

Wheelboys

by
Dd Jaseron

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CHAPTER 1

It was a rainy April afternoon in Auburn, Alabama, when Elle Dillanger rushed through the emergency room doors at the Methodist Hospital. Her husband had called her while she was in the middle of a session with a client, and her mind had been racing for the whole hour's drive to Auburn. Now she was in a panic. Where was their son?

"Is this emergency intensive care? Is Gary Lee Dillanger here?" she asked at the receptionist desk.

"Are you immediate family?" asked the attendant.

"Yes, I'm Elle Dillanger, his mother," she said, catching her breath.

"Sign in here on the keyboard." The woman pointed to a screen right next to her.

Elle could barely think, let alone type. Her hands were shaking. After entering her information, the woman handed her a name tag to wear.

"Room 121, Mrs. Dillanger." She directed Elle down the corridor.

As she approached room 121, she saw glass walls enclosing a flurry of activity. Several doctors and nurses hurried to manipulate tubes and wires connected to various machines. Elle tried desperately to see the patient in the bed.

"Elle." Her husband was suddenly beside her and touched her on the shoulder.

"What...what happened?" she asked.

“His car went off the road and crashed. I didn’t want to tell you on the phone because I knew you had a long drive over here,” he replied. “Gillian is dead. They airlifted Gary Lee here, and they are trying to stabilize him.”

Gillian dead? She couldn’t absorb any of it. Gillian Mason was Gary Lee’s high school girlfriend, and they had been on what seemed to be a harmless precollege visit to Auburn University. It was just an hour from their home in Blue Springs. Stunned and confused, Elle couldn’t remember any of the details of Gary Lee’s plans for the weekend.

Elle leaned against the glass wall to balance herself and tried to focus on what was happening inside. She could see the doctor looking into her son’s eyes with a small flashlight. The doctor turned to an attendant and then looked back at Elle and Drew through the glass. He walked toward them and opened the door.

“I’m Dr. Anderson,” he said, holding out his hand. “Gary Lee’s parents, I assume?” The doctor wore a white coat over dark blue scrubs with instruments in his pockets. He seemed very experienced, and his expression was serious.

“Elle and Drew Dillanger,” Drew replied.

“I’m sorry to tell you that your son has suffered severe head trauma, and we’ve induced a coma to reduce the possibility of brain damage,” Dr. Anderson said. “The pressure and swelling of the brain were causing seizures. He also has internal injuries, some bleeding, and several bone fractures. We’re going to take him over to get scans now. My current concern is compression fractures in his neck and back, and we want to get him into surgery as soon as we have the x-rays. We’ll have a better idea of his prognosis after surgery.”

Elle was in shock and could not speak. It was like a nightmare, and the hallway seemed to spin about her. Drew thanked the doctor, and he walked Elle a few steps over to some chairs so she could sit down. They sat and watched silently as the attendants wheeled Gary Lee on the bed out of the ICU room and down the hall toward Radiology.

Elle stood up to try and catch a glimpse of her son's face. "Oh, Gary Lee..." she said softly as if not wanting to wake him up.

She turned again to Drew and asked, "How did this happen? Gary Lee is a good driver. What could have gone wrong?"

Elle was thinking how her son had been driving motor vehicles since he was a little kid. As long as he wasn't racing on the street, she thought, he could handle a car without any problems.

"I don't know. The police were here. They had some sketchy information about Gary Lee losing control on the highway. They said they had more information coming in from witnesses, and they were hoping to come back and speak to him."

"Speak to Gary Lee?" Elle asked. "He's in a coma!"

"It didn't make sense. I don't know how they work. I've never been in a situation like this before. The officer said he wouldn't have all the details for us until they finish their police report."

Elle had to pull herself together. There were problems to solve. She needed to reach out to friends and family to let them know what was happening before they heard it all on the news. She started making phone calls and texting. She was able to reach several of Gary Lee's friends, including his best friend, Chad Gibbons, who told her they would be coming over to the hospital, even if they could just sit in the waiting room and pray. She called her office and canceled her schedule for the next week.

Elle expected to see Gary Lee come back to the ICU room from Radiology, but only Dr. Anderson returned.

"Gary Lee is being prepared for surgery," the doctor explained. "I suggest that you go down the hall to the waiting room since it will probably be several hours before we have any additional news for you."

The two of them walked down the hall silently. Drew and Elle were separated, and their marriage was dissolving; he had moved out nine months earlier. There had been much tension between them, but that seemed insignificant at this moment.

Elle could feel her anger rising in her stomach as she thought about how much Drew loved racing and racing history and how much it had influenced Gary Lee. The thought suddenly tore at her

again that Gary Lee had been street racing. If that were true, there would be no coming back for Drew; no reconciliation between them. Her intuition had already kicked into full throttle, and she would not be putting it away in a little box on the shelf now.

They entered the empty ICU waiting room. There were various arrangements of dreary couches and armchairs with some vending machines in the corner. Elle thought this room needed a facelift; it reflected the somber dread of so many of its visitors. As an interior designer, she had worked on many office and medical design projects like this—it would have been easy.

They walked to the back of the room, and Elle threw down her purse on a couch to claim her territory. She tucked her light brown hair behind her ears and dropped onto the cushions. Drew pulled over the chair next to the couch. Elle looked at him with a sense of bewilderment and disbelief. Now in his forties, Drew had aged well; he still had his preppy look from college that she liked so much. How did this happen to them?

“Do you want some coffee, Elle?” asked Drew.

Elle ignored his question, staring into space for a moment. “Do you think he was racing?” she asked Drew point-blank. She looked at him sternly, with that same look that she had on many of their disputes over Gary Lee’s go-karting endeavors.

