

C A R O L Y N M A C K L E R

**NOT
IF
I CAN
HELP
IT**

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CHAPTER 1



“Want to do best part worst part?” Ruby asks

as we turn right on Broadway. She’s just texted her mom that we’ve left school and will be at I Scream in ten minutes.

“Sure,” I say, smiling as two terriers trot past us, their rhinestone collars sparkling in the sunlight. I once told Ruby how my mom and I do best part worst part every night on the phone and now she likes doing it too. “I can go first,” I add. “My best part is definitely now.”

Ruby’s phone chimes in her pocket and she takes it out for a quick glance. I look into her hand. It’s her mom saying *Okay!* with a bunch of hearts after it. Ruby is still ten and already has a phone and I’m eleven and don’t have one yet. My dad says I’ll get one at the beginning of sixth grade in the fall.

“Be more specific about what you mean by *now*, Willa,” Ruby says, pinching her nose so she sounds congested. She’s imitating our fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Lacey, who has seasonal allergies. Ms. Lacey spent the morning sneezing and

coughing and lecturing us about how we can't get away with generalizations like *I dunno* and *fine*.

Ruby knows that Ms. Lacey's long lectures make me antsy, just like I know that she has to pee twice as often as the average person. Ruby Kapoor and I know so much about each other because we're best friends. We met last fall, when she and her mom moved to Manhattan from Connecticut. Now it's the spring of fifth grade, which I really don't want to think about because any day now we're going to get our middle school acceptance letters in the mail and find out where we're going to sixth grade. For one, I hate any kind of change, so the idea of leaving The Children's School, where I've gone since kindergarten, freaks me out. For two, what if Ruby and I get into different middle schools and have to be ripped apart after only one year of best friendship? That would be the worst kind of change ever.

I reach down and adjust my left sock so it's not bunched up in my sneaker. "Specifically . . . my best part is right now," I say. "Walking to I Scream with you to get ice cream—"

"And sorbet," Ruby interjects. She's lactose intolerant and has to be careful not to eat dairy or she'll get a stomachache.

"And sorbet," I add, "and definitely with a heap of gummy bears on top. Is that specific enough?"

"Yum!" Ruby says, grinning.

That was how our friendship began, with gummy bears from the exact I Scream we are walking to right now. Last August, my dad told me that a new girl was starting at The

Children’s School and that the principal had asked a bunch of parents to take their kids to I Scream on a Sunday afternoon to meet her and greet her and make sure she felt comfortable on the first day. The new girl turned out to be Ruby—short and skinny, her long hair in a ponytail, a palate expander on her teeth. A few other girls were there, like the twins, Norie and Zoe Robbins, and horrible Avery Tanaka, smiling wide like she was going to be noticed by a talent scout while choosing her flavors. Ruby was with her mom, who was shaking hands and collecting parents’ phone numbers. As we were at the toppings bar, I noticed that Ruby and I both loaded our dishes with gummy bears. I squealed and told her that gummy bears were MY signature topping. No one else understood how perfectly they stiffened when they made contact with ice cream. *Or sorbet*, she said, grinning at me. I grinned back at her, and it was best friends at first sight.

“What was *your* best part today?” I now ask Ruby as we pause at the light on Ninety-Fourth and Broadway. We live in a neighborhood of Manhattan called the Upper West Side. The exciting thing about this spring is that, after eleven years of being taken everywhere by a parent or babysitter, my dad has finally agreed to let me walk the dozen blocks to and from school by myself. I usually still walk to school with my dad and my little brother, Benji, who is eight. Going home, I sometimes walk with Benji and our sitter, Joshua, or Ruby if we have plans to hang out after school. Ruby and her mom

live thirty blocks downtown, so she's not allowed to travel home by herself yet because that would mean taking the subway or a city bus, and her mom says "no way" to that. If Ruby doesn't come to my apartment, she goes to afterschool until her mom picks her up after work.

Today Joshua is taking Benji to his climbing class, and Ruby and I are meeting my dad and her mom at I Scream. My dad told me the plan this morning at breakfast, and he said that Ruby's mom was telling Ruby the same plan. They're both getting off work early, and we're supposed to leave school together and walk up there.

"My best part is also now," Ruby says. "And playing soccer at gym. That was awesome. I can't believe I got four goals! What was your worst part?"

I don't tell Ruby that soccer at gym was my worst part. I hate gym. At least at recess, I can read a book or join in a gaga game, which in my opinion is the only ball sport for people who stink at ball sports, because all you do is try to whack other people's shins with the ball while dodging the ball so your shins don't get whacked. But at gym, when participating in the sport is required, I'm forced to deal with soccer balls and volleyballs and kickballs. I can barely run without tripping, so having a ball involved in a non-gaga way makes everything worse. Unlike me, Ruby loves soccer. She plays on a team during afterschool and another team on weekends. She even watches soccer on TV, which sounds as exciting to me as watching pencils getting sharpened.

I don't want to insult soccer, so instead I ask Ruby, "Why do you think my dad and your mom want to meet us at I Scream? Don't you think that's strange on a random school day?"

Ruby shakes her head. "Probably because ice cream and sorbet covered in gummy bears is an awesome way to spend a Thursday afternoon."

