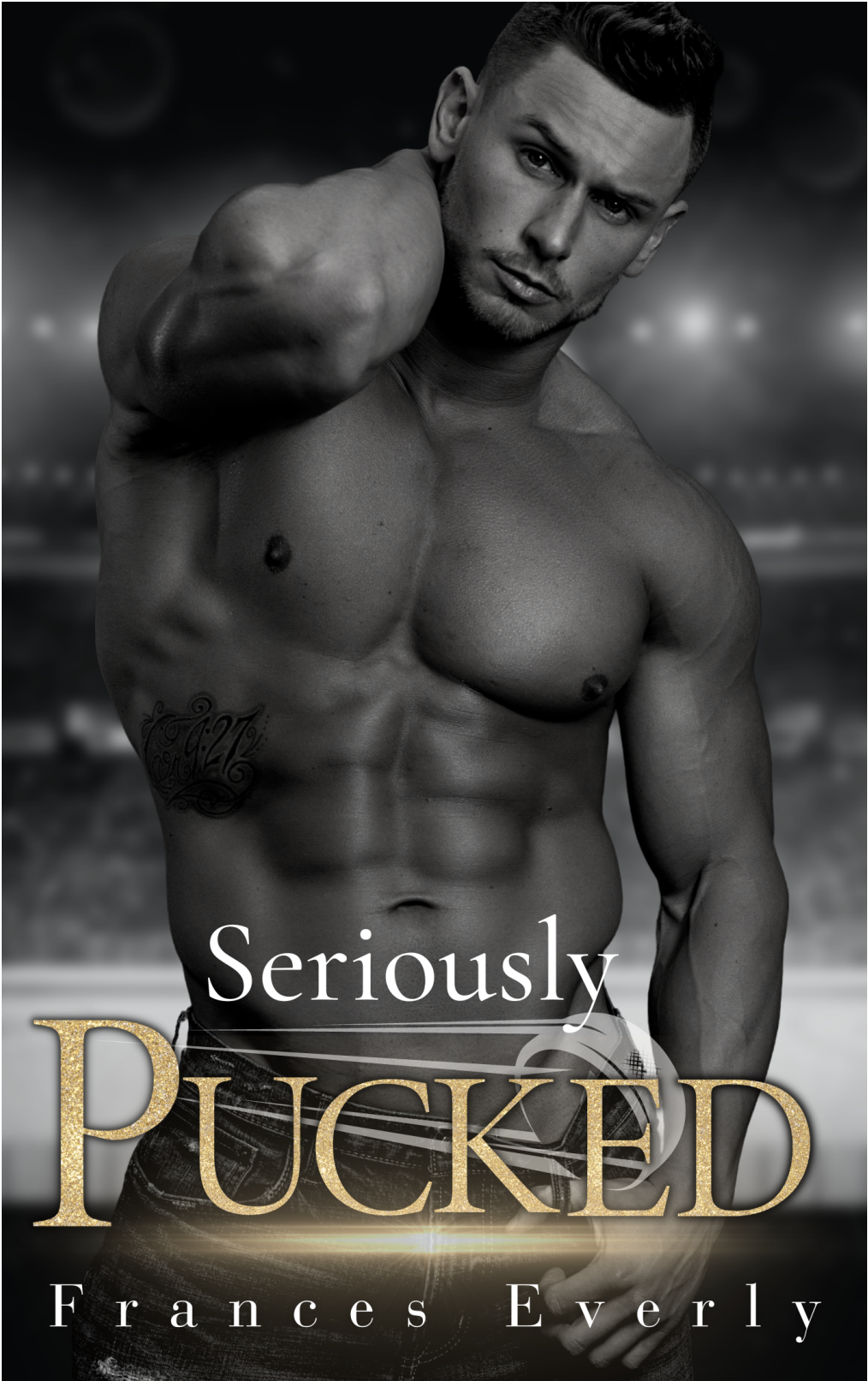


Seriously

PUCKED

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Seriously

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FRANCES EVERLY

Seriously Picked

Frances Everly

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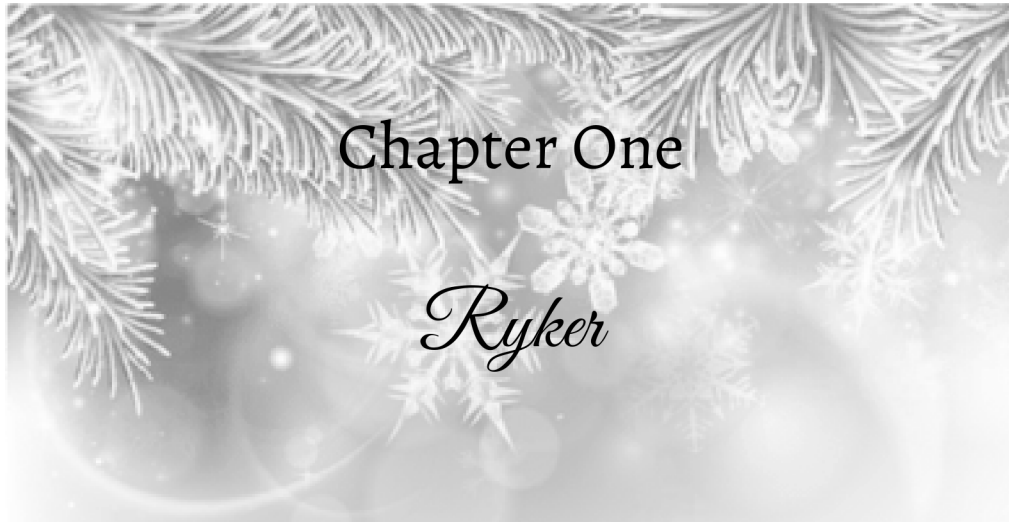
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“Jones!” Coach shouted as I passed his office on my way to the locker room.

“Uh oh, looks like someone’s about to get in trouble,” Greg, the team’s centre and my best friend teased. “What did you do this time?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m as innocent as the pure, driven snow,” I joked.

Everyone knew I was the furthest thing from innocence. I was always pulling crazy stunts, and Greg had even helped with a few since they had traded us to the same team last year. New York didn’t like cowboys, so they traded me to Montana for a player that could follow orders. I was happy to oblige them when I heard that Greg was also being traded to the Stallions. We’d grown up playing hockey together in Sweetwater, Montana, and were as thick as thieves in high school. So naturally, playing on the same Professional Hockey League team was a dream come true.

“Jones!” Coach Germano shouted, louder this time. “In my office. Now!”

“Man, what did you do?” Greg whispered, his face blanching this time. By the sound of Coach’s voice, it was serious.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “I’m not sure I want to find out.”

“It’s about time,” Coach grumbled. He was a burly man with thick black hair and a middle-aged waistline. His meaty arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against his desk, staring at the board with the latest plays outlined on them. The coach was an old-fashioned man who liked to have hard copies of all his plays. He didn’t trust technology that could easily get hacked or crash at a moment’s notice.

“What’s up, Coach?” I asked, trying to sound more confident than I felt about the situation.

“It’s been brought to my attention that you’ve been up to those pranks of yours again,” he turned his attention to stare straight at me with icy blue eyes that I swear could see clear through to my soul. It was unnerving to be on the wrong side of that gaze. Maybe that’s part of what made him such an excellent coach. He had a reputation for rehabilitating troubled players, not that I was one. I didn’t do drugs or drink excessively. But I did like a good prank.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the blood drained from my face. How could he know it was me? Did someone tattle on me about the saran wrap in the showers? Or the water in the sticks?

“You don’t huh?” Coach arched a pointed brow. He had a way of making me feel like a kid in a minor league again. I hated that feeling.

“No sir,” I replied, still hoping against all odds that he wasn’t about to hand me my walking papers.

Instead, he slapped a newspaper down on his desk and pointed to it. I reached for it, curious about what it said, and unfolded the page he’d left it open to. The headline read, “Former Patriot’s player, Ryker Jones, greets ex-teammates with epic hotel prank.” I gulped and side-eyed the door.

“Since you like being a joker, I have the perfect joke for you, Jones. You’re out of the next game,” Coach moved away from his desk to sit in his chair behind it.

“But coach! You can’t bench me. We’re playing New York tomorrow. I have to be in that game,” I begged. It was no secret that I hated my old team. I’d been looking forward to playing against them since they traded me.

“You’re out, Jones. It’s not up for debate! And you won’t be lacing up with the team either,” Coach said. This was it. This is where he fired me. Sweat rolled down my face in waves, or maybe it was fear. I’m not sure, but hockey was my life. I couldn’t lose it. Not now. Not when it was the only thing I had left.

“Please don’t do this, Coach,” I whispered.

“Oh, you’d better believe I’m doing it,” he replied, reaching under his desk to pull out a giant garment bag. “And I’ve been

waiting months for this.”

“What-?”

“Our mascot, Andre, fell in the stands and tore a ligament in his ankle at the last game. Guess who’s going to be parading through the stands when we play New York?” His face stretched into an evil grin. He couldn’t be serious? He wanted me to work the fans up as the team’s mascot instead of playing on the ice. What kind of joke was this?

“Did Greg put you up to this?” I asked, convinced that he was pranking me.

“Consider it good PR for the stunt you pulled,” Coach handed me the bag, and I stared at it, my eyes wide with disbelief. “Now get out of my office.”

“But Coach-.”

“I said we’re done here, Jones. And don’t bother calling your agent about this. I already did it for you.” He picked up the phone and began dialling. I stared at him and back down to the bag, open-mouthed in astonishment. He couldn’t be serious. Come the night of the game, Coach was probably going to have me skate around the ice before the game or something looking ridiculous in the hockey-playing horse costume with its black and gold mane. Then he’d either bench me for the rest of the game or make me do a dozen drills after it was finished. Right?

“Did you forget how to open the door?” Coach asked with his hand over the receiver.

“No, sir,” I replied, shaking my head to clear it. I took the bag and headed out of the office and back down the hall to the now mostly empty locker room. Greg had thankfully waited behind and was busy playing some game he was obsessed with on his phone. When he saw me enter, he quickly set it down.

“So... what did coach want? Did he fire you?” He asked, cautiously.

I shook my head.

“No.... No, he didn’t fire me,” I replied, still in disbelief. “He demoted me.”

“Demoted you? To what, second string?” He asked, eyeing the bag in my hand.

“To mascot.”

Greg gaped at me, reminding me of a goldfish. A moment later, he was howling with laughter so hard that he fell off the bench and crashed into his locker behind it.

“You’re kidding?” He laughed. “Nope. And it’s not funny,” I growled, shoving the bag into my locker. I grabbed my gear and headed for the door.

“Wait. So you’re telling me that coach is making you the team mascot, and you don’t see how funny that is?” Greg called out. He grabbed his stuff and caught up to me as I headed to the parking lot.

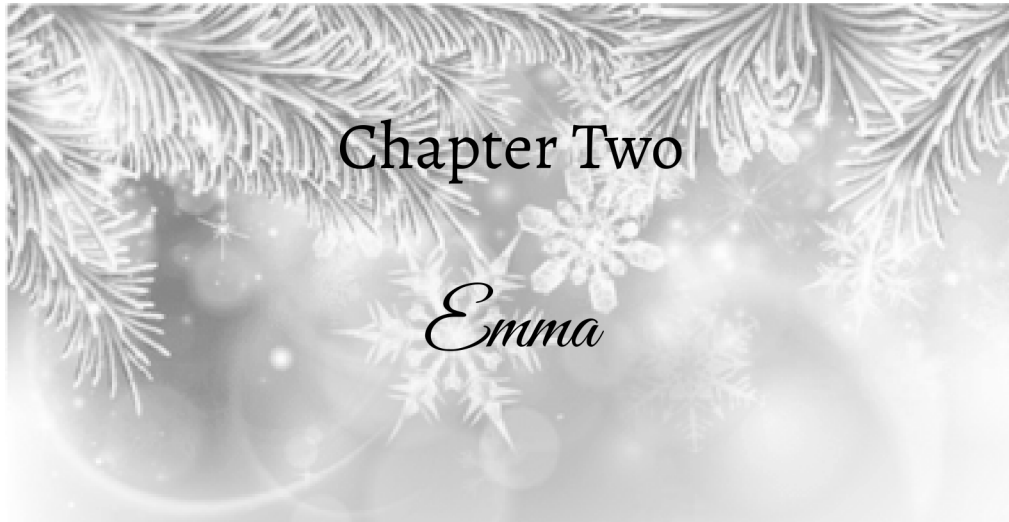
“Not funny at all, man,” I said. “I thought he was going to fire me for sure.”

“Who knew the old man had a sense of humour?” Greg chuckled. “What did you do this time?”

“If you really want to know, check out the sports section in today’s paper,” I replied, slamming my trunk closed and climbing into my BMW.

“Come on, you can’t tell me?” He asked.

I shook my head and backed out of my parking space with squealing tires. The faster I got out of this place, the better. I couldn’t put this week behind me fast enough.



“Are you sure about this?” I asked for the thousandth time as I eyed my best friend in the mirror. She grinned and winked back at me, her green eyes twinkling as she struggled to hold back a laugh.

“You haven’t been on a date in months, Emma,” Melody admonished, pausing to tuck a stray piece of short red hair back into her headband. “Besides, you agreed to this blind date. You can’t back out now. He’ll be here any minute.”

“You’re right,” I sighed, smoothing a hand down the front of the little black dress I’d borrowed from her. It was skin-tight and hugged my every curve while still allowing me a small modicum of modesty. I’d chosen it specifically because it covered my cleavage better than every other dress Melody had insisted I try on the minute she’d found out about my blind date.

“And it would be an absolute crime not to show off those legs. I think my dress actually looks better on you than it does on me!” Melody twisted up one last strand of my blonde hair into a classy French twist and shoved a bobby pin in to hold it

all together. I was a couple of inches taller than Melody, so her dresses always showed off more leg when I wore them, which I didn't often do but tonight she'd insisted and I was too weak to say no. "Do you know where he's taking you?"

"Not a clue. He insisted it was a surprise." I took one last assessing glance in the mirror. Wisps of curls framed my oval face, and my blue eyes popped beneath the thick fringe of black eyelashes. Waterproof mascara was a godsend. Satisfied that nothing was out of place, I slid my feet into my favourite black heels and grabbed my clutch from the bed. "I hope I'm not overdressed."

"That's what's so great about black dresses. It's perfect for just about everything. Relax already," she urged as she plopped down on a corner of the bed. "You look great. You're going to have a blast. And maybe you'll get another date out of this guy. Who knows? He might be mister right."

"Or he might be mister wrong! What if the entire date's a disaster, Mel? I'll have to get a new hairdresser! What was I thinking, letting my hairdresser set me up on a blind date with her nephew?"

"You seriously need to take it down a notch, Emma. It's one date. Maria will get over it if it doesn't work out with Devon. You guys aren't getting married or anything." The doorbell rang before Emma could reply. "Have fun. You deserve it. And if he's a creep, text me. I promise to rescue you."

"Thank you, Mel." I took a deep breath and headed out of the room as the doorbell rang again.

“Any time,” she replied as she followed me down the stairs.
“Remember, have fun.”

“Right. How can I forget?” I glanced back at her as we stepped into the front foyer.

I took a deep breath and grasped the handle in my hand. A chill swept through the room, the wind blowing in snowflakes and a very handsome man with dark brown hair trimmed short. He wore jeans and a black and gold jersey. My heart instantly sank, along with my expectations.

“Wow, you look incredible.” He looked me up and down, and I shared a gag with Melody when he wasn’t looking.

“And you look... nice.” There was a fake smile on my face.
“Sorry. I didn’t realize we were going somewhere casual. I’ll run upstairs and change.”

“No need. You look great. And we’re running a little late. The game’s going to start soon,” he replied. “We should get going.”

“The game?” I gulped.

The only game playing tonight was my brother’s, and I was not eager to attend it in a dress and heels. He was going to tease me mercilessly if he caught me attending his game looking like this. I silently prayed that I was wrong and there was some other game playing tonight, even if it was the middle of December.

“The hockey game. I go to all the games when the Stallions are home. Didn’t my aunt tell you?” I shook my head. This

night was already looking downhill. I made a mental note to trust my instincts next time and cancel the date if I wasn't comfortable with it.

“Sorry bout that. I thought she'd have said something.” He at least had the decency to look apologetic as he scratched the back of his neck. “We can do something else if you want....”

“No,” I sighed. At least if the night got any worse, I could catch a ride home with my brother when the game was over. “It's fine. Let's go.”

I grabbed my coat off the hook by the door and hugged Melody on the way out. Chuckling softly in response to her whispered reminder to text her if I needed a rescue. The night was colder than I had expected and I shivered, pulling my coat tighter around my body as we headed out to his car. The SUV was black with tinted windows. Inside, it was thankfully still warm, and I relaxed into the buttery soft leather seats. I barely had time to click my seatbelt in before Devon peeled out of the driveway with a squeal of tires and took off towards the Yellowstone Stadium. I held on to the door handles and squeezed my eyes closed. Was this how I was going to die? If I made it to the rink alive, I was definitely going to swallow my pride and beg Greg for a ride home. There was no way I was getting back in that car with a maniac behind the wheel.

“So,” Devon's voice carried over the booming base of the radio, and I cautiously opened one eye. “My aunt tells me you're a wedding planner?”

“No, not exactly,” I replied, grateful that we’d arrived in one piece. “I host weddings and all kinds of events at the Serenity Gardens. We’ve even hosted a murder mystery.”

“Sounds like fun,” he replied, already climbing out the driver’s side.

I waited a moment to see if he would open the door for me, but it quickly turned out that I was going to be chasing him all night if I didn’t open that door myself. Not that I usually had a problem with opening my own doors. I wanted to see what he would do, and he disappointed me. I pushed open my door and quickly rounded the car to catch up to him. The last thing I needed tonight was to break my ankle in these heels, trying to chase him down in the parking lot. I held little hope that the rest of the night was going to be any better.

“What is it you do again?” I asked. “Maria mentioned something about sports?”

“Yeah, I’m a reporter for SNN,” he replied as he handed our tickets over to be scanned. Silence fell between us again as the game began. Between the shouting fans and the music, I was grateful for the reprieve from attempting small talk and allowed myself to get lost in the game. Before I knew it, it was the first interval. Devon rose from his seat and disappeared, returning a couple of minutes later with a giant beer in his hand and nothing for me. He may as well have a giant red flag waving over his head. I opened up my phone and started searching for a new hairdresser.

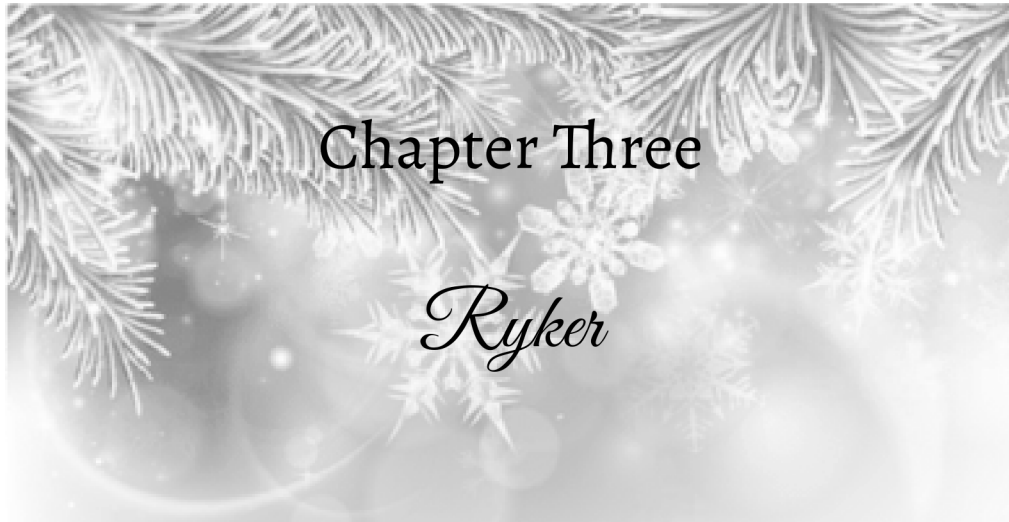
The puck dropped, and the second period was in full swing. I slipped my phone back into my purse and watched number forty-two pass it to another player. Where was number fifty-seven? Greg always played with his best friend, Ryker Jones. I frowned, wondering if he'd gotten hurt. Greg would have mentioned it if he had, but they hadn't talked in a couple of days, so it's entirely possible that he wouldn't call unless it was a serious injury. I ignored the wave of relief that rushed through me with that thought. Glancing down at the box, I read every jersey and sure enough, Ryker wasn't playing tonight. How strange. New York stole the puck, and I was once again sucked into the game. About halfway through the second period, Devon's phone beeped, and he hurriedly replied to the messages, tapping away furiously. I rolled my eyes and waved to a passing vendor selling bottled water. I handed her a bill and gratefully gulped half the bottle as the Helena Stallions valiantly fought to regain control of the game.

Greg stole the puck and was darting across the ice in a flash that had the fans up in their seats cheering him on. It was total chaos, but it was the best kind. He lined up with the net, pulled his arm back and one of the New York players snuck around him and stole the puck back again. My big brother hit nothing but ice. He recovered quickly and skated after O'Reilly, catching up to him and slamming him into the boards. A whistle rang loud and clear through the arena and a referee in his white and black striped shirt skated over to break up the melee.

I glanced over at my date, who was still typing away furiously on his phone. What was his deal, anyway? He brought me here to the game because he had season tickets, and claimed to be a huge fan of the Stallions. I suspected he wasn't as big of a fan as he claimed to be. Who spends an entire game, completely oblivious to the raucous cheers and loud music, on their phone? Especially when said person was on a date with the little sister of one of the players. It made no sense. Unless he really was as dumb as he looked and didn't put two and two together when he heard my last name. Boy, was he going to be in for a surprise when I ditched him for a ride home with Greg after the game. A pang of remorse stabbed me in the gut. Normally I wouldn't ditch a date, even if it was going badly. I preferred to end things politely and catch a cab home. But did this qualify as a date? He brought me to my brother's game and ignored me the entire time we've been here. And the drive from my place was a terrifying experience I'd rather not relive. Given how little attention he's sent my way, Devon probably wouldn't even remember having brought me here, anyway.

A horn blared, making me jump and spill some of my water. I blotted furiously at the wet spot on my dress with a napkin. Was it really only the end of the second period? I groaned internally. This was already the longest night of my life. At least there's always the kiss cam. That was always great fun to watch. You never knew what was going to happen. Would the couple kiss? Were they even a couple? My favourite was when a man got down on one knee and proposed to his girlfriend on

the kiss cam. A truly beautiful thing. She said yes, and the wedding march echoed over the ice as he picked her up and spun her around, his joy so clear to read on his face. I sighed and glanced over at Devon again. Would I kiss him if the camera landed on us? I doubted that he'd even notice.



I still couldn't believe the coach was serious about me working the crowd as the team mascot. We were getting killed on the ice and instead of pulling hat tricks; I was dancing in the stands with the fans. It sucked, but at least I wasn't kicked down to the minors or worse, kicked out of the league completely. I knew that the last stunt was pushing the limit, but who could have guessed this would be the result? My agent, Margot, was no help at all. She insisted it would be good public relations, and I could use all the good PR I can get. My departure from New York mid-season last year made a huge ding to my reputation.

It was so hot in this costume. Sweat was rolling down my face. A glance at the clock told me we were almost at the second interval. Maybe it won't be too late for the coach to change his mind and let me in the game. He wouldn't lose a game simply to teach me a lesson... would he? I hoped not, but my gut said otherwise. When the Stallions recovered the puck, I sat in an empty seat and cheered. I slid down the steps and booed with the fans when New York stole it back and scored.

During the interval, the aisle was full of people getting up for drinks and snacks. Others stayed in their seats watching the crowd shots and laughing and cheering. Replays were played while the teams took a break from the ice and headed back into the locker rooms. I moved along to another section and glimpsed someone completely unexpected on the KissCam. Was that Emma? Greg's little sister looked completely bored and her date was so occupied with his phone that he never noticed they had turned the camera on them. It seemed Emma Chambers could use a knight in shining armour. Or a mascot dressed as a stallion. I chuckled to myself as I raced over to her section and quickly searched through the restless crowd until I found her. Thankfully, the KissCam was still locked on her and her date. The surrounding fans were shouting at the guy sitting next to her, but he never once looked up. Emma was clearly unimpressed and tried to wave the camera off them.

“Who comes to a hockey game and plays on their phone the entire time?” I asked myself. I came up behind them and mimicked Emma's date, relishing the laughter in the stadium. Emma giggled. When her date still didn't notice, I slipped over the row of seats that separated us. A glance back at the other man told me everything I needed to know. Emma squealed with delight as I slipped an arm under her legs and another around her shoulders and picked her up. The crowd roared with approval as I snuck off with her to another section. The KissCam stayed glued to us the entire time.

Chants of "Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!" was echoing through the rink. It reached almost ear-splitting levels.

How could I refuse? I ignored the excitement slithering through my veins, reminding myself that my best friend's sister was off-limits. A reminder I found myself needing more and more these days. I carefully set her on her feet, did a cheesy little dance, and then pulled off the mascot's head. The crowd gasped, and Emma's laughter died in her throat. I grinned and pulled her close.

"May I have this kiss?" I whispered.

Emma was clearly stunned, and it took her a moment to respond. Even then, the best she could do was nod. Greg was probably going to kill me for this, but I never could resist a damsel in distress and the opportunity for a good prank. At least, that's what I kept telling myself to justify betraying his friendship for a kiss. Her date finally noticed she was missing, and the camera quickly moved from us to zoom in on him, pushing his way through the rows of seats. I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in close for what I'd intended to be a chaste kiss. I don't know what possessed me, but before I knew it, I had her bent over my arm and my tongue down her throat. When I finally released her, I glanced over my shoulder and noticed her date getting closer.

"I hate to kiss and run, but that's my cue to leave," I shouted to our audience and quickly retreated down to the tunnel before I could do something stupid. Like, kiss her again.



The locker room was buzzing by the time I got in there. Two guys patted me on the back. Others were peeling their gear off for a brief reprieve before they had to go back on the ice. Greg was laid out on a table, getting his leg examined and wrapped in ice.

“What happened?” I asked as I made a beeline through the other players to get to him. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” he answered tersely. My eyebrows shot up questioningly. It wasn’t like him to be short with people. “What happened is that my best friend distracted me by making out with my sister in the stands!”

“Whoa! I wasn’t making out with her-.” I tried to explain, putting my hands up in front of me defensively.

“Looked like it to me, and millions of other people who saw it on the big screen over the arena!” Greg shouted, his muscles tense. The coach’s assistant eyed us and slowly backed away. “Are you dating her?”

“No! No, it’s nothing like that, I swear,” I tried desperately to appease him. “She’s here on a date and looked absolutely miserable. I was trying to save her from boredom, that’s all.”

“So you kissed her?” Now the rest of the team was watching us instead of eating their power bars or icing their tired muscles.

“It was the KissCam! What else could I do? The crowd was literally chanting for me to kiss her and after I rescued her from her date, who was completely oblivious to the fact that the camera was pointed at them, I couldn’t very well leave her hanging like that. That’s all.” I would never in a million years admit to him I enjoyed kissing his sister. It was the fastest way to lose the closest thing to a brother I’d ever had.

“You promise you’re not dating her?” Greg questioned warily, his shoulders sagging a little as the fight left him. I barely contained my sigh of relief.

“I swear I will never date your sister,” I vowed. “Emma’s too sweet for me, anyway. She’d give me cavities.”

Greg chuckled. The coach took that opportunity to march into the locker room, and everyone’s attention was now focused on him. He growled when he saw me and marched to the game board with our plays outlined on it. After he finished going over them again with the team, he dismissed them. It was time to get ready to go back out on the ice. I watched longingly as Greg laced his skates back up and headed out to the tunnel.

“Jones!” Coach barked, making me jump. I thought I was the only one left in the locker room.

“Yes, coach?” I asked, moving to stand next to him by the board.

“You can’t keep yourself out of trouble for a single night, can you?” He asked, his steely gaze locking onto me.

“I tried sir,” I gulped. Was this when he demoted me back to the minors? Or would he fire me altogether? I can’t believe I’ve done this to myself again. Playing in the Professional Hockey League was all I’d ever dreamed of, and I was destroying my chances of staying in it. Why can’t I toe the line like everyone else?

“Lace up,” he grumbled, and I had to ask him to repeat himself. There’s no way I heard him right.

“I said, lace up! If you can’t behave off the ice, I might as well put you to good use. Then I’ll at least be able to keep my eye on you, and Chambers won’t be distracted the rest of the game,” he replied and marched out of the locker room.

I collapsed onto a bench. This was happening. He was really putting me back in the game. He was putting me back in the game! Realization hit me with the force of a cement truck and I jumped up and hurriedly stripped out of the mascot costume. By the time I was in my gear and heading out of the tunnel, the third period was in full swing. I watched from the tunnel entrance for a moment before climbing into the box with my team as surreptitiously as possible. But the crowd went crazy when they saw me, stomping and cheering to shouts of “Ryker! Ryker! Ryker!” I stood and waved to the fans. It was enough of a distraction that Greg could steal the puck and score.

“Jones! On the ice! Now!” Coach barked, and I climbed over the boards as Lunato climbed into the box and yanked off his helmet.

I was determined not to make Coach regret his decision, and worked my legs off to turn the game around. But it was too little too late. The game was already lost by then. Adding me to the roster was merely damage control. At least it wasn't an embarrassing loss. We evened the score a little in the last period with some quick maneuvering and hard skating. I waved to the fans and signed a couple of pucks and foam fingers before heading into the tunnel with waiting reporters and a furiously texting Margot by my cubby.

"We need to talk." Margot didn't even look up from her phone.

"Now?" I asked, peeling off my helmet and shoving it on the shelf.

"Now!" she commanded and marched off to the conference room, shoving her way through the eager reporters shouting questions at me.

"Ryker, do you know the woman you kissed?" One of them asked.

"Do you plan to see her again?" Another shouted as a mic was shoved in my face.

"No comment," I replied. "Excuse me. My agent calls."

I left them standing there as I followed Margot down the hall into a private room with a large table and a giant screen on one end. She whipped around to face me as I shut the door behind us, her silver hair flying around her face.

"What was that?" She demanded, gesturing wildly.

“What was what?” I asked, pretending I did not know why she’d dragged me in here.

“Don’t play dumb with me. The girl you kissed! Who is she? Do you know her? How do you know her?” She asked, firing off each question in rapid succession.

“She’s, uh-,” I scratched the back of my neck, trying to decide how much trouble I was in this time. I briefly debated lying, but Margot always seemed to know when I was pulling her leg. She was a brilliant agent. I was lucky to have her. She’s probably the only thing standing between me and the Hockey Hall of Fame blacklist.

“Her name’s Emma Chambers,” I finally admitted. “She’s Greg’s sister.”

“Greg Chambers, your teammate?” She asked. “This is perfect. Are you dating her?”

“She was here on a date,” I answered, my words stilted as I tried to decide if Margot had lost her mind. How was kissing his best friend and teammate’s little sister perfect? Greg had nearly lost his mind when he saw it.

“Right... the guy on the phone. That was clearly going to go nowhere. A minor hiccup, a little Non-Disclosure Agreement can’t solve,” she returned to hurriedly tapping away on her phone.

“I’m sorry. How is this going to save my career?” I asked, resting a hip on a corner of the table.

“Chambers. Where is he?” she mumbled to herself and opened the door, ignoring my question as she shouted for Greg to join us.

“Who’s your sister? What does she do for a living? Any skeletons in her closet? Is she serious about that guy in the stands? Has she ever been married? Does she have kids?” Margot fired off each question in rapid succession the minute Greg joined us in the conference room.

“Emma? She’s an event planner. Why? What’s all this about?” He asked, his eyebrows pinching together as we shared a confused glance. I shrugged.

“Kids?” Margot demanded, tapping her foot.

“No. She just got out of a serious relationship this past summer. I didn’t even know she was dating again,” Greg replied, then pointed at me. “If you’re considering dragging her into this mess to clean up his image, forget it! He made his bed, he can lie in it.”

“Hey, no one’s talking about dragging her into anything,” I tried to placate him. “Actually, I’m not sure what we’re talking about. What’s going on Margot?”

“You just got engaged, Ryker Jones. Congratulations,” she smiled and returned to tapping away on her phone. I gaped at her. She couldn’t be serious.

“Wh-How?” I asked, my words jumbling together nearly incoherently. I cleared my throat and tried again. “How is an engagement supposed to help my career?”

“It’ll show the General Managers that you’re serious about cleaning up your act and settling down. You’re a skilled player, Ryker, but you’re a loose cannon. I’m not saying you have to marry her. When the heat dies down, you can break it off quietly. No harm, no foul,” she replied.

“But what if she doesn’t agree?” I asked.

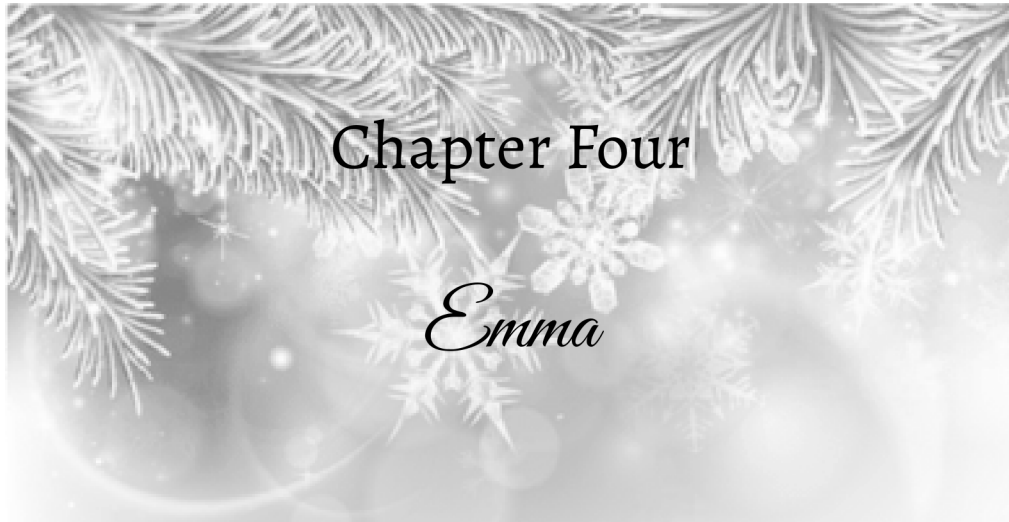
“She won’t.” Greg bit out. “She’s not a pawn to be used to boost his image. She’s my little sister!”

“That’s what makes it so perfect. You have a history together.” Margot whipped the door open and started out the door. She paused and turned back, fixing first Greg, then me with a stern, no-nonsense glare. “I don’t care how you do it, Jones. But make it happen. You two are magic on the ice together. Don’t mess with that.”

I stared at the door long after she left. Judging by Greg’s face, he was ready to explode. I opened my mouth to say something to him and quickly shut it when he stormed out of the conference room. The door slammed closed behind him, rattling the walls. I pinched the bridge of my nose. How did one kiss get so complicated? By the time I left, the locker room was empty. I quickly changed and grabbed my bag, nearly forgetting my phone, when it pinged with a notification. I opened Snapgram as I made my way out to the parking garage and dropped my keys when I saw the post that Margot’s assistant made on my account.

“Crap.” I squeezed my eyes shut and leaned back against my car. Breathing in through my nose, I realized Margot was

serious after all. I was engaged to my best friend's sister.
Emma just didn't know about it yet.



Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. I groaned as I rolled over and turned off the alarm and slumped back into my pillow. It had to be a crime to get up so early. I was convinced of it, but my friends all laugh when I bring it up. The smell of roasted coffee beans reached my nose and instantly perked me up. I climbed out of bed and grabbed my robe, then headed downstairs, grateful to have such a thoughtful roommate. Melody moved in after my ex, Lance, broke off our engagement and moved in with his secretary several months ago. She needed a place to live after her apartment flooded, and I couldn't stand to be in this house alone. At least I'd discovered his infidelity before the wedding. His betrayal no longer stung as much as it once did.

Christmas decorations adorned practically every surface on the way through the house to the kitchen. I adjusted a reindeer ornament as I passed and headed straight to the coffee machine. Melody was a much better roommate than Lance ever was, and I loved having her here. She always had a fresh pot of coffee ready to go in the morning. It was a lifesaver. It would doom me to misery every morning without her.

“Morning,” Melody greeted over the rim of her mug. “How did the date go last night?”

I groaned and poured the hot brew into my favourite mug with little silver bells on it. Grabbing a muffin from the box on the counter, I sipped my coffee as I joined her at the table. The date was a complete disaster, except for that kiss. My nerves were still tingling from Ryker’s touch. I tried hard to squash those feelings. He’d made it clear, for years, that we would never be anything more than friends. Friends... in our case that was a very loose term. We barely tolerated each other. So why can’t I stop thinking about that damn kiss? I’d tossed and turned all night, desperately ignoring how excited it had made me.

“It was worse than I expected,” I mumbled, and popped a piece of muffin into my mouth. “I should have cancelled it. Now I have to find a new hairdresser.”

“It couldn’t have been all bad,” she smirked. “I mean, you left the rink with a proposal from a popular player.”

I nearly choked on my orange and cranberry muffin.

“Excuse me?” I squeaked. Has she lost her mind?

“Check your Snapgram,” she replied with a smirk.

I grabbed her phone, having forgotten mine upstairs, and clicked on my account. Sure enough, they tagged me in a post that read “I’m in awe that this beautiful woman said yes!” The picture was one of Ryker and me dancing together at my brother’s wedding last year. Was this another one of his jokes?

Judging by the comments, everyone else thought it was as well. Except for my mother, apparently, who shared the post and gushed about how excited she was. Did I step into the twilight zone? First Ryker kissed me, and now we're somehow engaged?

"This is a joke, right?" I asked. "I'd remember getting engaged to Ryker."

"Yeah, you would," Mel smirked. "Maybe this is his way of proposing after that kiss."

"You saw it?" I gaped.

"Everyone's seen it, Emma. It's all over social media," she sipped her coffee.

"Oh, no... but that means.... Is this Greg's doing then? He was so quiet last night after the game, I thought he was simply upset over losing the game. You don't think he said something to Ryker that made him act so recklessly?" I have officially lost my mind. That was the only explanation. I quickly typed out a reply, denying the "news," when the doorbell rang. Mel snatched her phone out of my hand before I could hit send.

"Maybe he has a good reason for this. What could it hurt to hear him out?" She called out over her shoulder as she went to answer the door.

A few minutes later, footsteps sounded in the hallway. I stewed over my coffee, contemplating what I was going to say to my brother and his best friend the next time I saw them.

“I still don’t believe this.” I took a shaky sip of my coffee. “Whoever’s idea this was, they’re going to regret it. I won’t be a fool for another one of Ryker’s stupid pranks!”

“It’s not a prank,” a deep voice replied. I near spat out my coffee in surprise. Swallowing, I nearly choked and started coughing so hard my chair fell backwards and I crashed to the tiled floor. I landed in sight of a pair of running shoes, and let my eyes travel upwards, my head tilting back to glimpse the man in the middle of my kitchen.

“Are you alright?” Ryker asked, crouching down to help me stand. I pushed his hands away and climbed to my feet, ignoring the flutters in my belly.

“I’m fine,” I bit out. “Care to explain why the entire world, and my parents, believe we’re engaged?”

“Yeah... sorry about that. That’s why I’m here,” he swallowed. “That was my agent’s doing. In fact, this whole situation is entirely my fault. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be dragging you into my mess.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” I crossed my arms over my chest and stepped away from him. “Care to explain how I ended up in the middle of it?”

Ryker ran his hands through his thick, ash-blond hair, sending the short locks in every direction. My inner teenager sighed, and I imagined giant red heart bubbles popping out of my ears. I briefly forgot the outrage roiling around in my gut. Then he opened his mouth and reminded me all over again.

“I might have welcomed my former teammates with itching powder in their hotel sheets, among a few other things. Anyway, the coach benched me from the game last night as punishment and forced me to play the team’s mascot if I wanted to stay in the league. Long story short, when I kissed you, it gave my agent a crazy idea to clean up my image. Margot believes if I show some maturity and look like I’m settling down, the GMs for my team and New York’s will forget about the prank. If I’d known they would drag you into my mess, I swear I wouldn’t have kissed you last night,” he rushed on. “Margot’s assistant is the one who made that announcement. I’m so sorry. I had hoped to talk to you about all this first.”

“I’m not marrying you!” I shouted, outraged that anyone would even suggest it.

“You don’t have to,” he quickly replied. “All we need to do is pretend to be engaged, do a couple of things engaged people do... whatever that is... and then we call it off when the heat dies down.”

