



*Chasing*  
**CHECKERS**

**CHRISTOPHER  
HINCHCLIFFE**

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## Prologue

Teddy squirmed in his seat. The safety straps were crushing his chest. He felt as if he couldn't breathe.

*Oh, god. What if I pass out? He closed his eyes and focused on his breath. Come on. This isn't your first rodeo. It's just like any other race.*

Except it wasn't. This was the exact opposite of “any other race.”

Even before he was old enough to have a driver's licence, Teddy had raced cars. He started with go-karts when he was seven years old. Each year, as he got bigger, his ride got bigger too—from four-cycle lawnmower engine karts to two-cycle; from shifter karts to Formula Fords. He jumped at the chance to drive anything with a gas pedal—just so long as his foot could reach it. “Brake pedals are optional, right, Teddy?” his dad used to joke.

Today, his seventeenth birthday, Teddy found himself sitting in a brand-new 145-horsepower Formula 2000. It felt like an oven. The sun was beating down hard, baking the asphalt beneath the car. The rumbling engine directly behind his seat warmed his back. He hadn't even left the pits and his thick racing suit was already soaked in sweat. To distract himself, he closed his eyes and tried to visualize the course.

Teddy was no stranger to the track at Rock Point Racing in Morton Falls, Ontario. Everyone called it "Motown." Aside from a few farms, and a bed and breakfast that used to be an old mill, the race track was about the only interesting thing in the area. Teddy made his first visit when he was five. His dad was what you might call a "weekend warrior." He drove in a casual series for vintage-sports-car enthusiasts—mostly middle-aged men who believed that in some alternate universe they could have been professional racers. American classics like Corvettes and Chargers, or British beauties like MGBs and his dad's own gorgeous Lotus 7—there was a class for just about anything with an engine.

Bright and early every Saturday during the summer, Teddy and his dad would make the three-hour drive to Motown from their home in the suburbs of Toronto. Teddy soaked it up. He loved learning all he could about racing and race cars. Folks around the track told him

that by the time he entered high school, he would have a PhD in the history of motorsports.

Between races, the organizers of the vintage series held open sessions. Fans and their families could take a few laps around the track in their own less-vintage (and usually less-sporty) vehicles. Teddy never missed a chance to ride with his dad.

Today was only his second day on the track in an actual race car. But Teddy already knew each turn by heart. The years he spent riding shotgun with his dad had paid off. He had an instinctive feel for every bend, every straightaway, and every rolling hill. The hills were the track's signature feature. Teddy could see them all in his mind's eye.

He opened his eyes and waited for the signal to move. The powerful Deutsche engine growled at his back. He could feel his heart thumping hard in his chest. He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. Then he readjusted it. Teddy knew he should have felt calm, cool, and confident. This was his turf. Instead, he had the distinct impression that he was about to need a change of underwear.

# Chapter 1

Teddy walked into his bedroom in a daze. He sat down on the bed and stared at the wall. His head was spinning. His knee bounced nervously and his hands trembled. He felt as if all the warmth in his body was being sucked into the pit of his stomach. He tried to shake it off. He rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his short light-brown hair. The phone beside him dinged.

Teddy suspected that his girlfriend, Leah, was planning something for his upcoming birthday—a surprise party, he figured. She wasn't very good at hiding it. All day she'd been giving him over-complicated answers to simple questions about the weekend, and she'd get a little too excited if he made a suggestion. She would text him: "OMG, yes, 6pm is perfect. Let's definitely meet then." And then a few seconds later: "Wait, no, can we make it

6:15? No, 6:20—that’s perfect.” Winky face. Smiley face. Big smiley face.

Teddy just shook his head. He hated having to play dumb. Still, he couldn’t help but smile. She was always doing stuff like this, going out of her way for people. She had a knack for making you feel special.

He stared at the phone. He was having trouble focusing. Leah was going on about this delicious piece of chocolate cake she’d just eaten. She’d even sent him a photo of a plate smeared with dark-brown goo and crumbs. “Don’t you just loooooove chocolate cake?”

He was used to her sending photos of food, but if he’d been less distracted he would have realized she was trying to suss out what kind of cake to get for his party. (Answer: Dairy Queen ice cream cake, obviously.) Instead, he replied automatically: “Who doesn’t?”

