**CHAPTER ONE**

MOLLY

Torture had never been her thing, but Molly Mason endured it as she walked with her boyfriend Trevor through the mall. She glanced at his profile and stifled a sigh. He loved it. The noise, the crowds, the stares directed at them from other girls, jealous that he chose her over them. He smiled at them because as a theater guy, the attention suited him. She, however, preferred a quiet trail with her feet propelling her forward—toward a better future.

“Let’s stop in here.” Trevor pulled her by the hand, cutting across the stream of people walking along the shiny, white tiled floor. “I love this store.”

“I don’t,” Molly mumbled, but he continued to guide her until they had entered a cluttered gag gift shop.

Trevor released her hand. He weaved through the narrow aisles and headed for the back of the store. A tall red head smiled at him and he smiled back, nodding politely. Molly smirked at the disappointed look the girl gave Trevor, amazed again that he had chosen to date her when he had so many other choices.

Not that Molly thought she was ugly. Hours spent training had given her a fit body, even if it was only five feet tall. And Trevor always complimented her long blonde hair and silvery gray eyes. Still, compared to some of the girls who flirted with Trevor, Molly wondered how she measured up.

She followed Trevor through the store with a frown. His intended destination *always* made her frown. “Trevor, why do you look at this stuff. It’s totally gross.”

He snorted a breath out his nose. “To you. I think it’s funny.” Reaching for a shelf, he grabbed a package and grinned. “See, like this. Can you imagine the look on your mom’s face if she saw this in your room?”

Molly glared at the clear plastic bag filled with extra-large, glitter-infused ribbed condoms. She snatched it and tossed it back onto the shelf. “Very funny. Especially considering we don’t do that, and I would never use something like *this* if we did.”

Trevor wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. “C’mon, Molly. You know I’m just joking.”

He leaned in to kissed her and his soft lips melted away her irritation. Molly kissed him back for a moment then laid her head on his chest.

“Of course,” he said, “I am open to trying something new.” He slid his hands to her butt and squeezed.

“Trev,” she grabbed his hands and stepped back with a nervous laugh. “I’m… uh…going to go check out the t-shirts.”

He pressed his lips together for a brief moment. “Ok.”

He turned back to the wall, and Molly walked toward the front of the store and the less suggestive items. She stopped at a rack crammed with band t-shirts.

*Why is everything about sex?* Every movie, every song, every conversation at the parties she and Trevor went to on the weekends. She shook her head and searched through the overloaded display. Pawing aside the wrinkled shirts, she bit her bottom lip.

Not that sex would be a *bad* thing with Trevor. The physical attraction was definitely there. His tall, well-built body, Brett Michaels hair and those gorgeous lips made her stomach tingle every time he touched her. For whatever reason though, Molly just couldn’t do it. Something didn’t feel right, like there was some spark or magic missing and every time they came close, she chickened out.

Slamming the hangers aside, Molly pursed her lips. Maybe she was a prude, this *was* the eighties, and at seventeen, she could make her own decisions. She glanced up, searching for Trevor and caught a glimpse of the back of his head as he moved to another area of the shop. His shoulder length blond hair glimmered under the flashing neon lights from the signs for sale on the walls.

*Yep, totally righteous, just not exactly… right. For now*.

She watched him for another moment. He laughed with the girl standing next to him. Another one of his traits; he could talk to anyone. No shyness like Molly.

Smiling, Molly returned her attention to the rack and paused on a white shirt with black three-quarter length sleeves. On the front, a thin blue circle house a screen print of Bon Jovi, one of her favorite bands. The rockers, with their big hair and leather clad legs, each gave a one-armed fist pump in typical rocker style.

“Yes! Finally.” Molly pushed her hands into the fabric sea and yanked the shirt from the rack. Closing her eyes, memories of the concert she and her best friend, Cindy, had gone to flooded her mind. The screaming, the blaring guitars, John Bon Jovi dancing on the stage in his tight pants. She shivered, humming the tune to *Shot Through the Heart*. The concert had been a for Cindy’s birthday, courtesy of her friend’s parents. A rare treat for Molly considering she and her mom were lucky to have any extra money for buying pop-tarts let alone a concert ticket.

Getting a shirt at the outrageous prices the vendors wanted was out of the question. So, Molly had searched the stores afterward, but they’d sold out fast. Her heart soared at the chance to get one. Running her fingers along the sleeve, she found and raised the price tag.

Her flipping stomach slammed to a dead stop as she stared at the number.

“Darn it.” She clutched the shirt with shaky fingers then returned it to the rack. “Still too much.”

“Hey.” Trevor hugged her from behind, pointing to the shirt. “Isn’t that the concert you and Cindy went to?”

“Yeah.” She gazed at the picture.

“You gonna get it?”

