

*play with me*



PIPER  
SHELLY

## CHAPTER

# 1

HE'D NEVER TRIED to kiss me, even when we practically shared the same bed half of the summer. And then he was gone. For five tormenting weeks. I thought I was going to die after day two.

But today, my torture was over. Today, Anthony Mitchell returned. My best friend and future husband.

Not like I had informed him about that yet, but it wasn't necessary. Everyone knew it, and I couldn't wait to trade my last name, Matthews, for his. Tony and I had been hanging out since kindergarten. We were inseparable, except for the few hours every day when he had soccer training and I had—well, some time to write

how much I loved him in my diary for the sixteen millionth time.

Liza and Tony, that went like Bonnie&Clyde. Like Lois&Clark. We were M&M, really.

The door bell chimed.

My heart banged against my throat as I tossed my diary to the side, struggling to disentangle the quilt from around my legs. I finally flopped off the bed together with the comforter.

“I’m coming!” On the way down the winding stairs, I raked my fingers through my long, brown hair to give it the last bit of oomph before I rushed to open the door. A sunbeam hit me first, then Tony’s long missed prettiness followed. His blond hair, tousled over his forehead, almost touched his pretty blue eyes. He wore the white shirt half open, and I always had to fight really hard not to drool over his naked skin.

Hands shoved into the pockets of his shorts, he just stood there and looked at me. Then his mouth curled into his typical sly grin. “What is it, Liz? I know you’re dying to hug me.”

Gee! I flashed my teeth, which now were perfectly straight after wearing braces for two years, into a broad smile and gave him the bear hug he expected. He dragged me outside and twirled me under the warm sun with my face buried in the crook of his neck. Ah, he smelled so good, sun-kissed and all Tony. I never got enough of that special brand.

“How was camp?” I asked after he set me down.

He mocked me by wrinkling his nose. “Boring as hell without you, what else?”

“Yeah, right. As if.”

To fully understand him, one had to know that apart from the one obsession we shared about Spielberg-movies, soccer was Tony’s greatest passion in the world. But I appreciated his lie and stuck my tongue out at him.

Tony tsked at that. “Manners, girl. If you want to kiss me, just say so.” His face was close enough that his nose brushed mine. I swallowed the urge to tilt my head and do just that. But I knew he was teasing me again. So far, we’d never kissed. In regular intervals, I fell asleep in his bedroom when we did a *Jaws*-marathon, or he would crash at mine when his parents were out on business trips

around the state. He let me rest my head on his shoulder, even played absently with my hair. But a kiss? Nah.

I was going to be seventeen at the end of this summer and started feeling a little weird because I hadn't been kissed yet. But no one other than Tony would touch my lips, and if he needed a few more months to realize he wanted me, too, I could wait.

"Hey, want to go down to the beach? I got this pretty new swimsuit and haven't tried it out yet." In anticipation of our reunion, I had put on the neon green bikini in the morning, and now pulled down the collar of my pink tee to tease him with a glimpse. Green was his favorite color.

He snarled like a jaguar, with one corner of his mouth lifted. "I'd love to see you half naked, Matthews." Just another tease, but it didn't matter. Goose bumps shot up on my skin. "Unfortunately, I have to pass. I'm going to see some friends from the team down at Charlie's."

My shoulders slumped. "Seriously? You just got back, what, ten minutes ago? Didn't you see the guys enough at camp?"

"Hunter wants to discuss tomorrow's qualifications."

I pouted. Ever since Ryan Hunter had become the new captain of Grover Beach's high school soccer team, Tony's training time had doubled. And more training meant less time for him to hang out with me. I hated Hunter.

"Cheer up, girl. Why don't you come along? You know most of the guys anyway, and I'll introduce you to the rest. I'm sure Hunter won't mind." He gave me no chance to argue, or even trade my flip-flops for decent shoes. My hand in a tight grip, he hauled me down the path through our front yard.

"Wait! I have no money on me."

"Don't need it. That single soda you'll sip on for the next two hours won't ruin me."

I pulled my hair back and fastened it with a band I had in my pocket as we ambled along Saratoga Avenue to Charlie's café and diner.

A bunch of kids sat around three tables in the shade of the wooden roof sloping over half of the outdoor area. I recognized a few of them from Tony's team. Sasha Torres, Stephan Jones, Alex Winter. Nick Andrews' arm

was laid in a cast. The training camp obviously didn't pass without leaving battle scars.

I was surprised with the many female faces there, though. "What's this?" I whispered to Tony when we still were out of earshot. "Are you into co-ed training now?"

"Cool, isn't it? We played a few games together in Santa Monica, and Hunter thought it would be fun to assemble a mixed team here, too."

Some of the girls looked familiar, and I even had Spanish with Susan Miller. But a handful of them I swore I had never seen before. Like the one who stood as we approached and kissed Tony on the cheek with her awfully bright red painted lips.

"You're late, Anthony. I almost thought you wouldn't come."

Anthony? The only person I ever heard calling him that was his grandma.

"Hi, Cloey," he replied in a strange, deep voice I'd never heard before. His hands rested on her hips. He dipped his head and let her kiss his other cheek.

She winked at him then gave me the strangest once over I ever got. The spite in her eyes made me feel as if I

fell short in the looks and fashion department in her books.

My glance skated to Tony's face. What the hell was that? And seriously, he didn't have to drool over her shamelessly long legs when she sat down again and swung one over the other. Her white mini dress must have shrunk in the wash, because something red flashed underneath.

Tony shouted our order to Charlie behind the bar. A Coke and Red Bull. The Red Bull certainly wasn't for me. But when did he start drinking that nasty stuff? Red-lips-and-white-dress had a bottle of that in front of her, too. I started feeling really awkward all of a sudden.

"Mixed soccer teams, huh?" I grumbled at Tony while we sat down—he opposite Cloey, and I between him and Nick with the cast.

"The tryouts are tomorrow, Matthews. I can put you on the list, if you're interested," Ryan Hunter called out to me, a mocking glint in his deep brown eyes.

The fact he even knew my name caught me off guard.

“Liz and soccer?” Tony laughed next to me. It hurt in a weird way. “You might as well try to get an elephant dance the tango. Right, Liz?”

I directed an irritated scowl at my supposed best friend. He didn’t even notice when the entire bunch joined in the laugh.

“The elephant is a close hit home,” Barbie said to the redhead next to her then flashed me a cruel smile.

*Sorry, what?* I was a perfect size XS. My five feet four might seem a little short to her Amazonian six foot something, but I was in no way fat. I picked up my dropped stomach from the ground, deciding to punish Tony later for pretending not to have heard that. In all the time we had been friends, not once did he let anyone insult me without breaking their jaw. Okay, messing with Cloey’s face would be a little drastic, but he could at least have said something to defend me.

Since he seemed to have forgotten how, I returned the saccharin sweet smile to the Barbie Clone. “I tried puking my meals in ninth grade, but then this seems to be more your thing than mine.”

The laughter died, and Tony choked on his swig of Red Bull while the rest of the group pretended to be conversing in lowered voices. The only sound, a chuckle, came from the place where Ryan Hunter sat.

Cloey frowned at me as if I'd spoken a foreign language. "Did you just insult me?"

The funny thing was she really meant it. I cut a glance skyward and sipped on my Coke.

Thankfully, Tony got a text message from his mother a little later. Mrs. Mitchell was hoping to see him again before she and her husband had to leave town for two days. Tony looked at my glass of soda and asked me if I wanted to stay with the others.

I downed the drink in three seconds, already standing. "Nope, I'm ready."

He shook his head, but smiled, and let me walk in front of him.

"See you tomorrow, Anthony," Barbie cooed.

I ignored the rising heat of jealousy and resisted the urge to glare at her over my shoulder. Instead, I counted the tiles on the floor to the exit. One, two, three...

“How about it, Matthews?” Ryan Hunter said as I passed him. “Will you opt for the team or not?”

I stopped, stunned that he was serious about it. My eyes fastened on the easy smile he cast me. “I—”

Tony’s hands on my shoulders gently pushed me forward. “You shouldn’t tease her. She’s just not made for soccer.”

My heels dug into the ground. Not because he tried to save me from answering, but because of *her* snortling laugh behind me. “Know what?” I turned to face Tony with a determined glare. “I think I’ll just give it a shot.”

“You’re shitting me.”

That didn’t require a reply, but I raised my brows at him anyway.