Teddy’s mind was stuck on the phone call he’d just received. He seriously considered pinching himself—it was that unreal. Greg Godwin, the owner and head instructor of the Rock Point Racing Academy, had just offered him a seat in the Firebrand National Shootout.

The shootout was a once-in-a-lifetime event. The prize: a seat in a brand-new North American open-wheel series called Formula Firebrand. Almost all of the cars in the series already had drivers. Most of them were at least two years older than Teddy and had a lot more racing experience. Some had even driven as substitute drivers

for major teams in the AmRun Light Series, the feeder series for the top echelon of North American motor-sports—AmRun Pro. But the series founder had left open three wild-card seats. These seats would be offered to the top three finishers at the shootout.

All the major racing academies in Canada had been asked to nominate one driver who showed promise and could be competitive in this new series. Greg had chosen Barry Wilcox, a friendly, talented driver a year older than Teddy.

Teddy had known Greg for what felt like his whole life. Greg had taken an active interest in his driving career from the beginning. So Teddy hadn't been especially surprised when his dad called him into the other room to "have a word with Greg on the phone."

"Hi, Greg," said Teddy.

"Chex, how the heck are ya?"

Greg had nicknames for everyone. Teddy told people that "Chex" came from all the checkered flags he'd collected over the years. In go-kart races, the winner got to keep the flag as part of the prize. He felt this was a better story than the truth, which he kept a secret from almost everyone.

"Good, thanks, you?"

"Great, glad to hear it. So, look, you turn seventeen this weekend, right?"

“Hmm, let me think.” Teddy pretended to calculate in his head. “Carry the one . . . yup sounds right.”

“Spectacular. Listen, Chex, I’ve got some good news. Pinball’s sick. Like really sick.”

Pinball was Greg’s nickname for Barry, who once touched the wall in the same spot three times in a single race without crashing and *still* managed to finish on the podium.

“Jeez, Greg, that’s a bit harsh.”

“Hilarious,” said Greg, sarcastically. “You didn’t let me finish. Look at you, always in such a hurry. Makes me even more sure I’m making the right move.”

“What move?”

“Chex, you know about the shootout this weekend, right?”

*Duh*, thought Teddy.

“Well, I need you to take Pinball’s seat. Since you’ll be seventeen by then, you’re just old enough to qualify. And I can’t think of anyone better. Whaddya say?”

Teddy felt like he’d been punched in the gut. He quickly put a hand on the wall for support and inhaled deeply through his nose.

“Uh, I mean, thanks, but I can think of, like, at least a dozen guys more qualified. Surely, they aren’t *all* sick.”

“That’s gratitude for ya. And don’t call me Shirley!”

“Huh?” It was all a bit much. The wall wasn’t cutting it. Teddy glanced around the hallway hoping a chair had magically appeared.

“Let me say it again. Pinball’s sick. Caught *e-bola* or *e-coli* or *e-something*. Point is, ’e’s not gonna be doing any racing this weekend so, well, you’re my guy.”

Teddy took a second to let the words sink in. Greg was asking *him* to ride in the shootout. *The* shootout. He did his best to collect himself.

“OK. First, Greg, I mean, wow, thanks. I mean, like, seriously, thank you. I’m absolutely honoured that you would think of me.” Teddy had a sudden flash of doubt. Was this a birthday prank?

“Still there?” Greg’s voice sounded distant. The phone had drifted away from Teddy’s face.

“Yes. I mean, yes. Yes! Of course I’m in. Greg, this is, I don’t even know what this is.”

“It’s short notice is what it is. OK, great. Glad you’re finally catching on. There’s a lot to organize and not a lot of time. Put your dad back on the phone, would you? I need to sort out some details with him. We’ll speak soon. Ciao for now!”

Teddy had completely forgotten that his dad was there. He was beaming down at him, barely able to contain his excitement. He didn’t say anything. Instead, he gave Teddy a wink, took the phone from his hand,

turned away, and started talking and laughing. Teddy didn't hear a word of it as he walked back into his room.

He stared at the phone trying to think of what to say to Leah.

Finally, he sent a reply: "Hey, can I call you? I need to tell you something."

An hour later, Leah rushed up to him in the Tim Hortons' parking lot, squealing with delight. Her long dark-brown ponytail bounced behind her. She gave him a big hug.

"Oh. My. God." She punctuated each word with a kiss on the cheek. "I'm so proud of you! This is amazing. You're gonna do great. How do you feel? Are you excited? Of course you are. Stupid question."

