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Turn Four

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CHAPTER 1

Michigan International Speedway—Brooklyn, Michigan
JUNE, ONE YEAR AGO

Chance Reynolds tugged the racing harness tight, dipping his shoulders left, then right, pressing himself more deeply into the seat until no further movement was possible. He ducked his head forward to clear the roll cage and pulled the full-faced helmet on.

The helmet smelled new, which it was; his sponsorship agreement with the maker called for a fresh one, custom-fitted and finished in his team's colors, every race.

Four hundred miles from now, that helmet would stink of sweat, spit, burned oil, and greasy rubber—the grim, primal smell of the work he did. But he liked the feel of it now, the tricot lining clean and smooth against his face.

It would warm up soon enough because the helmet was padded with better than an inch of high-density foam. But right now it was comfortable, cool against his head. Chance set his driving gloves on top of the dash, routed the flexible tube from a sports bottle up and over the polymer chin of the helmet, and took a sip of Gatorade.

A roar swept the air over the Michigan infield; 200,000 spectators leaped to their feet in a single, spontaneous cheer. Chance peered up through the open window just in time to see a diamond formation of F-16s streaking overhead, hurtling south over the infield on afterburners, the leader peeling off and bolting straight up into the clear blue, late-spring sky.

The jet shrank to a pinpoint, nearly imperceptible even to Chance, with his exceptional racecar driver's vision. He followed it as far as his helmet would allow.

A photographer aimed a long lens at the open window, and Chance smiled as the strobe flashed, knowing that his eyes would convey the

TURN FOUR

warmth even though the helmet covered his mouth. Then the photographer turned away, and a familiar face moved into view.

Andy Hofert, crew chief for Robert Vintner Racing, leaned in through the window, smelling of mint toothpaste and Aqua Velva, not a hair out of place under his headset. His E-World Broadband team uniform, like Chance's, red, white, blue, and spotless. Pressed and dressed; that was Andy at the beginning of a race. But by lap 200, he'd be ready for someone to turn a hose on him.

"How you doin', Hoss?" Chance asked as Andy double-checked the closures—helmet and harness both—plugged in the leads to both radios, and put the steering wheel in place on its hub, pulling the release out twice to make certain it was locked on and that the safety cable was out of the way. He snapped the lanyards to the head restraint onto Chance's helmet, and secured the radio wires to the chin bar with a little piece of duct tape so they wouldn't pull loose during the race.

"I'm doin' good, Boomer."

For what seemed like the thousandth time, Chance wondered why it was that everybody on a race team had a nickname. He'd always assumed that it was some county fairgrounds thing until he got to Cup and discovered that nobody there got called by the right name either—at least, not in the garage area. Even the owners and drivers, many of them millionaires several times over, got referred to as "The Captain," or "Smoke," or "Happy." There was one driver who was just called "Her-man," but his real name was Kenny.

Go figure.

"Radio check," Andy said. This time, his voice came not through the muffling foam of the helmet, but through Chance's custom-molded ear-pieces, a slight burst of static sounding as the microphone cut out.

"Ten by ten," Chance said.

"Gotcha, guys," came the call from his spotter, high atop the center grandstand.

"Got you, Pooch," Chance replied.

"You need anything?" Andy accepted the squeeze bottle and handed Chance his gloves.

"Thanks, Hoss. No. I'm good to go."

Chance made every effort to sound casual, and he did this for Andy's sake every bit as much as he did it for his own. Medical studies showed that a crew chief's pulse rate just before the start of a race was actually

TOM MORRISEY

about 20 percent higher than the typical driver's. You had to respect that; it wouldn't do to have a thirty-two-year-old guy dropping over on pit road from a heart attack just before the start of a race.

"Only seventy-two points out," Andy said.

"Just for now. We'll close that up today."

"There you go."

There were volumes of implications in that brief exchange. Chance was in second place in the Nextel Cup championship points race. And for the first time this season, the margin between Chance and first place had shrunk to double digits.

Chance looked up, through the windshield.

"Give us a second, will you, Hoss? Brett's coming."

Brett Winslow, chief Nextel Cup chaplain with Speedway Christian Ministries, straightened up from the window of the car ahead and came walking back, shaking hands as he moved. In his sunglasses, red SCM polo shirt, khaki slacks, and Topsiders, dark brown hair ruffled by a light breeze out of Turn Four, Brett looked more like a golf pro than the ordained doctor of theology that he was. He got to Chance's Taurus, smiled, and leaned in over the broad blue sill-plate.

"Chance, can I have a word of prayer with you?"

"Absolutely, Preacher."

The two men closed their eyes as Brett spoke.