“Cool, so you’re on the list. We meet at ten on the field.”

I turned to Hunter’s amused tone and gave him a polite smile. “I’ll be there.”

A ball cap shadowed his face as he lowered his chin, but I could feel his gaze skim down to where my cut off jeans ended then travel slowly farther down my naked

legs and back up. “Bring shoes.” He smirked and winked at me.

This sent a shiver skating down my neck. Tony shoved me out of the café before I could figure out why.

We walked most of the way in silence, until we were close to home and I exploded right in his face. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“What?” He looked at me baffled like a toddler who was robbed of his sucker.

“You let that girl insult me and didn’t say anything.”

“You had everything under control. And she didn’t really insult you.”

“Oh, right. *You* did! You called me an elephant.”

Tony took my hand and pulled me with him. “You know it wasn’t meant like that. I don’t see why you’re throwing a fit now. You never liked soccer. When did that change?”

“Today. Now I *love* it.”

“Yeah, I can see that. So badly that you want to be a player.” He rolled his eyes. “Please, tell me you’re not doing this because of Cloey.”

*I'm doing it for you, idiot.* But it would have taken more than a crazy afternoon to tell him that. I gritted my teeth. "The girl can get lost in her closet full of Barbie dresses."

Suddenly, his arm was wrapped around my shoulders, and he pulled me close to his side as we walked on. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're jealous of her."

"We have been best friends since we grew out of our diapers," I moaned, being slightly comforted by his embrace.

"And I promise we'll still be when we need them again." His laugh rocked me with him. "Cloey is just a girl who likes to play soccer. But you're the only girl I know who can watch E.T. without bursting in tears."

Even though there was this obvious note of admiration, I couldn't help but feel a chill sneaking around my heart the way he said it. Like I was one of the guys and not a *delicate girl like Cloey*. I wiggled out of his embrace, and a snort escaped me.

Tony quirked his brows. "What?"

"Nothing."

“Are you mad at me?”

“No,” I grumbled.

He waited a second, eyeing me with skepticism. “*Okay*. Is this one of those moments where you say *no* but actually mean *yes*?”

“No.”

He slapped his hands to his face then slowly dragged them down, glancing helplessly at the sky. “You know I don’t speak this language. Just tell me your problem.”

“There is no problem!” I ran up the path to my house, slamming the door behind me.

## CHAPTER

# 2

AT NINE THIRTY the following morning, I answered the door and found Tony outside. Hands braced on the doorframe and head hanging, he cast me a sheepish grin as he looked at me from under those incredibly gorgeous lashes.

“Still mad?”

I swallowed. The endless speech I had prepared for him the previous evening—including words like ignorant, idiot, and dumbass—had slipped from my mind. “Never again call me an elephant,” was all that came out in a low grumble.

“Promise.” The silly boy pouted and even crossed his heart.

I smiled. “We’re good then.”

Tony's metallic green mountain bike leaned against our low picket fence. I grabbed mine from the shed, and we cycled to the high school soccer field together. Close to fifty girls and boys from tenth to twelfth grade had gathered in front of one of the goal posts. Someone was handing out numbers as we joined them. Already a member of the team, Tony didn't have to participate in the tryouts. But I lined up to get mine.

"Forty-seven...Matthews," Ryan Hunter shouted to Susan Miller, who wrote down names on a list. He gave me the sticker, which I was supposed to pop on my chest, and smiled. So far, I hadn't seen Ryan without his ball cap, except on rare occasions, and then from far away, too. But today, the sun played in his dark hair that fell devilishly over his forehead, giving him a whole new appearance. His unexpected good looks took me unaware, and he caught me staring. His matter of fact tone changed to a sly rumble. "Good luck, Matthews."

When everyone got their numbers, he raised his voice over the chatting crowd. "Okay, everybody. For a little warm-up, I want you to run three laps around the field then come back here."

Panic kicked me in the gut. “Is he kidding? Three laps?”

“Don’t say you already regret opting for the team.”

I hated Tony’s *I-told-you-so* chuckle as he dragged me from the trimmed lawn and started jogging next to me. Swallowing my retort, I tried to match his pace. Impossible of course, when one of his strides measured two of mine.

Shit, one lap seemed like ten miles. Screw Hunter and his warm-up. By the time I was done, I collapsed on the grass, hearing nothing but my own erratic breathing. Thank the Lord, I had a chance to catch my breath as forty-six candidates attempted to score goals before it was my turn.

Tony got me a drink from the water cooler while I mimed a dead frog for several minutes. My mouth and throat felt like the desert. As he stepped over me, his shadow was a welcome respite from the sun. I sat up, longing for the cup of water he held out to me.

But when I grabbed the plastic cup, my heart sank. “So little?” I held the mouthful of liquid against the sun, turning it this way and that, seeing if it would

miraculously become more. “There’s something seriously wrong with your head.”

“Not at all.” He laughed. “But since you can hardly breathe after this short run, more water would make you sick. In fact, it would be better if you just rinsed your mouth with this and spit it out.”

I offered him a sneer. “Can I spit it into your face?” Not waiting for his come back, I downed the little he granted me. The sip evaporated on my tongue in an instant.

“Matthews! Your turn!” That was Hunter, and when I turned in his direction, the soccer ball came flying toward me. Praise my mad reflexes. I caught it before it hit my churning stomach. Tony pulled me to my feet and gave me quick instructions on how to hit the ball for best impact.

Yeah, right. As if I really wanted to know that. I placed the ball on the ground then kicked it toward Frederickson who stood in the goal. It dropped to the lawn several feet in front of him then rolled on as if out for a relaxing stroll before it touched his left shoe.

My beam at Tony was full of faked enthusiasm. “Hey, what do you know, I got the direction right.”

“Come on, Matthews.” Ryan came jogging toward me with the ball under his arm. “I’ve seen you kick Mitchell’s butt harder than that.”

Beaten and exhausted, I was ready to capitulate, but when he offered me the soccer ball, his lips curved to a mocking smile, which prompted me to prove him wrong. I accepted the challenge.

He planted the ball in front of me, but then he had me taking several steps back. “Now take a short run and put a little more power in your thrust.”

“Ah no, don’t let him make me do that,” I begged Tony and grabbed his shirt in growing horror. “We both know I will just trip over the damn thing.”

The boys laughed, and Tony pried my fingers loose from his collar. “No, you won’t. Tell you what, if you hit Frederickson straight in the chest, I’ll buy you a chocolate decadence ice cream sundae. Deal?”

Ice cream? If there was the right incentive... “Deal.” I started forward and kicked hard, aiming for the redhead

guarding the goalie net. The soccer ball dropped neatly in Frederickson's arms.

"Well done!" Ryan yelled. Then he sprinted back to the low desk where Susan took her notes and called Sebastian Ramirez to try his luck.

Unspeakably proud, I turned a smiling face at Tony. But my smile got lost the moment I glimpsed Barbie girl standing with him.

Hands laced behind her back, she rocked on her heels in front of him. Her boobs pushed out so far, she could have staked him in the heart. "Will you be at Hunter's party later?" she asked him in a sickly sweet voice.

I gulped. Ryan Hunter's parties were legend. I could only rely on the gossip in school of course, but rumor had it his father was friends with Chief Berkley, and so Ryan could turn up the music to a maximum all night. Beer flowed in endless rivers, and he even had his own pool table. The closest I had been to his house was when we drove by to get to the library, but it looked big enough to bear *several* halls. Getting an invitation to one of those parties meant stepping up into the *cool league*.

Not that I cared about hanging out with jerks like Cloey—yuck. But Tony had been to many of his parties, and he never told me much about the events behind those doors. That alone sharpened my curiosity.

He would go tonight for sure. The fact the Barbie Clone would be there too had my heart slipping to my pants. I put up a nonchalant face when I actually felt like bawling and trudged over to the water cooler to get a drink larger than the fly pee Tony had brought me after the warm-up.

The afternoon dragged on with more qualifications that involved passing the ball back and forth, zigzagging over the field with short kicks, and finally a count of how often one could kick the ball without losing it. I shot amazing two and a half.

This was it. I was done with soccer. May the ball rot in hell and the players die of thirst. I didn't give a damn if I made it onto the team or not. Playing ball in the scorching sun was for morons anyway.

I wiped the sweat off my face with the towel Tony had brought, then stuffed it back into his backpack, and stomped off.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

“Home.”

