

the rookie's SISTER



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THE ROOKIE'S SISTER

THE THUNDERHAWKS

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

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Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

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ONE

EMMA

THE BUZZ FROM THE CROWD IS HUMMING THROUGH MY BONES while I'm hanging on the sidelines of the Chicago Thunderhawks' practice field. I'm clutching a clipboard and trying to spot my brother Jeff among the sea of jerseys and helmets.

The field's lit up with players—every muscle popping, faces all determination and grit—they're running drill after drill under the blazing sun. And there he is. I'd know Jeff anywhere. The way he holds his shoulders, the jitter in his feet while he waits for the play to start, he's all in, ready to show them what he's got.

This is Jeff's first official team practice, and it feels like all eyes are glued to him, sizing him up, wondering if my little bro has what it takes to hit the big leagues. Dad has been managing Jeff since he was just a kid, and I've been helping as much as possible while getting my degree in sports psychology.

A movement in my peripheral vision snaps me from my thoughts. Xavier Johnson, Thunderhawks star player and cockiest ego, has just swaggered onto the field twenty minutes late. Even from here, his charisma is as undeniable as his attractiveness as he smooth talks the coach. But punctuality has never been one of Xavier's virtues. Figures he'd pull a stunt like this on such a crucial first day.

Despite repeatedly telling myself that I can't stand him, I scrutinize him through my binoculars. His helmet obscures his handsome face, but his athletic form is unmistakable. He's

built like a tank, all corded muscles and brute strength. Yet he moves with a quickness and agility that belies his size. Xavier Johnson is truly at the peak of physical perfection. Which, of course, he knows and exploits fully around charming fans and women alike.

Moving my attention back to my brother, I lean forward, unable to tear my gaze away as Jeff crouches down into position. The play is about to begin. His body coils like a spring, ready to launch. Come on, bro. You've got this. Show them what a Thompson can do.

The coach raises the whistle to his lips and blows. The shrill blast splits the air. Jeff explodes forward, legs pumping like pistons as he sprints down the field.

The quarterback launches the ball in a perfect spiraling arc. It slices through the humid air, a tiny speck against the cloudless sky. I hold my breath, willing it toward Jeff's outstretched arms.

But the ball bounces off his fingertips, hitting the grass with a soft thud.

Jeff's shoulders slump an inch before he composes himself. The other players shove each other good-naturedly, laughing. I wince in sympathy.

So close. An easy pass, one I've seen Jeff grab effortlessly thousands of times before. Maybe the first day pressure is getting to him.

I make a note on my clipboard to schedule a quick session with Jeff about managing performance anxiety. Besides helping my brother and my dad, I'm the team's assistant psychologist. It's my job to look out for the players' mental wellbeing.

I watch Xavier reach up and remove his helmet, running a hand over his sweat-dampened hair. His expression is unreadable, but his stare remains fixed on Jeff. I can almost see the calculations running behind his dark eyes. He murmurs something to the coach next to him without ever looking away from my brother.

My fingers curl into fists. Don't you dare judge my brother yet, Xavier Johnson. Jeff's journey is only beginning. He just needs to get into a rhythm.

Truthfully though, I know Xavier's assessment matters, especially as the team's star player. The way his analytical gaze is dissecting Jeff reminds me uncomfortably of a lion sizing up weak prey separated from the herd. It's that ruthlessly pragmatic part of Xavier that both thrills fans and causes problems behind the scenes. And it's the same reason that I try to keep my distance as much as possible, despite the way I constantly find my eyes drawn to him.

So, I resolve to advise Jeff to make nice with Xavier. Maybe fetch him an energy drink or volunteer to carry his gear. Anything to win the approval, or at least the indifference, of the Thunderhawks' star player.

Because as much as Xavier's presence is a thorn in my side, the man holds a key. A key that could unlock futures, my brother's included.

And, I fear, a key that could just as easily lock them away.

My phone shatters the air with its shrill ring, hijacking my concentration like a car alarm in the dead of night. A jolt to the system. I pick it up, fingers fumbling.

"Hello?"

Static hisses in my ear, drowning out any response. It's like trying to hear a whisper in a windstorm. I speak louder this time, "Hello? Anyone there?"

Just as I'm about to give up and set the phone aside, a female voice splinters through the static.

"Am I speaking with Emma Thompson?"

I freeze, phone hovering above the desk. "Yes, you're speaking to her. What's going on?"

The voice sounds as if she's talking through water, but I make out her next words like a hidden current, "Are you related to Charles Thompson?"

“He’s my father,” I reply, feeling as though I’m walking on a thin sheet of ice. The woman on the other end seems to pick up my caution, her voice taking on a taut quality.

“...Mercy Hospital... heart issues... critical condition...”

The phone nearly slips out of my sweaty grip. Blood drains from my face as if rushing to aid another part of my body. Dad. Hospital. Heart. It’s a reel of horror I can’t stop playing in my head.

“I’m sorry, you’re breaking up,” my voice wavers, bordering on hysteria. “Can you say that again? Is he alright? How serious is this?”

The call disintegrates into a cacophony of pops and crackles before going dead. Damn it, the cell service in the training facility might as well be nonexistent.

Fear courses through my veins, electrifying my cells. Ever since I was a little girl, Dad has been my constant, my touchstone. And after mom died, he was always there to count on. My rock.

The news worried me. He seemed totally fine this morning when all three of us grabbed breakfast together. And now he’s....what?

I need to pull it together and get to the hospital. Freaking out will only make things worse.

Easier said than done when it feels like the world is collapsing around you.

I stand shakily, grabbing my things with trembling hands. Focus, Emma. You can do this.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and glance back at the field. For a moment, my eyes lock with Xavier’s brown ones and a strange little jolt of energy goes through me. I rip my gaze away and return it to my brother. Jeff is completely unaware of the family crisis as the practice continues in full swing.

I should tell him. Call down to the field or something. He’ll want to know about Dad.

But I hesitate, not wanting to rattle Jeff right in the middle of practice. This is his moment to shine, to really impress the coaches. And Dad would kill me if I disrupted Jeff's big shot for anything less than an emergency. Which this is, my anxiety-fueled brain reminds me.

Fuck!

I'll go investigate the situation at the hospital first. For all I know, it could be the wanting to be safe. After all, he had a checkup today. Until I have verified facts, no reason to send Jeff into a tailspin.

I scribble a quick note to Holly, the assistant offensive coach, asking her to inform Jeff after practice so he doesn't hear it through the grapevine. This is the best I can do for now.

Then I pass through the doorway, the door groaning shut behind me, closing off the outside world. Enclosing me in shadowy silence.

Alone with my fear.

I pull off my sunglasses so I can see in the dimly lit corridor, but I keep them in hand. I move on autopilot down the concrete corridor toward the exit. Each footfall echoes like a gunshot. I should've worn quieter shoes, I distantly register. The tapping only magnifies my escalating anxiety.

Breathe in for five counts. Out for five. You're okay.

But the too-calm voice in my head sounds fraudulent even to me. Because I'm not okay. My rock, my foundation, is crumbling. If it falls completely, will I be crushed in the rubble?

You know nothing concrete yet I argue back, shoving the doors open into glaring sunlight. Other people get emergency calls about loved ones and things end up fine.

Positive thoughts.

Ha. Easier said than done with your pulse crashing loud as thunder in your ears.

The July heat smacks me full force, amplifying my nausea. Momentarily blinded by the sun, I fumble with my sunglasses

as I put them back on before stumbling across the boiling asphalt.

My car is a small oasis of shade at the far end of the massive lot. By the time I reach it, my cotton blouse is plastered to my skin. I crank the AC, blast the vents directly on me. Leaning my forehead against the blessedly cool leather steering wheel as the arctic air slowly chills my heated body.

When my pulse slows to near normal, I straighten with new conviction.

Get it together, Thompson. Dad needs you.

TWO

XAVIER

THE CROWD'S ROARING LIKE A BEAST, AND MAN, IT'S MUSIC to my ears as I step onto the field. That fresh-cut grass smell hits me, and just like that, I'm in my zone. This is my turf, my stage, my kingdom—where I'm the star of the show, no questions asked.

Everyone's eyes are on me, but hey, that's how I like it. I live for this spotlight. For a couple of hours under this scorching sun, I'm the man, the boss of this 100-yard paradise.

I toss the football, feeling that adrenaline kick in. It's just a practice day, but who cares? The crowd is cheering, and yeah, they're here for me. Xavier Johnson, the name on everyone's jersey. A quick wave and grin to the crowd, and they go nuts. "We love you, Xavier!" they shout.

You bet I love you guys right back.

It should've been business as usual—same rhythmic drills, same hyped-up fans, same electric aura in the atmosphere. I mean, I practically grew up in this stadium. But today, there's a plot twist—Emma Thompson.

She arrived a few weeks back, trailing her little brother Jeff like a protective hawk. The kid's decent, aspiring to be a wide receiver. With some polishing, he might just make the team. But Emma? She's classified as a "new variable" in my life equation. Official title: Assistant Sports Psychology Consultant. As if we need another head doctor messing with our game.

Why does she have to be so distracting? I mean, I've always got my game face on, but now I find myself stealing glances her way. She stands by the sideline, ever the diligent scribe, her fingers dancing across her clipboard like she's composing a magnum opus. The tilt of her sunglasses lends her an enigmatic aura, as if she's deliberately blurring the line between observer and participant.

The whistle trills through the air, signaling the start of passing drills. This is my moment, my theater act where I leave the audience in awe. I square my shoulders, ready to unleash the cannon. But there she is again, an unwelcome interruption in my peripheral vision. She stands rigidly, as if she's guarding secrets instead of stats. And it's not just her physical stance; there's something about her—maybe it's the fierce cascade of blonde hair, or perhaps the way she wears that fitted blouse as if it's her armor.

Snap out of it, Xavier.

Okay, so she's attractive. Big deal. She's also been riding me about proper sleep schedules and hydration, as if I haven't been doing this for years. I've got bigger fish to fry than worrying about impressing a sports psychologist with her all-too-critical clipboard.

I inhale deeply, recalibrating. Focus on what you're here for. You've got an audience in desperate need of awe and admiration. Their screams are your oxygen, their applause your lifeblood. Deliver the spectacle they came for. Be the Xavier Johnson everyone expects you to be.

But I can't shake off a nagging thought: If Emma Thompson happens to look up from her clipboard and actually likes what she sees?

Well, I wouldn't mind that one bit.

Coach blows the whistle and I burst forward, fingers outstretched. The ball sails through the air in a perfect spiral, landing smack in my hands. *Gotcha*. I tuck it in tight and make a beeline for the end zone, pumping my legs into a graceful gallop.

Right as I cross the line, I toss the ball aside and turn toward the stands, arms raised triumphantly. The fans go wild, but I barely hear them over the pounding in my ears. Instead, I search for another reaction, one in particular. Where is she?

There—on the line, Emma stands with crossed arms. Even with the distance between us, I can imagine the lift of her eyebrows above the rims of those chic sunglasses. Was that a tiny smile I saw flash across her face? Hard to tell from here.

I hope she realizes that bomb of a catch was for her benefit. Xavier Johnson, delivering as promised.

I linger for a moment longer, waiting to lock eyes, to exchange even a glance of mutual understanding. But Emma's face remains angled down at her clipboard as she jots notes, seemingly oblivious to my maneuver.

Irritation simmers in my chest. *Look up and acknowledge me, damn it. I know you saw that catch. Why won't you react?*

Maybe she's playing it cool, avoiding feeding my ego. Or perhaps her little brother's struggles have occupied all her attention, causing her to miss my skills.

Speaking of which, my gaze drifts to the rookie. Even with his helmet on, his body language screams dejection—shoulders slumped, feet shuffling aimlessly. The complete opposite of my perfect form.

I watch his next rep, analyzing his sloppy footwork and weak cuts. Mediocre at best. Not starter material, that's for sure. The kid has heart, I'll give him that, but raw talent only gets you so far.

If he doesn't shape up soon, this could become a real problem. The franchise can't afford to waste a coveted wide receiver spot on an unreliable rookie. Not when the season starts in a month.

I need to talk with Coach about getting Jeff extra conditioning reps. We have to nip this in the bud before it costs the team wins and me stats.

Then again, maybe I should talk to Jeff directly first. Appeal to that eager puppy dog nature he seems to have.

Show Emma that I don't just look out for myself out here.

Yes, reaching out to help her struggling brother could be the perfect way into Emma's good graces. And if it improves the team's performance in the process, it's a win-win.

The whistle screeches again and we all gravitate to the water coolers for a break. Now's my chance. I remove my helmet and approach Jeff with what I hope looks like a friendly, supportive smile.

"Hey, rookie. Spare a sec?"

Jeff looks up, startled, his eyes wide, mirroring the brown warmth I've seen in Emma's. "Uh, sure, Xavier. What's up?"

I toss him a water bottle. "Look, no need to make this a big deal, but I saw your footwork earlier. It's a little...in development."

He colors immediately, looking like a spilled glass of red wine. "Yeah, still figuring out the new routes."

I pat him gently on the arm. "Hey, the key is to let your feet memorize the dance steps, right? Keep your shoulders in line till it's time to veer off. You'll get there."

Jeff rubs his neck, nervously shifting. "Thanks, man. Emma's been on me about the technical stuff, but it's something else to get tips from the star receiver."

I puff up a little, pleased with myself. "I'm all for a strong team. We're in this together. And hey, tell Emma to ease up. You've got potential; you don't need a drill sergeant."

Jeff's smile blossoms, his shoulders lifting. "Will do. She can get a little intense, but she means well."

"Intensity's in the blood, I guess," I say, giving him a friendly slap on the back.

As I pivot back toward the field, I catch Emma in my peripheral vision, pacing with her phone pressed to her ear, her gaze concentrated on Jeff. But then she looks up, her eyes scanning until they find mine. Her face is a canvas of subtle emotions, difficult to read.

For a fraction of a second, our eyes hold each other, a spark igniting somewhere deep within me, an electric current with no prior warning. And then she looks away. It's as if the charge dissipates, but its afterglow lingers, a confusing blend of warmth and agitation.

What was that? A glitch in the matrix? No way. Must be the adrenaline.

Helmet back on, I join the huddle, forcing my focus back onto the field. But Emma's face—a collage of unspoken words and veiled looks—remains, imprinted on the back of my mind like stubborn ink.

Practice winds down, but as I savor the satisfaction of another session owned, a shadow falls over me—Holly, the assistant coach, her face pulled taut with concern. “Xavier, you spoke to Jeff, right? Did he say anything about his dad?”

I freeze. “His dad? Nah, didn't mention anything. What's up?”

“I overheard Emma on the phone. Her dad's been rushed to the hospital. Sounded like it wasn't just a routine check-up.”

And there it is, a brick thrown into the tranquil pond of my thoughts. This is what Emma was dealing with, alone, on that phone call. Unless, of course, she's not alone, and there's some guy out there holding her hand through it all. I shake off that thought, focusing on what's in front of me.

I thank Holly, but my words are mechanical, my thoughts already rushing ahead.

In the locker room, as I remove my pads and jersey, Emma fills my mind. Whatever cosmic pull I felt before gets eclipsed by a greater force—concern.

The stakes have shifted.

THREE

EMMA

THE STERILE SMELL OF ANTISEPTIC HITS ME LIKE A WALL AS I step into the ICU's hushed halls. My heels click too loudly against the polished floors, echoing in the heavy silence. A few nurses glance up, offering tight smiles that don't reach their eyes before returning to their clipboards and monitors.

I feel like an imposter here in my sweat-stained blouse and wind-tousled hair, woefully out of place among the solemn medical staff in their crisp scrubs. As if I'm playing dress-up in a world meant for adults.

Dad's room is at the far end, right by the nurse's station. I pause in the doorway, peering in. An oxygen mask, the steady beep and hiss of machines marking time like some ominous metronome, obscures his face. Tubes and wires snake under thin sheets.

My heart sinks. This fragile patient surrounded by equipment barely resembles my robust father. Charles Thompson has always been larger than life—a force of nature not easily contained. Seeing him diminished ignites a spark of fear in my gut.

Fear that I haven't felt since the day Mom told us that her chemo hadn't worked.

As I step inside, Dad's eyes flutter open. Despite the oxygen mask, I can see his crooked smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Hey, sunshine,” he rasps. “Was wondering when you'd get here.”

I'm at his side in seconds, my fingers slipping into his. They feel fragile, delicate as autumn leaves about to crumble. "I came as fast as I could."

Dad manages a feeble squeeze. "Heart gave me a bit of a scare is all. No reason to have you speeding through red lights."

My grip tightens on his hand, unwilling to let go. "The hospital made it sound like you were auditioning for a soap opera death scene. Why didn't you call me?"

Dad raises an eyebrow, his trademark you're-being-overdramatic look that would have annoyed me in any other situation. "Miss Jeff's practice for me? Your mother and I raised you better."

I open my mouth to argue, but snap it shut just as quickly. Even laid up in a hospital bed, Charles Thompson is as stubborn as a mule.

Dad gently pries his hand from mine, patting my wrist. "Now I don't want you fussing over me. I'll be right as rain in no time. It's Jeff who needs your focus now. The future face of football." Dad's tanned face glows with pride.

My throat constricts. Dad has dreamed about this since Jeff first tossed a football at age three—his boy going pro. And Dad was supposed to be right by his side through it all: the highs, the lows, the victories, and defeats. But now...

Dad seems to read my thoughts, his bushy brows furrowing. "Just a minor speed bump. I'll be back on my feet before the season starts." But we both hear the hollow note in his words.

I stare at the heart monitor, watching the spikes march across the screen. "You need to focus on your health right now. Let me handle Jeff."

Dad's eyes flash, and for a second I see a glimpse of his old vitality. "Now you listen here. This changes nothing. Jeff's future is too important—" A wheezing cough cuts him off.

My shoulders tense as I wait for the spasm to pass. When Dad's breathing returns to normal, I keep my voice measured. "Dad, you're in no shape to manage Jeff's career. Not when

—” I gesture helplessly around the room. “Let me take over temporarily. At least until you’re back on your feet.”

Dad’s mouth sets in a grim line. We lock eyes, two bullheaded forces focused on the same goal but clashing over strategy. I prepare for an argument.

But then Dad’s face softens, something like pride flickering across his tired eyes. “Look at you, baby girl. All grown up.” He lays a trembling hand against my cheek. “Okay, sunshine. The reins are yours for now.”

Relief and panic war inside me. Dad’s trust means everything, but the weight of responsibility threatens to crush me.

Dad seems to sense my trepidation. He gives my hand one last pat. “You’ve got this, Emma. Now go show them what a Thompson can do.”

I smile through the sheen of tears misting my eyes.

Game time.

THE MOMENT I STEP INTO THUNDERHAWKS’ strategy room, the harsh glow of halogen lights meets the glass doors, flashing a short-lived glare that dances across my vision. I blink hard, forcing the shadows and shapes to coalesce into something recognizable—a long table, the centerpiece of the room, surrounded by a cadre of people engrossed in paper shuffling and the synchronized tap-tap-tapping of laptop keys.

It’s like entering the Situation Room but for football. A war room for million-dollar plays and multimillion-dollar players. My fingers wipe against the fabric of my pantsuit, damp from nervous sweat. I scan the room for any sign of friendliness, any semblance of an ally.

“Emma! Hey, Emma!”

The voice sails across the room, a buoy in a sea of uncertainty. I pivot toward it, and my shoulders drop a fraction as I spot

Holly Jones, the assistant offensive coach, waving energetically. She's the kindest soul in this viper's pit.

I make my way to her, letting my heels hit the floor with purpose. "Thank God you're here, Holly. I was afraid I'd be swimming with sharks alone."

Her laughter washes over me, a sonic hug. "Sharks are more afraid of you than you are of them. Besides," she leans in, her voice a soft whisper, "today the big bosses are here."

Her eyes cut to the end of the table. There sits Robert O'Malley, the team owner. As if beckoned by our attention, Xavier, the star player turned devil's advocate, turns and winks at me—an exaggerated, deliberate gesture. I resist the urge to roll my eyes skyward. Forget sugar and spice; dealing with that ego is a job for a cattle prod.

"I hope you're prepared," Holly presses her arm against mine, a tactile pep talk.

I straighten my blouse and wish for the nth time that I wore a more imposing outfit—a power suit for a power meeting. But I'm stuck with a blouse and skirt. "Prepared as I'll ever be," I reply, and Holly's nod makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, I do belong here.

The head coach walks in and stands at the head of the table. His gaze sweeps the room, an invisible wave that silences any lingering chatter. "We have a lot to cover. Let's begin."

The room *obeys*, diving into a dissection of recent scrimmages, all the while a coil tightens in my gut, winding up for the inevitable discussion about my brother, Jeff. Just when I think I might implode, the coach takes off his glasses, rubs his temples, and speaks.

"Thompson. The kid shows promise, but potential is nothing without performance, and he's lacking."

I'm already formulating a defensive strike when Xavier, a maestro of interruption, cuts in.

"Coach, I have to concur. Thompson is raw talent, and raw talent is still half-baked."

My eyes narrow as I meet his gaze. “Are you saying my brother’s not up to par, Xavier?”

His eyes dance, filled with the enjoyment of a cat toying with a mouse. “I’m saying he needs refinement. Maybe someone could guide him, refine him. I’d be willing to take on that challenge.”

I cross my arms. “So you’re suggesting mentorship as a guise for ego-stroking?”

“More like shaping potential into greatness,” Xavier retorts, a sly grin on his lips.

Before this could escalate any further, the head coach’s phone buzzes. “I have to take this. We’ll reconvene. Thompson has promise, but he needs work.”

I slump back into my seat, energy depleted. Getting Xavier on Jeff’s side would be a huge asset. But after that exchange, I feel like I’ve already blown any chance of cooperation. As the room empties around me, a shadow falls over my notes. I glance up. Speak of the devil.

“No hard feelings, right?” he says, grinning like he just won the lottery.

I look up, my eyes probably as icy as they feel. “You worried I’m mad or something?”

He bursts into laughter, and it’s so, I don’t know, genuine that for a split second I forget I’m annoyed. “Wow, you’ve got spunk. How ‘bout we hash this out over dinner? There’s this swanky place, The Peninsula. Could be fun.”

I shake my head, cutting him off. “Dinner? With you? Yeah, no. You’re, like, the opposite of an ally right now.”

He leans in, coming way too close for comfort. “We’re on the same side, Emma. Both in the game and, you know, in life. Maybe we should figure out how to not kill each other?”

I make a move to leave, but he grabs my wrist. The sensation is weirdly electric, like my skin just woke up. “Think about it,” he whispers, his eyes never leaving mine. “You might actually enjoy it.”

I pull away, my mind a mess of stuff I don't even want to unpack right now. "Yeah, I'll put that on my to-do list, right under 'learn to juggle fire.'"

He steps back, but there's this spark in his eyes that won't go away. "You're something else, Emma Thompson. Take your time, but don't think too long." He winks, walking backward toward the exit. "I don't bite. Much."

I roll my eyes so hard it's a miracle they don't detach. But Xavier only laughs again, shooting me an infuriatingly attractive grin before pivoting out the door, letting it swing shut behind him, leaving me alone with my frustration. And maybe, though I hate to admit it, the tiniest thrill at his attention.

Ugh. *Get it together, Emma.* I need to focus on Jeff. Not waste mental energy on cocky distractions.

Squaring my shoulders, I pick up my phone and stuff it in my bag, then bolt out of there. I've got to whip Jeff into shape, and, oh God—my phone buzzes. It's the hospital. It's about Dad. Everything else slips away. Family is the real battle, the one that counts.

I speed out of the parking lot, and while my focus is on the road, a corner of my brain can't shake off how Xavier's touch felt, or why his annoyingly confident grin is still lodged in my head. Is it attraction? Annoyance? Or a messed-up mix of both?

I don't know. And not knowing? That's the scary part. It's like playing two games at once and forgetting the rules to both.

My phone buzzes again, lighting up with a second call from the hospital.

Swallowing hard, I answer. This is real life, with its actual high stakes, not some weird emotional roulette with Xavier. But as I weave through LA traffic, a nagging thought pops up: Whatever's going on between me and Xavier, it's far from over.

And I have no clue what I'm risking by letting it continue.

FOUR

XAVIER

EMPTY LOCKERS ECHO BACK MY BROODING SILENCE. IT'S JUST me here, in this dimly lit cave of metal and grime, and I find myself poised on the locker room bench, hands steepled. The entire episode with Emma replays in my mind like some kind of indie film—fast cuts, close-ups, a soundtrack of clashing egos. Who does she even think she is?

There's a twitch at the edge of my mouth, the unbidden ghost of a smile. I'm kind of amazed by her, not that I'd ever put that on the record. It's refreshing—a woman with enough steel in her spine to throw my own artillery right back at me. But she's got another thing coming if she thinks I'm just some pushover.

My phone vibrates—another ESPN alert, no doubt—but I shove it deeper into my bag. Right now, I've got a different opponent to think about.

With a sigh that feels heavier than my weights, I grab my towel and furiously rub my damp hair. It's like I'm trying to physically scrape away the memory of Emma's gaze, those emerald eyes lit by a fire I didn't start but might be guilty of fanning.

“Come on, X,” I mutter to myself. “You're letting some psychologist with a mouth mess with your head. You're the one everyone looks up to here. Act the part.”

But self-pep talks can only do so much. I stretch my arms, and the pull in my muscles is less about the strain of today's workout and more a sign of a bigger truth. I'm not as invincible as I once was. My joints snap, crackle, pop like

some breakfast cereal jingle—a physical, ridiculous reminder that age, the sneakiest opponent of all, is catching up with me.

Years ago, the adrenaline of the game would've obliterated any discomfort. But now? It's like my body is keeping a tally, reminding me that each hit sticks a little longer, that every sunrise practice is a more brutal wake-up call. The guy in the mirror might look like he's still got it, but my body keeps whispering, "Not so fast, champ."

I can't afford to air that out loud, though. My career, hell, my entire identity is balanced on a knife's edge, ready to tip at the slightest hint of weakness. I can practically hear the tabloids licking their chops, waiting for me to slip.

Still, I can't shake the idea of Emma. Damn, she's under my skin, confusing the hell out of me. Annoying? Hell yes. But intriguing? That too.

Water droplets fly as I shake my head. Enough. There's zero room for distractions like Emma Thompson, especially not when I'm staring down one of the most important seasons of my career. She and her opinionated self will have to wait in line, taking a number behind all the other things I can't afford to screw up.

The door creaks, and I don't need to look up to know who it is. Jeff shuffles in, shoulders hunched as if bracing for a storm. His gaze is glued to the floor, feet dragging. It's like he's carrying the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders, not just Emma's lofty expectations.

For a second, I contemplate continuing my march towards the showers. I could let the water blast away the frustrations of the day, along with whatever is eating at Jeff. But something stops me—maybe it's the slump of his shoulders, or perhaps the flashbacks of my own rookie anxieties. There's a familiar vulnerability there, a dread of not being good enough, that takes me back to nights spent staring at the ceiling, wondering if I'd ever make it.

On an impulse, I stand, my legs covering the distance to Jeff's locker before my mind has time to second-guess. He finally looks up, and the surprise that flashes across his face irks me.

What? He thinks I'm such a jerk that I can't be bothered to chat with a teammate? But as quick as the irritation bubbles up, it dissipates. He doesn't know me, not beyond the locker room banter and highlight reels.

"Rough practice?" I toss out casually, leaning against the row of lockers.

He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck like it's some kind of nervous tick. "Yeah. Could've been better." He pauses, clearly sizing me up. "These new plays are killing me, man. Feel like I'm back to Football 101."

I arch an eyebrow, then nod. "I get it. Coach's playbook this season is like reading Dostoevsky—in the original Russian. It's supposed to be tough."

A smile flickers on his lips. "You're telling me. I thought I was gonna have a brain aneurysm just trying to get through those route trees."

"Listen," I say, letting a hint of the mentorship role seep into my voice, "it's all about muscle memory. The steps, the cuts, the breaks—they all become second nature. Trust your feet."

His eyes finally lock onto mine. "Hearing that from you is like getting tips from a football god. Seriously, man, thanks."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, a low, insistent hum. "Anytime, rookie," I say, slapping him on the back as I make my exit. "You've got this."

As he grins, I sense the heavy cloud lifting from him. For some reason, I find that satisfying. Maybe I'm not just the egotistical superstar everyone paints me to be. Maybe there's room for another dimension—the mentor, the elder statesman of the game.

The hot water beats down on my back, washing away the grime of practice. As I soap up, my thoughts circle back to Emma like water swirling down a drain. I wonder if she knows how hard this has been on Jeff, transitioning from college ball to the big leagues. Probably not, given how hard she's been pushing him. Though I'll admit, it's admirable to see a woman so young holding her own in the manager's role.

I think back to our argument earlier, the way her eyes flashed like green fire. She's a spitfire, no question. Never imagined someone so petite could get all up in my face like that, but she held her ground. I chuckle under my breath, remembering her sarcastic jabs she threw right back at me without missing a beat. The girl's got moxie and I can only imagine what it would be like to get all that fire underneath me. Or on top of me. I'm not picky about position.

She's not like the other women I know—the groupies and gold-diggers always looking for an angle. No, there's something more substantial about Emma. A substance I haven't found in a long time. I scrub a hand over my face beneath the spray.

This is your teammate's sister. Don't make it weird.

I shut off the water and roughly towel myself dry, trying to shake off this unsettled feeling. So Emma intrigues me. So what? Doesn't change anything. I have my goals and my reputation to maintain. No distractions. No matter how hot.

My gym bag vibrates with the intrusive hum of my phone, breaking my brief spell of introspection. I weigh the options: ignore the call and maintain the fragile peace of the moment, or take it and risk opening a Pandora's box. My hand dives into the bag and pulls out the phone. The screen flashes: Rachel.

Fuck. My lunatic ex-girlfriend.

My thumb hovers over the decline button as if teasing fate.

Against my better judgment, I swipe to answer. "Rachel, you're gracing me with your voice," I say, the words laced with a sarcasm I can't quite suppress.

Her reply is painfully cheerful. "Xavier, it's been ages! I was hoping we could chat."

I lean against the cold metal lockers, hearing the water droplets from my wet hair patter onto the floor. "Chat? I remember us covering a lot of ground during our last tête-à-tête."

She exhales audibly, a tired sigh traveling down the line. “I know it got messy, Xavier, but I’m doing better now. So much better that I’d like to ask for a favor.”

A smirk touches my lips; she can’t see it, but I imagine she can sense it. “You want a favor?”

“Yes,” she responds, her voice dripping with saccharine sweetness that makes my skin itch. “I need closure. Will you meet me at a gala event next week?”

“Closure? I recall us having an entire Shakespearean act of closure.”

“Will you consider it, for old times’ sake? I’ve moved on. I’m seeing someone.”

My curiosity rears its ugly head. “So, who’s the unlucky guy?”

Rachel chuckles, and the sound is like nails on a chalkboard. “You’ll find this amusing. It’s Mark Collins.”

Hearing that name, my old rival from a competing team, is like a gut punch. “This isn’t about closure, is it? You want to parade him around me for the press to see?”

She ignores the accusation. “Mark’s a wonderful man, Xavier, quite generous in a way you never were.”

Her words are daggers, precisely aimed. I grit my teeth. “Careful, Rachel. I know all the tricks because I wrote the damn playbook.” I hang up before she can reply, my grip on the phone tightening until my knuckles turn white.

Shaking my head, I place the phone back into my bag and pause, leaning against the locker as a storm of conflicting emotions sweeps over me. “Two can play this fucking game,” I murmur to myself. It’s less of a statement, more of a vow.

As I sling my bag over my shoulder, the phone buzzes again, another text. This time, it’s from Emma: *You’re on. Tonight at seven at The Peninsula. I’ll meet you there.*

Damn, I didn’t expect that. I read it, then read it again, a feeling of anticipation tinged with a hint of nervousness, which feels foreign to me. I was partly joking when I suggested dinner. What am I getting into?

Her message still hanging in my mind, I make my way through the locker room and out the door into the embrace of the night air. Emma, Jeff, Rachel—all of them are becoming threads in a complex tapestry I'm weaving, intentionally or not. And as I settle into my car, one question settles over me like a fog: Who is Emma Thompson, really?

I ignite the engine and pull away from the lot, the stadium lights shrinking in my rearview mirror. Another vow crystallizes in my mind: Regardless of what the game of life—or football—throws at me, I'll play it my way.

Unapologetically. On my own terms.

FIVE

EMMA

THE SUN HANGS LOW OVER THE CHICAGO SKYLINE AS I MAKE my way down Michigan Avenue, the click of my heels keeping pace with the rapidfire thrumming of my heart. I take a deep breath before the grand archway of The Peninsula, steeling my nerves for the evening ahead.

What was I thinking, agreeing to have dinner with Xavier Johnson? The man is arrogant, infuriating, and...okay, fine. Objectively attractive. But definitely off-limits.

