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**I hadn't always wished** I was someone else. But that day I did. I'd have given almost anything to be like those *other* girls. You know the ones I mean—they laugh loudly and cut up (among themselves) and their hair is always perfect and their teeth are straight and white and they dress like they just stepped off the slick pages of *In Style* or *Glamour* or *Seventeen*.

On most days I was perfectly happy with who I was and how I looked. My best friend, Anna Krenshaw, even thought I was pretty. And most of the time I thought I had it basically together. But there were moments I wanted to be someone else. Like someone who was as cool and together as, say, Sierra Reynolds.

But the main reason I felt like that was because

of this one particular guy. A guy who, in my opinion, was the coolest guy at Highview High, maybe even the coolest guy on the planet. His name was Ryun Lee and right then he was dribbling the ball downfield, getting ready to make another spectacular goal.

I'd been in love with Ryun for a long time At least most of my junior year. Everything about him seemed so perfect. But, unfortunately, he didn't even know that I existed. Not yet anyway.

The good news was that Ryun did NOT have a girlfriend yet either. And that day I'd come to school with a plan, thinking that maybe, just maybe, I might be able to get this guy to speak to me. I knew that meant I had to say something to him first—and hopefully something intelligent. And since I'd been a faithful fan at every single one of his soccer matches, and since I'd studied every single move he made on the field, and since I understood soccer pretty well (I used to be pretty good before I broke my ankle my freshman year) I was thinking that maybe, just maybe, I could come up with something halfway decent to say. I even had on a new Lucky sweatshirt and my best jeans and, although I wasn't an expert on those things, I thought I looked fairly decent. Or at least okay.

That was until I noticed the “cool girls” hanging over by the bleachers. Then I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't blind. I could see the way Ryun glanced their way from time to time. And I could tell he *cared* about what they thought.

But he didn't even seem to notice Anna or me.

He didn't seem to hear us yelling for him to steal the ball and cheering for him when he scored a goal. He didn't seem to know that we'd come to every one of his games, even when it was cold and raining. No, he just raced past us like we were invisible.

I guess I'd describe us as "fringers" since we stayed along the edges of things. I mean, we *knew* the kids who were popular and had brief conversations with them, but for the most part we were outside the elite crowd.

Still, I'd been pretty much okay with that. I had my music and art, plus youth group and my job at the day-care center at our church. And I made good grades and got along well with others. I should have been perfectly happy, right?

So, what was wrong? Okay, I admit it. Sometimes I was jealous of girls like Sierra and her ever-popular friends. *And especially that day.* But it seemed like they had more than their fair share of the fun.

It didn't help that Sierra was petite and had gorgeous auburn hair and emerald green eyes. Her dad had this big psychiatric practice in town. I could tell by the way Sierra dressed that they were loaded. She always made High High's best-dressed list in the newspaper. (I happened to think that list was lame, not to mention insulting to the rest of us.) Fortunately they didn't have a worst-dressed list or my name would have been a regular there.

I knew I was having a bad attitude that day and I should have put those negative thoughts out of my head and enjoyed the sunshine, the soccer match,

and my good friend Anna's company . . . *but I just couldn't!*

Sometimes I convinced myself that Sierra and her crowd were all shallow and boring and not even worth knowing. But other times I found myself looking longingly at them and wishing I could be like them. Anna knew—she just sensed it sometimes. “Why are you even looking at them?” she asked me, as she caught me glancing their way again. Of course, I was only looking because *Ryun* was looking. I was wondering which one of those girls was capturing his attention and why.

“Huh?” I turned my attention to Anna.

“You know what I mean,” she said. “It’s so obvious. It’s like you wish you could be part of their group, Kenzie.”

“I do not.”

She laughed. “You should see your face right now.”

“Whatever.” I focused my eyes back on the soccer field. The match had ended, and my big moment was almost here. “I’ll be right back, Anna,” I said quickly as I headed over to where *Ryun* was being congratulated by his teammates. I edged closer and watched for the moment he broke away from his soccer buddies. Then I walked over to him and waved. He had a funny expression, like he was trying to remember whether he knew me or not.

“Nice game, *Ryun*,” I said in a controlled voice, acting all cool and composed, like my knees weren’t turning into wet noodles.

He smiled. Gorgeous smile, by the way. “Thanks.”

"That last goal was a perfect setup," I continued, not wanting to let him or that moment get away too soon.

"Huh?" His brow creased, as if he doubted I knew what I was talking about.

"It was calm," I said, wishing I felt that way myself. "That move with the outside of your left foot."

He really took a second look at me. "Huh? You saw that?"

"Sure." I nodded. "The keeper thought you were going to the left. Taking it right like that took him completely by surprise." I managed to say a few more intelligent-sounding things about the game, and he actually seemed to be listening. Suddenly I was feeling seriously hopeful. Maybe my eight years of playing soccer weren't a total waste.

But then Sierra Reynolds came along, and Ryun's gaze moved quickly from me to her. I could tell he was studying her with hungry eyes, like he couldn't get enough of this girl who looked like an ad for some big name designer. I stared down at the grass beneath my scuffed-up Birkenstock sandals and realized I was way out of my league, over my head, biting off more than I could chew—just pick the cliché and it would work.