Tony caught up with me. “You can’t. Ryan hasn’t announced the new players yet.”

“Like I care.”

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and used my speed to propel me in the opposite direction. “You don’t want to know if you’re on the team?”

Trying to wiggle from him, I gave him a hard stare. “Nope.”

“Where’s your spirit gone?”

“Where has your *eyesight* gone?” I stopped dead. “You saw what a miserable player I make.”

“Ah, I’ve seen worse. Actually, I’m pretty proud of you. This was the first time you came into skin-contact with a soccer ball and you almost hit a goal on the second try. All you need is a little training.”

I found that hard to believe, but the expression in his eyes told me differently. He meant it. Confused, I gave him a sideways glance. Unfortunately, Cloey intruded my view as she came skipping over to us like the tooth fairy.

Her perfectly manicured fingers wrapped around his biceps as she bounced up and down before him.

“Come, quick. Hunter will name the players in a minute. He already told me that I was on the team.”

“I’m not surprised.” Tony let himself being dragged away from me. “You proved in camp you’re a natural at soccer.”

“Only at soccer?” She winked at him and skipped away.

My molars suffered from the hard grinding I did. The thing was—I needed to become a member of this team, badly. How else could I fend off this bimbo?

Ryan Hunter held a list in his hands as he stepped in front of the expecting crowd. “We need eleven new players. I’ll call out the names of those who made it onto the team. If yours is among them, well done. If not, I’m sorry but hope you will try again next year. You’ve all shown great enthusiasm today.” He cleared his throat and reeled off the new players. “Stevenson. Jones. Summers—”

Since Barbie jumped with her friend at that name, I figured now I knew her last name.

“—Smith. Jackson. Daniels. Hollister. McNeal. Miller. Matthews. And Warren.”

My jaw hit the dirt. I pivoted to Tony. “Did he just say Matthews?”

“Guess he did.” His silly grin made me want to slap some seriousness into his face.

“I’m going to play?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “Now get your things, I owe you a sundae.”

I really made it, *and* he owed me ice cream. What a freaking fantastic day. I jogged to the bench and slung my backpack over one shoulder. Certainly, I had the most stupid grin in the world pasted on my lips. It slipped as the word *owe* got stuck on repeat in my mind. What if he had asked Ryan to let me onto the team even if I was a miserable player? At the thought of depending on Hunter’s mercy, I felt awfully embarrassed.

I had to know, and Tony would spill—even if it meant I had to threaten to burn his *Back to the Future* collection.

Whipping around, I bumped into Ryan.

“Congrats, Matthews,” he cheered. “You handled the tryout quite well.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Pissed at something I hadn’t yet proof of, I shoved past him but then stopped. “What does Tony owe you for putting me on the team?”

For a moment, he looked confused. Then he laughed out loud. “You don’t want to know.”

My hands fisted around the strap of my backpack. Hell, of course, I wanted to know.

Turning to leave, he glanced at me over his shoulder. His eyes sparked with a glint of mischief. “See you at my house, Matthews.”

*Holy shit.* Did he just invite me to his party?

## CHAPTER

# 3

THE SUNDAE WAS yummy, but so was Tony as he licked vanilla ice-cream off his spoon. I couldn't take my eyes off his lips the entire hour we sat at Charlie's. Unfortunately, the boy was like a fortress. Bolted down. He refused to tell me what he had to give Ryan for letting me play in the team. Well, he said he didn't owe Hunter anything, but I didn't buy it.

At eight thirty that evening, Tony picked me up at my door and drove us to Ryan's house in his mother's car. I had no idea what people wore to those parties, but since it was still over ninety degrees in the evening—not unusual for North California in August—I chose a dark gray tank top and black hot pants. Judging by the smirk I earned from Tony, I supposed I had settled on the right clothes.

As we entered the lane with Hunter's mansion, a long queue of cars told me just how big this party was. Tony appeared unimpressed and maneuvered into a spot at the corner, but I had a hard time closing my mouth. "How many guests is he expecting?"

"Can't say. Usually, there are one hundred to hundred and fifty. If his parents are gone, the number might as well get up to three hundred."

Heck, I didn't even know that many people if I counted all my friends, family, and their pets together. We walked up the drive then climbed the marble steps to the door with the bowed top. The music blasted through the wood so we figured we didn't need to ring. Tony jiggled the handle, and it opened easily.

Jean Paul's *She doesn't mind* was blaring from the many speakers as we entered. Bodies bumped and ground against each other in salacious moves I only knew from films. Several boys shouted a conversation over the noise and drank beer from bottles while groping the butts of the girls with them. Some people kissed in the dim light.

I clung to Tony's comforting biceps. "Oh my God, don't leave me alone in this place."

He laughed, or so I thought when his ribcage shook slightly, because I couldn't really hear him. But his arm pressed my hands tighter to his body as he pulled me into the mass of people. Not all of them were kids. It seemed Hunter had a lot of older friends, too, ranging from sixteen to about twenty-five.

A small group of girls from my History class gathered in the middle of the room. Simone Simpkins grabbed my arm when we passed them. I had to lip-read to understand that she wanted me to join them.

"I'll get you something to drink," Tony shouted in my ear.

I nodded and watched him walk away with a weird quiver in my stomach. What if he never found his way back to me in this blasted place? The distance he put between us was quickly filled with throngs of strangers. Shit, I shouldn't have let him go.

Turning back to my friends, I tried to join in the conversation, but mostly I just stood there and nodded, pretending to understand what they said. Simone handed me a bottle of Corona when Tony hadn't come back after ten minutes. Parched by the heat in the room, anything

cool was welcome. I wet my lips with the beer then licked it off. Okay, this stuff wasn't half bad. I took a real sip. A little acerbic, but quite palatable. I had downed half of the bottle when my head started to feel dizzy.

Across the room I thought I'd spotted Tony. I waved goodbye at my friends and headed off toward the back. The crowd thinned a little there, and I could actually move without rubbing against other people's sweat. But Tony was nowhere in sight.

A high arch in the wall connected this room to the kitchen. I headed there and found Ryan standing in the doorway, leaning one shoulder against the wall. The sleeves of his black shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and the jeans he wore were ripped at the hems. Black was a color I loathed on Tony. It made him look way too demonic. With Ryan it was different. The top buttons undone, he looked mysterious. Kind of sexy. Him looking like the devil was cool.

His gaze flickered my way then stayed as he sipped his beer, watching as I drew closer.

It would have been plain impolite not to say hello to the host, so I stopped before him and lifted my hand in

greeting. The music wasn't as loud back here, and I actually caught his *hi*.

"You have a nice place. So full of...people," I said, feeling awkward and a little stupid for not knowing how to start a cool conversation.

"Yeah, thanks." He moved away from the wall and leaned closer to me so I could hear him. "It was about time Mitchell brought you here. He kept you away from this place long enough."

Huh? I frowned. *Tony* was the reason why I hadn't been invited to any of Ryan's parties yet? That bloody wretch. But then he probably figured I wouldn't feel comfortable among this drinking lot and with all the noise. I, idiot, proved his point the second we came here by clinging to his arm like a frightened cat.

"Do you know where he is?" I said into Ryan's ear, thankful that I didn't need to shout and damage my vocal cords even more.

"Nope." He took another draught from his beer.

Sighing, I sipped mine too, not liking it much any longer. I grimaced. Ryan suddenly took me by the wrist and pulled me into the kitchen. He placed his beer down

on a counter, popped a can of soda, then lifted the bottle out of my palm and replaced it with the Sprite, closing my fingers around it.

“You shouldn’t drink beer,” he said in a stern tone. “Especially not in this place.”

Yeah, I didn’t want to end up someone’s groping puppet, like most of the other drunken girls. Thankful for the Sprite, I washed away the bitter aftertaste of the Corona in my mouth.

“You did really well today.” A smile slipped to his lips.

“I was lousy. And you know it. I still don’t get why you chose me to play in your team.”

Shrugging, he drank from my discarded bottle. “I don’t know. Maybe I just want you there.”

Jeez, the teasing in his voice made the hair on my arms stand on end.

“Do a little endurance training every day, and you’ll be a capable player.”

I screwed up at athletics. I even tried jogging a few mornings at the beginning of this summer to get in a better shape, but it didn’t work for me. Half a mile was

the most I could manage before trudging back home, panting and frustrated. “I guess I’m lacking motivation to do that. I’m like a lame duck at running.”