Drew shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine that Gary Lee would do such a thing.” He sunk into the chair and looked down, abandoning the idea of coffee.

Elle was concerned about what would come next. Sick to her stomach and holding her heart, she said, “Gillian Mason is dead. How am I going to face that family?”

A light rain was falling as Chad Gibbons was driving with his girlfriend, Annie, in his truck. They were headed back to Annie’s house for dinner after a fun Saturday in Leeds, Alabama, when Chad’s phone rang. Annie picked up the cell phone from the console and looked at it.

“Elle Dillanger?” she questioned.

“It’s Gary Lee’s mom. Go ahead and answer it,” said Chad.

“Hi, Mrs. Dillanger?”

Chad could hear the sound of a woman’s voice in between the swishing of the windshield wipers. He looked back at Annie, and a wave of shock washed over her face.

“Oh my God!” she blurted out. “Where are you now?” she asked into the phone. “What about Gillian?”

Chad knew something horrible had happened. Annie listened some more on the phone and then hung up. Morose anxiety hung in the air as Chad waited desperately for Annie’s response.

“Gary Lee had an accident, and he’s in the hospital,” she said. “She couldn’t tell me anything about Gillian. We have to go to the hospital in Auburn right away.”

Chad felt his throat tighten up, and his mind started to conjure up imagined scenes. He shook off the haunting thoughts and tried to focus on what to do next.

“Look up how to get to Auburn the fastest,” he said to Annie. She was already on it with his phone in her hand.

“Turn on 29 up ahead. I need you to stop for a moment.”

Chad made the turn and pulled off to the gas station that was by the exit. They both sat in silent shock. It had become dark, and Annie’s strawberry-blonde hair looked platinum in the dim light from the station. Headlights from a passing car illuminated the look of dread on her face.

“I should call Julia,” she said.

Before she could make a call, her phone started to ring.

“Hello?” she answered and then listened. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no! That can’t be,” Annie moaned and then started to cry. “Who told you that?”

Another long pause as she listened. The sound of the wipers and the pounding rain filled the silence as Chad waited to hear what had happened. Annie put down the phone.

“Gillian’s dead,” she said to Chad, looking at him in horror and misery. “That was Gabrielle. She heard it from Gillian’s brother.”

Chad felt numb. It was surreal, like a bad movie. Annie leaned over and put her arm around his waist. She muffled her crying into his shoulder. He put his arms around her to hold her, and she sobbed. They sat there for a minute, just holding each other. Annie looked up at Chad and took a deep breath. In the pale light, he could see a tear glistening on her round, freckled cheeks.

“We have to go,” she said in a determined tone. “Gary Lee needs us now.”

Chad pulled out, and they continued driving toward Auburn. Annie held his hand tightly in silence. What could have happened? Gary Lee was one of the best drivers that Chad knew.

Annie picked up her phone and started calling other friends. She told them to come to the hospital in Auburn. After some more texting, Annie had organized a small vigil to arrive that evening.

Chad turned into the parking lot at the Methodist Hospital in Auburn. They headed quickly over to the entrance to register and pick up name tags, where they found their friends Brent and Gabrielle signing in. Annie ran and hugged Gabrielle, and they cried together. Chad knew Brent from school, but the usual “hey” seemed not appropriate at the moment. He gave Brent a handshake and then a strong bro-hug spontaneously.

“You won’t be able to visit right now. He’s in surgery,” the woman at the desk said. “The waiting room is right down that hall.”

Chad and his friends walked into the waiting room to find Elle Dillanger sitting on the couch. Usually, she was an energetic woman, attractive and well-dressed. Chad wasn’t sure what to expect today. She looked up, and Chad could see the worry on her face. A feeling of anguish welled up inside him, and his eyes began to flood with tears. Chad lost control and began to sob when he walked over to Mrs. Dillanger. She stood up and held him as he cried, and then he regained his composure. Annie also came over to them.

“We’re here for you and Gary Lee,” Annie said.

“What happened?” asked Chad.

The teenagers gathered around to hear answers to all of their questions. Drew Dillanger also came and stood by Elle Dillanger; he started to tell them what had happened.

“All we know now is that Gary Lee was driving and lost control on Highway 280,” Mr. Dillanger said. “He skidded off the road and hit a tree on the passenger side.”

Annie gasped, and Chad put his arm around her. “And Gillian?” Annie asked.

“The highway patrol said that she was killed instantly. I’m sorry.”

Gabrielle started to cry, and Annie reached out and grabbed her hand.

“What about Gary Lee now?” asked Chad.

“Well, he was not awake when we saw him, and they’ve taken him into surgery,” said Mr. Dillanger. “That was about an hour ago. I’m sorry, but the ICU will be limiting visitors when he comes out.”

“That’s okay,” said Chad. “We knew we couldn’t see him when we checked in.”

“We just want to be here for Gary Lee,” explained Annie. “Some other friends are also coming, and we’ll just hang out here in the waiting room.”

“All right. Thank you for coming,” said Mr. Dillanger. He nodded and returned to his seat in the waiting room with his wife.

Annie staked out the back section of the room for their group to sit. As they were getting settled, three more of their high school friends entered the waiting room. Annie sprang into action, waved them over, and explained the situation to them with Gabrielle’s help. After that, everyone was seated, busily texting and posting online with their phones.

Chad sat on the couch, leaning forward with his face in his hands. He stared at the floor, not knowing what to think. He had such an important summer planned with Gary Lee. Chad was a contender for the All-Pro American racing scholarship, and this summer was supposed to be the launch of his racing career. Gary Lee was going to be his support team, and Chad didn’t know how he could pull this off without his best friend. Since they were eight,

they had been karting together, even though Gary Lee was grounded from racing that summer.

