

# Chapter One

## Lily

"I WONDER WHAT would happen if you lost your ability to shield."

That simple question from Lily's best friend, Sandra, almost got them killed. As Lily Morgan drove them to school for their band practice in her Mini Cooper, it took all of her limited driving skills to keep them on the narrow suburban road and not in the ditch.

"Let's not ever mention that again!" Lily's heart raced at the thought of it.

Sandra Jones was the best friend anybody could dream of. She was also everything Lily was not. She was outgoing, tall, and beautiful with her long, straight blond hair and blue eyes. She always wore the nicest outfits, and guys regularly asked her out on dates. She could have been part of the popular crowd had she wanted to, but she was perfectly content being in the marching band, just like Lily.

Sandra and her family, in addition to Lily's uncle, Charlie, were the only people alive who knew what Lily could do: she had the ability to feel the emotions of the people around her. The only way for her to function and have a close to normal life was to build mental shields, which prevented the barrage of emotions from continuously assaulting her. Sandra knew how important shielding was to Lily, particularly in an emotion-infested place like high school.

"Just saying. I mean, you've been giving me the silent treatment since we left home. I had to find a way to make you talk."

"Well, that's not a good subject on a good day."

"What's eating you then?"

"My mother, again."

"I don't understand. Why don't you take Charlie up on his offer and move in with him?"

"It's my house, Sandra. If anything, she should be the one moving out."

"Not going to happen, not until the courts kick her out. You know that better than I do. She's not going anywhere."

Her friend was right, unfortunately.

"Can we move on to another subject?"

"What did she want this time?" Sandra asked instead. "Another party to introduce you to your future husband?"

As Lily nodded, she could easily imagine Sandra rolling her eyes. If she hadn't been driving, she was sure she would have seen her do exactly that.

"I don't get it," Sandra continued. "She's not even your real mother."

"I don't get it either. Why does she keep throwing me at those guys?"

"Beats me. Did you say no?"

Lily remained quiet. She never said no. She still held the hope that if she did exactly what her mother requested, maybe one day she would approve of her.

Hope definitely made people stupid.

"When will you, Lily?" Sandra asked, turning toward her. "You deserve better than this."

Lily sighed. She had tried to explain it numerous times before, but Sandra never understood. After all, Sandra's mother loved her and was always so proud of her.

"David said football practice starts today," Sandra said, changing the subject.

Lily felt her best friend's eagerness at sharing the news, and she knew what was coming next.

"Malakai will be there."

Ever since she had admitted to Sandra that she liked the star wide receiver over a year ago, Sandra brought him up every chance she had.

"Why don't we talk about your love life for a change?" Lily asked.

"Oh, no, we're so not. Yours is so much more fun."

It was Lily's turn to roll her eyes. "So, what else did David say?"

"They should begin practice around nine this morning."

"They have it so much easier than we do," Lily said, turning onto the access road that led behind the school.

"You got that one right. If they practiced half as much as we did, they would wear paths in the football field."

"That's probably why we practice on hot, steamy asphalt," Lily said as they arrived in the parking area.

"It sucks, really. Why don't we get to practice their amount of hours and they, ours?"

"Because what we do is more complicated?" Lily suggested with a smile.

Sandra shrugged and glanced out the window.

"Look at it on the bright side."

"There is one?" Sandra asked, irony coating her tone.

"No!"

They were both laughing when Lily pulled into her usual parking spot.

## Chapter Two

### Malakai

AS MALAKAI THOMAS drove to school, his fingers were tapping a rhythm of their own on the steering wheel of his jeep.

Finally, football training was beginning.

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard for the fifth time since he left home; he had forty minutes to make a ten-minute drive to school. He then looked at the speedometer; he was doing forty-five in a thirty-five-mile zone. He willed his foot to relax from the gas pedal as he clearly remembered his father saying over and over again that getting a ticket wouldn't get anyone to their destination any faster. And the last thing Malakai wanted was to be late on his first day of practice.

A few minutes later, he pulled onto the access road to the back of the school. He parked his jeep in a spot close to the gym entrance, got out, picked up his gym bag, and closed the door. He then looked around for Wes's Honda Civic.