“What’s in it for me? My career isn’t hanging in the balance. I have no reason to agree to this lunacy.” I grabbed my muffin and my coffee and moved around the giant brick wall of a man. All this insanity was going to make me late for work. I still needed to get dressed... and brush my hair. Oh my god, he saw me with a rat’s nest in my hair. Please, please please don’t look like a raccoon! I silently begged, to no avail. A glimpse in the hallway mirror told me everything I needed to know, and I was mortified... and silently impressed that the

man following me from the kitchen didn't even bat an eyelash at the disaster in front of him.

"I'll be your plus one to Robyn's wedding," he promised, and I paused for a moment.

"What makes you think I need a date?" I asked. "Maybe I was planning to take Devon."

Ryker snorted.

"Is that the dude you went to the game with last night?" He mocked, and I reflexively turned and threw my muffin at him. Unfortunately, all it did was bounce off his chest and land in a pile of crumbs on the floor. I mewed in mourning over the loss of such deliciousness.

"He was perfectly nice," I replied, tearing my gaze away from the floor and locking on to Ryker's baby blue eyes.

"He was perfectly boring, you mean," Ryker laughed. "Come on, if you took him to your cousin's wedding on Christmas Day, your entire family would eat him alive. What were you even doing with a guy like that, anyway?"

I hated to admit it, but Ryker was right. My brothers would tear Devon apart with their classic intimidation tactics. It was one thing I'd loved about Lance. He was not afraid of them. Although maybe if he had been, he wouldn't have cheated on me.

"I'm still not convinced," I muttered, grabbing the door handle and yanking it open. "Why don't you try actually growing up? And apologize to your old team."

“Come on, Emma. I’m begging you to help me out with this. Please. What can I do to make it worth your while?” He asked, holding the door open and preventing me from shutting it in his face.

“Move to Mars?” I suggested.

“As soon as there’s a colony, I’ll be on the next rocket,” he promised.

“Why me? Why can’t you talk one of your hockey bunnies into helping you with this?” I asked, giving up on shutting the door in his face. It was cold outside, and he was too strong for me to wrestle the door out of his grip.

“That I know you, and you’re Greg’s sister, are what sell the entire story,” he admitted. “My career is hanging in the balance or I wouldn’t be asking you this, but will you please marry me, Emma?”

“Wow... that was so romantic,” Melody commented from the living room. I could almost hear her eyes rolling. I looked around the giant mountain of muscle blocking my view and caught her watching from the archway. She made no apologies for eavesdropping as she casually leaned against the wall and sipped her coffee.

“You should ask him about the auction,” she suggested unhelpfully.

“Yes, absolutely. Ask me about the auction,” he leaped on the suggestion like a dog with a bone. “What do you need? I can make a big donation, maybe or talk it up at my next news

conference, get you some great publicity.... Anything Emma. Please help me.”

“You want to help with the auction?” I asked, exchanging a conspiratory grin with Mel. “Fine. I’ll do it. But you need to fix this proposal ASAP. My family will never buy this story without a ring.”

“Thank you! Thank you! I could kiss you... but I won’t. I won’t make you do anything you’re uncomfortable with. Thank you. I promise I’ll do everything I can to make this up to you,” he said, taking my hand and pressing his lips to my knuckles. “Do you want to go ring shopping with me this afternoon?”

“You have no idea what you just agreed to,” I replied, wide-eyed with disbelief that he’d jump on this idea without more information. Was he really that desperate?

“I don’t care. I’m that grateful to you,” he smiled and I couldn’t resist smiling back at him. An icy wind blew through the hallway, reminding us that the door was still wide open. “I’ll pick you up at two?”

I shook my head.

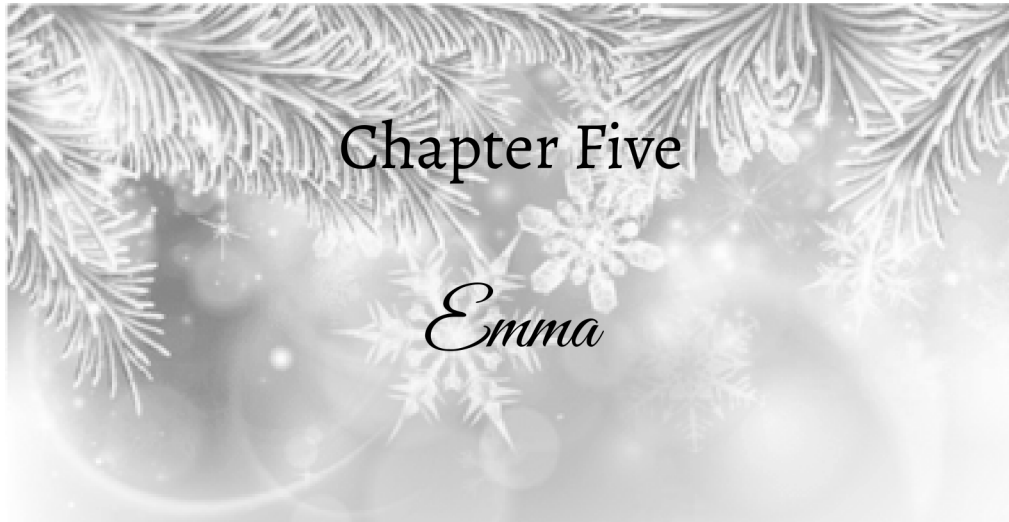
“I finish work at four... which I am going to be very late for. Pick me up at Serenity and we’ll look for rings,” I reluctantly agreed, ignoring the pain in my chest as I said the words.

Ryker whooped and wrapped his arms around me in a giant hug that encompassed my entire body. He picked me up and

swung me around in circles, my coffee sloshing violently and spilling all over the floor.

“I promise you won’t regret it,” he said as he set me down and headed out to his car.

“But *you* might,” I whispered, grinning as I shut the door behind him.



Serenity Gardens was my ideal house. It was perfect for hosting events like weddings, and since I was a little girl, this is where I always dreamed of someday tying the knot. The victorian architecture lent it a classical atmosphere that was high in demand. Unfortunately, the insides didn't match the outsides, which limited the number of events I can host. Weddings were definitely seasonal. Most of the brides I've met with so far were enthusiastic about outdoor weddings in the spring and fall. But then there were the brides with specific dates in mind who simply would not budge. Christmas weddings were becoming increasingly popular, and that meant indoor weddings. Serenity Gardens was probably still a year away from being able to host. I sighed as I glanced over at the books. Maybe Lance was right, and restoring this place was a hopeless cause. When I saw the city was going to demolish this place, though, I simply couldn't let that happen. I scraped together every penny from the inheritance my grandmother had left me and bought this place. My brother Mason is a contractor, and thankfully was donating some of his free time on the weekends to help with the renovations. If it weren't for

him, I probably still wouldn't be up to code. The rest was mostly cosmetic now, but it was draining my savings. I might not last the year, and the thought caused an ache in my chest.

A quick knock at the door tore me from the nearly overwhelming sense of hopelessness. I looked up and found Mason leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest. Judging by the sour expression on his face, he was upset about something. I took a deep breath, pushing away the worry that something expensive needed fixing.

"Good morning, I didn't realize you were in today," I greeted him.

Mason didn't reply right away. He watched me for a moment before pushing off the doorjamb and striding into the small room I'd turned into my office. It was one of the first rooms in the house that I'd renovated. Even with most of my events outdoors, I still needed a place to meet with my potential clients and vendors, and this room was a quick and easy fit for the job since most of the original wood panelling was still intact.

"I wasn't planning on it. But I got this weird phone call from my wife, followed by one from mom. Care to know what it was about?" He plopped into the chair across from me.

"I can only guess," I groaned.

"Imagine my surprise that you went on a blind date with one man and ended up engaged to Greg's best friend the same night." He arched a brow and glared at me. A flutter of excitement surged through me at the mention of Ryker, but I

quickly squashed that down. He didn't really love me, and we weren't really getting married I reminded myself.

Older siblings have this way about them. You can talk to them about anything and they won't judge you like your parents or punish you. They'll even help you get out of trouble and keep your secrets. Or they can glare at you like Mason was doing to me now and make you wish the ground would open up and swallow you whole. Being four years older than Greg and six years older than me, Mason perfected the look.

"But of course, I gave you the benefit of a doubt. I mean, you wouldn't actually accept a proposal from Greg's prankster best friend. So I called Greg right after I got off the phone with mom, and he told me a very interesting story," Mason continued, ignoring my increasing agitation. My foot was tapping on the hardwood floor, the sound completely obvious to anyone who knew me.

"Now, I'd love to hear your side of it before mom gets in over her head with all this wedding news. Because you know what she's like. She'll have this entire shindig planned and ready to go in under a month if she has her way. I know you can't possibly be so dumb as to agree to fake an engagement with Ryker Jones!"

My eye started twitching, oddly enough in time with the tapping of my foot. What have I gotten myself into? It's only been a couple of hours and already everything was going downhill. I was so entrenched in my little high school crush this morning that Ryker probably could have talked me into

doing his laundry, cooking all his meals, and having my life completely revolve around him. It was ridiculous. I was ridiculous. This whole situation is... well... ridiculous.

“He was desperate when he asked me this morning,” I squeaked. “I couldn’t say no.”

“You never could! But this takes the cake, Emma. He had no right asking you to do this for him!” Mason exploded, rising from the chair to pace from the window to the door and back again. “I can’t believe he’d take advantage of you like this. I have a mind to-.”

“No,” I bit out, finally calming enough to speak. I rose from my chair as I faced my brother and took a deep breath to steady myself. “He came to me as a friend and asked for my help. That’s not taking advantage of me. I agreed because I would help any of my friends if they were in trouble. So we’ll do a little ring shopping, go on a fake date or two... who is it going to hurt?”

“You,” Mason replied, coming to a stop in front of me. “It could hurt you. I know how much you care for him, Emma. You hide behind this facade of mutual dislike, but this is me you’re talking to. I know different. I held you when you cried every time he went out with someone else. This will not make him see you any differently. I don’t want you getting hurt again.”

“I won’t get hurt,” I promised. “This has nothing to do with a silly childhood crush! I’m a grown woman; with my own home; I have a business that I’m working hard to get off the

ground; I can make my own choices. Besides, I haven't thought of Ryker like that in years. He's like another brother to me now."

"If you're sure you wanna go through with this, fine. But he'd better treat you with complete respect," Mason growled, his shoulders deflating slightly. "And if he lays one finger on you-."

"I won't," Ryker said from the doorway. Neither of us had even noticed him standing there.

"How long have you been there?" I asked, my eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"Long enough," Ryker said. "Mason, I swear to you I will do everything I can to make sure she doesn't get hurt. I have complete respect for you and your entire family, and I would never do anything to jeopardize that."

"Too late for that," Mason said. "You have a lot of nerve asking my little sister to do this for you. Have you thought of her reputation at all if this gets out? The effect it could have on her career and the life she's fought to build for herself here? I didn't think so. Excuse me, I have to go call mom and make sure she hasn't started searching how to plan an engagement party."

Mason shoved past Ryker. A moment later, the house rattled from the force of the slamming door. I squeezed my eyes shut, silently praying that nothing fell off the walls or broke. I couldn't afford to fix something else. Ryker coughed, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen in the room.

“That went well.” He sat in the chair across from me and I glared at him.

“How do you classify that as going well?” I demanded, my eyebrows pinching together. “That was a disaster! And it was only the first one. I still have to explain this to Greg... and my parents... oh god what did I agree to?”

I slumped in my chair, my hands covering my face as I struggled to breathe. Deep breath in through the nose and out through the mouth. I repeated the exercise a couple more times until I was calm enough to face the man across from me.

“We need to call this entire charade off,” I decided. “No one’s going to believe it, anyway. We’ve always hated each other. There’s no way this will work.”

“It will work, Emma,” Ryker promised. “We can call a truce for a month or two and then go right back to hating each other.”

“A month or two?” I screeched. “What did you do that you need to pretend to be engaged to fix? How will this save your career? I don’t understand any of this. I must have still been half asleep when I agreed to this whole thing.”

“Come on, Emma. It’ll be fine. I only have to show the Stallion’s General Manager that I’m settling down and my prank-playing days are over.” He sat forward as he spoke. “Please, Emma. No one else knows me as well as you do.”

“Seriously, what did you do?” I smacked my desk with my open palms as I stood so abruptly that my chair fell over with a

loud crash. Ryker rubbed the back of his neck, the way he always did when he was nervous about something.

“I might have bribed a maintenance worker at the Halton Inn to let me into a few of the New York Raider’s rooms and laced the beds with itching powder,” he admitted.

“And?” He glanced up at me, surprised by my question. “I’ve known you since we were kids, remember? There’s always more to the story.”

“And... I filled the shampoo bottles with hot sauce,” he admitted with a grimace. “Not my finest prank, but I couldn’t resist pulling one over on my former teammates. The worst is that the team’s owner had travelled with them for this game. And his room was the one I messed with.”

I don’t know why, but laughter bubbled up inside me until it completely bubbled over. I laughed so hard tears streamed from my eyes. Ryker stared at me with a strange expression, but I was laughing too hard to care.

“So-o-o...” he drawled, “does this mean you’ll still do it? Remember, I agreed to be your date for your cousin’s wedding? And then there’s that auction. You never told me what you needed for that? Some autographed photos? Pucks?”

I shook my head, the laughter finally subsiding and wiped away a tear.

“No,” I replied with a grin stretching across my face. “No, all I need is you. It’s a bachelor auction to raise money for the Helena Animal Sanctuary.”

“A bachelor auction?” His face blanched, and I struggled to subdue the laughter that threatened to overwhelm me once again. I couldn’t speak for a moment, not trusting myself, and simply nodded.

“A couple of days after Christmas,” I finally said when I found my voice again.



The jewelry store he chose, Charming Gems, was decorated from floor to ceiling with Christmas decor. Elves by the door directed us as we walked in. Ryker grabbed my hand, surprising me. I stopped and turned to him, my brow arched with silent questions.

“We’re engaged now, remember?” He muttered. “It’s ok to hold hands in public. Your family knows about us. There are no more secrets.”

I nearly melted before I realized he was acting for the benefit of the sales associates and other customers in the store. Ice formed in my veins at the reminder.

“How silly of me to forget,” I replied, and he laced his fingers through mine.

The elves directed us to the ring counter, and I started perusing while he spoke with the saleslady. I rolled my eyes when she started gushing over him. The poinsettia blossoms in the display case were incredibly distracting. But it wasn’t as bad as the gnomes holding rings and diamond pendants. I was

beginning to doubt I would find anything when the sales lady started setting trays of diamond rings on the counter.

“See anything you like?” Ryker asked, and I shook my head.

“Not really, but anything will do, I guess,” I answered and pointed to a small solitaire. “What about that one?”

“That’s far too small, don’t you think?” The saleslady, whose name tag read Cindy, replied.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” Ryker asked, staring at the ring skeptically. “Money’s no object, my love if that’s what you’re worried about. I want only the best for you.”

“Only the best?” I asked, my interest piqued as an idea formed in my brain.

“Only the best,” he repeated with a smile.

“In that case...” I trailed a finger along the row of ring trays until I found the biggest princess-cut diamond in a platinum setting. I pointed to it and Cindy eagerly held it out to me to try on.

“Allow me,” Ryker offered, reaching for the ring. He glanced at it and an ironic, sideways grin lit his face. I steeled myself, preparing for a Bridezilla-level scene if he refused to buy the ring when he surprised me by getting on one knee and taking my hand in his. This one act completely demolished my plan to publicly embarrass him.

“Emma Chambers, I have loved you since the first time we met. First as my best friend’s sister, and now as the most

beautiful woman inside and out that I have ever met.” I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him as he held the ring up. I could almost believe he was being sincere, and I had to remind myself that none of this was real.

“Oh my gosh, this is going to look so great on our Snapgram page!” Cindy gushed as she pulled out her phone and started filming.

“Will you marry me?”

Tears welled up in my eyes from the effort it took to keep silent. At least, that’s what I told myself as I nodded. Ryker slid the ring on my finger and pressed a kiss to my knuckles before standing and folding me in his arms. I should have pushed him away, but I was swept up in the moment. Ryker wiped my tears away with his thumb and stared into my eyes. For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

“I think I’m going to cry,” Cindy sniffed. I jumped, having completely forgotten she was there. Ryker’s arms dropped to his side, and the moment was broken.

“I’ll box that up and meet you at the cash register.” All professional now, Cindy put the trays away and held her hand out for the ring. I slid it off my finger and handed it to her.

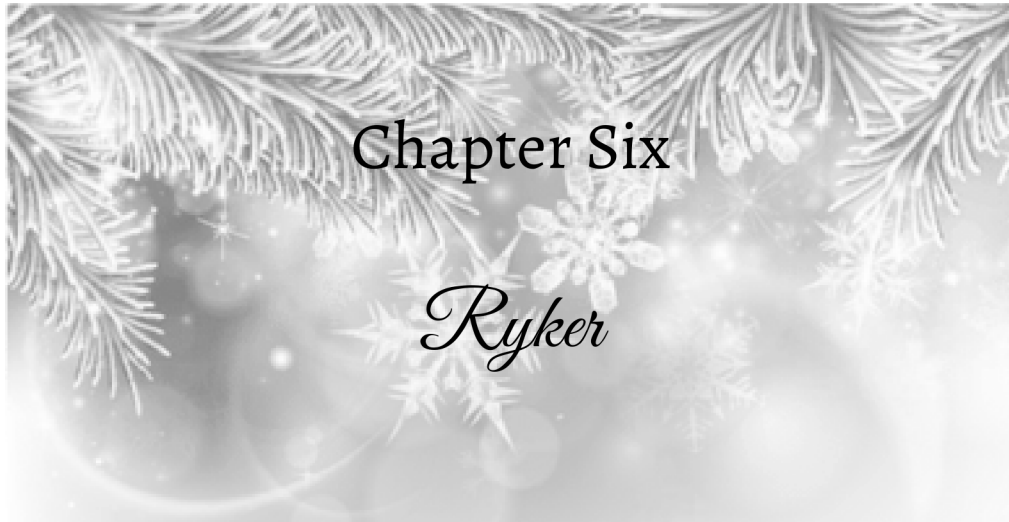
“You don’t really have to buy that one,” I whispered to Ryker when Cindy left us. “It’s really expensive.”

“Don’t you like it?” He asked, his eyebrows pinched together in confusion.

“I love the ring,” I huffed. “But it’s too expensive for a fake engagement. We should pick something cheaper, like that first ring we saw.”

“Come on,” he slung an arm around my waist and ushered me towards the waiting Cindy. “If I bought you a cheap ring, everyone would know we weren’t serious. Besides, I can afford it, Babe. I want only the best for my future bride.”

He was pouring on the charm so sweetly that it made my teeth ache. It was a struggle not to gag when he turned that charm on the gushing Cindy as she rang through the sale. But I somehow kept my smile in place. Pretending to be Ryker Jones’ dotting fiancé, without my heart getting involved, might prove tougher than I expected.



I think I was just served a plate of humble pie. Why am I always so impulsive? It had been stupid to sneak into the Patriot's hotel rooms as I did, and dumber still not to have bribed the security guys to wipe the footage. If I had, none of this would be happening right now. I wouldn't be bending over backward for my agent to keep my career in pro hockey, and I definitely wouldn't be on the verge of suicide by my best friend. It's honestly surprising that he hasn't decked me yet for dragging his sister into my mess. Not that I wouldn't deserve it, of course. What was I thinking, asking her to do this for me? I should call Margot and call the entire charade off. My fans would be non-existent if they found out about this lunatic plan. I grabbed my phone and hit her number, only for it to go straight to voicemail.

"Crap," I shouted to my empty condo. "I'm doomed!"

Christmas was around the corner and it was bound to be awkward if Greg and Mason were both breathing down my neck. Not to mention whatever lucky lady won me for a date at the bachelor auction. I slammed my phone down on the

counter in frustration and yanked the fridge open to grab a bottle of water. I gulped it down, but it didn't help. Maybe a good workout would do the trick? Refilling my water bottle with the jug of filtered water I always kept in there, I screwed the cap on and changed into a pair of sweats before hitting the little home gym in my spare bedroom. An hour later, I emerged, drenched in sweat and ready to hit the shower, when a knock resounded through the condo. I quickly changed direction, and when I saw it was Greg, I opened the door, prepared to take a punch. But none came. I glanced up at him with one cautious eye, and he simply stood there with his arms crossed and a disgruntled frown lining his face.

“How did you sweet talk my little sister into being your puppet?” He barked.

“Nice to see you too, old pal. Would you like to come in?” I asked, my cocky confidence newly restored. I held the door open wider, and he shoved his way past me.

“Answer the question, Jones,” he demanded.

I closed the door, trying to buy myself a little time to gather my already jumbled thoughts. Crossing the room, I plopped into one of the cozy leather chairs that came with the place when I moved in and indicated for him to do the same.

“How bout a drink?” Greg glared at me as I offered. I forgot how intimidating he could be with that thick beard of his and broad shoulders. I was a big guy, but Greg was easily three inches taller and twenty pounds heavier. A man as big as he was shouldn't be as fast on a pair of skates as he is, but

somehow it all works. I sighed, scrubbing the back of my neck.

“Emma was all too eager to agree to be my fake fiancé if I’m completely honest with you...” I looked up and winced at the fury directed at me. “After I agreed to escort her to your cousin’s wedding, and....”

“And?” Greg prompted after a few minutes of silence.

“And I also agreed to take part in a fundraiser,” I admitted. “An auction for some animal sanctuary.”

Greg stared at me for several moments, the silence drawing on awkwardly until a smile broke out across his face. Then he started laughing, harder and harder until his face went completely red. I was half convinced that he’d lost his mind. Maybe the whole Chambers family had. That would explain how Emma thought auctioning me off to the highest bidder was a great idea.

“You mean...” he gasped between laughs. “You mean the bachelor auction? Oh man, I didn’t see that one coming. She’s good.”

It was my turn to glare.

“I don’t see what’s so funny about raising money for poor, helpless animals,” I replied, arching my brow haughtily.

“You’re going to be auctioned off,” Greg chuckled. “To the highest bidder. Who would even want to bid on you? You’ll die of embarrassment on that stage, strutting your stuff without

a single pitying bid to get you through the mortification of the experience.”

“Ha ha,” I growled. “Anyway, it’s the least I can do, I guess. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

“Don’t forget that she’s still *my* little sister.” Greg’s humour sobered. “I’d hate to hurt you if you cross any lines with her, and don’t think I’ll let you get away with hurting her just because you’re my best friend.”

“Come on, man. I’ve known her for half my life. She’s like my little sister too,” I claimed, despite my inner voice screaming that if I really believed that, I wouldn’t have kissed her the other night.

“Good. Make sure you don’t forget that,” he stated, and rose from the chair. “I’ll see you at the rink tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, ignoring the pang in my chest. The longing was getting hard to suppress and ignore every time I saw her. “See you there.”



Practice was brutal. I was surprised yesterday that Greg was letting me off with a warning. I should have known better. He kept his anger on ice. Literally. My legs were burning, trying to keep up with him. It’s been a long time since practice was that brutal. I hope it doesn’t stay that way for every practice from now on. I plopped on the bench and downed a bottle of water while I struggled to catch my breath.

“Jones!” Coach’s shout carried through the locker room, overshadowing all conversation. What did I do this time? “In my office, now!”

I groaned, slowly rising from the bench. I glanced at Greg, and the grin on his face told me everything I needed to know. He was amused by my suffering. I glared at him as I turned and shuffled my way to the coach’s office. The door closed behind me with a sense of finality. This is it. This is where I get fired. I couldn’t even pretend to be optimistic with coach Germano’s suspicious eyes burning a hole through my head.

“I’ll start packing my things,” I promised as I stared straight ahead and ignored the ache in my chest.

“Pack your things? What are you talking about?” He demanded, propping a hip on the corner of his desk.

“I’m assuming you called me in here to fire me or announce that they have demoted me back down to the minors,” I explained, still staring at the wall of framed photos behind him.

“Fire you? Huh, now there’s an idea. I might still do that, but that’s not why I called you in here, Jones,” he said.

“It isn’t?” I wasn’t being canned from the majors?

“Nope. Not today at least,” Coach replied. “I hear you’ve finally settled down and are getting married. Is that true?”

“Yes sir,” I lied, my eyes wide with shock that he’d call me into his office for this. “I asked Emma last week, and she said yes.”

“Who was that fellow she was with at the last game? The guy on the kiss cam?” He questioned.

“A friend of Emma’s. He had an extra ticket and his date cancelled on him, so he invited her to come to watch me play.” I really hoped that was a reasonable explanation. How else could I explain that my ‘fiancée was on a blind date at the game? I held my breath while the coach stared me down.

“And that’s Chambers’ little sister?”

I nodded.

“Explains the hustle at practice. So this practical joke on the Patriots... what was that? Some sort of last hurrah?”

I nodded again, still speechless that I was having this conversation instead of clearing out my locker. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants

“Glad to hear it. You’re a fine player and I’d hate to lose you over some stupid shenanigans,” he grunted. “I can’t wait to meet her at the team Christmas party when we get back from playing Dallas.”

“Yes sir,” I eagerly agreed. “I can’t wait to introduce you. She’s incredible.”

“Woman’s a saint in my book if she’s put up with Chambers her entire life and now you too,” coach’s voice cracked with laughter. “Now go hit the showers.”

“See you at the game tonight, Coach,” I finally let out the breath I’d been holding as I turned to leave.

“Oh, and one more thing,” he called out when I was halfway through the door. “Congratulations Jones.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I replied and hurried down the hall to the almost empty locker room.

Greg was already gone. I stripped off my practice jersey and hung it up. Then I quickly peeled off my shoulder pads and the rest of my gear, eager to shower and get out of there. It’s already been a long day.

“There you are,” Margot’s voice rang through the shower room.

I groaned and scrubbed the soap out of my eyes. Grabbing a towel, I shut the water off and wrapped it around my hips.

“What do you need, Margot?” I called out as I exited the shower room and made my way back to my locker. I grabbed a shirt and yanked it on, grateful for that small barrier between us.

“We need to go over the plan for your engagement. You haven’t been returning my calls.” Her face pinched with irritation as she typed away on her phone.

“Plan? I thought the engagement announcement was the plan...” My voice drifted off.

“That’s hilarious.” Margot’s eyes rolled. “Because the entire world of hockey would be happy that it would be enough to settle you down and save your career. You must be seen in public with her and actively planning a wedding. I have an

entire itinerary here for you. Also, would it kill you to send her some flowers? Take her on a date?"

"Do you know what it took to convince her to do this for me?" I spat out, irritated beyond belief. This whole charade was going to drive me bonkers.

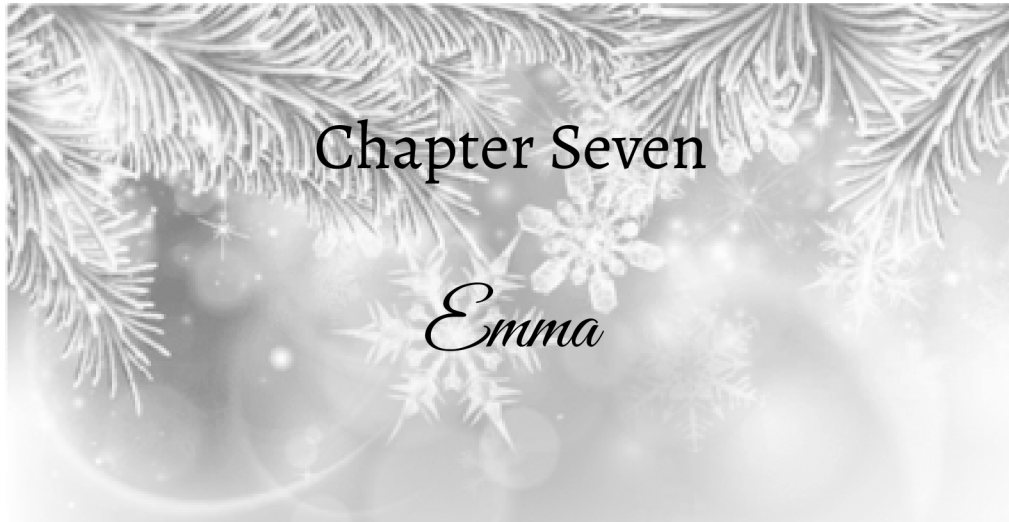
"All the more reason to pamper the bride-to-be. Also, I need her contact info so we can plan."

"Arrangements for what?" I demanded. Margot glared at me, her attention momentarily torn away from her phone.

"Wedding planning," she drawled as if it should be obvious to everyone on the planet. Everyone but me, apparently.

"But there won't be a wedding. This isn't a true engagement," I shouted, my voice ringing through the space.

"Doesn't matter. Fake it till you make it, babe," Margot abruptly walked out, leaving me alone in my misery. This fake engagement was looking pretty real.



I stared at the light glinting off of the ring on my finger. Was I crazy for agreeing to this charade? What would happen when his fans discovered the truth? I convinced Mason and Greg not to tell anyone else about this agreement after they'd calmed down. Mom was unpredictable, and who knew what she might say to the wrong person about it? They remained adamant about going big brother on him, however, if Ryker got out of line. *That* I could easily agree to. I doubt he would try anything on me, especially since he'd made it incredibly clear years ago that even if I wasn't his best friend's little sister, he would have nothing to do with me. Remembering that fight, when I was fifteen, and he was seventeen, brought a whole new wave of anger and hurt crashing down on my head. Oh, man. What was I thinking about agreeing to this? I dropped my head onto my arms on the table. If I wasn't careful, this fake engagement was going to destroy my reputation or my heart.



Excitement coursed through my veins. I swear, if gravity wasn't an issue, I'd be flying from the high of my first kiss. Roman Charlton asked me out to this party last week. He was the hottest senior in our school... if you didn't count my brothers because... ew... and Ryker Jones. It had almost killed me, keeping this secret all week, but it was finally here. I'd met Roman at the party, and he grabbed me a drink. Ryker was furious when he stumbled into me in the kitchen.

"What are you doing here? Are you wearing makeup?" He peered down at me, his face pinched in scrutiny as he examined the hours of work it took for me to get my eyeliner perfect. "A little young to be at a high school party, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" I gasped. "I'm a sophomore!"

"If you say so," he muttered.

Roman came around the counter and handed me a red plastic cup filled with soda. I gladly took a sip, barely keeping from coughing when I realized it was more rum than soda. Ryker watched me take another defiant sip, ignoring the blonde bombshell yanking on his shirt to get his attention. I licked my lip and his eyes darted downwards.

"Is there a problem here?" Roman asked, his eyes moving from me to Ryker and back again.

"Not at all," I replied, stepping closer to him, hoping he'd lead me away from here, or at least wrap his arm around my shoulder. But he didn't do either of those things. When I

glanced over my shoulder, I realized why. Ryker was glaring at him with the strangest expression on his face.

“Actually, there is,” he growled. “This girl is too young for you, pal. Go bark up another tree.”

“Hey! Hold on a second,” I whipped around and smashed my hand against his chest to stop Ryker from taking another step closer. “I’m old enough to do whatever I want to do. You’re not my brother, Ryker. Back off!”

“You’re right,” he huffed. His chest rose and fell as if he was struggling to hold on to a semblance of calm. “I’m not your brother, Emma. And I’m so grateful for that right now.”

“Hey man, I don’t want any trouble. I didn’t mean to step on your feet. She never mentioned a boyfriend,” Roman stuttered as he backed away into the living room, where most of the party was in full swing.

“Great. Not only did you scare off my date, but now he thinks we’re dating! Thanks a lot, Ryker.” I rolled my eyes and raised my glass to my lips.

“Baby,” the blonde hanging off his arm whined. “Let’s go back to the party.”

“Go ahead,” Ryker urged, disentangling himself from his date. “I have to drive Emma home before her brothers catch her drinking at a party she shouldn’t be at.”

“Seriously? You’re ditching me to be with her?” The blonde gasped. “Fine! Go ahead, but don’t come crawling back to me when her brothers find out.”

“I’m not leaving,” I bit out between clenched teeth.

“No point arguing with me. Dump your drink and let’s go,” Ryker ordered, not bothering to glance at his date as she stormed out of the kitchen.

“Stop ordering me around!” I shouted and defiantly raised my glass to my lips and took the biggest gulp I’d ever taken. A fire burned down my throat and into my belly. This time I couldn’t keep the cough in, and I nearly fell over. The room was spinning. Why was the room spinning? Rooms shouldn’t spin.

“Yeah, you’re ready to be at a party alright,” Ryker didn’t wait for me to respond. He bent down and tossed me over his shoulder. I banged on his back, but he didn’t even flinch as he shouldered his way through the house full of teenagers. Laughter rang in my ears as everyone caught sight of Ryker carrying me like a sack of potatoes.

“Would you stop wiggling?” He grunted as we passed through the door. “I’m going to drop you. Hold still.”

“Put me down!” I demanded again, and he did. Right into the passenger seat of his beat-up old mustang. He clicked my seat belt and slammed the door before I could blink. How had he moved so fast when everything was spinning? It made little sense. He climbed into the driver’s side, stuck his key into the ignition, and shifted into first gear.

The entire ride home was silent. I watched as cozy houses and strip malls flew past my window. I swore to myself that Ryker would pay for embarrassing me tonight and my mind

sluggishly sorted through ideas that had me giggling periodically and Ryker shooting sideways glances at me. He probably thought I'd lost my mind. When he pulled up in front of my house, I let out a sigh of relief and reached for the seatbelt. Ryker stopped me with a hand on my arm before I could open the passenger door.

"Emma," he paused, fixing his attention on something over my shoulder. I glanced back, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. "I'm sorry for embarrassing you tonight. What were you thinking, though, going to a party like that? Wearing makeup? Drinking? You're too young for all that."

"I don't need a lecture," I sneered. "I was supposed to be on my first date tonight, but you had to ruin everything for me. Now I have no date, no first kiss, nothing! Thanks a lot."

"Hey wait for a second," he pulled me back when I fumbled with the door. Apparently, his passenger door sticks. Isn't that great? Now I can't even storm off in a huff! Can this night get any worse? "You don't really want to kiss that toad Roman, do you?"

"He's not a toad! He's the hottest guy in school!" I snapped.

"Seriously. Roman?" He rubbed the back of his neck and turned away for a moment. "You don't want to kiss him, Emma. He's not right for you."

"Name one person who'd be better?" I demanded.

"Me?" He whispered so quietly I barely heard him.

“You? You’re Greg’s best friend. Why would you want to kiss me?” This was another one of his stupid pranks, and I was the butt of the joke. My chest ached, and my throat burned with unshed tears.

“You’re right. I don’t want to kiss you. You’re almost my little sister. But I don’t want you chasing after guys like Roman for a stupid kiss,” he growled and turned in his seat to face me again. He cupped my chin in the palm of his hand, his face moving closer to mine. “I guess I’d better show you what you’re missing out on since it’s so important to you.”

His lips crashed down on mine in a tender kiss that sent shivers down my spine. Electricity poured from every pore. Then, as quickly as it had started, it was over and he was climbing out of his car. He rounded the hood and opened my door for me. My legs were shaky as I tried to stand, and he helped me regain my balance before slamming the door closed again. At that moment, my mom opened the front door of the house and stood there watching us with her arms crossed. I couldn’t make sense of what had happened a moment ago. One minute he was telling me how gross it would be to kiss me, and the next he did it, anyway? I was so confused. I dimly registered the song playing on the radio. Iris by the Goo Goo Dolls was one of my favourites.

“Like kissing my sister,” he mumbled as he stalked back to the driver’s side. His words were daggers in my heart.



Ryker Jones had given me my first kiss and then stomped all over it. I've told no one about that night. Especially not after he kissed every single cheerleader at our high school. In front of me. Mason had caught me crying once when I thought no one was home, and I'd told him about my confused feelings for Ryker and how much it hurt to see him with the other girls. But I never told him about that night. He held me, as I cried, and never said a word about it after that... until now.

Why did he have to bring that up? I'd buried that crush under a pile of emotional rubble and a mack truck of cement. Ryker graduated and was immediately brought up to the minor leagues. Roman was a total dud, and I moved on. I'd met Lance in college, and when we'd graduated together, I thought we were going to settle down. I used my inheritance from my grandma to buy this house for us. It should have been his ring on my finger. Discovering his affair with his secretary had been the worst day of my life. Until now, of course. Now I was fake engaged to a man I couldn't stand, and according to the paperwork his agent sent over, they actually expected me to plan a wedding. By Christmas! She wanted us to plan a wedding in three weeks with us saying our vows on Christmas Eve. Planning a wedding took time and effort. This was so rushed. What were people going to think? What was Robyn going to think? My cousin was getting married the very next day. People were going to think I'm pregnant... or jealous of her limelight. No one's going to want to go to two weddings in two days. This is ridiculous.

Of course, there would not be a real wedding, I reminded myself. We'd call it off before then. But then everyone would expect me to be a sopping mess at Robyn's wedding. I can hear it now, all the comments from well-meaning relatives asking me how I'm doing and whispering about how brave I was, or how baggy my eyes were behind my back. To make things worse, Ryker agreed to take part in both the bachelor auction on the twenty-eighth and as my date to Robyn's reception. If we called it off before then, he would get out of our bargain scot free and I would do all of this for him for nothing. Nope, not going to happen. I'm milking every single minute out of this as I can. I picked up my phone and dialed the number on the paperwork in front of me. A woman on the other end answered immediately and passed me through to her boss when she heard my name.

"Margot Royal here," she answered, and I rolled my eyes. Does anyone say hello anymore?

"Hi Margot, I'm Emma Chambers," I began, and she cut me off.

"I know who you are. What can I do for the lovely bride-to-be?" she asked.

"I'm going over the paperwork you sent me and the itinerary. I'll have to shuffle a few things around, but I think I can do it. The only thing is, I need more time. My cousin's getting married on Christmas Day. It would be the height of impropriety to plan a wedding for Christmas Eve when we're only now engaged."

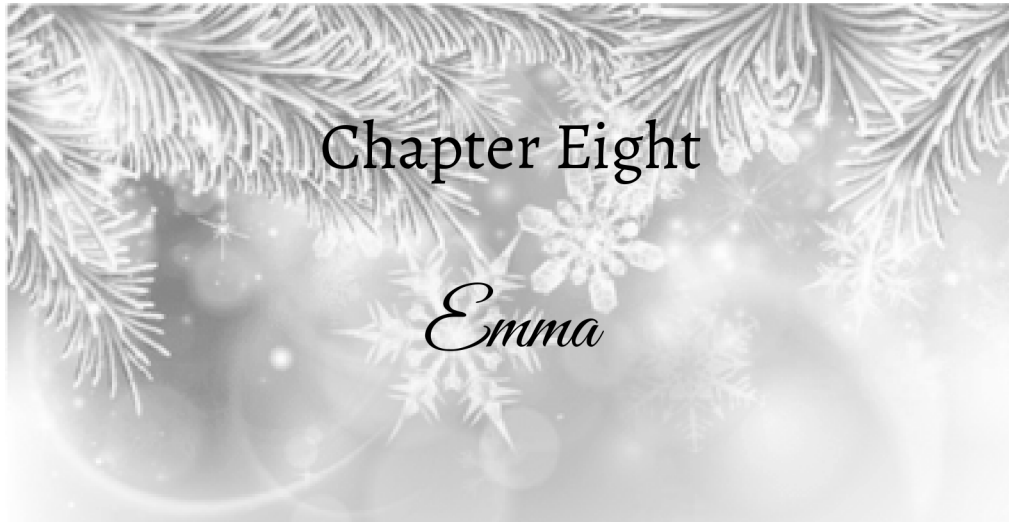
“I see,” she drew out the word, making it sound like a hiss, and a shiver crawled up my spine. “What are you proposing?”

“New Year’s Eve,” I suggested. “It’s only a week longer. It’s just as romantic as a Christmas wedding, the holiday decorations will still be up everywhere, and I won’t insult my cousin by rushing to the altar the day before her when she’s been planning her own nuptials for months.”

“A New Year’s Eve wedding,” Margot paused, and I imagined she was pondering the idea. Mulling it over in her head and trying to figure out the logistics. “I think we can make that work. I’ll call the Regent Hotel and see if they have the ballroom booked for that night.”

“No,” I practically shouted and forced myself to calm down. “No, I have a place in mind that won’t cost anyone any money. Serenity Gardens will do perfectly. It’s becoming a hot spot for weddings, and I already own it, so there’re no worries about deposits or anything like that when we call it off after Christmas.”

“Fine, fine. It’s your wedding. Don’t forget to be at the bridal store downtown at noon tomorrow. None of this will fly if you don’t at least have a dress, and they’ve guaranteed that they have a few dresses on hand that can be ready in our timeframe,” she reminded me and promptly hung up before I could ask her anything else. Like how she explained my date away at the last game. The world has forgotten Devon existed, and all eyes were on me and Ryker now.