That hasn't stopped my traitorous mind from replaying our charged argument from the other day on a loop. The way his eyes blazed with challenge, his muscles taut beneath that fitted t-shirt.

This isn't a date. It's a business transaction.

I smooth my hands over my simple black sheath dress, wondering if it's too formal. Maybe I should have gone with something more casual, like my go-to jeans and booties. But I can't afford to be anything less than put together around Xavier. He'd see right through me.

"Just hear him out," I mutter under my breath. "See if he actually has anything worthwhile to offer Jeff."

Before I can talk myself into bailing, I stride through the polished doors. The host's eyes widen slightly, an expression that quickly smooths into professionalism.

"Good evening, ma'am."

“I have a reservation under Xavier Johnson,” I say, trying to keep my voice as cool as winter air.

“Ah, Miss Thompson,” he says, looking at his computer before giving me a polite smile. “Please, follow me.”

I let him lead me through the maze of luxurious dining, avoiding eye contact with patrons who scream privilege—people my parents would have considered their bosses in another life. Men are in tailored suits that probably cost more than my rent, while women flaunt diamond-encrusted necklaces and carry designer handbags. The atmosphere is heavy with the aroma of seared steak and truffle, clouded with quiet laughter and the clinking of wine glasses. I keep my focus ahead, trying not to trip over the irony that, for Jeff, the guy who used to eat cereal for dinner, I’m stepping into this strange world.

Finally, the host takes a sharp turn and leads me to a back corner. My heart jackhammers as I see Xavier. He’s sitting alone in a booth made of supple leather, his jacket thrown casually over the side. His shirtsleeves are rolled up, displaying those sculpted forearms that I remember being splashed across sports magazines. He looks up and raises his hand slightly, an inscrutable smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. For a brief moment, my pace stumbles, but I regain my composure.

You’ve navigated harder situations, Emma. He’s just another guy. A very, very infuriating guy.

I give the host a nod as I slide into the booth. “Thank you,” I say, my voice surprisingly steady.

Xavier leans back, his eyes examining me like a puzzle he’s trying to solve. “You made it. I was beginning to think you’d stood me up.”

I bite back the sharp retort on my tongue as I smooth the napkin over my lap. I promised myself I’d at least try to be civil tonight. “Apologies for keeping you waiting,” I say lightly. “I know how busy your social calendar must be.”

His lips quirk up. “Oh, don’t worry. You’re the highlight of my week.”

I press my lips together, unsure how to take that backhanded compliment. Before the awkward silence can stretch too long, the waiter appears to take our drink order. Xavier orders a merlot—a name filled with so many vowels and accents, it sounds like a song. When it’s my turn, I opt for water.

“Really, Emma? Water?” Xavier teases, taking the liberty to choose a white wine on my behalf.

My jaw clenches. He’s usurping my choices now? But I swallow the sharp words that rise like bile. *Keep your eyes on the prize, Emma. You need him. Jeff needs him.*

“Fine,” I say, relenting. “Wine it is.”

We make it through the mundane small talk about the weather and my brother’s first weeks of training. I discreetly glance at my watch, wondering when Xavier will get to the point of this entire production.

Finally, after an awkward lull, Xavier leans forward, his expression turning serious. “So I’ve been thinking a lot since our...confrontation the other day.”

I incline my head warily. “Oh?”

He braces both forearms on the table, an intense look in his dark eyes. “Here’s the thing, Emma. I like you.”

I blink, gobsmacked. “...What?”

“Obviously, we got off on the wrong foot,” he continues smoothly. “But I see a lot of potential for us.”

“Potential,” I repeat dumbly, my mind racing to catch up. Where is he going with this?

Xavier toys with his wineglass, gazing at me intently beneath hooded lids. “You’re not like the other women I know. You challenge me. And I respect that.”

Despite myself, I feel an instinctive spark of pleasure at his words. I tamp it down quickly. “Forgive me, but is there a point to this... flattery?” I ask, steel lining my voice.

He chuckles. “Perceptive as always.” Xavier leans back, regarding me shrewdly. “I have a business proposal for you, Emma.”

I arch a brow, waiting.

“It’s no secret my breakup with Rachel caused some... complications,” he begins slowly. “Now, with her new boyfriend, the media won’t leave me alone about it. They think there’s more to the story.”

“Which I’m sure there is,” I interject pointedly.

Xavier’s jaw clenches briefly before he smooths his features. “Regardless, I could use some good press to get them off my back. Which is where you come in.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “What exactly are you asking me to do?”

His lips curve into a knowing smile. “I’m so pleased you asked, Emma. I’d like you to be my girlfriend.”

My jaw drops open.

Xavier holds up a hand. “Let me clarify. My pretend girlfriend, just for the press and a few events. We’ll play up the romance angle, give them something new to fixate on. Once it all dies down, we stage a clean breakup. No harm done.”

I stare at him, speechless. Is he actually serious right now?

Xavier casually takes a sip of wine. “Obviously, I’ll make it worth your while. Put in a good word with the coach about Jeff. Maybe suggest he get more field time.” His gaze turns piercing. “Lord knows he could use the help.” He leans back, locking eyes with me as he waits for my response. The wine in his glass has barely been touched, but the atmosphere between us is heady, almost intoxicating. “So, you understand the proposal.”

“Understand it?” I say, still incredulous. “I understand you want to use me as some sort of tabloid diversion. But understanding doesn’t mean agreeing.”

He inhales deeply, a veneer of composure glossing over a hint of...what? Nervousness? No, Xavier Johnson doesn’t do

nerves.

“Let’s not pretend it’s entirely altruistic,” he says softly. “You need something, too. Your brother needs something. And I can provide that. Besides,” he hesitates, “it’s not like we’d be lying. We’d just be...curating the truth.”

I can’t help but snort. “Curating? That’s what we’re calling it?”

“Yes,” he says, ignoring my sarcasm. “It’s like modern art. Everyone sees it, but not everyone gets it. And right now, I need the world to see something specific.”

“That you’re over Rachel and her new boyfriend?” I cut in.

Xavier’s face tightens, a ripple in his smooth exterior. “That, and that I can maintain a stable relationship without turning it into a TMZ highlight reel.”

“You had me fooled,” I murmur, more to myself than to him.

But he hears me and leans forward, eyes unguarded for a fraction of a second.

“My relationship with Rachel was a tangled mess. People think they know what happened, but they don’t have a clue.”

My arms unfold as I sit back, weighing his words. His eyes are keen, intense. He’s not lying, that much I can tell.

Xavier takes a breath, looking uncharacteristically vulnerable. “Look, I get that you don’t owe me anything, Emma. But the media has a short attention span. Give them something else to chew on, and they’ll leave my past alone. And that...that would mean a lot to me.”

Something about his honesty tugs at me, the sincerity contrasting sharply with the persona I’ve seen plastered all over social media. But it’s the last part, the promise of helping Jeff, that has me truly considering his proposition. I take a long sip of my wine, feeling the liquid courage settle into my bones. Is it crazy to even entertain this idea?

As much as I hate to admit it, Xavier wields a lot of influence on the team. He’s their undisputed star player. If he took Jeff under his wing, mentored him...it could change everything.

Xavier's seal of approval carries a lot of weight in this world I'm still struggling to navigate. As infuriating as it is to depend on his arrogant whims, I can't ignore the opportunity this presents. For Jeff's sake, maybe I should at least entertain the idea.

Xavier studies me intently. "Of course, this would strictly be for the cameras. No need to pretend when it's just us," he adds, likely trying to reassure me. "Think of it as a business partnership."

I swirl the wine in my glass as I consider his offer. Xavier mistakes my silence for coyness, proving just how little he really knows about me.

"Come on, Emma. I promise to be the perfect gentleman." He grins rakishly. "Unless you'd prefer I wasn't?"

I roll my eyes, biting back a scathing retort. Play nice, Emma.

Setting down my wineglass, I meet his gaze squarely. "Okay, Xavier. Here are my terms."

His eyebrows raise in surprise and intrigue.

"You do more than just put in a good word about Jeff. You coach him. Get him ready for game day." I take a sip of water. "This arrangement ends the moment it stops benefiting my brother," I state clearly. "No surprises or public spectacles. We stage a clean break on my terms."

Xavier spreads his hands acquiescence. "Of course. You have my word."

I lean forward. "And this stays strictly business. The second it gets inappropriate, I walk away and deny everything." I pierce him with my most serious look. "Are we crystal clear?"

He places a hand over his heart. "Scout's honor."

"Fine," I huff out. "I can't believe I'm agreeing to this madness, but consider your offer accepted."

A wide grin breaks across Xavier's face. Clearly not the answer he expected. "Excellent. We have an accord."

He lifts his wine glass. After a slight hesitation, I clink mine gently to his. The crystal chime seems to seal this ludicrous deal I've somehow consented to. I quickly gulp down the rest of my wine, hoping the alcohol will settle my nerves.

Xavier smiles slyly. "You know, agreements like these are often celebrated more...privately." His eyes gleam suggestively. "My condo isn't far from here. We could—"

"I believe I made the terms of our arrangement clear," I interrupt sharply.

Xavier looks briefly disappointed before he smooths it over with an easy laugh. "Kidding, kidding. Just testing. Making sure we're on the same page, right?"

I simply lift one brow in response. Message received.

The final notes of laughter and lingering conversation fade away as Xavier and I step out of The Peninsula's elegant interior, the air shifting from warm hospitality to the brisk nip of a Chicago evening. I feel the cool breeze snake around my ankles, making its way up my legs, chilling the bare skin left exposed by my dress.

Xavier, noticing my involuntary shiver, retrieves my coat from his arm. With a surprising grace that contrasts his athletic build, he slides it over my shoulders. His fingers brush against the nape of my neck for a second, sending a ripple of warmth up my spine.

Concentrate, Emma. Remember what this is—and what it isn't.

Pulling my coat tighter around me, I glance over at Xavier. The streetlamps cast a soft, golden light that plays across his features, carving shadows that make his already striking face even more arresting. The interplay of light and dark etches out his jawline, outlines his cheekbones, and suddenly, he's not just Xavier, the infuriating, confusing athlete. He's Xavier, the man whose proximity has the power to make me feel, for lack of a better word, jittery.

Gathering my wits, I take a deliberate step back, tearing myself away from whatever magnetic field has momentarily

trapped me. “Well, goodnight then,” I manage to say, though my voice emerges tinged with an unfamiliar raspiness.

His eyes, like twin lanterns in the half-light, don’t waver from mine. “Until next time, Emma.”

That smile of his—subtle, inviting, yet wholly enigmatic—stays with me as I pivot on my heels and head toward the subway. My heels click against the sidewalk, echoing down the empty streets, each step punctuated by a swirl of thoughts that seem to grow increasingly nebulous.

What have I agreed to? I replay the evening in my mind, dissecting each spoken and unspoken contract. Me, Emma Thompson, pretending to date Xavier Johnson—a man who embodies everything I’ve professed to abhor. His ego, his cavalier attitude toward relationships; these qualities aren’t just red flags, they’re blaring sirens.

And yet, the unsettling thing isn’t that I’ve agreed to this outrageous scheme. No, what truly disorients me is the whispering, traitorous voice insisting that, perhaps, Xavier Johnson isn’t the two-dimensional character I’d originally thought.

You’re starstruck, Emma. That’s all this is. You’ve been caught in the flashbulbs of his fame, and it’s blinding you.

My internal monologue turns into a pep talk as I descend into the subway. This act—this ruse—is for Jeff. For his future. It’s not about me or the irrational pull I feel toward Xavier. I can be in his company without falling under his spell. I’m not that naive.

Once I’m safely ensconced in my apartment, wrapped in the comfort of sweatpants and a worn-in T-shirt, I grab my phone. Scrolling through my contacts, I find Xavier’s number—now saved, a stark reminder of the new reality I’ve voluntarily entered. My thumb hovers over the screen for a second before I shoot off a text, trying to distill all the chaotic emotions of the night into a few simple words.

“Looking forward to our ‘public debut.’ Strictly business, of course.”

Seconds stretch into minutes. Just when I'm convinced he's already forgotten about our deal, my phone vibrates.

"Strictly business it is. But business doesn't have to be boring, Emma."

The screen goes dark, but his words hang in the air, their insinuations lingering like a half-remembered dream. My fingers grip the phone a little tighter, and I feel the edges of it digging into my palm, as if grounding me to the complex reality I've just committed to.

And as I set my phone back on the table, a thought nudges at the periphery of my consciousness—a thought I immediately try to suppress but can't.

What if this "strictly business" arrangement turns out to be anything but?

THE STERILE SCENT—MINGLED with a dash of antiseptic and rubber gloves—welcomes me as I push through the automatic glass doors. The hospital is an eerie space of order, where controlled chaos thrives behind the closed doors of exam rooms and surgery suites. I weave my way through the labyrinth of corridors, my sneakers squeaking lightly against the waxed floors, until I reach my dad's room.

I pause, hand hovering over the doorknob. Taking a deep breath, I brace myself for the world on the other side. It's not the smell of medicine, nor the drab beige walls that I'm afraid of. It's the myriad of questions hanging like an invisible cloud, each unanswered, each capable of raining down a storm of discomfort over our heads.

I swing the door open and find my father propped up against a mountain of off-white pillows. The sunlight slants through the blinds, casting pinstripes across his waning features. Despite the frailness, the inevitable toll of being in a hospital, his eyes light up when he sees me.

"There's my beautiful girl."

The way he says it, with that admiring lilt, evokes a torrent of memories—Saturday mornings in pajamas, the excitement of school dances, and those mellow evenings of cooking together. His words, always a salve, smooth over the sharp corners of my worries.

“Hey, Dad.” My voice is a careful balance of cheerfulness and sincerity as I lean down to kiss his forehead. The skin there feels more tender than I remember, as if it has grown thin from carrying the weight of his worries. I pull the visitor’s chair closer to his bed, the metal legs screeching softly against the linoleum floor, and sit.

“So,” I start, keeping my voice light, “what did the white coats say today? Are they still hoarding all the good pudding from you?”

He chuckles, a sound that seems to momentarily chase away the hospital’s cold ambiance. “You wouldn’t believe it. Dr. Stevens said they might let me out by the end of the week, as long as I promise not to do any square dancing or bungee jumping.”

“Ah, bungee jumping. Always knew that was a secret passion of yours.”

He winks. “One of many.”

A quiet laugh escapes me, and for a brief moment, the hospital room feels a little less oppressive.

I stand up and sling my purse over my shoulder, but just as I’m about to declare my exit, my father’s hand reaches out to envelop mine. It’s a strong hand, one that’s flipped pancakes and thrown baseballs, but now it trembles ever so slightly.

“Listen, Emma,” he says, and the jovial tone is gone, replaced by a weightiness that roots me to the spot. “You’re carrying a lot, looking out for Jeff and all.”

I open my mouth to deflect, to make light of it—my go-to defense mechanism—but he silences me with a look. It’s the same look he used to give me before diving into heart-to-hearts during my tumultuous teenage years. A look that says, This is important, pay attention.

“I know you’re doing the best you can, honey, but it’s okay to ask for help. You’ve got this habit of being a one-woman army.”

My eyes sting a little, and I feel the thickening lump in my throat. Dad’s reading me like one of his beloved classic novels, each sentence tinged with underlying themes and foreshadowing. I squeeze his hand back, making a promise without words. “I’ll try to remember that it’s not a weakness to lean on others.”

His smile blooms softly, a subtle work of art. “Atta girl.”

For a fleeting second, the room feels as though it’s suspended in a different time, one where he’s not in a hospital bed and I’m not burdened with newfound adult responsibilities.

“Don’t be too quick to judge Jeff,” he continues, pulling me back into the moment. “He’s like a photograph still in the darkroom, you know? Needs the right amount of time and light to come into focus.”

I nod, absorbing his metaphor like a sponge. If anyone understands the fragility and strength of human potential, it’s Dad.

“And this Johnson guy,” he says, his voice adopting an unusually stern tone. “Whatever your dealings with him, don’t cut ties recklessly. A person like that can either open doors or seal them shut. Be mindful.”

I wince inwardly, my cheeks flushing a shade that feels incriminating. Oh, if he only knew about the labyrinthine plan I’d knitted with Xavier just last night. A pretend romance, each of us pulling strings behind a curtain. But instead of divulging this tangled web, I simply nod.

“Don’t worry, I’ll play nice with Xavier.”

Dad seems satisfied with my response, but little does he know that ‘playing nice’ is a performance that could earn me an Oscar, given the nuances involved.

After another hug, one that I wish could last forever, I step back into the dim corridors. The atmosphere of the hospital fades as I navigate through the maze of hallways, soon finding

myself thrust into the gray Chicago afternoon. My feet instinctively guide me toward the train station, but my thoughts are a whirlwind, each one a leaf caught in an autumn gust.

My dad's wisdom reverberates through my head. He's right; Xavier Johnson isn't just some guy I have to endure for the sake of my own professional life. He's become an unexpected key player in my brother's fledgling football career. This pretend romance, hatched in a moment of audacity, now looms like a towering skyscraper I'm somehow supposed to scale without a safety net.

Questions surge like a tide within me, each one begging for attention. How do I navigate this complicated charade without losing parts of myself? How do I ensure that Jeff isn't collateral damage in a game neither of us wanted to play? And the biggest question of all—how do I reconcile with the mounting tension between Xavier and me, a tension that's more complex than simple annoyance or indifference?

The die has indeed been cast, setting into motion events I can neither predict nor fully control. All I can do is play this high-stakes game with the cards I've been dealt, no folding allowed.

SIX

XAVIER

THE SMELL OF SWEAT AND MUSK PERMEATES THE LOCKER ROOM as I make my way to my designated spot, eager to rinse off after a grueling practice under the blistering sun. The cool air inside is a welcome relief from the oppressive heat outside.

I nod at a few of the guys as I walk by, exchanging casual fist bumps and manly half-hugs. Despite being on this team for years, I've never been the buddy-buddy, slap-on-the-back type. Sure, I have my inner circle - Chase and a couple of other guys I really trust. But mostly I keep to myself. It's easier that way.

As I'm about to round the corner to the showers, the unmistakable sound of a confrontation stops me in my tracks. I peek around to see Billy, one of our second-string defensive ends, crowding Jeff against the lockers. Even from here, I can see the kid's eyes wide with apprehension.

"Look, rookie, all I'm saying is maybe you're not Thunderhawks material," Billy says with a sneer, shoving Jeff's shoulder. "Coach is wasting his time thinking you could ever start. Hell, I give you two more weeks tops before they ship your ass down to the practice squad...or cut you altogether."

Jeff flinches and looks away, his face burning red. I feel a flare of anger in my gut. Sure, the kid's made some mistakes on the field, but he's got raw talent. And he takes direction well - never complains or talks back. Not his fault the playbook is thicker than a phonebook.

Before I can think better of it, I stride over and plant myself between Billy and Jeff.

“How about you quit puffing your chest and hit the showers, Billy?” I say sharply. “Jeff’s gonna be starting before you know it.”

Billy’s eyes widen in surprise, then narrow menacingly. “Wasn’t talking to you, Johnson.” He spits my last name like it’s dirty.

I fold my arms over my bare chest, well aware that every eye in the locker room is on us now.

“Yeah, well, I’m talking to you,” I reply coolly. “Lay off the rookie, got it? Kid’s got more potential in his pinky than you’ve got in that thick skull of yours.”

A few muffled chuckles echo around us. Billy glances around, then fixes me with a deadly glare.

“Just you wait, Johnson,” he hisses under his breath. “That pretty poster boy rep of yours won’t last forever. Mark my words.”

With that, he brushes past me roughly, stomping toward the showers. I turn and put a hand on Jeff’s shoulder. The kid won’t meet my eyes.

“Hey, don’t let assholes like that bother you,” I say, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “You’re doing great out there.”

Jeff nods, still looking at the floor. “Yeah uh, thanks Xavier. Appreciate it.” His voice is so low I can barely hear him over the echoing din of the locker room.

I give him an affirming pat on the back, then continue on my way. Adrenaline is still pumping through me from the confrontation. As much as I hate to admit it, Billy’s words dig under my skin.

My poster boy reputation, as he so eloquently put it, is something I’ve worked hard to cultivate over the years. And it’s damn well deserved - I’m the best receiver this team has ever seen. Two-time All-Pro, richest contract in Thunderhawks history. I’m the face of this franchise.

But lately, some shadows have crept into the edges of that shining reputation. Whispers about my focus being off. Comments from the coaches about relying on my natural talent versus honing my technique.

I grit my teeth, grabbing a towel and stalking toward the showers. As if on cue, I hear Chase call out as he falls into step beside me.

“Yo, Johnson, you see the latest on your ex?”

I clench my jaw so tight it aches. I suspect I know what Chase is going to tell me, but I pretend like I don’t, just in case.

“What now?” I ask tightly.

“Oh man, it’s bad. She’s strutting all over New York with that Mark Collins punk attached to her hip. They’re calling them a power couple.”

My hands ball into fists around my towel. Of course, the queen snake is flaunting her new boyfriend for the world to see. For the press, it’s a juicy story - two rival NFL stars fighting over the same woman. For me, it’s salt poured in an already festering wound.

I battle the urge to chuck my phone at the lockers. Instead, I take a deep breath and head for the showers. I refuse to let Rachel’s petty games get in my head. I need to focus. Prove her and Billy and all the rest of the naysayers wrong.

The hot water sluicing down my back does nothing to wash away my simmering anger. By the time I towel off and change, a reckless idea has taken root in my mind. It’s time I turn this narrative around in my favor.

Grabbing my keys, I quickly swipe open my phone and send a text to Emma. “Heads up. We’ve got a charity event this weekend. Black-tie affair. Time to make our public debut. You in?”

I’m already picturing it—us walking down the red carpet, the camera flashes, the envious looks from my teammates, and especially the surprised, and perhaps slightly hurt expression on Rachel’s face. For once, I’d like to see her scramble to keep up with the narrative.

My phone buzzes, and I see Emma's response pop up on the screen: *A charity event? Is that where they auction off overpriced things to people with too much money and too little sense? I'll need to practice my 'impressed' face.*

Her text makes me chuckle, a welcome reprieve from the dark mood I'm navigating. God, she's nothing like those other women—the Vegas bottle girls, the B-list actresses, the influencers—all desperate to snap a photo with me just to post it on their socials. Emma doesn't give a crap about any of that. She's all sharp edges and sharper wit, and it's as infuriating as it is refreshing. And okay, maybe a little bit hot. That lithe, strong body...fuck.

Shaking my head, as if that could physically derail my thoughts from that precarious track, I shove my phone back into my pocket. My footsteps echo in the quiet hallway as I make my way towards the parking lot. And just when I think I can make a clean getaway, Coach's voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Got a minute, Johnson?”

I paste on a smile and do a quick pivot. “For you, Coach? I've got two.”

As if my day wasn't complicated enough already.

Coach gives me a stern look, his face as unreadable as ever. “Your footwork today was lacking, Xavier. You moved through those agility drills like you were learning to walk for the first time.”

I force myself to keep my composure, grinding my teeth quietly. Criticism from my teammates is one thing; from Coach, it's something else entirely—the sort of thing that could bench me next Sunday if I'm not careful.

“Just an off day, Coach,” I say, striving for a tone that's casual yet respectful. “The sun got to me, I guess. I'll fine-tune it for the next practice.”

Coach holds my gaze with his piercing eyes. “Make sure you do. We can't afford for our star receiver to lose his edge.” He

lifts his hand and points two fingers at my eyes, then back to his. “Stay sharp. Got it?”

“Understood, Coach,” I reply, locking eyes with him. “I’ll bring my A-game.”

With one last scrutinizing glance, Coach heads back to his office. As he leaves, I’m hit by a wave of indignation. After all, I’ve given to this team—years of dedicated service, playing through injuries, navigating contract disputes—now he questions my focus?

Before I know it, my feet are carrying me back into the facility, down the corridor to the weight room. The place is mostly empty, a couple of stragglers lingering. I grab a towel and attack the weight machines with renewed vigor, channeling my frustration into each rep until my muscles quiver.

My thoughts drift, uninvited, to Emma. The contradictory emotions she stirs in me are perplexing. She challenges me in ways no one else does—certainly not like Rachel ever did. Is it so wrong to be intrigued by that kind of friction? Yeah, there’s the physical attraction too, of course, but it’s more than that, which is part of what confuses me.

I glance at the clock and realize an hour has slipped by. The remaining guys are shooting me quizzical looks, probably wondering why I’m overdoing it tonight. Ignoring them, I rack the weights and collect my things.

By the time I reach my car, I’ve pushed aside my run-in with Billy and Coach’s critique. I have too much on my plate to waste time doubting myself. The training has just started, and I’ll soon remind everyone why I’m irreplaceable.

And this upcoming weekend with Emma will serve as the perfect launchpad for my reputation’s recovery. Utilitarian as it may be, our arrangement will eclipse the drama with Rachel. Emma will play her part—I’m certain of it. By the time we stage our “breakup,” any concerns about my standing on the team will have been silenced. It’s a foolproof plan.

A nagging voice in the back of my head asks what will happen when Emma and I go our separate ways. Will I need another challenge, another fire to fuel me? I shake off the thought as I step inside. There's no room for contemplating the long-term when the present is already a labyrinth of complexity.

One step at a time. That's my mantra for clawing my way back to the top.

SEVEN

EMMA

I STAND IN FRONT OF MY CLOSET, STARING HOPELESSLY AT A collection of pencil skirts, blazers, and other nondescript business attire. Not a single dress that fits the bill for a glitzy charity function. And definitely nothing that will make it look like I deserve to be on Xavier's arm.

With a sigh, I run my fingers over the neat row of hangers, as if an elegant gown might magically materialize among the sea of grays, blacks, and navy blues. But unless Xavier's taste runs toward pantsuits, I'm fresh out of options.

I chew my bottom lip, a nervous habit ever since childhood. How does a small-town girl like me transform into a leading lady on the Chicago social circuit overnight?

My eyes land on a modest blue shift dress I wore to a cousin's wedding back home. While lovely, its simple lines and muted color scream "bridesmaid," not "superstar's date." I need something bold. Glamorous. Roused from its Midwestern hibernation, my inner fashionista spreads its wings with a vengeance.

I snatch my phone off the dresser and fire off a text to the one person I know who can help—Holly Jones, Thunderhawk's effervescent assistant offensive coach. The team's resident fashion plate. Ten seconds later, my phone chimes with her enthusiastic response.

Oh, honey!! Say no more. I'm taking you shopping!!!

Relief floods me. If anyone can help this wallflower blossom into a showstopper, it's Holly. I quickly text back my eternal

gratitude, along with a place to meet. Time to put my pride, and credit card limit, to the test.

An hour later, I step into Ellie's Corner Boutique downtown. A charming hole-in-the-wall compared to the glitzy high fashion stores that line Michigan Avenue. The bells above the door tinkle sweetly as I enter. A middle-aged woman behind the counter looks up from her paperwork and smiles.

"I'll be right with you, dear."

I turn my gaze to the racks, scanning for the perfect dress for a woman on Xavier Johnson's arm. No pressure.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's a text from Holly.

Where are you?? I'm circling the block but don't see you. Don't tell me you bailed!

I quickly reply:

I'm inside Ellie's on Walton. Come on in!

Within minutes, Hurricane Holly blows through the front door in a streak of Emilio Pucci and Marc Jacobs.

"Emma!" she squeals, as if we hadn't just seen each other at the office a couple of hours ago. "You found this place? I love Ellie's."

Before I can respond, she bombards me with questions about how I'm holding up, if I'm nervous about tomorrow night, and whether Xavier gave me any juicy insider details about his ex. My head spins like a bobble toy.

"Whoa, slow down," I laugh, putting my hands up in mock surrender. "Let's start with finding something for me to wear first."

Holly squeezes my arm, her brown eyes sparkling. "You've come to the right stylist, babe. By the time I'm done with you, Xavier's jaw will drop to the floor."

I feel my cheeks flush and make a noncommittal noise. This whole situation still feels surreal, and tomorrow night will determine if I'm cut out for the role of celebrity girlfriend or

destined to make a fool of myself. I remind myself that it's pretend. I'm not a real celebrity girlfriend and I never will be.

That doesn't mean I can't look good.

I push aside the thought that pops into my head, wondering what Xavier will think when he sees me.

Holly seems to read my uncertainty because she loops her arm through mine and steers me toward the evening wear section. "Ignore the nerves. You're gonna rock this."

I squeeze her hand gratefully as we peruse the options. The racks are neatly organized by style and color. Blues, silvers, nude—all lovely but too safe. I need something bold. Vibrant. I want to be a knockout, not a shrinking violet.

My hands travel across silk, chiffon, lace, fingers assessing each texture. I pause on an emerald number with a plunging neckline. Holly tilts her head, assessing.

"That emerald green would look so pretty with your eyes and hair," she muses. Still, I hesitate.

"I don't know...isn't it too much?" I ask.

Holly gives me a pointed look, lips pursed. "Emma Thompson, when are you gonna stop dressing like you're auditioning to be a librarian?"

I bristle slightly, even though her criticism isn't totally off-base. I spent most of my life in a rural Midwest town where the height of fashion was yoga pants and fleeces. But Holly has a point—if I want to walk with Xavier into Chicago's elite circles, I need to ditch my safe neutrals.

So over the next hour, I try on dress after dress, each bolder than the last. The silk emerald. A sultry red number with a low back. An electric cobalt wrap dress that clings in all the right places. Holly assesses each one like a drill sergeant, barking critiques and adjustments. I'm starting to lose steam when she spins me around and fixes me with a serious look.

"Emma, stop thinking about what Xavier or anyone else will think. You're a beautiful woman, inside and out. Own it. That confidence will outshine any dress."

I take a deep breath and nod, bolstered by her pep talk. She's right—the dress alone won't transform me unless I carry myself like I belong.

We move to a section of more understated choices. I pause on an elegant lavender gown with a sheer overlay, its softness contrasting the previous bold options. Holly tilts her head thoughtfully.

“Try it. I have a good feeling about this one.”

The silk lining feels luxurious as I slip it on. The bodice fit like it was tailored for my curves. The sheer overlay drapes just right, showing a subtle hint of skin without being too revealing. I turn and gasp softly. The dress makes me feel graceful, feminine, and powerful. Holly's eyes light up as she takes it in.

“Oh, Emma. Sweetie, that's the one.”

I smooth my hands over the material, allowing myself to imagine walking into tomorrow night on Xavier's arm. Heads turning. Eyes widening in appreciation. His voice is low in my ear as he leans in close...

The trill of my cell phone jolts me from my dangerous imaginings. I glance at the screen. Speak of the devil.

“Hi you,” I chirp, aiming for a breezy, playful tone. Holly smirks.

Xavier's smooth voice comes through the line. “Hey, just confirming I'll send a car to get you at 3 p.m. tomorrow. Black-tie affair, lots of big names. You good with that?”

Suddenly this feels real. Tomorrow, I'll be thrust into the orbit of Chicago's elite circle with athletes and celebrities, me playing the part of Xavier's lover. My chest tightens.

“Yeah, of course. 3 p.m. I'll be ready,” I reply evenly.

“Perfect. Can't wait to see you in a gorgeous dress,” he says, a teasing lilt to his voice. Before I can respond, he says a quick goodbye and hangs up.

I stare at the phone for a beat, nerves and anticipation swirling like a tempest inside me.

Holly gives me a little shake. “Chin up, pretty lady. You’re going to knock Xavier’s socks off.”

Buoyed by her confidence, I change back into my regular clothes and take the dress to the counter to purchase it. The older saleswoman beams as she rings me up.

“You look just darling. That man of yours won’t know what hit him.”

I simply smile, not bothering to correct her assumption. She hands me the garment bag, wispy white hair bouncing.

“Wear it well, sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” I say sincerely. “I will.”

Stepping back into the buttery afternoon sunlight, I take a deep breath. Whatever happens tomorrow night, I know one thing’s for certain—the Emma who walks into that event won’t be the same one who walks out. This dress represents a bridge to somewhere new, unknown.

As Holly and I part ways outside the boutique, she pulls me into a fierce hug. “You’ve got this,” she whispers into my hair.

I cling to her words as I head home, garment bag in hand, excitement and nerves fluttering inside me like a flock of birds. I absently twist the new delicate bracelet adorning my wrist, imagining how it will shine under the twinkling lights. The stage is set. Time for this small-town girl to play leading lady.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, I stand in front of my full-length mirror, held captive by my reflection. I hardly recognize the woman staring back at me. Holly’s expert touch during our glam session has elevated my look to an unfamiliar level of elegance, and I can’t help but marvel at how everything has come together. We have styled my hair into a cascade of artful pin-curls that frame my face, with the rest of it swept up into a chic chignon. My makeup, which I usually

keep simple, is now a smoky-eyed, red-lipped masterpiece that Holly assured me “brings the drama.”