"Oh, gracious heavenly Father, we ask that you guard your child, Chance, as he does his job here today. We ask you to calm and comfort Cindy with the knowledge that Chance is under your constant care, and we beg a heavenly hedge of protection around this racecar and every car on the track here today, on the drivers, the crews, the officials, and the fans. Please allow the work done today to be excellent and worthy, and we ask that the outcome glorify your name. And all this we ask in the name of your precious Son, Jesus Christ."

"Amen," they said together.

"What'd Cindy give you?" Brett asked.

"Psalm 37, verses five and six," Chance read from the handwritten label stuck above his oil pressure gauge.

Brett nodded. "'Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.' She does know how to pick 'em, doesn't she?"

TURN FOUR

“That she does.”

“She’s a good lady.”

“That she is.” Even the thick foam of the helmet could not muffle the fondness in Chance’s voice as he spoke of his wife.

“Race safe, Chance,” Brett said. The SCM chaplain never said anything that showed favoritism, and he never wished an individual driver luck. He couldn’t. Of the forty-three drivers on the starting grid, more than half had attended Brett’s chapel service, held in the tech-inspection garage just after the race-day drivers’ meeting. So he never played favorites. Safety and strength of character: that was what he asked for them all, instead.

The two men shook hands and Chance pulled on his driving gloves as Brett walked on to the next car in line.

That done, a rare thirty seconds of inactivity passed. Then somebody—at this race it was the chairman of the race sponsor, a national chain of outdoors shops—called, “Gentlemen, start your engines” over the public-address system. While Chance couldn’t hear this, Andy did, saying, “Engine start” over the radio as Nextel Cup officials up and down pit road mixmastered their fingers in the air. Chance reached for the long switch on the left side of his instrument panel, flipped it up, and lifted the spring-loaded toggle next to it.

The big Ford V-8 engine—larger by two cylinders and 650 horsepower than anything in the Tauruses at the local dealership—shook itself to life with a bone-numbing roar. Two crewmen bent to the rear bumper, unhooking the hose-like umbilical that had been feeding warm oil through the crankcase.

Andy lifted his thumb, and the nearest Cup official did the same, telling those who needed to know that the engine had fired. Then the crew chief was back at the window to “button up” the racecar—securing the window net that would keep Chance’s head and arms inside the car in the event of a rollover.

Chance saw Andy straining, and helped him from the inside, lifting until he felt the releases click at the net’s upper edge. Like most crew chiefs, Andy labored under the illusion that a window net was more aerodynamic if it was tighter than the proverbial banjo string. Two more strips of duct tape—the most indispensable material in racing—were wrapped around the releases to keep them from popping. Then there was the

TOM MORRISEY

familiar double-thump as Andy patted the roof of the car, and Chance was alone, the racecar trembling around him.

A human tide receded back to the pits, the race crews, photographers, and well-wishers leaving the tarmac. In the pit boxes, crew members were exchanging high fives, getting pumped for the work to come. All that remained on the pit road itself were the racecars, the officials, and a single television camera crew that had obviously signed a mountain of liability releases for the privilege of serving as a human traffic island.

On a signal from the chief steward, a camera car and pace car rolled slowly out into Turn One, followed by the entire field of forty-three NASCAR Nextel Cup racecars, their brilliantly painted hoods, decks, and fenders tattooed with sponsors' decals.

Chance breathed a little easier as he let the clutch pedal out. The clutch on a racecar is a relatively delicate thing, deceptively easy to break in the simple act of going from sitting still to moving. Without so much as touching the clutch pedal a second time, Chance upshifted to second, trying to keep the water temperature down until he could get air running through the partially taped-off grille.

The first lap was driven purely for the function of forming the field, running in third gear at low RPMs so the one or two teams that hadn't started on the first try could catch up. Then came the parade lap, driving in close formation as the corner workers, mostly emergency crews now that lights had replaced the secondary flagmen, came out for the traditional salute. This one was run at precisely 55 miles per hour, the pit road speed at this track, and Chance pressed his radio button and called out, "Second gear, twenty-nine hundred"—letting his spotter know the tach reading since his car, like every racecar in the field, was not equipped with a speedometer.

The second time they came up on pit road, the camera car and the second pace car, leading the rear half of the field, pulled off, and everyone went to third gear. The fire crews went back behind their barricades, and the field was back to business.

Chance had qualified seventh: inside of the fourth row. It was a good, but not outstanding, place in which to start a race, not high enough to get a prime pit box, but close enough to the front to see when the pace car pulled off, which was good just in case the radio broke and nobody told you when to begin racing.