I shrug. That's another way we're different. Ruby doesn't wonder why my dad and her mom would leave work early to meet us. Ruby also doesn't get upset whenever I mention middle school. She says it'll all work out. She says if we go to different middle schools, we'll stay best friends and have lots of sleepovers. The thing is, I've slept over at her apartment a bunch of times, but whenever I invite her to my apartment she makes an excuse for why she can't come. It doesn't help that I go to my mom's—she lives upstate with my stepfather—every Saturday morning and return Sunday night, so my sleepover days are limited. Even so, I can't help feeling offended that she never sleeps at my apartment. Yes, I live with two guys—my dad and brother—but they're not slobs. Actually, I'm messier than they are! My room is littered with LEGO bricks and LEGO accessories and whatever clothes I shed onto the floor in my daily quest to find something comfortable to wear.

"Maybe they want to talk to us about middle school," I say, fiddling with the bracelets on my wrist. I like to wear an assortment of stretchy bracelets, friendship bracelets, and rubber bands. "Maybe our middle school letters came

and they want to tell us the news together so we can celebrate if we got in to the same school and cry if we didn't."

"I doubt it," Ruby tells me. "My mom has me check the mail. All we've gotten the past few days are bills and junk mail. Nothing from the Department of Education, if that's what you're wondering."

Just then, a golden retriever walks toward us. Golden retrievers are my favorite dogs. I watch it lumber by, its feathery tail waving like a flag. Ruby is used to my dog ogling, so she gives me a second before taking my elbow and tugging me along.

"So what do you think it is?" I ask once we're walking again.

"Maybe they're planning a surprise trip to Polar Bear Adventures," Ruby offers, giggling.

"Get us some *me time!*" I say, flashing her a thumbs-up.

Ruby and I joke about the commercial for Polar Bear Adventures, an indoor water park in New Jersey. It's a cheesy commercial with the girl whooping as she whizzes down a water slide and the boy bodysurfing in a wave pool and the mom getting some "me time" in a burbling hot tub. The truth is, it actually looks fun. A few weeks ago, when my dad and brother and I had dinner with Ruby and her mom at Thai Market, we started talking about Polar Bear Adventures. Ruby's mom said maybe she'd take Ruby and me for Ruby's eleventh birthday in August. When I turned eleven in February, I had my regular birthday party—movie, pizza,

and mini-cupcakes with a group of girls from school. I've been doing that since I was six. The only difference about my birthday this year was that I didn't get my big present on the actual day. That's because after years of begging, I'm finally getting a dog! My dad says we have to wait until the end of the school year to adopt one so I'll have the whole summer to bond with it.

"I guess why we're meeting them at I Scream is going to remain a mystery," Ruby concludes.

I kick at a bottle cap on the sidewalk and watch it slide into the street. "For three more blocks."

"So what was your worst part?" Ruby asks. "You still didn't say."

I'm trying to think of a worst part other than soccer at gym when we spot Avery Tanaka on the other side of Broadway. I've known Avery since preschool. She even annoyed me back when we were four and she insisted on being the queen in every castle game and the head dog in every kennel. Ruby and I glance at each other, and I can tell we're thinking the same thing: *worst part*. Across the street, Avery is eating an apple and walking toward the subway with her mom. No doubt she's going to voice lessons or tap lessons or drama coaching or whatever else Avery does to make sure she gets into a performing arts middle school and becomes a movie star someday. Aside from being horrible, Avery is perfect. She's got long, shimmery hair that's never messy, and she wears sparkly dresses and headbands and slip-on shoes, and she

always gets the solo in any class performance because I think the teachers are afraid of what would happen if she didn't. It's not like I'm jealous of Avery. What bothers me is the way she rubs in her perfect life. She brags about how she has a sister in high school and they go for manicure-pedicures together, and she has a Cavalier King Charles spaniel who sleeps in her bed every night. On top of her bragging, she makes comments to me about how I still can't do a cartwheel or that I wrote my research paper on LEGOs and that's a boy topic. Even though the majority of people who trade LEGOs in my class are boys, it's not a *boy topic*. LEGOs are awesome and they're a girls' toy too. I didn't tell Avery that, though, because if I did she'd just roll her eyes and call me weird.

Avery isn't as nasty to Ruby as she is to me, except for once, when we were doing a classroom project on family trees, and she told us how sad it is that we're both from *broken homes*. My parents divorced when I was seven and Ruby's split up when she was a baby. On the way out of school that day, Ruby and I decided that Avery was wrong. Our homes aren't broken. They're just built in a different way.

Sure enough, when Avery spots Ruby and me across the street, she rises onto her tiptoes and says something into her mom's ear. A second later, Avery's mom glances in our direction and gives us an awkward wave.

"Worst part," Ruby mutters. "I have to pee, by the way."

"Didn't it look like Avery was telling her mom a secret about us?" I ask, tugging at my left sock again. It was fine all

day but now it's driving me crazy. "The way she whispered and then her mom looked over?"

"She's just Avery being Avery. Can we hurry? I really have to pee."

I peer over at Avery one more time. She's tossing her apple core in the trash. As soon as she catches me watching her, she presses her lips together and grins like she knows something I don't know.

"Yeah, let's go," I tell Ruby, groaning. "Let's get out of here."

"It's just Avery being Avery," Ruby says again.

As we speed walk toward I Scream, I think about how I'm not so sure Ruby's right. It definitely looked like Avery knows something we don't know, and I don't have a good feeling about it.