

chapter **1**

Hands down, British Columbia is the best friggin' backyard in the world. Endless roads overflowing with chicanes, hairpins, and switchbacks weave their way through the Rockies and fold back on themselves like ribbon candy. On either side of me, I've got these massive eight-hundred-year-old Douglas fir trees that are so big their trunks are wider than an Austin Mini and so tall I'm like a sparrow in their shadows. Whenever stuff gets to me, brings me down, all I need to do is hop on my bike, twist the throttle, and ride.

I take my turn on lead slicing up the curves. On the steep inclines I downshift and climb toward the cloudless skies, and on the downhill spirals I give the bike a break, rev low, letting 'er coast. Minus the horsepower and engine noise, this is the closest I think I'll ever get

to flying. On the next straightaway, I gesture for someone else to take point, and Neil steps up. In his brown leather jacket and aviator glasses he's looking like Steve McQueen, but I know he's a hundred percent business, always choosing the smart line, flowing his black-and-silver bike and taking the apex — straightest line through each corner — with ease. My dad would have liked seeing this: Neil riding just the way he taught him.

When it's Mags's turn to pilot, I jockey for second so I can picture it being just the two of us, together. Her posture is straight-backed and flawless, and she glides her oxblood-red 650cc from side to side, curving like she's in a ballroom dance. A tiny-framed girl who handles a big bike is incredibly hot.

I just wish I knew if she liked me.

Then it's Dean on lead.

My back nearly spasms as I watch the underage punk. He's all hunched over on a motocross bike that's too small for him, and it's so beat-up you can hardly tell it's cobalt-blue anymore. The exhaust farts a trail of blue smoke and looks about ready to dump a load. Who knows where he got the thing? Hell, maybe he stole that too.

Dean heads wide into the next hairpin and starts drifting toward the gravel shoulder, and before I can figure out if he's in trouble, he's dragging his sneaker in the dirt,

then shoulder-checking to watch me eat his dust.

What a scumbag. I accept his challenge.

I kick it up a notch to pass his crappy piece-of-shit bike, but he senses me coming. He starts to weave from side to side, blocking all openings. The road ahead corkscrews, and I can't pass on the outside and risk soft ground, and I'm not about to chance it on the inside near the yellow line. You never know if some jerk's gonna come the other way playing NASCAR, take his turn too wide, and make me into a hood ornament.

On the steep downward curve, Dean takes it toward the outside edge before entering the turn, hitting the apex of the bend perfectly. I twist the throttle to follow his line, then go for a pass on the corner's exit when he stuns me with a vicious front-end chop — the ultimate cheap shot. He cuts me off coming out of the turn and his back wheel drifts hard toward my front wheel. In a millisecond, twenty-two years of riding skills and experience open and close like a valve, pumping information into my muscles and nerves. I get right off the throttle and my front and back end lock, the bike sideburns and I hang on, hoping to hell that Mags and Neil aren't in my drag. To straighten out, I'm forced toward the yellow line. The next thing I see — an oncoming car.

Battleship grey.

Karmann Ghia.

Fat guy.

Eyes huge.

I'm so close I could reach out and touch the paint. I'm so close, I could take the guy's wallet.

He blasts his horn, but the sound is already fading behind me.

I see red, and the anger builds and builds until we reach Eagle's Overlook Restaurant, our planned pit stop, roughly four clicks down the road. Dean pulls in first to the parking lot. He removes his helmet and sports this shit-eating grin. I fishtail it in — not easy on a sport bike — so that a spray of gravel pelts his legs and ricochets off his bike.

“Hey, what the hell, man?” Dean yells.

I flip up my visor. “You see what he did back there?” I holler loud enough so Neil and Mags can hear. “You don't take the friggin' line like that. Jesus, I could have been killed.”

Dean runs his fingers through his rat's nest of black hair and rolls his eyes like I'm some kind of baby. I get off my bike and chuck my gloves to the ground.

“What?” he says, acting innocent.

I rush him, but Neil gets in there first. He's half a foot taller than Dean and has a couple of inches on me,

so he makes a good dividing wall. “Guys, guys,” he says and holds his hands to his sides, palms facing out in a move we call his Jesus Christ peace pose because he once played him in an Easter crucifixion re-enactment. “Dean, what were you thinking? I told you what happened to Scott’s dad.”

Now I’m fuming. “Don’t talk about my dad to this guy.” I step around Neil and jam my finger into Dean’s chest. “And you, don’t ever take the line like that from me or anyone else.”

At first Dean’s surprised that I’m all up in his face, then his expression hardens and he swats my hand away before pulling his arm back in a half-cocked motion. I actually want him to try to take a swing. I want a good excuse to clock him.

