



CHAPTER 1

I AM A rocket on wheels blasting down the freeway in the dark. Black asphalt and white stripes are my runway. Foot on the gas, the clutch, dropping down to second gear, feeling the vibration of the steel around me, pushing, pushing the engine to its limit until *foot, clutch, gear change, whoosh* and I am in third.

Blast off.

My engine growls under me, reluctant and then ready. It is a roaring beastly thing, and I am outrunning every pendejo beside me. This isn't a race; it's a declaration of war, and I am leaving no survivors on these streets.

They can all choke on my exhaust smoke and their humiliation when I, the only girl driver who has ever shown up at 2 a.m. on highway 95, leave them in the dust. The Mustang, the Celica, the Crown Vic, the Acura, the fancy-ass car Derek's pops gave him—I am pulling ahead of them all, and as I drop into fourth, I leave them behind.

“Adiós, que lástima pero adiós!”

I am serenading my steering wheel with Julieta Venegas, laughing and yelling at it like we are lovers as the black road opens up, clears out, and I am all there is. A rocket ship out

in the wide-open asphalt sky. Me, my Civic, and the light cast from my high beams.

I'm free. I'm flying. I'm more than a rocket. I am a shooting star.

As I cross the finish line, I look in my rearview mirror and see the cars finally catching up as I slow down and pull over. My face hurts. My face hurts because I am smiling so much, and I am breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth to steady my breath. A laugh bursts out of me, defiant. *I won. I won, I won, I won.*

I imagine the elusive Underground Race Invitation being slipped into my pocket. Maybe someone here is from that circuit. Perhaps one of them will see me.

I'm positively feral as I jump out of my car, shake off the excitement to find my cool, and sit on my hood. The metal is hot under me. The cars all start to pull over, and I watch them with a smirk on my face.

"So glad you all finally decided to make it!" I yell in their direction.

Derek slams his door shut, all anger. I hope the spit-off from my wheels didn't hurt his pretty red paint job. Red like his face. I smile. Yes, his face is the color of a cooked crab.

He looks at me like I was the one who put him in the boiling pot. I'm glad.

I still have the text message he sent me this summer on my phone. My chest and fist tighten every time I see his face, and I hate that.

I tip my chin up and glare at him as he stomps toward me and yells, "You fucking cheated!"

“Ni vergas, no she didn’t!” My brother, Santos, is there. He is always there. His black hair is tied back, his throat tattoos pronounced even in the dark, eyebrows cut in a lethal line. Esa cara could make boys piss themselves.

Derek stumbles back a step and swallows. He doesn’t want to appear as if he is afraid of my brother, but I know he is. Everyone is. I call him my saint, and his wrath can be biblical.

I look at my brother, my anger a match for his. I look at his tattoo and see my name written in cursive there. A tattoo that he has had since he was sixteen. The same age that I am now. He’s the one who taught me to drive when I was eleven. He’s the one who showed me how to change a tire, the oil, the brakes. He showed me how to completely break apart and put together an engine to go faster. He’s the one who helped me build the one under my ass now. “La calle es el tuya, cabrona,” he always says. And the road was mine tonight.

The other thing my brother taught me? You don’t start a fight. But you always finish it.

I’m off my hood, marching across the shoulder, and then I stand a foot under Derek’s nose. I don’t care that he towers over me like a giant. I put my index finger to his sternum like it can cut right through it. “Don’t call me a cheat when your daddy’s ride just can’t keep up.”

He swipes my hand away. He’s too close, but I won’t be the one to back up. “You crossed the line before the flag waved.”

“Bullshit,” my brother and I spit out at the same time.

He’s there, standing next to me, our shoulders touching. Sixteen years older than me, and just a few inches taller. He’s

still light-years under Derek's gaze, but he is built like a tank, and he is always ready to smash right through anything even if his knuckles suffer the collateral damage. He cracks his neck. Clenches and unclenches his fists. It is a warning, and everyone who knows Santos Rivera knows it.

"She won, Derek. Don't be a dick about it," buzz cut says. I don't know his name. He drives the Ford. I can't tell if he says it because he knows that it's true or because he is afraid of what my brother might do.

"See, I won." I'm smiling, my arms crossed over the heart-beat that feels like a merengue rhythm pounding out in my chest. Fast, precise. A few of the guys pat me on the back. I still feel like there is rocket fuel in my veins and stardust under my feet. I won. That means we can bring the cash back to the garage, which means I can build Sombra a new engine—

"What do you think, boys? This *girl* win?" Derek says, face smug. Smug just like that night in July.

I want to rearrange his face into something more palatable. Something a little broken.

Rage is a nitrous switch. I am about to cock my arm back to punch him in the jaw when I realize that some of the guys around him are shrugging or shaking their heads. My mouth drops open, disbelieving. They are taking his side.

And just like that, it happens. Whispers—

... *she did launch too soon.*

... *she shouldn't even be here.*

... *she's a cheat.*

—all rumble around us, and I am too stunned to speak. Some of the guys go and stand behind Derek like sentinels, ready for command. My brother is about to charge into them, I can feel it. He is coiled-up anger and fists. He wouldn't win against every guy here, but that wouldn't matter to him. He'd fight on anyway. Fight until he couldn't stand up again.

I can't let him do that. I grab his shirt and drag him back. "No vale la pena, hermano." Because these assholes *aren't* worth it.