The shop was bright and elegant, and they immediately welcomed me with a glass of champagne the minute we walked in. Gowns lined the racks on either side of the door and beyond was a changing area, complete with a small podium to stand on for fittings. Mirrors lined every available space.

“Welcome to Tina’s Bridal. I’m Tina. Who is the lucky bride today?” A saleslady with short, white hair and a cute navy skirt and blouse greeted us. Melody pointed to me and sipped her champagne.

“Hi, I’m Emma,” I introduced myself with a small wave, regretting passing up the drink. It was too early to drink and the last thing I needed was to get too drunk and buy an outrageously expensive gown.

“Ah yes, Ms. Royal told us you’d be coming. You’re marrying a hockey player?” She asked.

“I am,” I replied, glancing over the displays at the front of the store.

“And you’re getting married Christmas Eve?” she asked, her eyes glancing briefly downwards. A knowing smile crossed her face when she noticed I wasn’t drinking the complimentary Champagne. I cringed. I should have accepted that glass after all.

“New Year’s Eve,” I corrected her. “We don’t want to waste any more time. We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“Of course, dear,” her eyes crinkled with a smile. Beside me, I swear Melody’s shoulders were trembling with barely contained laughter. I shot a dark look her way and was relieved when the bells over the door jingled and my mother and Mason’s wife, Hannah, walked in. “Is this the rest of the bridal party? Let’s get started, shall we? Did you have a style in mind? What about colour schemes for the bridesmaids?”

“Oh um-,” crap I forgot about needing to know this. I was an event planner. I should be prepared for these things.

“A-line, off-the-shoulder, floor-length gown for the bride. And silver and gold for the bridesmaids,” Hannah cut in and I smiled at her gratefully.

“I have just the thing.” The saleslady led us to the changing area and bustled off in a flurry of motion, directing her army of minions to every corner of the shop.

“Well, now that we’re alone,” my mother began, and I groaned internally. Bring on the inquisition. “Why am I only now finding out that you were even dating again? Let alone seeing Ryker? How long has this been going on? Are you pregnant?”

I blinked, momentarily dazed at the dizzying speed my mom fired off her questions.

“First, I’m not pregnant,” I finally replied around the lump that was forming in my throat. I hated lying to my mother, but she’ll forgive me when this was all over. Eventually. I hope. “Second, this all happened so fast. Ryker swept me off my feet. I said nothing before because we were worried about Greg’s reaction to the news. So we kept it on the down-low until we figured out where the relationship was going. Honestly, I did not know he was going to propose. But I’m so glad he did because now I get to share my joy over spending the rest of my life with him. We wasted so much time already, and we didn’t want to waste another minute. Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m far from mad, dear. I’m ecstatic that you two have finally stopped circling each other like a pair of dogs in heat. But, if you’re not pregnant, explain why Melody is drinking all of your champagne,” my mom smirked as if she’d caught me in a lie and was proud of it. But she never has, and that will not change now. Especially since that was the only truth in my entire explanation.

“First, gross. Second, it’s only 10 am, Mom. If I was drinking already, you’d be dragging me down to an AA meeting or something,” I pointed out. “Mel hates to waste free drinks. It was a win-win. If I thought everyone was going to believe I was pregnant, I would have gulped down the damn bubbly and gladly sat through a meeting!”

“Here we are,” Tina waltzed back in with a slew of dresses and I was so grateful for the interruption. Mom was far from finished with her questions, but at least she wouldn’t grill me in front of strangers. I sighed in relief, ignoring the sharp glare mom shot my way as I focused on the beautiful gowns. One gown caught my eye. It was a floor-length, off-the-shoulder, ivory silk dress. Perfect for a winter wedding, and breathtakingly elegant. I knew I shouldn’t try it on. That dress was meant to be worn, not shoved into the back of a closet when the whole charade was done. But I couldn’t resist. I needed to see how it looked. Tina, the bridal expert, didn’t need any direction from me. She took the dress and placed it on a hook in a large, lush change room and shepherded me into it with a promise to return in a few moments to do up the back and pin the bust.

She drew the curtain closed behind her as she left. I stared at the dress, biting my lip. This fake wedding was suddenly becoming all too real. Tears welled in the corners of my eyes. What was I doing? I was lying to my mother, of all people, and actively assisting Ryker Jones to deceive his fans. There was no way this was going to end well. We should call the whole thing off... tell everyone it was a mistake.

We should end this charade now.

Right after I try on this beautiful gown that I’ll never get the chance to wear.

Ten minutes later, I was buttoned up and standing on the podium as Tina expertly pinned the dress to fit my body. I

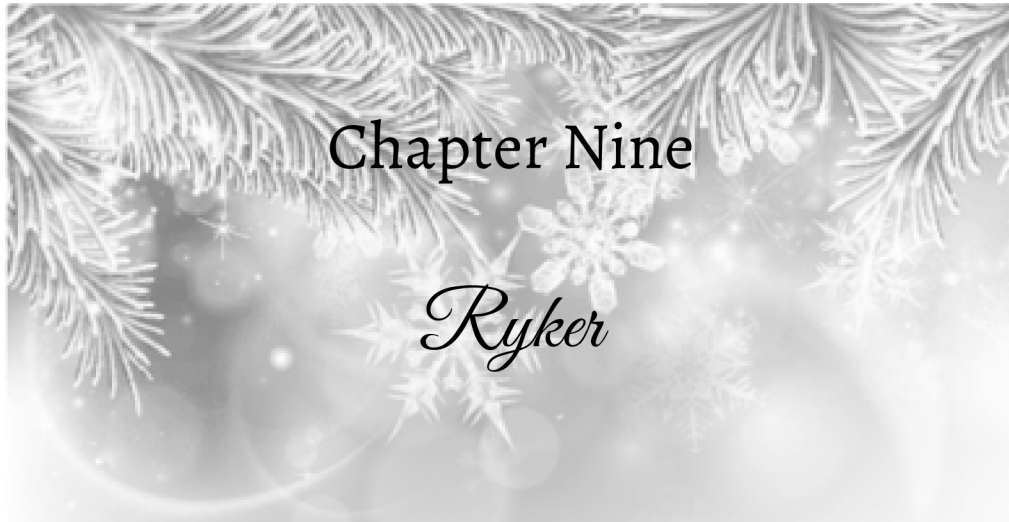
stared at my reflection, not daring to speak out of fear that I would burst into tears or a confession. It was the most beautiful gown I had ever seen.

The satin dress cascaded to the floor in a vintage-styled skirt. The sleeves were off the shoulder and crisscrossed across my chest in a simple, yet elegant style that flattered my figure. It even had a train that was detachable and flared out from behind. It almost appeared to be framing the lower half of the dress. The whole dress was perfect for a winter wedding. Was it possible to fall in love with the very first dress I tried on? I couldn't possibly buy this one for my fake wedding. Could I? I was so confused. Maybe I could save it for a real wedding someday....

“Oh sweetheart,” mom gasped as she came around the side of the little podium. “That is definitely the dress. Look at your face! It's ok to love the first one. I can see the conflict in your eyes, but you love this dress. I can tell and I won't take no for an answer. This is the dress for you. It even fits you perfectly!”

“It's definitely meant to be.” Melody's reflection nodded sagely in the mirror, in sync with Hannah's bobbing head. I bit my lip, barely holding in a groan. “And so are these black and gold dresses I found in the bridesmaid's section. I know you said silver, but look at this!” She held the dress up high in front of her so I could see it better without turning around. “It's gorgeous and has the added benefit of being Ryker's team colours. What do you think, Emma?”

I made a show of humming and hawing. Melody stomped her foot and charged into a dressing room. She changed so fast; I swear she'd give Flash Gordon a run for his money. I really need to learn her trick. But she was absolutely right. That dress was perfect. It was a strapless black satin gown accented with a simple gold belt around the waist. I really couldn't say no when I saw her face. So in the space of an hour, I had a dress, two bridesmaid dresses, and a colour scheme for a wedding that would never happen. How was I going to explain all of this to my mother when it was all over?



Chapter Nine

Ryker

I climbed aboard the private jet, eager to finally head home. The games in LA and Dallas were hard wins, and I was exhausted. I didn't even notice that every seat was full at first, but my teammates were using this opportunity to give me a little payback. When I finally found an empty seat, I found it decorated with photoshopped pictures of me kissing Emma, but they had replaced her head with various farm animals.

“Haha, hilarious guys,” I plopped in my seat, not caring that it was the worst seat on the plane because it was closest to the bathroom. This flight was going to suck. I pulled out my earbuds and blasted some music, ignoring the snickers around me as I shut my eyes.

I must have drifted off, because the next thing I knew, I was being bombarded with spitballs and balls of paper. I jumped out of my seat and tackled the guy next to me. Greg howled in laughter as he put his hands up in surrender.

“This was your idea?” I asked, surprised. “What is this? Payback?”

“You’d better believe it, Jones,” Bobby D’Orino chuckled from his seat near the front of the plane. “Since you’ve called it quits on the pranks, we decided it was time to return the favour and make you the butt of them. Consider it your official team welcome.”

“Thanks a lot,” I laughed. “Any others I should know?”

“All I can say is keep your eyes open, newbie,” Bobby grinned. The pilot announced we were approaching our landing, and we all focused on buckling ourselves into our seats as the plane began its descent.

We bounced as we touched down, but after a few minutes, we were pulling to a stop in front of the hangar. I grabbed my go bag and climbed down the steps to the tarmac before anyone else had a chance. One lucky thing about the bathroom seat, I guess. I didn’t wait for the other guys. I climbed off the plane and headed straight toward the parking lot.

“Hey Newbie,” Bobby shouted, and I turned back to see him heading my way.

“I really hate being called that,” I grumbled, and Bobby smirked in response.

“Get used to it. Until someone else joins the team and bumps you out of that spot, the title is all yours,” he laughed at my growl, but soon I couldn’t help myself but laugh as well. “So the guys and I were wondering something.”

“What’s that?” I asked as I pressed the button on my key fob to open my trunk and toss my bag in.

“When’s the bachelor party? And are we all invited?” He asked, adjusting the shoulder strap on his bag.

“I haven’t worked that part out yet. Isn’t that usually the best man’s job? Why are you asking me?” I closed my trunk and faced him, shivering when the icy wind slipped its icy fingers between my scarf and coat.

“I’m asking you because no one knows who the best man is.” His reply surprised me and I looked over his shoulder to see Greg tossing his bag into the backseat of his sleek black Cadillac SUV.

“Hey, Greg!” I shouted, drawing his attention. “Be my best man?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he shouted back. “Especially since you’re marrying my sister!”

I grinned.

“The guys wanna know about the bachelor party,” I replied, and slapped Bobby’s shoulder. “Get on it!”

“Not sure there’s time to plan one, man,” he walked over to join us. “Since you’re getting married New Year’s Eve.”

“New Year’s Eve?” I asked, confused and trying not to show it.

“My mom couldn’t stop gushing about Emma’s dress and asking a million questions about why it’s happening so quickly.” Greg arched a brow. “Apparently there might be a baby on the way. I was thinking a baby shower might be more appropriate.”

“A baby?” I blanched. Did everyone think that? Emma’s going to kill me.

“Hey, congratulations man!” Bobby clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Greg, text me the details and I’ll make sure the rest of the team gets the invite.”

“Sure thing,” Greg chuckled when he turned his attention back to me after Bobby climbed into his car a few spots over from us. “Wanna explain why this whole charade is happening so soon? I wasn’t expecting actual wedding planning, and now my sister has a wedding dress.”

“Umm...” I scratched the back of my neck as I scrambled to find the words to explain everything, but I was stuck with the image of Emma with a swollen belly and the inexplicable joy the idea sparked inside me. “It must be Margot’s idea. I’ll talk to her and get back to you on that.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Greg replied, the smile falling from his face. “Or maybe go see your fiancé and talk to her about it.”

“How angry is she?” I asked, caution making me hesitate.

“I’d wear a cup if I were you, but it’ll only be worse if you put it off.” He waved goodbye and headed back to his car.

“Crap,” I muttered, shivering again as I climbed into my SUV and blasted the heat.



“Honey, I’m home!” I shouted as I walked in the door of Serenity Gardens. Given the nearly empty parking lot, I was

ninety-nine percent sure she was alone.

Something heavy crashed in a nearby room, and I raced down the hall, worried that she might have fallen and hurt herself. In what I assumed used to be the living room, Emma was bent over, trying to lift a giant slab of wood. I rushed in and grabbed it from her.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I set the wood gently on the floor.

“I’m trying to make this place look wedding ready!” She snapped. “Because the minute your agent announced our wedding, I’ve been getting booking requests left and right.”

“That’s a bad thing?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting sky-high as I took in her sour expression. Was she wearing heels? She’s trying to do construction work... in heels... by herself. Emma’s always been Miss Independent, but this is a bit much.

“Does this place look ready for big events for you?” She spat, waving her arms around the rooms that were clearly in the middle of a remodel and missing entire walls.

“Where’s Mason?” I asked, agreeing with her assessment that this place was a far cry from being ready to host anything. “I thought he was taking care of all this for you?”

“He is. But he also has to do other jobs. He’s squeezing me in between each one, otherwise, I wouldn’t even be this far along in the renovations. We weren’t supposed to be finished enough for indoor events until summer, so there wasn’t any hurry before. But now... if I keep turning people away I’m

going to lose my business,” she crossed the room and grabbed a hammer.

It took me two strides to reach her side and grab that hammer from her before she could do anything with it. Emma scowled at me, moving to try and wrestle it from my hands, but I moved faster than she expected and placed the tool high above the window, setting it on the frame where she couldn't reach it.

“First, let's not make this a bigger job for Mason than it already is, ok?” I suggested as I faced her killer glare, my hands up in a placating gesture. “Second, why don't you hire someone else to finish this?”

“No one else has the time. Everyone's booked. I've been trying to do that all day between viewing requests!” She was super cute when she stomped her foot like that and pouted. I cleared my throat and forced myself to focus on the fact that she was off-limits to me. I still couldn't believe how easy Greg was letting me off with this whole fake engagement thing. The last thing I needed was to complicate things even further. “Ryker, no one's going to believe me that this place is still under renovation if we're getting married here!”

“We are?” I asked, surprised by this new bit of information.

“Yes! I didn't want to waste anyone's time, so I suggested we use this place. It made sense,” she squeezed her eyes shut, and all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around her and tell her that everything would be alright. “This whole thing seemed so simple in the beginning, but look at us. Margot

insisted on a Christmas wedding, to make this whole fairy-tale romance story more believable, and I negotiated for New Year's Eve instead. I never imagined I would actually have to look like I was planning a wedding! Ryker, I even bought a stupid wedding dress!"

I folded her in my arms and held her while she struggled to calm down. Neither of us had planned for things to go this far. A simple announcement was building into a vast mountain of lies now and lying had never been Emma's strong suit. In all the years I'd known her, she'd only lied to her family once. To this day, I don't think any of them know about that party she snuck out to when we were kids.

"What are we doing, Ryker? I don't know how much longer I can keep this up," she whispered, and I dropped an impulsive kiss on the top of her head.

"I'm sorry you got dragged into my mess. Tell me how I can help," I suggested, my voice thick with emotion. "Do you want to call it off?"

Silence filled the room as I anxiously awaited her reply. The last thing I wanted to do was end this, but if it was what she needed, I would do it in a heartbeat. I would do anything for her. She was my best friend's sister. At least, that's why I kept telling myself I would.

"No," she sighed. "I promised I would help you, and I will. I'm sorry about all the tears. It's been a long day."

"It's alright," I rubbed her back in small circles, enjoying the feel of her in my arms and refusing to examine these

feelings any closer. “I’m sorry you had to go through all this while I was away. I had no idea. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I don’t have your number,” she sniffed. “I’ve never needed it before.”

“Right.” I glanced around the construction zone. “Where’s your phone?”

“It’s in my office. Why?”

“My number should be in there,” I replied, reluctantly releasing her. “So you can call me anytime you need to. I should have thought of that sooner.”

I followed her as she carefully stepped through the mess of tools and materials and into her office across the hall. Grabbing her phone from her desk, I typed in my number and quickly sent myself a text before I handed it back to her.

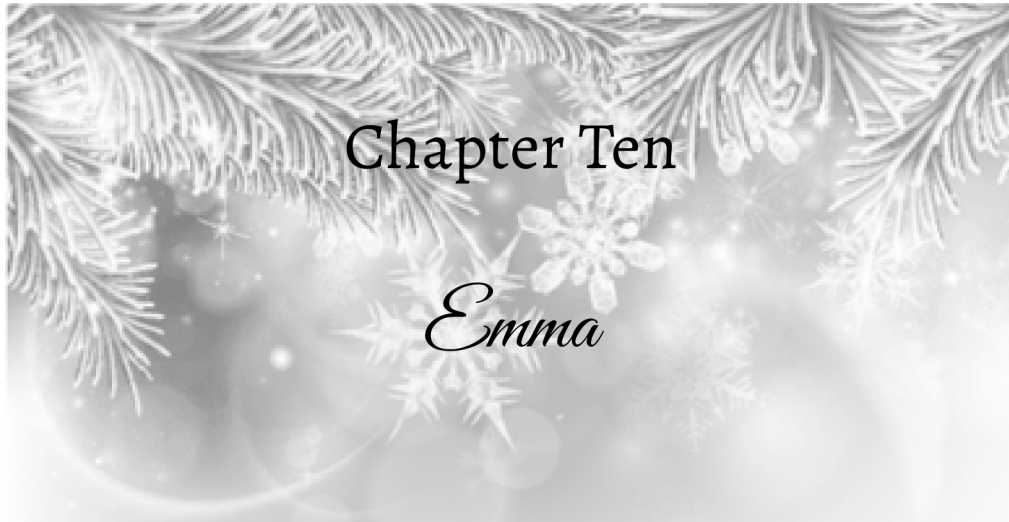
“Now I have your number too,” I answered her questioning look. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Breakfast... I think,” she answered, and we both glanced at the giant clock on the wall over her file cabinets across from her desk. It was well after 7 pm. It had been dark outside for probably hours already.

“Why don’t we go out and grab some dinner,” I suggested. “We can discuss our plans in more detail while we eat.”

“Ok,” she replied in a small voice. “But how about we grab a pizza from Maria’s and take it back to my place? We’ll be able to talk more freely there without a million eyes and ears on us.”

“Sounds good. I’ll grab the food and meet you there in a few minutes.” Emma agreed and grabbed her purse and keys from the bottom drawer of her desk. I grabbed her coat off the hook and held it for her while she slipped it on. We locked up for the night and I escorted her to her car, waiting until she locked the doors before climbing into mine and following her out of the parking lot.



I raced home and kicked off my shoes. My aching feet were grateful for their release as I padded up the stairs to change out of my work clothes. Ryker was right, I was nuts thinking I could do any renovations myself in heels and a skirt. Thankfully, I hadn't been on a ladder when he came crashing through the door earlier. I made a mental note to wear sneakers and jeans tomorrow. Tonight, however, I was getting out of these clothes and into my favourite pair of leggings and a sweater before he arrived with dinner. There was a lot we needed to discuss. Like how far this fake relationship was going to go, and how far we were going to take these wedding plans. I hated the thought that we'd place deposits on a wedding that will never happen, but I absolutely could not marry him, either. The very idea was ridiculous.

I changed quickly and tossed my hair up into a ponytail. Melody was working the late shift at the radio station tonight, so we would have plenty of time to discuss our plans in privacy. The doorbell rang, and butterflies took flight in my belly. I refused to examine that too closely. Flicking off the light in my bedroom, I hurried downstairs to let Ryker inside.

“Hi,” I greeted him and held the door open wide as he carried in the boxes of pizza. “That smells incredible.”

“Fresh from the oven,” he grinned and waved the boxes under my nose. I took a deep breath of its delicious aroma and savoured it until my stomach growled in protest. Ryker laughed and followed me to the kitchen. I grabbed a couple of plates and settled down across from him.

“Oh, my God! Is that-?”

“Pineapple? A complete crime against all things pizza,” he teased. “But it’s your favourite, isn’t it?”

“I’m surprised you know that,” I replied.

“Why? We’ve shared pizza before.” Ryker opened the second box and grabbed a slice of pepperoni.

“I didn’t think you paid attention to things like that. That’s all.” I lowered my gaze to the table and served myself.

“I paid attention,” he replied quietly.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, unsure how to reply to that. What did he mean, he paid attention? He was always so busy with Greg and hockey. Was he teasing me? Silence descended around us as we each devoured our dinner. A thousand questions swarmed through my mind, but I kept them under lock and key.

“So, this wedding stuff is-.” He began.

“Incredibly stressful,” I finished for him. “What is with the tight timeline, anyway? I thought it was going to be a long

engagement and then we would quietly call it off. I expected no actual planning.”

“Yeah, I asked Margot about that while I was waiting for the pizza. She thought it would look more convincing to the GMs. A whirlwind romance and engagement that ends as soon as it begins, you know? Something that would be quickly forgotten once the heat dies down. I’m sorry about all of this. I never would have agreed to her scheme if I knew what she intended.” He reached across the table and took my hand in his and gave it a squeeze. I nodded, accepting his apology.

“What do we do now? Everyone is expecting us to be so madly in love that we can’t wait to be married. My mother is busily planning the guest list and is coming over in the morning to pick out invitations. It’s all getting out of hand,” I replied.

“Do you want to call it off?” He asked, and I surprised him both by shaking my head no. “Any time you want to end this, say the word and we will. We can say you changed your mind, or discovered I pick my nose and decided you couldn’t live with such an embarrassing toad.”

I laughed at the image his words invoked.

“Do you eat it too?”

“Gross. I am civilized. I’ll have you know.” He grinned and pinched his fingers together. “A little bit.”

“A very little,” I teased with a laugh. “But no one would believe you pick your nose. Now, chew with your mouth open.

That is the worst.”

“Like this?” He tore off a piece of breadstick and popped it into his mouth.

“No, make it noisier,” I laughed. “With a juicy clucking sound.”

“I’ll have to work on that,” he grinned, and those stupid butterflies started flapping their wings again. His smile fell, and he glanced down at his plate before looking back up at me, a seriousness in his expression that I’d rarely seen before. “I’ll go with whatever you decide to tell people, Emma. That’s the least I can do. If you want to end it, say the word and it’s over. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt with all of this.”

My inner teenager sighed. Ryker Jones was sitting at my table, eating dinner with me and caring about what I wanted. It was a dream come true for my fifteen-year-old self. Now, though, it was a bit of a problem. Did I want to end my fake relationship with him? All this wedding stuff was getting out of control so fast, and my mom was so invested in it. I didn’t want to hurt her when she found out it wasn’t real. Would it be better to end it now before she gets any more invested? I looked up to find Ryker watching me, his intense stare burning a hole right through my heart. Who was I kidding? My mom wasn’t the only one who was going to be hurt when this was over. Why not enjoy it a little longer? Maybe this fake engagement is exactly what I need to get Ryker Jones out of my system so I can move on. My ex-boyfriend always accused me of being in love with him, anyway. To the point of blaming

my schoolgirl crush for driving him into his secretary's arms. Deep down, I knew I wasn't at fault for his infidelities, but the words still echoed painfully through my mind. What if there was even a little truth to what he claimed? I'd never be able to move on to a healthy relationship with that question burning in the back of my mind. This was my chance to find out if there might actually be something between us or put an end to my secret hopes once and for all.

"Ryker Jones, will you marry me?" I asked, and ignored how my body responded to his smile.

"Emma, I'm touched," he teased, his hands flying to his chest in mock surprise. "I never thought you would ask!"

I laughed so hard I nearly fell off my chair. Ryker caught me before I completely unseated myself and held me close while we laughed together. I could hear his heart pounding with my ear pressed to his chest and next to his laughter. It was the best sound I'd ever heard.

"Want to stay for a bit?" I asked when we finally sobered enough to get a word out. "There's a great Christmas movie that I've been meaning to watch. We could pop some popcorn and watch it together?"

"I'd love to stay," he smiled, and I wondered if he could feel how hard my heart was pounding right now.

"Great." I released my grip on his sweater and his arms dropped to his side. "Why don't you head into the living room and I'll be there in a minute?"

“Sure,” he said and started grabbing our plates and heading to the sink. “Right after I help you tidy up from dinner.”

“Ok,” I grinned and grabbed the pizza boxes to put the leftovers in the fridge.

Ten minutes later, the air was filled with the buttery scent of freshly popped corn and we sat on the sofa in my living room. I dimmed the lights and hit the button on my remote to turn the tv on and flicked through the movies to find the one I wanted. Somehow, *The Holiday* seemed incredibly fitting for our situation. We laughed, and it was a struggle not to snuggle into his arms as the movie progressed.

At some point, halfway through the movie, my eyelids became heavy as the exhaustion of the day finally hit me. I promised myself I’d only shut my eyes for a minute. Ryker wouldn’t even notice. Only a minute.



Something danced across my cheek. Was it a spider? I hate spiders! I slapped my cheek so hard my eyes popped wide open from the sting. Something heavy wrapped around my shoulders, holding me against a warm body. I looked up, confused, and found Ryker fast asleep, his arm around me. My head resting on his lap.

The living room was pitch dark, except for the glow of the television set. I carefully extricated myself from his hold and sat up, the throw that usually rested on the back of the sofa

dropping off my body onto the floor. Had he done that when I fell asleep? I smiled softly to myself, warmth spreading through my veins.

“Hey Sleeping Beauty,” a voice whispered, and I jumped, startled. My heart raced as I searched the darkness and found my roommate sitting in the armchair in the corner.

“Melody? I thought you were working tonight,” I whispered back, surprised to find her there. What time was it?

“My shift ended an hour ago. Looks like it was a very interesting night,” she grinned and winked.

“We were watching a movie. I didn’t plan to fall asleep,” I muttered and glanced at the clock. “I should probably wake him up. He probably has practice or something soon.”

“Wait, before you do that, I have an idea,” she replied. I arched a brow as I considered the marker she held out to me. “Mr. Prankster deserves a little payback.”

“What are you talking about? Payback for what?” I asked, my brain still foggy with sleep and slow to comprehend what she was implying.

“For dragging you into the mess his prank-loving ways created, that’s what,” she replied as if the answer should be obvious. “His face is a little too handsome, don’t you think?”

“Hmmm,” I turned and considered his powerful jaw covered in stubble. It only made him more desirable. Melody had a point. He loved a good prank and would get a good laugh out

of this... eventually. I grabbed the sharpie and carefully drew a handlebar moustache under his nose.

“His eyebrows could be a little more devilish.” Melody grinned and rubbed her hands together. I chuckled softly and added pointed eyebrows over his eyes. “Perfect.”

“What now?” I asked, recapping the marker.

“Now we wake him and make him rush out of here before he has time to look in a mirror,” Melody laughed and rose from the chair, snapping a quick picture of my artwork with her phone. “I’ll leave that part to you.”

“Thanks a lot,” I rolled my eyes as she chuckled and left the room. How was I going to do this? I glanced at the clock to check the time. If I remembered correctly, he had hockey practice in an hour. I snuggled in close, reluctant to wake him, and his arm snaked back around my waist and pulled my flush against his hard body. The closeness did funny things to me. Things I’d rather not be feeling right now about my brother’s best friend. I let myself relish the moment, a guilty pleasure that I refused to analyze too closely, before trying to extract myself from his arms again. Ryker mumbled something in his sleep and I leaned in to try to decipher it, only to find myself on my back on the sofa, his large body towering over me.

His eyes were still heavy with sleep as he stared down at me and my breath hitched in my throat. This wasn’t a position I’d ever believed I’d be in, despite how much I’d secretly hoped for it over the years. His head lowered and my eyes fluttered closed in anticipation of his lips on mine, and he hesitated. His

hot breath warmed my ear, but instead of kissing my lips, he pressed a lingering kiss to my cheek. I fought back the wealth of disappointment welling up inside me.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice thick and husky and doing all kinds of things to me that I was going to need to work out in the privacy of my bedroom after he left.

“Good morning,” I replied, opening my eyes to stare up into his big, beautiful ones. We lay like that for a few moments before Ryker finally pushed himself up to his feet and reached down to help me up.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he rubbed the back of his neck.

“That’s ok. Besides, it might look strange if you never sleep over when we’re supposed to be getting married in a couple of weeks,” I replied. “Maybe you should think about sleeping over more often.”

What the hell was that? Did I seriously invite him to sleep over? Sleepover? Because that’s exactly what I need. The man I’ve secretly wanted for years, sleeping mere feet away from me. As if this fake engagement wasn’t already torturing me enough. What was I thinking? I really wished I could kick myself right now. Instead, I bit my lip and anxiously waited for his reply.

“That’s a good point,” he slowly replied. “I’ll think about it.”

“Ok,” I breathed out a sigh of relief mixed with disappointment. He didn’t say yes, but he also didn’t squash my idea like an annoying little bug. That’s something, I guess. I wasn’t about to push my point, not when I wasn’t sure what I was asking for.

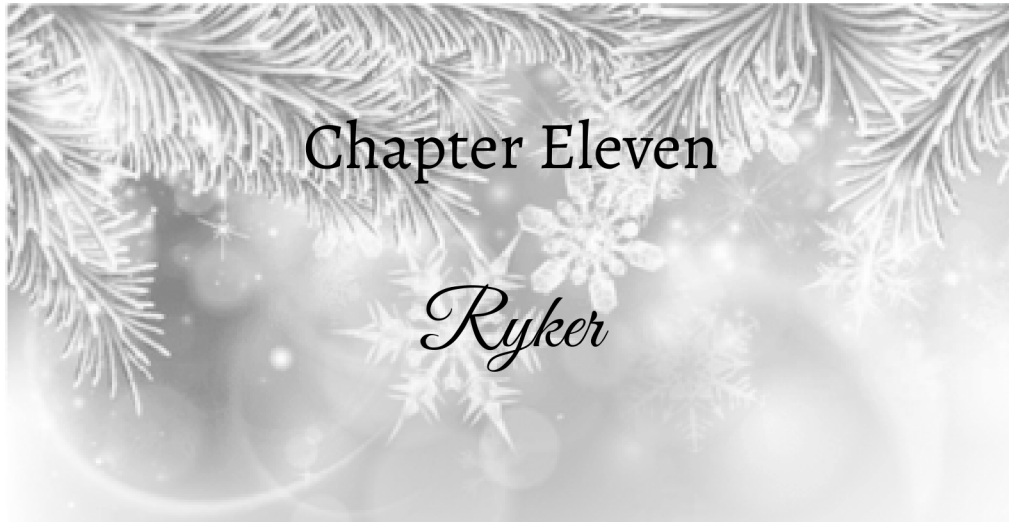
“I should get going,” he said. “I’ve got practice and then a couple of hours hitting the gym afterwards. Hey, do you want to meet up for dinner or something?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that sounds great,” I replied breathlessly. “Seven?”

“I’ll pick you up,” he grinned and kissed my forehead before grabbing his wallet and keys from the coffee table. “See you later, Emma.”

“Have a great practice,” I said with a fake smile that stretched across my face. “I’ll see you at seven.”

And just like that, he was gone. I collapsed on the sofa in a puddle of mixed emotions and hormones. What was wrong with me? He’s my brother’s best friend. Ryker is completely off-limits. He made that perfectly clear when we were kids. So why did he still have this effect on me?



Chapter Eleven

Ryker

I let out the breath I'd been holding since leaving Emma's in a loud whoosh of air the minute I pulled into the arena's underground parking. The entire drive, I couldn't get the feel of her underneath me out of my mind. Greg was definitely going to kill me. I prayed he didn't notice I was still wearing the same clothes as the day before. There hadn't been time to run home and change. I was running late as it was. I grabbed my gear from the trunk and raced to the locker room, popping a piece of gum in my mouth on the way.

"Morning Jones," one of the assistant coaches called out as I walked in. He didn't bother looking up from his clipboard as I rushed past him.

"Good morning, Tim," I replied, dropping my bag on a bench and hurriedly yanking off my coat. "Sorry, I'm late. Forgot to set my alarm."

"Don't worry about it. The coach's running behind today. His daughter went into labour last night," Tim said.

"Oh hey, that's great news. What did she have?" I asked, grinning as I forced myself to slow down.

“Nothing yet. It was a false alarm, but he was at the hospital for a while last night. Anyway, we’re doing things in reverse. Today is a workout day, tomorrow’s practice. Make sure you set your alarm tonight.” Tim looked up from his clipboard and smiled. “Shave first.”

“Oh yeah, sorry. I raced straight over when I realized I was running late. Haven’t eaten yet either,” I replied, yanking my shirt over my head and hanging it in my cubby.

“So you haven’t looked in a mirror yet?” He asked, his grin spreading from ear to ear.

“No,” I replied slowly. “Why? Is it really that bad?”

“You just have a little something here,” he pointed to the corner of his mouth with a smirk.

“Oh, thanks,” I wiped at my face with the back of my hand. “Did I get it?”

“Sure did,” he said and quickly made his way out of the locker room. I frowned. That was strange. Maybe he’s having a bad day? I shook it off and yanked my t-shirt over my head and changed into jogging shorts. On my way into the gym, I grabbed a towel and a water bottle and headed over to the empty treadmill next to Greg. Someone laughed behind me, and I looked over to see a couple of my teammates snickering about something over by the weights. Carlson started laughing even harder when he realized I was looking at him.

“What’s up with them?” I asked Greg, hitting the start button. He shrugged and took a huge gulp from his water

bottle, not bothering to glance my way.

“Steroids maybe?” He suggested, and I laughed. “I stopped by your place last night to watch the game. Where were you?”

“I was having dinner at Emma’s,” I replied, warring with myself internally to keep from smiling like some lovesick puppy. Because I’m not. There’s no way I’d ever fall for my best friend’s little sister... Right?

“More wedding stuff?” He asked, refusing to look my way. Greg was obviously still pissed if he couldn’t even look at me. I glanced over at him and noticed Carson was gathering a small crowd around him from the corner of my eye. I swear he’s looking my way and laughing. What’s happening right now?

“Sorry what?” I asked, distracted.

“I asked what you were doing at my sister’s last night,” Greg replied, irritated. “What’s going on with you today? First, you’re late, and now you’re distracted. That’s not like you at-.”

He burst out laughing when he finally looked my way. Greg laughed so hard that he lost his footing on the treadmill and nearly wiped out. I hopped off to help him up, but he only laughed harder every time he looked at me.

“What is your issue, man?” I demanded, giving up trying to help him stand. This was really weird. First Tim, then Carlson. Now Greg? Was there something in the water? I glanced

around and realized we were drawing an audience. An audience who cracked up the minute I looked at them.

“I leave you guys alone for an hour and come back to a giant looney bin? What’s going on in here? Have you all lost your frigging minds?” Coach barked as he entered the gym, his face pursed in a permanent scowl. His gaze landed on me and I swear a smile nearly cracked his stony demeanour. “Someone find Jones a damn mirror. Everyone else, get back to work!”

“What?” There was something on my face? Is that what everyone was laughing about?

Greg finally calmed down enough to stand and hand me his phone. I quickly clicked the camera and held it up so my face was on the screen.... And the cartoon face that someone drew on it with a marker. I guess Emma has a better sense of humour than I gave her credit for.

“So who do we send a thank-you card to for pulling this off?” Greg teased when I handed his phone back.

“Your sister,” I replied bluntly, appreciating the smile falling from his face when he realized that meant I must have fallen asleep around her. It was fascinating watching all the different thoughts pass over his face. The man was an open book when it came to his family. I drowned out any response he might have made by pouring my bottle of water on my face and scrubbing with my towel as hard as I could. “I fell asleep at her place last night, and I didn’t look in a mirror this morning because I was already running late.”

“You slept at my sister’s last night?” Greg growled.

“I’m sure that’s not all he was doing,” Carlson called out, followed by a couple of chuckles from those around him. “Your sister’s fine as hell, man. Wouldn’t mind getting me a bit of that, if you know what I mean.”

The mood in the gym changed quickly. Usually, I was the one holding Greg back when someone said something stupid about Emma. Carlson’s comments had me seeing red, and this time it was Greg holding me back from launching across the room and shoving my fist in his face.

“Not cool, man,” Bobby shook his head. “You have a death wish making comments like that in front of the woman’s brother and fiancé? Smarten up.”

“What? I’m not allowed to congratulate my man here on landing such a fine piece of—?” Carlson didn’t have time to finish his sentence before one of his buddies hauled him out of there. I was glad. It meant I didn’t have to hit one of my teammates and likely land myself in deeper trouble with the league. On the other hand, nothing would have satisfied me as much as knocking a few of Carlson’s teeth in. Greg grunted and together we headed for the punching bags to work off some of the aggression Carlson inspired. We didn’t talk for several minutes. Greg’s eyes kept darting at me, and I knew his earlier questions would not be forgotten. That or I missed some of Emma’s creativity on my face. I caught myself grinning to myself as I thought of different ways to get her

back, momentarily distracted from the lingering questions that went unspoken between my best friend and me.

“So, you slept at Emma’s last night,” Greg finally broke the silence, and I could feel the smile fall from my face with the seriousness of his tone.

“Yeah,” I reluctantly replied, careful not to look his way as I punched the bag in front of me again. “She was getting anxious about all this wedding stuff, so I went over to her place with a couple of pizzas and we talked and watched a movie. That’s it. I swear.”

“That’s it?” Greg turned to me, his brows arched questioningly. “But you fell asleep, and didn’t feel her draw all over your face like a damn toddler? Didn’t even think about how it might look if I found out you spent the night. You must think I’m an idiot. First, you use my sister to save your career, and now you’re lying to me?”

“I’m not lying! And I’m not using her. She agreed to help me.”

“You’re using her! I thought we were friends, but friends don’t use each other’s siblings like this,” he barked.

I hit the bag harder and harder before replying, letting his words roll off my back as best I could. The problem is, he’s my best friend and I hate that he’d ever think I would be such a dirtbag. I thought he knew me better than anyone.

“You know what? I like your sister. A lot! And out of respect for our friendship, I never made a play for her. But you

know what? All bets are off now.” I shoved my fist one last time into the punching bag and marched out to the locker rooms. I didn’t even bother changing out of my gym clothes before grabbing my gear and hitting the parking garage.

“Where the hell are you going?” Greg’s voice echoed through the garage. I didn’t bother turning around to face him. I shoved my back into the trunk of my car and hit the button to unlock the door.

“I’m going to make your sister mine,” I shouted back and slammed the door behind me as I climbed in. I heard nothing else he might have said as the engine drowned him out, followed by my squealing tires as I peeled out of the parking garage.



What did I just do? Did I seriously admit to my best friend that I’m interested in his little sister? Have I lost my mind? It’s a wonder he didn’t clock me. I drove aimlessly through the countryside, my mind and emotions tangled together in a blinding mess.

At some point, it started snowing, but I don’t remember when. Now it was coming down heavily. I made a right turn at the next intersection and carefully drove back into the city, my wipers scraping noisily across the windshield as I tried to see between the heavy flakes. This was the perfect ending to my horrible morning. A morning that began with so much promise. Without a second thought, I turned the car toward

Emma's house. It was the closest place for me to drive safely and get off these roads before it gets too bad to drive. At least, that's what I told myself as I turned onto her street. Everyone always seemed to forget how to drive in the snow, and there was always an accident or two or three in the first big snowfall.

Her car wasn't in the driveway, and I realized she was probably working at Serenity. It wasn't much farther from her place, and I hated the idea of her driving home in this. And she was stubborn enough to try it. I recognized the car parked in front of her house and stopped anyway to see if Melody would help me out with a few supplies. In a storm like this, it wouldn't take long for the roads to get really dangerous, and there's every chance we could get snowed in by the time I talked her into locking up. Which, knowing her, could take a while.

Melody opened the door after I pounded on it for the hundredth time. It was freezing out here, and the snow was coming down even more heavily now. Pretty sure I look like Santa Claus with all this snow in my hair and stubble.

"What are you doing here?" She yawned as the door opened, and I remembered that she'd worked the night shift the night before. A brief pang of guilt pierced my gut for waking her, but it didn't last long. "Emma's at work."

"Hi. Sorry, I woke you," I said. "It's coming down pretty hard out here. Mind if I borrow a couple of things? I'm on my

way over to Serenity right now, but in case we get stuck, or the power goes out....”

A slow grin spread across Melody’s face, one I’d rather not analyze too closely. She crooked a finger, and I followed her inside.

“Wait here, I’ll just be a minute,” she waved to the hallway bench and disappeared into a door I didn’t notice the last time I was here. I watched the snow anxiously as I waited, pacing the small space instead of taking a seat on the bench. She returned with her arms laden with a big tote and what looked like a picnic basket.

“You were only gone a couple of minutes. How did you pack an entire picnic basket?” I asked, taking the parcels from her.

“It’s not much. I packed it with whatever I could grab that you wouldn’t need to cook. You know, in case the power goes out,” she winked. “Mostly crackers, cheese, bread, and a couple of other things I found. The tote has Emma’s sleeping bags and some camping gear. She keeps it stored under the basement stairs so it didn’t take much to find it. Don’t let her drive home! Ok? By the looks of it, the roads are already getting pretty bad. I don’t want a dead roommate so do whatever you can to keep her there, ok?”