She detached herself from Teddy and took both his hands in hers. "Hey, what's wrong? You're barely smiling."

"Well, it's good to see you, too," said Teddy. "No, I'm fine, really. I'm still trying to wrap my head around it is all. I can't believe it."

"Whatever," said Leah, dragging Teddy towards the glass doors leading into the brown-and-red brick building. "This calls for Iced Capps, on me."

He smiled as she led him across the sidewalk. Teddy had never understood what Leah saw in him. He wasn't the most popular guy in school, not by a long shot. He

wasn't big or athletic like the football and rugby players—he was actually a little on the short side and slight in build. And he'd only recently graduated from the dorky bowl cut he'd had since kindergarten to the slightly cooler short and messy look.

They were hit with a cool blast of air conditioning, a refreshing contrast to the sticky, humid mess that was Southern Ontario in July. Teddy took a deep breath and inhaled the familiar smells: brewing coffee, baking donuts, and industrial-strength cleaning product. The combination of air conditioning and coffee shop aromas made the place feel both warm and cold at the same time. They walked up to the counter.

“Two *large* Iced Capps please,” Leah said to the girl at the cash register. She looked back at Teddy and grinned widely.

“Actually, just one is fine,” Teddy said to the girl.

“What? You don't want one?”

“You know those aren't really my thing.”

“Well, normally, I know. But this is a *special occasion*. We're celebrating.”

“I know. I think I'll just get a glazed donut, though. And a fruit punch, please,” Teddy said to the girl.

Leah shook her head. “You *always* get that. You're such a Plain Jane.”

“Guilty as charged, I guess. What can I say, I know what I like.”

“Fair enough. Good thing that includes me,” she said, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Teddy blushed. They had been dating for over a year, but public displays of affection still made him squirm.

When they had their drinks and food they sat down at a table by the window.

“OK, tell me everything,” said Leah.

“Well, I don’t know much more than I’ve already told you. Barry got some sort of infection that has him flat out. The doctors say he’ll be in bed for at least a week.”

“And Greg asked *you* to take his place? Sorry, I mean, obviously he picked you.”

Teddy pretended to look hurt. Leah reached across the table and playfully punched his arm. He laughed.

“No, you’re absolutely right. I can’t believe he asked me. There’s a bunch of guys who are older and better drivers than I am. Scott, for one. And Dave. Heck, even Patrick is at least as good as I am.” As he listed off the names, he began to slump in his chair, his shoulders rounding forward. Disbelief was giving way to doubt.

“Well, did he give you any more of an explanation?” asked Leah.

“Not really. He said we’d talk about it more on Friday when I go up to Motown.”

“Well, clearly he sees something in you.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He shifted in his seat. He knew Leah was right. After all, the school’s reputation was on the

line too. Greg wouldn't have suggested that Teddy drive if he thought he would embarrass himself.

"What do you mean 'maybe'?"

"I don't know. I keep thinking the whole thing is a joke or something. Like I'm gonna get there and everyone's gonna be like, *Psyche!*"

Leah's face turned serious. "Teddy, I can guarantee you that's not going to happen."

He was startled by her change in tone. "Oh yeah, what makes you so sure?"

"Because people stopped saying 'psyche,' like, before we were born. Seriously, you need to stop watching movies with your brother. Has Matt even seen anything made this millennium?" Leah grinned mischievously.

Despite himself, Teddy laughed. She had a point. Watching movies was about the only thing Teddy did with his brother. Matt was twelve years older, and hadn't lived at home since Teddy was six. Plus, Matt wasn't much interested in racing, so they didn't have a whole lot in common. But after he turned twelve, Teddy had been allowed to start spending the occasional weekend with Matt at his apartment in the city, and the two of them spent a lot of time watching movies from the 1990s. Teddy was actually quite proud of the fact that he could quote *Wayne's World* as easily as he could sing the national anthem. But somehow he could never remember to take out the garbage. It drove his folks crazy.

“Whatever,” Teddy said. “You just don’t appreciate classic art.”

“I’ll try to remember that next time you’re talking out of your butt like Ace Ventura,” Leah replied.

Teddy resisted the temptation to give Leah a lesson in how to train dolphins.

“Anyway,” he said, changing the subject, “none of this is for sure yet. There’s one teensy tiny thing that I need to do first.”

Teddy was dreading it—the conversation with his mother.

## Thank You

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