

Ruby

By

Shanna Handel

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Chapter One

Jacob winced as Ruby slammed the door to his car, throwing herself into the passenger seat. Having just finished restoring the Camaro to its former glory, he was still babying it.

She looked at him exuberantly. “Hi, Jacob.” She took a small pink glittery tube from her bag before tossing it sloppily onto the floorboard. Then twisting his rearview mirror towards her, while concentrating on her reflection in the small rectangle, she fluffed her mane of curly brown hair, pronouncing, “I have the best news.” while expertly applying the sticky pink goo to her full, enticing lips.

His eyes hovered over her face as he watched as her beautiful mouth transformed into a shiny plastic— mess. Shaking his head at her careless nature and disregard for his car’s safety equipment, he asked, “Could you not do that?” Jacob moved the mirror back in place, double checking it for accuracy.

Ruby flashed that adorable smile, the one that had instantly caught his eye on the sidelines of his rec league baseball game. She was there with a friend on the team, rooting them on, loudly, from the bleachers. Her petite frame bounced up and down as well as her curls, as she clapped and cheered. Tiny silver bells jingled from the bottom of her patchwork skirt. She was the most amazing creature he had ever laid eyes on and she had been on his mind every moment since then.

An infectious bubbly laughed filled his car. “Oh yeah, guess you kinda need that to drive. Although mine fell off once and it was weeks before I finally got a glue strong enough to stick it back on,” she said, her voice high and clear, like a bell. She casually waved a hand in the air and added, “And I was totally fine. Well,” she stopped for a moment, cocking her head to the side, “there was that one little bump, but still.”

Wincing again as he drove down her long gravel driveway, he said, “You drove without a rearview mirror?” He tried to tamper the tone of annoyance in his voice. This girl had a total disregard for her safety.

“Sure, why not? I had to get around town somehow. Those pets aren’t going to let themselves out.” She shrugged.

A smile crossed his face, despite his concern. He and Ruby were total opposites. Ruby was an outgoing free spirit, animal lover, and adorable. For Jacob, this more than made up for her forgetfulness, brashness, colorful language and sometimes over the top behavior.

Jacob wondered how they had even gotten through the first date— their personalities were night and day. He was a planner, taking life in slowly and methodically. He was also much more reserved with his emotions, though always warm and friendly. People often commented on his polite and respectful manners. Tall, athletic, and a former college soccer player, Ruby thought he was pretty adorable too, which she had told him, multiple times.

“If it happens again, promise me you will call me to fix it before you drive again.” The demanding tone of his voice surprised him a bit, and he added, “Please.”

“Okay. I guess.” Ruby looked down at her lap, a soft blush covering her face.

Not satisfied with her response, but not wanting to push her, Jacob let the subject drop. “So, what’s your news?”

“We are going to drag race this baby against Fi and Dan,” she said, while bouncing up and down in her seat and patting the pristine black leather dash of his, new to him, car. She flashed him a brilliant smile, her eyes shining with excitement

Though he and Ruby saw eye to eye on the important things in life, they did not see eye to eye on just about anything else. He was pretty sure they were about to have their first fight.

The Camaro reached the end of the long driveway, and instead of pulling out onto the road, Jacob stopped the vehicle. He put the car into park and turned his lean body towards Ruby. “No, we aren’t,” Jacob said. He wanted to add, “And I should take you over my knee for even suggesting something so dangerous,” but held his tongue.

She looked surprised that he would not be game for this, her face turning grumpy. “Yes, we are, I already told them,” she said with a slight whine in her voice. “Come on, Jacob, what’s the point of having a car like this if you aren’t going to test its limits? I just know we are going to win. Please?” She pouted her pink lips at him, brown eyes sparkling.

Although he thought she was as cute as they came, Jacob didn’t move from his stance. He had already given into her ways too many times in the past. “No,” he said harshly, giving her his best ‘I mean business face,’ knowing she wasn’t going to give up easily.

“Why not?” Ruby pressed.

Jacob looked at her for a long moment. Her long, wild mane of curly hair, diminutive stature, and sweet face almost got to him. Thank goodness he was raised better than to do a dare to impress a girl, even if he was infatuated with her. “It’s dangerous, illegal, and just plain stupid.” He turned his eyes away from her and back on the road, ready to get back to the date he had planned for them.

