

RIVAL HIGH

AVERY'S STORY

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NEXT

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CHAPTER 1

Sweat beaded on my temples, dripping down the sides of my face as I pedaled my bike up the hill to school. The small hairs along my hairline puckered and puffed, returning to the curly coils I had so diligently slicked down with gel that morning. I would not look super fresh when I walked into first period. And I'd be late.

Nothing was going to plan. Nothing.

Let me explain.

I'd had it all mapped out: My best friend, Reagan, and I would walk into Sherman High School arm in arm, ready to be the best versions of ourselves. But that wasn't meant to be, no matter how hard I wished

for it, because my mom had accepted a job as the Walker High School nurse and changed all that.

My mom always joked that I was as stubborn as a mule. Maybe she was right. I could be willful to a fault, and I could also hold a grudge. If I was being honest with myself, I still hadn't forgiven her for moving us to a rival school district and for separating my best friend and me.

Still, I was determined to start high school on my own, not under the wing of my faculty parent. Which was how I, Avery Jones, found myself pedaling as fast as I could to Walker High. Though, in this Texas heat, I was beginning to regret my bid for independence.

I pumped my legs as I crested the hill. Each inch was hard earned, and as I finally reached the top, I looked over my shoulder to watch for any oncoming traffic. When the road was clear, I kicked forward and rolled across the street, my legs throbbing from the exertion. Coasting into the parking lot, I scanned my surroundings for a bike rack. I was so distracted, I didn't even notice the motorcycle headed straight for me.

Grunting, I swung my handlebars to the left, trying

to dodge the collision. The kid on the other bike also swerved away from me, missing my front wheel by a hair. But I was tilted at an impossible angle. And even though I flailed my arms and shifted my weight to counterbalance, there was only one way this was going to end—

Splat.

The lawn flew up to meet my face. Blades of grass crinkled against my cheeks. My knee stung against the concrete curb. Hurried footsteps padded against the pavement, and soon a helmeted head bent over me.

“Holy crap!” a shaky, deep voice sounded from behind the plexiglass visor. “Are you okay?”

“No!” I grumbled, propping myself up on my elbows. Untangling my legs from my bike, I kicked it away and then rolled right side up.

Just then, a school bus rumbled past, and the students inside it pressed their faces to the windows to watch the spectacle.

Perfect. I was roadkill on the first day of school.

I glared at my collision-classmate. His helmet was hanging at his side, revealing shoulder-length blond hair, wide green eyes, and upturned brows. My frown

faltered; he was actually . . . kinda cute.

"Guess you didn't see my hand signals," he said, clearly annoyed.

My frown returned in full force. "So, this is *my* fault?"

"No. Sorry." He sighed. "It's not important. Let me help you."

He stretched out his hand, but I shook my head. There was no way I was letting him anywhere near me. Stubborn to the bitter end, I heaved myself to my feet, swaying slightly as I found my footing. He reached down and grabbed my handlebars, twisting the front wheel so it was facing the right direction again.

"Thanks a lot," I said, snatching the bike from his grasp. It was half serious, half sarcastic. I didn't appreciate falling flat on my face in front of my new school on the first day. Although, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd been right—if I'd been so distracted that I hadn't noticed he had the right of way. Maybe this near miss *was* my fault.

But I'd never admit that to *him*. The mule inside me forbid it.

"What are you even doing riding a motorcycle to a

high school? Isn't that illegal?" I frowned at his bike across the bus lane, wondering if this guy needed a license to operate it. And if he had a license, how the heck did he pass his driver's test?

"It's a dirt bike." His mouth betrayed a grin. "And as far as I know, they're not outlawed." He gestured to the main entrance, wincing as he looked at my scraped knee. "Can I help you to the school nurse?"

"No!" I said in almost a shout. He looked at me, confused, and I nearly felt bad for him. He didn't know how desperate I was to separate myself from my mother.

He nodded slowly, his eyes darting to mine, tightening as if he was unsure what to say. "It's just that you look new here. I haven't seen you around, and you might not know where the nurse's office is."

He had a point. The majority of Walker High was still unknown to me. There were halls I hadn't explored, classrooms I'd yet to experience, students I hadn't met. High school was a big and intimidating new world—made even more intimidating by my embarrassing fall. But at least I knew where to find a Band-Aid.

"Thanks, but I know where I'm going." I locked my bike in the bike rack and headed toward my mom's office, which she'd shown me over summer break.

After a few steps, I looked behind my shoulder at the mysterious boy who zoomed around on a dirt bike. He was still standing there, frowning as he watched my progress, likely still mad at me for getting in his way.

So, to recap: I was late for my first day of high school, I got into a collision with an upperclassman who was now pissed at me, and I fell flat on my face in front of my new classmates.

This day was turning out to be horrible, and it hadn't even begun.

