

## Chapter Five

### Ruby

I catch the new girl, along with Lydia Ramírez and Allie friggin' Marcetti, staring at me as they start to warm up. I'm sure they think they're being subtle, but they're not. I wonder what they're telling her—probably something along the lines of *Ruby's trash, stay away*, which is fine. I'm not a stranger to people talking about me; I just wish they were being a little less obvious about it.

“Hey, Ruby,” Marcus says. He gives my shoulder a light shove as he drops onto the bleachers beside me, running his hands over his fade before pulling out his AirPods. “You think you could take a look at my mom’s car this weekend? It’s making a rattling sound that’s got her stressing out.”

“Yeah, no problem,” I say as the varsity girls start running slow laps around the turf below us. “You know the deal, though.”

Marcus nods solemnly. “She’s already got the ingredients on the list.”

I grin. I’ve known Marcus Williams since we were kids. He and his mom live on the other side of the trailer park from me. His mom used to babysit me sometimes when I was little and my mom was working double shifts. I don’t remember a ton about those years—it’s kind of a blur of pageants and random sitters—but I remember Mrs. Williams makes the best mac and cheese I’ve ever tasted in my life.

One time, I worked up the nerve to ask her if it was Velveeta, because it sure as hell wasn’t the store-brand powdered cheese and pasta that I was used to. At \$3.99 a box, Velveeta always felt like this glorious, unobtainable thing. Mrs. Williams just laughed, though, and said, “No, baby, I made this from scratch.”

I don’t think I’d ever really had a meal made from scratch before that. Not that Mom didn’t try. I mean, she can twirl a mean baton and smile like a model and talk about wanting world peace, but her pageant

training didn't really cover skills like "how to raise a baby at sixteen when your mom kicks you out and your boyfriend ditches you" or "your toddler and you: how to make nutritious, homecooked meals on a two-dollar budget after working a double shift under the table when you're barely old enough to vote."

And even now, the only time I really have a good meal is when Mrs. Williams needs me to fix her car up. She and Marcus say I can come over anytime to eat, but I never take them up on it. Eating other people's food doesn't seem right, but trading for it seems fair enough.

Everly comes up beside us, giving Marcus a good-natured shove before dropping down next to me. He stares at her with big puppy-dog eyes as she pulls out her camera and tries to keep from smiling. They've been dancing around being together for a few months now, and as much as it kills me to say it, I think they'd be perfect together. We're joined a second later by a few lacrosse girlfriends and some stragglers.

The lacrosse team has a "friendly" scrimmage with another school today, and normally Marcus would be down there on the field, but he's "not progressing fast enough" through the concussion protocol, so he has to sit it out. Technically, it's a friendly match, but I know Tyler's still going to go all out. He would even if the guy who pegged Marcus in the head with a ball—costing them their best defender—weren't on the opposing team.

And maybe it blurs the lines a little bit for me to be here to cheer him on, along with the rest of our crew and the slew of lacrosse girlfriends, but I've got nothing better to do this afternoon, and god knows I don't feel like going home now that Chuck has taken up permanent residence in our living room.

"We miss anything?" one of the girls behind me asks, and I roll my eyes because clearly the guys are just walking onto the field now.

"Just the runners starting their drills," Everly says, sounding bored. She raises her camera and starts snapping pics as the lacrosse team pours out of the locker room and onto the field. Tyler is in the center of the herd, grin on his face, helmet in his hand, while the rest of the team ping-pongs around him like giant, sweaty versions of my mother's dogs. I don't know how he stands it.

I flick my eyes to the track just in time to see the new girl finish first. Lydia, who's been the fastest in the school since track-and-field day in fourth grade, finishes several full seconds later. Huh, I guess the new

girl's actually good. She folds her hands up over her head as she walks, her cheeks flushed from the effort, her chest heaving, and then she looks right at me. I swear to god the whole universe falls away, and all I can think of is *wanting*.

*Click.*

I snap my head toward the sound. Everly lowers her camera and studies its screen. "Wow, this is beautiful. I didn't think I'd ever get a candid of you, what with that stick you keep up your ass all the time."

"Delete it, please," I beg, and she frowns.

"Why? Look at it." She holds the camera toward me, but I look away. I don't want to see it. I don't want to know what I looked like in the single solitary moment I let myself get caught up in her. *Lock it down, Ruby*, I tell myself, shoving thoughts of the new girl, sweaty and breathing hard, into the biggest lockbox in my head with a hard *nope*.

"Wow, she's pretty fast," one of the lacrosse girlfriends says. I don't bother learning their names; the guys never keep them around long enough . . . and yet somehow I'm the one with the reputation.

"I think her name's Morgan," Marcus says.

Everly turns back to him. "It's weird that she transferred in so late in the year."

"I heard she came from some rich-bitch private school in Connecticut," another girl says.

"I heard it was a Catholic school, and she punched a nun or something," the first girl says.