“What you need is a personal trainer.”

That made me laugh. “You want the job?”

Ryan pursed his lips and studied me for a moment as though I had just offered him good money for stinking work. He shrugged. “Sure, why not? If you promise to show some enthusiasm, I promise to be there.”

That sounded like an interesting offer. After all, I had to work on my endurance if I wanted to last during an entire soccer game. I certainly didn’t want to give Blondie any more ammunition to use against me, especially if I broke down after the first half. Her satisfaction would ruin me. And Tony needed to see I was fit for more than just watching Spielberg with him.

*Yeah. Training, it is.*

Strangely enough, the thought of having Hunter coaching me sent a shiver of anticipation through me. He was the captain of the soccer team. It felt like an honor to personally train with him, and it sure would lift my status at school from average to super cool.

“Okay, deal.”

He gave a slow nod. “We’ll start Monday morning.”

Great. That meant suicide was delayed one more day. His gaze locking with mine promised I wouldn’t entirely regret my decision.

Someone shouted his name behind me. “We’re starting a game of pool. Are you in?”

Ryan pushed away from the counter. “There in a sec.” Then he ran the cool mouth of his bottle along my cheek. “Enjoy the night. And whatever you do, stay away from the strawberries.”

Dumbstruck, I stood rooted to the spot as he brushed past me and walked away, chuckling.

I swallowed a huge draught of Sprite to cool down. Susan Miller came in at that moment. Her face lit up when her gaze fell on me. She rushed over. “Hey, what do you say? Now we’re both on the team. And honestly—” She paused, and her eyes darted left then right to make sure we were alone in the room. Her voice dropped a notch, too. “I’ve never seen a prettier house than this. I wanted to come to Hunter’s parties for ages, but he never

noticed me in school. I think he didn't even know my name until I told him at the tryouts."

"Yeah, me too." Or so I thought until I found out he actually knew my name yesterday.

"Will you wear your sports clothes for the training or get a real soccer dress?" Susan seemed so excited, I couldn't understand her enthusiasm. Which girl would voluntarily play soccer? Well, if there wasn't a guy on the team she wanted to recognize her anyway.

I shrugged. "No idea. Think I'll start with what I have. Just shorts and a tee. Anything else is too expensive to buy with my pocket money." And no way would I wear those horrible shoes with spikes on their soles. But the outfit was nothing that really concerned me. "Listen, did you see Tony anywhere this evening?"

"Not after you came in with him earlier. Why?"

"Haven't seen him much. I just wonder where he is." I threw my empty soda can in the trash and pulled an apologetic face. "Mind if I go looking for him?"

Susan was cool. "Do that. I'll find you later."

I went back into the hall and wandered around the ground floor, hoping to find Tony somewhere. But the

shoving and bumping of sweat drenched people soon got on my nerves, and I kept closer to the walls instead. When I reached an arch leading to another room, I peeked inside. No blond caught my eye. My shoulders slumped with disappointment. But then a few guys shifted to the side, and I spotted a pool table and someone leaning over it in an eye-catching way.

By now I was pretty good at recognizing Hunter's black hair.

He held the cue low over the green felt, aiming the tip at the white ball. Some colored balls fanned out on the table too, but as it looked he went for the black eight.

"Come on, Ryan, give a friend a chance. You can't hole the ball just yet."

I pivoted to the left to see who was pleading with Hunter. I didn't know the tall boy's name, but he had Algebra with Tony. The look on his face was hilarious. One would think his life depended on Ryan's hit or fail.

"What's your problem, Justin?" Still working on positioning the cue perfectly, Hunter grinned. "Afraid, your Mama's going to find out you're playing for money?"

Just then I noticed the stack of dollar bills at the edge of the table. They seemed to have a sum of about one hundred bucks in the pot. My jaw dropped. Fifty from each? I didn't get half as much pocket money in one month.

“My Mama doesn't give a damn. But I *really, really need* this Spiderman comic. It's an original,” Justin whined.

I felt really bad for him. Intrigued how the game would end, I moved around the edge of the wall and stood face to face with Hunter across the room. Narrowed eyes and knitted brows gave away his tension. The cue moved backward just a couple of inches. He'd shoot any moment.

But then his dark eyes looked up...and remained fixed on me. His body froze, only his chest moved with each breath. Heads turned in my direction. My heart drummed a little faster, and with all the attention, my cheeks warmed uncomfortably.

I grimaced. “Is something wrong?”

Ryan didn't answer, but Justin victory-punched the air as he rushed to my side. He laid his arm around my

shoulders, grinning like a loon. “You just saved my life, poppet.”

“Ah...yes.” With a grimace, my gaze switched back to Hunter. “And how so?”

He started grinning, too, but didn’t seem as happy as the guy next to me. More like, he knew crap was about to fall.

“He can’t play when someone is watching him,” Justin almost sang into my ear. “Totally screws up then.”

“But you *all* are watching him,” I pointed out.

At the back of the room, someone laughed. “Yeah, but we’re not girls.”

Chuckling, Hunter straightened and chalked the tip of his cue, lips tight, eyes set on me. Although my being there obviously amused him, I didn’t want to trouble him, especially where money had a hand in the pie.

“Sorry,” I croaked. “I’ll leave you guys alone then.”

“Uh-uh, no way, poppet!” Justin’s arm remained firm around my shoulders. “You’re my insurance to get that comic book. You stay.”

His antics made me laugh, even though I felt like a traitor.

Ryan, who hadn't said one word in all that time, slid his tongue over his bottom lip, then the left corner of his mouth tilted up. He took a deep breath and leaned over the table once more. Everyone kept silent. Justin crossed his fingers next to my face, no doubt praying for Hunter's miss.

I never thought a single shot could get an entire room this tense. Including me. Ryan cleared his throat, his gaze moving back and forth between me and the white ball. Suddenly he dropped his forehead to the edge of the table and laughed. "Take your money, Just. I give up."

The room cheered as though the unthinkable just happened. Justin pressed a kiss to my cheek and hurried to grab the bills. I stood rooted to the spot, staring at Ryan, who now braced his palms on the pool table and hung his head. But when he looked up, there was this flash of amusement in his eyes again.

"I'm so sorry," I mouthed, not even trying to raise my voice over the other guys' celebration.

"*You* are banned from this room," he mouthed back, a smirk on his lips. Then he walked around the table, slowly, measuring me with each step he took. I pressed a

little harder against the wall, welcoming the coolness seeping through my top.

He stopped right in front of me, the cue in one hand, the other placed against the wall next to my head. “You just cost me fifty bucks,” he drawled with a smile.

“Yeah, I know.” I put on a poor puppy look. “But he *really, really needs* this comic book.”

That made him laugh. “Siding with the enemy. I should have known.” With his hand on my back, he ushered me through the arch in the wall, back into the main hall. “For tonight, this room is off limits for you.”

“Oh why?” Playfully pouting, I glance up at his roguish eyes. “It’s so much fun to watch you...screw up.”

He wouldn’t let his smile slip as he leaned in a little closer. “Off you go.”

## CHAPTER

# 4

I WIGGLED MY fingers at Hunter and left the guys to their game. It was time to look for Tony, anyway. But finding him in a place brimming with two hundred people was impossible. On the plus side, I ran into a few more friends, and Susan introduced me to her older brother and a few of his companions. One offered to get me another drink. When he suggested Corona, I told him I didn't drink alcohol.

“Fruit juice then?”

“Sounds good.”

He got me berry soda in a glass and popped in a straw. Wearing a hat, he looked a little like Bruno Mars. He made an interesting conversation partner over the next hour in which he refilled my soda three times. In the end, I saw his lips moving but didn't really get what he

said. I also felt the need to frown a lot and lean against the wall for support in the suddenly swaying room.

“You okay, hun?” the guy asked.

The guy with the hat. Did he tell me his name? And when did his twin brother come in? The boy melted into him, then appeared again. Something was very off here. I rubbed my brow. “Not so sure,” I said, having trouble to get the words out. I also spoke extra slow in case he had the same trouble like me and wouldn’t understand a thing.

The world tipped, and suddenly I was in his arms.

“Whoa, girl, you meant it when you said you didn’t drink, huh?”

I smiled at his face so close to mine. Sure I meant it. What did he think? That I was a liar? I picked up his hat and planted it on my head. “My turn to be Bruno for a while.”