As he prepared to turn onto the main road, he heard her whisper a very nasty word under her breath. A name she was calling him to challenge his masculinity and try to get him to relent, little did she know that she had crossed a line.

The word seemed to float through the air between them, hovering just above him, then socked him in the gut. It’s one of those moments in a movie, he thought, where the man takes his most challenging tone and threatens, what did you just call me? Jacob had no need for that; he had heard her loud and clear, the first time.

It seemed Ruby was expecting a heated response. Fuming, she sat with her arms crossed, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. A look of astonishment crossed her face when Jacob checked for traffic both ways, then did a three-point turn.

What she needed, he thought, was to be turned over his knee and have her bottom paddled until she was apologizing through her tears. Wordlessly, he took them back to her Aunt’s house.

“Jacob, why are we going back?” Ruby whipped her head around, looking at him in disbelief. Jacob didn’t answer, just kept driving at a steady pace until they were back at her front door.

Parking the car, he turned towards her. “Good-bye, Ruby,” he said with one hand on the wheel, and one hand on the gear shift then set his eyes back in front.

She playfully punched him in the arm, seeming unsure how to react. “Jacob. I was just kidding! I didn’t mean to call you that.” Jacob did not respond, just continued his steady gaze forward.

“Jacob. I’m, well, I’m sorry. Okay? Now let’s get going.” She put her bag in her lap and sat back in her seat determined to get her way.

His voice came in a low tone, almost a growl. “Please get out of the car, Ruby. Now.”

“No.” She scooted herself as far back into the leather seat as she could go.

Letting his anger cool, Jacob paused to collect his thoughts. What he wanted to do was pull Ruby out of the car, and give her naughty bottom a good hard spanking right there in her driveway. Sighing, he put the car into neutral and pulled the emergency brake for the second time, then calmly unbuckled his seatbelt. “Fine,” he said as he opened his door, stood up, closed it softly, then headed toward the road on foot. He would walk home before he stayed in the car with someone who would speak to him like that.

He heard her shuffle out of the car and winced as she slammed his door again.

“Jacob, wait.” She was a flurry of a long swishy skirt as she grabbed his arm, slowing him down. He turned towards her, silent.

“I really am sorry. I didn’t mean it. Can we still go out?” And of course, she flashed that heartbreakingly adorable smile, still cute even in all its fake, glossy glory. Seeing that she was winning him over slightly, she clasped her hands and stood on tiptoe, still almost a full head shorter than him. “Pretty please? With a cherry on top?”

It wasn’t in his plan to have a wild, foul-mouthed little girl at his side. Jacob had always pictured his “girl” as someone sweet and sensible, maybe from his church. But then this little firecracker had shown up at the game and stolen his heart at first glance. From her bohemian get up, to the wild hair that matched her personality, the pint-sized princess was everything he hadn’t imagined, and the only one he wanted. He relented.

“Okay. But any more language like that, and I bring you right back home.” He held back from threatening her with much more than that. He raised an eyebrow at her, setting his mouth in a firm line to hide the hint of a smile creeping in.

Blushing again and looking down, same as when he had mentioned fixing her mirror, she said, “Okay. No more language.” Grabbing his arm and laughing, she half skipped, half pulled him back to the waiting Camaro.

She stood at the passenger side door, hand on her hip, waiting for Jacob to open the door for her. He knew he should be the perfect, forgiving gentleman and open the door, assisting her into the vehicle, but he couldn’t. He had to set things straight, first.

“Turn around.”

“Excuse me?”

“Face the car, Ruby.”

Timidly, she turned and faced the car, an unsure look on her face as she glanced at him over her shoulder.

Whack! His hand came down hard on her pert bottom. She jumped up on her tiptoes, rubbing her behind.

“Ouch, Jacob!”

He snaked his hand around her and grabbed the handle of the door. One hand on the door handle and one hand tightly on her hip, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Watch your mouth, little girl.”

He observed her, satisfied as a shiver ran down Ruby’s body. He then politely opened her door.

Her eyes were wide as she stared at him and without a word, climbed into the car.