Instead, he glances over at Neil and relaxes his stance, but not before the corner of his lip curls up. “Anything you say, Scott.”

If his words were any greasier, I’d use them to lube the axle on my truck.

I shake my head at Neil. “I can’t believe you even *thought* about him coming with us to the TT. You’re crazy if you think you can trust him with your life.”

There’s a flicker of surprise in Dean’s eyes. It’s the first time he’s heard about Neil’s idea to invite him to the

Tourist Trophy Races, but the look falls from his face when he realizes the idea never turned into action. I pick up my gloves and head for the restaurant. Revenge is sweet.



Three hours later and we pull up to my place, Chateau des Saunders, a four-bedroom, two-storey farmhouse that was once my grandparents' home. My dad and I had always rented out the spare rooms in it. It's how we funded a lot of our races.

I pull past my pickup, a chocolate-brown '82 short-box I affectionately call Doris, then reach into my breast pocket for the automatic garage-door opener. The double doors rise and overhead lights flicker on. It smells of paint, metal, gas, and bike parts. It's a biker's wet dream and worth more than the house itself. Spotless, insulated grey floor coated with a waterproof seal, tools neatly hung up on walls by size, five apple-red Canadian Tire three-tier tool boxes full of wrenches, ratchets, and sockets in every size, a wall of custom-built cubbyholes, surround-sound speakers, flatscreen TV, and a space heater for working out here in winter. Dad and I used to spend countless nights tearing apart and rebuilding bikes. I park next to my red-and-white race bike. Neil

comes in beside me, next to his neon-green race bike, then Mags, who doesn't own a race bike, and finally Mr. Nutsack on his piece of crap. We shut off our machines, and I remove my helmet and gloves and set them down in one of the cubbyholes by the door. Of course, Dean tosses his stuff into an empty milk crate before kicking off his sneakers and slamming the garage door behind him. How is it that his crashing on my couch for a week in January ends up as permanent? Oh yeah, Neil, this good guy who sits on my shoulder, always whispering that I should give Dean a break. Yeah, well, if the guy steals anything he's out on his ass.

Mags undoes her chinstrap and removes her helmet, and cherry-coloured curls tumble down over her shoulders. Best roommate decision ever. Aside from being hot, she's also a bike mechanic at Terry's Cycle, the largest bike shop in town. She moved in two weeks ago and took my dad's old room, which was a little hard because he died in September. But it was easier to take than having Dean move in there, like he had wanted to.

Inside, I head for the kitchen, open the fridge, and pass out some beers, letting Mags have first dibs.

"Thanks," she says. She takes the bottle from me, then gives me this big, beautiful smile.

"No problem." I was going to be all gentlemanly and

twist off the cap for her first, but I didn't. I don't know if she likes me the way I like her, and it's best to play it cool, living in the same house and all.

To show that I'm a good sport — okay, that's a lie — to continue impressing Mags, I offer Dean the only honest beer he'll ever come by until he's nineteen and can buy it himself. Of course, he says yes.

“So what do you guys want to do for dinner?” I ask.

Neil lazily stretches before slapping his abs with the palms of his hands and rubbing his six-pack, but pretending like he's massaging a spare tire. “I got it covered.”

Before anyone can ask what he's talking about, there's a knock on the garage door.

“Come on in, babe,” he shouts.

“Hi,” Cathy hollers, and Dean *grrs* under his breath. It's what he does whenever he hears her voice. The door slams shut, and she comes bouncing into the kitchen holding a couple of grocery bags like they're pompoms. Neil picks her up before she gets a chance to set them down.

“Helicopter,” he cries, spinning her around. Mags and I step back from the flight path.

Cathy squeals, making me cringe, while Dean bolts from the room. I like Cathy and her cheerleader, punch-the-air-with-positive vibes, but that voice. God. It could peel the iron off a skillet. Seriously.

He sets her down.

“I’m making burgers, yay!” she announces.

The girl loves playing domestic, and we don’t mind because she can cook. I think Cathy’s practising on us because, after their first year at college ends, she and Neil might be moving in together. Neil hasn’t said anything official yet, but I can tell something’s brewing.

Neil rests his hands on Cathy’s tiny waist and draws her in close. “What would I do without you?” he asks.

“Starve,” she replies, like it’s obvious, and they start making out, full tongue-on-tongue action. When Mags catches me looking at her, I can feel my face grow hot.

From the living room stereo comes a sudden blast of thug music.

“Okay, okay!” Dean yells out. “Don’t nobody get your panties in a twist.”

The volume lowers to zero fast, but it’s too late. He’s broken the sacred house rule: Thou shalt play only rock and roll. He must have committed the crime yesterday when we were all out and he’d come home from the night shift at the cannery.