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

“Tony?” I cheered, trying to locate where his voice came from. And then he was right behind me, pulling me away from Mr. Mars without his hat. I turned in Tony’s

arms and beamed at his oh so worried face. “Where have you been all night. I tried so hard to find you.”

“Where did you look? At the bottom of the wine cooler?”

I decided I didn’t have to understand that and let him pull me to the rear, into the kitchen. “Whoop,” I slurred with a loopy smile as he grabbed my waist and lifted me onto the counter. He usually stood half a head taller than me, but sitting here, we were on eyelevel, which I really liked. He had such pretty blue eyes.

His hands planted firmly besides my hips, he stood in between my dangling legs. This awkward pose made my brains go wishy-washy and majorly turned me on. I dipped forward and touched my forehead to his, grinning as I stared into those sapphire gems.

Tony laughed, but it sounded nothing like his normal, easy laugh. He straightened me on the counter. “How many drinks did you have?”

“Hey, why so worried?”

“How *many*, Liza?”

Not liking his commanding tone, I sighed heavily, puffing my bangs out of my view. “There was this half

bottle of beer, and then some Sprite. The soda. One—or four—glasses...I think.”

“Soda?”

“Berry soda.”

“Shit.” He laughed again. It sounded nervous. “Your mom’s going to strangle me if I take you home drunk like this.”

“I’m not drunk,” I protested. “You know I don’t drink *alco-whole*.”

When a certain bimbo bounced into the kitchen like a doe in a marigold meadow, I thought I was going to puke. She totally ignored me and flashed Tony with a flirtatious smile that set my stomach on nausea. “Anthony, you promised to dance with me.”

“*Anthony, you promised to dance with me,*” I iterated like a three year old.

That drew her attention to me. “What’s wrong with *her?*”

“She just had a little too much of the wine cooler. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

He was going to dance with Cloey? *No!* I wanted to tell him he couldn’t, but a sudden lethargy settled over

me and made me dip my head to his shoulder. “I’m so tired. Can we go home?”

“Aw, come on, Anthony. You’re not going to leave already. It’s only eleven.”

Jeez, how I hated Barbie’s voice.

“Take her upstairs to one of Hunter’s guest rooms. She can sleep there.”

“And not bother you any longer?” I managed to moan, tilting my head in her direction, but unable to open my eyes. Her annoyed snort didn’t bother me.

“You don’t want to do that.” Another person seemed to have joined our conversation. Hunter. But what was he talking about?

“In her state, she’s not safe in any of the guest rooms. You know how the parties go on the later it gets. Take her to my room.”

“What?” Tony and I shouted simultaneously. I was sitting straight with my eyes wide open. The thought of sleeping in Ryan Hunter’s room shocked me something awful. But why Tony was agitated I didn’t figure out.

Ryan rolled his eyes. Mmm, sexy. He could do that quite well.

“Don’t be ridiculous, guys. She’ll be awake and gone before I even get upstairs.”

There was a tense pause.

“Hell, do it already, Anthony, and come back fast.”

*Barbie.*

Tony pressed his lips together.

What was he supposed to do again? The thought escaped me.

“Come on, Liz.” He pulled me off the counter and walked me to the door. But a sudden lack of control over my feet made me stumble sideways, knocking into something cold and shiny.

“Pardon me,” I said to the fridge.

Ryan caught me before I knocked into more kitchen furniture. “Didn’t I tell you to stay away from the strawberries?” he growled into my ear.

“Strawberries? There was one in my last soda.” I grinned. “It was yummy.”

“Yummy, all right.” He chuckled as he swept me up in his arms. “I’ll carry her to my room, Mitchell. You can grab her when you go. Or come back for her in the morning.”

“You sure?” There it was again, Tony’s worried voice.

“Yes. Go dance with Cloey or she’ll pester me next.”

The music grew fainter as Ryan climbed the stairs with me. I flung my arms around his neck and leaned my head on his shoulder. “You don’t like dancing with Cloey?” I murmured.

He chuckled. “Would you?”

“I don’t like her, period.”

“And I know exactly why that is.”

“Really?” I breathed deep, inhaling his aftershave mingling with the scent of his heated skin. “You smell good.”

For some reason, that made him laugh. “Time to go to bed, Matthews.”

He shoved open the door and carried me backwards over the threshold. Next I was placed on a soft mattress. The pillow bore the same musky scent that clung to Ryan. I drew in a long breath.

He slipped off my shoes and pulled a blanket over my bare legs. “You comfortable?”

“I’m not sure. But can you check if my head sprouted rotor blades?”

With my eyes closed, I felt his hand raking through my hair. “That will go away when you sleep. If you need anything, the light switch is right in front of your nose and the bathroom is next door on the left.” He paused. “Did you hear me?”

“Light, nose. Toilet, left. Gotcha.” I gave him a thumbs-up, feeling sleep tugging at me. “Hunter?”

“Hm?”

“Sorry about the pool game.”

He chuckled. “Sleep tight, princess.”

Something brushed over my cheek. Very gently. Fingers? I couldn’t tell as I drifted off to careening dreams.



A door banged shut. Jolting upright, I found myself in the center of a bed in a moonlit room I didn’t recognize. The figure standing in front of me seemed slightly familiar, though.

“Hunter?”

“You’re still here?” Ryan moaned. My presence didn’t stop him from unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it in a corner of the room along with his sneakers.

My brain roared like mad. I rubbed my brow. “Where is *here* exactly? And why are you undressing?”

The moonlight cast a silvery look to his features as he studied me. “This is my room. And that thing you’re lying on is my bed. Since I don’t usually sleep in clothes, I figured I’d just take them off.” He spoke slowly and in a slightly slurred way. I rubbed my temples, having trouble following this conversation.

The blurry events of the previous evening crept up in my memory. “Is the party over?”

“Someone puked on the floor. Yeah. Party’s over.” His deep breath was audible in the silent room. “I swear, next time Claudia brings her strawberry soda, I’m going to *debut-ish* kick a girl’s butt. Harmless, my ass.”

I glanced at my wrist watch. The clock face should be glowing in the dark, but as soon as I tried to focus, dizziness made me groan. “What time is it?”

“Three.”

“A.M.?” I cried.

“It’s dark outside. Of course it’s A.M.”

Slamming back the covers, I jumped out of bed. But gravity was a bitch, and I stumbled to the floor. I patted around for my shoes. I should have been home hours ago. My mom was going to kill me.

I tried to stand again. “Where are my shoes?”

“What are you doing?”

*Panicking!* Because I felt trapped in a strange house. “Going home!”

God, the pain in my head snarled at me to take it easy. And speaking fast was impossible.

“Oh-woe.” Ryan pushed down on my shoulders until I sat on the bed again. “So not a good idea. Since we already agreed that it’s the dead of the night...and you’re sixteen...and drunk—”

“Drunk? *No.*” I never drank alcohol. And soda sure wouldn’t make my brain so spongy. But I had to admit something was seriously wrong with either me or the room, since everything started spinning in a very uncomfortable way.

Hunter waved a dismissive hand at me. “Whatever. I can’t let you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Walk alone.”

I frowned. “You want to come with me?” Strange. Shouldn’t Tony be around to drive me home?

“It’s a mile and a half to your house. That’s three for me to walk. I’m positive I won’t make that tonight.” The mattress sank under his weight as he lowered next to me. “So if you really want to go home, I’ll have to drive you. But right now, I’d rather not.”

Even sitting, Hunter swayed in front of me. But since the room did that too, I wasn’t sure if he really did or if I was having some kind of weird hallucinations. “So what do I do now?”

“I’d say lay back. Sleep. And worry about everything tomorrow.”

“What about you?”

He looked around the room, rubbing his neck. “The floor is hard. And I’m beat. There’s room for two in that bed.” He made his last statement sound like a question.

I was getting sick—and not because of his request to sleep in the same bed with me. My stomach rolled. I felt the sour taste of soda traveling up my gullet. There was

only one way to avoid puking all over this strange bed and floor. I had to get horizontal.

Dropping to my side, I buried my cheek in the pillow. I groaned, keeping one eye open, and focused on the top of the lamp on the nightstand. If only I could grab my brain and stop it from spinning.

“Good choice, Matthews,” Ryan rumbled and lay down beside me. He probably took my silence as an invitation.