“You ain’t seen nothing, yet,” Jacob said aloud to himself, after slamming the door. Whistling, he made his way to the driver’s side.

“Honey, if this were any other gal, I’d say run for the hills. The truth is, I think Ruby is a real sweetheart, just a bit of a lost little girl. Doesn’t sound like she’s had anyone to look after her. Maybe she doesn’t know that she can let someone take care of her, ya know?”

Jacob sat at the gleaming island in Heather’s gourmet kitchen. After his confusing date, he had headed straight to her house looking for some of her classic ‘from the heart’ advice.

Taking a deep breath, he answered, “She has had a hard time of it. Her dad left when she was little, and she’s always lived with her mom and aunt, but it sounds like they weren’t ever around. She does seem lost I guess.” He didn’t add that he had a burning desire to protect her from the moment that he had laid eyes on her. It was such a new relationship; he didn’t want to sound like he was coming on too strong.

Heather looked at her son, his handsome face reflecting her own, the same furrowed brow she got when she was working on a problem. “Jacob,” she said, “what would Gail have told you in this instance?”

The pain of the loss of his adoptive mother washed over him. Gail and Gregory were an older couple who had adopted him at birth and were the only parents he had ever known. Until last year, when a private investigator approached him to reveal that he had a birth mother, and she was looking for him.

Giving birth to Jacob when she was only fifteen years old, and coming from a fatherless home, Heather had put the baby up for adoption. Her mother was barely taking care of herself, as it was and there was no way she was going to help her barely teenaged daughter raise a baby.

Gail and Gregory had passed away several years before Jacob had been contacted by Heather, leaving him with no family. He was grateful and surprised to be introduced to his birth mother as well as his extended family. Jacob even moved with Heather, and her husband David, back to the small town David was from, just to be close to his new found family. One year later, it felt like everyone, from Luke and Lila to Elizabeth and Cole, and their children, had always been a part of his life, but he would never stop missing his parents.

“My parents were old-fashioned, I guess some might say. They had a very traditional marriage. My mother would never have disrespected my father like that. I always assumed that my relationship would be the same. Ruby is just more— I don’t know.” He tried to put his thoughts into words as he looked out of the window, admiring the picturesque backyard.

He knew Heather understood all angles of this situation. She had been a wild teen, much more so than Ruby, and only turned her life around when she found a stable community by going to her local church. It was after that that Heather had met her husband, David. She had been a girl without anyone to show her the ropes, or set boundaries. But Jacob also saw what pragmatic Gail would have seen. A relationship starting out rocky, two people with very different expectations and backgrounds, which could lead to unhappiness

“David and I have a very un-traditional, traditional marriage, as you know.” She looked at Jacob pointedly. He looked away, embarrassed by her confession. Although he saw the benefits himself, it was awkward to hear his mom refer to the domestic discipline side of her relationship.

Continuing, never missing a beat, Heather said, “I’ve seen you two together, and can’t help but feel you are a match made in heaven. Two people who could let their weaknesses complement each other. Ruby needs someone like you, Jacob, to be strong for her, and guide her. But she has to be open to your guidance. If that is the kind of relationship you want, be honest with her. Ruby needs two things. Number one, to hear the truth. Number two, a good, hard, spank-”

“Okay, Okay, I got it,” Jacob stood as he interrupted his mom, waving his hands in the air to stop her from finishing her train of thought. He didn’t dare tell his mom he had slapped his girlfriend on the butt just that morning.

“I can’t help myself, Jacob. It worked for me. David ‘took me in hand’ as they say, and it was my saving grace.” She gave a low whistle before continuing. “I can’t tell you what he would have done to me if I had said a word like that, even that early in—”

“Mom.” Jacob gave her a look that told her their heart to heart was over.

“Hearing you call me Mom, now that warms my heart through and through. More than I deserve, but I’ll take it.” Heather reached out, hugging her son.

“That’s in the past, Mom. You made the best decision you could, and it all worked out.” He tightly returned the embrace.

Holding Jacob at arm’s length, she looked him over proudly before releasing him to dab at her teary eyes. “I just love you, baby. You’ll figure this out. Maybe you should talk to your Uncle Luke. I know it might be awkward for you to speak to David or me about this, but you and Luke have gotten to know each other well under the hood of that automobile.”