And then there’s the dress. This lavender dream, ethereal as a twilight sky, clings to me in all the right places. Its fabric hugs my curves while providing just enough give for comfortable movement, a piece of craftsmanship so beautiful it could only be described as daydream incarnate.

A sudden honk from outside disrupts my trance, and my pulse kicks up a notch, pounding in my ears like a dance club beat.

I grab my phone and send Xavier a quick text, telling him I’ll be right down.

My gaze returns to the woman in the mirror.

This is it. Showtime.

EIGHT

XAVIER

I SMOOTH MY HANDS OVER MY TROUSERS, WIPING AWAY BEADS of sweat. Despite the cool air conditioning, my palms are clammy. I glance at my watch again. 2:55 pm. Five minutes to go.

The tinted windows give me privacy as the limo idles outside Emma's apartment building. I glance up, wondering which window is hers. What's she doing right now—applying a final coat of lipstick? Slipping on heels? My heart thuds against my ribs. I shouldn't be this nervous to pick up my own "girlfriend" for a charity event. But Emma has a knack for knocking me off-kilter. Maybe by the end of this, I'll be able to think of her like just another woman.

A rap on the window makes me jump. It's just the driver. I lower the partition.

"We're good to go whenever you're ready, Mr. Johnson."

I nod. "Let's give her a few more minutes."

He heads back to the front as I smooth my palms down my thighs again. *Man up. It's just Emma.* The woman who somehow infuriates and intrigues me all at once. The only one who has ever made me second-guess myself with a single look.

My phone buzzes with a text notification. It's from her.

On my way down!

I text back a quick thumbs up emoji and sit taller, adjusting my bow tie.

Within minutes, the apartment door swings open, and Emma steps out. I stiffen, momentarily stunned. Her hair is swept into an elegant updo with loose tendrils framing her face. The lavender gown clings to every curve, swishing around her feet. She's radiant. Regal. I have to pick my jaw up off the floor.

I take a deep breath and step out to open the limo door for her. Our eyes meet, and her lips quirk up in a smile.

"Hey you," she says breezily. "Fancy seeing you here."

I grin back, admiring the mischief in her eyes. "Your chariot awaits, m'lady."

I offer my hand. She takes it, fingers cool against my palm. As I guide her into the limo, the scent of her perfume floods my senses. Something floral mixed with a hint of spice. Intoxicating.

Once she's settled, I slide in next to her, hyperaware of the inches separating us. The driver pulls away from the curb, and we're officially off to our first public event as a couple. An anxiety I can't quite place simmers beneath my skin.

"So," I begin conversationally. "Think we can convince all of Chicago we're madly in love?"

Emma arches an eyebrow, lips pursed in amusement. "Please. I can play the doting girlfriend in my sleep."

A laugh escapes me, surprising us both. More surprising is the warmth coiling in my belly as I study her profile as she gazes out the window. Wisps of hair kiss the slender curve of her neck, and suddenly all I can think about is brushing them away with my lips.

Bad idea, Johnson. This whole "relationship" straddles a delicate line, and one wrong move could ruin everything. But when she turns and gifts me with that crooked smile, something tells me our little scheme will get complicated fast.

When we pull up to the illustrious Drake Hotel, I'm a bundle of nerves. It's far from the first upscale event I've attended, but it's the first with Emma on my arm and that sets off a whole slew of emotions I'm not ready to handle. A chorus of camera shutters greets us as I step out of the limo and extend a hand to

Emma. She slides her fingers against mine, velvet over calloused skin, and joins me in the blinding blaze of flashbulbs. We pause at the edge of the red carpet, both instinctively angling toward each other as photographers jostle for the money shot.

“Xavier! Over here!”

Our smiles become strained. Emma’s grip on my elbow tightens imperceptibly as microphones are shoved toward our faces, and I feel a surge of protectiveness that’s new and startling.

“Xavier, care to introduce us to the lovely lady on your arm tonight?”

I pull her closer against my side, hoping to shield her from the barrage. “This is Emma Thompson, a very special woman in my life.”

“Emma, what’s it like dating Chicago’s most popular athlete?”

Her laugh sounds slightly brittle. “Oh, you know, just another day...”

Before she can continue, I guide us down the gauntlet with polite waves. We pass beneath an archway strung with twinkling lights and emerge into the event space proper. The flashbulbs and shouting fade to a distant buzz.

Emma exhales, shoulders loosening. “Wow. I always thought the red carpet stuff looked glamorous on TV.”

I chuckle ruefully. “All part of the job. Comes with the seven-figure contract.”

“And the legions of fangirls throwing themselves at you, I bet.”

Her wry tone makes me laugh, and I feel a surprising jolt of arousal. I lean down, lips grazing her ear. “Jealous, Miss Thompson?”

I’m rewarded by the pretty blush blooming on her cheeks again. She swats my chest playfully.

“You wish, Johnson.”

Stepping into the opulent ballroom steals my breath. Glittering chandeliers cast golden light across tables draped in silk linens. An orchestra plays softly on a raised dais, accompanied by the mellifluous murmur of conversation. Men in crisp tuxedos and women in colorful gowns hold flutes of champagne, mingling and laughing.

Inside the grand atmosphere, my nerves settle. This is my element. Schmoozing with the city's upper crust comes as naturally as breathing. But for Emma, this glittering new world likely feels foreign and intimidating. I glance down to find her lips parted in wonder, and that protectiveness stirs inside me again.

"Stick close to me, and you'll be just fine," I murmur, putting my hand on the small of her back.

Her eyes meet mine, softening. "My knight in shining armor."

Before I can respond, a booming voice calls my name. I turn to find the team's owner, drink in hand, barreling toward us. It's pure instinct that has me putting Emma slightly behind me and I tell myself that I would've done that for any woman at my side.

"Xavier, my man!" He crushes me in a back-slapping hug before turning to Emma. "I've seen you before..."

Emma extends a graceful hand. "Emma Thompson. The team's new assistant sports psychologist. Please to meet you, Mr. O'Malley."

"Please, call me Robert." He presses a smacking kiss to her knuckles. "You got your work cut out for you with this one." He laughs and points to me.

Warmth rushes my neck, but Emma smoothly slips next to me. "Oh yes, you could be right. Xavier might be a lost cause."

O'Malley laughs. "Clever girl. Well, I'm thrilled you're here." He winks. "Try not to tire my star player out too much tonight, will you?"

Emma merely smiles demurely as I guide her away with a polite laugh. Once we're out of earshot, I release a heavy breath.

“Sorry about him. O’Malley can be...”

“Let me guess. Boorish and handsy?”

I chuckle. “Something like that.”

Emma gives my arm an affectionate squeeze. “Trust me, I can handle men like him in my sleep. Now, let’s mingle before I raid that seafood tower.”

With her arm tucked securely around mine, we dive into the glittering throng.

Over the next hour, we work the room flawlessly. Emma is a natural—laughing charmingly at bad jokes, complimenting wives and girlfriends, and seeming genuinely interested in endless football talk. More than once, I stare too long, mesmerized by her poise and quick wit.

We join a circle of the team’s corporate sponsors. One balding man’s face lights up in recognition.

“Well, if it isn’t Thunderhawk’s star wide receiver! Xavier, so great to see you.”

I shake his hand. “Likewise, Mr. Andrews. Allow me to introduce my girlfriend, Emma.”

Emma gifts him with a dazzling smile. “So lovely to meet you.”

As she exchanges pleasantries, I scan the room inconspicuously. Still no sign of Rachel. I tune back into the conversation in time to hear Emma tactfully navigating a question about her career.

“I recently started a role in sports psychology, actually. It’s fascinating work, helping athletes maximize their potential.”

Andrews’ wife, an elegant brunette in a beaded gown, tilts her head curiously. “You and Xavier must talk shop all the time, then! Tell us, what’s his secret? How can he catch all those balls on the field?”

Emma sips her champagne, eyes dancing playfully. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly reveal all his tricks. But let’s just say his hands are as talented off the field as they are on.”

I almost choke on my drink as the group erupts in laughter. I fight back a flush, impressed at how easily she plays the coy girlfriend. But that heated look she throws me makes my mouth run dry.

We extricate ourselves a few minutes later, after Emma charms them utterly. As we stroll toward the bar, I lean in close. “You’re a natural at this. Quite the little actress.”

Emma lifts one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “I was captain of the high school debate team. I know how to think on my feet.” Her eyes flick to mine, softening. “Besides, it’s easy when I have you next to me.”

Before I can think of a response, a hush ripples through the crowd. I glance up to see Rachel gliding through the arched entrance on the arm of my rival, Mark Collins.

Showtime.

I straighten my shoulders and fix a casual smile on my face. But my gut twists at the sight of Rachel looking radiant on Mark’s arm. Her scarlet gown clings to her frame, and a massive diamond necklace drips down her throat. Classic Rachel, dialing up the drama. Mark soaks up the attention, leering around the room like he owns the place. Pompous jackass.

Emma’s fingernails bite into my arm, and I cover her hand with mine. “It’s okay. We’ve got this.”

She nods tightly. I know seeing my ex rattles her, even if she won’t admit it. Rachel pretends not to notice us at first, breezing by in a cloud of Chanel No. 5. But I know this game. Any minute now...

Right on cue, she whirls around with mock surprise. “Xavier! Darling, I almost didn’t see you.” Her heels click over as she air-kisses my cheek. I fight the urge to wipe it off.

“Rachel,” I reply flatly.

Mark saunters up, reeking of arrogance. Rachel clasps his hand possessively. “Have you met my boyfriend, Mark Collins? Such a dear.”

I force a civil tone. “Good to see you, man.”

We size each other up with fake smiles. Rachel turns to Emma, eyes flickering with mischief.

“And who is this lovely creature?”

I curl my hand around Emma’s waist. “My girlfriend, Emma Thompson.”

Rachel’s smile sharpens a fraction. Bingo. “Of course. Lovely to meet you.”

They exchange frosty cheek kisses. Mark pulls Rachel closer, nuzzling her neck in a juvenile show of possession. “Johnson. Hell of a season you had last year.”

I force a tight smile. “Appreciate that, Collins.”

His hand migrates to Rachel’s hip, staking his claim. She leans into him but keeps her predator’s gaze fixed on me and Emma.

“You surprise me, Xavier. Rebounded from our little breakup, straight into this delightful creature’s bed.”

Emma inhales sharply. Before the red haze can descend over my vision, she grabs my arm, expression politely neutral. “Can I steal you for a minute, hon?”

Not waiting for a response, she steers me toward the bar with surprising force. I follow mutely, pulse hammering.

Emma doesn’t breathe again until we’re seated at the polished marble bar, a fresh martini pressed into my hand.

“Just inhale slowly,” I murmur. “Rachel wants us to lose our cool. Let’s not give her the satisfaction.”

She nods tightly, rage and humiliation churning in my gut. In my periphery, I see Rachel watching us as she’s fawning over Mark, angling her body suggestively against his side. Baiting me. And goddamn it, I’m falling for it.

Emma’s fingers wrap around mine, drawing my eyes back to her.

“We can’t let her win, Xavier.”

Before I can ask what she means, her mouth crashes against mine in a searing kiss. Shock ricochets through me, followed swiftly by a desire so strong that it was almost painful. After a stunned second, I kiss her back hungrily, the rest of the ballroom fading away. I lose myself in the taste and feel of her.

When we finally break apart, her cheeks are flushed, eyes glittering. She leans in close, lips grazing my ear.

“How’s that for a show?” she whispers wickedly.

I follow her gaze to where Rachel stands motionless, lips parted, brows drawn together. For the first time, my ex looks genuinely thrown.

A satisfied smirk tugs at my mouth as I face Emma again.

“I think you managed to one-up her, Miss Thompson.”

With a satisfied hum, she straightens my bow tie and pulls me back into the crowd. I follow in a daze, nerves still jangling from her unexpected PDA. Sneaky, brilliant woman. Those soft lips of hers might just be the end of me.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur. We pointedly avoid Rachel’s orbit, though I catch her shooting us resentful glares when she thinks we aren’t looking. At one point, Mark steers her forcefully away when she tries approaching us, his smug smile replaced by a thunderous glower.

Good. Let him deal with her dramatics for once.

Emma is a vision all night, working the room effortlessly. Watching her charm and disarm these elite circles stirs something uncomfortably close to pride. And that kiss plays on loop in my head, tormenting me.

Near midnight, the gala winds down and guests drift out. Rachel pointedly refuses to look at us, clearly unhappy her little stunt failed to provoke a reaction, and fired back on her. I help Emma into her coat, unable to resist grazing her neckline with my fingertips. Her sharp intake of breath gratifies me.

We say our goodbyes to friends and step out into the night. The cool air helps clear the remaining haze from my brain. As we wait for the limo, Emma turns to me, eyes gleaming.

“We make a pretty good team, Johnson.”

I study her upturned face, once again struck by her loveliness. Not just her beauty, but her wit, strength and tenacity. Qualities Rachel never possessed. I take her hand, running my thumb across her knuckles.

“The best. We definitely gave Rachel a run for her money tonight.” I hesitate. “But are you sure you’re okay? I know seeing her couldn’t have been easy.”

Emma lifts her chin. “Please. I’m more than equipped to handle your petty exes.” But she softens it with a teasing smile.

The limo pulls up, and I open the door for her. As we settle inside, I feel myself relaxing for the first time all evening. Alone with her in the darkness, this complicated woman next to me almost feels like someone I could get used to having around.

If only things were different.

The ride back to Emma’s apartment passes comfortably. The radio plays softly as the city lights stream by outside. Emma kicks off her heels with a contented sigh and tucks her feet beneath her, a wry smile on her face.

“These shoes are gorgeous, but torture devices. My feet will ache for days.”

I chuckle. “Beauty is pain, or so I hear.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Easy for you to say. Men get to wear comfortable shoes while women teeter around in stilettos and call it fashion.”

“Hey, don’t knock the bow tie. I can barely breathe in this penguin suit.” I pluck at my collar in demonstration.

Emma laughs—a rich, warm sound I realize I could listen to all night. She nudges my shoulder playfully, and a jolt goes through me. “Poor baby. It’s no comparison. Next time, I’ll find myself a nice pair of Yeezys to wear.”

I clutch my chest in mock horror. “Such blasphemy! Your stylist would have a heart attack.”

Her answering laugh makes everything inside me go soft and liquid. I study her smiling profile as the limo cruises downtown, her sharp edges softened after a night of laughter and connection. Not for the cameras or Rachel's benefit—but genuine moments just between us.

I should regret getting drawn further into this scheme with Emma. Nothing waits for us down this path but complications and heartache. But the more layers she reveals, the harder it gets to remember this is just a performance. One that will end after the curtain call.

The limo slows outside her building, and I step out to walk her to the door. Outside the car, the biting air makes me long for the warmth of her body again. We pause at the entrance, reluctance pulling me as taut as a bowstring.

Emma searches my face, cheeks flushed prettily from the champagne. And, maybe, a little from our physical interactions tonight. "Thank you again for tonight."

She rises on tiptoe to kiss my cheek, lips grazing the corner of my mouth. Electricity skitters across my skin everywhere she touched. Our eyes connect, and something dangerous flickers between us—an acknowledgment of this illicit attraction simmering beneath the surface.

With a whispered goodnight, Emma slips inside. I stand frozen on the sidewalk as icy wind lashes my face. Tonight was a revelation. Emma has slipped beneath my armor and coiled herself around my heart before I realized the danger. And now I understand one thing with sudden, breathtaking clarity—I'm in serious trouble.

NINE

EMMA

MORNING SUNSHINE FILTERS THROUGH THE BLINDS, STIRRING me from a restless sleep. I blink up at the ceiling, slowly coming back to my senses. The events of last night replay in vivid technicolor—the glitz of the ballroom, the dazzling smiles and air kisses, the champagne bubbles dancing across my tongue. And one moment seared into my mind on an endless loop: my mouth capturing Xavier's, his fingers threading through my hair, my pulse thundering in my ears.

My hand slips between my legs, a horny smile tugging at my lips. I can almost still feel the ghost of that electrifying kiss. A reckless, impulsive move, but so very worth it to see the look on Rachel's face. Point one to Emma Thompson.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, jolting me from my pleasant memories. I reach for it, squinting against the brightness. It's a text from Xavier. My pulse quickens.

Xavier: Thanks again for being my date last night. You were amazing. Looking forward to our next public appearance, girlfriend ;)

I bite my lip, heat creeping up my neck. Our little scheme is becoming dangerously convincing, in more ways than one. This man has a knack for knocking me off-kilter. I'm already dreading and anticipating our next "date." Such a tangled web we're weaving.

With a sigh, I roll out of bed and shuffle to the bathroom. As I brush my teeth, my mind still replaying that impulsive kiss over and over. Obviously, it was just for show, a way to stick it

to Rachel after she tried baiting us. But the way Xavier responded, pulling me fiercely against him, left me breathless. No man has ever kissed me like that before—with a hunger bordering on desperation.

Get a fucking grip, Thompson. It was pure smoke and mirrors, a convincing performance for the cameras. Nothing more. Xavier Johnson is not a man who loses control. Especially not over an arrangement as transactional as ours.

I turn on the shower as hot as I can stand it, as if I can scald away these dangerous thoughts. But as steam fills the bathroom, I can almost feel Xavier's strong arms around me again, his cologne enveloping my senses. A treacherous part of me hopes our next "date" comes very soon...and that I'll have someone else to ease this throbbing ache inside me.

For right now, however, it seems like I'm the only option available. And if I'm being completely honest, it's been that way for quite a while. Which means I know exactly what I need to do to find relief.

Closing my eyes, I give myself over to fantasies that have been playing through my mind in one way or another since I left that limo. I slide my hand down my stomach, imagining thicker fingers, strong ones. Dexterous.

A shiver goes through me as I imagine him looking down at me through hooded eyes that miss nothing.

He watches my face as his fingers part my folds, finding me slick and wet—and not because of the shower. His touch ghosts over my clit, sending a zing of pleasure through me.

I breathe out a sigh as that bundle of nerves swells under my fingers. My free hand comes up to cup my breast. My nipple pebbles against my palm and when I take it between my thumb and finger, I imagine that it's Xavier plucking at the sensitive flesh.

As the water flows over my body, I picture what it would be like to see Xavier go to his knees in front of me, those dark eyes full of promise. The knowledge that he will totally and completely take care of me.

His tongue is hot, moving over silky skin as he uses his thumbs to part my lower lips. He presses his mouth more tightly against me, working his tongue into me, then moving up to circle my clit.

I press my fingers more firmly against that nub of flesh and think of what it would feel like to have him take it in his mouth. To have him peer up at me, his hands on my hips, holding me in place as he draws out every ounce of pleasure. I let the cry spill from my lips as I come, the sound muffled by the water.

It takes me a couple minutes to recover, but my legs are still shaky as I wash my hair. It's only as I lather up my body wash that my pulse returns to normal, and I finally feel like the tension inside me has eased.

Freshly showered, I towel off and throw on yoga pants and a Thunderhawks T-shirt. My wet hair soaks the back, but I'm too lazy to blow dry it. As I'm pulling it up into a messy ponytail, my phone rings. It's Jeff.

"Hey little bro, what's up?" I ask, wedging the phone between my shoulder and ear as I rummage for socks.

"Just wanted to check in after last night," he says. "How was the big charity ball with all the hoity toity football folk?"

I snort. "You make it sound like I was hobnobbing with royalty. It was fine—good food, free booze. Oh, and Xavier behaved nicely."

"Yeah? How's that going, you two 'dating' and all?" Jeff asks. I can hear the smirk in his voice.

"It's...going. It's for show, as you know. All for your benefit." Even as I say it, my lips tingle with the ghost of Xavier's kiss.
Down, girl.

"Uh, huh. I know the plan. Just don't go falling for my teammate, sis. Could make for an awkward Thanksgiving dinner. Also, I don't want you getting hurt for my sake."

I roll my eyes. "You forget you're talking to your big sister. You know me, Jeff. My head's always on straight."

Mostly straight. Definitely attached to my shoulders. Not fantasizing about Xavier's muscular arms wrapping around me again. Not thinking about what he looks like without a shirt. Nope, not at all.

Jeff's voice turns serious. "But really, I wanted to say thanks. Xavier took me aside at practice yesterday and gave me some great tips. I think having you close to him is rubbing off. My field awareness has gotten so much better this week."

I pause midway through lacing my sneakers. "Well, I'm glad to hear he's helping you. But you got here on your own merit, Jeff. Don't sell yourself short."

"I know, I know. But it's nice to have someone like Xavier in my corner, you know? I think this whole arrangement is gonna work out."

I chew my lip, sensations at war within me. I'm thrilled Jeff feels supported, that our gambit seems to pay early dividends. But there's an undercurrent of something less definable rippling through me. Almost like...guilt?

No, not guilt. Uncertainty. About how intertwined the personal and professional are becoming here. Xavier and I are playing with fire, that much is clear. Even if last night's white-hot kiss was just smoke and mirrors, it felt dangerously real in the moment. Where do we draw the line between true and false, between helping Jeff and satisfying our own ulterior motives?

I force a lightness into my tone. "Well, as long as you keep your head down and keep impressing, little bro, I'm happy. I'll handle Xavier and the politics."

Jeff thanks me again and hangs up. As I slide on a Thunderhawks cap and tug my ponytail through the back, his words keep playing through my head. Xavier helped Jeff at practice. Could be he's just earning up to his promise, but what if it's more? I think of the focused way he watches Jeff on the field, almost paternal. Is it possible Xavier truly wants to see my brother succeed? And if so, where does that leave us?

These thoughts are getting too heavy for early morning; I need to clear my head. Locking up, I head out for my usual

weekend long run. The sun is still low in the sky, casting the city in a golden glow. As my feet pound the familiar path along the lakeshore, memories from the gala play like a movie reel in my mind—the blinding camera flashes, Rachel’s razor sharp gaze, Xavier’s playful smile as he guided me through the crowds. The heat of him practically burning my skin despite the layers between us.

God help me, when he looks at me like that, I feel it everywhere. His charm is a tangible force, sinking into my pores, making it impossible to resist his pull. Everything about him draws me closer, like a moth to a flame. His sculpted arms in that perfectly tailored tuxedo. His smooth baritone murmuring intimately in my ear. And those searing kisses that set every nerve ending ablaze—all for show, I remind myself harshly. *Xavier Johnson is not yours to get attached to, Thompson.*

By mile three, my mind settles into that heady runner’s calm. The lakefront trail levels out, sunlight dancing off the water. As my breathing evens into a peaceful rhythm, my thoughts clear. This thing with Xavier is complicated, no question. There are layers upon layers here I have yet to unravel. But I can handle complex. Life is messy - something my dad taught me young. What matters most is how you face the mess when it inevitably comes.

Dad. The thought of him makes my throat tighten. I should visit while I’m close by. Mile four brings me near the hospital, so I hang a left to go inside. The familiar antiseptic scent washes over me as I walk the sterile halls to his room. Dad looks tired but alert when I step inside.

“Hey there. Surprise visit from your favorite daughter,” I say, leaning down to kiss his scratchy cheek.

Dad gives me a wry look. “I’d say you’re my only daughter, but I don’t want to hurt Janie’s feelings.”

I laugh. Janie is our elderly tabby cat back home. It’s good to see Dad joking after all he’s endured the past week. We make small talk about the doctors, the food, “barely edible”, and how he’s itching to sleep in his own bed again.

“What about you, Em? How are you holding up with your brother’s gig there?” he asks, reclining back against the pillows.

I rearrange his IV cords, buying time. Dad doesn’t know the full story about Xavier, and now doesn’t seem the time to get into it. “Oh, you know. Just trying to keep Jeff out of trouble.”

Dad studies me, brown eyes keen despite the oxygen cannula under his nose. “You’ve always been like your mother—never could hide your worries from me. Everything okay?”

I look down, fiddling with a loose thread on his blanket as the mention of my mother brings a lump to my throat. It doesn’t matter how long she’s been gone. Every so often, I’m struck with a fresh wave of grief. Dad has enough on his plate without me unloading my tangled love life woes. But his familiar, patient gaze draws the truth out like a lodestone.

“Let’s just say things are...complicated right now. I’m trying to do what’s best for our family, but my heart and head don’t always agree.”

Dad lays a weathered hand over mine and squeezes gently. “You know what your mother always said. The heart wants what it wants. But sometimes life has other plans.” He smiles, the skin crinkling around his eyes. “Not exactly profound advice, I know. But the best any parent can do is remind you to listen to yourself—both heart and head. You’re too smart not to know the right path when you see it.”

I lace my fingers through his, soaking up his steady warmth. Dad always could see right through me and speak the truth I didn’t want to acknowledge. As much as I try to live logically, emotions creep in to muddy the waters. Xavier Johnson seems very intent on crashing through all my careful boundaries and leaving that murky water in his wake.

By the time I leave, the knot in my chest has loosened, breathing coming a fraction easier. Whatever happens next, with Dad recovering and Jeff pursuing his dream, I can weather any storm. Even a pair of smoldering brown eyes and a knee-weakening smile.

The lakefront trail beckons, so I start the long run back home, resolved to clear my head. Dad is stable, Jeff is thriving. Those are the priorities now. Xavier and this conveniently cozy fake romance will sort themselves out in time. Just stick to the plan.

I'm so consumed with self-talk that I don't notice the runner approaching until we've nearly collided. I pull up sharply, shoes scuffing the pavement. As I look up to apologize, the words evaporate on my tongue.

Of all the paths in Chicago, Xavier Johnson has to cross mine.

He looks unfairly good, flushed and sweaty in a tank top and shorts, muscles contracting smoothly as he jogs in place. His startled eyes meet mine, equally surprised by this encounter.

"Emma! Fancy running into you here," he says. Was that nervous laughter? No, must be my imagination. Xavier doesn't get flustered.

I try unsuccessfully to slow my racing pulse, and it has nothing to do with the physical exercise. "Hey! Out for a jog?"

Brilliant observation, Thompson. Xavier gestures wordlessly to his athletic ensemble, looking amused.

"Right, dumb question," I mutter. "I just wasn't expecting to see you." Outside of charity balls and family dinners, that is. Our worlds aren't supposed to intersect like this. It feels too... intimate.

"I heard this neighborhood wasn't a bad spot for a morning run. Just trying to clear my head." Xavier rolls a shoulder, not quite meeting my eyes. "Been a lot going on lately."

I have the strangest sense he means me. Or at least this unconventional situation we've entangled ourselves in. For a moment, I wonder if he feels this strange connection between us. The morning sun catches the sheen of sweat on his collarbone, and I have to drag my eyes away. *Focus, Thompson.*

"I get that. I was visiting my dad, actually. He's doing better." I don't know why I add that last part. Maybe I want him to know my family is still my priority. Not wide receivers with dreamy brown eyes and breathtaking smiles.

Xavier's expression softens. "That's great to hear. Give him my best next time you visit."

He sounds like he genuinely means it. Once again, he's surprising me. A long pause grows between us, filled only with early morning birdsong and the lap of waves along the shore. I fiddle with my earbuds, increasingly aware of Xavier's eyes on me.

"So, listen..." he finally says. "Have you thought any more about...you know. This whole fake dating thing?"

He rumples his short curls almost nervously. I bite the inside of my cheek.

"It's definitely more complicated than I pictured," I admit. "I want to help Jeff, obviously. But the lines are getting kind of blurry..."

I trail off, unsure how to put words to these nebulous feelings Xavier evokes in me - at once thrilling and terrifying. He takes a half step closer, voice lowered.

"You're right, it's gotten complicated fast. But it doesn't have to be a bad thing." His eyes lock onto mine, vulnerability flickering across his face. "What if we just made this real?"

My heart seizes like a faulty engine. The world narrows down to Xavier's beautiful, uncertain face. He moves another fraction closer, and I catch the intoxicating scent of his sweat mingled with lingering cologne. Every neuron in my brain is firing out of sync. Xavier can't be implying...

But his searching eyes don't waver from mine. In their depths, I see my own conflicted feelings reflected. He's just as uncertain of this ill-defined thing brewing between us. And just like that, the game has changed.

I open my mouth, then close it again, pulse pounding in my ears. The rules of our arrangement no longer apply. I am standing on the edge of a precipice, my old life behind me, and something terrifying and new stretched before us. So I do the only thing I can.

I run. Literally.

Mumbling some lame excuse, I break Xavier's magnetic gaze and take off down the path, feet slapping the concrete. My mind spins faster than my legs. I run until my muscles burn and Xavier's dangerous question fades into the distance. But his eyes—hopeful, vulnerable and utterly human—remain seared into my soul.

This fake relationship is getting hotter every day. I've stood toe to toe with volatile forces before. But I don't know if I can handle Xavier's simmering fire. Last night we reached a slow boil, this morning a rolling simmer. One more spark and we may both go up in flames. Because despite all my best intentions, I know one truth with sudden, breathtaking clarity—I am in serious trouble here.

TEN

XAVIER

THE CLANG OF IRON PLATES ECHOES THROUGH THE EMPTY GYM as I rack another set of deadlifts. Even this early, my t-shirt is soaked with sweat, muscles burning pleasantly from the exertion. But my mind isn't focused on my workout. No, it's replaying one rash, impulsive moment on repeat - asking Emma to make our relationship real.

I strip off the weights and grab a towel, brow furrowed. What the hell was I thinking? What the fuck is wrong with me? We have a good thing going, a convenient arrangement that benefits her brother and makes my ex jealous. And I had to go and complicate it by getting all emotional. I scrub the towel roughly over my face, equal parts embarrassed and frustrated with myself. That kiss at the gala to one-up my ex, fried my circuits, no question. The feel of her in my arms, her lips pressed fiercely to mine...it knocked me off-kilter in a way I'm not used to. Made me want more. Made me say things I shouldn't have.

With a sigh, I grab my phone and scroll through notifications, stomach twisting. Part of me hopes Emma responded to my proposition. Most of me hope she's going to ignore it completely so we can go back to the way things were before. But there's no message, no sign she even heard me. Just radio silence since our charged encounter on the running path yesterday morning.

Probably for the best. *Get your head back in the game, Johnson.*

The rookie training session awaits, so I stuff my gear in my bag and head for the practice field, resolve hardening with each step. Whatever this thing is with Emma, I can't let it become a distraction. Not with so much at stake this season. A two-time All-Pro receiver doesn't earn an all-time record contract by losing focus over a pair of pretty green eyes behind sexy librarian glasses. *Just keep your eyes on the prize like always, ace.*

When I arrive, Jeff is already on the field running routes. Gotta give the kid credit, he's always early like his sister. I wave in greeting and start our warmup drills. We've been working together several mornings this week, and slowly but surely, I'm seeing improvement.

We run through all the basic patterns first - posts, outs, drags. Jeff's memorized most of the playbook by now, but needs to get the muscle memory ingrained. I remind him to sink his hips on cuts, explosion forward from the break.

"Relax your shoulders, let your legs do the work," I suggest, demonstrating the motion. Jeff watches me closely, then tries again. This time the move looks more fluid.

"Better," I say with an approving nod. Jeff's face lights up at the praise. Gotta remember to encourage the rookies too - can't improve if they're always on edge. We practice a few more times until he nails it.

"Now that's how you do it!" I give him a friendly smack on the back. The kid grins, flushed and out of breath but focused.

By the time we wrap, the midday sun beats down on us and his shirt is as drenched as mine. Maybe with enough work, Jeff can hack it after all.

Just then the club owner, Robert, flags me down, his usually impassive face furrowed. My gut sinks - that's his "we need to talk" look. I wave Jeff ahead to the lockers and jog over.

"What's up, Robert? Everything okay?"

He gestures me closer, voice lowered. "Got some news you may not like. We're thinking of cutting Jeff before the season starts."

My pulse stutters. I must've misheard. "Cutting Jeff? But why? You said yourself all the rookies get a fair shot to prove themselves."

Robert scans the empty stands, brow creased. "I know what I said. But other people are skeptical. They don't want to waste a roster spot if he can't hack it."

I cross my arms, mind racing. I can't let them brush Jeff aside so easily. "Look, I've been working with the kid. He's got potential. Just needs time to develop."

"That's a luxury we may not have." Robert levels me with a piercing look. "I'll give you two weeks before the trade window closes. If you can prove the rookie has what it takes, we'll keep him on. If not, well..." He trails off grimly.

My gut twists even as determination floods me. It's a hell of an ultimatum, but I'm not giving up on Jeff yet. I tell myself that it's only because I see that potential and it has nothing to do with the rookie's big sister or the way my gut tightened at the thought of her disappointment. "Got it. I'll push the kid twice as hard, get him up to speed. Just leave it to me."

Robert studies me for a long moment, then nods. "Alright Johnson, we'll do it your way. But my hands are tied if we don't see concrete improvement." He heads for the clubhouse, leaving me standing alone on the empty field, his words swirling through my mind.

This complicates things exponentially. I rake a hand through my sweat-soaked curls, suddenly bone tired. I'd already promised Emma I would mentor her brother. Made it part of our little arrangement. But now his whole career hinges on what I can teach him in 14 days.