It was not the first time the demons of fate tried to steal away Chad's dreams. When he was fifteen, Chad was competing in a southern karting championship, along with Gary Lee and others. In practice before the event, Chad had a horrible karting crash, and Gary Lee stuck with him to the Emergency Room. Chad dropped out and tried to support Gary Lee in the competition, but he knew he wasn't much help with a broken leg and crutches. It was really Gary Lee who helped him over his disappointment. The memory of his accident still haunted Chad, and thinking of the crash this day, he had visions of the sudden impact, smoke, and agony. Gary Lee had won the karting championship that summer, so why did this happen to him now?

Graduation was next month, and the summer was to be a glorious flurry of new opportunities for Chad and all his friends. Everything had been going so perfectly up until this happened. Chad just couldn't get his head around it. He was with Gary Lee and Gillian earlier that day at the races in Leeds, Alabama—Annie, too. They had so much fun. It just wasn't fair; it couldn't be true; this must have been a horrible dream—please wake up!

Elle couldn't stand the waiting. She rose from the couch and started to pace. Time felt like it had stopped when finally, another set of footsteps was heard coming down the hall toward the waiting room. Everyone stopped talking and looked up with expectation. Elle recognized the tap of those steps. Evan Waitts suddenly appeared in the doorway and gazed over the sullen group of high school kids. He was lean and wore his dark hair brushed back, which gave him a younger look. He had arrived sharply dressed in a navy-blue blazer—perhaps from a meeting. Elle sprang from her seat and hugged Evan.

“Elle, I'm sorry it took so long to get here,” he said.

Evan was Elle's closest friend from college at the Rhode Island School of Design, and he was always present in good times and trouble. They were friends before she met Drew, and Evan claims he introduced them. He had encouraged Elle to go to mixers at Brown University since she didn't know any straight guys at Risdee. That's where she met Drew—an architecture student at Brown who wanted to become a stock car driver. He was very amusing to her, and they shared common professional interests but not stock cars. After graduating, they married and moved to Massachusetts so Drew could get his master's degree at Northeastern. Chad was born there, and it was a struggle for them in Boston. Evan had always wanted the three of them to start a business together in Blue Springs, where he had grown up. Ten years ago, he convinced Elle and Drew to make the move.

Since her separation from Drew, Elle had become isolated from many of their friends. Most of them seemed aligned with her husband rather than Elle, and she did not share that crowd's fascination with autos and fast living. Evan Waitts was the one true friend who stuck with her after the split, and Elle appreciated his loyalty. She had only left a cryptic voice message for Evan, and he showed up.

"Drew, I don't know what to say," Evan said. "How is Gary Lee doing? Tell me what happened?"

"Gary Lee is in surgery right now. It seems like forever, but we're just anxiously waiting for an update," Elle replied.

Elle rehearsed what she knew about Gary Lee's accident. As she said the words, Elle struggled to hold onto hope. She knew her son's life was in the balance.

"Gary Lee is a strong young man," said Evan. "He has a fighting spirit. You mustn't dwell on the worst case." Evan was always very positive, and Elle appreciated his encouragement.

As they talked, Dr. Anderson suddenly appeared at the waiting room door with a woman also dressed in scrubs and a white coat. Elle looked at Anderson's face for a sign, but he wore the same all-business expression he had when she first met him. He signaled Elle

and Drew with a head nod, and Elle walked briskly toward him; Drew followed.

“Your son is out of surgery now, but he’s still in critical condition,” said Dr. Anderson. “This is Dr. Kramer. She is the orthopedic surgeon who helped in the operation. We have him in recovery, and you can come and see him now.”

“Is he awake yet—what did you find in the surgery?” asked Elle. The others in the room had moved closer to Drew and Elle.

“It’s not good news, other than that he’s alive,” replied the other doctor. “We were able to stabilize the internal bleeding and set his arm and legs. The fractures in his vertebrae have us worried.”

“I’ve also consulted with a neurosurgeon,” continued Dr. Anderson. “We’ll need to keep him in an induced coma for quite some time so his brain can heal. And honestly, we won’t have a prognosis of the condition of his spine until he wakes up.”

“So does that mean he could be paralyzed? Isn’t there a test for paralysis?” asked Elle. Another horrible thought, but it was certainly better than losing her son.

“Right now, we are looking for brain recovery,” said Anderson. “We won’t be able to address his spinal condition until we get through this phase of recovery. We will know more when we can wake him out of this coma.” Dr. Anderson paused and looked at the anxious friends. “I’m sorry, but only two visitors are allowed right now. The others will need to wait here in the waiting room.”

Elle looked back at Evan. She did not know how to feel yet.

“Go on,” said Evan. “I’ll watch over the crowd in the waiting room.”

Elle and Drew followed the two doctors out and down the hall. Elle could see Gary Lee lying on the hospital bed with shiny metal splints on his left arm and legs as they approached the ICU room. Elle leaned up against the glass and peered in. The doctor opened the door and motioned for them to enter. As Elle entered the ICU, the sounds of the machines became more noticeable—hissing and beeping. The doctors had wires and tubes connecting her son to illuminated and chirping devices.

Elle stepped slowly over to the bed with her eyes fixed on Gary Lee. Where was the energetic boy so full of life? His eyes were closed and surrounded by dark bruising. She reached for his right arm that was not in traction and put her hand on his. She started to sob when she touched him. Drew pulled up a chair for her to sit by the bedside.

They stayed there until the morning light came through the window out in the hall. The all-important first twenty-four hours were passing, and Elle had a glimmer of hope.

Elle and Drew had dozed off but woke up when the nurse came in to check on Gary Lee. It was now the Sunday morning after the accident, and the hospital was full of activity. Elle stood up to stretch her legs, and Drew said they should go and check on the visitors in the waiting room. They sleeplessly walked back to the waiting room where a larger group of friends had gathered, along with clusters of visitors for other patients.

