

CHAPTER ONE

EMERSON

*Piedmont Bay, North Carolina
Thursday, March 12*

THE NEWSROOM IS BUZZING WITH excitement.

I feel it the moment I step through the doors of the *Piedmont Bay Gazette*, the small newspaper where I've worked as a sportswriter for the past four years.

The excitement is palpable, the air crackling as if I've entered an electric force field.

"Hey, Emerson." Gloria, the receptionist, smiles cheerfully at me. "How was your dentist's appointment?"

"Wonderful," I say distractedly, keys jangling in my hand as I head toward the newsroom.

There's a large crowd gathered around the television mounted in the middle of the bullpen. It's an election year. Maybe one of the candidates has been caught in a sex scandal. Maybe we're about to be treated to the spectacle of a press conference where the disgraced politician—dutiful spouse in tow—tearfully apologizes to the American people before withdrawing from the race.

My theory is shot to hell when I see that the TV is tuned to ESPN. Renowned NFL insider Adam Schefter is on the screen with his phone to his ear.

Seeing him on the phone sends a familiar zing of anticipation up my spine, because it means we're about to get a good scoop.

It's the start of NFL free agency, a period marked by lots of wheeling and dealing in closed-door meetings. It's a thrilling time of year for sports reporters, but I've never seen the entire newsroom take such an avid interest.

I sidle up to one of my fellow sportswriters. "What's going on?"

Troy glances at me, his blue eyes surprised. "Weren't you listening to sports radio on your way over?"

"No," I grumble. "I was on the phone with my damn insurance provider trying to straighten out a billing issue. What'd I miss?"

"Schefter has some breaking news about the Renegades."

"The Renegades? Really?" I've had my ear to the ground all week and haven't heard about any major developments. Granted, I'm not Adam Schefter.

"We think they just signed someone big," Troy says.

"No way! Who?"

"I don't know. That's what we're waiting to—"

Someone shushes him, and we both turn our attention to the TV just as Adam Schefter looks up excitedly from his phone.

"Folks, I've just received word that free agent Reyes Malone has signed a whopping four-

year, \$180 million contract to play for the Carolina Renegades.”

The newsroom erupts in celebration.

I'm so stunned I can't move or speak. I'm barely breathing.

My coworkers are ecstatic, whooping and cheering and slapping high fives like we've just won the Super Bowl.

Troy slings an arm around my shoulders and hugs me, beaming from ear to ear. “This is fucking awesome!”

“Heck, yeah,” I force myself to say.

“How the hell did they keep this under wraps?” someone exclaims incredulously. “Everyone's been wondering for months where Malone would go. We didn't even know the Renegades were on his radar!”

Troy laughs. “Schefter said it'd be a team that comes out of nowhere. He was right, but not even *he* predicted the Renegades!”

“Well, yeah, because Malone himself said he didn't want to play here,” another voice pipes up. “Doesn't anyone remember that interview he gave four years ago right before the draft? The reporter rattled off a bunch of prospective teams to him, and Carolina was the only team he didn't want to sign with.”

“Did he specifically say that?” the city editor asks.

“Pretty much. And the reporter was surprised because Malone has family here and he used to visit every summer. But he clearly wasn't interested in playing for the Renegades.”

“Well, things have obviously changed,” Troy crows, “so we won't hold that interview against him!”

Everyone starts babbling excitedly about the future of our abysmal Renegades, who finished the season with a craptastic 3-13 record. Signing a surefire Hall of Famer like Reyes Malone is a massive game changer, and we all know it.

But I feel disconnected from everyone around me, from the joy and optimism infecting them. I don't share their joy or optimism, so I can't join in their celebration.

The smile plastered on my face is an imposter's smile. I have to get out of there before someone sees through my facade and starts asking questions. Questions I'm not ready to answer.

Thankfully no one notices when I retreat to my cubicle tucked into the back corner of the sports department.

My head is spinning and an invisible hand is squeezing my heart.

Reyes is coming to Piedmont Bay. He's going to be here, in the same town, playing for the professional football team that I cover.

I'm still struggling to process this stunning turn of events when Lon Nowak shows up at my cubicle. He's the *Gazette's* sports editor and my boss.

“Heard the big news?”

“Of course,” I say weakly.

Lon grins. “Huge fucking deal, right?”

“Totally.”

“I'm really surprised the news didn't get leaked. That's hard to pull off nowadays.”

He made sure it didn't leak because he wanted to blindside me. It gives him the upper hand.

“The Renegades are holding a press conference tomorrow at noon,” Lon says briskly. “I expect you there front and center.”

My throat goes bone dry. Of course I should be there. I’m the *Gazette’s* NFL beat writer.

Which makes the next words out of my mouth so ludicrous: “I’m supposed to cover a softball game tomorrow afternoon.”

Lon stares at me like I’ve completely lost my mind. “The Renegades just netted the biggest free agent on the market. That trumps everything else.”