And Emma. What the hell do I tell her? That her brother will get cut if I can't pull off a miracle? I picture the worry clouding those intelligent green eyes behind her glasses, the weight of responsibility already weighing on her shoulders with her dad in the hospital. This news could break her. Or maybe it will strengthen her resolve, light that fiery spark I've caught flickers of beneath her practical exterior.

God, I wish I could read that woman better. Emma Thompson is an enigma, always keeping me guessing. And I'm no closer to unraveling her now than the first day she intrigued me with that sharp tongue and stubborn dedication. Makes me want to dig deeper, peel away those layers one by one...

I forcefully derail that train of thought. Fantasizing about Emma won't help me save her brother's career. As much as I don't like the idea, I need to keep her at arm's length right now, for both our sakes. Be the mentor Jeff needs, give him a real fighting chance. I can figure out the rest later.

Decision made, I stride toward the locker room, muscles pleasantly fatigued. The rookie will get the toughest two weeks of training in his life starting tomorrow. I'll make sure he learns that playbook back to front, drill every route and pattern until he can run them in his sleep. It's a Hail Mary plan, but I don't have better options. And I keep my promises.

I'm almost to the door when a figure in black leggings and a ponytail turns the corner, nose buried in her phone. Emma. I freeze, pulse skyrocketing. How is it she still catches me off guard every damn time, my chest tightening with something I don't want to name?

She looks up and stops short, eyes widening as something unreadable passes across them. An awkward tension instantly charges the air between us. We both know exactly why. My reckless proposition hangs over us like a brewing storm: *Should we make this real?*

"Oh! Xavier, hi," she says a little too brightly. "I was just, um, checking in on Jeff's progress. Making sure those early practices are helping."

She fiddles with the earbuds looped around her neck, not quite meeting my gaze. I shove my hands in my pockets, suddenly hyperaware of my sweaty shirt and disheveled curls.

"Right, of course. Jeff's doing good. Still needs work, but he's got real promise." I keep my tone light, hoping she can't hear the turmoil in my head. Man, I do not need this distraction right now. But the sight of her face flush, teeth tugging that full bottom lip...it tempts me to throw all better judgment

aside and take what I want. What we could have together, if she'd just let me in.

Emma smiles, though it doesn't reach her eyes. "Well, I'm really glad to hear that. Thank you again for taking the time with him. I know you've got a lot on your plate this season."

Her words bring a twist of guilt. If only she knew how much was really on the line. But I force my features neutral, hoping she can't read the secrets in my eyes.

"Of course, it's my pleasure," I say lightly. "Your brother has genuine talent. Just needs some guidance to reach his potential."

Emma studies me a moment, brows faintly furrowed. For a second I'm terrified she sees right through my facade. Then she exhales and the tightness in her shoulders eases.

"Still, I appreciate you looking out for him. Let me know if you need anything else from me." She hesitates, like she wants to say more, then just nods. "I'll let you get back to your day. See you around, Xavier."

"See you," I echo lamely as she continues down the path. I stand watching her retreating figure, emotions warring within me. It's for the best that she doesn't know about Jeff's jeopardy. One less distraction from the hard road ahead. But seeing the trust in her eyes stir feelings, I have no right to indulge now. With a sharp exhale, I turn and push through the locker room doors, leaving thoughts of Emma Thompson and her dangerously tempting lips behind. *Focus on the things you can control, Johnson. Let the rest fall into place.*

I continue on with my routine, showering and changing into casual wear. The weight of the day's revelations still sits heavily on my shoulders as I grab my phone. Wayne, my agent's name, flashes on the screen.

"Hey, what's up?" I answer, my voice a little more curt than intended.

"Xavier, listen, there's a charity event tonight. They'd lost one of their stars and ask for you to make an appearance. I know

it's last minute, but it's a good cause and it'll be good for your brand," Wayne's voice rushes through the speaker.

I rub my forehead, weighing the pros and cons. "Who else is going?"

A slight pause. "Well, Rachel will be there, with Mark Collins."

Ah, Rachel and Mark. Just what I needed. Another encounter with my ex added to my already complicated life. My jaw tightens at the mention of her name. I'm not sure if it's my wounded ego, a pang of residual affection, or just the competitive streak in me that hates to lose at anything, but I say, "Alright, I'll be there."

"Great, I'll send you the details."

We hang up, and for a moment, I'm caught in my thoughts. It's a dangerous game I'm doing, throwing myself back into the social circus with Rachel and her new beau. But then again, maybe it's the danger I need right now, a diversion from the precarious balance of my professional life and whatever's happening—or not happening—with Emma.

I stare at my phone, thumb hovering over Emma's contact. Should I tell her to go? My gut says no, stay away. But another part of me, the part that felt electric at her touch, wants her close.

Before I know it, I'm typing. *An unexpected event has come up. It's tonight - feel like playing the doting girlfriend again to make my ex jealous?*

I hit send and immediately question my sanity. What am I doing, continuing pulling her into this web, this game with Rachel? I can't afford to lose focus, not with Jeff's career on the line, not with my reputation at stake. The team is at stake.

But as I pocket my phone and head for the exit, I realize I can't ignore the truth any longer. Emma has become more than just a convenient arrangement, more than a game. She's become someone I don't want to lose. And that terrifies me more than any opponent on the field.

I shake off the thought, trying to steady my racing heart. “Focus, Johnson,” I mutter to myself. “One battle at a time.”

But as I step into the sunlight, I can’t shake off the feeling that I’ve just set multiple battles into motion, battles that I have no idea how to win. And the stakes? They’ve never been higher.

ELEVEN

EMMA

THE BUZZ OF MY PHONE AGAINST THE WOODEN DESK JARS ME from my thoughts. I glance at the screen, my stomach doing a little flip when I see Xavier's name flash across it.

An unexpected event has come up. It's tonight - feel like playing the doting girlfriend again to make my ex jealous?

I chew my lip, contemplating. After that charged moment on the running path yesterday, I know I should keep my distance from Xavier. Step carefully into the fake girlfriend territory. But the reckless part of me - the part that came alive under the heat of his lips - tingles at the idea of being close to him again.

Ah, what the hell. It's for Jeff's benefit, after all. One more fancy party won't hurt me.

I type back an affirmative, trying to ignore the flutter of nerves in my chest as I hit send. We're playing with fire, Xavier and I. But the rush of it is addicting, like a hit of adrenaline straight to the bloodstream. Just have to remember it's all pretend. Strictly business.

My phone buzzes again, making me jolt. A smile spreads across my face, thinking it's him. But it's the hospital's number flashing on the screen, not Xavier's. My adrenaline spike fizzles.

"Hello?"

The nurse's voice filters through, laced with sympathy. "Ms. Thompson? I'm so sorry, but your father's condition has taken a turn. The doctors strongly recommend we operate."

My pulse stutters. I was afraid this might happen, that the medication would stop being enough. But the timing couldn't be worse.

I force steadiness into my voice. "Of course, do whatever you need to do."

After finalizing details, I hang up and grab my things, emotions churning. This was always a possibility, I remind myself. But the thought of him going under the knife twists my insides.

By the time I arrive at the hospital, my nerves are nearing their fraying point. But I steel myself and push through the doors into the too-bright, too-sterile lobby. The nurse at the front desk recognizes me.

"He's stable for now," she says gently. "The doctor will speak with you about the procedure."

I nod, throat tight, and make my way back to Dad's ward. The rhythmic beep of machinery and murmur of voices fills the hallway. Inside Dad's room, the harsh overhead lights accentuate his pallor, his sunken cheeks. But his eyes brighten when he sees me.

"Hey sweetheart." His voice is raspy but warm. "Come on in."

I paste on a smile and perch next to the bed, clasping his wrinkled hand in mine. I have a sudden flashback to similar circumstances when my mother underwent her double mastectomy. She made it out of surgery fine, but the cancer had already spread. She was gone less than six months later.

I force the negative thoughts away and focus on the here and now. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, well enough, considering the circumstances." He pats my hand weakly. "Don't you worry about me. How are things with your brother and the team?"

My thoughts involuntarily flicker to Xavier - those penetrating brown eyes I've unexpectedly come to crave. I shove the image away.

“Good, really good, actually. I think Jeff has a real shot at starting if he keeps working hard.”

“I’m proud of you.” Dad’s eyes crinkle. “I always knew you’d take care of him when I couldn’t.”

I squeeze his hand, emotion clogging my throat. We chat lightly about Jeff’s practices, the doctor’s reports, idle things to keep the mood upbeat. But an undercurrent of gravity simmers beneath our conversation. We both know what’s at stake. I don’t have to tell him where my thoughts went only minutes ago. I can see the echo of those memories in his eyes.

A soft knock interrupts us. Dr. Klein enters, chart in hand, his expression sober.

“Emma, Mr. Thompson, good to see you both.” He shakes our hands before launching into a rundown of the planned procedure for tomorrow morning. As he speaks, my thoughts threaten to spiral into dangerous territory. What if something goes wrong? What if this is the last actual conversation I have with my father?

I force myself to focus, to be strong like he taught me. Dad listens intently to the doctor, brow furrowed but resolute. He’s always faced adversity head on. Now it’s my turn.

After finalizing details, Dr. Klein excuses himself. Dad turns to me, eyes softening.

“Emma, whatever happens tomorrow, I’m so proud of you. Of the strong young woman you’ve become.” He squeezes my hand with surprising firmness. “Don’t let fear hold you back from living life to the fullest. Focus on what you can control, and let the rest fall into place.”

My vision blurs, but I blink back the tears and lean in to hug him tightly. “I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, baby girl. Now go on - I’ll see you soon.”

I cling to his words as I make my way back through the sterile maze of hallways, the weight of uncertainty pressing down. Dad’s right - all I can do is take things one step at a time and have faith.

Still, by the time I step outside into the glaring afternoon sun, the full implications hit me square in the chest, nearly knocking the wind from my lungs. My father, my rock through so many storms, is facing the fight of his life behind those doors. And I'm about to play pretend girlfriend with his wellbeing hanging in the balance.

I rake both hands through my hair, breathing shakily through the surge of emotions. *Get it together, Thompson. Dad needs you to be strong now more than ever. You can do this. One step at a time.*

With effort, I rein myself in and head for my car. Time to go prep for tonight's performance.

“YOU LOOK NICE.”

Xavier's gaze lingers as I slide into the limo beside him, a glimmer in those dark eyes. The appreciation in them bolsters me, steadies my rattled nerves even as his presence twists other parts of me. I allow myself a moment to take in the sight of him - crisp charcoal suit accentuating those athletic shoulders, smooth jawline begging to be touched. A strange sort of comfort washes over me. Maybe this is exactly the distraction I need tonight.

“Not too shabby yourself,” I return, skimming a hand down his lapel. Xavier catches my hand as it falls, giving a light squeeze.

“You okay? You seem...” He pauses, searching for the word.

“Stressed? Distracted? Emotionally unstable?” I supply wryly.

His lips quirk. “I was going to say pensive.”

I sigh, gently extricating my hand from his warm grasp. “It's my dad. He took a bad turn today. I don't know if he told you, but he needs pretty risky heart surgery. They are operating tomorrow.”

Saying the words out loud makes them real, unleashing a fresh swell of emotions. I blink hard, willing my voice not to break. Xavier's hand finds mine again, grounding me. The warmth I feel is more comforting than arousing and I know that should freak me out, but I don't have the energy to let it.

"Emma, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. If you want to cancel..."

His voice resonates with sincerity. The genuine emotion there nearly breaks my resolve. But I marshal myself, clinging to composure. I appreciate his support, but I can't let myself lean too hard on him. We can be friends, but nothing more.

"I appreciate that. But no. Let's just...try to enjoy tonight, okay? I could really use the distraction."

Xavier searches my face, his eyes filled with things unsaid. But finally he nods, giving my hand one last squeeze before releasing it. "You got it. I'll keep you distracted."

The limo slows to a stop at the hotel's entrance. I straighten my shoulders and extend a hand.

"Shall we give them a good show?"

Xavier takes it with a hint of a smile. "Let's do this."

We step out hand in hand into the flashing lights, leaving the solitude of the limo behind. Instantly we slip into character - his proprietary hand on my back, my adoring smile up at him. The press eats it up as we pause for photos. Xavier spins me effortlessly into his embrace. The crisp scent of his cologne mingles with the heady energy of the crowd, making my head spin.

We continue inside, the din of the ballroom hitting me like a wave. Extravagant chandeliers hang above circular banquet tables draped in gold fabric. An orchestra plays unobtrusively in the corner while servers weave through with trays of champagne flutes. It's all overwhelmingly opulent.

Xavier keeps me tucked close as we make small talk with fellow players and club owners. I'm keenly aware of his warm palm pressed to the small of my back, the casual intimacy of his hold on me. Each introduction as his girlfriend sends an

illicit thrill through me. I enjoy it far more than I should, but after the day I've had, I can't bring myself to give it up.

The circular dance floor beckons as music swells through the speakers. Xavier turns to me, eyes gleaming.

“Shall we?”

I let him lead me onto the polished floor, hyperaware of each point of contact between us. He sweeps me effortlessly into the rhythm of the melody, our bodies swaying in sync. When he pulls me close, my veins flood with heat. Being wrapped in his arms feels far too natural, our bodies molded together like missing puzzle pieces. I cling to his shoulder, struggling not to get lost in the sensation. Xavier's thumb traces absent patterns on my hipbone as we turn. Even through the fabric of my dress, his touch scorches my skin.

The song ends, blending fluidly into the next. We drift to the edge of the dancefloor but remain loosely embraced, his fingers tangled with mine. Xavier leans close, breath fanning my cheek.

“You look completely smitten, Thompson. We're killing this.” Amusement lurks beneath his low tone.

I playfully swat his chest, acutely aware of our proximity. “It's called acting, Johnson. Don't get cocky.”

His eyes dance. “Maybe you're just that into me.”

Before I can retort, a familiar nasal voice cuts through the music. “Well, if it isn't my favorite fake couple.”

We turn to see Xavier's ex, Rachel, watching us with a sly smile. Her slinky red dress hugs the curves both Xavier and I lack. She looks like sex poured into silk. Very on-brand for her.

Xavier's hand tightens reflexively on my hip. “Rachel. Charming as always.”

“Oh, I do try.” She steps closer, studying us with too-bright eyes. “You two are just adorable together. I love this little game you're playing.”

Irritation flickers in Xavier's expression. "What my girlfriend and I do is none of your concern."

"Mmm, keep telling yourself that, Xav." Rachel's stare bores into me. "Must be so fun playing house with the star receiver, Emma."

Heat creeps up my neck. I open my mouth to retort, but Rachel steamrolls on.

"Oh, Mark baby! There you are." She waves over Xavier's athletic rival, draping herself on his arm like an expensive fur coat.

The muscle in Xavier's jaw feathers. I read the silent frustration in the tense lines of his body, the irritation swirling beneath that polite facade. Impulsively, I reach up and turn his face toward me. His cheek is smooth under my palm and I'm struck with the question of what it might feel like against the insides of my thighs.

"Hey. Don't let her get to you." My voice drops to a murmur meant only for him. Xavier's eyes latch onto mine, raw emotion swirling in their depths.

Before I can overthink it, I close the distance between us and press my lips to his. Xavier makes a small surprised sound but recovers quickly, hands coming up to grip my waist. We melt together, the rest of the ballroom fading away.

This kiss differs from our reckless encounter at the gala. That was fueled by play-acting, by the thrill of competition. This simmers with deeper emotion, a chord striking between two kindred spirits. For a breathless moment, it's real. Dangerously, terrifyingly real.

We break apart slowly, filtered ballroom light dancing across Xavier's face. He searches my expression, brow furrowed, like he's seeing me for the first time. I offer a small, trembling smile.

"Come on, let's get some air."

Xavier lets me lead him through the oblivious crowd to the balcony doors. The night air hits my flushed skin like a balm, clearing some of the haze from my mind. What am I doing,

letting myself get so caught up? This man has the power to destroy everything I've worked for. But looking up at Xavier's conflicted face in the moonlight, all my doubts and fears seem unimportant. I just want to lose myself in those dark eyes again.

His phone vibrates loudly, shattering the moment. Xavier pulls it out, brow creasing when he reads the screen.

"I need to take this. It's the club owner." He squeezes my hand, regret flickering across his face. "I'll come find you in a minute, okay?"

"Okay." I watch his retreating figure, wrapping my arms around myself against the sudden chill.

When Xavier returns, his expression is carefully neutral, but I notice the tension in his shoulders, the slight furrow of his brow. He looks like a man who's just received bad news but is trying hard not to show it.

"What was that?" I ask, concerned.

He hesitates, just for a moment, before putting on a reassuring smile. "It's fine. Just some team logistics I need to sort out. You know how it is."

I study him, sensing there's more he's not saying. But then I remember my father's words from earlier: *Focus on what you can control, and let the rest fall into place*. I don't press Xavier for more information; we all have our burdens to bear, and tonight, for a few hours at least, I want to set mine aside. Besides, regardless of this spark between us, his life isn't mine to share.

But we still have the rest of the night.

Taking a step closer, I pull him toward me. "In that case, would you like to invite me back to your place for a nightcap? I could use some distraction, as you know."

His eyes widen slightly, clearly not expecting my forwardness. The surprise quickly morphs into a warm smile. "Why not?" he breathes.

The weight of the evening, the weight of our individual worries and fears, seems to lift a little as we exit the venue, hand in hand. The night is still young, and the air between us is charged with a newfound intimacy. We're both on the edge, teetering between what's real and what's pretend, between the roles we play and the people we might become when the masks come off.

As we wait for the limo, a wave of relief washes over me. Everything with my dad has been a harsh reminder that life gives us only so many meaningful moments. Some are worth more than others, sure, but a few are worth really going out on a limb for. This is definitely one of those moments. For the first time tonight, the world's weight feels a touch lighter, its burdens a bit more bearable.

Xavier holds the door open for me, his hand briefly touching the small of my back as I slide into the plush leather seat. He follows suit, the door closing behind him with a soft thud. The partition between us and the driver goes up, offering a semblance of privacy in the enclosed space.

He turns to me, his eyes searching my face for a moment before he speaks. "You're sure about this?"

I look back at him, taking in the concern in his eyes, the way he's giving me one last chance to change my mind. And it only makes me more certain. We both need this.

"Very sure," I reply softly.

A slow smile spreads across his face, transforming it. "In that case, let's go."

As the limo pulls away from the curb, I feel an uncharacteristic sense of peace wash over me. Tonight, in this small space, the chaos of the world outside feels far away. Right now, there's just Xavier, the soft glow of the limo's interior lights, and the promise of a few stolen hours away from our respective realities.

TWELVE

XAVIER

WE'RE ACTUALLY GOING TO DO THIS. WHEN SHE FIRST TOLD me to invite her back to my place, I thought she was joking. Teasing, flirty banter. The moment I realized she was serious, it was like she was all I could see.

Now, as we walk toward my front door, she's still the only thing I see. It's not until I fit my key in the lock that I realize exactly what I'm doing. I'm letting Emma into my place. It took Rachel and me dating for more than a month before I invited her over. It's too late to back out without looking like a complete ass—and if I'm being honest, I don't actually want to back out—but I know I can't let Emma find out what a big deal this is. My gut says if she gets even a hint of how much I lose my head around her, I'll be well and truly fucked.

And not in a good way.

A strange sense of urgency hits me the moment the door closes behind her. Strange because it's only partially about physical need. The other part is this unsettling feeling that if I show the slightest bit of hesitation, she's going to run.

Acting on that, I turn toward her, letting her read my intent on my face as I crowd into her space. Leaning into her, I press our bodies together, more of my blood rushing south at the feeling of her subtle curves against the harder lines of my body. There's a hardness to her too, the firmness of a well-toned body that I know I won't break if I actually let myself go.

My lips hover above hers a fraction of an inch. As much as I want her, I need to know that she wants me, that she's making

this choice not because of what I can do for her brother or for her career or bank account. I need her to want *me*.

Her eyes meet mine and the heat I see there sears me to the core. She inclines her head just the slightest bit and I seize the opening. I close the last of the distance and the moment our mouths touch, I know I need her now.

Right now.

She wants a distraction and if there's one thing I know how to do as well as I know how to play football, it's how to use sex to drive a woman out of her mind. That ought to be enough distraction.

What starts as a relatively gentle kiss becomes something more as I push my tongue between her lips. She moans as she opens her mouth, and the sound goes straight to my cock. I rock against her, the hard length of me pushing against her stomach.

Her arms go up around my neck, nails lightly scratching the base of my skull and driving me wild. I grip her hips, my fingers digging in until she makes a small noise that tells me where the line is. A part of me wants to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to my bedroom, but a larger part wants something else.

I know how her mouth tastes, but there's another part of her that I've been dreaming about ever since that first time she walked into a room like she owned it. I bite down on her lip and tug on it before soothing it with my tongue. Then I meet her gaze and relinquish her mouth. Her breathing is ragged, her cheeks flushed. They only grow pinker as I go to my knees.

She lets out a soft curse, her hands going to my head. Even as she runs her fingers through my hair, I slide my hands up her legs, savoring the feel of that silky skin against my palms. When I reach the hem of her dress, I pause, waiting for that nod again before I go any further. When she gives it, I continue my exploration.

I don't look though. Not yet. I want the anticipation between us building as I reach her hips and then find the silk of her panties. Without taking my eyes from hers, I tug down her panties. When they reach her ankles, she puts a hand on my shoulder to balance herself as she steps out of them.

"Feel free to scream." I give her my most cocky smile, the one that makes all the girls melt. Her not looking impressed makes me chuckle, and that's what earns me that light in her eyes.

"Maybe you should put that mouth to better use." Her fingertips trail down my face, filling the moment with more tenderness than I expected, especially after that comment.

Not knowing how else to respond, I continue with what I intended to do, pushing up her dress until I see pretty pink skin that's nearly bare. Not shaved, just very little hair. Not that I mind a natural woman. I'll take pretty much any kind of pussy that's offered to me.

Or, at least, I did in the past. I have a bad feeling that Emma's pussy is going to wreck me for other women.

I push that thought aside and press my mouth to her. She curses, her body jerking. My hands move back to her hips, and I tighten my hold on her, forcing her to stay still as I run my tongue along one side of her slit and then the other. She spreads her legs wider, a silent plea for more, and I'm happy to oblige.

As I work my tongue between her folds, the taste of her bursts across my tastebuds, something fresh and salty that makes my already hard erection feel like it's going to burst out of my pants. I resist the urge to touch myself and focus on her pleasure.

Using her moans as a guide, I coax her toward climax. Alternating pressure and friction, I tease her clit until she's gasping, her muscles quivering under my hands, then I move a hand between her legs and slip a finger inside her. I close my eyes, my dick throbbing as I imagine what it'll be like to have that tight, wet heat gripping my cock.

I pump my finger in and out of her half a dozen times, twisting as I go until my knuckle rubs against her g-spot. I don't put much pressure on it, treating it with even more delicacy than her clit. I don't want her to be too sensitive when I take her, but I do give her what she needs to tip over the edge.

"Xav..." My name becomes a scream that echoes through my house and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

Her pussy is clenched so tight around my finger that I have to wait until her orgasm fades before I can withdraw my hand. When I do, she stumbles, as if I'm the only thing holding her up. I'm on my feet, catching her around the waist before she falls. Her expression is dazed as she looks up at me and it tugs at my heart in a way nothing else has before.

"Bedroom?" I ask.

A small smile curves her lips. "Don't think I can walk just yet."

Her claim makes my chest swell with pride and other parts of me just swell. Grinning at her, I scoop her up, laughing at the surprised squeal she makes. She wraps her arms around my neck and tucks her head against my neck. For a moment, I wonder if she's going to fall asleep and I find that doesn't bother me as much as it would with another woman. I think I'll be happy just sleeping next to her.

Then I feel her lips feather against my skin. The touch of her tongue nearly makes me stumble. I feel her laughter as a hot breath and vibration.

When we reach my bedroom, I set her gently in the center of the bed and then take a step back. Only when I see her eyes on me do I shrug out of my suit jacket and toss it onto the closest chair. Instead of stripping as quickly as possible so we can get to the main event, I take my time undressing, enjoying the feel of her gaze on me, the way her tongue darts out every so often to wet her lips.

My cock is already pushing out of the top of my boxer briefs when I take off my pants and I can't help my smirk when her eyes widen.

“As you can see, I come by the cocky attitude honestly.”

She rolls her eyes and gestures with a hand. “Well, then, get on with it. I’d like to see the full show.”

I hook my thumbs in my waistband, pause once more for dramatic effect, then push down my underwear and step out of them. My cock bobs up against my stomach and I grip the base of it, squeezing rather than stroking. I don’t need any help to get or stay hard.

“Please tell me you have condoms here,” she says. “Because I really need that inside me.”

It doesn’t surprise me that she’s straightforward about sex and I like it. She doesn’t come across as crude or even aggressive. She just knows what she wants and goes for it.

And right now, we want the same thing.

I reach into the top drawer of my bedside table and pull out one of those little packets. I rip it open and roll it on, gritting my teeth as my dick throbs. I’ll completely embarrass myself if I don’t gain control over myself.

She shifts on the bed, her hand going to her breast in what appears to be an unconscious gesture. When I climb onto the bed, I reach for her hand first, moving it aside so that I can lean down and take that tight little nipple into my mouth.

She cries out, her back arching as I suck on the wrinkled flesh. As I tease her with lips and teeth and tongue, I reach down to position her legs, one on either side of me. Without raising my head, I slide down until I’m cradled between her legs, my cock brushing against the dampness there.

“Please,” she begs, her hands clutching at my shoulders, her legs wrapping around my waist. “Xavier, please.”

I raise my head, letting her nipple pop out of my mouth with a lewd sound. “Impatient,” I tease.

Her eyes narrow, but I don’t give her time to be mad. Instead, I reach between us and notch the head of my cock at her entrance. Watching her face, I ease the tip inside. There’s a catch in her breath, a lovely flush spreading on her chest, and

then I push inside. Slow and steady, I fill her, my pulse racing as she stretches around me. I've heard the phrase 'fit like a glove' before, but I don't think I've ever experienced it until this moment. She isn't just tight. This feels like two puzzle pieces coming together.

"Fuck." Her eyelids flutter and her nails dig into my shoulders, the bite of pain almost enough to send me over the edge.

I still above her, running through mental gymnastics to keep myself from losing control. By the time she begins to writhe underneath me, I can't hold back any longer. I pull back and then surge into her again, driving a cry from her. I pause for a second, worried that I hurt her.

"Don't stop." She tightens her legs around my waist. "I won't break. Just don't stop."

That's all I need to hear to get me moving again. And she moves too. We fall into a rhythm that feels as natural as everything else that comes with being with her. I lose all track of time, of my surroundings, of anything and everything that isn't the woman beneath me and the slowly growing pressure inside me. We ride that haze, chasing our mutual release.

When she makes little whimpering sounds, I know she's close and I focus on getting her there first. My climax is on the horizon, but I refuse to give in until she comes again. I need this to be good for her, and not just because I have a reputation to uphold. When she thinks of tonight, I need her to remember that this is the best sex she's ever had.

"Come for me," I demand. "Let me feel you come on my cock like a good girl."

I don't know if it's my words or the way I grind against her, but before the last word is out of my mouth, she's coming, chanting my name. Between one breath and the next, I follow her and my last thought before everything goes white is that one time with her isn't enough.

THIRTEEN

EMMA

THE BUZZ OF MY PHONE AGAINST THE NIGHTSTAND JARS ME from sleep. I crack one eye open, blinking against the pale pre-dawn light filtering through the blinds.

5:00 AM.

A heartbeat later, the reality of why I set an alarm punches me in the gut. Dad's surgery. Today at 9:00 sharp.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my breathing to steady. *You've got this, Thompson. One step at a time.*

The warm weight of Xavier's arm drapes over my waist, his steadying exhales grazing the back of my neck. Last night comes rushing back in a kaleidoscope of sense memories - the brush of his fingers over my spine, the heat of his mouth caressing my skin, his body moving with mine. A secret stolen from time, binding us in this little sanctuary of rumpled sheets.

With care, I ease out from under his arm. Xavier mumbles something unintelligible, but remains deep in slumber. A pang strikes my chest as I take in the sight of him - hair mussed, face smoothed of its usual intensity. Unguarded. More boyish somehow, stripped of the larger-than-life persona he wears like well-fitted armor. An armor I've seen beneath now.

I dress quickly in last night's discarded clothes, movements muted. The gleaming Rolex on Xavier's wrist catches my eye as I stand - 5:02 AM. Plenty of time to slip out unnoticed before facing the harsh light of day.

After a last glance at Xavier's sleeping form, I creep from the bedroom on silent feet. My heels dangle from one hand, shoes

seeming trivial in the hush of early dawn.

In the sparkling high-gloss kitchen, I scrawl a brief note on a stray Post-It.

Xavier,

Didn't want to wake you. Dad's surgery is this morning. Thank you for last night - I needed the escape more than you know. Let's talk soon.

Emma

I leave it on the counter beside the sleek coffeemaker. Then I slip out the front door into the breaking dawn, the click of the lock punctuating my exit.

The morning air kisses my bare legs and exposed shoulders, leaching away the last wisps of sleep. I quicken my pace, heels clicking against the pavement. Can't afford to linger here in this luminous bubble suspended out of time. Reality awaits.

Once home, I gulp down a scalding shower and change into jeans and a simple blouse. The familiar purified scent of soap dispels the last traces of Xavier's cologne from my skin. I twist my unruly hair into a braid, slicking on a touch of mascara and lip balm. A light application of armor for whatever comes next.

The rich aroma of fresh coffee draws me to the kitchen. Jeff sits at the counter blowing absently on a steaming mug. He's dressed in a button-down and khakis, hair combed neatly back. An unusual display of punctuality for my little brother.

"Hey." I pour myself a to-go cup, the normalcy of the action steadying my nerves. "Early for once."

"Yeah, couldn't really sleep." Jeff takes a cautious sip, eyes flicking to meet mine. "How about you? You look kinda..."

"Ragged? Disheveled?" I supply wryly. "Why thank you, dear brother."

Jeff holds up his free hand. "I was going to say tired."

I sigh, leaning against the counter beside him. The ceramic mug warms my palms.

“I didn’t get much sleep either. Too nervous, I guess.”

Jeff nods, a crease deepening between his brows. We sip our coffees in easy silence, a familiar rhythm after countless shared mornings just like this. But an undercurrent of gravity simmers beneath the surface this time. No lighthearted debate about which donut place has the best glazed crullers. No banter about my disastrous cooking skills after an ill-fated attempt at breakfast.

Just the weight of uncertainty pressing down, and the comfort of having each other to shoulder it. For now, at least, until the doors swing wide and we’re back in the fray.

I drain the last bitter dregs and rinse out my mug. “You ready for this?”

“As I’ll ever be.” Jeff straightens, squaring his shoulders. The set of his jaw echoes our dad’s - stubborn to the core. “Let’s do it.”

We head out together into the glaring July sunlight. Even this early, the air is thick and muggy, weighted with impending rain. Fitting weather for the day ahead. I slide behind the wheel of the sedan while Jeff folds himself carefully into the passenger seat, long legs scrunched uncomfortably.

“Remind me again why I let you drive?”

I back smoothly out of the driveway. “Because you inherited Dad’s lead foot, and speed limits exist for a reason?”

“Okay, fair.” Jeff fiddles with the A/C vents, cooling the flush creeping up his neck. “But your parallel parking leaves something to be desired.”

“Nothing that a little practice won’t improve.” I flash him a saccharine smile. “By the way, you’re welcome for chauffeuring your ungrateful butt everywhere the past few weeks.”

Jeff holds up both hands in surrender. “Kidding, I’m kidding. You know I appreciate you.”

He lapses back into silence, staring distantly out the window as I navigate the sparsely populated streets. I resist the urge to

pepper him with pep talks or platitudes. Neither of us needs empty reassurances right now. All that's required is showing up, come what may.

We arrive at Mercy Hospital's towering main entrance, the glass doors glinting harshly in the stark sunlight. I find a spot close to the front, white lines still glistening from a recent rain.

"Ready?" I meet Jeff's eyes, steady and resolute.

He nods, a muscle feathering along his stubbled jaw. "Let's do this."

Inside, the too-bright lights reflect off the polished linoleum floors, assaulting our senses after the muted outdoors. The waiting room stands mostly empty except for a security guard thumbing his phone behind the front desk. He barely glances up as we approach.

"We're here for Charles Thompson's surgery," I inform him briskly. "Where should we wait?"

The guard - Darryl, according to his badge - directs us to a smaller waiting area outside the cardiac wing. His monotone instructions fade into the background as we follow the signs down the maze of corridors. The rhythmic beep of machinery and smell of antiseptics sharpen my nerves, grating against the lingering softness of my memories from last night.