Elle scanned the young faces of Gary Lee's friends, all looking to her and Drew in desperation for some positive news. Her eyes stopped on Chad Gibbons and his girlfriend, Annie. Elle had known Chad since he was eight. He stood up and looked athletic and youthful, with a head of short, brown hair brushed straight. It was hard to believe he was now eighteen. The teenage couple walked over to Elle and Drew, and some other friends followed also. Elle looked at their faces, full of despair and exhaustion. She wished she had something hopeful to tell them. Annie had clearly been crying; her eyes were red and swollen.

"Mrs. Dillanger," said Chad. "Any news or improvement with Gary Lee? We're kind of going crazy here."

"Oh, Chad," said Elle, suddenly filled with emotion. She hugged him. "Gary Lee seems to be stable—no change in his condition. I'm afraid this is going to be a long recovery. You and your friends should probably go home. I appreciate the support, but I don't know when you'll be able to see him."

"If it's okay with you, Mrs. Dillanger, I'd like to stay a little longer," said Chad. "If others arrive, we'd like to be able to talk to them."

“Me too,” said Annie, barely able to speak. The others with them nodded in agreement, and they all began to sit back down on the couches and chairs.

A highway patrol officer was also apparently waiting in the back of the room and approached the two parents.

“Mrs. Dillanger?” the uniformed man asked. “I’m Officer Ryan. I spoke with your husband yesterday. I wanted to see if I could also speak with you or your son.”

“My son? Didn’t they tell you he was in a coma? Honestly, this is not the best time,” she replied.

“Ma’am, we need to compile as much information as possible in the initial accident report,” explained the officer.

Elle decided to seize the moment. “What can you tell me about the accident? Did he lose control? How fast was he going?” she asked.

“Well, they were going very fast. We have one eyewitness who said they passed him at around a hundred miles per hour,” said Ryan. “The car skidded off the road on a turn and slid sideways through the wet grass until the passenger side hit a tree. We’re not sure why he lost control.”

Elle was horrified at the images in her head; she stared out the window as if in a trance. She had always trusted Gary Lee on the road, but now she was wondering if she ever should have. Elle looked around and saw Evan and Drew talking while putting coins into the coffee vending machine.

Evan looked over at Elle. “Coffee?” he mouthed, pointing at the machine. She nodded.

“I’d like to go back to sit with my son if we’re done,” said Elle to the officer. She took the cup of coffee from Evan and thanked him.

“Mrs. Dillanger, I have enough for now. This case will be reassigned to a detective for the criminal investigation. I hope your son recovers,” Ryan said, and he turned and left the room.

A criminal investigation? Elle could hardly stand up. Her coffee started to spill, and Evan reached over to support her.

CHAPTER 11

Uma was in a deep sleep that early Sunday morning and was suddenly consumed by a nightmare. She was a young woman racer, a celebrated champion, driving around corners in the heat of a race. She looked at her hands on the steering wheel, adorned in pink leather gloves, which moved quickly left and right. Suddenly, her car was spinning out of control. She could see the road and other cars swirling around her. She felt like screaming as she began to tumble. Everything came to a stop, and all she could see was the blue sky above her. People came and started to pick her up and pull her out of the crash. The man was going to cut her gloves off, and she yelled, “No! No! Do you know how hard it is to find pink leather racing gloves?”

Uma woke up in a sweat. She felt paralyzed from her nightmare. Now awake, it felt like a great weight held her down and made it difficult to breathe. She remembered hearing a voice in her dream: “Winning is everything.” She looked around the bedroom. It was early dawn, and Monroe was sound asleep on his side of the bed. Uma decided she wasn’t going to try to go back to sleep.

She got up and put on her slippers. She walked down the front stairs and through the long hallway to the kitchen. In the dark, she stumbled on the threshold and was so glad that she didn’t lose her balance and fall. She heated some water in the electric kettle and poured a cup of tea. She took a deep breath to shake off the anxiety of her dream.

Uma sat down at the kitchen table by the sliding glass door. Looking at her cobalt blue appliances and holding her warm teacup, she remembered how Elle Dillanger had worked so hard on the kitchen remodeling project. They had become close during that time. Uma appreciated how Elle cared about Uma's opinion during the project. Now their community was in mourning, and she felt anxious about Elle's son, Gary Lee, who was in the hospital, fighting for his life.

The beautiful morning light outside was rising over the willow trees by the brook. She grabbed her sweater from the kitchen counter stool and went out through the sliding glass door to the patio garden. It was early summer, and she had already planted some herbs and tomatoes.

Uma looked down and saw a white paper Chinese sky lantern on the ground by the young plants. What was this? Uma picked it up. It was pure white, and the wick of the candle was charred.

"Oh!" she gasped aloud. "They had sent up sky lanterns at Gary Lee's vigil last night at the high school. It must have fallen from the sky." She thought the vigil was a kind gesture.

Uma examined the lantern and saw that there was a yellow envelope attached inside it. She opened the envelope and read a note, "*Slow and steady wins the race. Keep moving forward, Gary Lee.*" Another piece of lavender paper was folded inside that read, "*The stars will light the sky for you, Gillian.*" She laid the lantern down on the stone wall and tucked the notes in her sweater's front pocket.

A morning mist was floating up from the brook, and Uma heard sobbing but could not locate where the sound was coming from. This was not the first time she had heard this sound near the brook. She walked through the fog over toward the stone garden and saw a man in a white racing suit sitting on one of the large boulders. Could it be? The sad soul had his face in his hands and was softly weeping in the early morning mist. She could hear him moan, "Winning is everything," in his lamentation.