“Maybe Troy—”

He jabs a finger at me. “Tomorrow at noon.”

“Yes, sir,” I mumble.

As soon as he walks off, I drop my head in my hands and close my eyes.

I am so freaking screwed.

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THE PRESS CONFERENCE IS HELD at the Renegades’ corporate headquarters just outside Piedmont Bay.

A nasty traffic jam has me running late that afternoon. By the time I arrive, the press room is packed to capacity. Every seat is taken, and the back is crammed with reporters and cameramen eager to hear from the Renegades’ new star quarterback.

As I look around, I’m relieved to see that the *Gazette’s* photographer got here early enough to stake out a seat near the front.

At least one of us is on the ball.

Pulling out my digital recorder, I push my way through the crush of bodies and squeeze into a spot halfway up the aisle, standing against the wall.

Then, and only then, do I allow myself to look directly at the podium.

The team’s general manager and head coach are seated behind a table addressing the audience. Sitting between them is none other than Reyes Malone, aka My One True Love.

The sight of him causes my heart to slam against my breastbone.

Never in a million years did I think he would sign with the Carolina Renegades. The Ravens offered him the sun, moon and stars to stay with them. Every other team would have given their collective left nut just to talk to him.

He literally could have gone anywhere he wanted.

He came here.

Grinning like a bandit that just pulled off the greatest heist in human history, the Renegades’ GM cedes the floor to Reyes.

The room immediately erupts with camera flashes and the buzz of excited voices.

As he takes in the crowd, loud cheers and whistles break out.

A slow, devastating smile spreads across his gorgeous face before he leans toward his microphone.

“Good afternoon.” His voice is a dark, hypnotic drawl that curls my toes and steals the air from my lungs. “Thank you all for coming.”

“*We* should be thanking *you!*” someone jokes, setting off a wave of raucous laughter.

Reyes’s rumbling chuckle makes me shiver inside my pinstripe pantsuit.

I stare at him, my heart lodged firmly in my throat as he begins addressing the crowd.

The overhead light glints off the inky blackness of his hair. His eyes are the most intense golden color with blue flecks I vividly remember. They're framed by thick slashes of black eyebrows and ridiculously long lashes. His nose is blade straight, his cheekbones high and sharp. His square jaw is shadowed with heavy dark stubble that makes him look wickedly dangerous. His mouth is firm and sensual with a full bottom lip that I miss tugging between my teeth and sucking like candy.

At six feet five he's one of the tallest quarterbacks in the NFL, a gridiron Goliath who's famously hard to tackle. Dressed in a hand-tailored navy suit that accentuates his massive shoulders, broad chest and muscular arms, he has every woman in the room drooling.

Including me.

It doesn't matter that I've spent the past eight years trying to get over him. The man is sexy as hell—painful history be damned.

As he fields a barrage of questions, I find myself plunged back in time, lost in a rush of memories.

Memories of him teaching me how to climb a tree and bandaging my scraped knees with his first aid kit.

Memories of him defending me against bullies at summer camp and walking me back to my cabin just to make sure no one else bothered me.

Memories of him fisting his hand in my hair and kissing me for the very first—

Someone bumps my arm with a camera bag, jostling me back to the present.

“. . . enjoyed tremendous success with the Baltimore Ravens, winning back-to-back Super Bowls,” a reporter is saying to Reyes. “Are you worried about fitting into the Renegades' offensive scheme, which is very different from the one you're used to?”

It's an absurd question because obviously the Renegades' offense is going to be built around their elite franchise quarterback. Reyes won't have to “fit into” anything, and everyone knows it.

But he indulges the question, and while he does, my eyes slide over his big hands clasped together on the table. He's wearing his two Super Bowl rings.

No wedding band in sight.

But I already knew that.

What I *don't* know is why he's here. What are the chances that after all these years, he would end up in Piedmont Bay with me?

Every instinct is telling me that there's only one explanation for his arrival. He wants revenge.

Even at the expense of his own career and legacy?

“At this time, Mr. Malone will take one more question,” the GM announces.

Chaos erupts as the reporters fire questions at Reyes, shouting over one another to be heard.

My voice should have joined the cacophony. Reyes Malone's signing is the biggest sports story to hit this town in years. I should be just as eager to get the scoop as my peers. Under normal circumstances, I *would* be.

But there's nothing normal about Reyes's sudden reappearance in my life. He was my childhood best friend. My high school sweetheart. My first love. My *only* love.

And I broke his heart.

I watch nervously as his eyes sweep over the crowd before coming to rest on me, as if he knew where I was all along.

No shit, Sherlock. You showed up late, throwing a huge spotlight on yourself!

“Miss . . .” Reyes pretends to pause as if trying to recall my last name. “Miss Sartori. Good to see you again. Did you have a question for me?”

My mouth goes dry, heart jackhammering in my chest as every eye swings in my direction. *Why, God, why did he have to put me on the spot like this?*

You know why.