“Will do. Thanks for this Melody,” I turned to open the door, and she stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Be careful, Ryker. On the roads, and with her heart. I don’t want a dead you either, but if you hurt her...” she left the rest

unsaid. I nodded.

“Right now, that’s the last thing I want to do,” I replied.

“Good,” Melody smiled and held the door open as I lumbered through it and packed everything away in my car. “Drive safely!” She shouted and shut the door as I waved and climbed into my car.

The roads were getting worse. I couldn’t see beyond a few feet past the hood. Traffic lights were out. I drove past several blocks that were dark and wondered if the storm had already knocked the power out. The closer I got to Serenity Gardens, the more I hoped Emma was still there and her fireplace worked. If the power goes out, there’s a good chance her furnace might as well. It’s not an uncommon occurrence in a storm like this.

The lights were out when I finally pulled into the small parking lot on the side of the old house. I squinted through the snow and spotted an oddly shaped lump of snow and parked next to it. It wasn’t surprising that her car was unrecognizable, but a wave of relief washed through me to see it was still there. Emma could be pretty stubborn, but she wasn’t dumb. Not as dumb as I was anyway, considering I was the fool driving in these horrid conditions to get to her. I quickly jumped out and grabbed the stuff I’d borrowed from her house, trudging through nearly knee-deep snow. Snowflakes swirled around me on the ice-cold wind and crunched underfoot as I struggled through the bitter weather to get to her door. I propped the tote against the doorjamb as I tried the

knob and found that it was, thankfully, unlocked. The door swung open, and the wind howled, sending it flying back into the wall with a loud crash that echoed through the silent halls.

Emma came flying out of her office, wielding a broomstick for a weapon. I barely deflected her blow before she realized I wasn't a criminal, taking advantage of the storm to rob her.

"Ryker, what are you doing here?" She asked, her voice breathless as she stared up at me. Her hair cascaded down her back in violent waves of tangles, half in and half out of her bun. She looked absolutely adorable.

"I came to rescue you," I replied, kicking the door shut behind me and setting my load down next to it. "But it looks like we're both going to be stuck here for a while instead."

"Oh," she replied, frozen in place. I shook the snow out of my hair and kicked off my shoes, not wanting to wreck her hardwood floors, and hung my coat up. There wasn't much I could do about my wet jogging pants, unfortunately. I'd left my bag in the car and there wasn't a chance I was going back out there soon. Emma blinked, finally shaking herself free of whatever mesmerizing thought she was having, and grabbed the picnic basket. I followed her with the tote full of camping gear and set it down inside her office.

"I stopped by your place first and Melody was kind enough to let me borrow some of your camping gear. She even packed us some food in case we got stuck here," I said.

"Thank you," Emma replied with a shy smile. "I don't think anyone's ever done this for me before."

“Really?” I was stunned. “Not even what’s his name?”

“Nope. Not even Lance,” she said with a small shake of her head. “He would have called and asked me to stay off the roads until the storm cleared, but he wouldn’t have risked getting into an accident.”

“Fool,” I bit out, collapsing into a chair next to her fireplace, grateful to see that it was actually functional after all and not just for looks. With the heat it was throwing off, I’d be dry again in no time.

“You must be freezing,” she said, changing the subject. “You should take those wet things off. I think I have a blanket or something tucked away upstairs.”

“Why do you have a blanket here?” I asked instead. Emma flushed.

“I actually have a bedroom set up here in case of emergencies like this,” she answered quietly. “Even a change of clothes and some old pyjamas. But nothing that might fit you, unfortunately.”

“I see.” I watched as she fidgeted nervously around the small space. “Have you had to stay here before?”

“Once or twice,” she replied. “I’ll go find something for you to warm up with. Take your wet clothes off and set them near the fire to dry.” She took off through the double glass doors without another word. I stared after her for several moments, willing myself not to go after her and demand answers. What kind of man doesn’t at least attempt to rescue the woman he

loves during a snowstorm? I can't believe she's had to wait out storms here by herself enough times to warrant having a bedroom set up here in case things like this happen. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got until I had to distract myself or knock down her ex's door and demand answers with my fist. Did her brothers know about this? Why had Greg never mentioned it before? I stripped off my jogging pants and wet socks and laid them out next to the fire to dry. My shirt was next, and I had to admit I was feeling warmer already without those layers of icy, soaked clothing sticking to my skin.

A loud knock resounded through the old Victorian house. The door swung open before I covered myself or could shout that I needed a moment. It would have been fine if it had been Emma on the other side of the door. Except that it wasn't. Having spent many Christmas holidays with Emma's family over the years, I knew exactly who the dark man was standing frozen in the doorway of her office. He looked as bewildered as I felt, having caught me in my underwear.

"I-um... Excuse me, I didn't realize anyone else would be here," Lance said, backing slowly out the door. "Is-um- is Emma around?" He asked, looking anywhere but in my direction.

"She'll be right back," I bit out, struggling to contain the turmoil in my gut. What was he doing here? Did he come here with the idea that he'd try to win Emma back? I wanted to punch him for the hurt he caused her. My hand flexed instinctively, and I had to force myself to remain calm. My

career was already in enough jeopardy without adding assault charges to the mess of my life.

“Ryker, I found a pair of old sweats, my broth-,” Emma froze mid-sentence when she spotted Lance in the hallway, looking everywhere but in my direction. “What are you doing here?” She snapped.

“I was driving by and saw your lights on,” he replied. “I wanted to make sure you were ok. Be-because of the storm. I should go.”

“Yeah, maybe you should,” I bit out, crossing my arms over my chest. Emma glanced out the window behind Lance before replying, drawing my gaze in the same direction. It was nothing but white beyond the window now. There’s no way Lance happened to be driving by and see her lights on, so why was he really here?

“You can’t drive in that,” she whispered quietly, her eyes moving between me and her ex-boyfriend. “You should give your girlfriend a call and let her know you’re safe. There’s plenty of space here until the storm lets up.”

“We-uh-we broke up,” Lance replied sheepishly. “I’ll stay out of your hair. The kitchen is still this way?” He pointed down the hall, and Emma nodded. Wordlessly, he disappeared in that direction, leaving Emma and me alone in her office. She moved to the door and quietly closed it, flicking the lock as she did so. I glanced out the giant bay window again, confirming my suspicions. There is no way Lance just “happened” to be in the neighbourhood during a storm like

this. He was up to something and I didn't like it. My jealous inner beast was roaring to life, and I had to chain it up quickly before I did something stupid like marking my territory. Emma would kill me if I did, and that would end everything before I had a chance to try to win her heart. And Greg would probably kill me twice for pissing him off and hurting his sister. I had to tread carefully if I wanted something real with her.

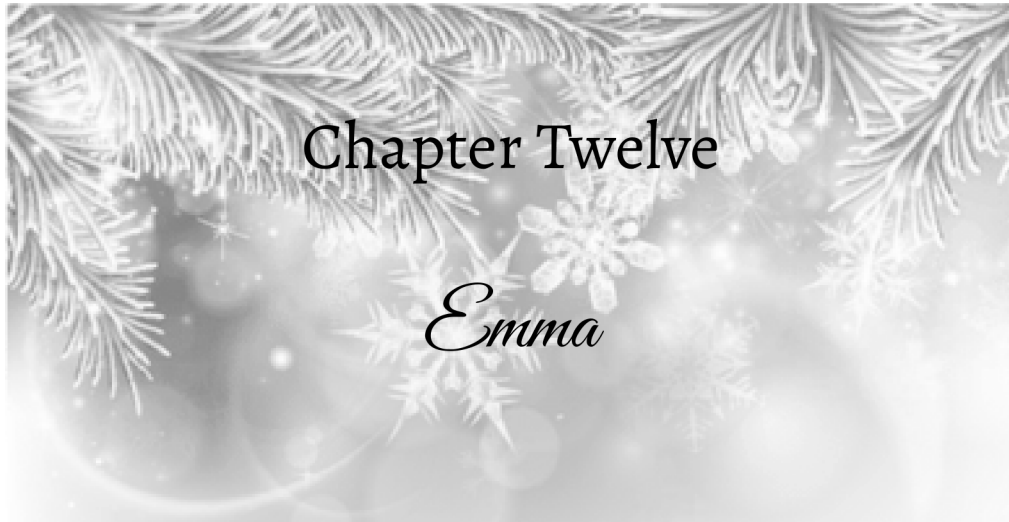
“Are you ok?” I asked, my voice thick with thinly bridled possessiveness.

“Besides being pissed that my ex, who cheated on me for months with his secretary and tried to talk me out of following my dream of buying this place and making a business out of it, used a snowstorm to get me alone with him again? I'm peachy,” she huffed, and a stray strand of hair fell across her face. I grinned and tucked it behind her ear, warmth spreading through my body from the contact. Emma blushed and glanced down at the floor, shuffling her feet a little.

“I found these old sweats upstairs,” she thrust a pair of grey sweatpants and a sweater into my arms. “My brother must have left them here the last he stayed late working on the place. They might be a little tight, but at least you won't have to sit around in your underwear while your clothes dry.”

I grinned even more broadly when I noticed how red she turned when she mentioned my underwear. If her ex wasn't down the hall, I would tease the heck out of her right now. I swallowed back the impulse and thanked her instead. Lance was the world's worst third wheel. My inner beast roared

silently, and a plan started hatching in my mind as I pulled on the smallest pair of sweatpants I'd ever had the misfortune of wearing. Glimpsing myself in the large mirror behind Emma's desk, my inner beast changed from jealous roars to cocky struts in a matter of seconds. Lance had nothing on me. I probably towered over him by a good foot and had more history with Emma than he could ever hope to have. My dashing good looks and washboard abs were all a bonus. It might sound cocky, maybe even a little narcissistic. But all's fair in love and war, right? I needed all the help I could get.



This wasn't fair. What did I do to upset the universe so much? As if being fake engaged to my brother's best friend wasn't bad enough, now I'm stuck here with him as a snowstorm rages outside. I seriously hope we're not stuck here all night. Though I have to admit, it was wonderful waking up in his arms this morning. It was so real, I could almost believe we were a genuine couple. That's why it's so dangerous being alone with him. My heart couldn't bear another heartbreak like the last one. It took everything in me to keep myself from staring at his incredibly ripped body. What is wrong with me? I'm practically drooling over my high school crush while my ex-boyfriend is right down the hall.

I almost forgot about him. Crap! Why is Lance even here? I told him I never wanted to see him again. Walking in on him, ramming himself into his secretary while she moaned, sprawled across his desk with her skirt up over her hips.... It took weeks for me to get that image out of my head. The heartache his betrayal caused... I never want to feel that way again. Lance was the last man I ever expected to hurt me that way. That's what made it worse. I never saw it coming.

A man like Ryker, though... was a player through and through. He's never had a serious relationship. I doubt he's even capable of being serious. Now he's the type of man I'd fully expect to catch cheating with another woman. It's the very reason a woman like me could never trust him with my heart. It would easily be broken. Which is another reason this fake engagement is so risky. It would be too easy to fall in love with him, and I would only get hurt. Why did I let him suck me into this stupid scheme of his?

Why can't I stop thinking about his abs? My mouth watered and my heart pounded so hard in my chest that it was almost deafening. All the blood drained from my brain and raced straight to my core. Was I seriously getting turned on by Ryker Jones? The same Ryker Jones that was always tormenting me in high school with all the girls he'd bring around? I could almost feel my heart breaking all over again. Crap. Feelings. Exactly what I can't afford to have for Ryker.

Ryker frowned.

"Are you sure you're alright with Lance being here?" He took a step forward and my breath caught in my chest, remembering that kiss from a few nights ago. Was it really only a week ago that I was on a disastrous date that led me to this farce of an engagement? I forced the breath out in a slow hiss between my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. Ryker must have noticed because he moved so close I could feel his body heat radiating through his clothes. A finger on my chin tilted my head up, and I opened my eyes to meet his warm ones.

“Are you ok with Lance being here?” He asked again and hesitated before continuing. “Or is it me you don’t want here?”

“I never said I didn’t want you here,” I blurted, and Ryker’s lips tilted up at the corners.

“I’ve known you long enough to recognize when something’s bothering you, Emma. Whatever it is, you can talk to me,” he replied.

“It’s just... I really want to be alone with you,” I flushed, mortified that I’d admitted that to him. What was he going to think about me? Would he run away, scared that I was getting too attached and trying to rope him into actually marrying me on New Year’s Eve? I’m such an idiot. Why would I say that? He still thinks of me as his best friend’s little sister. He’ll never look at me the way I wish he would. A sharp pang stabbed me in the chest and my breath hitched.

“I mean... Lance broke my heart. I don’t even know why he’s here, but it’s not like I can kick him out in the middle of a snowstorm. Look out the window. He’d probably get lost trying to find his car and freeze to death in the parking lot,” I rambled on, hoping to diffuse the sudden tension in the room.

“If you want him gone, Emma, I can make sure he gets home safely,” Ryker offered. His hand dropped to his side and awkwardly shoved it into his pocket. His abs rippled with the movement, drawing my gaze downwards to that beautiful little trail to happy land. My mouth watered, and I forced myself to swallow and take a step backwards. I handed him the shirt I found and turned to stare out the window as he slipped it on

over his head. There really was nothing to see outside but a giant white screen.

“It’s far too dangerous, Ryker, but thank you for the offer.” I paused and licked my lips, an idea forming in my mind as I spoke. “But how would the master of pranks like to join me in a doozy?”

“Anything for you, Emma. What did you have in mind?” He asked. I watched his reflection as he moved closer to me, now fully clothed. A pang of regret shot through me and I offered the clothing to him. He was much better looking without all that fabric concealing him. Was it hot in here? I explained my idea, nervous about how he’d react and careful not to turn and look him in the eye until I finished. I’d never get another word out if I looked at him now.

He chuckled.

“Your brothers are going to kill me,” he laughed. “But I like it.”

Every muscle in my body instantly eased. I turned, surprised that he was so agreeable with my plan and secretly thrilled. Ryker stepped closer, pressing me into the cold glass window. He bent down slightly, his hot breath on my ear as he whispered.

“I’d like it even better if it was true,” he said.

I won’t lie. The only reason I didn’t melt into a giant puddle at his feet was that he was holding me up. His powerful arms wrapped around my waist as he pulled me even closer to him.

I stared up at him, completely mesmerized by the warmth in his eyes as his head lowered to mine.

A breath away from claiming my mouth, a knock at the door had us springing apart. I glanced over at the now open door to find Lance standing there, a plate of cookies in one hand as he stared at us.

“Am I interrupting something?” He asked, clearly not guilty about it at all.

“Yeah, actually you are” I cut Ryker off before he could say anything both of us might regret later.

“What do you need, Lance?” I asked, moving closer to my desk to sit down before my knees completely failed me. No one had ever had this effect on me before. But Ryker always had. What did that say about me that my ex-boyfriend never once made me weak in the knees? Looking at him now, I didn’t even feel a flutter of attraction.

“I found these in the kitchen and thought you might like a snack.” He stepped across the threshold and placed the plate down in front of me. Ryker crossed his arms, standing with his back to the window and looking like an angry Viking.

“Thank you,” I replied, examining the sugar cookies I’d bought this morning. I’d been planning on giving them to Ryker to apologize for the sharpie mustache I’d drawn on his face. “These are actually for you, Ry. I picked them up this morning from that bakery you like downtown.”

“Sweet Eats?” He asked, moving closer to examine the offerings. Lance moved back and forth on the spot, clearly agitated by Ryker’s presence.

“Mmm hmm,” I nodded and snatched one before he could steal them all.

“What’s the occasion?” He asked, propping a hip on the corner of my desk and selecting a cookie decorated like a blue ornament with stripes of gold and silver crisscrossing in a diamond pattern.

“No occasion.” I batted my eyelashes at him and nibbled on the pink and purple one I’d chosen. “I was feeling a little guilty this morning after you left, because of that prank I pulled, and wanted to make it up to you.”

“Ah,” Ryker chuckled. “That got me in some hot water with your brother, by the way.”

“Let me guess, he still believes I’m as innocent as the pure-driven snow?” I batted my eyelashes at him and he laughed.

“Guess he forgot we’d lived together since college,” Lance butted in. I’d nearly forgotten he was there and reluctantly dragged my gaze from Ryker to Lance. The mood in the room instantly sobering.

“I guess you’re just that forgettable, Liam,” Ryker chipped in. He leaned in close to grab another cookie, my heart pounding with his closeness.

“It’s Lance,” he corrected irritably.

“Don’t really care,” Ryker smirked at me and I barely refrained from giggling. He turned back to me and whispered loudly enough for the bats in the attic to hear, “The sharpie was hell to remove too. I wasn’t sure I’d still have skin left when I was done scrubbing. But it was worth it. Greg fell off the treadmill when he saw it. Speaking of, won’t Greg be surprised when we tell everyone the news at the reception?”

“I don’t know if I can wait that long,” I groaned and leaned back in my chair, carefully placing a hand on my belly. Ryker’s eyes softened as he followed my movement and stared. The moment felt so real between us, I could almost believe it was true. Except for the glaringly obvious fact that we’d only kissed. Well... obvious to us, at least. “But given your womanizing reputation....”

“The past doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m in love with you and only you,” Ryker whispered quietly in my ear. I wasn’t sure if he was pretending anymore and my heart did a happy little somersault in my chest until I reminded myself that he was acting. But damn if he wasn’t convincing.

“Wait—,” Lance piped in, interrupting our beautiful if fake, moment. “Are you pregnant?!”

“My body is none of your business, Lance,” I replied, but couldn’t help smiling to soften my words. Lance glanced between Ryker and me. His silence was almost deafening before he finally excused himself. He left without another word, probably back to the kitchen, I guessed, since there was

no way he was getting out of here soon without an escort of snowplows.

“Well, that was fun,” Ryker purred. “Since we’re all going to be cooped up for some time, how about you and I have a picnic by the fire? Leave the wet blanket to mope on his own about how he lost such an exceptional woman.”

Yeah, that right there is why so many women have fallen into Ryker Jones’s bed over the years. His damn charm and sense of humour got me every single time. Even my heart was flip-flopping right now, and he’d clarified that we would never happen. We would never be a genuine couple. The memory of that day froze the blood in my veins. High school was never easy, but it was ten times worse when you were in love with your brother’s best friend and he only thought of you as the little sister he never had.

I swallowed back the lump in my throat and looked away to stare at the cabinet behind him. It was easy to believe this could be real.

What the heck was with this “feeling sorry for myself” business? I’ve always hated that. I lowered my lashes and glanced sideways at him.

Why couldn’t he be mine?

At least until the holidays.

Everyone else already thought he was.

I licked my lips and watched as his eyes dropped to follow the movement.

What would it be like?

“Emma?” His voice was warm and smooth as molasses when he said my name, warming me all over my body. Even my toes tingled. He moved closer, moving my chair so I was facing him. He placed his hands on the armrests, caging me in his arms.

“Ryker,” I sighed, my eyelids lowering as he bent down, bringing his face within an inch of mine.

A loud crash sounded from outside the room. I jumped. The spell between us was broken.

Ryker moved to the door and peeked into the hallway, and burst out laughing. I nearly tripped over my desk in my haste to see what was causing so much amusement.

Lance sprawled across the hallway, tangled in the lights and garland I’d put up in around the entryway and leading up to my office. He looked ridiculous trying to untangle himself from the tinsel, and making it worse. Laughter bubbled up inside me until I noticed his phone on the floor. I picked it up and glanced at the unlocked screen. On it was a message to someone named Cindy. I didn’t mean to read it. Only, as I was about to hand it back to him, I noticed my name mentioned a couple of times and I was curious.

Lance: I’ve got a scoop to share with you.

Cindy: I’m still not having dinner with you.

Lance: Not looking for a date from you. If I give this to you, I want an introduction.

Cindy: To who?

Lance: The weather girl.

Cindy: It'd better be worth it.

Lance: My ex, Emma, is getting married to Ryker Jones, the center forward for the Helena Stallions.

Cindy: That's old news, Lance. Everyone knows already. We're planning on doing a segment about the wedding.

Lance: What if I told you I just found out she was probably cheating on me for months with him? Maybe even years. They've known each other for a long time.

Cindy: That's too bad for you, but what does it have to do with me?

Lance: He's only marrying her because Emma's knocked up!

I gasped, my hands shaking. Blood drained from my body as the world tilted on its axis.

“Emma?” Ryker’s voice was full of concern. “What is it?”

“Wh-who is Cindy?” I asked, focusing on Lance as Ryker came to stand next to me.

“No one,” Lance bit out. “Give me back my phone! You have no right to read my private messages!”

I ignored him and re-read the messages while he kept struggling to untangle himself. I could feel Ryker tensing next to me as he read over my shoulder.

“Cindy Dale? The reporter for SNN?” He growled. Lance froze, visibly nervous now as he watched Ryker.

I stared at him, wondering how he knew a reporter from the Sports News Network. Especially when he’d always hated watching sports and always refused to accompany me to my brother’s home games.

“You slimy, sleazy little worm!” I screamed and launched myself at him. Lance disentangled himself enough to avoid my claw-like fingernails aiming for his smug face. “How dare you suggest to anyone that I cheated on you?! Get the hell out of my house!”

“We’re not in your house,” he grunted and doubled over when my knee connected with his balls.

“I don’t care!” I screamed. “Get out!”

“But I’ll freeze to death trying to find my car,” he gasped and slumped to the floor.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you find your way,” Ryker growled, practically picking Lance up and shoving him towards the door. He grabbed the phone from where I’d dropped it on the floor and threw Lance’s coat and hat at him. Opening the door, a freezing draft blasted my fiery face with icy daggers. Snow blew into the open portal.

“M-m-my phone. G-Give me back my phone!” Lance demanded in the chilly evening air.

“You want it? Go fetch it.” Ryker pulled his arm back and launched it into the storm. Then he grabbed the collar of

Lance's shirt and dragged him outside. I slumped to the floor, tears stinging my eyes as I barely held back a sob.

The minutes dragged by, feeling more like hours before Ryker finally returned. He shut and locked the door behind him before crossing the hallway and kneeling in front of me. Without a word, he slipped an arm under my knees and another behind my back, lifting me easily. I threw my arms around his neck and buried my head in his shoulder as he carried me up the stairs. How could this have become any worse than it already was? All I wanted was to prove to Lance that I'd moved on and was happy. Faking a pregnancy seemed natural since we were already faking an engagement. I suspected it might get back to my family, but even Ryker seemed ok with that at first. Now I've wrecked everything. I wouldn't be surprised if Ryker's agent made up some story to distance him from me. I was trying to help him save his career... now I've probably made everything worse with Lance's outright lies about me cheating on him with Ryker.

"Which room is finished?" Ryker asked, startling me from my thoughts.

"What? Oh... that one at the end of the hall. The master suite," I pointed down the long hallway. "You don't need to keep carrying me. I can walk."

"Nonsense," he gripped me as he pushed the door open with his hip. "I want to carry you." He grinned down at me and my heart flip-flopped. I was alone in a bedroom with the man who's owned my heart since tenth grade and he was holding

me in his arms. If this wasn't dangerous territory, I don't know what is.

"Seriously, Ryker. Put me down," I wriggled in his arms, trying to escape their iron grip on my body.

"If you insist," he smirked and let go. I screamed as I fell onto the mattress and bounced. Ryker jumped on the bed next to me, making me bounce higher. I shrieked and giggled when I finally landed.

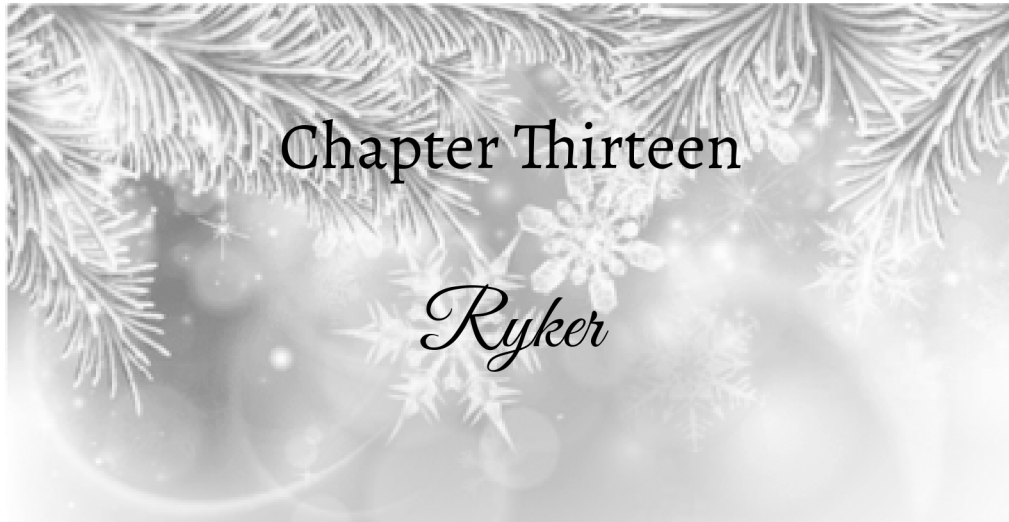
"I'd better call Margot," Ryker finally said, and the name was like a bucket of ice water dumped over my head. Reality crashed back down on us. Lance and his lies were going to ruin everything I'd been trying to help Ryker with.

"Yeah," I replied with a husky voice thick with unshed tears of frustration. "That's probably a good idea. What did you do with him, anyway?"

"Helped him to unbury his car and watched him drive down the street." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and pulled up Margot's number. "The snowplows are already hard at work keeping the streets moderately clean. He'll be fine. Your car, however, is completely covered. There's no point digging it out until the snow stops."

"Oh," I watched as he left the room, flopping back on the bed once he was out of sight. This was it. He was going to tell Margot everything, and she'd demand he cut ties with me now. Maybe find another woman to play the part of the doting fiance. That thought stung. I reminded myself that it was probably for the best. He would never be interested in me the

way I wanted him. I was only going to get hurt when this was all over. There was no way around it. Ryker will walk away and take my heart with him. Not even Lance had had that power over me. When will I learn?



”Margot, listen. It was supposed to be a harmless prank on her ex. How were we supposed to know that he even had a contact in journalism? Let alone that he would claim she cheated on him when the opposite really happened?” I squeezed my eyes shut as I held the phone up to my ear. This was a disaster. I didn’t need Margot explaining to me how big of a disaster it could end up being.

“I thought I told you no more pranks, Ryker? How am I supposed to convince the league that you’re settling down, that your pranking days are over when you pull a stunt like this?” she bit out. I could sense her frustration through the phone and winced. “As I see it, there are a couple of options here. You can cut ties with her —.”

“Not an option, Margot. She agreed to this to help me. How can you expect me to walk away? She’s my best friend’s little sister. I won’t abandon her to deal with the fallout alone. We both took part in it. If we fall, we do it together,” I replied through gritted teeth. I finally have the chance to make Emma mine. I finally admitted to myself and her brother the feelings

I've had for her for as long as I can remember. There's no way I'm losing out on this chance now because of some prick.

“Our other option is to put out a statement claiming that you both are excited about getting married and having a family, and he misunderstood,” she said.

“Yes, that sounds like a brilliant plan.” Relief filled me until I remembered the claim that Emma had cuckolded him with me.

“Why was he even there?”

“He claimed it was because he was in the neighbourhood when the storm struck and wanted to check up on her. But that makes no sense. I drove into the city, stopped at her house first to check on her, and when I realized she was at work, her roommate packed up some supplies for us in case we got stuck here and I came straight over. The roads were already pretty bad by the time I got here. If he was in the neighbourhood, he would have been here long before I was.” I wonder why he was really here. Was he hoping to get stuck here alone with her? What good would that have done him? Except to give him the ability to claim something happened between them... was that his plan? Wait out the storm with her, meanwhile attempting to seduce her... for what?

“The man sounds like a snake,” Margot said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “It's a pity she's not really pregnant. That would help so many things,” she whispered, and I wondered if she realized she'd said the words out loud. I couldn't help but

agree with her. Seeing Emma pregnant, knowing it was my child she carried... I smiled.

“How would that help?” Emma asked, making me jump. I spun to look at her, eyes wide as I realized what she’d heard. I cursed myself for having the phone on speaker.

“Emma —.” I started, but she put a hand up to stop me and grabbed my phone out of my hand.

“Margot? How would being pregnant help Ryker’s career?” She asked.

“Other than offering further proof to the league that he’s settling down? In this case, an ultrasound photo and a due date would prove that you didn’t get pregnant while dating that other bloke,” Margot replied. “And a new pregnancy would help quell the rumours that he’s marrying you because of it. I’m trying to sell an image. It’s not enough anymore to fake an engagement. Your ex has made a muddle of this entire situation. Either Ryker cuts ties with you and I sell a heartbroken player to the league, or he becomes a family man.”

“I see,” Emma replied, and I wondered what it was she was actually seeing.

“Of course... I could always put the feelers out about a pending adoption, I suppose,” Margot went on.

“No,” Emma replied. “I couldn’t do that to an innocent child. I could never get their hopes up when there was no actual intention of giving them a family. That would be cruel.”

“Have it your way, then. Ryker, what am I doing here?” Margot demanded.

“For now, just do what you can about Lance. As for the rest... we’ll get back to you on that.” I took my phone from Emma’s hand and ended the call.

Emma bit her thumbnail in that adorable way she had that always went straight to my cock. I groaned and forced myself to look away. Now was not the time to be thinking with the wrong head. I shoved the phone in my pocket and paced a couple of steps away from her to keep myself from yanking her into my arms and making love to her right there on the stairs.

“So I guess this is it, huh?” She finally broke the tense silence, and I glanced back to see tears sparkling in her eyes. It was a knife to my gut. I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her worries away. But I needed to earn the right to do that first. I want Emma. I’m playing for keeps, but I’ll be damned if I take advantage of her emotions right now. Greg would have every right to kick my ass tomorrow if I did, and I’d probably let him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“I-I wanted to help you fix your image, but I don’t see how I can do that now with Lance and all his bullshit.” She resumed nibbling on her nail and I barely contained a groan. “I’m only going to drag you deeper into the shit. We should probably end things now.”

“What if I told you I don’t want to end anything?” I took a step towards her. Her bright eyes glistened as she fixed them on me and widened. “This fake relationship is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Emma. I have no intention of walking away because things are a little tough right now.”

“But Lance—.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Lance. He can say whatever the hell he wants. What matters is that you and I know the truth.” I took another step toward her, stalking her like prey until she backed herself against the wall and I had her caged in my arms. “We both know what that prick did to you. How he betrayed you. If he wants to pull out his dick and have a pissing contest with me, he’s going to lose every goddamn time. Do you know why?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide as she listened with bated breath.

“Because I’m in love with you, Emma. I don’t care who knows it. And if this is the only shot I’m going to get with you, I’m going to fucking take it,” I growled. “I don’t want to break off this fake engagement. I don’t want any of this to be fake. Nothing would make me happier than knowing my baby was growing in your belly someday. But I don’t want to live a lie, Emma. I want you. All of you. Not because it’ll save my image. Not because some dick-wad started spreading rumours about us because we played an innocent prank on him. No. I want you, and I want to know that you want me back. That we’re in this together through thick and thin.”

“Wow,” she breathed. Our chests nearly touched, our breaths growing heavy as we stood there staring at each other. “I never knew you felt that way.”

“I didn’t want you to know,” I said. “Because I didn’t want it to affect my friendship with your brother. But I can’t do it anymore, Emma. I won’t deny what’s in my heart any longer.”

“I-I don’t know what to say,” she had a stunned look in her eye.

“Just — how about we start with a date, and see what happens?” I suggested, giving her an out if she needed it. My confession was a lot for anyone to handle. I can’t expect her to pick up where I left off and run with it. “That’s the real reason I came today. Melody even helped put together a picnic basket for us. It was a bit spur of the moment, but... how about it? Emma, will you join me for a picnic by the fire?”

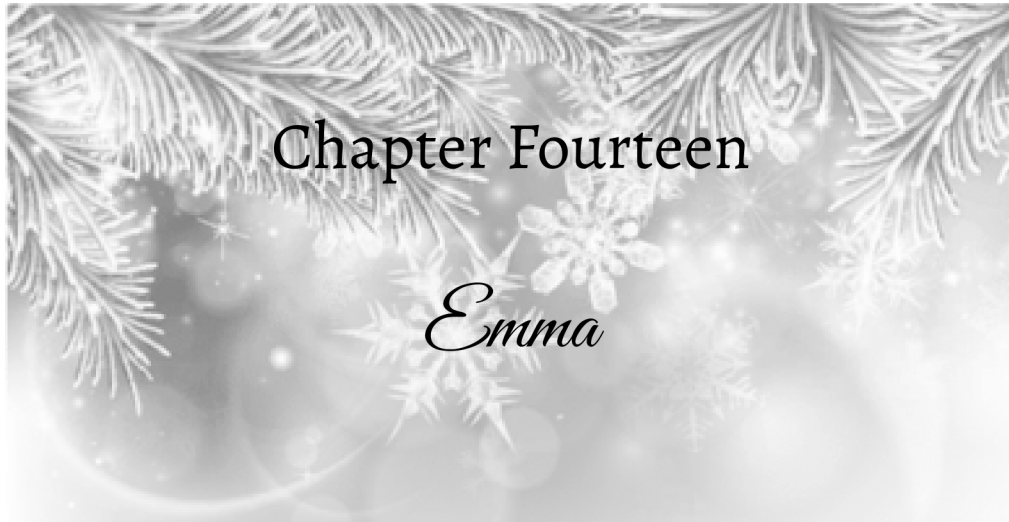
“I’d love to, Ryker. But first, I need a moment to freshen up a bit.” She bit her bottom lip, and I realized she was staring at mine as she did it. I barely contained the groan that bubbled up in my throat.

“Take all the time you need.” I pushed away from the wall and hesitated a moment before heading back down the stairs. I really hoped Melody put together a decent spread. This wasn’t exactly how I’d pictured our first proper date, but if there’s a second, I’ll have to step it up. Take Emma somewhere really nice.

Downstairs in her office, I grabbed the old picnic basket and duffle bag Melody packed and opened it up. Inside the duffle

bag, I found a giant sleeping bag, candles and is that... rose petals? Who keeps rose petals on hand? Who cares? I grinned. This might actually turn out to be the perfect first date, after all.

“Thank you, Melody,” I whispered and got to work.



Chapter Fourteen

Emma

I took a deep, steadying breath and stared at my face in the mirror. Ryker's confession had my heart all tangled up in knots. It was everything I'd ever wanted, only better. Closing my eyes, I took a deep inhale and slowly let it out. With shaking hands, I picked up the phone on the counter and hit dial.

"Devon? It's Emma. I'm sorry about our date the other night," I apologized.

"Emma, good to hear from you. Look, no hard feelings. We both know that we would never end up in anything serious," Devon's voice crackled through the phone. The snow must be coming down heavy enough to interfere with the satellites. Crap.

"Thanks, Devon. Can I ask you for a favour?" I asked.

"Sure, Emma. I'd love to help you out if I can get an invitation to that wedding of yours. It'd be one hell of an exclusive."

“It’s yours,” I promised. “But if you can’t help me, the wedding might never happen.”

“What can I do to help?”

“You mentioned that you’re a journalist?” I asked, remembering the day my hairdresser talked me into going on that date. Devon’s chuckle was warm as it echoed over the line.

“You could say that. I’m an anchor for the Sports News Network,” he replied. “I still can’t believe I didn’t put two and two together when I found out your last name.”

“It’s a pretty common name. Listen, my ex-boyfriend is trying to feed a story of lies to some journalist named Cindy Dale,” I began and Devon cut me off.

“I know her. She’s a talented reporter. I’m confident she would do everything in her power to vet a story before airing it.”

“Even if it’s a salacious tale of a cheating scandal that could ruin Ryker Jones’s image and possibly end his career?” I blurted, irritated by his blasé attitude. The line went silent for a moment and I was beginning to worry that I’d lost him when he finally spoke.

“Tell me more,” he said. I filled him in on everything. How I fell in love with Ryker the first time he kissed me on a dare, how he’d pushed me away for years until I believed he truly wanted nothing to do with me. I believed he saw me as only his friend’s kid sister and moved on. I dated a few guys and

finally saw myself settling down with Lance Tomlinson. We moved in together during our senior year of college and discussed getting married when we graduated. That was the plan. Graduation, then careers and marriage. Buy a house. Settle down with two or three kids once we were established. Only I walked in on him doing the nasty with his secretary one day. My mind drifted back to that day as I told Devon my story.



I ran blindly down the street, my tears mixing with the rain when I crashed into a man. He steadied me and didn't let go until I assured him I could stand.

"What's wrong Emma?" Ryker's voice washed over me like warm honey, soothing me.

"I-It's Lance," I sobbed, burying my head in his chest.

"Is he ok? What happened?"

"He-he's cheating on me!" I blurted and sobbed even harder. Ryker wrapped an arm around my shoulders and directed us out of the middle of the sidewalk. People rushed past us, dashing through the rain and splashing us with puddles, but I didn't care. The only thing I could see was Lance, his pants down around his ankles, his ass completely bare as he thrust himself into the woman sprawled, ass up, on his desk, her skirt pushed up over her hips. Their musky scent still burned in my nose and I gagged.

“Where is he? I’ll beat the daylight out of him,” Ryker offered. I couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking. His voice softened as he held me close. “You’re too good for him anyway, Emma.”

“You’re only saying that because you’ve never liked him,” I sniffed and dashed my tears away with the back of my hand.

“No, Emma. I’m saying that because it’s true,” he said, his hand rubbing circles on my back soothingly.

“You never liked anyone I’ve dated. If you had your way, I’d be alone forever,” I said.

“Not forever. I see you settling down one day with a good man. One who constantly works to keep you happy. A couple of kids toddling around your feet. A house full of love and laughter like the one you grew up in. That’s what you deserve. Nothing less. Lance could never have given you that,” he replied. I snorted in derision.

“Men like that don’t exist anymore,” I said and pushed away from him. “I’m sorry I ruined your sweater.”

“You ruined nothing. But you’re wrong. Men like that exist. You just need to find the right one.”



“Ryker helped me move Lance out of my townhouse and put his stuff in a storage locker. My best friend moved in shortly after. I didn’t see it then, but he meant what he said about the

man he saw me with. He was talking about himself,” I explained, then added a bit of ad-libbing to the story. “It wasn’t until the game that I realized what he’d meant. He was waiting for me to be ready to move on. We talked for hours after his game that night and we decided we didn’t want to wait and do things the traditional way. Why date for months or years when we’ve known each other for most of our lives? It was an impulsive decision, but one neither of us regrets. And tonight we were talking about having a family one day when Lance walked in on our private conversation and misinterpreted what he heard.”

“So what does he have to gain by making these claims?” Devon asked, startling me into reality. I’d completely forgotten I was talking to him, engrossed in memories. Everything was so clear now. Ryker was in love with me and had been for a long time. The idea made me warm all over.

“Other than to hurt me? I have no idea,” I replied. “It makes little sense that he came to my place of business during a snowstorm with the desire to check up on me. I haven’t heard from him since the day he moved out.”

“I’ll see if I can do a little digging. Let me talk to Cindy and see what we can figure out. SNN prides itself on relating accurate information,” Devon replied, all businesslike. I thanked him and hung up.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. That went better than I’d hoped. Maybe we could salvage this entire situation after all. I splashed some cold water on my face, the

icy tendrils dripping down my neck and collar. Finger-combing my hair, I pinched my cheeks to give them some colour. I really need to keep some makeup here for emergencies. Not that anyone could have foreseen a romantic first date with the man of my dreams during a snowstorm. The lights flickered, and I quickly headed downstairs to find the flashlights I kept in the kitchen.

An orange glow emanated from my office, drawing me to it. Flashlights in each hand, I tapped on the French doors and waited. Ryker quickly opened them with a flourish. When I saw what he'd done, I stared, open-mouthed, at the scene. Tea light candles adorned every surface of the room. Was that a sleeping bag spread out on the floor before the fire? A picnic basket sat proudly in the middle of the blanket, surrounded by plates and wine glasses. A bottle of my favourite wine rested nearby. Rose petals littered the hardwood floor, encircling the blanket.

“How—?” I was too speechless to speak.

“I wish I could take all the credit, but Melody helped me out. She packed the picnic and threw in the wine, candles, and flower petals.” He blushed and stared at the floor, strewn with rose petals. I've never seen him blush before. It did crazy things to my insides. “I had to convince her first, though, that I was serious about all of this.”

“She threw all of this together when you stopped by my place this afternoon?” I gawked. “How long were you there for?”

“A few minutes maybe,” he shrugged. “It wasn’t very long, to be honest. She packs fast.”

I chuckled.