In the waiting room, Jeff and I take seats beside a gurgling saltwater tank. A lone red fish darts behind swaying green tendrils of anemone. I watch the hypnotic movement, searching for a shred of the tranquility it emanates.

Jeff's leg jitters up and down beside me until I lay a hand on his knee. He stills, shooting me a rueful glance.

"Sorry. Nervous habit."

"I know. Used to drive Dad nuts during your games." Fondness wells in my chest. "Remember what he'd say?"

Jeff nods, the corner of his mouth twitching. "The game is already won or lost in your head before you ever set foot on the field."

His impression of Dad's firm, steady timbre is spot-on. Hearing it ignites an ache deep in my core, tempered by a swell of gratitude to have Jeff with me.

We pass the next stretch of minutes, making idle small talk about Jeff's upcoming practices, a neutral topic to keep our nerves at bay. But as the hour hand ticks closer to nine, the weight of uncertainty presses down like a physical force.

Just after 8:30, Dr. Klein appears through the double doors, wearing mint green scrubs and a sober expression. Jeff and I both rise to our feet.

"He's all set in pre-op now," Dr. Klein informs us. "We'll take good care of him."

I force my voice to remain steady. "What are his chances, realistically?"

Dr. Klein's intelligent eyes soften behind his glasses. "There's always risks with a procedure like this, as we've discussed. But your father is strong, and I have a very skilled team with me. We'll do everything possible for him."

I search his face, looking for false platitudes or sympathy. But I detect only calm assurance. Jeff grips my shoulder, subtly steadying me.

"Thank you, Doctor."

Dr. Klein squeezes Jeff's arm. "I'll come update you myself as soon as I can. You made the right choice."

He turns to rejoin his team, white coat swishing. I blow out a long breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Well, this is it." I drop back into the stiff chair, doubts swarming like gnats. "Now we wait."

Jeff collapses beside me, raking both hands through his hair until it stands on end. "God, I hate waiting."

"Preaching to the choir." I stretch my legs out, feigning nonchalance. "Good thing I come prepared."

Digging in my purse, I produce two worn paperbacks - a thick spy novel for Jeff and a romance for myself. He accepts his

with a snort.

“Only you would bring books to an ICU waiting room.”

“Never leave home without them,” I quip lightly. “Now hush up and read.”

The next hour crawls by at an agonizing pace. I manage a few chapters of my book, but the words blur together meaninglessly. At some point a nurse brings us bad hospital coffee in styrofoam cups. The bitter liquid scorches my tongue but offers a welcome distraction.

When Dr. Klein finally reappears, Jeff and I both lurch to our feet in unison. I search the doctor’s tired face, heart clenching.

“The surgery went well.” Dr. Klein’s voice resonates with professional satisfaction. “We were able to fully repair the damaged tissue without issues.”

Sweet, dizzying relief surges through me. My knees nearly buckle. Jeff grips my shoulder to steady himself.

“So he’s okay?” Hope edges into his tone. “What now?”

“He’s stable in recovery. The next 48 hours are critical while he regains strength.” Dr. Klein levels us with a serious look over the rims of his glasses. “I won’t sugarcoat it - complications can still arise. But this was a very successful first step.”

The knot in my chest loosens fractionally. Not out of the woods yet, but moving in the right direction.

“When can we see him?” Jeff asks roughly.

“I’ll allow brief visits once we have him settled in the ICU.” Dr. Klein checks his watch. “Give us an hour to get him monitored and stabilized. The nurses will come get you.”

We thank him profusely, shaking his hand in turn. As Dr. Klein leaves, I wrap Jeff in a fierce hug, allowing myself a moment of vulnerability. His arms come around me, the embrace grounding us both. No further need for empty platitudes or false assurances. Dad’s not out of the woods, but he’s cleared the first hurdle. That’s all we can ask for now.

When the nurse finally fetches us an hour later, every nerve in my body thrums with anticipation laced with dread. I trail close behind Jeff down the hallway, knees weak. The steady beep of machinery greets us as we round the corner.

And there lies my father - pale and small-looking tucked into the large hospital bed, but breathing evenly. Strongly. The monitor above his head spikes with a steady rhythm.

Sweet relief, laced with lingering dread. But for now, we'll take this small victory.

One step at a time.

FOURTEEN

XAVIER

THE SCENT OF FRESHLY BAKED BROWNIES WAFTS FROM THE kitchen as I step across the threshold into Emma's home. My palms suddenly feel slick against the bottle of red wine I'm carrying. What am I thinking, agreeing to this little family gathering? I'm used to high-profile events, flashing camera lights, and microphones shoved in my face. Not awkward small talk over a home-cooked meal. But when Emma invited me, sincerity shining in her bottle-green eyes, I said yes before my brain could talk me out of it.

"Well, look who it is!" A robust voice booms out as Emma's father Charles rolls into view in a wheelchair. His frame seems shrunken since the surgery, but his eyes are as sharp as ever. "The man of the hour arrives."

I offer my hand, which he clasps in a hearty shake. "It's good to see you up and around, sir."

"Ah, please, call me Charlie. 'Sir' reminds me too much of my old man." He gives my shoulder a firm pat, nearly knocking me off balance. For a man who just went through an operation less than a week ago, he sure packs a punch.

Emma appears behind him, a vision in yoga pants and a loose top, auburn waves escaping from her clip. "Don't scare him off yet, Dad. I just got him here."

"I promise to be on my best behavior." Charlie holds up three fingers like a Boy Scout. "Scout's honor."

I chuckle, feeling my nerves uncoil slightly. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

“Something smells amazing in here,” I say, offering Emma the wine. “I brought a little something to contribute.”

“Ooh, Syrah, my favorite.” Emma’s eyes glimmer as she takes it. “Dad’s famous lasagna should be just about ready. Jeff is in the den watching last season’s highlights as usual. I’ll give you the grand tour in a minute.”

As if on cue, Jeff’s lanky form unfolds from the couch and ambles into view. His face lights up when he sees me.

“Xavier! Glad you could make it, man.”

We clasp hands, and I give him a light pat on the shoulder. “Wouldn’t miss it. I hear your dad’s lasagna is the stuff of legend.”

Jeff nods, an earnest smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Hands-down best lasagna in the five boroughs. Secret family recipe.”

As Jeff takes his place at the table, Emma steers me down the hall for the promised tour. We pause in the cozy living room with its overstuffed couch and shelves crammed with sports paraphernalia and weathered paperbacks—an eclectic blend of Emma and Jeff’s interests. Evening sunlight filters through gauzy curtains, washing the room in a comforting glow.

Emma gives my arm a teasing squeeze, noticing me taking it all in. “Not exactly a state-of-the-art bachelor pad like yours, I know.”

I nudge her playfully. “It suits you. I like it.”

And remarkably, I mean it. My own sleek high-rise condo suddenly seems cold and hollow by comparison.

“Only the best for you.” Emma’s eyes dance. “Come on, time for the Thompson family dinner extravaganza.”

Around the cozy dining table laden with food, the conversation flows easily. Lasagna is heaped on plates and passed around along with garlic bread still steaming from the oven. I sip Emma’s preferred Syrah and relax into my chair. No cameras, no prying reporters’ eyes—just good wine and better company.

Halfway through the meal, Jeff clears his throat. “So, that last practice—”

Emma shoots him a quelling look. I guess she doesn’t want shop talk tonight. But I find myself curious about the rookie’s perspective.

“You were saying?” I prompt.

“Oh, just that the pocket collapses so fast on that last play during practice. I know Coach wants me to hold strong, but I am getting pummeled.” He shakes his head. “Still getting used to taking those heavy hits.”

I nod slowly, thinking it over. “The NFL is not college football. It’s tough finding that balance between holding your ground and knowing when to bail. But you’ve got good instincts, kid. You’ll get the timing down.”

Jeff sits a little taller, soaking up the praise.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Emma watching us, a curious little half-smile on her lips. Warmth coils in my stomach and it has little to do with the amazing food.

Charlie clears his throat then, redirecting the conversation to a story about his fishing misadventures upstate. I sense Emma’s relief as the topic shifts away from work.

I study the easy dynamic between Emma and her father as the meal wears on. Their banter and inside jokes hint at a deep bond forged over years of shared memories. I think back to my own distant relationship with my father, more surface-level conversations than heart-to-hearts. Envyng what she has here—this warmth, this intimacy.

As Charlie regales us with a tale about the water heater explosion of ‘13, his eyes crinkle fondly at Emma. “Sweetheart, remember how you try to fix the pilot light yourself and singe off both eyebrows?”

Emma buries her face in her hands, laughing. “Ugh, Dad, do you have to tell that story?” But she glows under his attention.

Warmth swells in my chest, seeing this new side of Emma emerge. Not the stylish psychology assistant with clipboards

of stats and performances, but someone's daughter. Someone's entire world. It stirs a pang of longing inside me I don't expect.

The rest of the meal passes in a blur of good-natured ribbing and family lore. Full and satisfied, I help clear dishes and stack them neatly beside the sink. Emma's hand brushes mine as she takes a plate from me, sending a spark skittering up my spine. Judging by the gleam in her eyes, she feels it, too.

"Thanks for sticking around to help clean up," she says. "You're off the hook now if you need to head out."

I lean back against the counter, not ready to leave just yet. "And miss this Thompson family fun? Not a chance."

Emma's eyes soften. She glances over her shoulder down the hall where Jeff is engrossed in a replay analysis with Charlie.

"It means a lot, you being here," she says quietly. "This whole fake relationship thing feels pretty silly now."

I hook my finger under her chin, gently turning her face back to mine.

I don't even hesitate. "It doesn't have to stay fake. Honestly, being here, seeing where you come from, helps me understand you better."

Emma studies me for a long moment, lips parted. Our faces hover inches apart, the rest of the world fading away. All I see is green and gold, as brilliant as jewels.

Then she rises on her toes and kisses me. Soft and sweet, lingering. It's almost chaste, but it still turns me on. Hell, just being around her turns me on.

We break apart at the sound of Jeff's footsteps approaching and rush back to the safety of the dishes. But the sensation of Emma's lips clings to me for the rest of the evening, warm and right.

Later, as I slip on my coat to leave, Emma walks me to the door. We pause on the stoop, the bracing night air rushing to fill the space between us.

“Thank you again for coming,” Emma toys with the ties on her sweater, suddenly shy. “I’m really glad you and Dad hit it off. And Jeff, of course.”

“Me too. Your family’s great.” I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal just yet. But the wine and the honesty of the evening loosen my tongue. “Honestly, Em, tonight makes me see this could be something real between us. Not just pretend anymore.”

Emma’s eyes widen behind her glasses, lips curving. “Yeah?”

I nod, heart thudding against my ribs. “Yeah.”

Her fingers brush mine, feather-light. “As delicious as it sounds, we just...can’t.”

As the silence stretches between us, filled only by the distant sounds of the night, I take a deep breath, emboldened by the evening’s emotional transparency.

“I understand. Can I at least take you out tomorrow night?” I ask, my voice tinged with disappointment. “Can you give me a chance to show you a good time, just the two of us? No family, no ex, no distractions. Just... Emma and Xavier.”

Her eyes meet mine, and I sense a flicker of excitement that quickly morphs into something softer, something like hope.

“I think I owe you that much,” Emma says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’d love to.”

The tension that has been building all evening seems to break, replaced by a sense of anticipation, a promise of what’s to come. We share a lingering look, full of unspoken possibilities, before I finally turn to go.

As I step off the porch and into the night, I can’t help but feel a sense of completeness. I walk away with her warmth still lingering on my skin and the promise of tomorrow adding a buoyant step to my walk.

Something very real is blooming between us, and for the first time in a long time, I’m genuinely excited about what the future holds.

FIFTEEN

EMMA

THE SCENT OF JASMINE WAFTS ACROSS THE STEAM-FILLED bathroom as I step from the shower. I wrap myself in a plush towel, watching tiny drops of water race down the fogged mirror. Tonight is my first date with Xavier with no distractions. Tonight, there's no need for pretending, and maybe no self-imposed restrictions. The thought sends a thrill racing across my skin, more powerful than the heady florals infusing the air.

In the bedroom, I contemplate the dress options fanned across my comforter. I settle on a simple black number with a lace overlay that skims my knees flirtatiously. The square neckline and fitted bodice are understated but alluring. I turn in front of the full-length mirror, watching the fabric shift subtly over my body. Satisfied, I move to the vanity and arrange my hair in loose curls that tumble becomingly over one shoulder. A touch of mascara and lipstick in a deep berry shade complete the look.

The doorbell chimes as I'm fastening delicate silver earrings. Taking a steadying breath, I grab my purse and move to let Xavier in.

He stands casually on the entrance, suit jacket slung over one shoulder. The top buttons of his dress shirt are undone, exposing a tempting glimpse of smooth chest I long to explore further. His eyes widen almost imperceptibly as he takes in my appearance.

“You look absolutely stunning.”

I bask in the warmth of his admiring gaze. “Back at you. I’m liking this slightly undone formal look on you.” Unable to resist, I reach out and trail a single fingertip along his exposed collarbone.

Xavier sucks in a sharp breath, eyes flashing. “Careful, or we won’t make it out of your doorway tonight.”

Laughing softly, I grab his outstretched hand. “Come on, Casanova. I believe you promised me dinner.”

The drive to the restaurant takes us along the lakeshore, windows down and the tang of brine perfuming the air. We chat lightly about nothing consequential—sports, movies, our shared obsession with true crime podcasts. But an undercurrent thrums between us, a new awareness heightened by tentative touches and stolen glances. Each brush of Xavier’s hand under mine on the gearshift sends sparks skittering across my skin.

We pull up outside an elegant brick building nestled inconspicuously between a vacant storefront and a New Age shop advertising aura readings. Two small lanterns flank a nondescript wooden door.

I raise a questioning eyebrow at Xavier. “Not exactly the five-star establishment I pictured.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Xavier grins and opens my door with a gallant flourish. “Trust me, the lack of crowds and paparazzi will be a welcome change.”

Inside, a winding staircase leads down into a cozy space lit by flickering sconces along exposed brick walls. A jazz quintet plays softly in one corner while couples and small groups lounge at intimate tables. The atmosphere is at once lively and relaxed.

Xavier gives his name to the hostess, who leads us to a secluded corner booth. “Your server will be right over,” she says with a polite smile, handing us menus.

“This place is wonderful,” I tell Xavier, sliding in across from him. “How did you find it?”

“I can’t reveal all my secrets.” Xavier winks. “Let’s just say I wanted our first real date someplace special.”

Warmth spreads through me at this casual declaration of his intentions. Our server appears to take our drink order, and Xavier selects a top-rated Malbec to complement our meal. Under the table, his leg presses against mine. The contact sends my pulse skittering.

We pass the evening in easy conversation, the initial shyness quickly giving way to our natural rapport. Xavier regales me with tales of locker room antics I’m certain would horrify PR while I recount my early matchmaking efforts between Holly and a bewildered intern. Laughter comes frequently, our banter just this side of flirtatious.

“Remember that time you chewed me out for showing up late to practice? Said that I didn’t care anymore, and it was a sign I was getting too old for football. That I was in denial of my decline. Hell of a way to motivate a player on your team, Thomson,” Xavier says with a smirk, as he’s refilling my wine glass. “I thought you were going to skin me alive. Hard to believe that was less than a month ago.”

I cringe at the memory. “In my defense, it was my first week, and I was frantic about making a good impression.”

“Oh, you definitely made an impression.” Xavier’s eyes gleam with mirth. “I believe my first thought was, ‘Who is this pint-sized tyrant, and how can I get under her skin even more?’”

I swat playfully at his shoulder. “You’re incorrigible.”

Xavier catches my hand, expression softening. “Maybe. But you changed my mind, eventually.”

His thumb strokes over my knuckles, sending little sparks up my arm. The air suddenly feels charged, the playful atmosphere shifting into new, uncharted territory. Xavier’s eyes hold mine, his look changing from affectionate to something more heated and intent. Desire coils hotly within me.

The spell breaks when our server appears to clear our plates. Xavier releases my hand slowly, almost reluctantly. I sit back,

senses still reeling. I never react this way, and certainly not to playboy jocks, but somehow Xavier is the exception to the rule.

Outside the restaurant, we stroll hand in hand along the river walk, listening to the gentle lap of water against stone. The gibbous moon shimmers on the dark surface. Our steps slow, both reluctant for the evening to end.

When we come upon a weathered wooden bench tucked off the main path, some unspoken signal passes between us. We sit, thighs barely brushing. I yearn to close those scant inches between us, to lose myself in his strength and heat. Sensing my thoughts, Xavier drapes his arm across the back of the bench in silent invitation. I nestle against him contentedly, tucking my head against his shoulder. He presses a kiss to my hair and I feel him relax into me.

For a few blissful minutes we sit without speaking, watching moonlight dance across the ripples. Somewhere nearby, music and raucous laughter spill from a crowded bar, jolting us from the moment. Slowly, I lift my head to meet Xavier's gaze. The intensity there mirrors my simmering need.

"Emma..." Xavier's voice is rough, barely a whisper. His hand comes up to cradle my jaw, his thumb stroking my lower lip. My breath catches at the desire darkening his eyes. He leans in agonizingly slowly. I can't stifle a needy whimper.

"Please," I breathe against his mouth.

The dam breaks. Xavier crushes his lips to mine, kissing me with a fervor that steals my breath. My hands grip his shoulders as our mouths slant desperately together. He tastes of wine, heat, and temptation. I want to drown in him.

We come up for air reluctantly, pupils blown wide. Xavier's hand still grips my nape possessively. He brushes his nose against mine, both of us struggling for composure.

"We should continue this somewhere more private," he suggests, voice deliciously uneven.

I answer by claiming his mouth again, briefly, but with unmistakable intent. Xavier makes a small, needy sound low

in his throat that liquefies my bones.

He stands and pulls me to my feet swiftly, keeping our bodies flush. Lips grazing my ear, he rasps, “My place. Now.”

My answering shiver leaves no doubt about what I want. Hell, my panties are already damp. We practically race back to the car, hands threaded together. The short drive to Xavier’s sleek condo takes every ounce of restraint. I squirm against the exquisite torture of anticipation. Beside me, Xavier grips the steering wheel with white knuckles, jaw tight.

In the condo foyer, Xavier presses me back against the wall, winnowing one leg between mine. He kisses a scorching path from my ear down my neck while I pant and clutch him closer. I can already feel him hard against my thigh and the memory of what he feels like inside me makes things low in my belly clench almost painfully.

“Bedroom. Now,” I gasp out.

In answer, Xavier lifts me easily, and I wrap my legs around his waist. He carries me through the living area without breaking contact, our mouths fused together urgently, my body rocking against his with the rhythm of his steps. It’s almost enough to make me come right then and there.

Somehow, we maneuver onto the massive bed in a tangle of seeking hands and clinging limbs. Xavier braces himself above me, muscled arms caging me in. The sheer strength of him sends a chill down my spine, but in a good way. There’s something arousing about knowing that a man can overpower you, but that he won’t. His eyes blaze with desire and a hint of disbelief, as if not quite trusting our good fortune.

“You’re so beautiful, Emma,” he rasps, trailing a finger down my throat.

I arch up to meet his touch. “I want you, Xavier. All of you.”

He groans softly at the bold invitation. Slowly, his hands skim my sides, pausing at the hem of my dress. Our eyes lock in a silent question. In answer, I sit up just far enough to unzip my dress agonizingly slowly. Thanks to the built-in bra, all I have underneath my dress is a pair of barely there panties. Xavier

helps ease the fabric—and my panties with it—down until I’m laid bare before him.

Reverently, he trails kisses across my collarbone to the swells of my breasts, drawing a gasp when his tongue grazes one taut peak. My hands slide across the shifting muscles of his back, nails digging in slightly when he hits a particularly sensitive spot. I feel rather than hear his answering groan against my fevered skin.

“Too many clothes,” I mumble, fumbling with the remaining buttons of his shirt. Xavier obliges by stripping it off, exposing all of that smooth, rippling tanned skin. My eager hands learn every contour and ridge, reveling in the contrast of hard muscle and velvet skin.

While I’m busy exploring, he somehow manages to get his pants off and a condom on. He then settles between my thighs, eyes questioning even as the tip of him brushes against my sensitive skin. In answer, I wrap my legs around his waist and put my hands on either side of his face. He has to understand what I’m feeling.

“Need you, Xavier.” My eyes reflect the same singular focus mirrored in his—to finally, blissfully unite without barriers or guilt. Nothing else exists outside this bed, this man, this moment. It’s hard to believe that we stayed apart for as long as we did. What we have between us is combustible.

Xavier enters me in one smooth stroke that wrenches gasps from us both. He stills for a breathless moment, muscles rigid with restraint, before I dig my heels into the small of his back, urging him deeper. I want to not know where one of us ends and the other begins. We move together, unhurried but urgent, a dance perfected through unrealized fantasies. I cling to him, senses overwhelmed by the slick slide of skin and the sweet pressure building within me. I’m primed to explode already, and he sees it.

“You can come, Emma. I’ve got you.”

His assurance is proven in the way his entire body covers mine, the strength radiating off him. I clutch at his neck and close my eyes, allowing myself to cross that short distance

between me and bliss. Pleasure hits me with enough force that it drives the air from my lungs. I gasp for air, my nails raking his skin, my body writhing beneath him. And through it all, he keeps me grounded.

I'm only just coming down when he starts moving again. I didn't realize that he stopped, but now that he's thrusting into me once more, I realize how hard my muscles are holding onto him. I force myself to relax so that he doesn't have to fight for room and then I pick up his rhythm again.

The pressure builds rapidly, but this time, he's ahead of me. The strain of holding back is written across his face and I slide a hand between us to get myself to where he is. It takes only a few brushes of my fingers over my swollen clit before I'm biting my bottom lip as my muscles shake.

"Look at me, Emma," Xavier commands through gritted teeth.

Our eyes lock, bodies joined. I see my own nearly unbearable pleasure reflected at me in Xavier's dark, lust-blown gaze. We shatter together in a white-hot crescendo that leaves us tangled and spent, trading languid kisses as our breathing slows and pulses return to normal.

Xavier brushes damp hair from my forehead as he props himself up on his elbows to keep from squishing me. His eyes are softer than I've ever seen them. "You're driving me crazy. You know that, right?"

Happiness bubbles up in me, bright and buoyant. I kiss him soundly. "Right back at you, Xavier."

As he rolls to the side, he takes me with him and wraps me in his formidable embrace, brushing his lips over my hair. "Stay with me tonight?"

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away," I vow, snuggling closer and letting satiated bliss pull me under.

DAWN'S rosy fingers find us still curled together, Xavier spooned protectively around me. I luxuriate in the novelty of

waking wrapped in his strength. Last night was only the beginning of this new phase together, and my body still thrums pleasantly from our repeated explorations. Judging by the hard length pressed against my backside, Xavier is similarly inclined this morning. That seems like a great way to start the day.

I shift in his arms to face him, kissing a lazy path across his collarbone. Xavier makes a low sound of approval, large hands gripping my hips.

“Good morning,” I murmur against his skin.

Xavier anchors his hand in my hair, guiding my mouth back to his. We kiss slowly, still half-dreaming. His free hand trails down my side, curving over my backside to pull me tighter against him. I gasp at the friction, heat already coiling.

The shrill ring of Xavier’s cell phone on the nightstand jars us from the moment. Xavier curses under his breath as he breaks the kiss and rests his forehead against mine.

“Let it ring,” I plead, dipping my hand between us to take him in my hand. His eyes darken as I stroke him from base to tip, and for a second, I think he’ll ignore the call. But responsibility wins out, and he reaches for the phone with a rueful look. Taking pity on him, I release his cock, but I’m not about to let him go completely.

“Johnson here.”

I take advantage of his distraction, kissing a meandering path down his chest and grazing my teeth over his taut abs. His hand tightens almost painfully in my hair and I feel a surge of satisfaction.

“Right, the interview this morning. No, I haven’t forgotten the meeting with the sponsors this afternoon. No problem, Wayne. I’ll head over.” With effort, he nudges me away, eyes promising retribution later.

I shiver in anticipation and know that’s all I’ll be able to think about all day.

“Duty calls. Rain check on this?”

I sigh dramatically. “The life of a celebrity. Okay, go be charming for the cameras.”

Xavier tugs me up for one last lingering kiss before reluctantly rolling from the bed and heading for the shower. I slip into his dress shirt from last night, inhaling the lingering scent of his cologne.

In the kitchen I forage for the makings of a simple breakfast, mentally cataloging the contents of Xavier’s fridge and cabinets. Most are predictably sparse, occupied mainly by protein shakes and nutritional supplements. I find coffee and eggs, deciding omelets will have to suffice this morning. Soon savory scents waft through the air and I hear the shower shut off.

Xavier emerges in a cloud of steam with a towel slung low around his hips, at ease with his own flawless physique. He looks momentarily surprised to find me cooking breakfast in his kitchen.

“Getting domestic on me already, Thompson?” But his voice holds a note of undisguised pleasure.

“Can’t have Chicago’s most eligible bachelor wasting away.” I hand him a steaming mug of coffee. “I’m just ensuring you make it to your interview fueled up properly.”

Xavier sets his coffee down to wrap both arms around my waist, nosing at the open collar of his shirt on me. “I can think of better ways to start my morning than eggs.” His voice drops suggestively, and I press my thighs together.

Laughing, I extricate myself from his embrace. “Plenty of time for that later, Casanova. Eat up.”

We enjoy a quick breakfast together before Xavier has to leave for his interview, and it’s strange how easy it is to be with him like this. It’s clear that it’s not just sex between us. At the door, I tug playfully at his loosened tie. “Go dazzle the media. If you’re lucky, I might still be available for dinner tonight.”

Xavier smiles, boyish and unguarded, the sight still rare enough to quicken my pulse. He kisses me firmly and long enough for me to get light-headed. “I’m counting on it.”

The door shuts behind him and I wander back to the bedroom, hugging his shirt a little closer. I know the coming weeks won't be all playful breakfasts and stolen hours in bed together. Real life looms, with its pressures and uncertainties. But wrapped in Xavier's lingering scent, I feel a sense of possibility take root and unfurl within me. This thing between us—this potential for actual love—can weather coming storms. As long as we hold on to this newfound closeness, the future feels bright with promise.

SIXTEEN

XAVIER

THE SLEEK GLASS AND STEEL OFFICE TOWER LOOMS OVER ME as I step through the revolving doors into the lobby. Everything about the space screams money and power, from the polished marble floors to the uniformed security guards.

I'm here for a meeting with Pulse Athletic, a mega brand that's been trying to get me on board for months. And based on the way my agent, Wayne, has been talking, they're ready to pay the big bucks if I'll add my name to their roster.

Speak of the devil, I spot Wayne crossing the lobby toward me, arms extended for a back-slapping bro hug.

"There he is! My favorite client." Wayne grins up at me, blue eyes sparkling like he's about to reel in the catch of a lifetime. Given the dollar figures he's been floating, he just might be.

"What's up, Wayne? Did you get lost on your way to the champagne fountain?" I nod toward the elevators. "Let's get this show on the road."

As we ride up to the executive suites, Wayne leans against the brass railing and fixes me with his best serious agent expression. "Now listen, Xavier. I know you've had some reservations in the past about endorsement deals. But I want you to keep an open mind here. This is a game changer."

I nod, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. Wayne always had a flair for the dramatic.

The elevator doors slide open. Wayne straightens his tie and adopts a professional grin. Showtime.

We're greeted by a receptionist whose smile looks like it could cut glass. She ushers us back to the sleek conference room where a team of executives in power suits are waiting, looking like sharks ready to feed.

The head honcho, a tanned guy named Bradley with teeth so white they should come with a warning label, pumps my hand. "Xavier, so great to finally meet in person. Please, have a seat."

As I settle into a leather chair probably worth more than my first car, he launches right into his pitch. How much they love me, my play and interactions with fans. They want me as the face of their new athletic line. Not just a one-off ad campaign—they're talking about integrating me into all their branding, plastering my mug on billboards and websites across the country. They're even showing me the design of a prototype shoe called "The X-Savior," obviously inspired by me.

The numbers start flying around the room faster than passes on the field. Six million for the first year. Ten if they expand internationally. Stock options. Profit sharing of the sales of the shoe.

"This is how billionaires are made," Wayne whispers to me with a big grin.

I feel like I just chugged a triple shot of espresso. Wayne wasn't kidding when he said game changer. I could do...well, anything with this kind of cash.

Bradley must read the look on my face, because he leans forward with a gleam in his eyes. "I know it's a lot to process. But opportunities like this don't come often, even for a superstar like yourself. Think it over, but not for too long."

I nod, my brain already churning through the possibilities. As we exchange handshakes and goodbyes, I can practically see the dollar signs spinning in Wayne's eyes.

"We should celebrate," Wayne suggests, "Even if it's just for a bit. You in?"

"Sure," I agree. "But make it quick. I've got another engagement."

“It’s not...,” Wayne inquires with raised brows.

I wave a hand, realizing he means Emma. “Nah, that’s totally over,” I say with a smirk, knowing I’m lying out of my teeth. I’m in no mood for a lecture about the dangers of mixing business with pleasure.

We head to a nearby upscale bar, and Wayne orders a round of high-end Scotch. As we clink our glasses, he winks at me. “To new beginnings and unfathomable wealth!”

The Scotch burns as it goes down, but it’s a good kind of burn. A burn that reminds me that life is about to change in a big way.

“Alright,” Wayne says, setting down his empty glass. “I know you’ve got to run, but remember, this is just the beginning. The world is about to become your oyster.”

“Or my playground,” I add, smirking.

“Even better,” Wayne laughs. “Now go, don’t keep your hot date waiting. We’ll talk details soon.”

We part ways, and as I step back out into the bustling city, I feel like I’m on the brink of something monumental.

I have a dinner date I don’t want to miss, and as I head toward the restaurant, I can’t shake the feeling that tonight could be a turning point in more ways than one.

SLIDING into the leather booth across from Emma, I’m still riding high. I can’t wait to see her reaction when I give her the good news.

“You’re in an awfully chipper mood this evening,” Emma says, one eyebrow arched. “Good interview today?”

“Oh yes, it was fine, but even better, I just had a meeting with Pulse Athletic. You know, that huge athletic wear company?” I quickly lay out the details of the sponsorship offer, unable to keep the excitement out of my voice.

But instead of matching my enthusiasm, Emma bites her lip, looking uncertain. “That’s quite an opportunity, Xavier. But have you thought about their business practices at all? Companies like Pulse Athletic are notorious for cutting corners with ethics and sustainability.”

I hesitate. To be honest, I’ve been so focused on the dollar figures, I haven’t considered much else. But Emma’s brows are knitted with concern, so I wave for her to go on.

“It’s just—an industry based on endlessly churning out cheap products, pushing reckless overconsumption—there are consequences.” Emma adjusts her posture, like she’s shifting into teaching mode. “The waste, the carbon footprint, the exploitation along the supply chain...”

As she lays out the not-so-glamorous underbelly of the fast fashion machine, I feel my excitement fizzling. The high I was riding sinks beneath a creeping sense of doubt.

Because she’s right. I let myself get so blinded by the money, I didn’t stop to think about the harm a brand with this kind of business model can cause. And attaching my name, my reputation to that—maybe not the smartest move if I want to keep looking at myself in the mirror. Be a spokesperson for generations to come.

Emma reaches across the table and gives my hand a squeeze, a soft sort of smile on her face. “I know you’re excited about this. I just want you to make sure you’re fully informed before signing anything. There’s a lot more at stake here than a paycheck.”

I nod slowly. My head is spinning now for a whole different reason, and I almost feel sick. I have to force myself to keep a smile on my face through the rest of the meal so Emma doesn’t feel guilty for bursting my bubble.

After dinner, I step outside and call Wayne. He answers on the first ring. “Xavier! So, you ready to make it official?”

I take a deep breath. “About that. I can’t sign the deal, Wayne.”

“You...what?” I can picture Wayne’s grin sliding right off his tanned face. “Why the hell not? This is a no brainer!”

“I know what we talked about, but I can’t attach my name to something that’s doing so much harm. Ethically, environmentally—”

Wayne cuts me off with a harsh laugh. “Don’t tell me this is about your girl. Yeah, I know you went out with Emma. Stop fucking with me, Xavier. You’ve only got a few more years to capitalize on your pro status. You really wanna let your less than a month-old relationship dictate your business moves?”

I bristle at his dismissive tone, but I don’t know if it’s because of how he’s being with me or his attitude toward Emma. “It’s not just her, man. I have to think about the impact of these choices. My legacy.”

“Impact,” Wayne scoffs. “You need to think about your own damn future! Deals like this don’t grow on trees.”

I open my mouth to respond, but he barrels on. “You’re at the peak of your career. If you don’t cash in now, you’ll regret it.” He lets out an exaggerated sigh, voice dripping with condescension. “But hey, it’s your mistake to make. Don’t come crying to me when you’re sitting there in a couple of years watching the big bucks go to younger players.”