"Pederson?" she said with her hand over her mouth. The apparition stopped and looked up at her, and she could dimly see his face—a face she recognized from years ago. "Oh, Pederson," Uma

confirmed. She started to move slowly toward him as if to avoid frightening him off.

“Uma?” a voice behind her called out.

She continued forward, steadfastly looking at the man in white. He had stopped his grieving and smiled when he saw her.

“Uma, are you out here?” Margaret called again. Uma turned and could see the lights were on inside the kitchen and Margaret on the patio. A soft rush of wind blew from the brook. She looked back at Pederson, but the fog had lifted, and he was gone.

“Oh, don’t go,” Uma said, but it was too late. “I’ll be right there,” she replied to Margaret. Uma glanced around wistfully and relished her encounter. She crossed back through the yard to the patio and greeted Margaret.

“What are you doing out here at this hour?” asked Margaret. “Church doesn’t start for at least a few hours. Uma, come in the house before you catch a chill.”

“I’m skipping church today,” she said. “You and Monroe can go. You have a lot of catching up to do.”

Margaret was staring at her. “Who were you talking to out here?”

“I was talking to myself in the stone garden, of course,” Uma replied with a sly smile. They went into the kitchen together. “I’ll fix you breakfast. Monroe is still asleep.”

She silently busied herself in the kitchen and was looking forward to being alone again. Perhaps her spirit friend would return. Uma was also not in the mood for exchanging small talk with other people. She had tragedy on her mind. She did not want to look at the smiling faces at church, which she imagined saying, “Boys will be boys,” and just sweeping it under the rug.

After Monroe and Margaret left for church, Uma sat alone outside on the patio for her own private reflection time. She walked to the small bridge over the stone garden, and as her ritual was, she

said a short prayer for each lost soul marked by a stone set by the brook.

“Oh, Pederson, I hope you find rest soon,” Uma said out loud. Why was his troubled soul still visiting her? Maybe it was her doing—was she keeping him here? No, it must be something else. Tragedy weighed heavy on her heart. Uma prayed for Gillian Mason and her family. She prayed for the Dillangers and Gary Lee’s recovery. She prayed for her son and grandson—for Mackie’s safety while racing today.

Uma turned her mind to the day ahead. She went inside to the kitchen and started preparations for an early Sunday supper. She opened the refrigerator and took out the vegetables and fresh roast from the butcher. Uma spun into action, and the time flew by while she immersed herself in the cooking.

Uma had just put the meal in the oven and set the timer when she heard Margaret and Monroe come through the front door. It was noon, and they were just returning from church.

“How was the service this morning, Monroe?” Uma asked when she walked to the foyer.

Monroe let out a disgruntled noise.

“I don’t think Mo was feeling the love today in church,” explained Margaret. “The pastor could barely say ‘nice to see you’ when we left after the service.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with people these days,” said Monroe. “I’m generous with my donations. I sponsor activities. What more do they want?”

“What happened?” asked Uma.

“The teen choir sang for everyone in church today,” said Margaret. “The same choir that sang at the high school vigil last night.”

“I don’t know why they have to go on and on about it all,” said Monroe. “Sure, it’s very unfortunate, and of course, I feel sorry for the families.”

“That wasn’t the point, Mo,” said Margaret. “The students talked about the importance of safety and the dangers of speed. You felt out of place because your family name is all about speed.”

Uma understood Monroe's issue, and it wasn't just his family name. It was his brand: *Kilgore*. He wanted everyone to associate *Kilgore* with fast driving, courage, and tenacity. He wanted *Kilgore* to be the standard. People should say, "That guy drives like Big Mo Kilgore!" But he had a problem when he met people who were advocates for safety or caution.

"Why did they have to do that in church?" asked Monroe. "Some people glared at me as if I was the devil. I'm a Christian man. I say my prayers. One certainly must, with the business I'm in."

"Well, did you talk to God today?" asked Uma.

Monroe glared at her and sulked toward the back of the house. Margaret took Uma's arm and walked with her down the hall behind him. Monroe settled into the family room just off the kitchen, where he sat down in his favorite chair and scowled.

"Oh, lighten up, Mo," said Margaret. "We will be watching the race in Atlanta on TV after supper. Maybe Mackie will win."

Uma retrieved cheese and crackers on a long slate board from the kitchen and served it on the coffee table in the family room. Grapes and apricots alongside Monroe's favorite cheeses might cheer him up, thought Uma. As Monroe stared out the window, the corner of his mouth started to turn upwards, and his frown soon turned into a smirk. Uma knew he was thinking about the Kilgore team on the podium.

"Oh, these apricots are delicious," Margaret said. "Are you going to see Dad when you come up for your road rally in August?" she asked Monroe. "He is not well, you know. It might be your last chance to make peace with him."

Monroe's smirk turned back into a scowl. "He isn't a part of my life because I was too much of a disappointment to be a part of his life," Monroe said sternly. "Dad never came to one race of mine. When I was inducted into the Grand Prix Hall of Fame, only Mom was there for me. He was not."

"Mo, you promised that you would help with Dad when Mom died last year."

"Who do you think is paying his bills? Isn't that enough?" asked Monroe.

“He is in the nursing home now, and I’m not sure if he will make it through the winter. At least visit him when you come up to Belle Isle in August,” Margaret continued. “Just because Dad didn’t agree with your business and your life choices doesn’t mean you should cut him out of your life.”

“Certainly, we will see your father when we are in Michigan,” said Uma. “Do you two want wine with dinner?”

Monroe nodded. “Well, I won’t be looking forward to it,” he answered. “Disapprove. That’s all he does. Dad was sour when I started Sonny racing, and I have never even discussed Mackie’s career with him.”