Should I care? I wasn’t sure.

His head tilted to my side, he grinned—dangerously. “I swear you’re safe with me for the next three to six hours. I can’t make promises for any time after that, though.”

## CHAPTER

# 5

THE SUN BREAKING through the windows woke me the next morning. I felt as if I was drifting out to a restless sea on an unsound airbed. It took a few seconds for the eerie swaying to stop so that I could focus.

My cheek rested on a pillow smelling of pine trees and warmth. I inhaled deeply, wanting to keep that scent, and opened my eyes to stare at the sensual lips of Ryan Hunter. My hand on his naked chest rose and fell with his slow, even breaths.

Holy cow, what the hell happened? I was in bed with the captain of the soccer team. Heck, I should have never gone to that party.

Now, my only thought was *run*. But shock kept me pinned to the bed as I became aware of the entangled position Ryan and I had taken on in our sleep. Lying on

my right, my left leg was slung over his hip. My calf rested neatly on his groin. He lay on his back, his left leg bent so, that I wouldn't be able to withdraw mine. I tried to stop my body from shivering. No chance.

Not daring to wake him, I didn't move, frantically running through the options I had. Great, there were none. I was trapped.

Maybe if I lay still, pretending to be fast asleep, until he woke up and got out of bed first, then I could sneak out after him and be gone before he noticed. I would have slapped myself for that idea if I could remove my hand from his warm chest.

And a firm chest it was. He must lift weights besides playing soccer. As if my eyes had their own mind, they traveled down his gorgeous body. A thin trail of dark hair led south from his navel over his flat stomach until it vanished under the waistband of his jeans. His bent leg seemed amazingly long. I never paid attention, but he must be more than a head taller than me.

My gaze swept up to his neck and the part of his face not covered with his arm. A lean jaw and a perfect, straight nose. He sported an overnight shadow that

begged to be rubbed. I resisted. Under his left ear was an old scar, about an inch long. One would never notice unless close to him, like I was now.

Suddenly his lips twitched.

“I can feel you staring at me,” he said in the softest wake-up voice I’d ever heard. “I only hope you’re a girl and not one of the drunken guys.”

My breath caught in my chest. I jerked my hand back from him. Not taking his arm away from his face yet, he reached down with his other hand. And slowly ran his palm over my naked thigh in the direction of my bum.

“Yep, definitely female,” he purred.

In panic, I held his hand in place. “Move another inch, Hunter, and you’re a dead man.”

“Matthews?” Surprised amusement filled his chuckle. Unlike me, he seemed relaxed enough.

A strange heat rose from my gut to my head as I studied his hand on my bare skin. Wearing nothing but jeans and a black wrist watch, he looked more like a guy from the many posters on the walls of Caroline Davis’ bedroom than the boy I knew from school.

I felt awkward for not letting go of his hand on my leg, but I was too scared he'd continue the path he'd started if I did.

"Tell me, Matthews," he said as he dropped his arm to the pillow and tilted his head to study me with warm eyes. "Why do I have you in my bed, when I'm not allowed to touch you?"

"I didn't know there were strawberries in the soda," I whined.

His brows furrowed, his lips pursed. "Come again?"

Jeez, did he not realize that he was still holding my leg, and how very uncomfortable—and excited—it made me? "Someone was getting me sweet soda all evening." My voice shook slightly. "I didn't realize it was the wine cooler you meant when you said—"

"—not to touch the strawberries," he finished for me, closing his eyes. "Damn, I told her not to punch it too much."

What? The wine cooler? I was pretty sure I had a tad too much of that stuff.

A frown creased Ryan's brows as he looked at me again. "Sorry, I don't remember much of the night after I carried you up here. Am I in trouble?"

Considering I still had my clothes on, nothing had happened during the night. "As far as I remember you were pretty drunk yourself. So I was quite safe from you."

A smirk played around one corner of his mouth. "I'm afraid my time of numb indifference is over." His thumb had started drawing small circles on my skin. "So, unless you're up for some trouble *now*, would you mind moving your leg?"

My eyes widened at his seductive threat.

"What? You know you're not the ugliest girl in the world."

Wow, what a compliment. Idiot. I needed to get out of here. Back to...back to... Damn, Ryan *had* a nice smile.

I shoved that thought away and let go of his hand, then pushed his leg down so I could remove mine from his groin. I was out of his bed faster than the transatlantic. But the aftermath of drinking hit me harder than I had expected. The floor rushed to me or I did, I couldn't tell which.

His hands cupped my elbows, and he steadied me before I was going to fall. He waited until my gaze locked with his. "Feel better?"

"Not really." I tried to find my shoes. They lay at the end of the bed, and I wiggled out of his hold to put them on.

Ryan ignored his trainers and shirt, which lay tossed on the floor. Barefoot, he padded from the room. I followed him down the stairs, gazing at his back. What was it with naked skin all of a sudden that let me forget the world around me?

"Hey, Ry," someone called from the hall to which we descended.

"Morning, Chris," Hunter replied to the boy lying sprawled on the sofa. He walked on as if it was the most natural thing for him to come down from his room with a random girl after a partying night.

It might be the usual for him, but it sure as hell wasn't for me. I felt my face turn a deep red when the heat shot to my cheeks. God, I should have jumped out of his window instead of being subject to this embarrassment. I

hated giving anyone the wrong ideas. And there were quite a few leftover guests from last night.

The front door called to me, promising freedom. But Hunter had different ideas and pulled me into the kitchen. When he released my hand, I stood rigid in the middle of the room with the marble floor, while he headed for the fridge. He grabbed two bottles of water, unscrewed them, and dropped a tablet in both which he'd fetched from a cupboard. The tablet was still dissolving as he handed me one and then leaned against the counter, legs crossed at the ankles, drinking from the other.

I didn't dare take a sip.

"Why so skeptic, Matthews? It will help your headache."

After this innocent looking berry drink that landed me in this situation...yeah, I was. But since he drank the same stuff, I figured I was safe. Reluctantly, I sniffed the water then sipped.

"You don't trust me?" He chuckled and drank some more.

“How could I? I woke up with a hangover from a soda and with an equally drunk person sleeping next to me half of the night.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” He gave me a sheepish grin. “I don’t usually get drunk at my own parties. And believe me I’m going to get a piece of Claudia for messing with the wine cooler.”

I really started to loath that word. And the drink even more so.

“Look, as long as you keep hydrated today, you’ll be fine.”

I winced, not believing him one second. “It feels like someone installed a construction site in my head.”

“Oh yeah, I know the feeling. If you give me a minute to shower, I’ll drive you home.”

“No!” Ah hell, panicky shouting wasn’t a good idea. I grimaced, pressing my temples until the throbbing eased. “No thanks,” I tried again in a calmer tone, just wanting out of this house. “I’ll be happy to take the walk and sober up before meeting my parents. My mom will freak out.”

“Suit yourself.” He walked me to the front door. “Want my sunglasses?”

“Why would I want your sunglasses?” The moment I pulled open the door I knew why. Like a vampire, I flinched back into the shade.

And right into his firm chest. Which was still naked. And damn enticing.

He reached around, holding out his shades to me which he had fetched from where I didn’t know. The scent of pure Hunter enveloped me. For a millisecond, the screaming in my aching head stopped, and I was about to faint for a different reason.

“I know you so want it.” I could hear the mocking smile in his voice when he said it into my ear. I swallowed hard, only then realizing he meant his sunglasses.

Putting on the shades, I pushed away from him and trudged outside, down the steps.

“Matthews,” Ryan called after me, and I turned. “We’ll start your training tomorrow morning. Be up and ready at five. I’ll pick you up.”

My jaw hit my chest as he said it and shut the door.

## CHAPTER

# 6

BY HALF PAST ten, I slipped through the door of our house. Mom stood in the threshold to the kitchen, with her cell phone in her hand. She looked up, and a relieved smile curved her lips. “Hi, sweetie. Why didn’t you take your phone with you? I was just about to call Tony to check if everything was okay.”

Praise the Lord for the many nights I crashed at Tony’s in the past ten years. Mom was so used to it, she would never expect anything bad when I didn’t come home after being out with him. I resisted the urge to cross myself and forced a smile.

“How was the party?” she asked in her innocent, motherly way.

“Good.”

“When was it over?”

“Little after three?”