TURN FOUR

Chance sawed the wheel back and forth, weaving tightly, heating up the tires to build grip. They passed the start-finish line and the pace car doused its strobe lights and picked up speed, fourth gear finally and accelerating steadily. The weaving stopped, and Chance experienced, as he always did at this point, something that the sports psychologists called “perceptual narrowing.” The crowd in the stands, the hundreds of flag-festooned RVs in the infield, the television boom cameras mounted on dollies along the infield fence, the blimp and helicopters orbiting overhead, the rainbow of crew uniforms along pit road, and the JumboTron TV monitors facing the grandstands . . . all of these faded to a muted and unimportant haze as Chance concentrated on feeling what his car had to say. The tach needle crept higher as he accelerated steadily into the turn, the pace car bringing the field up to speed.

Back straight, and the car was starting to feel like a racecar now, which is to say that it rode like a cross between a speedboat and a Magic Fingers motel bed. The broad asphalt track, seamlessly smooth from the fans’ perspective, had dips and rises that were more than perceptible at speed. And the harshly stiff racecar suspension transmitted every bump, seam, joint, and ripple up into Chance’s thinly padded aluminum driver’s seat, bolted directly to the Taurus’s flat steel floor. The big steering wheel thrummed in time with the race-cammed engine, buzzing his hands and forearms.

As they entered the third turn, Chance could see the compact outline of the pace car dropping down to the inside, ready to head for the pits if NASCAR’s chief steward said the field was in shape. Chance pulled closer to the car ahead of him, tucking into its slipstream. The noise level dropped dramatically, and the nose of the Taurus quieted down as the air smoothed out around it. A glance at the long, panoramic rearview mirror showed that the rest of the field had also tightened up in anticipation of the start.

He cleared Turn Three. The lead car dropped off the track.

“Pace car’s pitting.” Pooch’s voice crackled in Chance’s earpieces.

“Get ready . . . green flag,” Pooch said rapidly, as if saying it faster would somehow make the radio work more quickly. “Green! Green! Green! Green! Green! Green!”

Even before the first syllable was out, Chance had his right foot all the way to the floor.

Like a huge cat uncoiling in one great, powerful leap, the forty-three-car field sprang out of Turn Four, accelerating down for the straight, V-8

TOM MORRISEY

engines roaring wide open now, rapidly gaining momentum. The pack streaked under the starter's box, where the governor of the state—honorary starter for the event—danced the green flag up and down. Chance kept closing until he was riding just inches behind the Chevrolet Monte Carlo in front of him, the “Dupont Automotive Finishes” script under its rear spoiler moving up and down and side to side in his windshield, like a rail commuter's view of the next car. They entered the first turn and the centrifugal force pressed him heavily against the right side of the seat, like being dropped into a gargantuan carnival ride.

The wall was a blur off to his right, and the engine noise had risen to a high, raw rumble, loud even through the helmet and the earplugs. The Taurus was shuddering, twitching from side to side as if shaken by a giant hand. Chance corrected with the wheel constantly, holding his line as the turbulence fought back. In his mind, it was as if the minute hand had just clicked twelve on a time clock.

It was time to go to work.

Racing was the only job Chance Reynolds had ever known. He had never flipped a burger at the local McDonald's, never had a paper route, never cut any lawn except his family's own, back home on the farm in Chillicothe.

Still, the racing had started out being something Chance did just for fun—flinging go-karts around county fairground tracks on Saturday afternoons back in Ohio, or charging around a hay-baled course up and down the town square during the annual Harvest Days celebration. He was a farmer's kid, and he raced other farmers' kids in competitions that were outwardly social, but inwardly as hard fought as if money had been riding on the outcome. And for Chance, that had eventually turned out to be true.

Nate Reynolds hadn't possessed half the resources that some of the other kids' dads had at their disposal. He'd built Chance's kart engines up himself rather than ordering them from the race shop over in Columbus, and he tried to keep Chance competing at dirt tracks as much as possible. Tires run on dirt could be stretched through a month of race weekends, while asphalt attacked tires like sandpaper, and concrete ovals could wear them out in a single heat.

TURN FOUR

For a couple of seasons, the family had actually hauled a carnival popcorn machine along in the trailer, and Chance and his mom had taken turns selling popcorn between races, bringing in enough money to help keep him on the track.

But even though Chance's equipment and financing had been a step or two below that of his competition, his competitive edge and driving skills had eventually placed him in a league of his own. If the engine kept running and the tires stayed up, Chance won, pure and simple. He rarely made mistakes and showed an uncanny ability to capitalize on it every time his opponents made one. While most kids his age fought constantly for the lead, every lap, all through the race, Chance had learned to lag back in fifth or sixth place, let the leaders use up their karts, and then move steadily up and make the winning pass somewhere in the last three laps—showing a level of maturity that was rarely seen, even among the adults in that caliber of racing.

He'd graduated from go-karts into midgets and had stayed there only half a season before turning his first lap in a sprint car.