“It’s called a Camaro, Mom.”

Luke was a man that he admired and respected. He and his wife, Lila, had an enviable marriage. “You’re right. I should have a chat with Luke. Thanks, Mom.”

Jacob enjoyed the smile that crossed Heather’s face every time he said that word.

The next date with Ruby was a whirlwind of laughs and fun mixed with deep conversations. He was fascinated with the way her mind worked. She seemed to see things from a more in-depth angle than he did— always a step ahead of everyone else and quick witted. Many women in her situation would rightly feel jaded by the universe, but Ruby lived with a moment to moment awe of life. She accepted any adventure and new friend that crossed her path.

The warning spank he had given her never came up, but Ruby’s language was much improved this time. Unfortunately, this date came complete with a huge, confusing speed bump, this time at the end of the evening instead of the beginning.

He had taken her ice skating, at her request, something he hadn’t done since he was a kid. Although a lifetime athlete, he struggled on the ice, much like a fish out of the water. Ruby laughed as she glided across the smooth surface, seeming to almost hover over it, her long colorful skirt and unruly mane flowing behind her. Jacob ‘walked’ in careful choppy steps until he could skate beside her.

Enchanted by the presence of the angel beside him, he wanted to hold her but would settle for her hand. “Would it be too forward of me to ask if I could hold your hand?” he said as they skated in sync around the curve of the ring.

Ruby came to a stop, causing ice skaters to move around her to avoid a collision. Jacob turned around cautiously trying not to fall, dodging skaters as he did, and faced her.

A strange expression registered on her face. Suddenly, she looked down, tears spilling from her eyes. Oh man, he must have over done it. Onlookers went by slowly, staring at the couple frozen on the ice ring.

“Look, Ruby, if it’s too soon, I’m sorry. I just really like you.”

Looking up and wiping the tears away her smile shined from her face, beaming towards him. “No, it’s not that Jacob, it’s just that no one ever asked me before. It took me off guard. I guess I’m just used to guys that— take. You know?”

The last words she said brought a flash of red in his mind's eye. He was surprised at how much anger he felt about these 'guys' of which he knew nothing. If anyone ever were to hurt her... well, no one was going to if she was with him. He would die before he let that happen.

"You can hold both my hands," she said giggling. She grabbed both of Jacob's hands in hers and started skating backward, almost toppling several people as she did. Jacob couldn't keep up, and eventually, they had to settle for holding hands the traditional way, gliding peacefully next to one another. The feeling of the energy where their bodies connected was electric.

They held hands in the car, as best he could while driving stick, on the way to get ice cream, held hands while they ate their ice cream, then held hands all the way on the drive back to her house. As they pulled up the dark gravel driveway, he rubbed his thumb back and forth over the back of the hand he held. He parked the car in front of the porch, running his thumb over the elegant finger of her left hand, hoping that his ring would adorn it one day.

Walking up the stairs to her dark, empty house, Jacob felt dread. He knew which subject was going to come up, and he knew he had to come clean with her.

She looked down at the porch floor, "So, I hate that I can't invite you in, it's just a wreck in there. But we could go back to your place for a while." She looked up at him with the sweetest smile, her eyes sparkling playfully.

Jacob took a deep breath and both of her hands in his. "I can't. I mean, I won't."

Ruby looked dismayed. "Don't you like me?" she asked in a tiny voice.

Jacob sensed her self-doubt and quickly reassured her. "Ruby. I like you. A lot. A whole lot. Too much, in fact, to trust myself if we were to be alone at my house right now."

She looked up at him, and his heart melted at the wounded little girl he could see in her eyes.

"Won't you at least kiss me?"

He looked down at the porch and sighed. "Ruby, I've never kissed anyone."

She was apparently shocked and didn't reply to him.

Heat coursed over the back of his neck. The warmth seemed to be frequently happening around Ruby, as she often pushed him out of his comfort zone. It quickly passed, though. He believed in his convictions and was one of the few men of his age who was completely comfortable with himself, exactly how he was. He looked back at her in a quiet reply.

"What?" she whispered, waiting for further explanation.

"It's simple, Ruby, my first kiss is for my wife."