I walked back to Anna, feeling like a total loser.

"What was up with that?" she asked, obviously curious about my stupid move on Ryun.

"Nothing," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"But what were you doing?"

"Trying to compete with Miss Fashion Queen." I shook my head as we walked away. "Can you

imagine how much someone like Sierra must spend on clothing, Anna? Her shoes alone probably cost more than my whole outfit, including my backpack.”

“I just don’t get why you care so much about those airheads,” she said.

“Airheads?” I paused to study my friend. She wasn’t usually so critical of people, even if she didn’t like them.

She shrugged. “Well, you know . . .”

“I *don’t* care about them.” I tried to convince her as we approached the parking lot.

“Then why are you talking about them right now?”

I studied Anna for a minute. She had been my best friend for years, and you couldn’t ask for a better friend. Anna was loyal and intelligent and even quite pretty, not to mention she dressed better than I did. Anna was Chinese by birth. She had been abandoned as a baby, then rescued by an adoption agency and later placed with an older couple in our church. Her life had had some tough challenges, but all things considered, it seemed to be going pretty well to me. She was an only child, and she usually got whatever she wanted. So in some ways she wasn’t much different than girls like Sierra and her friends. Only, of course, Anna was much nicer, and she was my friend.

“You want my honest answer?” I asked her as we approached her car.

“Yeah.” She eyed me curiously as she fished her keys from her purse.

“The thing is, Anna, it’s just *not* fair.”

Anna frowned at me as she tossed her shiny black hair over her shoulder. "Well, get used to it, Kenzie," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Because life's not always fair."

"I know," I admitted. "But it just figures—the first time Ryun Lee has an actual conversation with me, Sierra has to come along and steal the show!"

"What did you expect, Kenzie?" Anna rolled her eyes at me. "Did you really think that Ryun Lee, the soccer king, was going to ask you out or something?"

"Well, nooo . . ."

"Really, Kenzie," she said as she unlocked her car, "it's not worth beating yourself up for him."

"How do you know?" I slumped down into the passenger seat of her immaculate Nissan, a gift for her 17th birthday a few months ago, and sighed deeply.

"Well, why would he blow you off for Sierra if he was?" She turned on the ignition and backed up.

"Yeah, you're probably right." I leaned back and closed my eyes, hoping that my agreeing with her would end this stupid conversation. But even with my eyes closed, all I could see was Ryun. The way he ran down the field with such incredible skill and speed. His long tan legs and the way he gave his head a shake after shooting a tricky goal . . . I'd never say such a lame thing out loud, but Ryun Lee was like poetry in motion. Truly beautiful. And talk about ripped. I was sure that guy had muscles over every inch of his body.

I knew that Ryun was Korean and that his father

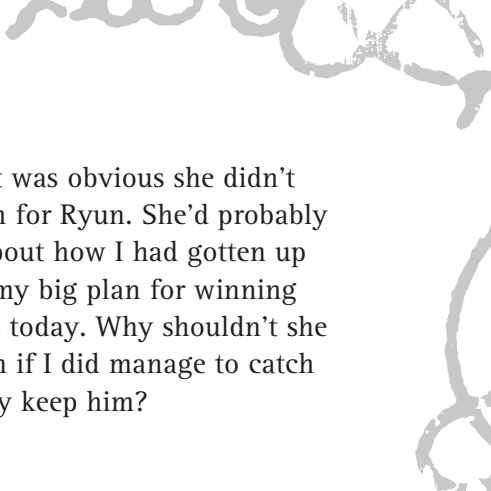


ran a bunch of grocery stores around town. I knew he drove a dark blue Explorer that always looked clean and shiny and that he made good grades, although I wasn't sure why he hadn't joined Honor Society yet. I also knew he was getting all kinds of offers for college scholarships and some of them were quite impressive. But that was about all I knew about him.

Ryun Lee seemed to be the kind of guy who kept mostly to himself. But even that made him appealing to me—kind of mysterious and intriguing. And until that thing happened with Sierra, I'd imagined that Ryun might have room in his life for someone like me. I felt that we were alike, simpatico, you know. Don't ask me why, because I couldn't explain it in a thousand years. But I just had this feeling that he and I could have something, if I ever got the chance. For starters, there was soccer. I'd always loved soccer and would still be playing if I hadn't been injured. But breaking my ankle and missing an entire soccer season really set me back. Then my ankle never healed up as strong as it had once been.

At the time I told myself it was a blessing in disguise since not playing soccer had given me time to take up the guitar, get interested in art, and begin working more hours at the day care. But I still missed the thrill of the game. And watching Ryun Lee play was the next best thing.

I peeked over at Anna as she turned her car down the street to the day-care center where I worked. She'd been pretty quiet. I felt guilty for



shutting her down, but it was obvious she didn't understand my attraction for Ryun. She'd probably just laugh if I told her about how I had gotten up that very morning with my big plan for winning him over after the match today. Why shouldn't she laugh? And besides, even if I did manage to catch him, how could I possibly keep him?