“No. It… It’s not my size.”

Trevor grabbed the shirt and held it up to Molly. “Looks like it will fit.”

“That’s okay. I don’t need it.”

She took a step toward the door, but he grabbed her arm. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. C’mon, let’s just go.” With a lawyer for a dad, Trevor didn’t understand Molly’s need to be frugal. It was easier not talk to him about her lack of money.

“You are such a terrible liar. Is it the money?”

Heat filled her face. “No.”

Trevor held her hand and led her to the counter. He handed the shirt to the cashier.

“You don’t have to buy it. Really. I don’t want—”

“Yes, you do want it. And it’s no big deal. I’ll get it for you.”

“That’s okay. Don’t waste your money.”

He handed a twenty to the guy behind the counter. “It’s not that much. Besides, you can pay me back later if it makes you feel better.”

Tears filled Molly’s eyes. “You’re too good to me.”

“Anything for my girl.” Trevor kissed her cheek and handed her the bag. They left the store and re-joined the throng of shoppers. After traveling past the indoor merry-go-round crawling with screaming kids, he pulled her into an alcove next to a metal gated store front with a large *coming* *soon* sign hung from the top. The sound of hammers and drills drifted from inside the construction site.

“What are we—”

“I think I’ll take a bit of that payment now.” Smiling, he backed her against the wall then, holding her cheeks, he pressed his lips to hers.

Still moved by his gesture with the shirt, Molly hugged his neck and returned his kiss. Her chest filled with heat. Was that the spark she needed? Teasing moments like this made her want to give him everything he asked for. His playful smiles, his tender kisses, the way he made her feel so loved. Guilt twisted in her gut knowing she always let him down.

Trevor slid his hands to her waist and moved even closer, slipping his tongue into her mouth and pushing against her with his hips. His quick breaths fanned her face and he put one hand behind her neck, holding her tight.

“Trevor…” She put her hands on his chest.

“You want to get out of here?” he asked, trailing kisses along her cheeks and to her neck.

Molly’s muscles tightened in her back. Fear doused the spark like dipping a match in water. “Uh, well. I thought we were… going to eat lunch.”

“Is that what you really want right now?” He chuckled. “Because I can think of something better than food.”

He kissed her again before she could answer, but she pushed against his chest and he stopped.

“I’m sorry,” Molly said.

He narrowed his blue eyes for a second, then closed them, leaning his forehead against hers. “Yeah. I know. Let’s go eat.”

Molly sighed then took his hand in hers. “Can we stop by the bathroom first?”

Stepping backward, Trevor pulled her with him and re-joined the throng in the main walkway. “Anything for my girl.”

Molly gave him a sideways glance. Her heart skipped a beat at the frown on his face and the guilt punched her in the stomach.

*Yep, letting him down again*.

They reached the hall leading to the bathroom and Trevor stopped, glancing around them at the shoppers. “I’ll wait out here.”

“Okay.” Molly squeezed his hand and rushed down the hall. Fighting back tears, she pushed the door open and went inside the bathroom.

A few minutes later, after drying her hands on a paper towel, Molly opened the door and tossed the paper in the trash by the door. She walked through the hall, looking for Trevor. She found him and jerked to a stop.

Trevor stood with his back against the brick wall under a sign that read restrooms, a brilliant smile on his face. But it wasn’t for Molly. Another girl stood with him, playing with the edges of his jean jacket. Andrea, a girl from their school—the one Molly consistently beat in every cross-country race. She said something to Trevor, and he laughed touching the tip of her nose with his fingertip.

Heat scorched Molly’s face and chest. She narrowed her eyes and stalked over to them. Trevor looked up as she approached and raised his eyebrows for a second. Then he pushed off the wall and reached for Molly.

“Hey.” He gestured to Andrea. “Look who I ran into.”

Molly met Andrea’s gaze and nodded. “Hi, Andrea.”

Andrea cocked her eyebrow, flipping her long brown hair over her shoulder and looked at Trevor. “I’ll see you later.” She glanced at Molly and grinned, then walked away through the crowd.

Biting her tongue, Molly glared at Trevor. “What the hell?”

A wrinkle formed between his eyes. “What?”

“What do you mean *what*? What was that all about?” She waved a hand in the direction Andrea had walked.

“Jeez, relax. We were just talking.” He took her hand in his and pulled her toward the food court.

Molly yanked away and planted her feet. “No, you were flirting with her.”

“I was not flirting.” He narrowed his eyes. “You’re overreacting.”

“She had her hands all over you and you touched her. That’s not *just* *talking*.” Molly clenched her hands into fists to stop them from shaking.

Trevor huffed a breath. “Great. You think I’d do that? Nice.”

“What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re supposed to trust me.” He pushed out his bottom lip. “I guess I haven’t earned that from you.”