“It’s not a surprise. Look what happened to our uncle’s family—Dad’s brother lost a son and another injured. It isn’t unusual for a parent to not want their only son to race cars over 175 miles per hour, you know,” said Margaret. “Who wants to see their child end up dead or handicapped for life, like our cousin Ian?”

“I feel the same way,” said Uma.

“Well, you never complained about Sonny’s racing,” said Monroe to his wife.

“There’s a lot I never complained about,” Uma replied. “That’s not how I was raised, you know. But that didn’t change how I felt about it.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” said Monroe, looking at her intently. “You know I always value your opinion.”

“Ha!” Uma laughed. “You value my happiness, and I am thankful for that, but you don’t value my opinion. Just be glad I’m not like Kylie Shay, or we would have been through years ago.”

“Ugh. Now that woman is the embodiment of ungratefulness,” said Monroe.

“Mo, don’t say that about your neighbor,” said Margaret, giving him a nudge on the knee. “She’s a good mother to your grandson, and she’s one of the reasons you see Mackie as much as you do.”

“She has the same attitude as Dad about racing, even though it’s paying her bills,” said Monroe.

“Oh, I bet she’ll be watching the race today,” said Margaret. “Why don’t we invite her over to watch with us?”

“No way!” said Monroe, thumping the coffee table with his hand. “I’m already outnumbered.”

Uma liked the idea of inviting Kylie over after supper. Uma didn’t particularly want to watch the race, and she would like to have someone to talk to.

The timer chimed on the oven, and Uma returned to the kitchen to serve the supper. Margaret followed behind her. “Do you want me to open the wine, sweetie?” Margaret asked, picking up the bottle.

“Sure, the opener is in the drawer below the bottle.”

In no time, the veal with applesauce was on the dining room table, along with a serving bowl of roasted vegetables. The table was set with the Sunday dishes, Margaret brought in the wine, and the three sat down to the meal. Uma was pleased with how tender the veal turned out, and nodding heads from the Monroe and his sister confirmed it.

“So Monroe, how are Sonny and Mackie really doing?” asked Margaret. “You know, Mackie looked a bit depressed when he was up in Michigan last summer. Is this season going any better for him?”

“Oh, I think they are doing fine. Mackie has been a bit discouraged lately, but every racer has his ups and downs,” replied Monroe. “And Sonny is starting to make a name for himself as a team owner.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. How are you going handle this new racing country club in Florida?” asked Margaret. “It seems like Sonny and Mackie have their hands full, and the way you describe it—it’s such a big project. Why don’t you just enjoy your retirement like I am doing?”

“Not to worry, Sis,” said Monroe. “We have many partners on this project, and many hands make light work. There is room for more investors. You could put in some of that retirement money, and you’d be set for life.”

“Oh, Mo. You know that I wouldn’t dream of doing that!” said Margaret. “Remember what happened with Mom’s investment in that one project of yours.”

“Seriously, Sis, this is different. You’ll meet some of the investors at the White Party.”

“Even if it was bonafide, I couldn’t put my money into such a thing for two reasons. First, this Luxurious Lifestyle brand is just a cover for raunchy old men, loose women, and fast cars. Second, your version of ‘family karting’ is a disguise for kids’ racing. I have no issue with go-kart parks, but superkarts? You’re going to have teenagers driving what—130 or 140 miles per hour? How do you even get parents to consent to that? That’s just crazy.”

“Whoa, Sis. Calm down. Racing is not like it was when I started out. Technology has improved, and safety is paramount. Imagine how much better a racecar driver I would have been if I could have driven a superkart when I was a kid. I would not have thought twice about doing it. This is like a dream come true for these kids.”

“I think you’re drinking your own snake oil, Mo. Dad would have never given his consent. You must be quite a salesman if you’re getting parents to agree to that.”

Uma had finished her supper quietly while listening to the two of them bantering back and forth. Finally, Monroe, in desperation, turned to Uma.

“Uma, my dear, can you help me out with this debate? Remember how much Mackie loved karting and how it gave him confidence?”

Uma put down her wine glass. “You want my opinion?” she asked, almost in disbelief. Both Margaret and Monroe looked at her earnestly.

“Your father never gave you consent to race cars,” Uma began. “Now you and Sonny are determined to manufacture parental consent. You want the youngest of kids to participate in the fastest of driving and for their parents to say ‘isn’t that great’—why? Do you have something to prove to the world?”

Monroe was a little surprised but should not have expected any support from his wife on this topic.

“Kylie Shay left Sonny because Mackie broke his legs racing a kart when he was ten years old,” Uma continued. “Remember that? Sonny is probably the worst father in the world. Are you proud of

that? Now we have escorts and streetwalkers in our son's life, and for all you know, he could be carrying syphilis or some other strumpet's disease. Is that something our family should build a business around?" Uma was raising her voice now.

Monroe stood up and said, "Please remember who is making money around here and how I accumulated our wealth. It is my legacy, and that is important to me. I will do whatever I please, whenever I please. If I want to run my red Ferrari down the street at 150 miles per hour in my underwear, I will do it. If the cops catch me, I will pay the fine.

"The new club in Florida is on private property, and I earned the privileges that I worked for all of my life—just like the butcher and the baker and the candlestick maker. The strong and the brave lead with their heart. Weakness doesn't live here!" Monroe strutted out of the dining room.

Margaret and Uma watched him go and heard the patio door shut behind him. They were left in silence, looking at each other. Margaret burst out laughing, and Uma couldn't help herself but laugh as well.

Together they cleared the dining room and put the food away in the kitchen. Wine bottle and glasses in hand, the two went out to the pool area to reconcile with Monroe. He was reclining in a shady corner of the pool deck with his eyes closed as if asleep.