“I bet she did,” I muttered under my breath. Melody didn’t know the meaning of fast. But she was well known for meddling. I wonder how long she’d had all of this packed and ready to go? Since I declared myself ready for dating again? Or when I agreed to pretend an engagement with Ryker? It didn’t matter. What mattered was that this was beautiful, and I would never forget it. I owe her one.

“I promise, our next date will be better. This was a spur-of-the-moment thing,” he rubbed the back of his neck and I grinned. He was nervous. About being on a date with me? It was so adorable I wanted to melt in a giant puddle.

“Unless our next date is a Hawaiian vacation or a private tropical island all to ourselves, I can’t imagine anything better,” I babbled and flushed. Maybe I was nervous too, I admitted to myself. “So what’s for lunch?” I asked, changing the subject and taking a seat on the blanket.

“It looks like peanut butter and jam sandwiches, from what I can tell,” he laughed and sat next to me, flipping open the lid of the basket. “Wine?”

“I’d love some,” I laughed at the idea of wine and peanut butter and jelly. Definitely a gourmet picnic. I laughed at the irony and soon Ryker joined in. He poured a glass of wine and offered it to me, then poured one for himself. I sipped it and shut my eyes to savour the sweet tartness. It washed over my

tongue, coating it with berry flavours. A moan escaped my lips. I was completely unaware of it until Ryker coughed a little, and I flushed from embarrassment.

“It’s my favourite,” I explained and took another sip to mask the sudden onset of nerves.

“I’ll make a note of that for the future,” Ryker replied, his voice thick and husky. I risked a glance at him from beneath my lashes and caught him staring at my mouth. The devil on my shoulder screamed at me to lick my lips and I couldn’t resist the urge to let my tongue dart out and glide along my bottom lip. His eyes tracked the movement, and I struggled not to lean in and taste his lips with my tongue instead.

“So... we should probably discuss pushing back the wedding or cancelling it even,” I changed the subject.

“Why?” He asked, his eyes shooting up to meet mine, wide with surprise.

“Because we’re not getting married....”

“Are you changing your mind about us?” He asked, his earlier excitement diminishing, judging by the downturn of the corners of his mouth.

“Not at all. But we’re not even officially engaged. In fact, this is our first date. Isn’t a wedding rushing things? We don’t even know if we’re sexually compatible, so this could all be for nothing.” I rushed on and took a deep sip, using the wine to lubricate the foot in my mouth.

Ryker took the wineglass from me and set it down on the floor out of my reach. I opened my mouth to protest when his lips crashed down on mine instead. He was gentle at first, teasing and familiar from the couple of times we'd kissed before. It was nice, with a spark of something I couldn't identify. Time stood still, encapsulating our embrace in a bubble or snow globe. Then he moved and deepened the kiss, his lips urging mine wider as his tongue claimed my mouth and sent fire to all of my nerve endings. When we parted, I was seeing stars.

"There's only one way to find out," he whispered, his lips barely a breath away from mine.

"Holy crap," I gaped. Ryker chuckled, and I flushed, realizing I'd said that out loud. I grabbed a strawberry and shoved it in my mouth to keep from saying anything else stupid. What was wrong with me? I've been in love with Ryker Jones for years. YEARS! Now he's finally looking at me the way I've dreamed he would when we were younger and all I can say is holy crap? What about 'YES PLEASE!' Or even 'It's about damn time!'

Ryker's seductive magic was finally being aimed at me. So why am I not jumping on him right now? I wanted to scream some sense into myself, but I was completely brain-dead from the waist up.

"Emma?" His face fixed into a puzzled expression as his laughter subsided.

I was being offered everything I've ever wanted, and I'm blowing it right now. What is wrong with me? I finally shook my brain free of its fog and leaped. Ryker let out a huff of surprise as I pushed him backwards and followed him to the ground. Straddling his lap, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the side of his lips.

"I like the take-charge attitude," he murmurs with a smirk.

"If you think you can handle it," I wiggled my eyebrows. Ryker growled and pulled me down until we were a breath apart.

"The only thing I can't handle is spending another minute apart from you," he replied and claimed my mouth with his lips and tongue. The only word I can come up with in my scrambled brain to describe his kiss — is magic. His kiss was magic. What would the rest of him be like? He shifted his hips beneath me and I completely lost all thought after that.

I broke the kiss. Sitting up, panting, I grabbed the hem of my shirt and ripped it off over my head. Buttons went flying. I heard a ping as one hit the glass screen of the fireplace. But I didn't care. I couldn't bear all these layers between us anymore.

"Fuck," he growled as he stared up at me. His hands gripped my hips. I moved to remove my bra, but he stopped me. He sat up, one hand moving to the nape of my neck to pull me closer.

Our breaths hitched as our chests met.

“Look at me, Emma,” he growled. My eyes met his. “I don’t think we’re going to have any compatibility issues,” he said. I laughed, startled by his declaration. He grinned and flipped us over. I squealed in surprise. Ryker raised himself up and whipped off his shirt. My mouth salivated over his chiselled abs. I realized they could be mine and swallowed the drool pooling in my mouth. He could be mine. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. For Ryker to be mine, and for me to be his.

He lowered himself on top of me. I pulled his head down and kissed him again, deeper this time, claiming him with my tongue and lips. He unclasped my bra without breaking our kiss. I groaned as he moulded my breast with his calloused palm.

“Ryker,” I moaned. His touch was better than I imagined. But I wanted more. So much more. I wrapped my legs around his waist and rubbed my core against his erection. It wasn’t enough. There was too much fabric in the way.

“Emma,” he panted in my ear. His breath was warm. His husky voice sent shivers along every nerve ending. “I don’t think incompatibility will be an issue.”

“Probably not,” I chuckled. “But I’ve got you where I’ve wanted you for a very long time, and I’m not letting you go now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of letting you go,” he replied. “I almost did when you seemed happy with Lance, but never again. Never again, Emma. You’re mine.”

“Wait,” I paused, my chest heaving as I dragged in a ragged breath. “What do you mean, you almost let me go? You’ve never once let on that you wanted anything more—.”

“I started pranking people when you started dating that dimwit I told you to stay away from.” He dropped a kiss on my collarbone, dragging his tongue from my shoulder to the crook of my neck. “It’s how I coped with my feelings for you and my friendship with Greg.”

“Ew, please don’t bring up my brother right now,” I groaned. Ryker chuckled. His tongue continued up my throat to my ear. Then his words hit me like a tonne of bricks. Our first kiss. That was two days after our first kiss. Our only kiss until that last home game. Someone had broken into my boyfriend’s locker and stolen his keys.

“How did you get his car on top of the school?” I asked, remembering how frantic we’d looked for his car after school. That prank had made Ryker a legend that year.

“A good magician never reveals his tricks,” he replied.

“But that was—,” I gaped for a minute, trying to clear the fog he was creating in my brain so I could think.

“It means I’ve been in love with you since you were fifteen, Emma.” He paused, rolling off me and sprawling on his back in front of the roaring fire.

“But you never—.”

“No,” he cut me off before I could finish asking.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you were two years younger,” he explained. “And Greg’s my best friend. Back then, he was my only real friend. My parents were going through a nasty divorce. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters. Greg was all I had left. I wasn’t going to risk losing him because I had a crush on you.”

“Oh,” I stared at the ceiling, desperately trying to wrap my brain around what he’d said.

“Greg’s as close to a brother as I’ll ever have, Emma. But I was a fool for thinking I’d ever be able to get you out from under my skin. It wasn’t until I saw how serious you and Lance were getting that I realized it wasn’t a simple crush. I tried letting you go. When you caught him cheating on you, I was thrilled and angry. I hated him for hurting you. But I decided that day that I wasn’t about to let you get away a second time,” he said.

Ryker Jones has loved me since I was fifteen, I realized. A million emotions traced through me with that knowledge. Excitement. Elation. Joy. Love. So much love. And annoyance. I could’ve spent the rest of my life with another man, always wondering what if, and never knowing that he felt the same way. I rolled on my side, facing him, and punched him in the shoulder.

“Damn you, Ryker!” I shouted, climbing to my feet. Tears streamed down my face. I covered myself with my hands, searching for my bra, a shirt, or anything. “You made me feel like I was crazy! Do you know how much it hurt to see you with all those other girls? I cried myself to sleep every night

for weeks after that first kiss. Wondering why I was so different! What I lacked that you wanted?!”

“Emma,” he called my name, standing behind me. He was so close, I could feel his body heat on my back. “Emma, I screwed up. I was a scared, stupid kid.”

The heat from his hands radiated down my arms. I stared at his firm hands, which wrapped around my arms. Wonderfully warm, calloused hands with clean, short nails. Did he get manicures? His nails were almost as good as my own, polished ones.

Greg. All of this was because of Greg. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. In high school, he chose my brother over me. All because he was afraid to lose the only other family he had left after his parent’s divorce. That was why he was always at our house. With his parents fighting, who would want to be around that? He was admitting his feelings towards me now, though. A thrill shot through me. One that instantly chilled when I realized that by choosing me now, he might lose my brother. A friendship — no, a brotherhood — that has been the only stable relationship in his life for nearly fifteen years. Sure, they’d been friends since kindergarten, but it wasn’t until their senior year of high school that their bond deepened. Could I let that happen? Would he resent me later if he lost Greg’s friendship? A million questions whirled around in my brain.

“Emma?” He asked, reminding me we were still in the middle of... whatever this was.

“I — I think we need to slow things down, Ryker,” I mumbled. My heart and head warred with each other as I spoke.

“Did I say something wrong?” He asked, his hands dropping from my arms. I instantly missed them and turned to face him.

“Not at all,” I replied quietly, dashing tears from my eyes. “It’s just a lot to digest at once, that’s all. I need a little time.”

“Ok,” Ryker looked a little forlorn and my heart ached for him. All I wanted was to take him in my arms and climb him, to resume our earlier sex-capades. But my conscience screamed that it would be wrong. Wrong to step between the man I love and the man he loves as a brother.

“Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere, Emma,” he trapped my chin between his thumb and forefinger and forced me to look up at him. His other hand tenderly tucked a stray hair behind my ear. “I’m in this for the long haul.”

I was speechless. What does a girl say to something like that? Instead of speaking, I pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek.

“How about we eat these sandwiches and polish off the wine?” I suggested.

“Sounds perfect,” was all he said, and we sat next to each other on the blanket, my head on his shoulder. We ate in silence, staring into the flames of the fire as it licked the logs.

Eventually, we passed out in front of the fire, curled up in each other's arms.



My body ached. I rolled over with a groan. The afternoon slowly returned to me, the snowstorm, Lance, and even Emma's strange behaviour after I admitted my feelings to her. A glance to my right confirmed that she was still fast asleep on the blanket. What was she dreaming about? I wish I could see inside her head right now. But maybe I don't. What if all of this was for nothing? The fight with Greg, pouring out my heart to her, everything could be for nothing if she didn't return my feelings. I watched her for a few minutes, her cheeks flushed from the heat cast by the smouldering embers of the fire. She stirred but didn't wake. I turned and looked straight out the window. What time was it? It looked like the snow had stopped, but it was pitch dark outside. Night had fallen while we slept.

I realized I should probably check if the roads are clear and wake Emma. But she looked so peaceful. I didn't want to disturb her. Instead, I crouched down next to her and slipped my arms beneath her legs and back, lifting her. She mumbled something in her sleep and buried her head in my shoulder.

My heart swelled, and I smiled sadly down at her as I carried her out of her office.

Upstairs, I used my foot to nudge open the bedroom door. Careful not to let it hit her as I carried her over the threshold and gently laid her out on the bed. She looked so peaceful, lying there with her hair golden hair spread out over the pillow. I wanted to join her. Instead, I grabbed a blanket from the end of the bed and draped it over her, bending to tuck it in around her.

“I love you, Ryker,” she whispered.

I thought she was still sleeping, but the words lit a fire of hope in my chest. I planned to go back downstairs and clean up from our picnic. But Emma had other ideas. Her arms wrapped around my neck, pulling me down to the bed. Surprised, I nearly landed on her. Emma giggled.

“Think that’s funny, huh?” I tried to sound serious, but the giant grin on my face belied my words. She answered with more giggling. If I remember correctly, Emma was very ticklish. I tested my memory and paid her back by tickling the insides of her elbow. She shrieked and wriggled. Trying to get away. But I wasn’t about to let her go. I climbed on the bed and pulled her back to me, tickling her mercilessly. Laughter filled the room. Merging with her shrieks.

Emma reached behind her, distracting me with her lithe body splayed out beneath me on the bed. I paused, lust filling my veins. I lowered my head to kiss her and was struck by a pillow. It hit me in the side of the head with surprising force.

Feathers snowed down around us. I growled playfully, and Emma laughed.

“Think that’s funny, huh?” I asked. I snatched the other pillow, rising on my knees to get a better angle.

But before I could hit her back, she hooked her legs around my waist and flipped us over. I gasped for air, trying to catch my breath from laughing so hard. Emma was glorious when she smiled like that. I could listen to her laughter all day long.

“I think I like this spot better,” she teased.

I couldn’t help but agree. She took my breath away. The pillow lay abandoned on the far side of the bed. The atmosphere changed. Emma lowered her head, pressing a kiss to the side of my lips. I turned my head. Our lips met, and I quickly deepened the kiss. Everything I wanted, everything I felt, I poured into that kiss. All of my love, desire, and admiration for her. She met my every tongue thrust with one of her own. We engaged in a battle of tongues. The power flickered and went out. But neither of us paid any attention.

“Ryker,” she gasped, breaking away. That’s when I noticed she was straddling my thigh. I raised my leg and grasped her hips down on it, moving enough to make her gasp. “Ryker! Oh god, that feels so good—.”

I grinned.

“You like that, huh?” I asked. Emma could only nod as she increased the pace of her hips, rubbing my thigh. She was

glorious with her eyes shut and her mouth slightly open in an ‘o’ of pleasure. “Tell me what you want, Baby Girl.”

“I—I want — fuck. Ry, I can’t do this,” she surprised me by climbing off my lap.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I can’t fuck you, Ryker,” she explained. “Not when you’re wearing my brother’s clothes.”

I laughed. That’s what was holding her back.

“I can fix that, Baby Girl.”

I stood and whipped off the t-shirt and sweatpants I’d borrowed. My hard cock sprang free, and I fisted it. I pumped slowly up and down. Her eyes flickered down. She licked her lips. A bead of cum escaped the tip of my cock. I wished it wasn’t so dark right now. I wanted to see her full reaction. Was she touching herself? Could she see me stroking off in front of her? The fixated look on her face told me she could. Then she surprised me by dropping to her knees.

I groaned when her lips wrapped around my length. Wrapping her hair around my fist, I guided her mouth. My hips thrust against her as I pounded her face. I couldn’t believe this was actually happening. After years of dreaming about what it might be like with her, it was almost too much. I didn’t want it to end like this. I slipped my cock free before I exploded, Emma let out a mew of disappointment.

“We’re only getting started, Baby Girl,” I promised. “We’ve got all night.”

Emma mewed. I bent and picked her up, placing her back on the bed. She yanked her shirt off and tossed it aside. Her bra was a piece of black lace that barely contained her perfect breasts. I didn't touch them right away. Instead, I grabbed the waist of her skirt and yanked, pulling it down her long legs. Her panties matched her bra, and I nearly came looking at her. My mouth salivated. I wanted a taste. I wanted to bury my face in that beautiful juncture. Instead, I pressed my lips to the inside of her knee.

Emma gasped, raising up on her elbows. I studied her as I tasted her inner thigh. Watched how she threw her head back. Felt her writhe beneath my touch as I got closer to my goal. Her panties were soaked. I skimmed over them, briefly inhaling her scent. She was perfect. Perfect.

I kissed the inside of her other thigh. Hooking my fingers into her panties, I used them to rub against her swollen lips.

“Ry, Ry, Ry,” she called over and over. My name on her lips filled the room. I wanted to roar with pride. I yanked those panties down and buried my face in her core. Using my tongue, I spelt my name on her pussy. This was mine. She was mine. And she owned my soul.

My tongue swirled and stroked. My hands caressed her body. Her knees hooked over my shoulders. Emma moaned and writhed with each flick of my tongue. Her hips met my every thrust at an increasing, chaotic tempo.

“Ry!” she moaned as she bucked and shook. I tasted every second of her orgasm. It was beautiful. She is beautiful. I

didn't let up, savouring her as she shook and screamed. Tearing myself away was difficult, but I promised myself I'd bury my face in her every chance I got.

Rising, I climbed onto the bed. My knees held her legs apart. That's when I remembered something. I froze.

"What's wrong?" Emma stared up at me in confusion.

"I don't have a condom," I replied guiltily.

Emma bit her lip. My pulse raced. I dropped my head to her breasts. Suckling on her nipples through the lace of her bra. She arched her back, pressing them into my face. If I couldn't fuck her properly, I damn sure would not let her get away that easily. I was considering my options when the power came back on. Black spots danced across my eyes, and I blinked until they were gone.

"Ry? It's ok," Emma said. "I don't care if we use protection. I trust you."

"You do?" I asked, surprised and frozen in shock. She was going to let our first time together be bareback? God, she was a gem. I wondered dimly if she'd ever let anyone be with her like that.

"I've never tried it without one, but I hear it's better," she answered my unasked question. She moved her hips, grinding into my rock-hard cock. I was ready to explode. "Have you ever—?"

I shook my head.

"Never?" she asked.

“Never, Baby Girl,” I promised and sank into her. I groaned and held myself still for a moment, relishing the sensation. “Looks like we both have a first we can explore together.”

“I can’t wait to discover more,” she breathed. I grunted and tossed her leg over my shoulder. There wasn’t much I haven’t tried, but I’d give her anything she wanted.

I slowly withdrew, and she mewed in protest. One hard thrust followed another and another. Her body pulsed and clenched around my cock. I circled my hips and thrust in harder and harder.

The bed creaked. The headboard banged on the wall. I threw her other knee over my shoulder so I could pump deeper and harder. I was so close to coming.

“Emma!” I called out, preparing to pull out any second.

“Harder, Ry,” she begged. “Harder.”

I thrust as hard as I could. Once. Twice. Emma shook and twitched. She came on my cock. I followed her down the rabbit hole. All thought was lost as I thrust once more and came deep inside her.

Her legs dropped from my shoulders as I collapsed beside her. We lay tangled together on the bed. The rapid pace of our breathing was the only sound in the entire house. Emma curled up in my arms, her fingers playing with my hair. I pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose.

“Ry?” Her voice sounded almost timid as she whispered my name.

“It’s ok, Emma. I’ll run out and grab some Plan B as soon as the roads are clear,” I reassured her.

“But what if that’s not what I want?” She asked. “I mean, if you don’t want to take the chance, it’s fine. I’ll take the pill. But what if we took that chance?”

“You mean wait and see if you get pregnant?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” the word was barely a breath out of her mouth.

“If that’s what you want,” I paused to look into her eyes before I spoke the next part. “Why wait and see?”

“What do you mean?” She asked, her eyes wide as she stared back at me.

I nudged her with my hardening cock.

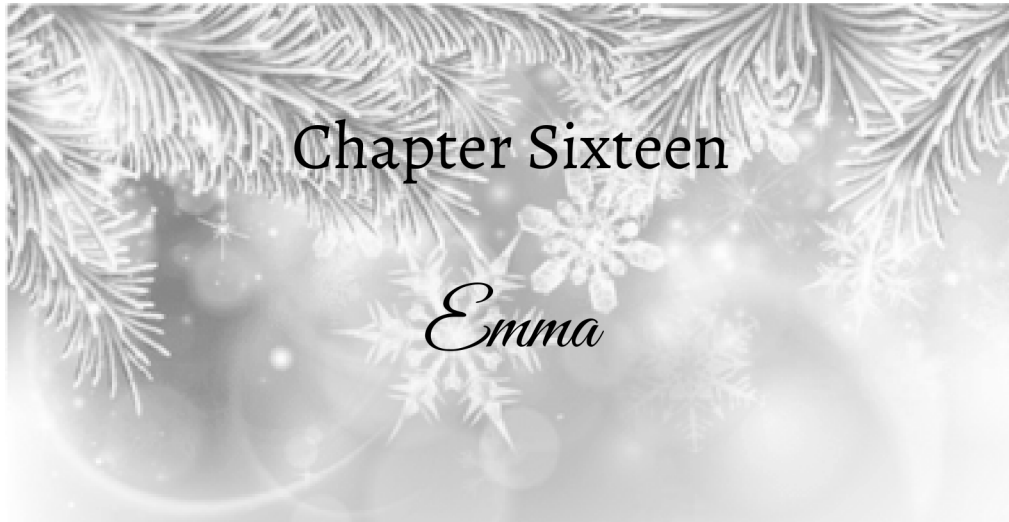
“I mean, I’d love nothing more than to have a family with you, Emma,” I replied. “The sooner you get pregnant, the better.”

I rolled her over onto her belly. Emma rose on all fours and sent me a seductive grin over her shoulder as she wiggled her hips. The woman was a natural seductress. I loved it.

My hand trailed down her spine. The other spread her folds. I plunged back into her warmth. My finger circled her nub. I bit her shoulder, marking her as mine. I might not be her first but damned if I won’t be her last. This time, I rode her hard and fast. She pulsed around my cock. I shuddered, losing all control as I thrust wildly. She didn’t seem to mind meeting my every thrust. This time, when she came, I was buried deep

inside her. She rode out my orgasm, milking me for every drop until I was completely spent.

We collapsed on the elegant duvet. After a few minutes, Emma rose to get cleaned up. I watched as she left the room, her bare ass swaying with every step. Yawning, I tried to keep my eyes open until she got back, but I couldn't do it. My eyes closed and within seconds, I was fast asleep.



The lights flickered and went out again. I scrambled into the bathroom, looking for the emergency candles and lighter I kept in the cupboard. Knocking over bottles until I finally found what I was looking for. I lit the candles and placed them on the vanity. The glow lit up my face in the mirror and I stared at my reflection, watching the orange and gold flames flicker over my features.

Had I really just fucked Ryker? My brother's best friend? Greg was probably going to murder both of us, but it was worth it. I can't get over the fact that I basically told him to impregnate me. How much wine did I drink? All this pregnancy talk is getting to me.

I glanced down at my naked body. That can't happen again. Not until I'm sure he's serious. Even if he wasn't, I don't regret a second of it. That was the best sex I've ever had. I grinned. Tomorrow might be different. We might regret all of this in the morning. But I still had tonight. And I intended to take advantage of that. What my brother doesn't know won't hurt us.

Cleaning up quickly, I blew out one candle and took the other to light my way back to the man in my bed. His breathing was shallow and even. I cast the glow of the candle over his face to see his features relaxed in sleep. But his cock wasn't. I bit my lip.

I couldn't possibly take advantage of him while he slept.. could I? I wanted to wake up him in a sexy way. Maybe blowing him, or straddling his lap and riding him till he woke. Would he like that? While I contemplated what to do, my free hand slid over my body. I caressed my breasts. My nipples ached for attention. My pussy clenched.

Ryker groaned and shifted in his sleep.

I've never felt so wanton before. So needy. But I was. I placed the candle on the nightstand and used my other hand to relieve some of that ache. My thumb swirled and flicked my nub. I hooked my fingers and slipped them inside.

It wasn't enough.

It wasn't him.

I don't remember deciding to climb onto the bed. Before I knew it, I was straddling his erection. Impaling myself on him. I rocked gently at first. Careful not to wake him at first. I circled my hips and gasped. Then sank a little lower on his cock. Ryker moved beneath me. My eyes popped open, surprised and a little worried that he might be upset about what I was doing. But the look in his eyes as they met mine set my whole being on fire.

This time was slower at first. Sweeter. I made love to Ryker. Showing him with my body everything that I'd kept locked up in the deepest depths of my heart for years.

Every movement hit that perfect spot. Ryker propped himself up on the headboard. His hands were free to roam and explore every nook and cranny. I lowered my head and pressed a kiss to his lips. He teased my lips apart with his tongue. Holding me close. His head dropped to my collarbone. Then lower to my breasts. I groaned, throwing my head back. My back arched, pressing my chest into his face. He bit my nipple and swirled his tongue. Soothing it.

Then he flipped us over, taking control. He sped up the pace. Ramming into my body. Changing the angle so he hit different spots until he found the one that made me lose control.

“Ryker,” I screamed, shattering. Clutching the sheets in my fist as I came. Hard.

“Emma,” he grunted in my ear. His breath was warm on my neck. He pumped harder and harder.

“Fuck,” he held himself still, filling me with his seed as he came.

I mewled in protest when he pulled out.

“You're so greedy,” he teased. Ryker dropped a kiss on my lips as he lifted himself off me. He tucked me into his arms, pressing his body into my back. I rested my head on his muscular arm. My eyelids were drooping and heavy.

“That was the best way to be woken up,” he whispered.
“You’re amazing, Emma. I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I replied, and yawned.

Ryker chuckled.

“Get some rest, Baby Girl. You deserve it,” he replied. I smiled and snuggled into him, letting my eyes close as I drifted into sleep.



Oh god, what is that infernal light boring a hole in my eyeballs? I tried to block it out with my arm, but it was useless. Was it morning already? How was that even possible? I swear I fell asleep only a few minutes ago. I cracked a reluctant eye open. Not only was it morning, but the power had come back on. We never turned the lights off last night. Crap. No wonder it was brighter than a cement parking lot on a hot summer’s day. I rolled over to nudge Ryker to turn the light off since the switch was on his side of the bed, but all I found was empty space. Cold sheets had me bolting out of bed, the light completely forgotten.

Where was he? Had I dreamt all of that? A quick glance at my naked body assured me it hadn’t been a dream. So where was he? Did he regret what we did? Did he leave? After everything, he’d said last night. I was a fool for believing him. Oh god. We didn’t use protection. We were joking about getting knocked up, but what if I really did and he left,

anyway? Or worse, stayed, but withdrew emotionally from me. Could I live that way?

I darted into the closet and grabbed a spare pair of jeans and a blouse I kept there for emergencies and dressed. In the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face and repaired my makeup as best I could with the minimal amount I kept there, and finished getting cleaned up. My phone sat on the counter and I grabbed it before racing downstairs, blinded by tears. I searched my contacts, looking for Ryker's number.

A humming sound came from the kitchen. I froze at the base of the stairs. Was that him? Maybe he hadn't left after all. I stared down the dark hallway. That was definitely a man's voice. Slowly, as if through quicksand, I walked towards the sound.

In the kitchen, Ryker was in front of the coffeemaker, pressing buttons and humming to himself. All he wore were the jogging pants I'd lent him. His back was bare, the muscles rippling as he moved. I must have made a sound because he turned and grinned at me.

"Morning, Baby Girl," he greeted, his voice low and husky and sending shivers along every nerve ending in my body.

"Morning," I smiled. "How'd you sleep?"

"Better with you in my arms than I have in the last fifteen years," he replied. "I made us some coffee. Hope you don't mind. I had to snoop a little to find it."

“I don’t mind at all. Why didn’t you wake me? I could have told you where to find it.” I moved to the counter next to him, needing to be closer.

“After last night, you deserved to get a bit of rest,” he replied. “Especially since I plan on repeating it at the next available opportunity.”

I shivered, remembering the multiple orgasms he’d given me. I couldn’t wait to repeat it either. He wrapped an arm around my waist and I turned towards him, my coffee was completely forgotten.

“So what’s stopping you?” I asked breathlessly, my lips an inch from his. His hands gripped my hips and lifted me onto the counter. He nudged my legs apart and moved between them.

“All these clothes are slowing me down a little,” he teased.

“And your brother is standing right here,” a voice boomed through the small room.

I jumped.

Ryker steadied me as I slid to the floor. His hands were on my hips until I was steady on my feet. He gave me a reassuring smile before focusing on my brother standing in the doorway.

“What the hell is going on here?” Greg demanded. His face was red and mottled with fury as he stared at Ryker. “Did you fuck my little SISTER?”

“Excuse me?” I gritted my teeth. His attitude was infuriating. “I am NOT a little girl!”

“Hey man, calm down and let’s talk about this,” Ryker tried to placate him.

“There’s nothing to talk about. My former best friend just ended our lifelong friendship for a fuck!” Greg shouted. “All these years, down the drain. Why Ryker? Not enough women on the entire planet for you?”

“That’s enough!” I shouted, stomping towards him.

“Can’t you see that he’s taking advantage of you?” Greg demanded, staring down at me. “I know how much you’ve crushed on him when we were kids. He’s using you to further his career! How can you be so blind and reckless?”

Did he imply I was a fool? Seriously? I saw red. Before I knew it, my palm was connecting with his cheek, the contact ringing through the house.

“How dare you?” I growled. Ryker moved blindingly fast, somehow wedging himself between Greg and me. “I am a grown-ass woman who hasn’t needed a big brother to look out for her for years! Years! You don’t get to waltz in here and tell me who I can and can’t have a relationship with!”

“You don’t know what he’s like with women!” Greg roared back. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“Hey that’s a low blow man,” Ryker bit out.

“Has all this wedding business gotten to both of you? He will not marry you, Emma!” Greg shouted.

“Yes! I am marrying her!” Ryker declared, getting into Greg’s face. “And if you have a problem with it, then you’re not the man I thought you were.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” My brother demanded.

“It means if you can’t be my friend and be happy for us, then you can turn around and walk out that door. I’ve been in love with Emma for a long time and you don’t get to walk in here and claim that you know my heart better than I do. I’d like for this to not interfere with our friendship. That’s the exact reason I never acted on my feelings for her. But I can’t pretend anymore! I’m done pretending! I’ve wanted no one else but her. So please, don’t make me choose.” Ryker nearly choked on his words. I wanted to soothe him somehow. But I wasn’t sure what I could do. So I slipped my hand in his and squeezed.

This was the last thing I’d ever wanted. The very thing Mason had warned me about when I was younger. I never wanted to come between Ryker and Greg, and now I’ve done exactly that.

Greg turned and marched out of the kitchen. A moment later, a slamming door shook the house, announcing his departure.

I stared, stunned and furious, at the empty entryway. How dare he storm in here like that? A seed of guilt planted itself in my belly. I had done this. I had ruined the best relationship Ryker’s ever had in his life. He’d even admitted that it was the

reason he'd kept his feelings for me to himself all these years. Did I really want a relationship with him, knowing that it ruined his friendship with my brother? Could I live with myself?

“Stop,” Ryker demanded, standing in front of me. His index finger tilted my chin until I met his eye. “Stop doubting if this is worth it. My feelings for you haven't changed. I jumped in, knowing full well that Greg wouldn't take it well and it was a risk I had to take. I can't live anymore, keeping the love I have for you caged inside my heart. Have your feelings for me changed at all?”

Tears beaded at the corner of my eyes. He smoothed them away with his thumb.

“No,” I sobbed. “No, my heart belongs to you. It always has.”

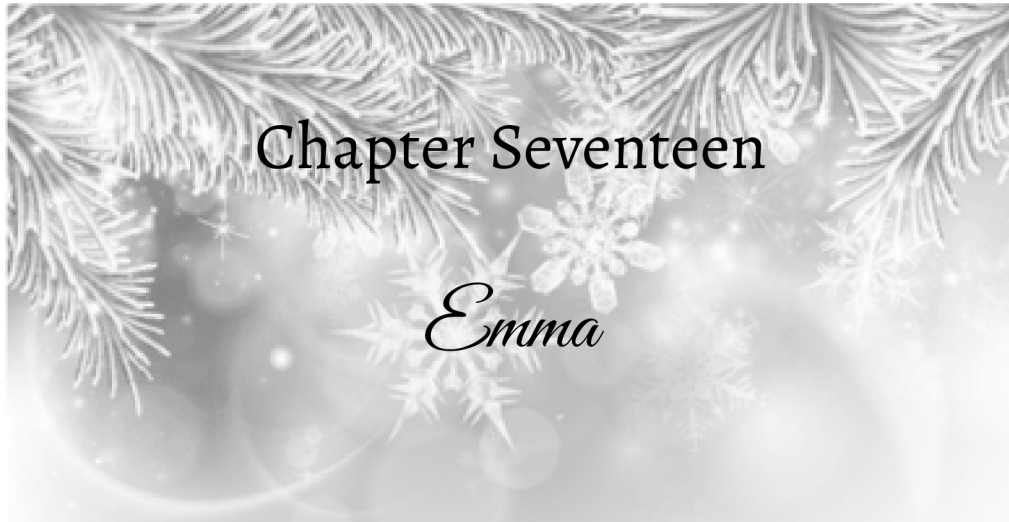
He smiled softly and gathered me in his brawny arms. I buried my head in his shoulder and cried. Happy tears mixed with hurt and guilt. Despite what he said, I couldn't help the niggling guilt that ate at me.

“Good,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “He'll come around, eventually. Once he realizes how serious we actually are about this relationship. Don't worry.”

“I can't help it,” I sniffed. “The last thing I ever wanted was to ruin your friendship or hurt him. I can't believe I hit him. Oh, my god. I should call him and apologize. I should—.”

“Shhh,” Ryker soothed. “Give him some time to calm down first. Ok? Before anyone else says something they regret. He needs some time, ok?”

I nodded, relaxing in his arms. He was right. Greg needed time. But I still hated everything about this situation. Everything but the man holding me right now. I could never regret being with Ryker.



Staring at the bright yellow door, I froze on the porch. It was freezing outside, and I imagined it would be warm and inviting inside. The air was fragrant with the scent of freshly baked cookies. Maybe the fire roaring in the fireplace. I've come home to this very thing so many times in the past, and never once did the cozy welcome fill me with dread. Until today. So many things could happen if Greg spilt the beans before I could. Mom might not be upset, but Mason? If he was here, Ryker might as well be a dead man.

I glanced sideways at him, wondering if he was as nervous as I was about opening that door. The choice to open it and walk into my childhood home was taken from us. The door flew open, and my mom stood there with a bright smile on her face.

“Why the long faces? Come in, you must be freezing,” she ushered me inside. Ryker followed with his hand on the small of my back for strength and comfort. It helped that he was here, but I was still terrified for him.

Kicking off our boots and hanging our coats by the door, we followed mom into her domain. The kitchen. She loved to cook, and for as long as I could remember, there was always something baking in the oven. How was she going to react when we told her everything?

“What brings you two lovebirds by? I thought you’d be sleeping in or spending the snow day in bed.” She attempted to wiggle her eyebrows, succeeding in an imitation of an awkward facial tick, and I nearly gagged. My mom commenting on my sex life was weird and icky.

“Ew, no Mom. I mean, yes, I’d rather be there. But ew, not discussing that with you,” I pulled up a seat at the island and plucked a fresh snickerdoodle off the cooling rack and took a bite. Mom laughed and opened the oven to pull out another tray.

“We have something we wanted to talk to you about,” Ryker started. He stood behind me, his firm hand warm on my shoulder.

“Is it about the wedding?” She asked, her cookies forgotten as she focused her attention on us.

“Um... yes. About that,” I started. “We um—.”

“We weren’t really engaged before,” Ryker filled in for me. Mom stared at us, surprise lining her face. She didn’t say a word.

“Ryker got in trouble with the league, and his agent saw us together and concocted the entire engagement to save his

career. But we realized that we're actually in love with each other, and we really want to get married now," I rushed on. "But Greg walked in on us this morning before we could talk to him about it."

"Say no more," Mom stopped me. "I know what a stubborn fool your brother can be. Takes after your father that way. Let me guess, he blew up and caused a scene, then stormed out, swearing to never speak to either of you ever again?"

I nodded.

"And this wedding, it was fake before? That explains why you wanted to have it at Serenity. I didn't want to say anything before, but Mason would never have had it finished in time on his own. But why keep it from me?" Mom asked, looking genuinely hurt that I hadn't shared that with her. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"No offence, Mrs. Chambers, but you aren't the best actor, and we needed everyone to believe it was real. We wanted to tell you, but couldn't," Ryker apologized. He squeezed my shoulder in a reassuring gesture.

"I see," she nodded to herself. "But you're really getting married now? Are you ready for that? If what you're saying is true, this is all a little fast."

"I know," I chimed in. "But we've known each other for so long, and since we've already set so much in motion, it seemed a shame to stop it. There's no reason to wait. I already know how annoying he can be."

“Hey—.”

“And how absolutely charming he is,” I finished. “We’re in love. We’ve loved each other for a very long time, but he said nothing before because of his friendship with Greg.”

“Are you pregnant?” Mom asked, lowering her voice as if to keep prying ears from listening in to our private conversation, alone in the kitchen, where she lived alone.

“No,” I calmly replied.

“Not yet,” Ryker replied at the same time.

Mom smiled slyly at us. I wanted to cringe a little. Thankfully, she never figured out how to wiggle her eyebrows or this conversation would go from weird to creepy super fast.

“I see how it is,” she leered. “Your brother will come around in time. It’s bound to be a shock to find your best friend in bed with your sister. I’ll talk to him. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

I sighed in relief.

“I’m glad you both figured this all out,” she waved a finger between Ryker and me. “I was tired of watching you dance around each other all the time. Now, how long till I get some more grandbabies?”

I groaned.

“Easy, Mrs. Chambers. Those things take time, and we have plenty of it. Let us enjoy the here and now, ok?” Ryker chimed in. It was as if he could sense my unease. Maybe he really

knew me better than any other man I'd ever been with in the past.

I know we said and did things last night that could lead to children, and I'd be ok with it if we got pregnant, but I couldn't help wanting to slow things down a bit. Especially with my brother so angry with us. I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. The last thing I wanted is for a child of mine to miss out on the awesomeness of his or her future uncles. Not that I'd ever admit that if they asked. I snatched another snickerdoodle and shoved a piece in my mouth.

"That's that then," Mom smiled. "So about the wedding. Are we still thinking of a New Year's bash? Because your cousin, Robyn, just called off her wedding, so Christmas is fair game now. I could even rebook her venue and caterers before they get booked up."

"Wait. What?" I'm pretty sure a chunk of cookie just fell out of my mouth, but I tried to ignore it as I digested this news. "They're not getting married anymore? Why not? What happened? When did this happen? Why haven't I heard anything about this before?"

"Oh, I believe it happened a day or two ago. It's still very recent so I haven't heard the entire story, but my sister said something about her fiancé having a secret child that no one knew anything about. Not even Robyn. Cecily is still confident they'll get over this hurdle and get married — those two are meant to be together. I'm sure of it — but it won't be soon.

What I don't understand is why he kept that information to himself all this time?"

"Oh god, poor Robyn. Is she ok?" I asked.

"Would you be if Ryker held something like that from you?" Mom pointed out. I side-eyed Ryker.

"I swear that I have no children, secret or otherwise," he promised, squeezing my shoulder.

"I still don't understand why anyone would go to such lengths as to conceal a blessing like that from the ones they love." Mom moved around the counter and resumed putting her cookies on the cooling rack. "It must have been terribly difficult to keep that from Robyn. That goes to show, it doesn't pay to keep secrets from those you love." She waved the spatula pointedly at us. "That poor child. Imagine finding out that the one you love doesn't trust you enough to share something like that."

"Poor Robyn. She must be devastated," I murmured. I made a mental note to call her later. "But I don't think I'd be comfortable stealing her venue. That was her dream wedding." I sighed. "And mine has always been to wed at Serenity, but that will not happen unless we postpone to the spring."

"Then we'll move the wedding," Ryker declared. "I want you to have the wedding you've always dreamt of, and I won't settle for anything else for some rushed ceremony."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

“We’ve waited this long to be together, Emma. Whether it’s tomorrow or next week or a year from now. It doesn’t matter. As long as I get to watch you walk down that aisle, knowing that I am the luckiest man on the planet.”

Boy, did he have a way with words. I wanted to melt into a giant puddle at his feet. But mom was already swooning enough for the both of us. I was equal parts impressed and horrified that she could move like that at her age. Ryker pressed a soft kiss to my cheek, and I smiled.

“It’ll give us time to set things straight with Greg,” I murmured. “I always imagined my father walking me down the aisle, but without him here, I hoped both of my brothers would fill in for him.”

“Those are mighty big shoes to fill, Lil’ Sis. But I’d be honoured,” Mason drawled as he ambled into the kitchen. What was with big men being so bloody quiet all the time? Seriously. Would it kill them to wear a bell or something?

“How much of that did you hear?” I asked.

“Enough, plus what I learned from Greg. So, you two finally stopped dancing around each other, huh? I was thinking it would never happen. It isn’t another PR stunt, right?” He scowled at Ryker.

“Not at all,” Ryker replied. “I love your sister, and have had the incredible luck to find out that she feels the same.”

“That’s more like it,” Mason rocked back on his heels. “I never did like the idea of you using her to further your hockey

career. But this... this I can get behind. So... does June sound good?"

"June?" I choked out.

"I should be able to have everything done and ready by then," Mason promised, frowning at me. "Is that too soon?"

"No. June's fine, Mason," I whispered. I've waited this long to be with the man of my dreams. What are a few more months? Unless I was pregnant. I silently prayed it wasn't the case, but I knew very well it could be. After last night, how could I not be? I don't regret a single moment of it either. But I'd hate to walk down the aisle heavily pregnant and with swollen ankles.