Molly stared at him, her mouth opened slightly, and eyebrows drawn into a deep V. She remembered the way he smiled at the other girls today and considered that in the light of this new information. Her stomach clenched.

“You’ve been smiling at other girls all day and I thought you were just being friendly. But it’s more than that, isn’t it?”

“No.” He crossed his arms. “Look, you know I think you’re beautiful, but it’s human nature to look at people. You aren’t the most beautiful girl out there just like I’m not the cutest guy. You look at other guys, too, and I never give you a hard time.”

Molly gasped. “I do not. And I never would when you were standing right next to me.” How had this turned into her fault?

“I’ve seen it. And you talk to *them*, too. But I trust you, so I don’t let it bother me.”

“I… I haven’t.” The only guys she talked to were on the cross team. And Hayden, Trevor’s best friend. And she *never* touched them. But did he think she was flirting, too?

Trevor drew a deep breath and dropped his gaze to the floor. He raised his eyes and tears glimmered on his lashes. “I love you, Molly. But how can we move forward if you don’t trust me?”

Molly caught her breath, her heart pounding against her ribs. She sighed and took his hands in hers. “It just looked like you were enjoying her attention.”

“I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.” He pulled Molly to his chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Please, don’t worry about her. She’s not the one I want.”

Laying her cheek against his soft shirt, Molly hugged his waist, too. “I guess I was just jealous. Sorry.” *Let down number ten thousand*.

His laugh rumbled under her ear. “That’s okay. I’d feel the same way if I saw you with another guy.” He lifted her chin with a finger and kissed her softly on the lips.

Molly relaxed into him for a moment then smiled. “Alright, now that the drama is over, let’s eat.”

“You got it. Anything for my girl.” He caressed her cheek with his fingertips and smiled,

Molly did too and turned toward the circle of food counters and tables. As they walked she sighed, pushing Andrea and any residual hurt from her mind. Trevor loved *her*, and that was all that mattered.

*Besides,* *I’ll take care of Andrea myself tomorrow*.

**CHAPTER TWO**

MOLLY

Molly bolted through the trees, the raspy breaths of her pursuers driving her forward. The smell of muddy, rotten leaves drifted on a breeze too weak to dry the sweat trickling into her eyes. She didn’t dare take the time to wipe it away. She pushed her feet faster, legs pumping, arms swinging. Her rapid, beating heart, throbbing inside her chest.

The trees reached toward her, half empty branches like the claws of gigantic, mangy, orange and red cats. She pounded her feet through dirt littered with clumps of color from their autumn coats. She dodged a fallen, ankle-breaking branch, hoping it didn’t slow her too much.

She couldn’t let them catch her. She wouldn’t. She never had before. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the oncoming hill and sucked in a deep breath, her lungs burning, pulling strength from inside her core to power her way to the top.

She broke from the trees and onto the dew-filled grass of the hill.

“Push it, Molly! Faster!” Trevor’s voice pulled her toward the finish line, toward victory.

“Go, Molly! You got this!” Hayden’s voice joined Trevor’s, adding to the adrenaline coursing through her blood.

Molly didn’t even look at them, she focused on the tape. The girls behind her would do the same, but they wouldn’t pass her now. Not when she’d worked this hard.

Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. She increased the rhythm. Faster and faster, until her lungs screamed, her muscles burned. Almost there. Just a little further. The crack of a stick told her someone crept up from behind.

“No.” The breathless grunt escaped, and Molly used the word to fuel her last few steps. The thundering sound of that little word eclipsed the cheers of the crowd, the screams of her coach, even Trevor and Hayden’s voices.

Molly blasted across the finish line, her chest breaking the tape. Now she slowed, her feet slapping the ground, arms relaxing from their bent position, lungs pulling in deep breaths of the cool morning air. She smiled at her new personal record time flashing on the clock.

She clasped her hands behind her head to catch her breath. Her nearest pursuer followed in three seconds and Molly turned to congratulate her. The greeting stuttered off her lips when she saw who it was; Andrea Wilkinson, her teammate, one year younger than Molly, and the bitchiest girl in the class of 1987. And Hayden’s latest reject.

“Good job.” Remembering the mall, Molly curved her lips into a shaky smile.

Andrea glared back, her lip curling at the corner. “Yeah, you too. NOT.” She stomped away, her dark brown ponytail bouncing back and forth with her steps.

Molly muttered under her breath. “Sore loser.” She ignored Andrea and paced, watching the other top runners cross the line. Once her breathing slowed to a more normal rhythm, she, ducked under the roped off corral, and walked away from the finish area. She went where Trevor waited behind the crowd, hugging him around the neck.

He kissed her then smiled. “Congratulations.”