Marcus shakes his head. "Nah, I heard Allie talking about her last week in precalc. She's some big-deal track star or something. She's just here to finish out the season and take us to states. Allie made it sound like she might go D-I."

"What does that mean?" I ask, because the only D1 I know of is the make and model number of the spark plugs I had to custom order for one of Billy's clients the other day.

Everly grips my shoulder and scrunches up her face in disbelief. "How can you watch your boy toy play this much lacrosse and not even know what a Division I school is?"

"He's not my boy toy." I push her hand away. She knows better than to do this, especially in front of his friend. And excuse me for not knowing, but I guarantee if I asked her to explain the difference between

a cupcake dress and an A-line gown, she'd be just as lost as I am right now.

"You hook up with him, don't you?" Marcus asks, pulling me from my thoughts. "And you *are* here to watch him play. Can't blame anybody for getting ideas."

I look at Everly, pleading—but instead of finding solace in my best friend's face, she just taps her camera screen. "I mean, he has a point. Candid's don't lie."

And, *Oh, shit*, I think, looking at the picture. I look like I'm ready to jump the fence and propose.

"Delete that," I say, to which Everly replies, "Nuh-uh," clearly thinking this is some kind of joke.

But it's not a joke; it's not. Even if Everly thinks I was looking at Tyler when she snapped that, I know the truth. And I don't need it staring me in the face like this.

Suddenly, I feel claustrophobic, the bleachers filling up with parents coming to watch the scrimmage, and I . . . I can't be here. I grab my bag off the step beside me and tromp down the stairs, fighting against eager moms with babies strapped to their chests, and nearly tripping over a diaper bag in the process.

"Ruby, wait!" Everly says, bouncing after me. "I was just messing with you. Everybody knows you're just hooking up."

"Oh my god." I groan, because shouting that doesn't make things any better. "Can we drop it?"

Everly scrunches her face up into her patented *did I go too far? please don't be mad* look. "Postgame meet up at the diner? Or do you have to work tonight?"

"No, but I have a tap lesson at six thirty."

"After that, then?" And I don't miss the hopeful lilt in her voice.

"We'll see," I say. I flip her off as I walk backward, slapping on what my mom calls my "realistic" smile. Not to be confused with my *please, judges, look how much time I spent bleaching my teeth* smile or my *who, me?* smile, which I reserve for the pervier judges who prefer their contestants coy.

Everly laughs and responds in kind, reassured that we're still cool. But she doesn't see how my face falls when I turn around or the way my eyes well up when I get to my car, google "division one," and realize that it's just another thing out of my reach, like Velveeta mac and cheese or a mom who actually listens.

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Billy's garage is only about a ten-minute drive from school. It's a rusted-out old building with two bays housing creaky lifts and glass on the doors so dirty you couldn't see through it if you tried. Out back are a bunch of old junk cars we scavenge for parts, and out front are two ten-year-old pickup trucks he's trying to sell, and a couple classic cars he wouldn't part with even on his deathbed. I swear to god, he's gonna ask to be buried in one. If I get a say in it, he will be.

Billy's basically my dad. Well, stepdad. Ex-stepdad, technically. My actual dad is more of a sperm donor than a father, so Billy's the closest thing I got. He and Mom were married for almost six years before the arguing got too much for him and they split up. I don't blame him; my mom is a hard person to live with. He gave it a good run.

Billy's the one who taught me how to work on cars, and he lets me hide out here whenever I need to. If Mom knew how much time I spent here, she'd probably try to burn the place down. She never really got over Billy—I think she thought he was going to be the one to stick. And he has, sort of, just not for her. Add it to the list of things I feel guilty about.

I pull into my usual spot outside the office, feeling the weight of the day—and Marcus's comments—slide off me. Sure, this place is a shithole, but I can get my hands dirty and feel like I'm doing something with my time. Fixing something broken just feels good.

I shut my car door as Billy steps out, wiping the sweat off his face with a greasy rag and spitting into an empty bottle of Gatorade. Billy doesn't smoke—he says his shop is too flammable—but he does dip, which is just as gross. He's fit for a guy in his forties, and unlike me comes by his tanned skin naturally. It's not unusual for him to pick up odd jobs—landscaping, roofing, whatever—when the shop is slow. Billy and I are alike in that way. We both prefer cars, but neither of us really cares what we're doing as long as we're working with our hands.

My mom, on the other hand, spends her time trying to keep me still and yelling about my manicures.

“Ruby,” he says, a smile on his lips. “I didn't expect to see you here today!”

“Yeah, well, she’s pulling a little to the right,” I lie. “Thought maybe you could take a look with me.”

He looks me up and down, narrowing his eyes before nodding. We both know I’ve done enough alignments to fix this with my eyes closed if needed. “Let’s get her up on the lift, then,” he says, not prying or pressing the issue. He always gets it—just because a person doesn’t want to be alone, doesn’t mean they want to talk about it.