Great, sound anymore guilty, and she'll tie you to the kitchen chair and start a nasty inquisition. Luckily, her frown eased after a second, and she asked me if I wanted anything to eat. Ham and eggs, my favorite breakfast.

The churning of my stomach rebelled like the worst traitor through the room. Please, no food. I couldn't help but gag and wrinkle my face. “No thanks, Mom.”

“What's it? Don't you feel well?” She was in front of me before I could escape to the stairs.

I pulled off Hunter's shades and pinched the spot between my eyes. “Nah, all's fine.”

“What's with your eyes, honey?”

Shit. I quickly hooded my eyes and stared at the floor.

Too late. She gasped. “They're totally red. Liza Isadora Matthews—”

Oh great, the full name. This was going downward.

“Have you been drinking alcohol?”

In contrast to her roar, my voice dropped to a mumble. “Only a little bit. And I didn’t know there was alcohol in the soda, I swear.”

From there she pulled off the full parental orchestra of scolding. She shouted, she grunted, she called me irresponsible for drinking. But the worst thing, she grounded me.

The only time where I would see daylight was soccer training Tuesday and Thursday, and she only gave in to that because I begged on my knees. After all, I couldn’t *not* show up for the first week of training when it had been so hard to get onto the team.

Then she brought me a glass of water, hugged me, and said she was happy I didn’t get hurt. Duh, she didn’t know about my hammering head yet.

Back in my room, I slumped on my bed and made plans for a week trapped inside. At least my to-be-read stack would shrink drastically this way.

Later that day, my phone vibrated on the night stand, with Tony’s name flashing on the display. I pushed the button to cut him off. Just letting it ring wouldn’t

have been enough. He needed to know that I didn't want to talk to him.

A few moments later, I got a text message. ARE YOU MAD AT ME?

Jerk, I wouldn't answer to that.

It didn't take long for him to send the next text. SO IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF *IF* BUT OF *HOW MUCH*.

I clamped down on my teeth, scowling sinisterly at the phone since he wasn't here to receive the evil glare himself.

I WOKE UP IN A STRANGE HOUSE, IN A STRANGER'S BED, WITH A STRANGER SLEEPING NEXT TO ME. WHAT DO YOU THINK? I texted back, then picked up my book, and read three more lines before my cell beeped again.

WHAT DID HUNTER DO TO YOU? I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!

HE DID NOTHING. HE WAS A PERFECT GENTLEMAN. OTHER THAN YOU, IDIOT!

No text came after that. But soon my phone rang again. This time I picked up. "What?"

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care. You forgot me at the party."

He sighed before he replied. “I didn’t forget you. It was the middle of the night, and I figured the way you were—”

“Drunk?”

“—yes. I thought it wasn’t a good idea to take you home. And your mom finding out. You seemed in a good place in Hunter’s room. He promised you’d be awake already when he would go to sleep.”

“What time did you leave?”

“One. Why?”

Okay, so he couldn’t know what happened. “Someone threw up in the hall. The party was over at three.”

“Shit.” He paused. “So will you come and hang out on the beach with a few of us?”

“I can’t. I’m grounded all week. Will Cloey be with you all?”

“Um...yes.”

Terrific! Tears of frustration welled up in my eyes.

“You only met her yesterday. I don’t see how you can hate her so much.”

“You know what I think about bimbos.”

“Look, she’s not a bimbo,” he tried in what should be a soothing tone. “And I think you two will get along well once you know each other better.”

“No thanks. I’d rather stay grounded for the rest of the summer.”

“Agh, Liz. Just when have you become so complicated?”

Me—complicated? “Know what? I wish you a nice day at the beach. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a book to read.” I didn’t wait for him to say bye, or anything for that matter, but pushed the disconnect button and tossed the cell into the laundry basket across the room. Screw him and the Barbie Clone. Screw them all.

As the first tears came out, I wanted to rip my room apart with the anger I felt. But I was going to spend a lot more time than usual in here the coming week and I didn’t want to live in a mess. So I took it out on my diary. In the evening I watched some TV then went to bed early.

It was still dark when someone shouting my name in a subdued voice woke me. Since there were not many people who called me Matthews, I jerked upright in my

bed, my heart banging in my throat. I rushed to the window and found Hunter standing in our yard, dressed in shorts and a black tee.

“Hi,” he said and smiled when he saw me. “You don’t look like you’re ready to go.”

I fought to find my voice but kept it low, leaning far out of the window. “How did you know this was my window?”

“I didn’t. It was trial and error.”

Gag. “How many windows have you tried?”

“Yours.”

Okay. *Oh—kay*. I needed to calm down. The captain of the soccer team waited below my window, and I stood here in my tank top and boy shorts. Duh, it was five in the morning.

“Are you coming?”

“I can’t. I’m grounded.”

A sly smile played on his lips. “For sleeping with me?”

“For not sleeping in my own bed,” I whispered back, fighting to bite down the grin he teased from me.

“How long are you grounded?”

“Until Sunday. But I can come to the training.”

“At least there’s that.” He scratched his chin, looking around my garden, especially scanning the shed and tree next to my window. “What time do you usually get up in the morning?”

What kind of question was that? “I don’t know. Eight, nine, sometimes later.”

“So we have at least three hours until someone will expect you downstairs.” The left corner of his mouth tilted up, and he flicked his head, motioning for me to move. “Come out.”

“What?”

“Get dressed and climb to the roof of the shed. I’ll help you down.”

A hesitant laugh broke from my throat. “You’re crazy.”

“*You* are a coward.”

“I’m not!”

“Prove it.”

That cut me silent.

Tony had used the tree and shed to get into my room since we were nine years old. But with a key to the front door, I had never felt the need to do the same.

“So?” Ryan prompted me.

“Fine. Give me a minute.” He was insane, and I was even crazier to agree to his stupid idea. But heck, what did I have to lose? Apart from another week of freedom for a reckless escape from my room.

I traded my jammies for shorts, a white tank top, and trainers, then wound my hair back to a high ponytail. Hunter was leaning against the trunk of the maple tree when I returned to the window. He straightened when he saw me.

A little shaky at first, I hoisted one leg over the window sill and then clutched the frame as I let myself down to the roof of the shed.

“Good.” Ryan’s low voice already sounded nearer than before. “Now hang on to that branch, and I’ll get you down.”

Huh? “I’ll break my neck if I fall.” Goddammit, I should have stayed in my room.

“I won’t let you fall. Promise.” He lifted his arms toward me as if intending to catch me.

Breathing deep, I grabbed the nearest branch then stepped off the wood board roof, suppressing a frightened moan. My feet dangled in front of his face. He stepped closer and ran his hands up my thighs until he had a good grip right beneath my bottom. I swallowed hard and wondered if he had the slightest idea how that made me feel...

“I have you. Let go.”

“What?” I cried out, digging my fingers harder into the wood.

He laughed, and I found I quite liked that sound. It felt soothing, somehow. “Let go of the branch, Matthews. *Now.*”

“*Ungh.*” It took all my courage to uncurl my fingers and let him support my weight. As soon as I let go, I clutched his shoulders, and he eased the grip of my legs to wrap his arms around me and let me slide down flush to his body. When my feet touched firm ground, I looked up at his face.

He didn't immediately release me but let a smile tug on his lips. "Hi."

## CHAPTER

# 7

THE BEGUILING SCENT of Hunter enveloped me, just like his arms. Tony had hugged me on countless occasions. But this was different. It screamed in comparison to the placid emotions I experienced when my best friend hugged me. This was mind-blasting, blood-boiling exciting. A thrill went through me. I stepped out of his embrace.

“Can we go?” he asked, making no effort to hide his amusement at my obvious discomfort.

“Where to?”

“The beach.”

That was about one and a half miles away. Was he kidding? I’d probably drop dead half-way. But I wasn’t a whiner—I hoped. I nodded, and we started off on a slow pace for which I was grateful. In the morning, the street

was unnaturally silent. I couldn't remember when I had last been out this time of the day. Five was way too early to do sports. Seriously. The normally bright facades of the houses lining our street all appeared in a monotone bluish-gray now.

"So your parents got angry because you didn't get home last night?" he said with perfectly even breathing after the first quarter mile.

Did he really expect me to jog *and* talk? My breathing was erratic, but I managed to say, "No. My parents thought I crashed at Tony's. Which is fine with them."

"You do that often?"

"You sound like you disapprove."

He only cut me a sharp sideways glance. Heck, what was that? Did he really care?

