

Prologue

Buddy Carruthers, wide receiver for the Connecticut Kings, read the headline, “Rock Star heads for the U.K.” then crumpled up the newspaper and stuffed it in his empty coffee cup. The stewardess took it away.

His breathing became rapid. Adrenaline pumped through his veins. His body refused to sit still. As soon as the seatbelt sign went off, Buddy paced like a caged animal, up and down the aisle of the private jet rented by the Kings. He sat by a window then got up and joined a card game three rows away. After a couple of hands, he couldn’t concentrate and changed his seat again, plunking down next to his best friend, Griff Montgomery, the quarterback.

“Movie, Mr. Carruthers?” the pretty flight attendant asked.

He shook his head and picked up a magazine, thumbed through it, and then tossed it aside. Emmy was all he could think about. While his teammates celebrated squeaking out a narrow victory over the Los Angeles Tigers, Buddy brooded. *If you’re going to Europe, I’ll never see you again.*

Emotion choked him. Buddy had three dreams. Success in football and financial security he’d already achieved. Then, he had set his mind and heart on settling down. But only with one girl, Emmy Meacham, known as Emerald, the rock star.

He blinked back tears and peered out the window, watching Los Angeles disappear below him.

“It’s done. After waiting five years. It’s over,” he mumbled.

Buddy shot a wry grin at the tall man next to him, sighed, and closed his eyes.

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Chapter One

Five months earlier

Buddy slowly tore out the page in Celebs 'R Us magazine. He smoothed his hand over the gorgeous photo of the stunning rock star, Emerald. *Why aren't you here with me?* After a glance at his watch, he pushed to his feet. Trotting through the hallway, he made it to the locker room with ten minutes to spare.

"Whacha got there, shrimp?" Bullhorn Brodsky asked.

"None of your fuckin' business," Buddy said, plucking the paper from the meaty hand of the linebacker and laying it on the shelf in his locker.

Before he could close the door, Brodsky, six four, two hundred and thirty pounds, shoved the five foot ten player aside. The big man stuffed his massive paw in the narrow space and snatched the photo back. He held it high, so Buddy couldn't reach it.

"Lookie, lookie, a pin up of Emerald. In a bikini, too."

The players hooted and hollered.

"Like she'd ever look at you, shrimp. Jack off material?"

"Shut the fuck up, you fat asshole. Gimme that," Buddy snarled.

"Who you callin' fat?" A meaty hand crumpled the page.

"The guy with three inches hangin' over his belt, you dickwad."

Bull's eyes widened as he went for the nimble runner.

Griff Montgomery, starting quarterback, stepped between the two men. "Come on, guys. Give Buddy his picture, Bull."

The big man handed it over. "I hear she's gonna pose for Playboy. Now that'd be jack off material."

Buddy got sick to his stomach at the thought of Bull leering at Emerald while jerking off. He flew at the linebacker. His fist connected with his teammate's nose.

"Hey! Hey, break it up!" Griff pulled on Brodsky's arm.. Trunk Mahoney and another large linebacker entered the fray and pulled the men apart. Buddy's nose was bleeding. So was Bull's.

"Somebody's got a crush," Bull teased, in a sing-song voice.

"Shut the fuck up," Griff said. "Assholes. You could get fined for this. Both of you."

"The way he's actin', you'd think she was his girlfriend," Bull said, gently touching the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah? Wouldn't you be surprised," Buddy muttered, grabbing a towel and his shoulder pads. After wiping off his face, he finished getting suited up to play. But his thoughts were far from the gridiron. They were squarely planted in a bus station in Willow Falls, New York, five years ago, where he said goodbye to the girl they now called "Emerald."

Emmy Meacham, as she used to be called before she became famous, had been Buddy's girlfriend in college. Though they had parted ways before she hit it big, his love for her had never died. She looked the same, except for a streak of bright green in her now-short hair. His blood heated simply looking at her petite, well-endowed frame.

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| Her mischievous smile practically winked at him off the page. Her eyes glowed with promise, promise that she and Buddy had fulfilled in college. His fingers tingled at the memory of her soft skin. He'd slept with a mountain of women in the last five years, but none could compare to Emmy.

| Still miffed that the badly wrinkled clipping wouldn't be worth saving, Buddy decided to order another copy of last month's issue, so he could get a pristine copy of the amazing photograph.

| His jaw stiffened, when he remembered that she had dumped him immediately following their tender goodbye. She had turned her back on him the minute she left. He hadn't heard from her since. Now, little Emmy Meacham was Emerald, a big rock star. Still painful after five years, the wound refused to heal.

| "Focus, Buddy. We got a game," Griff said, patting his pal on the shoulder.

| "Yeah, yeah, I know." He put his feelings for Emmy into the cold storage section of his heart and turned the key. After a deep breath, he shook out his arms, twisted his neck to loosen the muscles, and knocked off a bottle of water. Griff tossed him a jersey with number fifteen on the back. Buddy smiled. "Ready, Griff."

| The warmth of understanding in his friend's smile made Buddy uneasy. He didn't want anyone to know about Emmy. Only his mother knew of his heartbreak. The team all thought he was a womanizer with a heart of stone. He liked it that way. Fewer questions, fewer lies, and he kept his secret well hidden.

| His teammates joined the others heading for the field. They lined up and stopped. Standing next to Tony Harrison, back-up quarterback, Buddy rested his hand over his heart, like his mother had taught him, waiting for the National Anthem. Harrison looked like he didn't know what to do. *What the hell? What did he do at the million college games he played?* Buddy nudged the young recruit and motioned the boy to follow his lead. The newbie grinned. *Little asshole is relieved he knows what to do.* Buddy gave his head a shake.

| A sexy female in very high heels trotted out on the field, and the crowd went wild.

| Buddy rubbed his eyes. His brow creased. He stared in disbelief. "It can't be."