Swallowing my panic, I raise my chin and meet his cool gaze with forced calm. *You’re a professional. Act like it.*

The admonishment evaporates like a puff of smoke as soon as I open my mouth and blurt out, “Why did you come here?”

The crowd grows completely silent. So silent I can practically hear the blood rushing into my head, turning my face crimson.

Reyes’s eyes flicker darkly before he sends a mocking little smile around the room. “Haven’t I already answered this question?”

Laughter erupts from the pool of reporters.

My face burns hotter with humiliation. “What I’m asking is, what made you decide to leave Baltimore—after three successful seasons—to come play for the Renegades?”

A tiny smirk plays on his lips. “As I’ve already explained, once my contract with the Ravens ended, I felt it was time to explore other opportunities. As you know, my father was born and raised in Piedmont Bay. I thought it might be nice to finish my NFL career close to family.”

I stare at him, thinking of the longstanding rift between him and his North Carolina relatives. I find it hard to believe that he would relocate here to be near the very same people who’d once rejected his late mother. Especially since he hasn’t stepped foot in this town in five years.

I lift my chin in challenge. “Four years ago, you implied in an interview that you didn’t want to play for the Renegades. Do you remember that?”

“I do,” he admits with an aw-shucks country-boy grin. “See, I used to come here every summer to visit my grandparents. Piedmont Bay is a great town full of wonderful people, but my grandma’s curfews sucked. Even though I’m a grown man, I wouldn’t put it past her to try to put me back on some sort of crazy curfew. So when that interviewer asked me about playing here, I thought about my strict grandmother and was like ‘Oh, hell no.’”

The room explodes with laughter. Head-thrown-back, knee-slapping laughter.

Reyes gives me a smug smile, his eyes gleaming. *Checkmate.*

I clench my jaw, cheeks flushing.

“I don’t know about my colleague back there,” a familiar voice pipes up from the front row, “but I for one think this city is damn lucky to have you, Reyes. I look forward to finally celebrating the Renegades’ first Super Bowl victory.”

The crowd claps and cheers like championship-starved fans instead of the professional journalists they’re supposed to be.

Reyes smiles indulgently, a king on his throne. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I hope

I can live up to everyone's expectations."

When the press conference ends, several reporters flock to Reyes for one-on-one interviews. Leading the pack is an icy blonde in a super short skirt, spiky high heels and a ridiculously low-cut blouse.

Jesus. Could she be any more obvious?

As Reyes shakes her hand and gives her a lazy smile, my stomach curdles. Fortunately, the *Gazette's* photographer makes his way over to me, providing a welcome distraction.

We talk and compare notes until we're joined by Jackson Rollins, the smarmy reporter who just threw me under the bus with his kiss-ass comment to Reyes. He's my co-host on a local sports show called *Team Ticker*. I can't stand him, and the feeling would probably be mutual if he weren't so obsessed with getting in my pants.

"Way to go, slugger," he drawls mockingly as the photographer departs. "If I didn't know better, I would think you were trying to run our new quarterback out of town."

"Not at all," I grumble, glancing toward the exit. "Just doing my job."

"Riiight." Jack grins like a shark, revealing a mouthful of blindingly white veneers. "I would think a savvy reporter like yourself could appreciate the tremendous value Malone brings to our beleaguered Renegades. The man's practically a legend."

"I'm fully aware of that." For the past eight years I'd eaten, slept and breathed Reyes's football career. I'd cheered him on when he won the Heisman Trophy during his senior year at Stanford. I'd crossed my fingers tight when he got drafted by the Baltimore Ravens in the first round. And when he won his first Super Bowl, I'd soared on cloud nine for weeks.

As a sportswriter, I always tell myself it's my professional duty to follow the career of the NFL's golden boy. But it's so much deeper than that. I keep track of Reyes because I don't know how *not* to.

Watching the play of emotions across my face, Jack grins slyly. "I think I know what your problem is."

I give him a sharp look, my heart thudding with fear. Does he know about Reyes and me? Did he dig up old yearbook pictures? Will my secret finally be exposed?

"I knew it," he crows, laughing at my stricken expression. "You've got a thing for him, don't you? Your rudeness was just an act."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever, Jack."

He roars with laughter, deepening my annoyance.

"I'd love to continue this conversation, but I'm running late for a game." Before he can say another word, I turn on my heel and walk off.

As I approach the exit, my phone pings in my hand. I lift it up to see a text message from my editor: **What the hell was that???**

I wince. *Shit. I'm in trou—*

Without warning, I slam into the solid wall of a massive chest.

Two strong arms reach out and grab me when I stumble backward, nearly dropping my phone.

I don't have to see his face to know who I've run into. Even before my eyes meet his, my body reacts by shivering with awareness.

His face is leaner, harder and hotter than ever. Seriously. He's so freaking hot. But his eyes are colder than they've ever been. Cold and cynical with a hint of cruelty.

“Emerson,” he murmurs in a detached tone.
My stupid heart leaps into my throat as I stare up at him. “Reyes . . .”