I head into the living room. Dean’s sitting cross-legged on the buckled hardwood floor with his back against our old snot-green couch. He’s got a beer beside him, an unlit smoke in his mouth, and is strumming his guitar.

Neil removes the offensive MP3 player from the stereo. He scans my dad's massive vinyl collection that spans the wall in six milk crates high and fifteen across, and selects a Rolling Stones record, showing it to Dean. "Now *this* is what I'm talking about." He slides the album out of its sleeve, places it onto the turntable, and carefully sets the needle down onto the spinning vinyl groove.

Guitars rumble and Mick Jagger starts wailing. Neil begins lip-synching about the lack of satisfaction and I imitate Keith Richards on air guitar. Dean stares at us and I can tell he's dying to make a crack about our old-fart taste in music, probably something about our being geezers gumming Jell-O, but he keeps his mouth shut. The guy's not dumb, I'll give him that. I'm surprised that for someone who can play guitar he has such crappy musical taste. Dean gets up off the floor and gives us a high-pitched Michael Jackson "hee-hee," along with a crotch grab, and heads outside for a smoke.

"Hey, pop in the TT game," I say to Neil and scoop up one of the controllers from the coffee table. I offer it to Mags. "You wanna play?"

"Sure," she says, and when she takes the wireless remote from me, her grease-stained fingertips — a hazard of being a mechanic — brush mine, making sparks shoot along the back of my hand.

Neil squats down in Dean's old spot and Mags sits beside me. Cathy takes command of the kitchen, clanging dishes and searching through utensil drawers. We choose our game players. My guy wears red-and-black leathers, my actual racing colours. Neil's guy is green and Mags's is purple. The TV screen shows an overhead shot of the Isle of Man where the Tourist Trophy Races takes place. The lap, thirty-seven and three-quarter miles (or roughly 60 kilometres — but they go by imperial), runs all the way around the small island nestled in the Irish Sea. It's the land of the Manx people, whose laws hark back to the Viking days — no joke. The race is real too. Go look it up.

“Four months and two weeks till we're there,” I say, grinning big. Neil holds up his palm so I can slap it.

Saying you're going to race in the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy, or simply the TT Races, is like saying you're taking on The Dakar, the Tour de France, or the Vendée Globe. It's expensive, you need skills, tons of gear, and you have to study the course like your life depends on it, because it does. Just getting through practice week is considered an accomplishment. My dad, Neil, and I had worked our asses off to get invited to the TT, partaking in Ireland's North West 200 and securing our Mountain Course Licences from the Auto Cycle Union based on

our racing CVs. The TT is the Holy Grail. Sure, the Ulster Grand Prix may be the fastest race in the world, but they say you're not a real road racer unless you've ridden the TT — the most dangerous.

“I am incredibly jealous,” Mags says. “I’ve always wanted to head-wrench a race like that.”

“Come with,” I say. “We could always use an extra pit crew.” Neil’s cousins, Vince and Marco, from Vancouver, are our mechanics and they’re okay. Neil assures me that they can do the job, but they’re motor heads — guys who like to tinker with cars. Let’s just say that they do work on bikes, but it’s not their first love.

Of course, I’d rather have Terry in our corner backing us up, because I’ve known him all my life and he’s like family. But ever since my dad died in September, I haven’t seen or heard much from him.

“Yeah,” Neil agrees. “Come with.”

“I wish,” she answers. “I seriously doubt Terry would let me go. I just started working for him.”

Neil thinks I can’t see him looking at me when Mags mentions Terry’s name, but I can. I glide my rider up to the starter’s line under the archway, narrow enough for one bike, and wait for the countdown to commence. “Hey, Neil, when’s your new race bike getting here again?”

“Next Saturday,” he says. “After the race at Goodman’s — where I’m going to beat your ass on the track.”

“Bah,” I cry. “Strong words, little girl.” Mags elbows me for that and I laugh, nearly missing my start time. My rider takes off, flying down Glencrutchery Road.

“I need a volunteer!” Cathy calls from the kitchen.

Neil and I don’t move; her timing sucks.

“Coming,” Mags says and gets up off the couch.

“Bray Hill,” I say out loud to help Neil and me familiarize ourselves with the course. Did I mention there are more than two hundred bends in one lap? You can’t mind-map this race like you can a two- to three-mile circuit with ten to thirteen turns like the one at Laguna Seca. That’s why this is the ultimate road race. It takes a long time to learn it — like an average of three years — before you can even consider a podium finish. Just making it through qualifying week and getting a chance to race is our goal. To qualify, you have to come in with 115 percent of the third-fastest riders’ lap during practice week. This isn’t a circuit where you ride a few laps in the morning, then race that afternoon. They give you a week. So if the fastest lap time is say, I dunno, 17 minutes, and the third-fastest guy is 17.20 minutes, that means your lap has to come in at 23 minutes or you don’t make the cut. Easier said than done. Just because you get accepted doesn’t mean you’ll get to race.