Chance had been thirteen the summer he'd begun to race sprints professionally. That made him nearly four years junior to his youngest competition, and as much as five decades younger than some of the series regulars. Not every track had let him drive at that age; a lot of his racing had taken place in Indiana, where the liability climate and the insurance industry looked more favorably upon racecar drivers young enough to play Little League.

Sprints had been a very serious step up for the budding driver. Chance's go-kart engine, nominally rated at five horsepower—about the same as the average lawn mower—had been tuned, tweaked, and massaged by Nate Reynolds until it had produced more than six times that amount. And his first midget racer had generated 215 horsepower, more powerful than the family's station wagon. But the sprint car's race-tuned engine had produced almost 700 horsepower—nearly three times as potent as the big, brawny pickup that his father used to haul the race trailer.

And all of this horsepower had been put in the hands of a kid—a kid who would have to wait thirty-six months until the state of Ohio would deem him mature enough to drive the family car on a country road.

TOM MORRISEY

One lap into the race, and Chance had already picked up a place, although that had been more of a gift than a prize. The pole-sitter, the rookie member of a heavily funded two-car Dodge team, had so zealously guarded his inside racing line that he had actually gotten too low in Turn Two. This allowed the outside pole-sitter, a fourteen-season veteran, to switch to the high line, brake late, and go barreling around for the land despite the fact that the high groove had been washed away by the previous night's rain. It had been an awesome display of horsepower and driving skills, feasible only on first-lap-fresh tires. But when the next car back tried to perform the same feat, his setup wouldn't allow it, and so this unfortunate soul got slowed by the wall of air before him, and the entire front end of the pack—eleven cars in all—had freight-trained right on past.

Chance powered on down the front straight with the rest of the pack. He'd noticed something: the Chevy ahead of him was not following the same line around the racetrack as Chance and the other four lead cars. Instead, he tended to drift nearly—but not quite—a full car width higher on the track, powering back down to the inside lane as he exited Turn Four. When they'd gotten back onto the front stretch, a gap of more than twenty yards had opened between the Chevy and the four cars ahead.

Chance had seen the same condition so many times that he didn't even have to think about it. The car ahead of him was loose—its rear wheels dancing to the outside in the turns. So the only way the Chevy's driver could come square out of a turn was to let the car drift up out of the groove. That used up more racing surface. And that slowed him down.

Chance knew how to take advantage of a competitor's loose car. Braking later in the first turn, he let himself drift up to within a few inches of the Chevy's rear bumper and stayed low, with just the left front fender of the Taurus hanging out in the wind. This deflected the air running over the Chevy's spoiler, stealing the downforce.

The red racecar skated abruptly to the right.

Keeping his foot down, Chance shot past him on the inside and took fourth.

"Outside." Pooch's voice was crystal clear this time on the radio. "Outside. Stay low. . . . Clear. You the man. Good pass."

Chance went hot into the third turn, using up his tires a little, wearing a millimeter off his brake pads, but closing on the three-car lead

TURN FOUR

group. He tucked in on the Turn Four exit and felt it: the calmer air of the draft, that invisible, suction-like tube being punched through the air by the cars ahead of him.

“One-ninety-eight to go,” Pooch advised him. “Doin’ great. Might want ta’ just turn laps for now. We can race ’em later.”

“How’s she feel, Boom?” Andy asked him.

“Good going into One, neutral in the middle, just a little loose coming out of Two,” Chance replied, keying his microphone button as he set up for the turn at the end of the straight. “Not much at all, though. And we’re neutral all the way through Three and Four. Temperature’s perfect—don’t touch the tape.”

“That looseness in Two—track bar?”

“I don’t think so.” Chance grunted at the G-forces as he swept through both turns, his arms growing heavy, making him cling to the wheel with both hands. He keyed the mike again as he powered back onto the straight. “Let’s wait and see. Might just be fuel load.”

“Outside,” Pooch interrupted from the spotter’s perch.

Chance glanced to his right and saw the nose of the Cheerios Dodge draw even with his window and then fall back as they entered the third turn.

“Clear,” Pooch told him. “He’s fadin’.”

“Tires are right on,” Chance said, quickly cueing his radio. “Car’s perfect, Hoss. Let’s not touch it.”

“You got ’er,” the crew chief replied. “Cindy wants to know if you can see her waving.”

Chance allowed himself the briefest possible glance at the pits as he swept down the front stretch. He got a fleeting image of blonde hair and an upraised right hand from the timing-and-scoring seat next to the crew chief’s, high atop the team’s big red-white-and-blue toolbox.

“Tell her that I see her and I like the new nail color.”

“You just drive the racecar, Romeo. You just drive the car.”