Mom smiled, her look saying, 'I know exactly what you're thinking.' I wanted to bury my head in the sand and live there until June. I prayed she couldn't read minds.

"What about Greg?" I asked, changing the subject.

"He'll come around. Don't worry. His pride is hurt, but once he sees how much you two are in love, how could he not be ok with that?" Mom promised, reaching across the counter to give my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I hope you're right," I replied.

"I know I am," she said. "Now, where's my calendar for next year? I know I have one around here somewhere. Give me a minute and we can pick out a date together."



Emma's bedroom hasn't changed a bit. Posters of boy bands lined the walls, faded and forgotten. In fact, it looked exactly the same as it did the last time I was here. Walking in here reminded me of walking through a time portal or whatever. I picked up a unicorn knick-knack off her dresser and turned it over in my hand.

"What are you doing up here?" I jumped when Emma's voice rang through the room. She laughed.

"Nothin'," I replied in my best teenage me impression. I replaced the unicorn and strutted over to her. Shutting the door behind her, I backed her into it and flicked the lock on the door.

"What are you doing?" She asked again, breathless. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, drawing my gaze downwards.

"Nothin'," I said, smirking this time. My thumb traced the path her tongue took, then travelled lower. Along her jaw and down her throat.

“Ryker, what if someone catches us?” She asked, but I could tell it excited her, from the huskiness of her voice.

“Catches us doing what? We’re just studying for that anatomy test tomorrow.” My hand reached for her blouse and I flicked open the first button.

“Test?” Emma asked, momentarily confused. I could tell when she realized the role-play I was suggesting. Her breathing quickened, and her pulse raced beneath my hand as it travelled to the next button and flicked it open.

“Shhh,” I hushed. “How are we ever going to be prepared for that test if you keep distracting me?”

“Sorry,” she replied quietly. Her breath hitched as I flicked open the next button. My hand detoured to dip inside and caress her breast. I rolled a hard nipple between my fingers and squeezed. Emma’s eyes drifted closed, her head lolling back against the door. My lips hovered over hers. Instead of claiming them, I dropped my head to trace my tongue down her body and over the lace covering her breasts. My teeth nipped at her nipple. She gasped, then moaned as I soothed the bite with my tongue.

“I’m never going to pass this test with so much distraction.” My hand travelled down from her breast to finish unbuttoning her top. My mouth tasted its way across her chest to her other breast.

“We should probably take a break anyway,” Emma murmured. “Get a snack or something. I’d hate for you to lose your strength because of me.”

I grinned, my face pressed into her warm body.

“I have the perfect snack in mind,” I replied, and hooked my fingers into the waistband of her pants and dragged them down to her ankles. “It has everything I need to keep my strength up. Now, go back to your books. I can’t concentrate with all your yammering.”

I buried my head in the apex of her thighs. Urging her legs apart with my shoulders, I parted her lips. The taste of her on my tongue drove me wild. I forced myself to slow down. To let her enjoy the ride. I swirled my tongue, and she gasped. My fingers dipped into her core and hooked inside. I moved them slowly at first as I sucked on her clit. Her fingers were buried in my hair, urging me onwards. Her hips rocked with every flick of my tongue. Her body tightened around my fingers. She was so close to coming.

“Yes, yes,” she moaned. I stopped, withdrawing my fingers despite her mewls of protest.

“So noisy,” I muttered. “I’m going to fail this test for sure.”

“S-s-sorry,” Emma apologized, stunned. Her fingers travelled down her body and I grabbed them before she could finish herself off.

“Tsk tsk.” I rose from the floor to face her.

“Please,” she begged.

I grabbed her by the waist and turned her to face the bed. Standing behind her, I brushed her hair from her nape and bit her earlobe. She gasped, and I stopped again. Her ass rubbed

against my hard cock. I moved half a step away and guided her to the bed. Emma moved to climb on it, grabbing a pillow as she did. I stopped her with a hand on her hips. My other hand slid down her back until it rested between her shoulder blades. Gently pushing her upper body down. She bent willingly, her head buried in the pillow. I unzipped my pants and reached inside my boxers to caress my balls and hard-on, admiring the view. Squeezing, I pulled them out and slid the tip of my cock between her juicy lips. Up and down. She twitched. Without a second thought, I thrust inside her. In and out. Faster and faster.

Her body clenched and twitched. The bedspread clenched as tightly in her fists. Her groans muffled in the pillows. Her ass was in the air, bouncing as I moved harder and faster. I bit my lip to keep from calling out as I came. Seconds turned to minutes as I held myself still. Both of us panting for air in the aftermath of our lovemaking. Sweat beaded my forehead. I wiped it on my sleeve as I finally slipped free of her, instantly missing her warmth.

Yanking my pants up, I slapped her ass. She jumped, startled. I helped her up from the bed and winked at her. She sent me a saucy grin in return.

“Good girl,” I purred. “Best tutor I’ve ever had.”

“Keep studying like that and you’ll pass biology class blindfolded,” she replied.

“I intend to study every chance I get,” I grinned. “There’s a lot of lost time to make up for.”

Emma fixed her clothing and excused herself to the adjoining bathroom she shared with Greg when they were kids. I stared at the door, remembering pressing my ear to it, hoping to listen in on her and her friends whenever I came over. That bathroom was going on my list of places to make Emma come.

A knock sounded on the door, loud and firm, startling me. Before I could move an inch, it sounded again, more insistent this time. I quickly checked myself in Emma's vanity mirror and, satisfied that I didn't have that just fucked look, I clicked the lock and opened it.

"You two might be engaged, but until the vows are said, this door stays open. Got it?" Mason growled. He stood on the other side, his arms crossed over his chest as he towered over me. I think he's supposed to look threatening and intimidating, and it probably worked on many guys in the past. But I knew better. Mason was a giant teddy bear. Especially when concerned for his sister.

"Sure thing, Dad," I drawled and smirked. Mason glared at me before turning to leave. I could hear him chuckle halfway down the stairs. It helped that one of Emma's brothers accepted our relationship. I could only hope that Greg came around, for Emma's sake, at least. I already missed my best friend, but he was Emma's brother first. She had to be hurting.

When she finally came out of the bathroom, tidy and looking like nothing ever happened, I vowed to myself to make it right with him. No matter what. I loved Emma, but the

last thing I wanted was to be the reason her family fell apart. I already watched that happen with my family. It wasn't a fate I'd wish on anyone. Tonight at the game. That's when I'll try to talk some sense into him. He can't avoid me there.

“Come on, Baby Girl. I've gotta get to the game. How about we get you some tickets so you can watch me play? You can sit with the other wives and girlfriends.” I slung an arm around her shoulders as we left her room.

“You never explained what you were doing up here.” Emma was like a dog with a bone. I grinned. It was sexy as hell.

“Reminiscing,” I replied with a smirk. “And now I have a new favourite memory of that room.”



The arena was hopping by the time I got there. Everyone was hard at work getting ready for tonight's game. I grabbed my gear from the trunk and headed inside. The changeroom was buzzing with voices and activity. Usually, I'd walk in with a cocky smile and strut at my locker, but today was different. With everything going on with Greg, I didn't particularly want to call attention to myself. So I kept my head down and dropped my gear on the bench in front of my locker.

I busied myself donning my practice gear and ignored the stares coming my way. Today I was going to focus. First on the game, then on Greg. There was no time for gossip, though I was sure tongues will wag the minute I leave this room. It

didn't matter. In a couple of hours, Emma will be here watching from the stands and I wanted to play my best game for her.

Greg came in a few moments later, and the tension in the room was thick enough to slice. I ignored him on the way out the door, hoping to catch a few extra minutes on the ice since I missed yesterday's practice. A couple of trainers were there already, inspecting the ice. I kicked off the skate guards and climbed onto the ice, starting with laps. Eventually, the rest of the team joined me, one by one. Coach ran us through some drills and a couple of plays before dismissing us.

In the locker room, I removed my practice gear and hit the showers. The cold spray cooled my heated body, washing away the sweat and easing my aching muscles. Resting my forehead on the cool tiles, I stayed longer than I usually would. We had a couple of hours before the game. Most of the guys use this time to meditate or grab a light meal or snack. All I wanted was some peace and solitude. I couldn't stop running through the things I wanted to say to my best friend. How we bonded over our love of hockey and grew up going through the leagues together. How we were there for each other during the most difficult times of our lives, like when my parents got divorced, or his dad died. I never intended to hurt him. In fact, I did everything I could to stay away from his sister, so this wouldn't happen. But I can't anymore. I don't want to. After years of dating various, random women hoping that I might fall in love with one of them and my crush on Emma would disappear. But it never did. She was never far from my

thoughts and seeing her date another man damned near killed me.

“You jacking off in there or what?” Carlson shouted. Snickers echoed through the locker room. I shut the water off and grabbed my towel, wrapping it around my waist.

“Why are you so concerned about my dick, Carlson?” I asked when we were face to face.

“Your dick is the last thing on my mind, Jones. It’s that fine piece of ass you’ve got riding it, I’m thinking of. But hey, if you’re happy having a limp dick, I’d be happy to sub for you,” he leered.

“Thanks, but I prefer my fiancé. You just don’t do it for me.” I bit out and left the shower room before he could push my buttons even more. I grabbed a pair of sweatpants and jerked them on. That guy was a prick, always trying to press my buttons before a game. My stomach growled. The trainer offered me a protein shake, and I took it gladly before hitting the workout room, grateful that I was alone. Sitting on a bench, I polished off the shake.

Carlson still had me riled up. I tried meditating, sitting cross-legged on the mat and focusing on deep breathing. In and out. It almost worked. Might have if a door slamming closed nearby hadn’t startled me from my focus. Who was I kidding? I was never any good at meditating.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” A familiar voice growled. I popped one eye open and found Greg

standing in front of me with clenched fists. I closed my eye and took a deep breath before answering.

“Dancing a jig. What does it look like I’m doing?” Sarcasm dripped from my words, and I didn’t bother opening my eyes to watch his reaction. I’ve known him long enough to know I pissed him off even more. He probably looked like a cartoon bull with steam coming out of his ears.

“Quit playing games. What the fuck are you doing with my sister?” He bit out through clenched teeth.

“Marrying her,” I replied. “Making love to her. Cherishing her. Not sure what I’m doing wrong here.”

“Friends don’t go around messing with their friends’ sisters!” He yelled.

I slowly opened my eyes and stood until we were face to face. If he wanted to hit me, he can damn well do it. But I won’t sit here and listen to him talk about what Emma and I have like it’s a bloody joke. I thought he knew I’d never do that unless I was serious, but apparently, he doesn’t know me as well as either of us thought.

“I am in love with Emma,” our faces were practically touching, but neither of us was backing down. If he wanted to do this here and now, that was fine by me.

“Since when?” He demanded, pushing back.

“Since the first time, we kissed,” I said.

“So two weeks ago? Oh, that is some fine foundation for your argument, buddy. How long was your last relationship? I

think it lasted three weeks after she said ‘I love you.’” Greg pointed out with a finger poking at my sternum.

“No asshole. I realized I was in love with Emma in high school when I kissed her after driving her home from her first kegger,” I shouted back, punching his shoulder to emphasize my point.

“What are you talking about? Emma never went to the same parties we did. She only went to study groups. Are your brains so addled that you’ve mistaken my sister for someone else? Have you really kissed that many women that you can’t tell the fucking difference?”

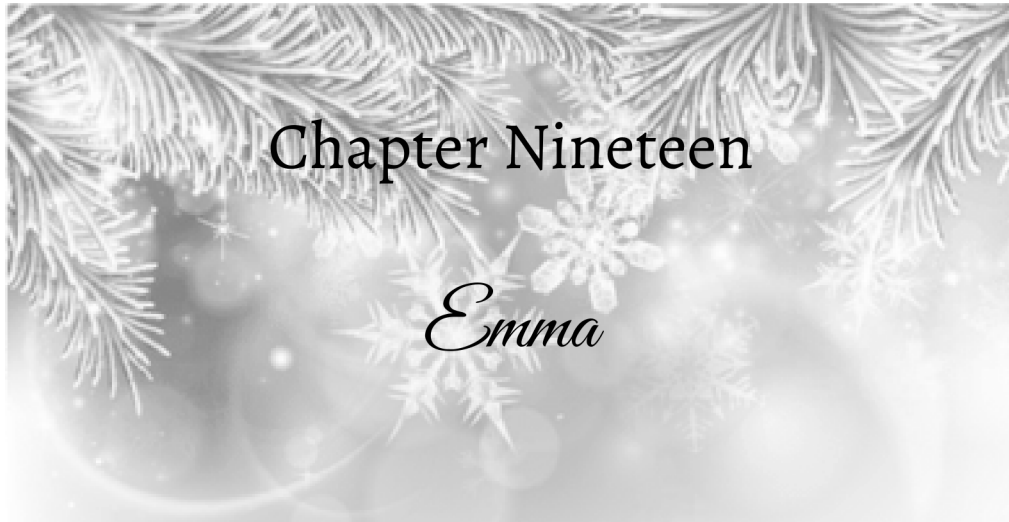
“Emma went to a party. She was flirting pretty hard, too. I immediately drove her home BEFORE YOU GOT THERE! She complained the entire drive that I ruined her chance to get her first kiss that night. So I kissed her! To shut her up!” The words came pouring out of me. The weight of the secret I’d been keeping from him for these years finally lifted off my shoulders. “I didn’t expect to like it. But I wanted to do it again and again. Do you know how hard it’s been to stay away from her out of respect for you? I tried to move past it. Put everything I could into keeping my distance.”

“Whenever a woman told me she thought she was falling in love with me, or that she was in love with me, I bolted. Guilty as charged. But only because it wasn’t *her* saying it. So if that makes me an asshole, then hit me.” I stepped back and held my arms out to my sides, inviting him to take his anger out on me. “I am a dreadful friend. Have been for years! Hate me.

Never talk to me again. Hell, I'll leave the fucking state if it makes you happy. But I am marrying Emma whether you like it or not. I don't care if you hurt me, so throw your best punch. But Emma's a disaster right now because of you. That I can't stand for."

"What do you mean, Emma's a disaster?" Greg asked, breaking his stunned silence following my speech.

"She's a mess, Greg. She wanted you and Mason to walk her down the aisle. We even agreed to put the wedding off until June, hoping you'll stop acting like a hurt, stubborn ass, and man up for her," I pushed my way past him and strode out the door, letting it slam behind me on the way out.



The game was in full swing by the time I got there. I'd wasted the first period trying to talk myself into walking into the building. Watching Ryker and Greg play was usually a magnificent sight, but with things being so tense between them, I dreaded being the reason they lost tonight. So when I finally climbed into the stands and took a seat with the other players' wives and girlfriends, it surprised me to find they were in the lead by four points.

"You must be Emma," one of the other women greeted me with a friendly smile and patted the seat next to her. "I'm Marley, Bobby's wife."

"Nice to meet you," I plastered a smile on my face to conceal my nerves.

"This is Connie, Marie, and Sasha. Sasha just married Luke this past summer. Isn't that right Sasha?" Marley asked the petite redhead sitting directly behind us. Sasha smiled shyly and nodded.

"She's a little shy around new folks, but once you get some tequila in her, boy, she'll talk your ear off." Marley waved her

hand, laughing. Sasha blushed and turned her focus to the ice. A twinge of sympathy shot through me. I made a mental note to keep Marley focused on me for the duration of the game.

“You’re Greg’s sister, right?” A brunette woman with a large, protruding baby belly that I believed was Connie asked.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I’m his little sister.”

“He must be thrilled that you and Ryker are together,” Marley commented, a bright smile lighting up her face.

“Not really,” I answered her quietly. “He’s pissed about the entire situation.”

“Oh,” was all Marley said. The look of surprise on her face said a thousand things that her lips didn’t. I ignored it all and followed Sasha’s lead, focusing on the game as a shocked silence descended around us. At the interval, I lined up with Sasha at the concession stand to get some popcorn. I loved the popcorn here. It was probably an entire month’s worth of calories, but it was worth it. So perfectly buttery.

“How are the wedding plans coming?” Sasha asked as we waited to place our orders.

“They are a disaster right now, actually. I found the perfect dress, and it fit me like a glove. Barely needs any change at all. And my bridesmaids all have dresses too. But my brother, Mason, has been helping me renovate Serenity in between contracting jobs and the occasional weekend, and he doesn’t think it’s possible to have Serenity finished in time. So it’s

looking like we might have to push the date to the spring,” I replied.

“Can’t you just move it?” She asked.

“We could... in fact, my cousin called off her Christmas wedding, and my mom suggested I scoop up her venue and caterers and move the date up from New Year. But I don’t want to get married anywhere else. Part of why I bought it was because I’ve always dreamt of getting married at Serenity. And with everything with Greg... I’m so sorry. You didn’t ask for a list of my woes. I didn’t mean to dump all of that on you. We’ve hit a couple of speed bumps in the planning, that’s all,” I replied.

“You know, my wedding had similar problems. But it all worked out in the end,” Sasha assured me. “I’m positive yours will work out, too. Don’t give up on that dream wedding just yet.”

“Thank you. I hope you’re right,” I replied.

“I know I am,” she smiled and moved up to the counter to place her order. Music started playing, and I realized it was the KissCam coverage starting. I smiled to myself, reminiscing about the night that Ryker changed my life. Grabbing my popcorn, I headed back up into the stands, eager for a glimpse of some lucky couple showcasing their relationship for a couple of seconds of fame. I resumed my seat, chatting away with Sasha and Marley, my earlier woes momentarily forgotten as we glued our attention to the big screen.

There was a rustling behind us. I thought nothing of it until I noticed the Stallions mascot on the camera. He was moving down the aisle of hockey wives, heading in my direction. I smiled. Ryker must have been reminiscing, the same as I was. I waited until the KissCam was on us before I stood, pretending I hadn't noticed him as I feigned surprise. This was so romantic. I couldn't believe he would do this a second time, and this time, it was all for real.

Ryker gestured for me to close my eyes before he took his stallion mask off, and I did, eager for him to kiss me. The chanting grew to a roar. My pulse raced. But something didn't seem right. The crowd's tone changed as if they too sensed something was off. I cracked an eye open but couldn't see much, as a pair of powerful arms crushed me against a body that felt vastly different and shorter. Arms that weren't Rykers.

My eyes flew open in a second. But it was too late. Brutal lips came crashing down on mine in a bruising kiss. I smacked the man and tried to push him away. He held me closer. People around us were yelling and heckling. I kicked his shin. He grunted and deepened the kiss, his tongue forcing its way between my teeth. I gagged on the thick, slimy, worm-like appendage and bit down as hard as I could. The man instantly let me go, and I nearly fell back, but thankfully Marley was standing behind me and caught me in time.

Nick Carlson has his hand over his mouth. Anger and hurt warring with each other as he directed his gaze at me.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Marley demanded. “She’s as good as married to your teammate!”

“Had to give it a shot,” his voice was thick and hoarse with pain.

“Excuse me?” My voice reached an octave I hadn’t realized it could hit as I squealed with outrage. “Had to give it a shot?”

Before I made a conscious decision, my arm wound back. My fingers curled into a fist. I let it fly with a second of hesitation. The right hook my brothers taught me as a kid connected with his jaw. Carlson fell backwards into an empty row of seats. It wasn’t until the crowd cheered I realized I was still the focus of the KissCam.

“What the fuck?” He shouted. “Why’d you do that? It was just a stupid prank!”

“A prank?” A pair of male voices shouted. My head shot up as Ryker and Greg came pounding down the steps in our direction, still wearing their pads and jerseys.

“Hey now, guys. Do nothing foolish and get kicked out of the game,” Marley acted as the voice of reason and I really hope it worked, as I was still too shocked to string two words together. “You can deal with his stupid ass later.”

Ryker’s piercing blue eyes landed on me. His anger softened as he directed his attention away from Carlson.

“Are you ok?” He asked, genuinely concerned as he pushed his way through the growing crowd around us. He stopped in

front of me, his thumb on my chin, tilting my head until our gazes locked.

“Are you ok?” He repeated quietly, brushing a stray strand of hair out of my eyes. I nodded. He held my gaze, searching my eyes for any sign of a lie until I satisfied him with my response. He bent to kiss me, and I held up a hand to stop him. Ryker looked hurt and confused until I grabbed a beer from the nearest server. I took a chug and swished it around like mouthwash, trying to wash away the taste of Carlson’s nasty tongue, and swallowed. Ryker raised a brow, a slow grin spreading across his face and pinging right down into my panties.

“I’m better now,” I replied. “But I’m still waiting for a real man to kiss me.”

“Are you now?” He asked. My brother groaned, but it was quickly drowned out with cheers and catcalls as Ryker bent me over his arm and laid one on me. I didn’t want it to end. A horn blew and someone tugged on his arm. Ryker steadied me on my feet and gave me a quick peck before grabbing Carlson’s jersey and helping Greg escort him back down the rink. I collapsed back in my seat, weak in the knees, and immediately started fanning myself with my clutch.

“Wow,” a chorus of feminine sighs followed Ryker as he retook the ice. I agreed. Wow, indeed. And he was all mine.

The rest of the game passed uneventfully until Carlson took the ice. All hell broke loose, and Ryker and Greg sat back and let it happen as he was checked into the boards time and time

again. I cheered every time. That man was going to have a hell of a post-game celebration tonight. I grinned, just thinking of it. Marley took one look my way and couldn't stop laughing. My plans were plastered all over my face, and I couldn't care less. She also didn't say a thing about the rest of my untouched beer, for which I was incredibly grateful. No need to poke that bear right now.



I made my way down to the locker room after I watched everyone vacate it. Years of experience had taught me that Ryker was always the last to leave after a game. I did not know why, but tonight I planned to use it to my advantage.

“I’ll be done in a minute,” Ryker called out as I opened the door and slipped inside.

Butterflies of excitement coursed through me. I kicked off my heels and tiptoed toward the sound of his voice. He was fresh from the shower and towelling off in front of a cubby with his name on it. Muscles rippled down his back with every movement. I bit my lip as I watched him.

“I said I’d be out in a min—.” He turned around and froze when he spotted me.

“I couldn’t wait another minute,” I pouted. He quickly glanced around, reassuring himself that we were utterly alone.

“We should do something about that then,” he replied with a smirk. I nodded.

“Come here,” he commanded, and I willfully stepped towards him. “Down on your knees, Baby Girl.”

I knelt in front of him and untied his towel. My mouth salivated. Locking eyes with him, I ran my tongue over his shaft.

“All of it, Baby Girl,” he commanded. I obeyed, taking his cock in my mouth as far as I could go. “That’s right. Keep going.”

I swallowed, taking him into my throat and sucking. His fist gripped my hair. My hands squeezed his hard ass as he thrust in and out. I hollowed my cheeks as I sucked. Ryker groaned, throwing his head back as the pace of his thrusts increased. My panties were soaked as I tasted his come.

“Fuck, Baby Girl,” he groaned. The pleasure in his voice made me smile as I swallowed. Never had I been daring enough to try something like this in public. But I couldn’t resist him. We’d spent so much time dancing around each other. I didn’t want to waste another minute.

The jingling of keys rang through the empty locker room. I jumped, startled, and Ryker helped me to my feet. I handed him the towel, and he quickly wrapped it around himself seconds before the janitor wheeled his cart around the corner. He froze when he noticed us.

“I’m sorry. I thought everyone was gone already,” he apologized and started backing up with his cart, but Ryker stopped him.

“No worries. I’ll be done in a second,” he replied, and stepped into a pair of black trousers and buttoned them up under the towel. “I was a little slow getting out of the shower and my fiancé came looking for me. She gets a little cranky when she’s hungry, and I promised her a nice dinner after the game.”

“My wife is the same way,” the janitor laughed. “I’ll leave you to finish dressing, Sir and wait outside. Take your time. Oh, and great game tonight.”

“Thanks,” Ryker grinned. The door closed behind the janitor and I finally released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. One look at me and Ryker started laughing. I slapped his shoulder playfully.

“That’s not funny!” I whined. “What if that had been a reporter or something?”

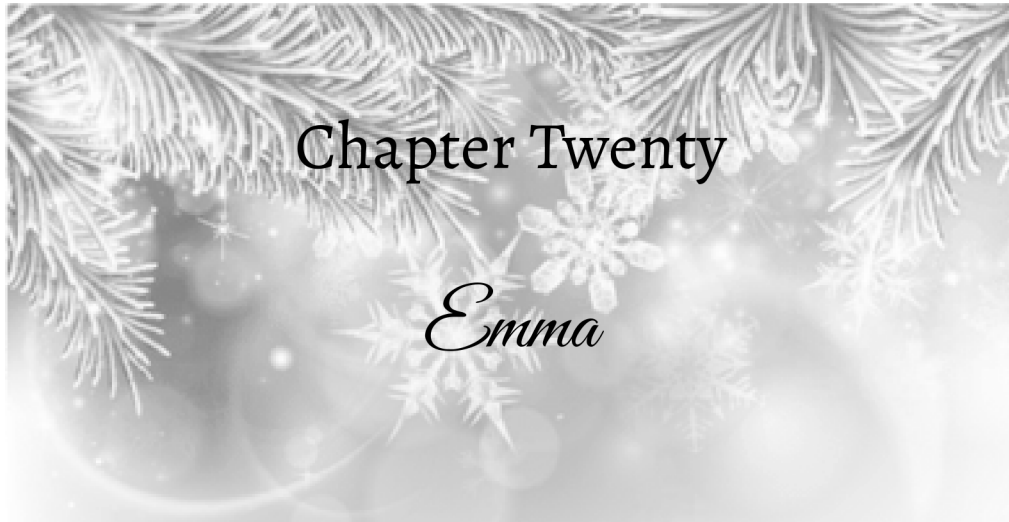
“Could’ve been so much worse,” he teased, wrapping a lock of my hair around his finger and tugging me closer until I was an inch away from his lips. “It could’ve been your brother.”

“Hilarious.” I rolled my eyes. “Hurry and get a shirt on. I’m hungry and you promised me dinner. I have a witness to prove it.”

Ryker laughed and gave me a quick peck on the lips before releasing my hair. He pulled on a blue dress shirt that brought out the blue in his eyes and buttoned it up, dressing in record time. With his gear in one hand, and his other arm slung around my shoulders, we sauntered out the locker room doors

and waved as we passed the janitor. When we reached his car, I burst out giggling. Ryker soon followed.

We probably looked like a pair of lunatics, laughing in an underground parking garage. Alone at night. My back pressed to the cold metal of his black hummer. But I didn't care. Because he was my lunatic and I was his.



“Hey, Stranger, welcome home,” Melody teased as I walked into the kitchen the next morning. I chuckled and poured myself a cup of coffee.

“I was wondering if I’d ever see you again,” she continued.

“Har har,” I mocked. “The Stallions have an away game tomorrow, and he had an early flight to catch.”

“Ah, and here I thought you missed me,” she jokingly pouted. “But seriously, run upstairs and change. You’ve got a dress fitting in an hour.”

“Wait, what? I thought that was cancelled.” I froze, my coffee cup halfway to my lips.

“Looks like I’m not the only one that’s been forgotten. Must be damn good sex.”

“Mind-blowing,” I grinned, and we both laughed.

“I’m going to need details and a bottle of wine later,” Melody chuckled. “Go get changed. Chop chop or your mother will have my head.”

“Ugh. I don’t see what the big deal’s about. We moved the wedding to June. What if I get fitted now, and it doesn’t fit by then?” I asked. At Melody’s questioning silence, I quickly filled her in on everything that had happened in the last two days.

“Wow, that’s... a lot,” she replied when I was done. “So you guys went from being fake engaged for publicity to really engaged? I don’t know what to say, except... I’m still the maid of honour, right?”

“Of course,” I laughed.

“Good. I’d never forgive you if I wasn’t,” she replied, shaking out her mass of red curls. “You can thank me by setting me up with one of his buddies.”

“Just not Nick Carlson,” I replied. “He’s a giant prick that doesn’t deserve someone as amazing as you.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet,” she sipped her coffee. “Now go get dressed!”

I jumped at the command in her tone. Taking my coffee with me, I sauntered upstairs to my bedroom and quickly showered and changed. My room seemed so empty and foreign, having spent so much time at Serenity and Ryker’s condo. There was no trace of him in this room, and I missed him already. I couldn’t even snuggle up to his pillow and breathe in his scent if I wanted to, because he’d never been in this room. As soon as he’s back, we’re going to have to rectify that. And decide where we’re going to live when we get married. Are we going to live together before the wedding?

Would we live here or in his condo or get a new place together?

“Melody?” I called out as I jogged back down the stairs with a minute to spare. She popped her head out of the kitchen with a questioning look on her face. “When Ryker and I get married, where are we going to live? I just realized, if I moved out, I’d be leaving you in a lurch. You’d have to get a new roommate, or find a new apartment somewhere.”

“Or I could buy this place from you with my savings and you don’t have to worry about a thing,” she replied. “You can’t live your life worrying about mine. Ok? I’ve been thinking about this since the day I moved in and putting money aside in case of this exact situation. Or, in my wildest dreams, in case I met my prince or princess charming and got married and we bought a house of our own.”

“Hey, it’ll happen,” I replied.

“If I’m really lucky, maybe I’ll find both.” She wiggled her eyebrows salaciously, and I laughed. Traditional relationships had never been in her vocabulary, so a throuple wasn’t surprising. “You ready to go?”

“Bring on the pinpricks and gossip,” I slipped on my boots and grabbed my coat from the hook.

“Don’t forget the mimosas,” Melody sang cheerfully as she grabbed her purse.

“Or not,” she whispered as she took in my suddenly tense stance, one eyebrow raised.

“We — uh — didn’t exactly have any condoms the first few times we had sex,” I flushed, staring at my toes to avoid any judgemental looks.

“You dirty hoe-bag!” Melody shouted. I winced. “Change of plans. Sparkling cider for you, wine for me and a lot of catching up to do when we get back! How could you leave that juicy tidbit out?”

“Please say nothing to anyone. We thought we’d just get married as planned on New Year’s and if we got pregnant right away, it’d be fine. But I’m kind of panicking with all this June wedding stuff. I really don’t want to be heavily pregnant and exhausted at my wedding.”

“Don’t say another word or you’re going to ruin your mascara,” she commanded. I blinked, not even realizing I was tearing up. I hadn’t even mentioned my fears to Ryker. “Leave it all to Auntie Melody.”

I groaned and followed her out the door.



“This dress is made for you,” the tailor declared, sticking another pin in the dress’s side to pull the bust in. I beamed at my reflection. The dress was absolutely perfect. I sincerely hoped I could wear it on my big day.

“Can we have virgin mimosa please?” Melody asked the dressmaker’s assistant.

My mother sat up straighter in her chair, her head slowly turning to Melody. I swear it was like watching a possessed doll in a creepy Halloween movie. I caught Hannah's eye in the mirror, and she winked at me.

"A virgin mimosa is just orange juice with a fancy name," Hannah teased, and I grimaced.

Thanks, bestie for keeping my secret, I wanted to shout.

"I'm an alcoholic," Melody replied without batting an eyelash. Hannah could barely contain her laughter at mom's gasp. How she could tell Melody was lying was beyond me. If I didn't know better, I would have believed her.

"We'll all have orange juice please," Mom declared, and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

"What a damper on the bachelorette party," Hannah continued with a straight face as if she hadn't nearly peed herself, laughing silently a few seconds ago. I really have to master that skill. "There is going to be a bachelorette party, right?"

"I suppose," I said as Melody said, "Absolutely!"

"Since the cat's away, us mice shall play," Melody wiggled her eyebrows. "I've got something stellar in the works. A couple more details to put in place and all the invites will go out. Keep your Saturday open."

"Saturday?" I asked. This was the first I'd heard of any bachelorette planning. Ryker was going to be in Texas by then, the team flying from Los Angeles straight to Dallas for the

next game. They were going to be gone for at least a week with back-to-back away games. It sucked, but he promised to video chat every night before bed. Did I really need a bachelorette party six and a half months before my potential wedding date? I bit my lip and said nothing. It was the maid of honours' duty to plan and if she planned it for while Ryker was away, who was I to argue?

All this talk reminded me of the deal I'd originally made with Ryker regarding the bachelor auction to raise money for the animal shelter. He definitely won't be eligible for that gambit.

"What about the bachelor auction?" I blurted, and all eyes turned to me. "I mean, Ryker was going to be the chief attraction, but he obviously can't be now, and Greg's not talking to me. How am I going to help the animal shelter get a new roof?"

"How about a bake sale?" Mom suggested. I smiled. Baking was her solution to everything, but I doubted we'd sell enough of her snickerdoodles to raise the money we'd need.

"You could raffle tickets to your wedding," Hannah suggested. "I mean, it's going to be a banger on New Year's Eve. Who wouldn't want to dress up and have a blast at a local celebrity wedding?"

"I like that idea," Melody sipped her orange juice. "We could keep the ceremony intimate and raffle off tickets to the reception."

“You guys are forgetting something,” I chimed in. “The wedding’s being moved to June, remember?”

“Oh,” Hannah bit her nail as if to stop herself from saying something. “Maybe we can get the guys to pitch in some memorabilia or something and we can do a silent auction then.”

“That’s a great idea,” I smiled, deciding to let Hannah keep whatever secret she was obviously trying very hard to keep from blurting out.

“There, we’re all done. Go slip out of the dress, and be mindful of the pins,” the tailor instructed. “Do any of the bridesmaids’ dresses need altering?”

“Mine does,” Melody chimed in as I diligently climbed down from the pedestal and made my way to the changing area. An assistant helped me out of the dress and left with it while I put my regular clothes back on. Voices carried to where I changed, but I couldn’t discern what was being said. They were probably back to the wedding talk. I stayed in the changeroom a few minutes longer than necessary to collect myself before rejoining the melee.

“So, what’s next? Anyone up for lunch at Slice of Spice?” I asked, taking the seat next to mom.

“No can do,” Mom replied. “We have cakes to taste!”

“Cakes?” I asked, stunned. More wedding planning for a wedding without an official date? Was this normal or was my family going wedding crazy?

“Absolutely,” Hannah rushed on. “It’s never too early to choose the right cake. The best bakers are booked months in advance.”

“Shouldn’t Ryker be here for this?” I asked.

“What for? If he’s picky, you can just do it all over again. Twice the cakes!” Melody sang. “Let there be cake!”

“Please stand still or I will end up sticking this pin in you,” the tailor chided. Melody dropped her arms and stood statue-still. I laughed. This was the first time I’d ever seen her stand still. She was a hive of activity.

“Alright,” I sighed when my laughter finally died down. “Cake lunch it is!”

“Yay!” Melody cheered and froze again from the scolding look the tailor shot at her.

I collapsed in a chair, laughing at the expressions crossing her face in an effort to stop moving. As long as I’ve known her, Melody has never stopped. It was obviously costing her quite the effort. Her fingers were tapping her leg, and every so often her nose wiggled and her eye twitched. This was worth every single drop of virgin mimosas.



Chapter Twenty-One

Ryker

Carlson shouldered past me to the locker room. If it weren't for his attitude, we would have won this game by a landslide. Instead, every point was a hard-won battle until Coach pulled him from the game. Who does he think he is? Ever since the last game, he's been nothing but an asshole to the rest of the team. If anyone had a right to act like an ass after the stunt he pulled, it was me. But for the life of me, I can't get the image of Emma slugging him out of my head. It didn't help that I laughed every time I saw the bruise on his jaw.

We proved tonight that we can win without him. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll be the next player traded. I showered and changed quickly, leaving the locker room with the rest of the team and catching the bus back to the hotel. Every muscle ached. I was exhausted. Normally I'd have a drink with the guys in the hotel bar to celebrate the win. But the first thing I wanted to do was call Emma. The whipping sound Bobby shouted to my back as I hit the elevators didn't even bother me.

In my room, I showered and changed before opening my laptop to video chat with her. It rang and rang. I wondered where she was. Maybe she was sleeping? It is late in Montana. My finger hovered over the hang-up button, ready to push it when she finally answered. Her hair was tousled, and she was fully dressed. I sat up straighter on the bed. Why was she fully dressed instead of in her pyjamas or better... wearing sexy lingerie and lounging on her blue and silver duvet?

“Hey there, hockey star,” she breathed. “How was the game?”

“We won,” I replied. “You didn’t watch?”

“I wanted to, but the girls dragged me out cake tasting after the dress fittings. I swear, all this wedding planning went into hyper-drive and we’re not getting hitched till June,” she replied. “Then Melody insisted on a gossip session when we got home since we’ve barely seen each other the past couple of days.”

“Cake tasting and gossip. Sounds like a fun night,” I smiled. “What did you choose?”

“Hmm? Oh, I didn’t. I didn’t think it was right to decide without you,” she replied, settling back on a pile of throw pillows on her bed. Damn, did she ever look sexy like that! I wanted to bury myself in her breasts.

“Were there any you liked?” I asked, shoving down the semi that was fighting for my attention.

“There was one I thought was amazing. You’ll have to try it when you come back. It’s a dark chocolate cake with white chocolate peppermint buttercream. It’s perfect for a winter wedding,” she sighed. “I’m not sure it would work for a spring wedding, though.”

“Why not?” I asked. “If it’s the cake you want, get it.”

“But you haven’t tried it yet. What if you hate it?” She asked, nibbling on her thumbnail in that adorable way that turned my semi into a raging hard-on.

“If you like it, I’ll like it. Besides, I want you to have the wedding of your dreams.” I tried to think of something else to calm my body down, but it wasn’t working very well.

“Are you sure?” She asked.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “And I can’t wait to try a piece when we get back.”

“I will have one waiting for you,” she replied and smiled. “And maybe a couple of other things, too.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” I asked, my voice thick and husky as I started rubbing my hard cock.

“Tsk tsk,” she scolded playfully. “What kind of future wife would I be if I told you all my secrets?”

“The hottest one on the planet,” I replied honestly. Emma blushed and chuckled shyly.

“I should get to bed,” she admitted with a pout. “I have a meeting with a potential client first thing in the morning.”

“That’s too bad. I was about to make this interesting.” My voice was hoarse and thick, leaving little to the imagination for what I’d had in mind as I continued stroking myself.

“Oh, yeah?” Her voice dropped an octave and her pupils dilated. “I think I can spare a few minutes.”

“This would take far longer than a few minutes, Baby Girl. Get some sleep and I’ll call you after we land in Dallas tomorrow,” I said, cursing myself internally. What was I thinking, turning down a virtual booty call? Maybe the guys were right. I was whipped. But it felt oh so amazing to be whipped by this beauty pouting on the screen before me.

“Good night, Stud,” she blew me a kiss and ended the call.

A few minutes later, my phone pinged. I opened the message from Emma to find her sprawled on her bedspread, wearing a matching set of lace panties and a bra and holding a bejewelled vibrator. Fuck, she was perfect.

“Good girl,” I growled. After I finished myself off and cleaned up, I opened my phone and scrolled through it to find her the perfect gift to keep her company while I was gone.



Bobby sat next to me on the jet as we flew to Dallas the next morning. He was talking away, but I was only half listening as I scrolled through Emma’s Snapgram. She looked seriously hot in a skimpy red bikini that barely covered anything, with her arm slung around her best friend’s shoulders next to a lake.

The caption read fourth of July with the fam at Lake Helena. It must have been during my brief stint in New York. It's a shame I missed it, but it was probably better that way. If Greg was pissed now, he would've had no bones about disposing of my body in the lake if he'd caught me ogling her back then.

"So I was thinking since we don't have a game till tomorrow night, why don't we all hit the bars tonight to celebrate you getting hitched? Won't have much time for a proper bachelor party before New Year's anyway," Bobby rattled on, dragging my attention away from Emma's red-hot photos.

"Hmm?" I asked.

"Dude, have you even been listening? Bachelor party tonight in Dallas. What do you think?" Bobby elbowed me in the ribs and I grunted.

"Not much point, is there? We're postponing till June," I replied, rubbing the sore spot he left.

"Postponing? Why?" Bobby asked, and several heads turned our way. It seems everyone's given up the pretence of being occupied instead of eavesdropping now.

"She's got her heart set on getting married at Serenity, and Mason, her other brother and contractor, won't have it done until then," I shrugged. "Makes no difference. One way or another, I'm putting a ring on her finger."

"You guys are getting married in June now?" Coach asked from his spot at the front of the plane, and I nodded. "There

goes my New Year's Eve plans. Is she even going to fit in her dress by then?"

"What do you mean?" My eyebrows pinched together in confusion. Why wouldn't her dress still fit her in six months?

"Oh, come on, like we don't already know." Carlson rolled his eyes. "She must be knocked up if she's marrying a guy like you."

"Excuse me?" I growled. "Want to repeat that?"

Carlson snickered. Greg's shoulders tensed, but he still didn't turn around in his seat.

"Only question is, are you the daddy?" Carlson smirked. "Or are you helping her out because of your pants feelings for her big brother?"