She stepped back to thank him. Before she could speak, Hayden grabbed her from behind and swung her around by her waist. She laughed. “Put me down you idiot.”

Hayden laughed, too, then squeezed her in a bear hug. “Great race. Nice kick at the end. You should have seen Andrea’s face when you beat her… again.”

Molly grinned. “Well, I haven’t lost to her yet. And I couldn’t let it happen today with the scouts here.” A scholarship was her only way out of this craptastic small town, and she wasn’t letting anything, or anyone, stop her from getting it.

Hayden looked at the stands. “Where are they?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. They’re probably with the coach.”

“I’ll bet they’re impressed. You had a great race today.” Hayden winked, his bright green eyes twinkling in the sun.

Molly chuckled then glanced at Trevor. Her stomach dropped. “Is something wrong?” She touched his arm and his frown disappeared.

Trevor shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong.” He shifted his gaze to Hayden, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Dude, you need to leave.”

Was Trevor mad his best friend was congratulating her? Hayden acted the same at every race, but it never caused a problem before. After the mall fiasco, Molly wondered.

Hayden smiled at her. “I’ve got to go. Practice starts in ten minutes.”

She looked at Hayden’s cleats and shin guards and shook her head. “You won’t make it. You should have left sooner. Now you’ll get busted.”

He brushed his hand through his spiky dark hair and laughed. “Right. I’m the captain, what are they going to do, bench me?”

“Whatever just go.” She pushed his chest. “But thanks for coming to cheer me on.”

Hayden’s gaze lingered on her for a moment. Molly’s breath caught in her throat. Trevor slid his arm around her and she jumped.

A hint of a crease appeared between Hayden’s eyes then he smiled at her. “Anytime.” Punching Trevor on the shoulder, he said, “See you later,” then turned and jogged toward the parking lot.

Trevor pulled her closer and pressed his lips to hers with a soft kiss. “That was a great race. But it got a little close at the end. Were you distracted by something?” He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Her back stiffened at the criticism. “No, some races are better than others.” Did he not even realize she had run her best time of the year?

Trevor glanced at Hayden’s retreating back and the frown returned. “Maybe too many eyes were watching.”

Molly forced a laugh to diffuse the tension. “If I can’t focus because people are watching then I don’t have a hope of getting a scholarship.” She tapped his nose with her finger. “I like it when you guys come to watch. Don’t worry though while I’m running I don’t even know you’re there.”

Trevor squinted. “Gee, thanks. Glad to see how important I am.” Cool air replaced the heat of his arms when he let her go.

She grabbed his hands, her stomach tightening again. “That’s not what I meant. I...”

Trevor squeezed her hands. “I know what you meant. Don’t worry about it.”

She held her breath, trying to think of something to say. Guilt squirmed in her stomach. “Is something else bothering you? Are you still upset about yesterday?”

He sighed. “I don’t…”

Another set of arms wrapped her in a hug from behind. “Girrll! Please, tell me you won. I couldn’t stand it if that skanky ho beat you.”

Trevor rolled his eyes.

Molly giggled and turned to hug her best friend, Cindy. “You know I did. Andrea was gracious about it, too.”

Cindy threw her head back and laughed. Her springy black curls bobbed in her loose ponytail.

Trevor took a step back, frowning at Cindy.

“Hey, Trevor.” Cindy flipped her hair back.

“What’s up Cindy? You finished.” He smirked. “Better than the last meet, I hope. Aren’t you supposed to be faster?”

Molly sighed, sure the insults were about to fly. She wished her best friend and boyfriend could like each other. Or at least act civil when they were together.

Cindy raised her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips. “Why?”

“You’re fast on the track.” He glanced at Molly and raised an eyebrow.

She giggled, rubbing her hand along his arm. “Sprinting and long distance are two different races. Runners aren’t always good at both.”

Cindy snorted. “Except for you, girl.” She nodded at someone behind Molly. “You better go to coach Davis. She’s looking this way.”

Two men stood next to their coach. Molly glanced at the college logos on their shirts and adrenaline sent her heart racing again. She waved to the coach.

“I gotta go. Wish me luck, Trev.” She touched his cheek. Her breath hitched at his glare.

“Right, well, enjoy your fan club. Good luck.” He walked away shaking his head.

Cindy growled under her breath. “Ignore him. He’s being his normal dickhead self. Go talk to the coaches. You’ve earned it.” She hugged Molly’s stiff shoulders. “Let’s hang out after and you can give me the 411.”

Molly nodded at her best friend but gazed after Trevor remembering their fight at the mall. *Dammit, I did it again*. She swallowed hard, then returned her gaze to Cindy’s wide eyes.

“You’re right. Wait here and we can go eat.” Molly lifted her chin and walked toward the coaches, toward her future, toward freedom.