"No me toques, vieja. Estos pendejos me valen—"

"Stop speaking Mexican and admit you lost," Derek says.

"Grab a book, dipshit. And I didn't lose." I look at Santos, my hand still gripped on his shirt. "This isn't over," I say in a steady and calm voice. I hope that it softens the edges of him, and quiets him into stepping back.

He flares his nostrils, clenches his jaw, and after a big exhale, I see his shoulders relax.

"Whatever." Santos turns back to the car. Most likely to trap his desire for violence within its steel cage. He slams the door.

Derek is laughing. "Got your guard dog on a tight leash, huh?"

"If only I could muzzle you," I bite back.

"I bet you'd like that." The bastard winks at me.

Conrad hands over the winnings to Derek. A roll of cash in a hair tie. Someone's girlfriend must have offered it up. I look out over the group of guys and their cars. A guy will always side with another guy, even when the truth of something has

been spelled out clearly on the pavement. Especially when it would mean admitting that they lost to a girl. Especially when Derek O'Neil, the Philmore Academy quarterback golden boy told them otherwise.

Even the guys who had congratulated me don't look me in the eye now. Their girlfriends gather around them, too. Most of them look bored or smug. But Vee, her arm looped into Ray's, offers me an apologetic frown. She still doesn't say anything.

I want to finish this fight. I want to yank the cash right out of Derek's hands, but instead, I bite my lip and turn toward my black Civic. On the side of the road, amidst the shadows, she looks lost in the dark. Maybe she feels angry, too.

"No te preocupes, mi Sombrita." I pass my palm over her hood. Yes, don't worry, my little shadow. This car won tonight. We won. I swallow down a feeling that has its own claws. *I will not cry*. I will not. You don't cry in the streets or for a race, or in front of anyone who isn't your sangre. Even then, tears never solve anything so you might as well keep them to yourself. I chew on the inside of my cheek until I taste copper.

As I open up the driver's side door, I no longer see a rocket ship blasting into the wide-open sky. I am not some celestial wish.

It's just a car. And I am just a girl.

I sit down in the driver's seat, and I stare through the windshield. There they are, celebrating what should have been mine. I scan the dashboard and put my hands in my pockets. I don't expect it to be there, but I was hoping that someone from the UG circuit saw me and knew I belonged

in their races. I was hoping for an invitation. The invitations are exclusive and they appear mysteriously once a driver has proven themselves.

I take a deep breath as my hands come up empty. How many years will it take for me to belong? How many races will I have to win?

All of them. I will have to win *all* of them. That's what Shelby Watson did. The only woman from the D.C. metro area to make it. She went from the streets to the UG to the pros and never looked back. Neither will I.

I turn the engine on.

"You should have let me fight them," Santos says.

I am usually the reckless one. He is usually my anchor.

"No. Not today." That's what I always say when it is my turn to drop the anchor.

I can feel the statement fall to the bottom of the sea, tethered to the tail of a comet, brightly burning too fast and too close, like it is destined to strike us where we stand. And then, draaaaaaggggg. The anchor steadies us. The comet slows and our breathing slows with it. The anger, such a wild, vivid, bursting thing, settles into something heavier and far more uncomfortable in the stillness. Shame, disappointment, some twisted-up feeling that feels slippery and ugly, and yet I can't look away from it because it is like it is sucking up all the oxygen in the car. I roll down my window.

We drive home, silent. I can't help but see all of the litter on the side of the road.

I wonder if I should ball up my own dream and toss it out there, too.

But then I see it.

A sign on the road in crisp black letters. \$1000 FINE FOR LITTERING.

There is a penalty for trashing something somewhere that you know is yours.

I grip my steering wheel, a deep knowing shoving out the doubt. These streets are *mine*. And if they don't want to give them to me, then I will take them. The thought roars right along with mi Sombrita's engine. I rev it louder.

I can feel Santos's gaze shift to me as if he can tell the silence has morphed into something new, bolder. I roll my shoulders, grab and drop the clutch, and step on the gas.

We fly down the highway, a rocket ship once more.

Santos crosses his arms, leans back, and smiles.

So do I.

"You will beat them all, Hermana. Swear it."

"Te lo juro." I make a juramento, an oath. Just like Santos did all those years ago to save my life. I wasn't supposed to survive as a baby, but I did. Because Santos makes miracles happen.

I will not stop until I win and win and *win* because then maybe—I shake myself to stop myself from thinking it. Just drive. Stay in these white and yellow lines. Keep going.

As we get closer to our neighborhood, I see someone running on the shoulder. He's tall, hair floppy, and wearing a Philmore sweatshirt. I know who it is even in the dark. Jacob Fleckenstein. I've seen him run through these neighborhoods before. But why is he running in the middle of the night? And why has he missed school all week?

I've been wiping off his desk every day since he's been gone because some asshole keeps writing FREAKENSTEIN on it. I've never talked to him before, but as a fellow outcast at Philmore, I want to. As a new student, I need to find my allies. If Santos wasn't in the car, I would have pulled over. Instead, I watch him disappear in my rearview mirror.

When we get home and sneak back to our rooms in the dark, I am thinking about the Underground invitation, cash pots, and big trophies. I am thinking of winnings so big they could carry me far away from this house. I am tempted to look out the window. I don't. Because with mi Sombrita, I *am* a shooting star. I just close my eyes and dream.

But as I drift off into sleep, I remember that there are dreams you chase and dreams you run away from, and sometimes in the dark you don't know the difference.