"Would you like your glass of wine?" Uma asked.

"Yes, thank you," Monroe replied, sitting up from his feigned nap.

"Sorry if I got under your skin, Mo," said Margaret. "I was just trying to say no thank you to your investment offer."

"Well, I heard you loud and clear, Sis. So we'll be having the White Party out here," Monroe said, changing the subject. "Summer is nearly here. There is nothing like the month of May. The groves of tall trees, dogwoods, and azaleas are beautiful. Looking off in the distance, you can see the hills of Alabama."

"It certainly is a beautiful setting, Mo, but you know how I feel about Belle Isle," said Margaret. "Nothing will surpass it. Oh, it's almost race time. Are we going to watch Mackie and Sonny on TV?"

“Yes,” said Monroe, standing up. “Speaking of Sonny and Mackie, they will be participating in Bump Day for the Indy 500 next Sunday. Sonny’s trying to beat the unofficial lap record of 239 miles per hour. We are all going, and I can get you tickets, Sis.”

“You know I won’t be attending, Monroe,” Uma said before Margaret could reply. “Kylie and Sonny will certainly be there to support Mackie. Maybe even some of Sonny’s karting families will attend, too. You and Butkis will be there, so the Kilgores will be well represented,” said Uma.

Margaret rolled her eyes and changed the subject. “How do you like my new red shoes, Monroe?” She pointed at the pair she had kicked off earlier.

Monroe laughed and picked them up by the chaise lounge. He pulled off his loafers and tried to slide his two big toes into her red shoes. Sitting on the chaise, he pretended to walk in them.

“A little tight on me, but exquisite red high heel shoes, Margaret,” said Monroe. He exaggerated his imaginary walk with hand gestures, and the women laughed at his little act. “How do they look on me, girls? High heels and hot wheels are what I live for,” he moaned in jest.

Monroe stood up and gave back the red shoes to his sister. “Let’s go watch that race on the telly!” he said. Uma and Margaret laughed once more, and they all walked inside. Monroe was happy again with his arm around Uma.

“Twins always have their secrets,” Uma said softly under her breath.

CHAPTER 18

Chad went out to his Chevy truck in the Babylon Karting Track parking lot to unload his kart for practice. Other kids just coming out from the clubhouse meeting were doing the same. The Alabama mud was still all around the parking lot from the recent rain.

“Chad, can you give me a hand here?” asked Artie, another Senior driver.

They each took a side of the kart in Artie’s truck, lifted it out, and set it on the dolly. Artie’s kart was in worse shape than Chad’s. Some of the tubing looked like it had been bent and then straightened, and the plastic covering was torn and taped in one spot.

“Wow! 250 ccs,” said a grinning Artie. “I can’t wait to trade in this hunk of junk for one of those superkarts.”

“I know,” said Chad.

The two boys walked over to Chad’s truck and lifted his kart out, as well. Chad looked at his kart. It was well used but still a good-looking machine.

“I’ll miss Dude,” he said.

“Dude?” Artie laughed. “Is that your kart’s name?”

“Sure. What’s wrong with that? Didn’t you name your kart?”

“No. But I guess if I had to, I’d call it Turbo Turd.” Artie laughed again. “It’s amazing what you can do with duct tape.”

“Buying one of those Kilgore superkarts is probably going to cost twenty grand,” said Chad. “I’m definitely going to have to sell some of those club memberships or something.”

“Hey, it’s perfect timing for me,” said Artie. “I had already convinced Craig Willis to join the Kilgore Karting team, so that’s five thousand kartcoin right there!”

Chad’s heart suddenly sunk. Craig was at the top of his list for selling a spot on the karting team. Maybe this was going to be more challenging than he thought.

“Nice,” said Chad. “Hey, I have to get my duffel bag. See you over there.”

Chad walked back to his truck, and Artie pushed his kart and dolly toward the pit area. Chad knew Gary Lee would be super optimistic about helping Chad get his referrals. Mrs. Dillanger wouldn’t have to know about it.

Chad and his dad checked all the cotter pins and fasteners on the kart while the other kids were zooming around the track. The kart dolly was thirty inches high, making it easy to work on the kart. It was certainly much easier than the brake job Chad had to do on his truck over at his dad’s garage two months ago.

Chad walked over to the track to watch the little kids run laps; they were up right before his practice time. He watched the little karts whiz by with their little motors sounding like tiny dirt bikes—a much higher-pitched sound than his kart. Chad vaguely remembered his days in the Kid class.

“Look at them go—they are so cute!” said a voice next to him.

He turned and saw Jessica Larsen. She had changed into a pink and white karting suit. He was so startled; he didn’t say anything.

“Hi, I’m Jessica,” she said.

“I know. I’m Chad Gibbons.”

Jessica had engaging green eyes and a warmly tanned face with slight freckles across her cheeks. Her Asian heritage gave her a subtle beauty. Brunette hair flowed gracefully down over her shoulders, ending with golden-blond tips. Chad wasn’t usually shy, but standing up close in front of Jessica unexpectedly launched a swarm of butterflies in his stomach.

“Are you racing now?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll be doing laps with you guys in the Senior class. The Junior superkart is too fast for the regular Junior class.”

They watched some more of the little karts whiz past. The sound calmed his mind while Chad desperately tried to think of something interesting to say.

“When did you start karting?” Jessica asked.

“That age,” Chad said, pointing to another kart zooming by. “I was seven.”

“Cool. Me too.”

“Where in Texas are you all from?” asked Chad.

“Longview. It’s just between Shreveport and Dallas. I’m not originally from there. We moved from Los Angeles a couple of years ago when my dad started the track.”

“Oh, so how do you like Texas?”