I practically launched at him from my seat. My fist met a solid wall of flesh. Strong arms wrapped around my body, dragging me backwards. I struggled against the force. Bobby grunted. Carlson swore and struggled out of his seat, but he was being held down by the trainer. The plane was in total chaos as players and trainers moved to separate us. I wanted to kill Carlson. My blood boiled. What was his problem?

"Leave him be, Ryker," Coach's deep voice boomed. "We'll let the other team solve this for us on the ice tomorrow. He's not worth the effort."

Confusion and anger warred inside me. I wanted to listen to the words of reason, but when I remembered what Carlson

said about my fiance, I wanted to murder him all over again. I surged towards him again, dragging Bobby along with me.

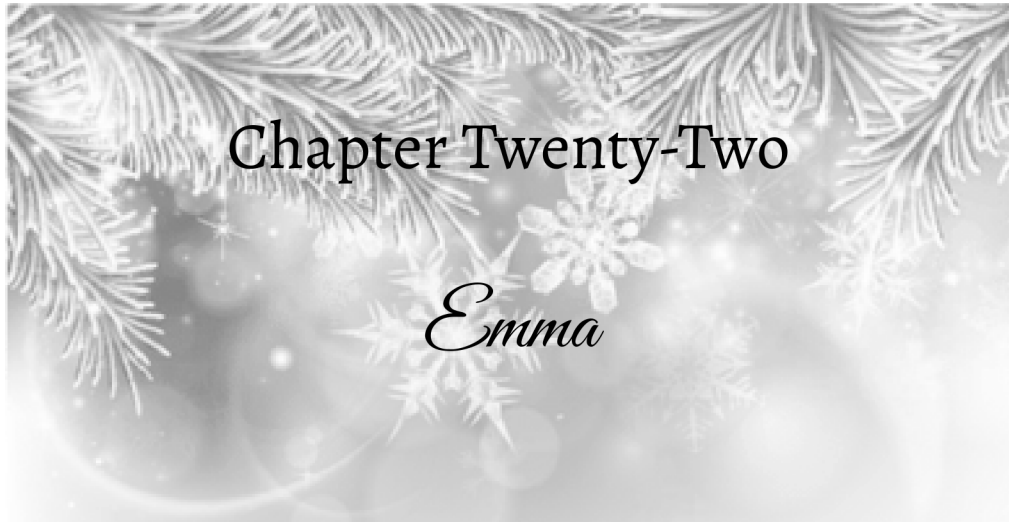
“Ryker!” Greg shouted to be heard over the other players. “Sit down. Emma can beat his ass for us when we get home. No point worrying about a pussy like him when my little sister can whoop his ass anytime she wants. She’s already proven it.”

I grunted. Our eyes met, and I saw Greg was serious. He really wanted me to leave Carlson for Emma to shred. The image brought a smile to my face. There was definitely an appeal to that. My warrior queen kicking ass and taking names. I relaxed slightly in Bobby’s grip. He let me go once he realized I would not launch myself across the jet and pulverize the smug bastard, rubbing his chest where my fist connected with his body.

“Everyone better sit down before I open the hatch and throw all of you out of this jet!” Coach commanded. I sat and buckled myself in, followed by everyone else. “Good. Now shut up and watch the movie. We land in one hour!”

I spent the rest of the flight stewing in what Carlson had said. Did everyone wonder that? Why was it so hard to believe that we might actually be in love? I stared a hole into Greg’s back as we landed. Did he think that? He knew me better than anyone, yet even he was blindsided by the truth of my feelings. I hated that he still wasn’t speaking to me, at least not as friends do. He’d been strictly professional and distant since

the first fight we'd had about my relationship with his sister.
Greg had to know I was in love with Emma. Didn't he?



How did this happen? I looked around the spa with its modern and clean decor. How did Melody talk me into spending the weekend at a spa when Ryker was flying home any time now? I missed him while he was away, yet instead of celebrating his return by showing him how much I was here on a girls' weekend/bachelorette trip. Although, I could use a manicure and pedicure. Oh, that facial was tempting too. I sipped the champagne a passing waiter brought as we waited for our massages.

“Should you be drinking that?” Hannah whispered as she sat on the lounge next to me.

“Hmmm?” I asked, drawing my attention away from the brochure in my hands, listing the various services the spa offered. “Oh, yes, it's fine. My lady friend dropped in for her monthly visit the other day.” It was also part of the reason I agreed to this trip. I was equal parts relieved and disappointed and dreading telling Ryker that I wanted to wait until we were married — or at least closer to the wedding — before we

resume actively trying to start a family. Would he hate me for not wanting to be heavily pregnant at our wedding?

“Are you happy or sad about that?” Melody pipped in from my other side. She wasn’t as quiet as Hannah had tried to be. I sighed.

“I don’t know how I feel about it,” I replied. “A little of both, I guess? I want to have babies with Ryker. Cute squishy babies. But I don’t want to be fat in our wedding pictures. Does that make me a horrible, vain woman?”

Melody laughed.

“It makes you human,” Hannah glared at Melody, then refocused her attention on me. “Have you talked to Ryker about it?”

I shook my head.

“I haven’t had the chance yet,” I replied, biting my bottom lip. “What if he hates me?”

Now Hannah joined in with Melody and laughed.

“That man,” Melody struggled to catch her breath, “could never hate you, Emma. But you should talk to him.”

“Absolutely,” Hannah agreed. “Right after our massages.”

I laughed and noticed the massage therapist in lavender scrubs waiting patiently by the desk. Her long, black hair was pulled up into a simple high pony that trailed halfway down her back.

“Bride’s up first,” Melody sang, practically pushing me off my chair. I stuck my tongue out at her, then followed the massage therapist down the hall. She led me into a small room with low lighting and soft music playing. The walls were a soft sage colour, and lavender oil infused the air.

“Welcome to The Meadows. My name is Cheyenne, and I’ll be your massage therapist today. Is this your first time here?” The other woman handed me a crisp white towel and pointed to a privacy screen in the corner for me to undress.

“It is, actually. I’ve been meaning to make a trip here for years but never seemed to have the time before,” I replied as quickly undressed and wrapped the towel around my body before stepping back out from behind the screen.

“We’re grateful you finally made the time,” Cheyenne replied. She was all business-like as she motioned for me to lie face down on the long massage table. “Is there a special occasion?”

“I’m getting married.” It felt so strange to say those words. For the first time, it all felt so real. I was getting married. I was getting married to Ryker Jones, and it wasn’t the teenage fantasy that had lived in my head on repeat for years. This was so much better.

“Congratulations,” her voice was so cheerful and genuine.

“Thank you,” I smiled to myself. Cheyenne draped a sheet over my body and opened the towel, so I revealed my back to her. Warm oil dripped onto my skin and firm hands got to work, kneading my neck and shoulder muscles before moving

lower. Between Cheyenne's ministrations, the warm oil, and the soft music, it nearly lulled me to sleep. I don't remember a time when I felt so relaxed. Would Ryker like this? I made a mental note to watch some videos and bring home the biggest bottle of this massage oil they offered. Maybe two.

An hour later, I was dressed in a fluffy white robe and following Cheyenne to my next destination. The saltwater spas.

"Your package includes the complimentary swimsuits for the spa," Cheyenne informed me and my eyebrows shot up in surprise. How much did Melody spend this weekend? I thought it was going to be massages and yoga, maybe manicures and pedicures as well. This was more than I expected. "There's a private dressing room through here, and your suit should be waiting for you. I'll fill up the spa while you change, and your friends should be here shortly to join you."

"Thank you," I smiled and walked through the door she'd shown me. I placed my belongings in a locker and found a swimsuit that fits. A white, one-piece with the spa's logo near the left shoulder strap. It was simple but cute. I loved how it accented my curves and made my hair look brighter. Usually, my swimsuit collection consisted of bikinis. I wondered if Ryker would like it. Grabbing my phone from the locker, I snapped a quick selfie in front of the mirror and sent it to him. Voices carried into the changing room, and I shoved my phone back into the locker before he replied. Melody and Hannah were waiting in the spa. I was taking far too long to get ready

if they were already out there. Sliding my feet into a pair of flip-flops, I snatched a towel from the cupboard and made my way out.

“Finally! I thought you would never come out of there,” Hannah greeted me from the large spa.

“Hot damn!” Melody blurted, gaping, and I laughed. “Where have you been hiding that body?”

“Under Ryker,” I smirked. “And on him.”

“Lucky man,” we burst into a fit of giggles and I slid into the tub to join them. Hannah handed me a flute of champagne and I slipped beneath the water and let the jets and the heat melt my bones until I was completely boneless.

“Thank you for this, ladies,” I murmured, my head resting back on the side of the tub. My eyes drifted closed. “I did not know how much I needed this. Remind me to install one of these when we get home.”

“Our home, or your new home with the hockey hottie?” Melody teased, but with a serious undertone to her question that I didn’t miss.

“You mean the house I plan to sell to you?” I asked, praying that it was the right move to make. I loved our house, but I didn’t see myself raising a family with Ryker in it. Forcing Melody to move because I was getting married didn’t seem right, either. The idea made me queasy. It was the last thing I wanted to do to my best friend, and after considering what she’d said the other day, it only made sense.

“Seriously?” Melody gasped. Waves slapped my chest, and I opened one eye to peek at her, praying she was as happy about the idea as she sounded. Melody’s arms wrapped around me and she squeezed. Spots dotted my eyesight from the force of her hug, but I smiled and laughed when I could breathe again.

“Sorry,” Melody bit her lip. “I was just a little excited. I’ve been trolling realty websites for a week trying to figure out where I was going to go. There aren’t a lot of choices this time of year.”

“I have one condition though,” I smirked. “You’re going to have to put up with us until *we* can find the perfect place. And I can’t promise you won’t walk in on anything.”

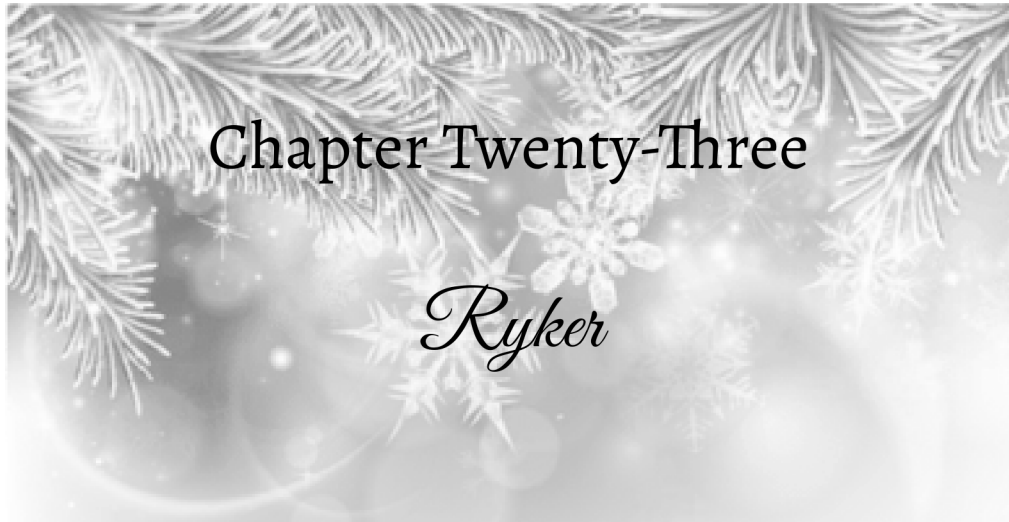
Hannah hooted with laughter.

“Done! I’ll buy a blindfold,” Melody agreed, and we all joined in with Hannah and laughed.

“A blindfold, huh?” I arched a brow. “I’m getting so many ideas at this place. First, the oils and massage, and now blindfolds. What next?”

“Wait till you see the sex room,” Melody wiggled her eyebrows. I howled. This weekend was exactly what I needed. Now I just had to tell Ryker what I decided and hope he’d be ok with it. We could move into his condo, but it was so far away from Serenity and he was gone half the time. It made little sense for me to move into his place after the wedding. But we had months to figure that out. At least one good thing

was coming from us delaying the wedding. We had time to find a place we both loved.



For the first time, walking into my condo, I realized how cold it was. Cold and lonely. The decor was fine. The designer I'd hired when I moved in had done an exceptional job selecting the furnishings and decor. But nothing here screamed *home* to me. I probably wouldn't even be here now if Emma's friends hadn't whisked her away for the weekend. No one else was around, and this was the last place I wanted to be.

I picked up the phone and started dialling Greg's number and froze. He wasn't ready to hear from me yet. I get it. But he was my best friend, regardless of what happened between me and his sister. The past two weeks were the longest we've spent not talking, and an ache formed in my chest. What was it going to take for him to forgive me? How long was this going to last?

Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I popped the top; the cap bouncing with a metallic clang off the kitchen tap and took a big gulp. Enough was enough. He needed to get over this, even if it meant my face was going to be re-arranged. I finished the beer, grabbed my keys and wallet, and stalked

down to the parking garage. My best friend was a stubborn mule who could stay mired in shit for months before finding his way out of it. And sometimes he needed a push.

By the time I got to his place, it was already dark outside. I parked in the driveway behind his car, blocking it on purpose so he couldn't run away. Now I just had to convince him to open the door.

Snow crunched underfoot as I jogged the short distance to his house. I raised my fist and knocked on the heavy wooden door; the sound reverberating through the large brick house. The house Greg had bought intending to fill with a family someday and currently lived by himself. Time ticked by slowly. My nose went numb from the cold. I raised my fist to knock again when I heard a click and it whipped open. Greg was bleary-eyed and swaying on his feet. Crap.

“What have you been drinking?” I asked, pushing my way past him so he couldn't slam the door in my face.

“Who are you? My mother?” He belched.

“No, I'm the best friend that's going to stay and keep an eye on you till you sober up,” I replied, shrugging off my jacket and shoes.

“S-some b-best friend you are,” he mumbled as he stumbled past me down the long corridor. I followed closely, ready to catch him if he tripped or passed out. It was rare to see him so drunk, and it worried me. Had I done this? “C-couldn't even k-keep your h-hands off my little sister.”

“I’m in love with her,” I stated, not relaxing until Greg collapsed in his favourite recliner.

“Sure it isn’t the baby you l-love?” He mumbled.

“Why does everyone keep insisting that Emma must be pregnant for me to marry her? Is it so hard to believe that I might actually love her?” This was beyond ridiculous. I couldn’t ignore the possibility, but damn it, this was my best friend. He knows me better than I know myself and even he thinks this of me? What kind of dick must I be to have this reaction to an engagement?

“So she isn’t knocked up?” Greg’s glassy eyes lit up seconds before he puked all over the pristine hardwood floor. I grabbed an abandoned popcorn bowl from the coffee table, dumped the contents, and shoved it under his face before I started puking, too. Racing to the kitchen, I grabbed an entire roll of paper towels and a garbage bag. The sour smell in the living room was nearly unbearable. I don’t know what was worse. The smell, or the chunks. Yanking my shirt up over my nose, I got to work cleaning up the mess. When I was finished, Greg passed out, still clutching the bowl.

“Great. So much for working things out,” I grunted, grabbing a clean bowl from the kitchen and swapping it out for the nearly overflowing one. After dealing with that, I grabbed a cloth from the linen closet and ran it under cold water, placing it on his face to cool his red cheeks. When I was finally done, I collapsed on the sofa and put the game on. There wasn’t a chance I was leaving him like this. If he

wanted to kick my ass out of here when he sobered up in the morning, fine. But I was going to stick by his side like a terrier until I knew he was ok.



Sunlight streamed through the window in a blinding brilliance that could wake the dead. I rubbed my neck and stretched. Greg was gone. I sat up and listened and could hear groans coming from the kitchen. Following the sounds, I found him slumped on the counter with a large, steaming mug of coffee and a bottle of ibuprofen in front of him. He looked like shit.

“I am not in the mood to deal with you right now,” he growled into the granite. I ignored him and poured a cup of the brew for myself, leaning a hip against the counter as I took that first hot, bitter sip. It was exactly what I needed.

“I don’t give a shit what mood you’re in,” I replied. “We need to talk, and it’s going to happen now. I’m fed up with all this avoidance crap.”

Greg raised his head enough to glare at me through bloodshot eyes. I stifled the urge to laugh at him. We needed to have a serious conversation.

“I am in love with Emma. Have been for a long time, but never acted on it because of our friendship. But I can’t keep my heart buried anymore. I am going to marry her, for real, and start a family with her. That doesn’t mean I think any less of you. You’re my best friend. The closest thing I’ve ever had

to a brother. Why does that have to change? I didn't pick her over you, but for years I've picked you over her for this very reason. Would it kill you to stop acting like a jealous prick and be happy for us?"

Greg mumbled something I couldn't quite catch.

"What was that?" I asked, leaning down on my forearms to hear him better.

"Is she pregnant?" He repeated, glaring at me.

"No," I replied with more confidence than I felt. I swallowed the lump in my throat. Did he really think what everyone else did? That I'd only marry Emma if she was pregnant? I wanted to hit something. I clenched and unclenched my fists. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"She's really not pregnant?" Greg repeated, raising his head to watch me closely. I shook my head, struggling against the frustration surging through my veins. "Did you know she's been in love with you for years?"

I nodded.

"We've loved each other from afar since high school," I replied. "I already told you that."

"I know. I just didn't think you were serious." Greg slumped back in his chair. "I'm happy you didn't knock her up."

"Don't expect that to last long," I bit out, and his eyes popped open. He stared at me for a minute before bursting into laughter. A second later, he was holding his head in his hands

and groaning. I wanted to laugh at the pathetic picture he was presenting to me. “What’s so funny about us wanting to have a family?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “I didn’t expect to gain a brother this Christmas, or for you to actually want kids. You’ve done everything you can to avoid it!”

“I never said I didn’t want to have kids. I just didn’t want to have them with anyone but Emma,” I replied.

“So, why are you delaying the wedding?” He finally asked. I stalled a moment by taking a large gulp of coffee while I sorted my thoughts. This was going smoother than I expected.

“There are a couple of reasons. She wants to get married at Serenity. Mason won’t have it done in time for New Year’s. The other reason is you,” I listed off each reason for our delay.

“Me?” His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Yep. You. You’ve been acting like an ass, but despite that, she still wants her big brothers to walk her down the aisle. Given what a stubborn ass you can be, we figured it would take you at least until June to come around.”

“That’s nearly seven months,” he replied. “Why are you here now?”

“I got impatient ,” I shrugged. “So sue me.”

Greg chuckled and carefully shook his head.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered. “How the hell does a fake engagement take a turn like this? It’s like something out of one

of mom's cheesy romance novels. The whole thing is so far-fetched, it's fucking unbelievable."

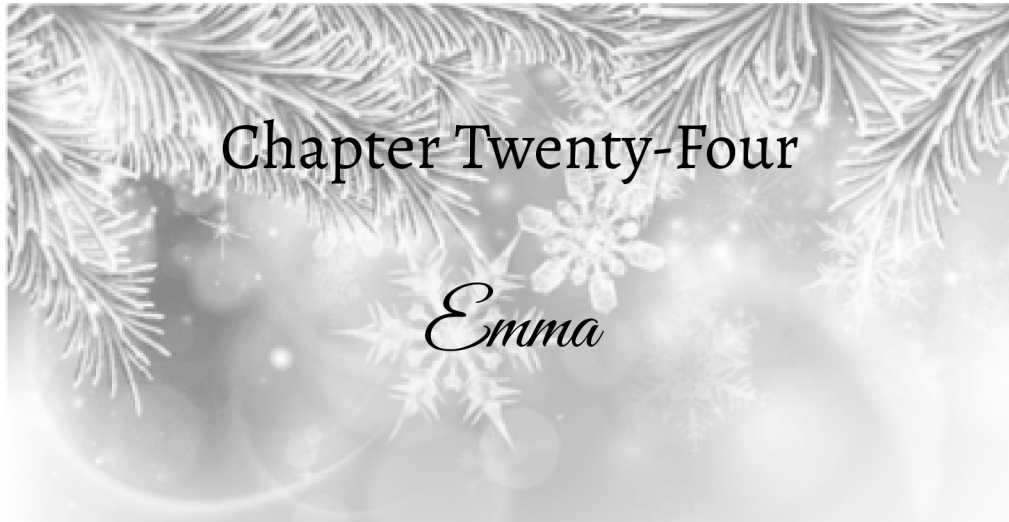
"Well, believe it," I grunted and set my mug on the counter with a loud clunk. "The fake engagement just helped me gain the nerve to defy your ass and make my move once and for all."

"If I'd known the truth," Greg sobered as he faced me, "I never would have stood in your way. I love you both too much to deny you that kind of happiness."

"Seriously?" My eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Seriously, man. You're my best friend and despite your lame-ass pranks, you're a good man. Much better for Emma than that Lance guy ever was," he said, and I nodded in agreement. Lance was an ass. He didn't deserve a woman like her.

"You have no idea," I muttered under my breath.



After a full day of pampering, I collapsed on one bed in our suite. Today was glorious. The only thing missing was Ryker's strong arms holding me right now. That would be perfect. What was he doing right now? I wondered if he missed me as much as I was missing him. Probably not. My brothers were always quick to remind me that women were the sappier, more emotional sex. It was completely unfair, but given how dumb they can be sometimes, I often wondered if it was the sagest advice they could give me to explain the complexities of a man's brain. At least the one on their shoulders. The other one I figured out on my own. The thought had me giggling. I could sense Melody and Hannah's attention on me and opened my eyes enough to see the look they exchanged, clearly wondering if I was drunk or crazy. Who could tell? That champagne had gone down like water all afternoon. How were they even still standing with this room spinning so fast, anyway? Did they have magic legs or something? I have to get myself a pair of those. Magic legs. I giggled even harder and rolled off the bed with a thunk.

“Shit.” Melody raced over to help me. I giggled and rolled away from her. “Come on, Emma. I’m trying to help you up.”

“Hehehe,” I giggled and tickled her behind her knee where she was the most sensitive. She collapsed in a giant, laughing, shrieking pile next to me as she struggled to get away. Hannah came to her rescue after she sobered from laughing. Together, they helped me to my feet and rolled me into the bed.

“When was the last time she ate?” Melody asked, and Hannah shrugged. “Well, she can’t go down to the restaurant like this.”

“Room service it is!” Hannah chimed and moved away to the other side of the room. Melody followed. My eyes drooped, suddenly too heavy to keep them open, and I let sleep drag me down into its blissful peace.

I don’t know how long I slept. It couldn’t have been long. A loud knock reverberated through the room, and Melody raced to open it. She returned with a rolling cart laden with foods of all kinds. My stomach recoiled from the distinct aromas tickling my nose, and I collapsed back onto my pillow, yanking the blankets up over my head to block them out.

“Oh, how sweet! Emma, you should see this. They even decorated the cart for Christmas,” Hannah gushed. “I wonder if they have any gifts in the shop. Remind me to check it out later, Mel. I still need a gift for Mason, and Christmas is a week away.”

“Do you think they’ll have anything he’ll like?” Melody asked. I could hear the crunch as she bit into something. She

jumped on the bed, and I bounced sky-high, wanting nothing more than to smack that apple out of her mouth. It was red and juicy. My blankets went flying on the floor. I grabbed a pillow and smacked her.

“Hey!” Melody laughed, her arm raised to block the blow. “Is that any way to treat your best friend after she ordered all your favourite hangover foods?”

I sniffed. My mouth watered. I ignored the roiling in my belly and clumsily climbed out of bed to check out the cart of the greasiest foods I absolutely loved. Grabbing the French fries, I dumped the cheese and gravy on top and collapsed in an armchair to dig in.

“What is that?” Hannah asked, her lip curled in disgust. “I’ve never seen anyone eat fries like that before. It looks revolting!”

“Mmmm,” I savoured the dripping, gooey mess that I shoved in my mouth. “Poutine! I haven’t had this since the trip we took to Toronto last year.”

“So that’s a Canadian dish?” Hannah arched a delicate auburn brow as I shoved another forkful in my face. I nodded as I chewed. “How strange.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it, Hannah,” Melody chimed in, reaching over to steal a fry. I growled playfully at her and she took a cheeky bite.

“I think I’ll pass. That would probably go straight to my hips anyway,” she mumbled, grabbed a dish of fruit and

cottage cheese and perched on a chair on the far side of the room.

“More for me,” I sang. Then Hannah’s words hit me. Christmas was coming. Fast. And I had nothing for my fiancé for our first Christmas as a couple. I nearly choked on that last bit of food. Don’t panic. There was still a week until Christmas and Mason had me shut down for the holidays. He claimed it was because he was between jobs at the moment and wanted to get as much done as he could over the holidays. I was reluctant, but now I’m seriously glad because it gave me extra time to plan something for Ryker. But what?

“Do you think the gift shop will have anything Ryker will like?” I mumbled around a cheesy French fry.



The drive home the next day was long and painful. I felt every pothole and tiny bump in my throbbing head. Though I still wasn’t sure what hurt more. My head or my wallet. I glanced at the bags next to me on the back seat of Melody’s Ford Focus. The Meadows gift shop had literally everything I could think of and more. I’d even splurged on the gift-wrapping service so I wouldn’t have to worry about hiding everything from him. I still had to think about a more heartfelt gift. Massage oils and bathrobes didn’t quite cut it. There was no sentimentality to them, and I pride myself on giving sentimental gifts that people actually appreciate.

My head bounced off the window when Melody hit a large pothole. Pain shot through my eyeballs. I groaned and held my head between my hands. Gift planning can start tomorrow. Today I was going to curl up in my bed and wallow in misery the moment we get home.

After what felt like hours, we finally pulled into our driveway. I groaned in relief and was out the door before the car was even in park. Stumbling up the driveway, I barely made it to the bushes before I fell into the snowbank. Normally, I'd jump and race inside and climb into a hot shower to get rid of that icy feeling seeping through my clothes. But today it felt so good, soothing my sore head and aching bones. Champagne hangovers were the absolute worst.

“What is happening here?” A deep voice chuckled, startling me. I jumped into a sitting position and cracked one eye open. Ryker stood at my feet, his hands in his pockets as he watched me with amusement sketched across his face.

“She’s a little hungover,” Melody explained, lugging our suitcases out of the trunk.

“Really?” His eyebrows arched in a silent question. I shook my head no. He didn’t even need to ask. If I could be pregnant, there was no way I’d risk taking a drink. “At least you handle your liquor better than your brother does.” He chuckled, and this time it was my turn to be surprised. I thought for sure he’d be a little upset.

“You’re ok with that?” I asked quietly, and he nodded.

“Come on,” he bent and tossed me over his shoulder, lifting me out of the snow to carry me inside. “We’ll talk about it after a nice hot shower.”

Sadly, he dumped me in the bathroom and didn’t join me. I mewed in protest, and Ryker responded with a grin and a shake of his head.

“I’m going to go help your roommate unload the car. We need to talk when you’re done in the shower,” he replied. My heart leapt into my throat. Was this it? Now that he knew I wasn’t pregnant, he was going to break up with me. How could I have been so blind? Ryker hasn’t been in a serious relationship in... well, ever now that I think about it. How could I be so stupid to think I was different? Greg warned me about this. I should have listened.

My head pounded in rhythm with my heart as I quickly showered and changed into dry clothes. I didn’t care what I put on, as long as it was warm and comfortable. If I was going to spend the rest of the day moping on the couch eating Ben and Jerry’s, I didn’t care what I looked like.

I froze with my hand on the doorknob. Was I really going to let Ryker dump me like I was nothing? Who the hell did he think he was? Last week, he was going to marry me and wanted to start a family as quickly as possible. Now he was going to dump me and walk away? I don’t think so. I turned around and wandered right back into my closet to find the sexiest clothes I could find... that I didn’t mind Melody seeing me in. Which meant my little black dress with lace overlay. It

was low cut, skin tight, and stopped about six inches above my knees. I didn't have time to fix my hair and make-up, so this was going to have to do. A quick brush of mascara, and lip gloss, a toss of my hair to fluff it up as best I could, and I was ready to do battle. I slipped my feet into my tallest pair of Jimmy Choo stilettos and made my way down the stairs. Ryker wasn't walking out of my life without a fight.

Downstairs, Ryker and Melody were in the kitchen, chatting over steaming mugs of coffee. I took a deep breath, letting the fragrant aroma settle my nerves before stepping through the doorway. Silence greeted me. Ryker's jaw dropped to the ground, reminding me of a cartoon character. It was a struggle not to giggle as I leaned seductively against the doorjamb. This dress definitely hit the mark.

Melody coughed, breaking the sexual tension in the room. I glared at her.

"Excuse me, I've got some work to do." She took her coffee and started making her way out of the kitchen. "Downstairs. In my soundproof booth. Where I will hear absolutely nothing as I work hard on those ads the station wants me to do."

Ryker and I locked eyes, not even noticing her excuses as she fled to the basement. Having a recording booth installed in the basement was one thing Melody had insisted on installing when she moved in with me and took over Lance's half of the mortgage. It didn't bother me at all, since that space was used for storage, and the booth only took up half of it.

"Wow," Ryker breathed. "How did I get so lucky?"

“You have seen nothing yet,” I breathed.

“We-uh... wow... um... I can’t believe I’m actually going to say this but... damn,” he stuttered, his eyes travelling down the length of my body and back up again. “We need to talk.”

Here it comes. He’s definitely breaking up with me. My heart throbbed achingly in my chest. I blinked back the tears. This dress was a bad idea, after all. I should know better. When Ryker gets an idea or plan in his head, there was no deterring him from it. He’d been like that for as long as I could remember. How could I be so stupid? I moved towards the kitchen table and reluctantly took a seat as far away from him as I could.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, frowning when I didn’t sit next to him. Like he didn’t know! I was equal parts angry and hurt, but I refused to let him see the damage he’d caused. I shook my head and refused to look at him.

“I’ll get right to it then,” he muttered, confusion lacing his voice. “I think it would be best if we put off having a baby until after the wedding.”

My head snapped up as I registered his words. He wasn’t breaking up with me? This is what he wanted to talk about. Relief surged through my veins, melting the ice that had formed there.

“Why?” I asked, my voice a little husky with emotion.

“Apparently there’s a rumour going around that I’m only marrying you because you’re pregnant,” his eyebrows pinched

together as he watched me closely. “Carlson suggested it wasn’t even my baby, and I was marrying you because you were Greg’s sister and I was trying to do right by you because the real baby daddy wouldn’t. I’m sorry, but I don’t want anyone to believe that I want to spend my life with you for any other reason than because I’m desperately in love. After the wedding, I don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks as long as you’re mine. Are you disappointed?”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. How could anyone believe Ryker would marry me just because I must be pregnant? I wanted to snap Nick Carlson in half for his ridiculous suggestions. Next, he’ll be claiming that he was the real baby daddy or something equally stupid. Alpha-holes are seriously going to ruin my life. I swear I’m going to rip him apart for that idiocy. But I was also relieved. I didn’t want to be pregnant on my wedding day if we are waiting till June. It was one thing to be pregnant and not showing, but another to waddle uncomfortably down the aisle, or have to have my dress altered a million times until it was unrecognizable.

“Don’t hate me,” I finally replied, breaking an extended and awkward silence, “but I don’t want to be heavily pregnant on our wedding day.”

“Really? So you’re not mad?” He asked, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand.

“Not at all. I wasn’t sure how to bring it up with you after everything, but if we have to wait until June, I’d rather wait to start our family,” I explained.

“So, why were you acting so strange a minute ago?” He asked. I shook my head and laughed silently at the irony of the situation.

“I thought you were breaking up with me,” I said, relief flowing through me. Ryker stared at me in shock for a moment, then a slow grin spread across his face.

“Is that why you did all this?” His eyes travelled over me, making my entire body flush before meeting my eyes again. I shrugged and glanced out the window, suddenly shy and embarrassed. A chair scraped against the ceramic tile floor. I could sense him moving closer, but I refused to look. My cheeks were on fire.

“Baby Girl, now that I’ve got you, I am never letting you go,” he whispered in my ear and a whole different sensation flooded through me. If I was wearing panties, they’d be soaked. He moved to stand in front of me, boxing me in with his arms on either side of the chair as he knelt until we were face to face. “You’re mine, Emma. And I’m yours. I always have been.”

Before I could respond, I was flying into the air. With a shriek, I landed bent over his broad shoulder. Ryker slapped my ass and started heading out of the kitchen.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked, struggling against his grip.

“Upstairs,” he growled. “To punish you for thinking I’d ever walk away from what we have.”

His idea of punishment excited me. I squirmed. He gripped my ass cheek and squeezed, and I nearly orgasmed right there. Fuck. I was a goner.

“Which door is your room?” He asked when we reached the top of the stairs.

“That one,” I pointed to the right. Ryker turned and kicked the door open. I gaped in surprise. Never in a million years did I think a man taking control like this would be such a turn-on, but damn. I didn’t like it, I loved it.

“Stop squirming, Baby Girl or I’m going to punish you up against the wall,” he growled. I couldn’t help myself. I squirmed.

Before I knew what was happening, my back pressed against the wall and my dress was up over my hips. His breath was warm on my ear as he rolled the lobe between his teeth. I was straddling his thigh, rubbing against him shamelessly. A strap on my dress slipped off my shoulder, freeing my breast to his touch.

“I need you, Ryker,” I panted as he bent and sucked the nipple into his mouth. He didn’t respond as I continued to rub and grind against his thigh. “Please,” I begged.

“Not yet, Baby Girl. You haven’t learned your lesson,” he whispered in my ear before freeing my other breast and pinching it between his fingers. He moved his leg, stopping me from riding it, and used it to spread my legs further apart. I mewled in protest and grabbed at the hem of his shirt.

“Tsk tsk,” he clucked his tongue and grabbed both my wrists, pinning them above my head. “I’m not done punishing you yet, Baby Girl.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” I begged, wrapping my legs around his waist. “Please, Ry.” I was on the brink of coming, and he kept moving to stop it. It was maddening. My breath hitched in my chest when his fingers danced around my swollen and needy nub. I moved my hips, searching for his touch, desperate for more. He’d glide his fingers over my nub and away again.

“Damn it, Ryker!” I panted, frustration warring with the need building low in my abdomen. I bit his ear. He let out a low, husky chuckle. Then the glorious sound of a zipper lowering and a package being ripped open filled the room. Finally!

Ryker slid his cock through my wet folds. I screamed in delight. I writhed and tried to move my hips, but his big, calloused palm held me still, my arms still imprisoned in the iron grip of his other hand. I was a mindless, dripping mess by the time he finally thrust inside me so hard my ass bounced off the wall.

“Yes!” I screamed. “Finally! Oh god, Ryker, yes!”

I was nearly there. My body coiled with tension, waiting for that last thrust for release. Ryker stopped. My eyes popped open in surprise and frustration.

“Why did you stop?” I demanded, trying to urge him on with my body.

“Emma, I love you,” he replied quietly. My heart melted at the sincerity in his tone. “I’m never going to leave you. Do you believe that now?”

I nodded. After today, there wasn’t a single doubt in my mind. Ryker was mine. As much as I’d always been his.

“Good,” he grunted, resuming his rhythm. Harder and harder. He pounded into me. I screamed his name as I shuddered and came. Ryker released my hands and carried me to the bed. We stayed connected as he laid me down on the soft duvet and made love to me, softer this time. His thrusts were gentler, slower, but still held the power to drive me wild. I held him close as he changed the angle of his thrusts. Hitting that magical spot over and over again until I came a second time. This time, he fell down the rabbit hole with me. Ryker held himself still over me as he came. He collapsed beside me, careful not to crush me with his body. We struggled to catch our breath for several minutes.

“Wow,” I finally broke the silence of the room. “That was —.”

“Incredible,” he finished for me. Ryker rolled over and snapped off the condom. I sat up and fixed the straps on my dress when I finally regained my senses. He can punish me anytime he likes if it’s like that every time. Damn.

My hangover was long forgotten as I excused myself to clean up in the ensuite bathroom. When I finished, I changed into fluffy pyjamas and curled up in the middle of the bed while I waited for Ryker to come out and join me. Being with

Ryker was better than any fantasy I'd ever had. I never wanted to let this go.



Chapter Twenty-Five

Ryker

The week leading up to Christmas was a blur. When I wasn't at the arena, or in the gym, I was with Emma nearly every moment. Greg teased me for being whipped, but I laughed and teased him back for being jealous. Growing up, everyone had always bet that Greg would be the first one to settle down and start a family. Now I was proving everyone wrong. A permanent grin fixed itself on my face all week. No one can get me down. Except maybe Margot, I realized as I watched her march through the locker room doors after our last game before the holidays.

“Ryker, what do you know about this?” She demanded, shoving her phone in my face.

“Margot, nice to see you again. Have any plans for the holidays?” I asked civilly.

“PHL forward, Ryker Jones, a victim of sextortion scandal,” she quoted, ignoring my efforts. My eyes popped wide open in surprise. What was she talking about? I took her phone and scrolled through the article on the screen.

“Emma Chambers, recently engaged to Ryker Jones, power forward for the Helena Stallions, recently revealed that she was the victim of attempted extortion by her former lover, Lance Tomlinson. Amongst her claims, we discovered that her jilted lover attempted to blackmail her with claims that she cheated on him with the Stallions forward, and was pregnant but that the father of her child was actually unknown. While she did not explain what his reasons were for this attempt to destroy her relationship, SNN discovered that Lance Tomlinson was the sole beneficiary of a significant fortune after the recent passing of his grandfather and hotelier William Tomlinson. However, the Will also states that Mr. Tomlinson will not inherit if he does not marry Miss Chambers by the end of the year unless there was proof of infidelity on her part. The suspect in question was also attempting to extort information from one of our own journalists,” the article continued, but I didn’t need to read anymore. Why didn’t Emma tell me about this? When did this all happen? Was that the real reason he’d showed up at Serenity the night of the snowstorm?

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Margot screeched, bringing me back to the present. “How am I supposed to represent you when I don’t know what the hell is happening before it happens?”

“You’re my agent. Isn’t that your job?” I asked, my eyebrow raised as I stared down at her. “Besides, I did not know any of this was occurring. You knew he showed up at her work and tried to sell some wild story to the press. Looks

like they did their due diligence and reported the actual story instead of what he tried to sell them. How does this hurt me?”

“It doesn’t,” she reluctantly admitted. “But if you end up embroiled in scandal for any reason, I need to know about it.”

“I warned you about the possibility weeks ago.” I turned my back on her and grabbed a shirt out of my cubby, focusing on the buttons as she fumed. “Who knew Lance would inherit a hotel chain on the condition of marrying his ex-girlfriend? Who makes it a condition of inheritance for someone to marry their ex, anyway?”

“Either a man set on a specific match for his child, or one who didn’t alter his Will after the relationship dissolved,” Margot sighed. “Is there any truth to the pregnancy rumour?”

“No,” I replied irritably, knotting my tie with sharp movements as I turned back to face her. “We’re planning to work on starting a family on our honeymoon. Too many people making up stories about a child that doesn’t exist for us to be comfortable enough to start one before the wedding.” I eyed Nick Carlson’s back as he slowly donned his jacket. It was obvious he was listening to the entire conversation. I wanted to knock him out but reined in the urge to storm across to his cubby and shove his face into the floor.

“Do me a favour then, I need a statement from both of you denying these claims,” I dragged my attention back to Margot as she continued to make demands. “You’ve never played better, Ryker. I’d hate for the league to ignore that because of yet another scandal on your record.”

I nodded in agreement. “You’ll get your statement tonight,” I promised. “As soon as I talk with Emma.”

“Good,” Margot turned to leave, but before she reached the door, she turned and shouted over the din of the locker room. “Congratulations on your engagement, Ryker! She’s a lucky lady.”

“No,” I replied. “I’m the one who’s lucky.”

Margot grinned. The expression wrinkled her face and made her almost unrecognizable. I smiled back and grabbed my gear to follow her out the door. Carlson stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. He quickly dropped it when I turned on him, furious that he’d dare touch me after everything he’s said over the past weeks.

“Hey man, I just wanted to apologize,” he put his hands up in front of himself defensively. “Everything I’ve said and done was stupid and you didn’t deserve it. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” I replied, confused by his sudden change of attitude. “Why now?”

“I thought — we all thought — that this engagement of yours was a farce to clean up your image. I can see now that we were wrong,” he shrugged.

I harrumphed, glaring at my teammates who were suddenly way too busy trying to pack up and leave. They’d obviously been listening to every word.

“What can I do to make it up to you?” He offered. I thought long and hard about it before answering.

“Since Emma had to change a fundraiser she was having for the animal shelter to a silent, online auction, how about making a donation?” I suggested. “I’m sure you’ll have no problem getting help to find items to donate.” My voice was ringing through the room. I walked away before anyone could say another word. It was almost Christmas Eve, and I didn’t relish having to spend another moment in that locker room, away from the woman I loved.



Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Emma was staying at my condo for the night, so she wouldn’t have to drive home to Sweetwater after the game. The more time we spent here, the more obvious it became how soulless this place was. I may as well be living in a hotel.

“So,” I broke the silence, no longer satisfied with pushing my food around on the plate with a fork and avoiding the obvious tension in the room. “When did you talk to SNN about Lance, and why didn’t you mention it to me?”

“I — um — do you remember Devon?” She asked, staring at her pasta primavera. I frowned. Who the hell was Devon?

“The man I was on the date with the night you stole a kiss on the Kiss Cam?” She looked up and the memory flooded back to me.

“The idiot who was on his phone most of the game?” I asked, confused about what he had to do with this.

“He works for SNN. So, I called him, asking for a favour when we discovered Lance was trying to sell lies to the news network,” she replied. “I was hoping to get the story killed. I never imagined it would blow up the way that it did. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you. I meant to, really. But the longer I heard nothing from him, the less I thought it was important. If he killed the story, then there was no harm done, right?”

“But he didn’t kill the story,” I pointed out. My fork hit the plate with a loud clang. “It turned out to be an even bigger one.”

“I’m really sorry.” She begged me to forgive her because she did not know. I could never be truly angry at her. She was distraught when we found out why Lance had shown up. I only wished she’d told me about her own phone call to the news network. “Is there any way I can make it up to you?”

I pretended to think about it. I could punish her, make her beg. The thought made my cock twitch. But I needed to make that public statement first. Needed to clear the air before we did anything else.

“Margot wants us to make a statement about the situation,” I replied. “But I haven’t got a clue what to say right now.”

“I think I do,” Emma replied shyly. “After all, a picture says a thousand words.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, watching as she pushed her chair back and walked around to my side of the table. She took my hand, and I let her lead me into the bedroom.

“Take your shirt off,” she demanded. My cock twitched again with her take-charge attitude. I liked it a lot and rushed to do what she said. I tossed my shirt on a chair in the room’s corner, and Emma pushed me down on the bed. She straddled my lap and bent to kiss me. I palmed her ass and squeezed.

“Tsk tsk,” she pushed away from me. I groaned and watched her walk into another room. She came back a few moments later with a stick in her hand.

“What’s that?” I asked, my pulse racing as I recognized it.

“Don’t panic,” she grinned slyly. “It’s negative.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. If it was negative, why did she have it? I wondered. The question must have been written all over my face as she came closer to the bed and placed it on the nightstand.

“I wanted to double-check before the holidays,” she shrugged as she answered my unasked question. “We’re going to use it to show the world that I’m not pregnant yet,” she replied. “Now lie back.”

I did as she instructed. Emma slipped her clothes off and climbed into bed with her phone in hand. She reached over and placed the pregnancy test on my chest, and handed her phone to me with the camera app open. Realizing her plan, I tucked the blanket extra carefully around her body. Emma giggled and snuggled into me, her hand on my stomach a couple of inches below the blue and white stick. I snapped a couple of pictures and handed the phone back to her, watching as she opened her Snapgram account and tagged me in the

photo. I read the caption and kissed the top of her head. It was perfect.

“Some people seem to find it incredibly difficult to believe in true love. For that, I’m truly sorry. But you will not ruin my happy ending. Ryker Jones and I have been secretly in love for years but tried to deny it for the sake of his friendship with my brother. That ended the night a mascot stole me from my date, and bravely showed the world the secret he’d kept hidden in his heart for years. When you’ve loved someone from afar for so long, and you finally have them, why wait to marry them? I don’t want to wait to become Mrs. Ryker Jones. We’ve waited long enough. Our engagement might seem sudden to many, but you do not know our history. We love each other. We can’t wait to start a family together. And we’re NOT getting married because of an unplanned pregnancy, nor out of guilt or a sense of chivalry. I LOVE YOU, RYKER JONES, and I can’t wait to be your wife.”

I read it over again before she hit post. Grabbing my phone out of my pocket, I opened my account and commented on her photo.

“I love you too, Baby Girl. Screw the haters who want to keep us apart with their lies.”

“Think Margot will be ok with that?” She asked. I kissed the top of her head and rolled us so we were face to face.

“I don’t give a damn what she or anyone else thinks,” I replied. “I’m the luckiest man alive to have you in my life and I am done defending our relationship. Screw the haters, screw

the cheating exes, screw the agents. Margot's plan to arrange a fake engagement might be the reason I had the nerve to acknowledge what's in my heart, but she doesn't get a say in how or who I live the rest of my life with. I just want to slip a ring on that finger of yours and love you for the rest of my life, Emma."

"This isn't some practical joke, is it?" She asked slyly and winked. I grinned.

"My joking days are over," I promised soberly.

"Mine aren't," Emma replied with a saucy grin. She stretched lazily beneath me, pressing her body against mine. "I kinda like it when you punish me."

I growled and lowered myself onto the bed.

"Don't worry," I promised, taking her wrists and holding them over her head. "I'm sure I can find plenty of reasons to punish you."



Chapter Twenty-Six

Emma

This was weird. So very weird. Everyone was missing. Mom's house was completely empty. On Christmas morning! Usually, there's a tremendous bustle of activity in the kitchen as Mom makes breakfast for everyone. I come early every year to help, but the echo of my footsteps through the house only magnified the fact that I was alone. Did I get the day wrong? I grabbed my phone and double-checked the calendar. Where was everyone?

"Hello? Mom?" I called out, but there was no reply. I grabbed the bag of gifts I'd brought over and placed them under the tree. Maybe Mom ran out of something and ran over to a neighbour's house or something to get more? That wasn't like her at all, but anything was possible. A door clicked shut behind me and I jumped, startled by the sudden noise.

"Robyn?" I gasped, noticing my lovely, red-haired and curvy cousin standing near the front door. She smiled at me, and when my heart rate settled down, I smiled back.

"Merry Christmas, Emma," she greeted me with a grin from ear to ear. I thought this was odd, considering it was supposed

to be her wedding day today, and she'd cancelled it. My confusion must have been written all over my face.

"I guess you haven't heard the good news yet," she laughed and pulled off one of her gloves. She wiggled her left hand. I gasped and rushed over to her. "Ricky and I eloped!"

"When? Oh my god! I'm so happy for you, but what about the secret kid thing?" I blurted out as I admired the beautiful pear-cut diamond ring with the matching diamond-studded wedding band.

"Oh, that?" She waved a dismissive hand, and my eyebrows shot up to the sky. "Turns out you aren't the only one with a psycho ex. That poor child was never Ricky's. His ex cheated on him while he was away on business in Tokyo and tried to claim that Ricky was the boy's father. But anyway, that's a story for another day. I was on the phone with Mason a moment ago and... well.. something happened at Serenity. We need to get you over there right away."

"Is he alright? Why didn't he call me? What is he even doing at Serenity on Christmas morning?!" A million and one questions whirled through my mind. Robyn gave me vague answers as I yanked my coat and boots back on and raced out to her car since it was blocking mine in the driveway. "Have you called Mom? Or Hannah?"

"I just talked to them. They were together at Mason and Hannah's, getting some last-minute breakfast supplies," Robyn answered calmly. She slid into her seat and threw the Ford Focus into reverse, backing out onto the quiet, snow-covered

street. I stewed in silence in the passenger seat the entire drive, worried about what I might find when we got there. Anything could have happened.

“Hun, can you hand me my phone, please? I dropped it on the floor at your feet.” Robyn’s voice interrupted my dark thoughts, dragging me back to reality. I glanced down, not even questioning why she had her phone out while she was driving, and noticed it sliding around on the floor by my feet. We turned onto the street leading up to Serenity, and I grabbed it as I bent down. I sat up just as we pulled into the driveway and gasped in surprise.

Serenity was all decorated for the holidays with a beautiful reindeer display and lights everywhere. Wreaths hung from every window on the second story, and garlands and poinsettias lined up the steps and front porch. It was absolutely magical. But why would someone do this? Because of all the renovations, I had planned to wait until next year to decorate it for the holidays. It had turned out to be a good thing since I couldn’t even show the place because Mason insisted that it wasn’t safe for me to be here this week. What was going on? I turned to Robyn and opened my mouth to ask if she knew about this, but she squealed in excitement and climbed out before I could get a single word out. I, however, was much more sedate as I slowly opened my door and followed her up the steps.

“Surprise!” My family, Melody, even Ryker, and his entire hockey team were there, lining my porch and shouting.

“But — why?” I blurted, dumbfounded. It wasn’t my birthday, and besides, who throws surprise parties at six a.m. on Christmas morning?

Ryker jogged down the steps and took both my hands in his. He knelt down in the snow on one knee. I stared at him, not knowing what to say.

“Emma Chambers, it took me a long time to realize how much I love you. I’m sorry about that. But you made me the happiest man on Earth when you promised to be my wife, despite my stupidity all these years,” he said.

“And your stubborn male pride, my brother’s ego, the list goes on,” I teased. Tears streamed down my face, but I couldn’t help cracking a joke to break the tension. Ryker chuckled.

“I don’t want to wait anymore to make you mine. Our friends and family have given us this wonderful gift today and I hope you’ll say yes. Emma Chambers, will you marry me? Today?” He asked. I glanced from him to my brother and back again. I wanted to say yes, but how could we expect all of our guests to sit outside in the cold and the snow on Christmas Day so we could get married? Mason had said it wasn’t safe... to go inside.... That’s when I realized what that gift truly was. He’d somehow worked a miracle to finish Serenity so I could get married sooner. How?

“Just say yes so we can get out of the cold!” someone shouted, and I laughed.

“Yes, yes, I’ll marry you today,” I said through the tears streaming down my face. Then a thought occurred to me. “But my dress is still at the shop! And what about my hair? And the caterers?”

“We have already handled everything, love. Just go inside and enjoy being pampered by everyone that loves you two,” Robyn came over and squeezed my shoulder. “My Christmas gift to you both is the use of my reception hall for after the ceremony.”

“I got enough done so you could at least have the ceremony here thanks to the help of some of Ryker’s buddies here,” Mason slapped Bobby on the shoulder.

“And don’t worry about your dress or hair or anything else. It’s all waiting for you upstairs,” Melody chimed in, squeezing through the crowd to give me a giant hug.

“I can’t believe you guys did all this! Thank you so much,” I dashed away my tears on the back of my hand.

“Did you know about this?” I asked Ryker.

“Greg brought me out here last night at the last minute. That’s why I didn’t come back after dinner. These beautiful fools needed help to untangle lights,” he explained. “We were here all night setting up.”

“And now, dear sister, we are going to catch some much-needed sleep,” Greg chimed in, slinging his arm around Ryker’s shoulder.

“Speak for yourself,” someone shouted. “I’m gonna make it just in time for the kids to open gifts from Santa!”

I laughed and dashed away a few more tears.

“While you head upstairs and get ready for the big event in,” Greg checked his watch, “eight hours.”

“Oh gosh,” I replied and raced up the stairs to Serenity.

“Where are you going?” Melody asked, laughing.

“I only have eight hours to get ready! Today is my wedding day!” I screamed and ran inside amidst a chorus of bawdy jokes and chuckles.

Upstairs, my mom was waiting with tears in her eyes. My dress hung on the back of the bathroom door. Hannah and my hairdresser, Maria, were also waiting patiently.

“Maria,” I froze in my tracks. “Maria, I’m so sorry for how everything turned out with Devon.”

“Are you kidding me? I saw the game. The boy’s an idiot! I’m sorry I put you up to it, but it ended up working out for you after all, eh?” She winked and nudged me with her elbow. I couldn’t help agreeing. It had all worked out beautifully.

Epilogue

Mason's handwork and dedication to his craft showed through with every bit of Serenity's restoration. While all of Serenity wasn't finished yet, he'd worked hard with the help of Ryker's teammates to finish the front room so I could at least have the ceremony there. It was beautiful to see my dream come to life in this one room and I knew then that this place was absolutely worth all the time and money I'd poured into it so far. I couldn't wait to see the entire place finished.

A dashing man in a tuxedo caught my eye at the end of the aisle. I practically dragged my complaining brothers down it to get to him, much to the amusement of our friends and families. I was still in awe of everything they had done for us when they could have been spending the holidays relaxing and having fun with their families. When I mentioned it to Hannah, she laughed at me and assured me that most of them were happy not to waste the entire day cooking.

Of course, none of the reception could have happened without my cousin's generosity. The reception turned into quite the party afterwards as we rang in the holidays together.

It was a night I could never forget, and couldn't have planned any better if I'd tried. One look at my new husband had me forgetting about everything else. I couldn't wait to start the rest of our lives together.

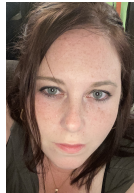
But first? A dance! I grabbed his hand and dragged him out onto the dance floor. His hands on my waist were warm through my dress. I glanced up at Ryker and winked. Nodding at the DJ, the hall was soon filled with Iris by the Goo Goo Dolls.

"Is that—?" Ryker started to ask and I nodded. It was the song playing on the radio the night he'd given me my first kiss in the front seat of his car so many years ago.

"I couldn't think of a better song to play for our first dance," I replied as we started to move to the music for our first dance as husband and wife.

"It's perfect," he grinned and bent slightly to kiss me. He was right. This whole night was absolutely perfect, thanks to my family and his team that had earned a new nickname, the Christmas Stallions.

About The Author



For as long as I can remember, I have always had a vivid imagination and a passion for writing. However, when it came to University studies, I chose to study Anthropology and hold an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree and a passion for history and archaeology as well as writing.

I grew up in Toronto, Ontario in a large family with lots of pets to keep us busy. Currently, I am a wife and mother to two wonderful boys and a chocolate Labrador retriever named Duke.

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Love Born of Fire Series

Hawk's Heart

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Other books by Frances Everly.

Wishing on Snowflakes

Wild Hearts and Dragonflies

The Phoenix Crown Saga written as FD Everly.

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A ROCKSTAR HOLIDAY ROMANCE



Wishing On Snowflakes

Keep Scrolling for a look at Wishing on Snowflakes

Wishing on Snowflakes Prologue

Chase

I dragged my feet through the snow as I followed my Mom through the tree lot. She was determined to find the best tree for Christmas and was convinced that it was exactly what I needed to cheer me out of what she calls the “Christmas blues.” It’s the same thing every year. Christmas comes and all I see are my friends playing hockey and having snowball fights with their Dads, and it reminds me that I don’t have one. Or at least, I don’t know who he is. Don’t get me wrong, I love my mom. She’s super awesome and fun. But sometimes, like at Christmas, I wished I could have a Dad too. Maybe mom wouldn’t have to work so hard to support us if he were around.

“What do you think about this one?” My mom asked, and I looked up to see a humungous tree looming over us. My eyes bulged out of my head. The tree gets bigger every year, but this time my mom’s outdone herself. I’ve never seen such a big Christmas tree outside of a department store.

“Can we really get it? It’s so big!” I practically jumped in excitement my earlier melancholy momentarily forgotten. My

mom bit her lip as she stared up at the tree, then smiled.

“Sure, we can. It might have to go on the front lawn though, I think it might be bigger than the house,” she turned to wave down a man dressed like a lumberjack.

“Hey, Chase, did you see the Wishing Fountain over there? Here, take this and go make a Christmas wish while I arrange for this tree to be delivered.” Mom handed me a bunch of quarters and pointed at the ancient fountain in the middle of the town square. I’ve never made a wish on it before. At least, not one I remember. I was always surrounded by other kids and their parents and I did my best to stay away. They already had the one thing I would wish for and I didn’t want to embarrass myself by wishing for it in front of them.

“Ok, Mom,” I took the change she offered and looked back at the Fountain. For once it was completely deserted.

I trudged through the snow and slush, the snow pants my mom insisted I wear, despite the fact that I’m ten years old and none of my other friends had to wear snow pants to go Christmas tree shopping, making every step seem a million times too loud as they rubbed together. Even the street was quiet, as I carefully crossed it, making sure I crossed where the streetlights were brightest. The whole town was decorated with festive lights and greenery. People were even starting to decorate the giant Christmas tree in the middle of the square. The Christmas music blaring over the speakers at the tree lot faded into the night with every step I took until I found myself at the edge of the old fountain. It was too cold now for the

water to run through it, but in the summer, it shot water up to incredible heights. Sometimes, on a sunny day, if I watched carefully, it would create small rainbows in between jets of water. I don't know how long I stood there, staring at the fountain. It must have been a while because my mom's voice startled me. I hadn't heard her calling my name until she was standing right behind me, and I still hadn't made my wish.

“Chase, are you ready to go? Grandma and Grampa should be coming over soon to help get everything ready for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. I know how much you love to bake with Grandma,” Mom rambled on about dinner and getting the tree decorated after it was delivered tomorrow but I wasn't really listening. I had lost my chance to make the one wish I'd been dying to make for as long as I can remember. My whole life. I scuffed my boots against the pavement and stared at the slush on the ground, fighting back the tears that struggled to break free. I didn't want my mom to see how sad I was. She tried so hard to make every holiday perfect, but the one thing I only ever wanted is the one thing she couldn't give me.

“Hey,” she placed a hand on my shoulder and knelt beside me. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I answered, clutching the change she had given me in my little fist even harder. She must have noticed because she looked down at my hand and then back up into my face.

“Do you know, there's a legend behind this fountain? Apparently, it's magical, but only at Christmas. Grandma used

to tell it to me when I was a kid. If I remember correctly, the legend says that wishes from the heart, cast at Christmas in this very fountain, will come true on Christmas morning,” she squeezed my shoulder tightly.

“Really?” I asked, my voice ragged with unshed tears.

“Really,” she answered. “Do you want to make your wish, or I can wait by the car while you make it?”

I rubbed my eyes and looked up at her concerned face and shook my head.

“No, that’s ok. I can make it now,” I answered quietly and turned towards the fountain.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and wished really hard, then I threw all the coins into the fountain at once. The coins glistened with the light of the streetlights before crashing onto the stones with a tinkling sound. All at once, the wind seemed to pick up, whipping my mom’s hair around her face and biting my cheeks and nose. Snow began to fall in giant flakes, and I swear I could hear the tinkling of bells. Mom stood and clasped my hand, holding it tight as she looked around for the car.

“Looks like there’s a storm coming in. We should get going,” she tugged my hand and I gladly followed. I glanced back at the fountain as we crossed the street, smiling for the first time all day.

Wishing on Snowflakes Chapter One

Sierra

Ten years ago

My back ached. I tried to rub the knots forming in my lower back, but it was no use. A hard kick to my kidneys had me wincing from the sudden pain and Dylan noticed. He put his guitar down, careful to place it back in its case so it wouldn't get thrown around the rattling, old bus and eased down on the bench next to me. He settled his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer, the scent of his aftershave soothing my inner turmoil. Our baby wasn't even born yet and already he or she loved their daddy. I smiled, turning my head to bury it into his shoulder and yawned.

"Come on," he urged. "Let's go lie down in the back and rest. I'll even give you a back rub."

I grinned when he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, bursting into laughter when Charlie started to gag from his spot on the opposite bench, where he sat playing video games. Dylan's brother Dean simply rolled his eyes at the drummer's antics and promptly shot his character.

“Hey, you cheated!” Charlie accused, good-naturedly. “I was distracted!”

“Shouldn’t let yourself get distracted so easily,” Dean teased. “Keep your head in the game and out of my brother’s bedroom.”

“It’s his fault for hitting on Sierra in front of us!” Charlie pressed the button on his controller and restarted the game.

“She’s his fiancé, when isn’t he hitting on her?” Barron asked lazily from his bunk, a book open in front of him. “Grow up a little and maybe you’ll find a woman who likes you enough to come on tour with us when she’s eight months pregnant too.”

“Ugh, no thanks. I don’t really like kids.” Charlie grimaced and Sierra laughed again.

“That’s because you still are a kid!” Dean teased and Charlie tossed a pillow at his head.

“Let’s leave these stooges to their antics. Come with me,” Dylan whispered in my ear, sending a delightful shiver down my spine. He stood and helped me to my feet. I felt like a giant sack of potatoes as I squeezed down the narrow aisle between the band’s bunks and back to the small room, I shared with him between hotels when he toured. His band, The Half-Baked Delinquents, was touring as an opening act, but Spitfire Records had made it clear that they were on their way up to being headliners really fast and were trying to keep them happy by supplying them with their own tour bus. Even if it was beat up and had its day back in the 1970s. It was a lot

more than what most opening bands got, and I was incredibly grateful not to be crammed into a bus loaded with roadies and equipment. I groaned at the sight of the bed and moved to lie down on it. Dylan followed, curling his long, muscular body around me as he proceeded to work on the knots in my back. I felt so safe in his arms and melted under the ministrations of his hands. As I drifted off to sleep, his arm curled around my body and he rested his hand on my massive belly, linking his fingers with mine.

I woke to the sound of shattering glass and screeching metal, the world spinning around me and settling as fast as it had begun. A weight settled on top of me, pinning me to the mattress, and I tried to wiggle out from under it. A pain seared through my stomach, and fluid soaked my thighs. I was barely thirty weeks along. This couldn't be happening. Not now! I screamed in panic, pushing against the weight holding me down with all my might.

“Dylan!” I screamed, again and again, my fear escalating when he didn't respond.

Metal screeched again, and I could hear people shouting outside the bus. I called them, hoping someone might help me get out of here and find him. I wanted nothing more than to hear his husky voice tell me that everything was going to be fine. When the weight above me shifted and groaned unexpectedly, I realized Dylan must have thrown himself on

me to try and protect us. It was his body pinning me down. I tried to shake him awake, still calling his name, but to no

avail.

I don't know how long we laid entwined, labour pains coursing through my body and becoming more intense when the screech of metal next to our heads gave way and was pushed inward by a gloved hand. A black helmet followed through the hole and I nearly wept with relief at the sight of the firefighter.

"Please help us," I begged. "Dylan won't wake up, and I think I'm in labour."

"Easy now, we'll get you both free. How far along are you?" The fireman asked, the calmness of his voice washing over me and easing my anxiety.

"Thirty weeks," I answered, unable to hold back the sob that had lodged in my chest when I first felt the sticky wetness between my legs.

"Alright now, we'll get you both out of here and in the hands of our very capable paramedic friends right outside. Thirty weeks is early, but nothing the great docs we work with can't take care of. Are you hurt at all?" He asked as another firefighter squeezed into the small space. They slid a plastic collar around Dylan's neck before both men slid Dylan off her and onto the backboard the second firefighter had carried in.

"No, I don't think so. Dylan... Dylan protected us from getting hurt," my sobs subsided as I gasped at the pain that gripped my belly.

“Then your man’s a hero in my book,” the firefighter replied. He looked me over, visually assessing me. “We’re going to get him out and onto a stretcher and come back in for you, ok? Try not to move.”

I nodded. Remembering the other guys on the bus, when he slid back in through the hole, I asked him if anyone else was hurt.

“Mostly bumps and bruises. It looks like most of the damage was sustained in the back here,” he replied. He felt my head with gentle fingers, searching for lumps and possible fractures, running his hands along my body searching for injuries. I gasped as another contraction gripped me, squeezing his uniform jacket as hard as I could. In the distance, I could hear sirens blaring and getting quieter as an ambulance rushed away from the scene.

“I don’t think anything’s broken, but I’m going to put this neck brace on you and we’re going to slide this backboard under you, alright? Try not to move. The quicker we do this, the quicker we can get you and your little one to the hospital alright?”

“Alright,” I choked, willing myself to stay as still as possible as they worked to get me out of that bus. It took them a matter of minutes to get me out and safely secured in the back of an ambulance. One of the paramedics climbed in the back with me and strapped a fetal heart monitor to my belly after checking my vitals.

“That’s a nice, strong heartbeat your baby has,” the paramedic offered reassuringly. I took her hand and squeezed it, not trusting myself to speak with the flood of relief her words brought me. “We aren’t far from the hospital. You’ll be in great hands there with some of the finest OBGYNs in the state.”

“Thank you,” I finally managed to whisper.

Once we were at the hospital, everything became a giant blur. I was quickly wheeled into an operating room where a surgical team waited for me. A nurse explained that due to the possibility of the baby being injured, it was important to get them out as fast as possible and into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. I nodded my consent and the surgical team moved quickly and efficiently to administer the epidural before proceeding with the Caesarean Section.

An hour later I was wheeled into recovery and my son was rushed off to the NICU. I had no idea if he would be alright, or what was happening with his father. Other than the kind nurse and one of the doctors monitoring me, I was completely alone. I doubted if the nurse would be able to tell me much, but I had to ask. I needed to know.

“Will my son be alright? Have you heard anything about his father? Dylan St. James. He was carted off by an ambulance and I have no idea if he’s even still alive,” the sobs threatened to choke me again, and the nurse came to my side and took my hand in hers.

“From what I saw, your son looked like a healthy pre-term baby. They’re checking him out right now to be safe, and he’ll need some time in an incubator while his lungs finish developing. As soon as the doctor’s confident that you won’t suffer from any complications from the epidural, we’ll bring you down to see him,” she sighed. “As for your husband, I’m afraid I have no news, but I will look into it and see what information I can gather.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Unfortunately, the nurse hadn’t been able to find out much, only that Dylan was in the Intensive Care Unit. So, I was left to worry about his fate, trying to picture a future without him as I sat in the NICU listening to our son’s mewling cries. Chase was so tiny in that huge incubator and he was practically drowning in the diaper. I hoped Dylan was ok with his name. I chose it because Chase was a result of Dylan chasing his dreams to be a Rockstar. I chewed on my thumb anxiously. I’d been alone with Chase and recovering from my surgery for nearly an entire day, and still had no news of my fiancé.

Deciding I had waited long enough for someone to come to me, I decided to go to him. Holding my incision as I walked, I asked for his room number at the desk. One of the nurses was kind enough to bring me a wheelchair and take me down to the ICU. In the waiting room, I found Dean pacing up and down the hall, his arm in a sling, and a crowd of people I didn’t recognize.

“Dean?” I called out hesitantly. When he didn’t hear me, I called out a little louder and everyone in the area stopped to look at me. I couldn’t be bothered to be embarrassed by my appearance in a hospital gown. My hair was probably a mess as well, but I’d been through a nightmare for the last 24 hours and I didn’t give a shit what anyone else thought of me right now.

“Sierra! Thank god you’re all right. You are alright, aren’t you? And the baby?” Dean crashed to the floor on his knees in front of me.

“He’s fine, but since he’s pre-term he’s going to be living in an incubator for a while. Thanks for checking on me and bringing me news of his father by the way,” I seethed with anger and resentment that he couldn’t be bothered to tell me what was happening with his brother.

“I know, I’m sorry. I couldn’t bear to bring myself down there until I knew if he was going to live,” Dean explained, melting the hard knot of anger that had built up in the pit of my stomach.

“And is he?” I barely managed to get out, not sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“I think so. The doctors are pretty hopeful that he’ll wake up soon, but the longer he’s in a coma, the less likely his chances are of ever coming out of it,” Dean answered quietly, taking my hand and squeezing it.

I blinked back the tears that threatened to pour down my face at a moment’s notice. I couldn’t do this now. I absolutely

refused to break down in this room full of strangers.

“Can I see him?” I whispered.

Dean nodded and rose to his feet, taking control of my wheelchair from the kind nurse and wheeling me through the large double doors. It seemed like we walked for miles down a long, empty corridor, before coming to an area with large glass doors and walls leading into various rooms. I assumed it was so the nurses could keep a closer eye on their critical patients but didn't think anymore as Dean turned and pushed me through one of the doors.

I sucked in a gulp of air when I saw Dylan. He almost looked as if he were sleeping, apart from being hooked up to monitors that beeped, and tubes sticking out of his throat and nose. His head was bandaged, and a large white sheet encased the rest of his body.

“Dylan,” I gasped, finally letting those tears flow down my cheeks. I wanted to hold his hand but feared it would hurt him or disturb one of the monitors, so instead, I placed a kiss on his cheek. “Dylan, you'd better wake up. You promised we'd raise our son together. He's beautiful by the way, and he looks just like you. I named him Chase. I hope that's alright, I know we agreed to wait until he was born and decide on a name together, but I just couldn't bear to hear the nurses keep calling him baby boy Blaine anymore. You'll fall in love with him the minute you hold him as I did.”

Dean rubbed my shoulder with his good hand, comforting me as I talked. Babbled really, but no one seemed to care.

Eventually, it was time for me to go back to the NICU, and I whispered to Dylan how much I loved him, before being wheeled out of his room. On the way back, Dean continuously promised that he would take care of us no matter what, but I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to hear the worry in his tone. I stopped listening until finally, we were back by Chase's side and I eased off my gown as the nurse handed my son to me. Dean gasped in surprise and turned around, causing me to giggle for the first time since the accident.

"You can turn around now," I said, staring down at the small baby in my arms.

"Are you sure it's safe? Dylan would kill me if I saw something I shouldn't," Dean murmured causing me to giggle again.

"It's called Kangaroo care. The skin-on-skin contact will help him get stronger and helps us to bond better," I explained, grateful to finally have something to take my mind off the accident and my fiancé who currently resembled a cyborg with all that stuff attached to him.

"He really does look like Dylan," Dean replied, and I looked up to find him watching us intently. I nodded and turned my gaze back to the now-sleeping babe.

"He really does," I murmured.



Two days later, Dylan finally woke. I was excited to hear the news and couldn't wait to see him. When I went into his room, he stared at me with cold eyes and told me to leave. I didn't understand, staring at him in shock until he started yelling for security. Dean tried to intervene, but it was no use. Dylan continued to yell for security until I was escorted from the room, my heart in shatters on the floor. I fled back to my room in the maternity ward and buried my head in the pillow. An hour later, I heard footsteps stop next to my bedside and I turned to see Dean standing there with a solemn expression on his face.

“I'm so sorry, Sierra. I just talked with his doctors and they think the swelling in his brain must have caused some amnesia. They're not sure how long it will last, or if he'll recover from it. In the meantime, I think it might be best for everyone if you focused on Chase while he recovered. I promise, as soon as he remembers you, I'll have him by your side as fast as humanly possible.”

At that moment, my parents flew into the room in a dizzying whirl of hugs and kisses and I allowed myself to be temporarily distracted by their arrival. I ignored Dean completely, refusing to accept that my fiancé, the father of my son and the love of my life, might never remember me.

Wishing on Snowflakes Chapter Two

Sierra

Now

I lugged the giant tree through the front door, grunting from the effort and groaning about the pine sap I was getting all over my hands and clothes. The thing was massive, and I'd had to recruit my brother into helping me put it up this year. Even then, he'd had to chop a foot off the bottom so we could get it inside.

"I will never understand why you insist on buying a bigger tree every year," Bobby complained as he carried in the other end of the tree and helped me stand it up in the corner of the living room.

"It's not that hard to understand. The older Chase gets, the bigger the tree he picks out. I can't afford much, but I can at least get the tree he wants," I sighed as I looked at the top of the tree brushing against the ceiling. "Though this year he really outdid himself. I'm going to have to plant a tree out front to grow with him and decorate that instead at this rate."

“Speaking of the little guy, Charlotte wants to know what to get him for Christmas,” Bobby asked as he finished securing the tree in its stand. I grabbed the watering can waiting for me on the fireplace mantel and filled the stand.

“I have no clue. He hasn’t asked for anything yet,” I answered.

My brother and I were as different as two siblings could be. He was tall with reddish-blond hair and a zest for farming and country music. He loved his plaid shirts too. Me? I was average height, with average blonde hair, and I loved Rock. I bet my brother didn’t even have any tattoos, and the thought made me giggle.

“Let me know when he does, will ya? She’s driving me nuts with all her shopping,” Bobby removed his gloves and examined his handy work on the tree. He’d met his wife at a local barn dance about 6 or 7 years ago. I couldn’t really remember how long it’d been, but since they had a pair of 5-year-old twins, I figured I couldn’t be too far off in my estimation.

“Charlotte’s a sweetheart. Don’t be too hard on her,” I admonished. I liked her a lot and thought she was too good for my pesky brother. Bobby just grunted in reply, grinning sheepishly, before returning his attention to the tree.

“Are you planning on decorating this thing tonight?” He asked skeptically.

“I haven’t decided yet. Mom and dad are coming over soon to do some baking and help me get ready for Thanksgiving

dinner tomorrow. You guys are still coming right?" I asked.

"When have I ever missed a turkey dinner?" Bobby teased.

I laughed.

"I was thinking, the girls might like to help you decorate this thing tomorrow if you and Chase don't mind waiting an extra day. There's talk of a snowstorm tonight, so it'll be nice to keep them busy in case we have to try and barbecue the turkey again." He said, fastening the last knob on the tree stand into the base of the trunk.

I groaned. The last time we'd had a storm all the power went out and my dad insisted he could cook the turkey on the grill. It had resulted in the outside of the turkey being burnt, and the inside was still frozen solid.

"Anything but that," I laughed. "Maybe I should tell them to bring extra clothes in case they get stuck here."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. Anyways, if we're done here, I need to get home and make sure the animals are secure in the barn for the night," he said, and I nodded.

"Thanks for helping me with the tree."

"Anytime," he replied and then he was gone. I stared at the giant, hulking green beast taking up residence in my house and sighed.

"I really should just plant one," I murmured to myself and grabbed the phone to call my folks. Now that the tree was up, it was time to start decorating. Once my mom promised to come over after her book club, I headed upstairs to dust off the

boxes of decorations and drag them downstairs. As much as I loved decorating and celebrating the holidays, I absolutely hated this part. Climbing into the attic full of spiders to drag out box after box and lug them down the stairs was the absolute worst part... next to packing it all away and dragging it back up to the spider-infested attic. Pulling the string, the ladder dropped down from the ceiling with a squeak of its hinges. I winced. That was definitely going to need to be oiled later.

Grabbing the rail, I quickly climbed up into the space that span the length of the old farmhouse. I hated coming up here. Careful not to look at the collection of guitars, and boxes of clothes piled up on the far side, I grabbed the first box marked "X-mas" and turned back to the ladder. My eye caught on an old plastic Santa, staring at me from across the room. I'd forgotten about that Santa. I smiled sadly at the memories the sight evoked. Making an impulsive decision, I carefully put the box down and made my way over to it. Snatching it up, I grabbed the old classic guitar next to it and quickly made my way downstairs before I could change my mind.

"What's that?" Chase asked, coming out of the kitchen with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk as I came down the stairs. I stared pointedly at the cookies and Chase smiled brightly up at me.

"Go put a couple of those cookies back before you rot your teeth," I replied instead.

“Ah mom, please? I’ll scrub my teeth really good, I promise!” he pleaded. “And it’s only one o’clock so I won’t wreck my appetite for dinner....”

“Fine,” I sighed. It would keep him busy while I lugged all this stuff down anyway.

“Awesome!” He gave me a toothy grin. “Is that a guitar?”

“Oh,” I jumped, startled to realize I’d forgotten the instrument in my hand. “Yeah, it was your Dad’s. I thought maybe you’d like to have it.”

“Really?” He gaped. “I can have that?”

“Really, bud. I think he’d like you to have it,” I smiled and handed it to him. “I’m just going to put this Santa outside on the porch. Be careful with that ok?”

“Ok, Mom. Thank you!” Chase beamed, putting his plate down on the hallway table to take it from me. “Wow,” he breathed and I smiled. As much as it hurt to see him with his Dad’s guitar, my heart filled with so much love for the little boy who was lovingly running his fingers along the strings.

Wishing on Snowflakes Chapter Three

Dylan

The snow was starting to fall harder as the day went on. It was pitch black outside, or at least it would be if it wasn't snowing so hard that all I could see was white. I couldn't even see the road beneath the bus's tires as we drove to our next show. If this storm got much worse, we'll likely have to stop for the night and try to make up the time tomorrow. I glanced at the clock mounted on the wall next to the door, the digital numbers glowing a bright 2:15. I should be sleeping instead of worrying about the storm, but every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was a cloud of pink hair and crystal blue eyes. I don't even know who she is, or exactly what she looks like, but whoever she is or was, she haunts my dreams with increasing regularity. It used to be an odd dream here or there, but eventually, it became once a month or once a week. Now I see her every night and I don't know why. Sometimes I'd deliberately hit my alarm, enjoying the dreams too much to want to wake. Not tonight. Tonight feels different.

The sight of my small bed in the center of the room fills me with longing. My eyes are burning with exhaustion, but I don't dare lay down and shut them. Every time I do, I see those

crystal blue eyes fill with tears and somehow I know that I have caused them and my heart breaks for her. I should probably wake my brother Dean and ask him if he remembers her from somewhere, but the sounds of snoring that fill the quiet bus make me reluctant to disturb him. I can ask him in the morning. There's no sense in both of us being up all night.

I resigned myself to a long, sleepless night and flicked on the light. I was reaching for my notebook when the bus slammed to a stop amidst the sound of screeching tires. I fell out of my chair with a grunt, rolling along the floor and slamming into the door with a loud thud. A woman screamed my name and pain stabbed along my right side. Beyond my door, I could hear shouts and groans as my bandmates were thrown from their bunks. My cell phone hit the wall above my head, I don't even know where my book ended up.

"Dylan! Dylan! Are you alright? The door is stuck," my brother shouted from the other side of the door. I could hear the worry in his voice as he struggled to open the door.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What the Hell happened?" I rolled to a sitting position, and slowly stood, the door bursting open the moment I did.

"Black ice, man. Are you sure you're alright? Did you hit your head at all? Come here and let me check your pupils," I shrugged Dean off when he grabbed my shoulder, stifling a groan at the pain the movement caused.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me. How's everyone else? Where are we?" I asked.

“Middle of nowhere, I think. Hard to tell with all this snow. Everyone’s a little banged up but nothing serious. Not like last time,” he replied looking over his shoulder in the hallway.

“What about the other car? Has anyone checked on them?” I asked, remembering the woman’s screams.

“Gerry didn’t mention anything about another car. I’ll grab my coat and check.” Dean dashed out the door and I followed behind him.

Beyond my small room, the bus was in utter chaos. Instruments and video games were strewn everywhere. Clothes and magazines, cellphones, everything that wasn’t stowed away in compartments was flung all over the floor and counters. I put my hand on the wall of the bunk to hold myself up as I walked, the floor angling to the right. The bus rocked as we moved slowly towards the open door. The others were already outside, checking each other out for injuries but no one seemed to be seriously hurt. I breathed a sigh of relief and glanced around for the other car, but the highway was deserted.

“Anyone see the other car?” I asked, shouting to be heard over the wind.

“There was no other car,” Gerry shouted up from the ditch where the front of the bus had landed. I stared down into the darkness until I spotted the dim flashlight and could make out the silhouette of his large form. Gerry had driven my tour bus for as long as I could remember. The one time he took a vacation, I nearly died in an accident. Now he refuses to let

anyone else drive my tour bus. The large man climbed out of the ditch and came to stand next to me, dusting snow off his pants and out of his thick beard. He reminded me of Santa Claus with all that white in his beard and I laughed at the comparison. Santa Claus in torn denim and old band shirts.

“Hit black ice and couldn’t keep control of the bus. I’m sorry Dylan. I promised to keep you safe, and I couldn’t do that.”

“Hey, no one got seriously hurt. This could have been a disaster. Anyone else behind that wheel and who knows what might have happened? You kept your promise, Gerry. You kept us safe,” I clapped him on the shoulder, wincing from the movement.

“Yeah Ger,” my brother piped up from somewhere next to me. “This is nothing like last time. No one could have prepared for black ice. We’re just lucky no one else was on the road.”

I frowned, remembering the woman’s scream again. I grabbed the flashlight my brother held and raced around the back of the bus. Ignoring his shouts, I ran up and down the side of the road, the light skipping across the snow, but there was no sign of another car. No skid marks or tire tracks beyond the ones the bus had made. No bumpers sticking out of the ditch on either side of the road. I must have imagined the scream. Resigned, I returned to the tottering bus and the other guys milling around it.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“Phones aren’t working. Service must be out. Before we crashed, the GPS indicated a small town up that way,” Gerry pointed down the highway. “Best bet is to walk there and hope we can find a place to warm up until a tow truck can pull this beast out and get her into a mechanic.”

I nodded, and as I did so, I noticed a dim gleam of multicoloured lights in the distance. Christmas lights maybe? I wasn’t sure, but it looked a Hell of a lot closer than Gerry’s suggestion of walking into town. It was freezing out here, and with the snow coming down so hard, we’d be better off heading in the direction of those lights than walking along into town and praying we didn’t get run over on the way.

“Looks like there might be a house down there,” I pointed in front of me. “I say we head that way instead. Whoever lives there might have a phone we could use.”

“Are you sure you see a house? It’s hard to see anything in all this snow,” Charlie barked from where he leaned against Barron.

I looked back at my drummer and lead guitarist and turned back in the direction I had seen the lights. A red light flickered in the distance like a beacon, brighter than the multicoloured lights I’d seen moments ago.

“I’m sure there’s a house there,” I stated and started trudging through the banks of snow. “Feel free to walk to town if you want. I’d rather get out of this blizzard as quick as possible.”