"So why the grounding?" he asked as we passed a crossroads and neared the ocean. The sound of waves crushing on the beach drifted to us, breaking the silence of the morning.

"My mom saw my red eyes and figured I'd been drinking. Crap—" I panted. Sweat trailed down my neck,

my back, and between my breasts. “I forgot your sunglasses.”

“No worries. You can give me them tomorrow before training.”

How did he do this? Run so far and still speak to me like he was lounging on the sofa. Gasping for air, I only nodded. The beach came into sight, and relief filled me. A few more meters I told myself and pushed harder. Then my feet hit sand.

And I collapsed.

Dropping to the beach like a sack of flour, I rolled onto my back and gazed at the soft pink sky.

Ryan stood over me. “What are you doing?”

“Dying.”

“No, you’re not. Get up, we’re not done.”

“*I am.*” My breaths sounded like those of a rasping woman on her deathbed. “But don’t mind me. You just go on. I’m sure in a few hours someone will come and scrape me off the pavement...dig me out of the sand...whatever.”

Amazing how the sound of his laughter made me wish for the strength to stand up and continue running

just to be near him again. Luck was on my side today. A moment later, he lowered to the sand, too.

Hunkered by my feet, he...untied my shoe?

“Hey, what the heck—!” I pulled my leg away. “You don’t steal from a dying person.”

He lifted his palms in defense. “Fine, then take them off yourself.”

“What? Why?” Shocked and a little curious, I propped on my elbows and watched as he untied his laces. Hope filled me. “We’re going to take a swim now to cool off after the training?”

“Nope. The little run was only warm-up. The training begins here.”

“You can’t be serious.” What was it with him and warm-up all the time? I was heated enough when we left my street.

His eyebrow arched up. “What are you willing to bet on it?”

Shit. He *was* serious. Ready to slump back and bawl, I clamped on my teeth instead and gathered what little dignity I had left then sat up. I slipped out of my trainers

and hid them with Ryan's close to the rocks and out of temptation from by-passers.

If I thought running to the beach was exhausting, then I sure didn't know what it was like to jog barefoot in the sand. The muscles in my calves took on a burn that became unbearable after only a couple hundred meters.

I shot him a look filled with loathing as I struggled to keep pace with him. He smiled, making me gnash my teeth.

"Do your parents know about this sadistic side of yours?"

He playfully tugged at my ponytail. "What can I say? You bring out my best side."

"Ah, great. I feel so special now." Each step became increasingly heavier as if my limbs were weighed down with stones. "How far are we going?"

"I never ran this route before, but I guess it's about a half-mile. You know the houses at Misty Beach?"

I nodded. Everyone knew them. It was place for the rich and wealthy. "Your parents own a house down there?"

"Yep."

I wasn't surprised. After seeing the palace he lived in last night, it was accepted the Hunter's would have another beach house here. But funny, after the last two days, Ryan didn't seem at like with the insufferable rich snob I thought him to be whenever I passed him in the school corridors. He was quite likable. Nice, even.

Just not right now. I scowled. He made me eat sand when I didn't think I could drag myself another couple of steps. The fine sand sunk under my feet and it felt like running on pudding. Every exposed square inch of me glistened with sweat, my drenched top clung to my skin.

When Misty Beach came into view, his fingers curled around my upper arm, and he was already dragging me. I stumbled along next to him, crying for water. "I swear I'm going to drink up the ocean."

"Chin up, Matthews. We're almost there." So said the king's most trusted torturer.

He led me to the prettiest house at this strip of the beach. Painted in white, it had a roundabout wooden porch with nice rattan furniture and even a porch swing. From the pot-plant on the broad railing, he fetched a set of keys and let us inside.

Average size, the bungalow had a kitchen and maybe two or three bedrooms in the back. We entered into a cozy sitting room, with comfy couches, flat screen TV, and an amazingly wide bookshelf. Someone really liked to read out here.

Ryan left me leaning against the wall and grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge. He tossed one at me.

Ah, liquid heaven. Water had never tasted this good.

My pulse stayed in higher spheres for a little longer, but I found I could talk without gasping for air like a dying fish. “So, great tormentor, why did we run on the beach? Was it just for your personal pleasure to see me suffer?”

He rolled his eyes with a half-smile that not even Tony could beat. “Why do you think so badly of me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I lost my lungs somewhere on the way? Or because my legs are on fire?” I walked over to the couch and leaned my butt against the backrest, arms folded over my chest.

“Oh, come on now. We jogged over two miles and you’re still standing. That’s great. And running in the sand will strengthen your legs a lot better than the

pavement. Since we only run on grass at soccer, you need to get used to the additional...”

“Torture?” I helped him out when he paused to search for the right word.

“Exactly.” He pushed aside my damp bangs with a finger, took my empty bottle, and dumped both with a high toss in the trash can just outside the kitchen door.

I fixed my ponytail then swept my forearm across my brows. Sweaty as my arm was, it didn’t help much.

The sound of footsteps clinking on the porch caught our attention. For a reason that escaped me, we both stiffened.

The shock on Ryan’s face as he glanced first at the door then at me prickled my skin into goose-bumps. Without warning, he rushed toward me, knocking me over the backrest of the couch. Together we rolled to the floor. Keys rattled in the lock as I landed on him, and a rush of air exploded out of his lungs.

“Who is it?” I hissed, glaring down at his face. In this awkward position, I couldn’t help but notice the beautiful color his eyes were. Like the tiger’s eye my mother kept in her collection of gemstones.

“Can only be my mom.” Using a little pressure to my hip, he steered me closer to the couch as he rolled me off him, then he clapped his hand over my mouth. Duh, as if I was going to scream.

My heart pounded like that of a criminal during a bank robbery as we listened to Mrs. Hunter walk into the room and put something heavy on the floor. Sounded like boxes. She carried one after the other into the kitchen.

“She’s stocking the fridge,” Ryan murmured with his mouth to my ear.

Great. Who would pack a fridge at six in the morning? But then she probably wanted it done before she went to work. When she went for the third round, I pulled Ryan’s hand off my mouth and said in a fierce whisper, “Why are we hiding here?”

“My parents don’t like me bringing random girls to this place. Unless you want to be introduced as my girlfriend, I suggest you stay down.”

Agreed. But I scowled at him from the half-inch space between us, wondering how, in only twenty-four hours, I could land in such an intimate position with Hunter—twice.

A breath of relief whizzed out of me when his mother finally left the house and the door locked. A minute passed before Ryan pushed to his feet. He held his hand out for me, but I didn't move a limb.

"You sure your dad isn't on his way, too?" Heavy cynicism laced my voice.

"Yes, I'm sure. He never comes here during the week." He grabbed my hand and tugged. "Get up."

I let him help me stand. "Next time you feel the need to knock me over, I'd appreciate a little warning first."

"Gotcha!" He went to the rear of the house and came back with a towel that he wiped over his face then tossed it at me.

"Ew." He didn't really expect me to use the same towel he already marked with his sweat? "I don't know how a little running together got us to that level of intimacy." But since he ignored my annoyed look and walked outside, I figured I just had to overcome that part of me and wiped my sweating body with it. Rubbing my neck, I followed Ryan onto the porch and found him lounging on the swing.

Drenched in my sweat, I tossed the towel deadly aim at his face. But he caught it. “Let’s go back,” I muttered.

“Are we in a hurry, Matthews?”

I refused to take a seat anywhere on this porch but leaned my shoulder against the post next to the wooden steps that led down to the beach. “Not really. But I won’t stay in a place where I have to sign a marriage license to be welcome.”

“She won’t come back.”

“I don’t care.” Wow, that was a growl. I didn’t know I could actually sound this pissed.

“Fair enough.” He sighed and rose from the swing. “Let me just get the ball, then we can go.”

“The ball?”

But he was already gone and came out little later with a backpack that had an ominous round swell. He stuffed the towel and another bottle of water into it then strapped it over his shoulders. The keys he dumped back into the potted plant.

Fortunately, he didn’t make me run again. We strolled along the beach, and I welcomed the cool rush of water around my ankles.

Safe out of sight from his house, I finally relaxed.  
“Why did you bring the ball?”

“You need to practice kicking and catching. The beach is perfect for that.”

Okay, that didn't sound too bad. But I underestimated Hunter. What he truly meant I found out when we reached the place where we'd hidden our shoes.

