn answered, "Kk."

Finn pictured Axel racing past his mom to the driver’s seat. Axel was a few months older, so he already had his learner’s permit, which meant he was allowed to drive with an adult.

Ten minutes later, Finn heard Axel’s car honking in the driveway. Going outside, he discovered Axel behind the wheel of his mother’s Lexus, no mom in sight.

Finn’s mouth dropped open. “You’re driving alone?”

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 weren’t.”

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 simply 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 transporting two of the hottest senior girls at school.

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

The car slowed and the driver turned toward 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 sun-glassed eyes in a classic “who’s that?” gesture.

Failing to recognize them, or worse, having recognized them, she turned and said something to the girl next to her. 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 the curb. 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 the 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 his hands clenched into frustrated fists.

Remarkably, it seemed the roll bar 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 boys the biggest break of your young life.” The officer’s eyes narrowed at Axel. “Get back into your car and drive your friend home.”

Axel complied obediently and drove Finn home, following the letter of the law.

In the driveway, Finn asked, “You wanna come in?”

“I probably need to get home.”

Finn nodded.

Axel shut off the car engine instead. “Maybe I’ll use your bathroom first.”