The line goes dead before I can get another word in. I stare down at my silent phone. What the fuck! Wayne’s warnings ringing in my ears.

He’s not wrong, though. Chances like these are fleeting in the world of pro sports for athletes my age. In five years, I could struggle to make a fraction of what Pulse Athletic is offering today. And I’ve only known Emma for a few weeks, really. Should I let her influence my career decisions?

I care for her, yes. I think there’s a chance I could fall in love with her. Hell, I think I’m partway there, if I’m being honest. But I’m not there yet. And I don’t know if she feels the same, if she sees a future with us.

Except her words hang in the air too, a reminder that most choices have consequences I can’t ignore. This is my legacy.

Whatever I decide will send ripples far beyond my career and bank account.

As I hail a cab to head home, one question pounds through my head, drowning out the blaring horns and screeching brakes of the city.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

SEVENTEEN

EMMA

THE SHRILL RING OF MY PHONE JOLTS ME FROM MY THOUGHTS. I glance at the screen and see it's Holly calling. For a brief moment, I consider ignoring it, not feeling up to one of her enthusiastic pep talks. But I know she'll just keep calling until I answer.

"Hey Hol," I say, trying to inject some energy into my voice.

"Emma! Girl, we are going out tonight," Holly's voice bubbles through the speaker. "It's Friday and you cannot keep moping around that sad little apartment of yours."

I sigh, flipping through the stack of notes on my desk. Player stats, schedules, bios—the never-ending tasks of a player manager. "I don't know, Holly. It's been a long week and I'm beat."

"Uh uh, no excuses. You need a night out. We all do! Especially after that grueling week."

I know Holly won't let this go easily. When she gets an idea in her head, she's like a dog with a bone.

"Okay, fine," I relent, sitting back in my chair. "But just a quick drink, nothing crazy. I'm still wiped from dealing with the guys today."

"Yesss, that's my girl!" Holly's enthusiasm is infectious even through the phone. "I'll come get you at eight. Wear those cute earrings!"

The line goes dead before I can respond. I set down my phone and stare blankly at the mess of papers on my desk, Holly's

words lingering in my mind.

She's right, it has been a long week. And an emotional rollercoaster ever since my fragile truce with Xavier at the fundraiser that ignited all this. I absently touch my lips, remembering the feel of his mouth on mine, his hands on my body as he thrust his hard and thick... The memory sends a now-familiar heat curling through me even now.

I try to refocus on the task at hand—finalizing the stats and schedules for next week's preseason game. But concentration eludes me. My thoughts keep drifting back to Xavier. The way his hand pressed into the small of my back as we posed together for the cameras. The smoldering look in his eyes when I grabbed his lapels and kissed him in front of everyone, staking my claim.

A claim.

Shit.

I sigh.

A knock at my office door shakes me from my reverie. I sit up straight, smoothing down my blouse.

"Come in," I call, shuffling papers on my desk.

The door swings open and Xavier saunters in, looking unfairly good in a fitted black t-shirt that shows off every sculpted muscle in that impressive torso of his. I fight to keep my expression neutral. I have no control, however, about the rush of arousal that floods my body.

"Emma. I swear you'll lose your vision one day if you keep staring at videos all day." His voice is light, gently teasing.

"Just going over the footage from this morning's drills," I say briskly, avoiding his eyes. I don't have time for distraction right now, no matter how tempting.

Xavier leans against my desk. I can smell his spicy cologne mingling with the familiar scent of fresh sweat from practice.

Yup. Distraction.

“Yeah, about that. Your brother’s footwork was sloppy on those ladder drills. He needs to tighten it up.”

I bristle at the criticism, ready with a sarcastic argument, but bite my tongue. As much as I hate to admit it, Xavier has a point. Jeff’s fundamentals need work if he’s going to make it in the NFL. He has the speed, but not enough muscle memory. He thinks too hard. It should come naturally.

“I’ll talk to him,” I say evenly. “Anything else?”

Xavier shrugs. “Nah, just wanted to check in. Make sure we’re good after the other night.”

His voice drops on those last words. I feel my cheeks flush and keep my gaze fixed on the paperwork in front of me.

“It was a lovely night, and we’re fine. I should really get back to this.”

Xavier pushes off from the desk but doesn’t make any move to leave. His presence fills the small office, stirring up a confusing tangle of emotions. Attraction, frustration, and an almost magnetic pull, like planetary orbits destined to collide.

“I don’t get you. All work and no play...” Xavier muses, trailing off. His hand reaches out to brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear. My breath hitches at the soft contact, and it takes an effort to keep my eyes open. “We could go out again, Emma. Have many more nights of fun, instead of just pretending like this. But you’re either hot or cold. Nothing in between?”

I bat his hand away, ignoring the tingles left in its wake. I need to keep my focus on my brother. What this is with Xavier is great, but I can’t count on it to last. My relationship with my family is constant, and that has to come first.

“I’ll have fun when Jeff has adjusted to playing in the NFL and the team.”

It comes out harsher than I intended. Xavier worked hard with Jeff to help prepare him. Xavier just chuckles, unfazed as always by my barbs.

“Ouch. Guess I’ll leave you to it then.”

As he turns to leave, he pauses in the doorway, dark eyes glinting.

“Offer’s still open if you want to grab that drink tonight. Might help get that stick out of your ass.”

Before I can retort, he disappears down the hall, whistling.

Damn him. I drop my head into my hands and groan. How does he always get under my skin like this? Pushing my buttons, stirring up emotions I’d rather keep buried. But no matter how much I try to fight it, there’s an undeniable spark between us. A grudging chemistry I can’t control.

Maybe all this would have been easier if I hadn’t slept with him...twice.

With effort, I force myself to refocus. There’s too much at stake for any distractions. Jeff’s career, Dad’s health, the mountain of responsibilities that never seems to shrink. I can’t let Xavier or my wayward feelings interfere with my priorities.

Work is my sanctuary, the one thing I can control. I dive back into the stats and schedules, determined not to let Xavier’s smug face creep into my thoughts again.

At least not until Holly drags me out tonight.

BY THE TIME HOLLY ARRIVES, I’ve swapped my severe work attire for casual jeans and a silky camisole, my auburn hair falling in loose waves instead of its usual practical bun. I feel exposed without my professional armor, but the appreciative whistle Holly gives me as I slide into her convertible tells me I’ve achieved the desired effect.

“Damn, look at you!” she exclaims, pulling away from the curb. The early evening breeze whips through our hair. “Trying to give all the men a heart attack tonight?”

I laugh, feeling myself relax already in Holly’s bubbly presence. “Just following orders. You said look cute.”

“Uh huh, and you absolutely nailed it, girl.” Holly slants a sly look my way as she navigates through the bustling downtown streets. “Though I wonder if a certain football star might be at our destination tonight...”

I stiffen, staring resolutely out at the passing scenery. “I hope you didn’t tell him we’re going out. I told you, whatever Xavier and I had was just for show. Nothing real there.”

“Mm-hmm. Keep telling yourself that, honey.”

I don’t justify her teasing with a response. But the ghost of Xavier’s touch, his lips on mine, whispers traitorously that she might be right. I squash it down, steeling myself for a night of fun free from complicated entanglements.

Holly pulls up outside a stylish club, neon lights glowing against the dusky sky. The sidewalk throngs with well-dressed patrons waiting to get inside the exclusive hotspot. Holly tosses her keys to the valet and links her arm through mine.

“Ready for some fun?” Her eyes sparkle mischievously behind her cat-eye glasses.

As we bypass the long line and breeze inside on Holly’s VIP status, I feel myself letting go of the week’s stresses. The club’s mood lighting and rhythmic music work their magic, loosening the knots of tension I’ve carried for days.

Holly snags us spots at the polished bar. She orders us mojitos, and soon we’re clinking glasses, the fruity cocktail slipping down easily.

“To the weekend!” Holly toasts. I grin and echo her enthusiasm.

We chat and people watch, critiquing outrageous outfits and creating imaginary backstories for the club goers posing around us. Guys try to buy us drinks, but we wave them away. For now, I relax, caught up in the music and Holly’s infectious energy. For the first time in weeks, practices, meetings, and worries about Xavier, Jeff and Dad, don’t consume my thoughts. I’m just Emma again, out on a fun night with a friend.

As if reading my mind, Holly leans over conspiratorially. “So, are you going to tell me what’s got you so twisted up lately? And don’t say it’s nothing. I know you too well for that.”

I hesitate, debating how much to confess. But the alcohol and Holly’s compassionate gaze loosen my tongue.

“It’s just...everything with Dad’s health, and taking over for him with Jeff’s career, it’s a lot.” I stir the cocktail straw through the melting ice cubes. “I feel pulled in so many directions. I want to be there for Dad but also support Jeff. It’s like no matter what I do, I’m letting someone down.”

Holly covers my hand with hers, brow furrowing sympathetically. “Oh, honey, no one thinks you’re letting them down. I know you’ve expected yourself to take care of them since your mom passed, but you’re only human. You’ve stepped up for your family when they needed you most. No one expects you to handle it all perfectly.”

Her validation soothes my ragged nerves. I manage a small smile. “I know. I just put a lot of pressure on myself. I want to do right by everyone.”

“You’re allowed to do things for yourself too,” Holly says gently. She brightens then, waving over the bartender. “In fact, doing shots is mandatory right now! Bartender, two tequila shots, please.”

Before I can object, two glasses brimming with amber liquid appear before us. Holly lifts one up insistently until I clink mine against it.

“To Emma,” she proclaims. “The most badass sister, daughter, and team assistant psychologist around. Now bottoms up!”

I toss back the shot, wincing as the alcohol burns down my throat, wiping away the sticky-sweet remnants of the cocktail. The tequila hits my system hard, leaving me flushed and lightheaded.

Holly whoops victoriously. “Yes! That’s what I’m talking about.” She grabs my hand, tugging me off the barstool. “Now come on, we’re dancing.”

I let her pull me onto the crowded dance floor, my earlier tension drowned out by pulsing music and the pleasant buzz smoothing all my sharp edges. Holly and I move together, laughing breathlessly. For once, I stop overthinking and just feel, losing myself in the beat.

“Have you ever kissed a girl?” Holly asks me.

I shouldn’t have been as surprised as I was, but it took me a second to process the question. “No,” I say, watching Holly bite her lower lip.

As the DJ segues into the next song, I sense eyes on me through the club’s dim lighting and gyrating bodies. I glance up to find Xavier leaning against a pillar, watching me with intent focus, and forget all about Holly. His handsome face is thrown into chiaroscuro relief by the neon lights. That now-familiar heat coils through me under his scrutiny.

I freeze mid-sway. How long has he been standing there? Holly notices my distraction and follows my gaze, letting out a low whistle.

“Well damn, look what the cat dragged in. Should’ve known he couldn’t stay away.” She smirks, leaning close to my ear over the music. “Maybe next time. Have fun, but be safe. Call me if you need an extraction.”

With that, she melts back into the crowd, shooting me a playful thumbs up. I watch Xavier in his designer outfit, and suddenly I’m vividly aware of how little clothing I have on. I cross my arms self-consciously as Xavier cuts through the sea of bodies until he’s standing before me, dark eyes raking over every inch of exposed skin. Heat follows his gaze and I wonder if I’m going to catch on fire.

“Fancy seeing you here, Em. Didn’t take you for the clubbing type.”

Even with my tequila-fueled confidence, that lingering gaze makes me flustered. I lift my chin, aiming for nonchalance when I feel anything but that.

“Guess you don’t know me as well as you think.”

Xavier's mouth quirks. He takes my response as a challenge, stepping closer. I can almost hear the crackle of the energy between us.

"Oh, I intend to get to know you much better. Care to dance?"

He doesn't wait for my answer, already guiding me back into the crush of writhing bodies. I'm hyperaware of everywhere our bodies meet, my skin prickling at the contact. Xavier's hands span my waist as we move together, the rest of the club fading away.

Maybe it's the alcohol muddling my thoughts, or the week of suppressed tension seeking an outlet, but I lean into him. My fingers creep up his chest, thrilling at the heat of hard muscle beneath the thin shirt. Xavier's breath catches. His grip tightens on my hips.

"Didn't take you for the PDA type either," he murmurs in my ear. "This is the third time. Are you trying to make it a habit, Miss Thompson? Should I warn my publicist?"

I trail my fingers higher, brushing along the exposed skin of his neck. I don't know if it's the press of the bodies or just Xavier's proximity, but I'm suddenly overheated. "Guess you *really* don't know me as well as you think."

I echo my earlier words, relishing his sharp intake of breath as I scratch my nails down the back of his neck. Xavier dips his head, lips grazing my throat in retaliation. A gasp escapes me before I can stop it. The kiss sears my skin long after his mouth leaves it.

We're wading into dangerous waters here, that dizzying precipice where pretense blurs into reality. But with the alcohol humming through my veins, I can't make myself heed the warning bells clanging in my mind. I want to drown in this feeling for a little longer, drown in *him*.

The DJ's voice booms over the speakers, jolting us apart. "Alright party people, grab that special someone for a slow jam."

The thumping bass melts into a sultry R&B melody. Couples around us sway together, but Xavier's eyes stay locked on

mine. Wordlessly, he tugs me against him, one hand stroking up and down my spine, my bare skin humming under his touch. I shiver, resting my cheek against his chest. His steady heartbeat thrums in my ear, drowning out the music.

We barely move to the slow sensual beat, just holding each other close. It feels dangerously intimate for two people supposedly playing roles. More intimate than the act of sleeping together somehow.

The song ends, shifting back to an upbeat tempo, and the spell breaks. We drift apart, the air suddenly colder. I clear my throat, avoiding Xavier's heavy gaze as I rub my arms.

"I should head home. Early morning tomorrow." The excuse sounds flimsy, spoken aloud, and I can't look him in the eyes.

Xavier just nods, face unreadable. "I'll walk you out."

He guides me through the cramped club with a hand hovering protectively at my back, sending sporadic thrills up my spine even though he doesn't touch me again. Outside, he hails me a cab, opening the door like a true gentleman. But a glance at his intense eyes belie his polite manner. This restless energy thrums between us, craving an outlet.

I hesitate, half considering inviting him back to my place, consequences be damned. But the sane part of my alcohol-soaked brain knows I can't complicate this entanglement any further. I have to set a line. A clear boundary.

Until he kisses me.

EIGHTEEN

XAVIER

HER KISS IS INTOXICATING. FOR A MOMENT, I LOSE MYSELF IN it, sinking into her warm mouth, the feel of her silky tongue stroking mine. But my good intentions resurface, forcing me to break the kiss before we get carried away. We're still outside the club, in full view of passersby and paparazzi. And while I'd happily risk the media for another taste of Emma, everything will be easier for both of us if this doesn't reach the papers.

I hand Emma into her taxi and head for my limo that's pulling up behind.

Before I open the limo's door, she's right there, ready for me, with a fire in her green eyes that promises trouble.

"Come with me," she purrs.

My mind spins as her words sink in and I have to resist the urge to press the heel of my hand against my zipper to calm my cock. *God, I want to.*

Emma's fingers run down my arm. The heat in her eyes rivals the hot Chicago night. "What do you say?"

The world tilts as I weigh the pros and cons. It's not like we haven't done it before, but this is different somehow. More charged.

"Screw it. Let's go. We'll take the limo."

I take her hand and lead her into the limo. As I slide in next to her, Emma gives the driver her address. I close the divider as he pulls into traffic, and I reach for Emma, my patience gone,

my libido fueled by pent-up lust and liquor. She melts into my arms, her mouth soft and pliant as I take it. Her fingers dig into my arms, reminding me of how strong she is, and I feel the tight leash I keep on my control slipping. Then her teeth scrape my bottom lip and I lose it.

Pulling her onto my lap, I grip her hips and hold her in place as I grind up against her. She makes a mewling sound and I claim her mouth again, a growl escaping as I do. Her hands fist my shirt, and she rocks against me, her movements just as urgent as mine. I grab her thigh and mumble a curse as I remember she's wearing jeans. Needing to feel her skin, I move my hand under her shirt, making a pleased sound when I find one of those firm, perfect breasts bare.

I'm barely aware that we're groping each other in the back of a vehicle. A vehicle that someone else is driving. All that matters is the silk of her skin, the nipple tight against my palm, the taste and sounds of her.

By the time we stumble into Emma's apartment, we're tearing at each other's clothes. Emma's top lands somewhere on the kitchen floor while I peel off her tight jeans, kissing and tasting the smooth, creamy skin of her inner thighs as I strip her.

"The bedroom," she gasps, tugging at my belt as soon as I straighten.

I chuckle as she pulls the belt free and tosses it aside, but I move her backward before she can take the last of my clothes off. I, however, take care of my pants myself as we go, managing to kick them aside without taking my mouth from hers.

We tumble into bed in a tangle of limbs and sheets, our kisses heated and hungry. Her hands slide down to free me from my briefs, but I catch her wrists, pinning them above her head.

I grin down at her, loving the way her eyes darken as my grip on her wrists tightens just a bit. "Nuh uh, I'm in charge this time, Miss Thompson."

She arches up into me, and I swallow the sassy reply on her lips with a bruising kiss. My free hand slips between her legs, and I smile against her mouth as she moans at the contact. While I'm not surprised to find her wet, I do feel a burst of masculine pride.

I stroke her lazily, enjoying the way she writhes against me, trying to push down on my hand, eager for more. She pulls against my hold on her, but I keep her pinned to the mattress, too entranced by her flushed cheeks and parted lips to relent. This tight, controlled woman needs to relax, and I intend to help her get there.

"Please," she whines, her swollen lips forming a mock pout. "Don't tease me."

That pleading tone sets my blood on fire. I capture her lips again and oblige, lubricating two fingers before I slide them inside her and making her moan in pleasure. I move them in and out of her a couple times before pausing and crooking them, the pads of my fingers searching for that little rough patch inside her. I know I find it when her hips jerk and I smile as I gently rub it in circles. It isn't long before she's arching up off the bed and shuddering, getting closer and closer to her peak, as my thumb flicks across her clit.

"Not yet," she whimpers, her head shaking from side to side. "Not without you. Please. I want us to go together."

The desperation in her voice undoes me and I slide my fingers out of her. I climb off the bed and finally take off my underwear, Emma watching me hungrily as I grab a condom and then climb back onto the bed. Before I can lay hands on her again, she's sitting up, wrapping her delicate hand around my cock and pressing me down onto my back.

"It's my turn now."

The gleam in her eyes excites me as much as her touch. She strokes me, twisting and squeezing with varying pressure until I'm going out of my mind. My head drops back as she goes faster, gripping my thigh with her free hand to steady herself as she lowers her head.

“Fuck, Em.” I curse a moment before she puts her mouth on me.

When she wraps her lips around the head of my cock, I almost explode right there. But I grit my teeth and hold back, lost in the sensation of her hot tongue licking up and down the length of me, working me into a fevered frenzy. When the first beads of pre-cum appear, Emma laps them up, and I nearly come apart.

Then she stops. The sudden loss of warmth and wetness is a jolt, and I snap my gaze down to meet hers. There’s a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she licks her lips.

“I meant it when I said I want us to go together.” She holds out the condom and then lies back, propping herself up on her elbows as she watches me roll on the latex.

I’m not going there yet though. Surprise flashes across her face as I roll onto my stomach and settle with my shoulders between her legs. I don’t see her expression change as I focus in on the glistening pink skin in front of me. When my lips meet her pussy, she groans and reaches down to fist my hair as I lick and suck. I don’t bother starting slowly, wanting to take her over the edge before I sink my cock into her. My tongue moves over and inside her before moving up to her clit again.

“Harder,” she pleads as I go to repeat the movements, and I have to oblige.

The moment my teeth lightly touch her clit, she bucks up, digging her fingernails into my back.

“I’m so close, Xavier.”

I love the sound of my name in her mouth, so I bring my hands into play and push my fingers into her again. As I suck on her clit, my digits curl up against her g-spot again, but this time, I tap it and the result is almost instantaneous.

“Holy fuck,” she whispers, just before the wave of pleasure crests and she shatters around my fingers, crying out as she reaches her climax.

I continue licking her, lapping up the evidence of her ecstasy, dragging out the end of her orgasm for as long as possible,

before I draw back to watch her beautiful body tremble as she comes down from the high. It's one of the sexiest things I've ever seen, and for a moment, I'm transfixed.

When her eyes open, I lean in for another kiss, letting her taste herself on my lips and tongue. Emma slides a hand down my stomach and then grips me firmly again, her touch only slightly lessened by the thin barrier between us.

"I'm not finished with you yet, Mr. Johnson." Her voice is breathless, but the intent in her eyes is unmistakable.

With those words, she pushes my shoulder, and I let her put me on my back. She moves over me so that she's straddling me, one leg on either side of my waist. The sight of her perfect tits and trim, athletic body as she hovers above me takes my breath away. I trace my fingertips over her velvety-smooth skin. My hands trail over her breasts, her flat stomach, and her firm thighs before I cup her ass.

She rubs my tip against her entrance, coating me with her wetness before she sinks onto me. She takes just the first inch and pauses, her expression transcendent, as if she's savoring that feeling. When my hands flex on her ass, she continues lowering herself until I'm completely sheathed inside her. She starts out slowly, giving me a show as she rises and falls in a hypnotizing rhythm. Watching her ride me is enough to undo me even without the sheer bliss of being inside the tightest, hottest cunt I've ever had.

And I've fucked a lot of women.

I drag my gaze over every inch of her tantalizing form. My eyes flick to her gorgeous face, finding her staring right back at me as our bodies move together. She picks up speed and I sit up to kiss her, my hands running through her silky hair before tightening close to her scalp.

Every moment we spent together flashes through my mind—every look, every touch, every stolen moment—until all that's left is Emma and me. No lies, no games, no hiding from what we feel for each other. Just pure, carnal, animal attraction.

And maybe something else.

Our hands tangle in each other's hair as we move together in tandem. I nip her bottom lip and she tightens around me, sending me over the edge. My hips jerk upward as I explode deep into her, and she cries out, my orgasm triggering her own.

Emma clutches at my shoulders, moaning softly in my ear as I pulse inside her. The feel of her climaxing for the third time that night means as much to me as the physical pleasure, telling me once again that this isn't just lust. Her muscles flutter around my twitching shaft as we drop back onto the bed together. She collapses onto me, our heartbeats drumming erratically, but somehow feeling like they're still in sync.

We're both quiet as we lie there, letting our bodies' natural rhythms return. I run my hands through her hair, down her back, feeling her breathing even out. She's asleep, and that's when it hits me like a ton of bricks—this thing we've got? It's real. No games, no pretending. It's as real as a touchdown in overtime.

So what's our next play?

I can't think about that now. Not yet.

Quiet as a mouse, I ease out of bed, trying not to wake her, and grab my clothes. Opening the door without making a sound, I step out into the night. It's nice, but not as nice as what just happened between us.

We'll have to tackle this thing head-on, no doubt. But for now, let's let the clock run a little longer.

NINETEEN

EMMA

MORNING DAWNS BRIGHT AND EARLY, THE SUN AN ASSAULT through my thin curtains. Relieved that Xavier bolted in the middle of night, I stumble to the kitchen to brew a pot of strong coffee, my head thick and muggy from last night's drinking. Flashes from last night reel through my mind on a loop—the reckless thrill of Xavier's hands on me, our bodies moving in sync, the aching intimacy of our passion.

I try to chalk it up to alcohol and pent-up tensions seeking an outlet. But my traitorous thoughts whisper, *what if there's more to it?* More to this undeniable connection pulling us together like magnets, no matter how we try to fight it?

The rich aroma of coffee fills my small kitchen, providing clarity. Whatever this volatile chemistry between Xavier and me, I can't lose sight of what's at stake. Jeff's career, Dad's trust in me—I won't gamble those things on an infatuation. Xavier himself warned me not to blur the lines.

Pouring a bracing cup of coffee, I mentally slam closed that tantalizing door of possibility my drunken haze had cracked open. Time to focus.

After a quick shower to clear out the remaining cobwebs, I head to the team's headquarters early. Better to throw myself into work than sit alone with my tangled thoughts.

Most of the building lies empty and dark this early on a Saturday. I flick on lights as I go, cursorily tidying stacks of papers and sports magazines left haphazardly on tables by the players yesterday.

Voices echo from the conference room down the hall—the coaching staff must be in early, too. I almost push open the half-closed door, intending to say hello. But the words make me freeze.

“...just don’t have the roster space,” the head coach is saying, massaging his temples wearily. “I get that he’s your friend, Xavier, but nepotism can’t factor here.”

Xavier leans forward, palms splayed on the polished table. “Jeff has raw talent. We all see it. He just needs guidance to reach his potential.”

My breath stutters in my throat. They’re talking about Jeff. Debating his place on the team. I should make my presence known, but shock roots me in place.

“I wish that were enough.” The coach shakes his head. “But his performance hasn’t improved these past weeks. O’Malley wants to bring in new blood.”

“So give us a little more time!” Xavier insists, an edge sharpening his tone. It’s the first time I’ve heard him anything less than perfectly composed. “The kid grew up watching me play, modeling his game after mine. Let me continue to work with him one-on-one. I can get him up to speed.”

The other staff members trade uncertain glances. “It’s not that we doubt you,” the offensive coordinator pipes up diplomatically. “We know you’ve taken an interest in mentoring him.”

He clears his throat, choosing his next words carefully. “But you’ve also been a bit...distracted lately. We have to consider what’s best for the team.”

Xavier’s jaw clenches, eyes flashing. I recognize that dangerous look—the coiled power of an athlete pushed to his limit. But the head coach speaks up before Xavier can retaliate.

“How about this? We’ll give it one more week. You work with Jeff daily, get his skills NFL-ready.” He holds up a hand to cut off Xavier’s protest. “But if he can’t prove himself ready by

next week's game, we'll have to let him go. Those are O'Malley's terms."

Xavier's shoulders slump in reluctant acceptance. I choose that moment to pull the door wider, rapping my knuckles against it politely as if I hadn't overheard everything.

"Sorry to interrupt—"

Xavier's gaze crashes into mine, his expression morphing from frustration to something softer. Caught off guard, he just nods tightly in greeting.

The head coach claps his hands together, forcibly brightening the mood. "Emma, perfect timing. We were just wrapping up a staff meeting."

I keep my face neutral through sheer force of will. "Of course, sorry to barge in. I'll get out of your hair."

As I turn to go, I feel Xavier's presence behind me. He catches my arm in the hallway.

"Emma..."

I halt but don't turn around, afraid he'll read the truth on my face. His fingers remain curled gently around my elbow, but I wish he would let go. It's too hard to think clearly when he's touching me.

"I tried to buy us more time," he says quietly. "Your brother's got potential, but this business is cutthroat."

I steel myself with a deep breath before facing him. "You knew about Jeff's getting cut all this time, didn't you?" When he doesn't object, I continue, "It's fine. Thank you for going to bat for him." I force a tight smile. "Jeff will prove himself. I know it."

Xavier searches my face, reading volumes in what I leave unsaid. But he just squeezes my arm lightly and lets me escape down the hall on shaky legs. I duck into my office before he can glimpse just how much his reassurances really affected me.

Because I know now, any attraction between us has to go on the back burner. Jeff's career hangs by the finest thread. He's

worked his whole life for a shot in the big leagues. I can't—I won't—let him lose it because of my divided focus.

For Dad's sake, and for Jeff's future, my priorities have to be realigned. No more distractions or entanglements, no matter how beguiling. I have a job to do—saving my little brother's career.

I sit at my desk, staring sightlessly at the paperwork piled before me. My fingers twist and untwist a pen compulsively. Everything rests on the next week's performance. One chance for Jeff to prove himself, or lose his place on the team that was his childhood dream.

Bile burns in my throat at the thought of telling Dad or facing Jeff's crestfallen eyes. He's worked so hard for so long. I hoped stepping in for Dad could ensure Jeff's success, but now it feels like I failed.

I sag back in my chair, dizzy from the emotional whiplash. Jeff's last chance, Xavier staking himself for us, and the burden of responsibility resting squarely on my shoulders. No pressure.

Worry gnaws at my gut as I mentally tally the long preparation checklist for next Sunday's game. So much depends on how Jeff performs under the scrutiny of the coaches and the team owner. It'll take every resource I have to get him ready in time.

Starting with having a brutally honest chat about where his skills are lacking. Then reviewing game tape to analyze what slows him down on the field. And finally, coordinating extra practices with Xavier to sharpen Jeff's abilities before next week.

My pulse kicks up, plans and contingencies already churning in my mind. This is my element—work the problem, find solutions. It's the only way I know to grapple with challenges too big to face head-on.

If I can somehow get Jeff up to speed before next Sunday, we might just survive this.

The weight of the revelation presses down on me, making my office feel claustrophobic. Every rational part of me screams to dive into work, to lay down strategies to ensure Jeff's success on the field. But the emotional turmoil of the situation—the genuine possibility of not just Jeff, but myself being uprooted and the budding relationship with Xavier being severed—threatens to overwhelm me.

I need to tell Jeff. He deserves to know. But how do I drop such a bombshell, especially with Dad's recent health scare? The stress could be detrimental to his recovery.

Distractedly, I grab my phone to check for any new messages. Maybe there's a reprieve, some good news waiting for me. But all I see is a missed call and a message from Holly. She wants to know how last night went. I'm not in the mood to rehash the details, but the offer for lunch is tempting. Perhaps some distance from the office and a chat with Holly could provide some clarity.

A half hour later, seated across from Holly at our favorite restaurant, I prod at my salad, appetite all but gone.

"Alright, out with it. You're glowing, but you also look like you just lost your best friend," Holly says, eyeing me from across the table at our go-to lunch spot. The ambiance is usually soothing, but today it feels stifling.

I smirk, sipping my iced tea. "Let's just say last night was... eye-opening, in more ways than one."

Holly grins, but then narrows her eyes. "Okay, you're clearly dodging the main issue. What's up?"

I sigh, setting down my glass. "You remember how I mentioned Jeff's shaky position on the team? It's gotten worse. They're talking about trading him."

"Damn, Emma. That's heavy," Holly says. "I've heard rumors, but I didn't know it had escalated to that point."

"Yeah, well, it has," I reply, my voice tinged with bitterness. "And if Jeff goes, I go. Say goodbye to whatever is budding between me and Xavier. Not to mention Dad. How am I

supposed to tell him this without making his heart condition worse?”

Holly pauses, contemplating her words. “Look, I get that you’re in the middle of a perfect storm right now. But let’s be real—you can’t control the business side of football. All you can do is make sure Jeff is as prepared as possible for next week.”

I nod, taking a deep breath. “You’re right. It’s just that my mind’s a mess right now. Between my father’s health scare, Jeff’s career hanging by a thread, and whatever is happening with Xavier, it’s a lot to process.”

“I can imagine,” Holly says sympathetically. “But hey, you’ve got some sway in the office, and so do I. Let’s use it to our advantage. What can we do to make sure Jeff nails it next week?”

“We?” I ask, my eyebrows rising.

“Yes, ‘we,’” Holly says, rolling her eyes. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, even if you are dating Mr. Hotshot receiver. Besides, I don’t want my best friend shipped off to another city.”

I chuckle, grateful for the levity. “Well, if we’re brainstorming, first things first: Jeff needs more field time. We need to work on his reaction time and his playbook knowledge.”

“Got it,” Holly says, pulling out her phone and making a note. “I’ll talk to the coaching staff. We’ll get him extra practice sessions.”

I nod, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. “I’ll sit him down for a film review. Maybe Xavier can join. He’s been mentoring Jeff.”

“See? You’re already formulating a plan,” Holly says, giving me a reassuring smile. “This is doable, Emma. It will not be easy, but it’s doable.”

“Yeah,” I agree, feeling slightly less overwhelmed. “It’s just a lot riding on one game.”

“Welcome to professional sports,” Holly says, raising her glass. “Where everything can change in a single play.”

We clink glasses, sealing our pact to do whatever it takes to keep Jeff—and by extension, me—where we belong. It’s a long shot, but it’s a shot. And right now, that’s all I can ask for.

TWENTY

XAVIER

THE SHRILL BLAST OF THE REFEREE'S WHISTLE PIERCES THE humid air as I run through passing drills with Jeff on the empty practice field. He's drenched in sweat but laser-focused, snagging each bullet pass I fire his way. The kid's clearly been hitting the gym, his lanky frame filling out with taut muscle.

"Nice grab," I call out as he twists and leaps to catch a high floater. His hands clamp down and cradle the ball into his chest before he lands in a controlled three-point stance.

Jeff grins, panting as he tosses the ball back. "Getting the hang of this whole 'catching impossible passes' thing."

"Could've fooled me," I laugh, mentally cataloging his improvements over the past week. His fundamentals are getting tighter, reactions sharper. He's still got a long way to go, but the raw potential is undeniable. Makes me think of myself as a cocky rookie trying to prove my worth.