Malakai was looking forward to seeing his friend and telling him about his good news. He had yet to tell anyone since his father was out of town, again, and he was eager to share.

It took only a moment for him to spot Wes's car, and the second he did, he wished he hadn't. Wes was there all right, but so was Zoe, and the two of them were kissing as if they didn't need to breathe.

Malakai shook his head, looking down at the ground.

To say he didn't like Zoe St. Claire was an understatement. Wes had been dating the popular rich girl since the previous March, right before spring training began, and Malakai didn't envy his friend's relationship one bit. Zoe had a temper and treated everyone like minions, including Wes. Malakai wasn't even sure whether his friend liked the girl or was more in love with the thought of dating her.

One thing Malakai knew for sure: Zoe did not love Wes. He had figured out a long time ago that Zoe was with Wes because he was the most popular guy in school, and one of the few people who rivaled her own popularity.

As for Malakai, he had yet to meet someone who would make his heart beat faster, and he had promised himself he would never date a girl for her social status. He wanted someone who was kind, intelligent, and interesting, someone he could connect with on a deeper level.

“This doesn’t look good.”

Malakai looked up. David Jones, the team center, had joined him and was now leaning on the jeep, arms crossed. David, now a junior, was so big he had made varsity in his sophomore year, on the second-string offense. Right after the last spring training, Coach had made him part of the starting line, and Malakai had to admit, David was good.

Malakai had gotten to know the center over the summer when they both worked at a local pizza joint. He had been happy to have someone to spend time with since Wes had been all but available. David was funny and easygoing and had become a good friend.

“He’s supposed to be our captain, the example to follow. I’m not sure extreme PDA is something we had in mind when we elected him.”

Malakai could only agree.

“Besides, what the heck does he see in her?”

“If only I knew,” Malakai said, his voice rough. He coughed to clear his throat.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. You’re just the first person I’ve talked to in two days.”

“I wish it was the case for me,” David said with a chuckle. “My sister made so much noise when she got up at her insane early hour that we had a fight,” he continued, pointing with his chin toward a group of students who were sitting in the shade under the walkway covering.

Malakai remembered David telling him a few weeks earlier that his sister was in the marching band.

“What does she play again?” Malakai asked.

“Clarinet.”

He wondered if she was the petite brunette with gray eyes he had spotted in freshman year. He had loved hearing her solo the previous year when, after the homecoming game,

Coach had made them watch the band perform. As he looked through the band members, he spotted her, sitting next to a tall blond girl.

“In any case, seems like the band dudes are having quite a laugh at Wes’s expense.”

Now that David mentioned it, Malakai saw quite a few members looking in Wes’s direction, pointing and laughing while commenting to one another.

“This has to stop,” David added, pushing away from the jeep and walking purposefully toward the kissing couple.

Malakai followed at a slower pace. Wes would not take kindly to the interruption, but David was right.

“You’ve got quite an audience there, dude,” David said once he reached Wes.

The couple stopped kissing and looked at David, dazed. David pointed toward the band members with his chin.

“Who cares what a bunch of geeks think?” Zoe said with a shrug.

“They might be band *members*, but they talk to other people, you know,” David said.

“What? Jealous, David?” Zoe said with a raised eyebrow. “Want some, too? Or are you too young for it yet?”

“Hell no! I’m getting enough just by looking at you two!”

Wes glanced at Malakai, his nostrils flaring, his hands gripping Zoe’s shirt with white knuckles. Malakai wasn’t surprised to see the quarterback was furious enough to hit someone.

“We better go,” Malakai said. He knew Wes couldn’t be reasoned with. “We’ll be late for practice.”

“Yeah, right. With half an hour to spare, I doubt that very much,” Zoe said, turning back to Wes and attacking his mouth with hers.

David shrugged and left. After a last glance at Wes, Malakai followed the center, wondering again what had happened to the boy who used to be his best friend.

“I tried,” David said, once they were inside the school, making their way to the gym.

“He’s changed,” Malakai said.

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t know him very well until training last spring. But why was he chosen as captain? Dude, that just doesn’t make sense to me.”

Malakai shrugged, wondering if Wes would ever return to his old self again.