“I’m going to ask Mags if she’ll help strip my new bike and get it race-ready,” Neil says, waiting for his countdown so his rider can head out.

My eyes are fixed to the screen as I reach the bottom of Bray Hill and head toward Quarter Bridge. “What about your cousins? Aren’t they doing that?”

“They’re swamped. They asked me to get someone to do the bulk.”

A small shot of something rushes through my chest. It’s not adrenalin. It’s more like when you sense a crack in the plan. “Braddan Bridge,” I announce. “Do Vince and Marco even want to go to the TT? ’Cause if they don’t, we need to know now.”

“Yeah, yeah. They’ll be fine. They’re just swamped. There’s a big car rally in two weeks. They’re both working overtime.”

I ride toward Union Mills and my chest floods with a second shot of whatever it’s dispensing because I realize I’ve never been in a race with another mechanic before. All my life it’s always been me, my dad, and Terry.

“Coming up to Bray Hill,” Neil says as he sets off from the start.

Mags and Cathy come back into the room. Mags sits beside me, picking up the controller again.

“Neil, can you come start the barbecue?” Cathy asks.

“Yup — Quarter Bridge,” he says, but his eyes remain on the screen. As I come out of Union Mills into Ballagarey, he’s heading for Braddan Bridge. “Give me a sec, babe?”

Cathy takes a seat on the armrest. “So is this where you guys are going, for real?”

“Yup,” I say. “Crosby Straight.” I gun it down the fast stretch, passing the Crosby Pub on my right.

“Gah!” Mags cries, and I look at her rider on the multiscreen. She’s ridden down Bray Hill and has successfully negotiated the right-hander at Quarter Bridge, but now she’s panicking and presses random buttons. She’s completely messed up the easy left-hander before Braddan Bridge, and we watch as her rider ends up in the churchyard. Spectators scatter, making all of us laugh. Thank god she’s a better mechanic than a gamer.

“I kinda don’t get why you want to do it so badly,” Cathy says.

Her words make me shudder. How could you not want to do this? I think.

“Union Mills,” Neil says.

Mags curls a lock of hair behind her ears. “Well, the idea is to pit your skills against the toughest road race course in the world.”

“Greeba Castle,” I announce. “Wait, is it Greeba

Castle or Greeba Bridge? I always get 'em mixed up.”

“No, you had it right. Think: all castles have bridges. So, Greeba Castle, Greeba Bridge.”

“Nice.”

“See,” Mags continues, “unlike a regular race course where there’s plenty of kitty litter to slide into if you spill, there’s no runoff over there. You’re racing on actual roads. You have to watch for street furniture: houses, storefronts, telephone poles, railway tracks — yeah, they actually have a train on the island — stone walls, people’s living rooms. One wrong move and it’s game over.”

I shoulder-check to look at Mags and my heart beats a little faster. By the shocked look on Cathy’s face, I think hers does too, but for different reasons.

“Ballaspur.” I tilt my controller hard to one side as I enter the bend that starts the head up north.

“Greeba Castle,” Neil says.

“Imagine a thirty-seven and three-quarter mile or sixty-kilometre stretch in downtown Vancouver,” I say. “Then throw in a few hundred bends and turns, add a set of train tracks, a mountain, and a bunch of sheep.”

We all chuckle at that last part.

“Now forget going the speed limit of 40 mph, try 180 mph.”

It’s quiet as we watch the screen for a few minutes.

“Coming up to Ballig Bridge.”

“What’s ‘no runoff’ mean again?” Cathy asks.

I’m surprised by her lack of knowledge. Don’t she and Neil talk? She should know by now what the risks are of dating a motorcycle racer. Doesn’t she know how my dad died? “It’s an empty patch of space where if you spill, you don’t crash into anything,” I say.

It gets quiet again.

“Neil, can you help me with the barbecue?”

“Sure, hon.” He puts his player on pause just past the Crosby Straight and gets up off the couch, then the two of them head outside. Mags continues to watch me play. It’s a tight right-hander coming into Laurel Bank and after that, a tricky twisty section. “Coming into Glen Helen,” I announce. “I’m one-quarter of the way around the course.”

Mags shakes her head and smiles, impressed. “Unbelievable. You’re only one-quarter of the way there. I don’t know how you’re supposed to remember all this during the race.”

“Lots of practice,” I say, “and miles of luck.”

Outside we hear Neil and Cathy’s murmured voices.