We run through a few more routes, Jeff gaining confidence with each diving catch. By the time we wrap up, there's a new lightness to his step that wasn't there before.

"Keep this up and you'll earn that starting spot in no time," I say, clapping him on the back. Jeff beams, guzzling water like he just won the Super Bowl.

A sudden flash of color catches my eye from across the empty stands. I glance up to see a lone figure sauntering toward us, her hips swaying in a way that's all too familiar. Rachel. A knot forms in my gut. This can't be good.

“Why don’t you start on those receiving drills we went over,” I suggest, keeping my voice neutral despite the alarm bells sounding in my head. Jeff nods and jogs to the end zone to practice his footwork.

Rachel sashays up, ruby lips curled in a coy smile. Her strapless sundress clings to every curve. “Funny running into you here, X,” she purrs, pointedly ignoring Jeff. “You’re looking as fine as ever.”

My laugh comes out sharp as a knife. “Let’s cut the bull, Rach. What do you want?”

Her smile widens, all saccharine sweetness. “You, of course. I’ve missed you, baby.” She reaches out to trail manicured nails down my arm. I jerk away.

“That’s not happening. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got practice.” I turn, but Rachel grabs my wrist with startling force.

“Don’t play hard to get, Xavier,” she hisses, all pretenses gone. “We both know little Miss Prissy can’t handle you. Not like I can.”

I wrench my arm away, temper flaring. “This obsession with Emma needs to stop. I’m with her now. Accept it.”

I’m about to walk away when Rachel suddenly closes the gap between us. Before I can react, she crushes her lips to mine, fingers tangling roughly in my hair. For one stunned second, old muscle memory takes over. Then my mind kicks into gear and I shove her back forcefully.

“What the hell, Rachel?” I spit out through gritted teeth, swiping at my mouth. Her lipstick stains the back of my hand like blood.

That’s when I see Emma across the field, frozen mid-step. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes glassy with hurt. The sight hits me like a sack to the gut.

“Emma, wait—” I start toward her, hand raised helplessly. But she whips around without a word and starts marching back toward the offices, spine ramrod straight.

Rachel trails one lacquered nail down my chest, smirking. “Looks like you’re going to need that second chance after all.”

I slap her hand away, seething. “You’re pathetic, Rachel. This little game of yours ends now.”

Her eyes narrow to slits. For a second, real hatred flickers there beneath the batted lashes and pouty lips. Then she turns on her heel and sashays away, leaving only the cloying scent of her perfume behind.

I rake both hands through my sweat-soaked hair, pulse thudding wildly. What a spectacular shitshow. I need to find Emma, explain what happened—

“Yo, what the hell was that?” Jeff demands, jogging up with a scowl. I curse internally. Great, just what I need. Another complication in an already FUBAR situation.

I raise both hands in a calming gesture. “Listen, that was my ex Rachel. She’s...unstable. Came here trying to mess with my head.”

Jeff crosses his arms, unconvinced. “Looked like you two have history.”

“Ancient history,” I say firmly. “She’s just jealous I’m with Emma now.”

Doubt still clouds Jeff’s face, so I clap a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, kid. My only interest is helping you succeed. Rachel showing up won’t change that.”

After a tense beat, Jeff finally nods. “Yeah...yeah, okay. I trust you, man.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Crisis averted, for now at least. But I still need to find Emma before this spirals further out of control.

“Keep running those drills,” I tell Jeff. “I’ve got something to take care of, but I’ll be back soon.”

He gives me a mock salute and trots off. As I jog toward the offices, nerves and anger battle inside me. I should’ve known Rachel would try something like this. She’s always been petty

and vindictive, unable to stand being upstaged. Looks like her claws came out when she saw me moving on with Emma.

My hands curl into fists just thinking about it. I was a fool to let her manipulate me as long as she did. Playing games with her. But Emma—Emma's different. Kind, principled, challenging me to be better in ways I'm still figuring out. If Rachel's little stunt ruins what we're building...

I pick up the pace as the office building comes into view, sweat dripping down my temples. But even as determination propels me forward, a worm of doubt gnaws at my gut.

Because I know from hard experience, Rachel is perfectly capable of burning everything to the ground if it means getting what she wants. And this time, that includes me and Emma.

I slow outside Emma's closed office door, heart hammering against my ribs. Gotta handle this right. No excuses or justifications. Just the honest truth, laid bare.

After a bracing breath, I rap my knuckles lightly on the door.

"Go away, Xavier." Emma's voice comes out choked, wavering on my name. Shit. This is worse than I thought.

I ease the door open to find Emma sitting rigidly at her desk, shoulders curled in defensively. Her eyes are rimmed in red, but they blaze with anger when they meet mine.

"I said go away," she repeats, swiping roughly at her cheeks.

I raise both hands, hovering tentatively by the doorway. The sight of her distress is like a punch to the gut. "Emma, please. I know what you saw looked bad, but—"

"Bad?" Emma interrupts with a brittle laugh. "Is that what you call mauling your ex on the fifty yard line where anyone could see?"

I flinch. When she puts it like that..."I didn't maul her, she ambushed me!" Even as I say it, I wince, hearing how weak it sounds.

Emma stands abruptly, chair skidding back. "I don't want to hear it, Xavier. In fact, I don't even care. I'm here for Jeff, nobody else."

She brushes past me, but I catch her wrist gently. “Emma, wait. Rachel showing up changes nothing between us. She’s just trying to get under my skin because she can’t stand seeing me happy with someone else.”

Emma stills, something vulnerable flickering in her eyes. But then it hardens into steel.

“What’s the point?” she asks coldly, yanking her arm free. Before I can respond, she storms off down the hall, auburn hair swishing behind her like a war banner.

I sag back against the doorframe, cursing silently. This day really went from sunny to shitstorm in record time. And while part of me wants to chase Emma down and make her understand, another voice whispers, maybe this is for the best.

After all, our whole “relationship” started as a ploy for the cameras. But these last few weeks have felt...different. Real. The thought terrifies me as much as it sets my pulse racing, because it means Rachel’s petty jealousy stunt could ruin something I’m only now realizing I don’t want to lose.

With a weary sigh, I scrub both hands down my face. No use brooding over it now. I tried to explain things to Emma, but clearly she needs space. For Jeff’s sake, I gotta keep things professional between us, even if it guts me to do it. The kid’s future is what matters here.

Pushing down the hollow ache in my chest, I head back outside into the glaring sun. Maybe I can channel this swirling mess of emotions into working Jeff twice as hard. Keep him too busy improving his game to worry about locker room gossip or my tangled history with Rachel.

Yeah. Focus on what I can control. The rest will shake out however it’s meant to.

I find Jeff practicing end zone catches, his lanky form silhouetted against the azure sky. At least one good thing came out of this clusterfuck of a day.

“Let’s run some drills,” I call out, plastering on a grin. Jeff whoops and sprints over, none the wiser. As we run routes

under the blistering sun, I pour every shred of focus into molding this kid into the star I know he can become.

My own problems will just have to wait.

TWENTY-ONE

EMMA

THE HARSH TRILL OF MY PHONE STARTLES ME FROM THE tornado of paperwork swirling around my desk. I glance at the screen, my shoulders already tensing for the next crisis needing resolution. Sure enough, it's the hospital. Of course.

“Hello?”

“Hi Emma, it's Dr. Patel. I'm calling about your father.” The doctor's somber tone makes my pulse pick up. “He came in this morning for his post surgery check-up, and I'm afraid Charles's heart condition hasn't improved. We need to discuss options for additional surgery.”

I press two fingers to my temple where a headache is rapidly forming. “I understand. What are our next steps?”

Dr. Patel details the risks and projected recovery time of the procedure. I scribble notes blindly, my focus splintering. Dad was supposed to be recovering, not slipping backwards. We just got him home.

“Please let me know if you have questions,” Dr. Patel finishes gently. “I know this is difficult news to receive.”

I manage a faint “Thank you” before ending the call with shaking fingers. Looks like I'll be making yet another unexpected trip to the Chicago Memorial. Dad's homecoming after his last intensive surgery was so hopeful. We finally felt like a family again.

Now Dad's health is plunging, and everything feels like a repeat of what happened with my mother. My makeshift office suddenly seems too small, the walls closing in. I shut my

laptop abruptly. No more work. Dad needs me. I can't lose another parent.

The cab ride to the hospital passes in a blur. Chicago's skyline glides by, hazy in the humidity. Somehow, the thick summer air makes it hard to breathe. My thoughts drift dangerously close to Xavier—his effortless charm at the charity gala, the heat of his hand at my waist. The warmth in his eyes when we met at the park, before everything got so tangled up. The sex.

I force the memories away, annoyed at myself. I can't afford distractions right now. My priority is getting Dad well, period.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text just as the cab pulls up to the hospital. It's from Xavier, asking about scheduling issues for Jeff's practices next week before the opening game. My thumb hovers over the keyboard before changing course and slipping the phone back into my bag. Whatever it is, will have to wait. I have bigger problems to handle.

The antiseptic chill of the hospital hits me as soon as I step inside, raising goosebumps on my bare arms. I should have grabbed a cardigan, but it's too late now. The smell makes me nauseous, but I ignore it. There's nothing I can do about that. At the front desk, I confirm I'm here to see Charles Thompson.

"Of course, Ms. Thompson," the receptionist says briskly, fingers clacking over her keyboard. "I see Dr. Patel informed you about the need for another surgery for your father."

She hands me a printout with surgery details. Skimming it, I learn the procedure needs to happen next week for the best chance of success. I swallow dryly and manage a faint "Thank you" before heading down the all-too familiar hall toward the elevators.

My heels echo sharply against the linoleum, underscoring my aloneness. It's just me now dealing with Dad's declining health, Jeff's fledgling football career, and my own sports psychology career I'm barely keeping afloat. The temporary arrangement to manage Jeff will last far longer than any of us anticipated.

Buzz. Another text lights up my phone as I step into the elevator.

I hit ignore and lean my head back against the elevator wall as it glides upward. When the doors slide open, I take a deep breath and smooth the anxiety from my face. Time to be strong again. Unfortunately, I've had a lot of practice at that.

Holly's call catches me right as I settle into one of the stiff waiting room chairs. Instantly, I feel bad ignoring her earlier texts. Her name flashing on my phone screen is a relief.

"Hey Hol, sorry I didn't text back. It's been a day." I pinch the bridge of my nose, willing away the tension headache building there.

"No need to apologize, just wanted to check in," Holly says gently. "I heard about your dad. How are you holding up?"

I smile despite myself. Holly always had a knack for seeing through pretenses. "Honestly? I've been better. Dad needs another surgery ASAP, which means time off work and even more juggling. And Jeff's barely keeping his head above water as it is."

I release a shaky breath, the emotions I've suppressed all day hovering dangerously close to the surface.

"It sounds incredibly stressful," Holly says after a beat. "You're one of the strongest people I know, Emma, but even the strong need support sometimes. It's okay to admit when it's too much to take on alone."

Her statement hits me squarely in the chest, deflating some of the tension I've been carrying. "Yeah. You're absolutely right, Hol. I may need backup on this one."

"I'm always here if you need to talk more. But for now, focus on your dad and don't spread yourself too thin. The rest will work itself out."

Leave it to Holly to cut through the noise and ground me. "Thanks, I needed that. I'll call you later, okay?"

After we hang up, I lean forward with elbows on knees and force air into my lungs. Holly's right—I need to re-center on

Dad and Jeff. The rest, including Xavier, will have to wait.

Filled with fresh resolve, I silence my phone completely before heading to Dad's room at the end of the hall. Inside, I find him sitting up in bed, looking fragile but smiling when he sees me.

"Hi sweetheart," he says hoarsely. "Come on in."

I kiss his paper-thin cheek and squeeze his hand gently. "How are you feeling, Dad?"

He pats my hand weakly. "Oh, still kicking. Gave the nurses a hard time about the lime gelatin, though. I wanted orange."

Despite everything, I huff a surprised laugh. Even laid up in the ICU, his sense of humor hasn't dimmed one bit. It was what kept us all going through those excruciating months of Mom's treatment, and then again when the cancer came back. That, more than anything else, eases the icy grip around my heart just a bit.

We chat for a few minutes about small things—the neighbor's yappy dog, Jeff's disastrous attempt at making breakfast. Safe topics. But underneath the surface banter, the unspoken words linger.

Finally, Dad squeezes my hand again. "It's going to be alright, Emma. I'm a fighter, remember? A little surgery won't stop me."

My throat tightens at his steadfast optimism. I cling to his words now more than ever. "I know, Dad. And I'll be right here the whole time. We'll get you back home in no time."

The look he gives me tells me that he remembers I've said those words before. Said them while sitting next to a frail-looking parent who's just told me that everything is going to be all right.

But it wasn't.

He tightens his grip on my hand even though I know it costs him to do it. "You listen to me, Emma, and you listen good." He waits until I nod. "This is not how I die. It's not my time to leave you and Jeff. I plan on being around to walk you down

the aisle one day. To see my grandchildren. To watch my son get a Super Bowl ring.”

I smile at the last one even though I know it’s only a half joke. His words do help, though. We don’t talk about it, but the night before Mom passed, she told the three of us that it was her time and that she would be watching over us, seeing all those important moments from heaven. She was so calm and matter-of-fact about it that we weren’t surprised when she fell asleep and didn’t wake up.

Dad has that same calm and matter-of-fact tone, and I tell myself that I can trust it. I manage a smile as I stand and tell him to get some rest.

Outside Dad’s room, I overhear two medical students at the central station murmuring about a surgeon named Dr. Alden. Apparently, he’s pioneered an innovative technique for treating Dad’s condition, with unmatched success rates. But he’s impossible to book.

I tuck away that information, wondering if Dr. Patel has already explored that avenue. Pasting a faint smile on my face, I slip back into Dad’s room. He’s dozed off, his face lined with pain even in sleep. I sink into the chair beside his bed, taking his frail hand in both of mine.

Whatever happens over the coming days, I can’t let him see my doubt. He needs me to be strong. And I will be, no matter how heavy the weight on my shoulders feels tonight.

XAVIER’S NAME flashes on my phone for the third time in just as many hours, jolting me awake from restless sleep.

Each time his name pops up, my pulse quickens. It’s usually just a reminder about Jeff’s practice schedule, but the man’s knack for diverting my attention—even in a crisis—is absurd.

I shoot back a quick text to confirm and push myself out of bed, my joints protesting. A shower and a strong cup of coffee are non-negotiables before heading back to the hospital.

I shuffle into the kitchen, wearing an oversized Thunderhawks shirt, and almost collide with Jeff, who's busy rummaging in the fridge.

"Whoa, sorry, Ems!" He raises his hands apologetically, one holding a block of cheese and the other an apple. "Just getting some fuel before practice. Xavier's really pushing us to prep for next week's preseason game."

My stomach drops. Between Dad's surgery and the upcoming game, my attention is stretched thin. Jeff notices the look on my face and his brow furrows.

"You okay? You look wiped out."

I wave it off. "I'm fine, just didn't sleep well." At his skeptical glance, I come clean, "Actually, I was just talking to Dr. Patel about Dad."

Concern morphs into alarm on Jeff's face. "What happened? Did something change?"

I brace myself. "Dad's not doing as well as we'd hoped. They're recommending another surgery—a riskier one."

"How risky?" Jeff sets down his food, the morning's lightness vanishing.

Dr. Patel hadn't mince words. "There are significant risks. But it's also risky to do nothing. It's a no-win situation."

Jeff rubs his temples. "When's the surgery?"

"Sometime this week. They want to move fast."

He steps closer, his usually youthful face tinged with seriousness. "So what's our game plan?"

"Firstly, we support Dad. I'll be at the hospital coordinating with the medical team. As for you—" I hesitate, my throat tightening. "I know you have practice and that important game, but—"

Jeff interrupts me. "Ems, family first. The game can wait. Dad needs us."

His certainty is a balm. I hug him. "Thank you, but Dad would also want you to give your best shot at making the team. We'll

have to juggle both.”

“We’re a team too, Ems. We’ll manage.”

I pull back, my eyes misty but my resolve firmed. At this moment, despite everything—the stress, the worries, the fear—I know we’re anchored by family.

“And for that,” I think, “I’m grateful.”

“Let’s visit Dad before you head to practice,” I suggest, finally finding steady ground.

“Lead the way,” Jeff says, grabbing his keys.

Before we leave, I remember a snippet of conversation I’d overheard at the hospital. “Jeff, one more thing. There’s a specialist, Dr. Alden. He’s renowned for treating Dad’s condition.”

A flicker of hope crosses his face. “But?”

I sigh. “He’s booked for months, and Dad can’t wait that long.”

Jeff grimaces. “So, bureaucracy and timing could cost us a better option?”

“Seems like it,” I say, frustration lacing my voice.

“Life’s not fair, huh?”

“No, it’s not. But we adapt. We always do,” I assure him, touching his arm for emphasis.

Jeff looks determined. “Okay, let’s go. Miracles happen, right?”

I nod, faintly smiling. “Yes, they do.”

As we step out, my mind toggles between the immediate challenges—a risky surgery, a game, a life in the balance—and the long-shot possibility of Dr. Alden. The odds might be stacked against us, but in this moment, held up by the strength of family, anything seems possible.

TWENTY-TWO

XAVIER

THE SHRILL BLAST OF THE WHISTLE RIPS THROUGH THE AIR AS I push through dribbling exercises with the rest of the team on the practice field. Beside me, Jeff's breaths come in shallow gasps, his cleats kicking up turf as he struggles to keep up.

"Get your head in the game, Xavier!" Coach yells, and a football narrowly misses my ear. Damn. My mind has been wandering too much lately, most notably to Emma and the growing tension between us.

Since her dad took a turn for the worse and went back to the hospital, she's been withdrawn. Not that I can blame her. It's her family. Her foundation could collapse. It's understandable, yet I can't shake the feeling that this might also be the end of us.

"Johnson, eyes forward!" Coach bellows, snapping me back to reality.

I grit my teeth and shake off the distraction, nailing the next drill with pinpoint accuracy. I can't afford to mess up, not now. After what feels like an eternity, Coach calls time, and I gulp down water as if I've crossed a desert.

Jeff hobbles over, looking like he's run a marathon.

"Man," he gasps, wiping his face, "Coach isn't holding back today."

I chuckle, clapping him on the back. "Pre-season pressures. We've all been there."

Jeff straightens, grimacing as he stretches. “Got to step up. Can’t be the rookie forever.”

“And you will,” I reassure him. “Just remember, progress over perfection.”

He nods, but a shadow passes over his eyes. “With everything going on with Dad, Emma’s barely holding it together.”

Concern flares up. “Is he going to be okay? Charles, I mean?”

Jeff runs a hand through his hair. “Could be better. They’re saying he needs a specialist, a Dr. Alden. But there’s a waitlist a mile long.”

A seed of an idea sprouts. “That’s rough. But, you know, sometimes miracles happen.”

Jeff looks at me, eyes filled with a mix of hope and skepticism. “We can only wish, right?”

Returning to the field, my mind races. I know people in high places, and perhaps I can make something happen. For Emma. For us.

As soon as practice ends, I grab my phone and start working connections. I call in favors, and next, I dial a number I had to pull a lot of strings to get. My heart pounds as it rings. Finally, a voice picks up.

“Dr. Alden speaking.”

“Dr. Alden, this is Xavier Johnson, the football player for Chicago Thunderhawks. I was told you’re the specialist who can help Charles Thompson—the father of Emma and Jeff Thompson. You know, Jeff is on the team, too.”

There’s a pause, and then Dr. Alden says, “Yes, I’m familiar with Mr. Thompson’s case. It’s quite severe, but I should tell you, I have a long waitlist, I’m afraid.”

“Yeah, I heard,” I reply, taking a deep breath. “Look, let me get straight to the point. I heard the hospital is planning a big charity event for a new wing, right? What if I could help make it a tremendous success? Bring in some big names, get the media involved, the whole nine yards.”

A pause, longer this time. “Interesting proposition,” Dr. Alden finally says. “But commitments to events like this are not to be taken lightly. You understand that, I hope.”

“Absolutely,” I reply. “I’m not talking about a photo op. I mean actual involvement—time, effort, endorsements, genuine commitment.”

Another pause, and then Dr. Alden speaks. “Well, if you’re willing to commit to that extent, I believe we can make an exception for Mr. Thompson. But let me be clear: this is a onetime arrangement.”

“I get it,” I say, then hesitate. “One thing, though. I don’t want someone else losing their spot on your list because of this. Can you make sure of that?”

Dr. Alden’s voice softens for the first time. “Mr. Johnson, I assure you I’ll work extra hours to make sure they bump no one from the list. Everyone who needs care will get it.”

“Thank you, Dr. Alden,” I say, feeling like I can finally breathe. “You won’t regret it, and neither will the hospital.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Mr. Johnson,” he says, and then we say our goodbyes.

As I hang up the phone, I feel a mix of relief and newfound determination. This is big—big for Charles, big for the hospital, and maybe, just maybe, big for whatever is happening between Emma and me.

Minutes later, a text pings my phone—it’s from the surgeon’s office, confirming Charles’ date for surgery in just two days. This is really happening. A bubble of hope swells in my chest. Emma will be happy.

But what if she sees this as a manipulation? Overstepping bounds already fraught between us? But if it saves her father’s life, surely she’ll forgive me that extra step?

I stare down at my phone, contemplating. Do I give Emma a heads up? Or let the hospital deliver the news?

Finally, I slip my phone into my pocket, leaving it up to fate. I’ve done all I can. Now it’s out of my hands.

PACING MY LIVING ROOM, I let out a sigh. For a moment, I feel good about what I've done—like I've made a real difference. Then, like clockwork, doubt creeps in.

My phone buzzes, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's Wayne, my agent.

"Xavi, what's the deal? Pulse Athletic's been on my ass. They're ready to cut a big check, man," Wayne's voice crackles through the speaker.

I pause, Emma's words about fast fashion and its environmental cost echoing in my head. "Look, Wayne, I'm serious. The whole fast fashion thing doesn't sit right with me. I need to see some changes before I'll feel right about going with it."

Wayne chuckles. "Man, when the fuck did you start caring about that stuff? They're offering serious money and exposure."

"But is it the right thing to do?" The question feels weird, even to me. I'm not usually the guy sweating over the small ethical stuff. But Emma's got me questioning a lot of things in my life.

Wayne sighs, the sound heavy with a mix of frustration and disbelief. "Since when did you turn into Captain Planet?"

"I wouldn't go that far," I say, skirting around the real reason for my hesitation. "I'm just taking a closer look at the choices I'm making, that's all."

"Fine, I'll tell 'em you need more time. But just so you know, opportunities like this don't grow on trees," Wayne warns.

"I get it, man. Thanks," I say, ending the call.

I sit down, my mind spinning. Every choice suddenly feels heavier, like there's more at stake than just me. That's Emma's influence, no doubt about it.

My phone buzzes again before I even have a chance to fully process my conversation with Wayne. The caller ID shows it's Ms. Williams, a board member from the hospital, if I recall correctly.

"Xavier, I just wanted to personally thank you for your commitment to our upcoming charity event. It's a generous offer," she starts.

"Ms. Williams, it's something I believe in. Happy to help," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

"That's good to hear," she says. "We were thinking it would be great if you could announce your involvement publicly today. It would do wonders for the early interest in the event, and it's not bad PR for you either."

The request makes me uncomfortable. The last thing I want is for this to turn into some publicity stunt, especially before Charles gets his surgery. "Is there any way we could hold off on that? I have some personal reasons for keeping this under wraps for now."

She pauses, clearly weighing my request. "I understand, but the sooner we announce, the better for everyone involved. However, if you need some time, we can respect that."

"Thank you, Ms. Williams. I promise it won't be long," I say, relieved.

"We'll hold you to it," she replies before we end the call.

I slump back into the couch, staring at the ceiling. The web I've woven around myself is complex, fraught with ethical and personal dilemmas. As I sit there, it hits me: I'm not just doing this for Charles, or for the hospital, or even for my image. I'm doing it to figure out what really matters to me—and who really matters to me.

TWENTY-THREE

EMMA

THE DISCORDANT BEEP OF MONITORS AND HUSHED VOICES OF the ICU greets me like old friends as I step into my dad's hospital room. Morning sun slants through half-closed blinds, casting zebra stripes across his blanketed form. His eyes are closed, head tilted back on the pillow, but a faint smile plays at his lips.

I pause in the doorway, chin quivering at the sight. He looks so small and fragile framed by all this machinery, like a fallen bird cradled in a child's palms. Hard to believe this is the same man who tossed a pigskin with me in our backyard every Sunday, his laugh booming louder than thunder.

Before tears can spill, I paste on a bright smile. "Morning, Dad. Brought you the crossword from today's Trib."

His eyes flutter open, crinkling at the corners when they meet mine. "There's my girl."

I settle into the chair by his bed, smoothing the newspaper across my lap. Dad's hand inches toward mine where it rests on the sheets. His skin is tissue-thin, mapping the blue highways of his veins. But his grip, when it comes, is still strong.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask, thumb grazing his knuckles.

"Better, now that you're here."

A lump wells in my throat. I duck behind the newspaper so he won't see me furiously blinking back tears. Focus on the words, I tell myself. Just get through this visit. You can fall apart later.

I'm scanning the clues for 1 Across when Dad says, "Remember this?"

I peer over the top of the page. He's holding a dusty photo album I haven't seen in years, running a thumb over the cover.

"Where'd you get that old thing?" I ask, curiosity temporarily diverting my sadness.

"Jeff brought it for me. Want to relive the good times, back when things were simple?"

I abandon the crossword and scoot my chair closer, nostalgia warming my chest. "I haven't seen these pictures in ages."

Dad cracks open the album across his knees. A flutter of polaroids spill out—me as a gap-toothed kid in oversized football pads, Jeff's chubby fingers covered in birthday cake. The memories unspool like an old movie reel, flickering moments from our childhood.

"Look at you two." Dad shakes his head, grinning. "Thick as thieves."

He points to a photo of Jeff and me, sitting on the front stoop, helmets askew, football cradled between us. I'm maybe seven or eight, skinny as a sapling. But the defiance in my raised chin rings familiar even now.

Dad flips through a few more pages, lingering on pictures of Jeff's peewee football games, my ballet recitals, our crowded breakfast nook on lazy Sundays. He pauses on one of me as a teenager, frowning down at a textbook, lower lip between my teeth.

"You always were an old soul, even back then," he muses. "Too serious for your own good."

I give a wistful half-smile, remembering those awkward years all too well. How I lost myself in school to avoid the confusing maze of adolescence.

Dad tilts his head, regarding me with those soft brown eyes that seem to see straight through to the heart of things. It's a look I know well. One that says he's piecing together a puzzle only he can see.

My stomach clenches. All at once, this visit feels different. Loaded. Like a gathering storm. The assurance from our conversation before is an oddly distant memory.

Dad closes the album gently and fixes me with that piercing gaze. “What is it, Emma?” His voice is a velvet rumble. “Something’s been off with you lately. I can tell.”

My cheeks grow hot. I fiddle with the crossword, avoiding his scrutiny. “It’s nothing. Just stressed about work. And you being in here...” I trail off with a lame shrug.

He makes a thoughtful noise at the back of his throat. “This is about more than just work, though. Isn’t it?”

I risk a glance at him. His eyes are knowing but kind, crinkling at the corners. My fragile composure wobbles like a house of cards.

I look away again, smoothing the already wrinkle-free newspaper. Maybe if I just keep deflecting politely, he’ll drop it. Let me leave this room with my emotional walls still intact.

But Dad reaches over and places a warm hand over mine. “You know, if I’ve learned one thing from all this—” he gestures around the room, monitors beeping in punctuation “—from losing your mom, it’s how damn short life is.”

My eyes sting viciously. I dig my teeth into my bottom lip.

“Hell, I’m not afraid of dying,” he continues, giving my hand a squeeze. “What scares me is leaving things unsaid. Burdens I’ve placed on you kids without realizing.”

A ragged breath shudders out of me. Because I know exactly what burdens he means. The promise I made to him on this very bed to look after Jeff, no matter what. His dream of seeing his son go pro before...

Well. Before.

Dad shifts in the bed, wincing slightly. But his eyes stay rooted on mine. “I don’t want you making the same mistakes I did, Emma. Letting the future eclipse the present until it’s too late. Do you understand?”

I open my mouth, but no words come out. Just a faint wheeze, like a stepped-on squeaky toy. Dad's face blurs through the film of tears I'm barely keeping at bay.

A knock at the door saves me from dissolving into a complete puddle. A nurse bustles in, her scrubs printed with cartoon zoo animals.

"Time for vitals," she trills in a singsong voice, oblivious to the emotional grenade she just walked into. I wipe discreetly at my eyes as she wraps the blood pressure cuff around Dad's arm, chattering about the weather.

Just as she finishes jotting down numbers, her head jerks up. "Oh! I almost forgot. Dr. Alden sent me to give you an update." She bounces on her toes, barely containing a grin. My stomach drops at the name. Alden is the world-renowned surgeon, whose six-month waiting list might as well be booked till the next millennium.

Dad frowns at the nurse, as puzzled as me. "What update?"

"He's cleared his entire morning Wednesday to operate on you!" She delivers this news like an announcer revealing lottery numbers. "Can you believe it? What luck!"

Her words land like an explosion, rattling the room's foundations. Dad's slack-jawed stare mirrors my own. Dr. Alden, operating on Dad? Wednesday? How is that possible?

The nurse continues gushing about what an honor it is while I try to process this seismic shift. Of all the brilliant surgeons in Chicago, what twist of fate brought the most gifted one to Dad's operating table? My pulse thrums as I mentally sift through the possibilities.

Dad recovers first, shaking the nurse's hand vigorously. "Well, I'll be damned. Remind me to buy a lottery ticket!"

She titters, then bustles back out, leaving a charged atmosphere humming in her wake. Dad collapses back on the pillows, grinning like he won the Super Bowl. "Can you believe it, Emma? Alden himself!"

I mimic his smile on autopilot, my mind spinning. Alden's availability is nothing short of a miracle. Which means

someone must have pulled some major strings to make it happen. But who? And how did they even know we needed this help?

Dad yawns, eyes already drooping. Making arrangements with a medical legend is apparently exhausting work. But as he slips into sleep, that same knowing grin teases his lips.

I sit, watching his chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm. Relief and confusion churn inside me, acidic as heartburn. I should be celebrating this eleventh-hour gift, but instead, my cop instincts are tingling. Pushing for answers.

I'm seized by the urgent need to slip into detective mode, scene-of-the-crime style. Crack this mystery wide open. But even the thought makes me feel small and ungrateful, like a kid sulking over the wrong color bike on Christmas morning.

Dad stirs, cracking one eye open. "You're thinking so loud I can hear the gears grinding," he rumbles.

I startle, realizing I've been sitting here just...staring. Gathering my turbulent thoughts, I offer him a contrite shrug. "Sorry, just processing everything. It's a lot to take in."

He gives me a knowing look I can't quite parse. "Emma, a word of advice. Sometimes in life, you've just gotta take the win without over-analyzing how you got it."

I open my mouth to respond, but he holds up one finger. "But other times, it's worth digging for the truth. Even if it's uncomfortable. You just have to trust your gut to know the difference."

I frown, tearing a hangnail on my thumb. Dad sighs, eyes drifting closed again. "I'm tired, honey. How 'bout you go hunt down some of that terrible coffee while I rest?"

Translation: I love you, but please stop sitting here having loud feelings at me.

I stand, leaning down to brush a kiss across his forehead. The skin there is crepe-thin but still warm. "I'll be back soon," I whisper.

He gives my hand one more feeble squeeze before I slip out the door, his words ringing in my ears. *Trust your gut.* As I wander the halls in search of caffeine, it hits me. I don't need coffee. I need answers.

Something about this miracle surgery doesn't sit well in my gut. I wind through the labyrinth of halls, not toward the cafeteria, but down to the nurses' station on Dad's floor. Luckily, it's the bubbly animal-scrub nurse from before manning the desk.

I paste on a friendly grin as I approach. "Hi there, I wanted to say thank you for the wonderful news about my dad's surgery today. It means the world to us."

She beams, cheeks plumping. "Oh, it was my pleasure! I'm just so glad Dr. Alden could fit your father in."

"It really is incredible." I lean in, dropping my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I'd love to send Dr. Alden a little thank-you gift for making room in his busy schedule. Would you know if someone on staff helped make the arrangements? I'd like to include them too."

The nurse tilts her head, tapping a pen to her lip. "You know, now that you mention it, I think the person who reached out to Dr. Alden said something about a charity event? For the children's hospital, maybe? Does that ring any bells?"

Everything inside me goes still. Charity event. Like the one Xavier was helping organize last month. The one I teased him about over dinner recently. No. It can't be...

As if on cue, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I glance down to see a new message from none other than Xavier himself.

Hey you. Any update on your dad's surgery? Let me know if you need anything today.