“It’s okay, but I’d probably go crazy there if I didn’t have karting. Hey—we’re up next! Come on. I want to show you the kart!”

Jessica grabbed Chad by the arm and pulled him over toward her pit area. Chad could see one of the parents was out on the track waving a finish flag, and the little kids were already stopping.

Chad and Jessica walked up to the pit area to find the Junior superkart off its dolly in the track entrance, ready to drive out. Mr. Larsen was explaining something to a group of parents and kids who were gawking at it.

The kart was a real jaw-dropper. First of all, it did not look like an assembly of tubing. It had a full plastic body, a spoiler airfoil in the back, and awesome red decal designs. It had the same wheelbase as a regular Senior kart, but it just looked bigger.

Jessica handed Chad her helmet. “Here, hold this.”

She whipped her beautiful, shimmery brown hair back, twisted it up, and put some small clips in to hold it in place. Jessica put on her white balaclava hood and took back her pink and white helmet from Chad. She put it on and climbed into the kart. Jessica looked back at Chad, and all he could see were her piercing green eyes. He was smiling and still just standing there.

“Well, get going!” she shouted, and she put on her racing neck brace. A couple of kids laughed at Chad. He turned and headed back

to his pit area. Chad didn't know what to think. Suddenly, everything felt different.

As he walked to his pit spot, Chad's dad was waving at him. The kart and dolly were in the lane, ready to wheel out.

"Come on," his dad called out. "You're going to be last in the pack if you don't hurry up. What were you doing?" Chad's dad handed him his duffle bag.

"I was looking at the superkart," said Chad.

"Yeah. I don't think that's all you were looking at, Son. Now pay attention here."

Chad pulled his karting suit out of his bag and put it on over his shorts and T-shirt. They wheeled the dolly over to the track entrance, set the kart down, and started the engine.

Chad put on his radio earpiece. The Kilgores insisted that their karters use radio systems for karting practice, even though radios were not allowed in actual karting events. All the kids liked it. It made them feel like real racers talking to their pit teams.

Chad finished donning his helmet and neck brace and then climbed into the kart. He revved the engine a few times, and his dad put on his own radio headset.

"Can you hear me?" came through the earpiece in the helmet.

"Yes. How am I?" Chad responded.

"Good. Now remember what we talked about when you're drafting behind someone and getting ready to pass," his dad said in the static of a radio voice. He gave the kart a push, and Chad rolled out onto the track to start his warm-up laps. "I talked to Artie's dad. You and Artie are going to be taking turns passing each other."

Chad hit the gas pedal and felt the acceleration pushing on his back. The familiar rush of adrenaline made his worries melt away behind him, and he accelerated up to track speed. His speedometer read forty-five. Warm-up laps were not only for the kart but also for the driver. It put Chad in a peaceful zone as he slung the kart in and out of the turns. He felt the kart rocking him back and forth, and it felt great. The anxiety of the outer world faded away.

"Look for Artie," his dad squawked over the radio, interrupting Chad's zen moment. "What are you doing out there?"

Gary Lee used to be on the other end of Chad's radio. He missed the way they worked together, with his friend's voice inside his head, warning him about who's coming up behind him.

Chad imagined Gary Lee commenting about the kart in front of him: "He's driving like a loser. Pass him on the next turn!" Chad drafted up close to the kart and then moved inside for the pass.

"Now that's what I was talking about. Nicely done," said his dad on the radio. "Artie's coming up behind you, and he's going to attempt to pass you. So just keep your normal line. You know there's no blocking allowed."

They were coming up on the last turn before the straightaway. It was a sharp right turn, and Chad's regular line would start the turn wide from the left side of the track and then cut tight into the turn. Chad could see Artie drafting up close for the pass. Artie would try to pass Chad on the right. He squeezed up next to Chad while they were braking for the turn. Once Artie was inside, Chad had to take the slower, outer path. They both came out onto the straightaway with Artie in the lead. Chad punched it—pinned back by the acceleration, the motor pitch going high and low as he shifted through the gears. Artie was doing the same. They flew past the bleachers. Chad looked at his speedometer. It said 103—sweet!

Chad was next. He would do essentially the same maneuver and pass Artie on the right when they came into the next turn. Chad was drafting close behind Artie on the straightaway. Suddenly, there was a loud engine noise and a flash of red in the corner of Chad's eye. The superkart flew by Chad on the right and then past Artie. She must have been going 110 miles per hour!

"I'm going where you're going!" Chad muttered to himself.

He took the opportunity and darted out from behind Artie to follow Jessica in the superkart. She was already starting to brake for the turn, so Chad was able to catch up. Artie had been forced to the outside by Jessica, so it was an easy pass for Chad. He just followed her around the inside of the turn.

"Whoa! Watch out, big boys—the girls are coming through," Chad's dad announced over the radio and laughed.

Chad didn't care anymore about his dad's training exercises; karting practice had become much more fun. Following Jessica, he passed three more karts. He knew Artie was falling back behind him. Now, if he could just pass Jessica—he was determined.

“What are you doing?” Chad's father squawked on the radio. “Artie's way behind you. Let him catch up.”

Chad wasn't interested in letting anyone catch up or pass him. He was desperately trying to keep up with Jessica. Suddenly, he felt the back of his kart moving the wrong way. Driving through a turn, he could not compensate for the skid. He continued to spin out of the turn and onto the grass. His vision blurred while the world revolved around him. He could hear the roar of karts continuing past. He came to rest with a thud on the wall of tires. His chest hurt from the steering wheel.

“What the hell were you doing out there?!” yelled his father over the radio. “You're an idiot trying to keep up with a superkart! There better not be anything broken on that kart!”

Chad knew there was going to be hell to pay for his fun, but it was worth it. He couldn't wait to tell Gary Lee.