The words blur before me. I mumble some excuse to the nurse and hurry back upstairs, heart and mind racing equally fast. Back in Dad's room I stand gripping the visitor's chair, the crossword page crumpling in my fist. It's suddenly hard to breathe around the knot in my throat.

Xavier must somehow have found out about Dad's condition worsening. About the impossibly long wait for Dr. Alden. And he used his connections to clear the way, no questions asked. Out of the goodness of his heart. *Oh, my fucking god.*

I sink into the chair, knees jelly-soft. If this is true, it changes everything. Whatever mess happened between us, Xavier still cared enough to move mountains for my family. And I don't know how to process the magnitude of that.

Dad snuffles in his sleep, dragging me back from the brink of a full meltdown. I smooth the wrinkled newspaper over my lap, staring sightlessly at the black and white squares. The not-so-distant memory of our last conversation plays on a loop in my mind.

Xavier's unexpected appearance on my running path after days of tense silence. His searching eyes and hesitant smile. That question he posed, so softly it nearly got swallowed by the wind. *What if this—us—were real?* Was he seeking me out all those times? Is it me who's been sabotaging this relationship from the get-go?

My pulse kicks just remembering the vulnerable hope etched across his face. Like I held the fragile future balanced in my hands. But the timing was all wrong. With dad's relapse, the club pressuring Jeff—I panicked. Shoved it all into a box and walked away.

And now here Xavier is, weeks later, silently moving mountains for my family. Making the impossible possible, just because he knew I needed it.

The knot in my throat swells, emotion spilling over. Because Dad was right about another thing. Sometimes, you don't get an unlimited amount of chances to be brave. And I'll be damned if I waste this one.

I dash the tears from my cheeks, a new purpose steeling my spine. However terrifying and messy this gets, I owe it to myself—to Xavier—to find out if this thing between us could be real.

I glance at Dad's sleeping form, remembering his advice. Trust your gut. Well, right now, my gut is screaming that I need to have a very overdue conversation with Chicago's star wide receiver. Preferably sometime before hell freezes over.

TWENTY-FOUR

XAVIER

THE SOLES OF MY SHOES SQUEAK RHYTHMICALLY AGAINST THE waxed linoleum with each anxious stride as I pace the sterile hospital corridor, every nerve in my body pulled taut. How long has it been since they wheeled Charles into surgery? Minutes? Hours? Time drips by agonizingly slowly in this place, like sap oozing down a tree.

I halt mid-step, raking a hand through my hair. *Wallowing in worry won't make the clock tick any faster.* I force a deep breath into my lungs, but the inhale catches jaggedly in my throat. Damn this helplessness. I'm used to being in control on the field, directing each play, but here I'm just another spectator awaiting fate's judgment.

At least Emma's holding it together better than me. She's sitting stiffly in one of the waiting room chairs, leafing through a dog-eared romance novel without really reading it. I noticed her arriving earlier but kept my distance, not wanting to intrude on her family's privacy. But I can't tear my eyes away for long. Every few minutes, my gaze drifts back to her silhouette, as if the mere sight of her could calm the storm raging inside me.

A swinging door swings open down the hall, ejecting a petite nurse in light blue scrubs. She totters toward us purposefully on soft-soled shoes. I halt, pulse thundering in my ears. This is it, the moment I've been bracing for. Beside me, Emma's head snaps up, eyes widening. She tosses the book aside and jumps to her feet. I resist the urge to go to her and put my arm around her shoulders so we could hear the news side-by-side.

“The surgery was a success,” the nurse announces briskly. “He’s stable in recovery now.”

Sweet relief cascades through me, so overpowering I have to lean against the wall for support. Beside me, Emma drops back into her chair, pressing both palms over her mouth as she blinks back tears.

“Thank you,” she whispers hoarsely. I echo her gratitude, the simple phrase laden with days’ worth of bottled up fear and anticipation.

The nurse smiles. “Of course. We’ll continue monitoring Mr. Thompson closely over the next 48 hours, but the outlook is very positive. Dr. Alden will be out shortly to discuss the details with you.”

With that, she bustles back through the swinging door, her practical sneakers squeaking down the hall. Emma drops her forehead into her hands, shoulders shaking with quiet sobs. I shift awkwardly, unsure if I should comfort her or give her space. But before I can decide, she lifts her head and catches my eye.

Her eyes are round and glossy, but behind the sheen of tears, I sense something sharper. Suspicion. Comprehension dawning. She knows. Somehow she’s put it all together.

She walks up to me. “Thank you,” she says again, but it’s different this time.

I shove my fists into my pockets and study the flecked tiles. “Just glad I could be here. Your dad’s a good man. He deserves the team rooting for him.”

Lame. I wince at my own feeble deflection. But the words hang between us now, loaded and inescapable. I feel like I’m waiting for something to go off.

Emma presses her lips together, considering me for a long moment. When she finally speaks, her voice is gentle but deliberate. “It’s pretty remarkable that the top cardiothoracic surgeon in the country just happened to have an opening on his schedule for Dad’s operation. Some might even call that a miracle.”

I scrub a hand over my mouth, pulse kicking. No use denying it now.

“Emma, I—”

But before I can finish, my cell phone blares to life, rattling against my thigh. Caller ID flashes Wayne’s name. Pulse Athletic’s lucrative sponsorship offer. The deal he’s still trying to get me to accept.

“I should take this,” I mutter. Emma nods, eyes guarded.

I frown at the phone for a split second before silencing the call and shoving it back into my pocket. Wayne can wait. I have something more important to deal with right now.

“You deserve an explanation,” I say frankly, holding Emma’s gaze. “I made some calls. Pulled some strings. Asked the doctor to do me a personal favor. I wanted to help get your dad the best treatment possible. But I didn’t do it fishing for gratitude or to...to gain your favor.”

I exhale sharply, struggling to articulate feelings I can barely untangle myself.

“I did it because—” I stop, start again. “Because I care about you. About your family. And because with the people who matter, you do whatever it takes. Even if that means calling in favors you swore you’d never use.”

Emma studies me for a long moment, eyes bright. When she finally speaks, her voice wavers just slightly. “Why wouldn’t you just tell me you were trying to help?”

I rake both hands through my hair, stalling. She’s right—I should have been upfront instead of maneuvering in secret. But at the time, our relationship was on shaky ground. I was afraid she’d refuse out of pride or principle. That I’d unintentionally hurt her trying to help.

“I guess I thought it would be better if I handled things quietly. I didn’t want you to feel like you...owed me anything.”

Even as I say it, I realize how patronizing it sounds. How utterly I’ve misjudged this remarkable woman standing in front of me. If I fuck things up with her because of this, it

won't be because of what I actually did, but because my reasoning for keeping it a secret are flawed.

Emma presses her lips together, considering this. Then she takes a step closer, eyes earnest. "Just so you know, that's not why I thanked you earlier. And it's not why I'm thanking you now. I know you didn't do this as some kind of transaction."

She pauses, emotion creeping into her voice. "You did it because you have a good heart. Because you understand what it means to protect the people you care about. And I'll never take that for granted."

Hearing her say this releases some invisible vise that's been squeezing my chest for days. I let out a long breath, the hint of a smile tugging at my mouth.

"Well, in that case...you're welcome."

We share a look then—a real, meaningful look without artifice or expectations. In her eyes, I glimpse possibilities I've been too afraid or proud to acknowledge before. Maybe I haven't irreparably screwed this up after all.

The charged moment is broken by another irritating buzz from my phone. I don't need caller ID to know it's Wayne again. I silence the call, but not before Emma's eyes flicker to my pocket.

"That sponsorship offer?" she asks neutrally. No judgment, just curiosity. God, have I ever met a woman like her?

I nod tightly. "Yeah. They're pressing me for an answer they like better than the concerns I expressed."

"Hmm." Emma furrows her brow. "And what are you going to tell them?"

It's a simple question without an easy answer. Signing the Pulse Athletic deal could take my career, or at least my income, to the next level. But it could also unravel everything I've come to care about. Everything I believe in.

I think of that conversation Emma and I had weeks ago, when she asked me what I wanted people to remember about me

after I retire. That my stats were the best? That I made crazy money? Or that I stood for more than personal glory?

My answer rings loud and clear now, like a bell cutting through fog.

Before I can overthink it, I tug out my phone and hit call back. Wayne answers on the first ring.

“Xavier! Tell me you’re calling back with good news.”

I take a breath, envisioning Emma’s face, her father’s frail hand clinging to life. The choice becomes clear.

“Wayne, I can’t sign the Pulse deal. I know what we discussed, but for personal reasons, I need to walk away.”

“Personal reasons?” Wayne’s voice spikes an octave. “You realize what you’re giving up, right? This is a legacy-defining partnership!”

I wince, resolve wavering. But one glimpse at Emma steels my spine.

“I realize that. But some things matter more. I need to stand by my principles on this.”

Wayne sputters in protest, but I cut him off. “I appreciate you setting this up. But the answer is no. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Before he can argue further, I end the call and silence my phone. Suddenly the sterile hallway seems brighter, the air easier to breathe. I lift my eyes to Emma’s. Something powerful passes between us then, words unnecessary. I feel like I’ve passed some secret kind of test.

In her face, I glimpse the first faint rays of a rising sun, burning through the fog to illuminate a path forward together. If she’ll still have me by her side.

I open my mouth, an invitation on my tongue, when the waiting room door swings open.

“Ms. Thompson?”

A tall, silver-haired man in a pristine white coat strides toward us, hand extended. Dr. Alden. The acclaimed surgeon who just saved Emma’s father.

Emma turns to him eagerly. “Yes, I’m Emma Thompson. Charles’s daughter. How is he doing?”

Dr. Alden’s craggy face crinkles into a smile. “The procedure went perfectly. Your father is recovering well. I expect a full recovery within a few weeks. You’ll have many more years with your father.” His smile widens. “We’ll keep him here for 48 hours until Friday, then he’ll be all yours.”

Relief crashes over Emma’s face. She thanks the doctor profusely, blinking back a fresh wave of tears, before peppering him with eager questions about post-operation care.

As their voices recede down the hall, I hang back, watching Emma walk away with the legendary surgeon. Today marks a new beginning for her family. And maybe, if I’m brave enough, for me and Emma too. For now, I’m content to give her space with her dad. There will be time to talk through the next steps later.

My thoughts are interrupted by the vibrating of my phone, still silenced in my pocket. Normally I’d ignore it, but something makes me fish it out.

The text isn’t from Wayne, but from Coach Reynolds. Three short words that make my stomach drop.

Trade offer received.

Ice water trickles down my spine. I know immediately what this means—the club has an offer to trade Jeff. To send him packing from Chicago before he’s had a chance to prove himself. If Jeff goes, Emma might go with him.

I grimace, guilt settling heavy on my shoulders. I promised Emma I’d look out for her brother, be his mentor. But between the mess with Rachel, managing my career, and getting tangled up with Emma, I’ve taken my eye off the ball.

And now that chicken has come home to roost.

I slump against the wall, Coach’s message blurring before my eyes. How did I let things get to this point? If I’d been a better mentor, maybe Jeff’s performance would be stronger and the club wouldn’t be so quick to cut him loose.

Which means this impending trade is on me. My screwup to fix.

The question is—do I tell Emma? She has enough on her plate right now with her dad’s health. This could destroy her.

But keeping it from her could seriously damage her trust if she finds out later. I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place, with no clear path forward.

Maybe there’s still a move left to play here. I straighten from the wall, fresh purpose surging through me. The club hasn’t pulled the trigger yet. That means there’s still time to convince them Jeff has potential, if I step up as his mentor for real.

Before I can overthink it, I fire off a text to Coach Reynolds: *Don’t make a decision until after the Sunday game.*

The three blinking dots taunt me as Coach types out his reply. After an agonizing wait, his response appears.

One game. Make it count.

I release a shaky breath. It’s something. A tiny victory. Now I just need to turn Jeff into a breakout star before Sunday’s game, all while watching Emma’s dad recover from open-heart surgery.

Yeah. No problem at all.

The waiting room door swings open, and Emma steps through. Her eyes instantly find mine, like magnets snapping together. I open my mouth, then close it again. Now isn’t the time to dump my problems on her.

Her gaze turns serious. “How are you holding up? I know this whole thing has been stressful.”

Has she ever met a man who didn’t adore her? I shake my head, smiling softly. Even on the brink of collapse from a marathon of family crises, her first thought is still how I’m coping.

“I’ll be fine.” I lift a shoulder, aiming for casual. “Just glad your dad’s surgery went smoothly. You must be exhausted, though. Can I give you a ride home so you can get some rest?”

The words are barely out when Emma's phone jangles, blasting some pop song. She fishes it from her bag, brow furrowing at the screen.

"Oh wow, it's Jeff's agent. I should take this." She bites her lip. "Actually, I told Jeff I'd swing by the practice facility to go over some scheduling stuff. Can I just meet you there?"

I nod automatically, thoughts already jumping ahead. She's heading to see Jeff, and has no idea they have already decided. Jeff's being traded unless he does extraordinary on Sunday. Which means I need to warn him that the clock is ticking. His career hangs by a thread, and he doesn't even know it.

"Yeah, that works," I say absently. "I'll meet you there in a bit."

Emma smiles, the gesture not quite reaching her eyes as her focus is already elsewhere, before stepping away to answer the call. As the waiting room door swings shut behind her, the smile slides off my face and my stomach twists at the idea that I might disappoint her.

Time to have a tough conversation with her brother. And the clock is ticking.

Twenty minutes later, I stride through the double doors of the training complex, my footsteps echoing sharply against the empty corridors. Most players won't arrive for hours, but I know Jeff's habit of showing up early to squeeze in extra practice. Sure enough, the cavernous weight room is already clanging with the sound of iron plates and the occasional grunt as Jeff pushes his lanky body to its limits.

He doesn't hear me approach, too lost in his own world of reps and sets. I rap my knuckles against a weight rack to get his attention.

"Jeff. We need to talk."

He glances up, surprise flashing across his youthful face. "Oh hey, Xavier. What's up?"

I cross my arms, unsure how to delicately tell him that his career is hanging by a thread. Screw it. Subtlety is overrated.

“The team got a trade offer for you.”

Jeff freezes, nearly dropping the 60-pound dumbbell clutched in his right hand.

“Wait, what? Seriously?”

I give a grim nod. Jeff’s eyes widen in alarm, and he sets down the weight with a muffled thud.

“So that’s it?” he asks hoarsely. “They’re just gonna ship me off before I even get a real chance to play?”

I raise both hands calmly. “Not if I can help it. I bought us some time. Until after Sunday’s game.”

Jeff blinks, looking more lost than ever. God, he’s just a kid. An earnest, talented kid who deserves a shot to prove himself. Failure’s not an option here.

“Look, with the improvements these last two weeks and some intense work over the next two days, we can get you ready.”

“Seriously?” Jeff breathes, tentative hope dawning on his face. “You really think we can turn things around?”

“We have to.” I clap him on the shoulder firmly. “I told Coach I believe in you. Make me look like a genius. It’s all in your head. All we need to do now is get into that head of yours and make *you* believe.”

Jeff chuckles at that, breaking the tension. I allow myself a tight smile. “Let’s start now. Show me what you’ve been working on, and we’ll go from there.”

For the next two hours, we drill relentlessly. I push Jeff harder than he’s ever been pushed until sweat mats his hair and darkens his shirt. We run every route and scenario I can envision, with me critiquing his every move.

By the time we finish, Jeff can barely lift his arms, but his routes are noticeably crisper. Tiny seeds of progress.

“Looking better,” I say, lobbing him a water bottle. He fumbles the toss, reflexes dulled by exhaustion. Still needs work. “Get some rest tonight. We’ll pick back up at 6 am tomorrow. We have until Sunday morning to get you there.”

Jeff groans but doesn't argue. As he shuffles toward the locker room, stiff-limbed and drained, I allow myself a small measure of hope. Maybe we can pull this off.

Just then, Emma bursts through the door, balancing large paper bags. The sight of her messy topknot and oversized Thunderhawks sweatshirt momentarily drives all other thoughts from my mind.

"Hey! I picked up dinner," she announces cheerfully. Then her eyes narrow, flitting between Jeff's hunched form and my tense expression. "Everything okay here?"

"Yeah, all good!" Jeff calls over his shoulder. "Just a tough workout. I'll hit the showers first, Ems."

He disappears into the locker room before Emma can respond. She frowns after him, then turns her searching gaze on me. "That was weird. Is Jeff alright?"

I meet her eyes, a whirlpool of emotions I can't quite name swirling in their depths. For a split second, I consider telling her everything—about the trade offer, the ultimatum for Jeff, the responsibility I now feel to save his career.

But then I think about her father, about the monumental day she's just been through, and the words die in my throat. "Jeff's fine," I say finally, forcing a smile. "We're just ramping up the training a bit. Big game on Sunday."

Emma nods, but her eyes are still clouded with something like suspicion—or maybe it's just the weariness of a day spent waiting on life-altering news. "Well, if you say so," she replies, setting down the paper bags on a nearby table. "But just so you know, if something's going on, you can tell me. We're in this together, right?"

The sincerity in her voice almost breaks me. *We're in this together*. The words echo in my head, affirming and terrifying all at once. What does "together" even mean for us at this point?

"I appreciate that, Emma," I breathe, the weight of the secret I'm keeping settling heavy on my conscience. "And you're right. We are in this together."

Her eyes meet mine again, and for a moment, we're both silent, suspended in the gravity of our unspoken thoughts. Then she smiles, a small, tired but genuine smile that lights up her face and eases some of the tension in the room.

"Good," she says. "Now, how about we eat? I'm starving, and hospital cafeteria food is a crime against humanity."

I chuckle at that, grateful for the shift in the mood. "You got it. Let's eat."

As we move toward the table, the paper bags crinkling and the scent of fried chicken filling the air, I can't shake the sense that we're at a turning point. In our relationship, in our lives, in everything. And as we sit down to eat, I make a silent promise to myself.

Whatever comes next, I won't face it alone. And neither will Emma.

TWENTY-FIVE

XAVIER

IT ALL FEELS LIKE A HAZE AS I WALK INTO THE LOCKER ROOM. The atmosphere is electric, thick with pregame jitters and adrenaline. Players suit up in tense silence, the gravity of the upcoming game settling heavily on their shoulders. This is the first match of the season, and for some, a defining moment in their careers.

Jeff sits hunched on the bench, staring at the floor as he slowly tightens his laces. He's been waiting months for this chance to prove himself, but now that it's here, his stomach churns with anxiety, I'm sure. So much is riding on today's game. For him, it's everything.

I sink down beside him and clasp his shoulder firmly. "You've got this, rookie. Just keep your head on straight and remember your training."

He nods, his eyes betray none of his nerves, only steely determination. "I won't let you down, Xavier," he says.

I grin and give his shoulder a shake. "I know you won't. Now let's show them what you're made of."

The haze continues as the shrill blast of the coach's whistle shakes us from our thoughts. It's time. We file out onto the field, the deafening roar of the crowd washing over us. Emma is on the sideline, a brilliant spot of blonde hair in the sea of black and red jerseys. She gives a little wave when she catches my eye, and my pulse quickens. Everything clears. There's no more haze as I realize I've worked for this moment my entire life.

The kickoff is flawless, sailing deep into our territory. Game on. We receive the ball and power forward, cleats churning up chunks of turf. But the opposing defense is just as aggressive. We struggle to gain ground, and the scoreboard remains ominously blank.

Ten minutes in, we finally manage a field goal to notch 3 points. A ripple of half-hearted cheers goes through the crowd. We need more than just field goals to win this.

From my receiver position, I scan the field, analyzing gaps in their defense. Jeff is light on his feet, using his agility to slip through tackles. But our drives keep stalling before we can reach the end zone. The clock ticks down relentlessly.

By halftime, we are trailing 10-3. The mood in the locker room is tense, voices muted between plays. In a quiet corner, the coach and owner converse in low tones, casting furtive glances Jeff's way. Their meaning is clear—his time to prove himself is rapidly dwindling.

We burst back onto the field, re-energized but also desperate. I can feel the eyes of the crowd, hopeful one moment and disappointed the next as our promising drives crumble.

With less than a minute left, we are down 13-9, our chances fading fast. The coach calls a timeout, and we huddle, strategizing our final play. Coach wants to replace Jeff, but I ask for one more shot. He gives an okay reluctantly. When the whistle blows, we line back up, hearts pounding. This is our last shot.

The ball is snapped, spinning cleanly into the quarterback's hands. He surveys the field for a split second before firing it in my direction. I catch it and pivot right, ready to barrel towards the goal line like I've done so many times before.

But at the last moment, I hesitate. A defender blocks my way, but parallel to my right is Jeff, eyes blazing with determination. The memory of our extra practices flashes through my mind. Without thinking, I toss the ball to him instead, trusting his abilities completely.

The pass throws off the defender, as the crowd seems to hold their breath. In an explosion of speed, Jeff scoops up the ball into his chest, just like we've rehearsed, and blazes downfield. Defenders rush him but can't get close as he weaves and spins at an unbelievable pace. I grin as he breaks through the last man and sprints for the end zone. A perfect play. The points flash on the scoreboard, sealing our victory.

The bellows and cheers are deafening. Jeff disappears under a pile of ecstatic teammates. On the line, Emma is on her feet, clapping and beaming. As Jeff emerges, I pull him into a quick hug.

"I knew you had it in you," I shout over the noise.

He shakes his head, dazed and panting. "I never could've done it without you, man. That pass was unbelievable."

Pride swells in my chest. The kid has come so far, and today proves he deserves to be on this team as much as anyone. We'll make a great team. I catch the coach's eye and he gives an approving nod. Jeff's future here is no longer in question.

As we head off the field, I notice Emma waiting, a barely contained smile lighting up her face. Jeff is waylaid by a crowd of fans, so I break off and approach her.

"Not bad for a rookie, eh?" I say, jerking my thumb at the scoreboard.

She laughs, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Not bad at all. You were pretty impressive yourself with that clutch pass."

I shrug, suddenly self-conscious. "Yeah, well, just trusting my teammate. That's what it's all about."

Her smile fades, replaced by an earnest vulnerability I haven't seen before. She takes a half step closer.

"You know, at first I wasn't sure I could trust you," she says seriously. "But you've proved yourself this last week, in more ways than one."

My pulse quickens at her nearness. This is the opening I've been waiting for.

“Emma...” I hesitate, nerves threatening to choke my words. “What I said before, about making this real between us—that offer still stands. If you want to try...”

I trail off, mouth dry. She considers me for a long moment before replying.

“I think I’m ready to give this a real shot,” she says finally. “No more pretending.”

Elation and relief flood through me. I made so many mistakes in how I handled things with her that I really wondered if she would walk away. I start to reply, but she suddenly grabs my jersey and pulls me into a searing kiss. My eyes shut as I wrap an arm around her waist, the noise of the crowd fading away. Everything about her dominates my senses. The vanilla scent that always seems to surround her. The taste of stadium popcorn mingled with the hot chocolate she brought with her. The way we fit together that screams that she’s *mine*.

When we finally break apart, breathless, the promise in her eyes is clearer than any words. This is our fresh start, and I won’t ever take it—or her—for granted.

“So, does this mean you’ll let me take you on a proper date?” I ask, with a smile.

She grins up at me, and the rush of affection I feel nearly bowls me over. “It would be my pleasure.” She reaches for my hand, lacing her fingers between mine like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

As we walk hand in hand toward the locker rooms, I recognize that today’s win isn’t just about the scoreboard or even about proving ourselves on the field. It’s a milestone, a point of departure for something far deeper and more meaningful. The adrenaline of victory is potent, but it can’t rival the profound sense of connection I feel with Emma in this moment.

With her beside me, uncertainties about the future seem to dissolve, replaced by a quiet confidence that whatever comes our way, we’ll navigate it together.

EPILOGUE

EMMA

I STAND AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE LAVISHLY DECORATED banquet hall, adjusting the silk green straps of my dress. The excited hum of mingling voices washes over me as donors, hospital staff, and city elite filter into the glamorous charity event. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow on circular tables draped in cream linens, elegant place settings twinkling under the light.

It's hard to believe I'm here as an honored guest. Tonight's auction promises to raise crucial funds for Chicago Memorial's ICU unit, the place I spent countless drained hours waiting for news. The same hospital floors where my father teetered so precariously between life and death just months ago, before Xavier intervened.

I spot Xavier across the bustling room, looking unfairly handsome in a tailored suit that hugs his tall, athletic frame. Our eyes meet, and he gives me a smile that ignites a glow deep in my chest. We've come so far from our inauspicious start. Though we've had our share of fumbles, fate seems determined to keep bringing us back together. And now here we are, officially a couple, ready to take things to the next level. Still, seeing him look at me like that makes my knees inexplicably weak.

The lights flicker, signaling the start of the program. Dr. Alden—the man who saved my father—steps up to the microphone stand at the front of the room. The applause dies down as all eyes turn to the leading cardiac surgeon in the country.

“Good evening esteemed guests, hospital colleagues, and friends,” Dr. Alden begins, his voice resonating with gratitude. “Thank you for being here tonight to support Chicago Memorial Hospital and its intensive care unit, which has saved countless lives over its long history...”

As he speaks about the ICU’s impact, my thoughts drift to Dad’s time there, unconscious and relying on machines to keep his fragile heart beating. I remember pacing the cold floors, obsessively checking monitors and charts through bleary eyes, terrified each shift change would bring bad news.

But now my father is recovering, the dangerous arrhythmia finally under control thanks to Xavier’s sheer force of will. He’s moved mountains to get Dr. Alden to make room on his schedule for my father, refusing to take no for an answer.

Dr. Alden’s words pull me back to the present. “Thanks to your generosity this evening, we will be able to upgrade dated cardiac monitoring systems and make much-needed renovations. This will allow Chicago Memorial to provide even better care for Chicago’s families when it matters most.”

Enthusiastic applause follows this announcement. Clearly, this is a crowd ready to give, knowing it will make a tangible difference. The energy in the room is palpably expectant as a server wheels out the first auction item—an impressive Manet lithograph.

“Let’s start the bidding at \$5,000,” the auctioneer calls. Paddles immediately shoot up around the room. Within minutes, the bids exceed \$30,000, the auctioneer’s voice rising in excitement. The item sells for \$47,500 and is whisked away, replaced by an opulent spa getaway that fetches an impressive \$41,000.

Each item is received eagerly, the bids mounting with astonishing speed. Rare antiques, luxury vacations, even a vintage pink Cadillac. The audience’s wallets are wide open tonight.

I’m not the only one finding it surreal. “Can you believe this?” Holly murmurs next to me as a dazzling 10-day safari sells for

over six figures. “I picked the wrong career. I should’ve been a philanthropist.”

I laugh under my breath. My fashionable friend looks stunning, as always, in a sleek black dress that compliments her warm umber skin.

“The next item may particularly interest the sports fans among us tonight,” the auctioneer announces. I notice Xavier straighten slightly, his eyes narrowing. “We have a unique opportunity for a private date with Chicago’s most eligible footballer, Xavier Johnson!”

A surprised laugh ripples through the guests. Xavier rubs the back of his neck, cocking his head self-consciously even as his mouth curves into a smile. Trust him to not only organize this entire charity event, but to put himself on the auction block, too. Though knowing Xavier, part of him also enjoys the attention.

“Let’s start the bidding at \$5000 for this handsome athlete and philanthropist,” the auctioneer continues. “A perfect chance for that special someone to score big!”

This elicits an excited buzz from the female guests. The bidding erupts instantly, shouts of “\$6000!”, “\$8000!” ringing out from every corner of the room. Xavier’s smile looks decidedly more nervous now, though I can’t tell if it’s the bidding or if he’s worried that I’m going to be annoyed. He doesn’t need to worry. I watch in amusement as the price rapidly soars into the thousands.

“\$50,000!” trills a socialite in satin opera gloves, batting her lashes at Xavier.

I just roll my eyes, confident in the way he feels about me. If nothing else, the whisker burn on the insides of my thighs from when he went down on me in a bathroom only thirty minutes ago is proof I don’t need to be jealous.

“\$60,000!” yells a glamorously dressed woman at the table beside me, who looks vaguely familiar. Probably the wife of some real estate tycoon.

The numbers keep climbing as more ladies thrust their paddles in the air, incentivized by the blend of charity and handsome athlete. Xavier's eyes are round, his competitive spirit somewhat mollified by the crazy bids. I catch his glance and have to press my lips together to keep from laughing out loud.

Finally, at "\$95,000!" the socialite lets out a jubilant laugh and blows Xavier a kiss. He looks both relieved and slightly terrified. But the thunderous applause and whistles show the guests' appreciation for his willingness to take part.

As chairs scrape back for a short intermission, I stand chatting idly with Holly about something one of the offensive players did earlier this week when Dr. Alden suddenly approaches me, smiling warmly.

"Emma, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you and Xavier for putting this together," he says. "Seeing our community come together like this to support the hospital is incredibly heartening."

I shake my head. "Please, the thanks truly go to Xavier. He handled everything. I'm just happy to take part any way I can."

Dr. Alden nods thoughtfully. "Well, I always knew he was a special young man. We're very lucky to have his dedication. And your family's too." He gives my shoulder an affectionate pat before disappearing into the bustling crowd.

I blink back the lump forming in my throat, once again amazed at all Xavier has set in motion. When Holly squeezes my hand, I realize I completely forgot she's right next to me.

"You really landed a good one, you know that?" she says, jerking her chin toward Xavier. He is speaking with a donor, his height and charisma commanding the attention of those around him.

"Yeah," I breathe, my heart swelling as I watch him work the room with ease despite the earlier embarrassment. "I really did."

A sudden amplified voice hushes the guests, directing us back to our seats.

“If I could have your attention, please! Thank you all for your incredible generosity this evening,” the auctioneer announces. “I’m pleased to share that so far, we have raised a staggering five million dollars for Chicago Memorial Hospital!”

The room erupts into spontaneous cheers and applause. Across the sea of thrilled faces, I spot Xavier already watching me, his eyes crinkling the way they do when he’s truly happy. I know exactly what he’s thinking. We’ve done it.

Scanning the room, I find my father seated near the stage, chatting amiably with Dr. Alden. He looks happier and healthier than I’ve seen him in ages, the pallor and fatigue that had plagued him greatly diminished. When he notices me watching, he gives me a little wink.

Before I can react, Xavier materializes beside me. “Hey you,” he murmurs, slipping an arm around my waist. His woody cologne wraps comfortingly around me.

Dad notices Xavier and waves him over eagerly. I watch, heart brimming, as Xavier approaches and shakes Dad’s outstretched hand, their exchange warm and familiar. After months of strain and uncertainty, seeing my father’s obvious affection for Xavier, and my boyfriend so at ease with him in return, fill me with profound joy.

The lights dim, signaling the auction’s conclusion. As guests drift toward the exit, Xavier gently turns me to face him. The mischievous glint is back in his eyes.

“So, since I brought in the most money tonight, does that make me the top prize?”

I bite back a laugh. “Obviously. Although I hope you got the socialite’s number for your big date.”

He grimaces dramatically. “Pure business. The only girl I have eyes for is standing right here.” His expression shifts, turns serious. “Emma, I’ve been thinking...” He hesitates, his fingertips grazing my cheek.

“Yes?” I prompt. His touch is making it hard to think straight. I absently wonder if I’ll ever get used to it.

“These past few months have been great. I know we sort of stumbled into this thing together, but now I can’t imagine my life without you in it.” His thumb gently traces my bottom lip. I hold my breath. “So I was wondering if maybe you’d like to move in with me?”

My pulse stutters. We spend most nights together anyway, but somehow this feels like an important threshold we haven’t crossed.

“Only if you’re sure your place is big enough for my shoe collection,” I quip, buying time.

He grins. “I think I can make some room in the closet.”

I study those velvety brown eyes, brimming with humor and tenderness. Dad’s advice about embracing life’s special gifts echoes in my mind. I’ve almost let stubbornness and fear blind me to what’s right in front of me all along. I won’t make that mistake again. I realize I don’t care if anyone else thinks it’s too fast. The only opinions that matter are mine and Xavier’s. Anyone who truly cares about us will be happy if we’re happy.

“I would love nothing more than to live with you, Xavier Johnson,” I whisper.

Joy flashes across his face. Then he draws me close and kisses me deeply, the rest of the room fading away. I savor the solid strength of his arms around me, the heat of his mouth claiming mine. We’ve certainly had our trials, but right here, right now, everything feels exactly as it should.

When we finally part, Xavier rests his forehead against mine, his breathing slightly uneven.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Emma Thompson,” he murmurs. “But now that I’ve got you, I’m never letting you go.”

I smile up at him, pulse racing. “Good. Because you’re stuck with me.”

We leave the banquet hall hand in hand, the future bright with promise. There are sure to be new challenges ahead, but with Xavier by my side, I know we can weather anything.

Tonight is just the start of our story together. And I can't wait to see what the next chapter will bring.

THE END

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