Chapter 6

It was Wednesday afternoon before Tyler found the time to stop at the flower shop. He had spent the last two days jumping for the phone every time it rang, but Lauren had never returned his phone calls from Monday.

He slid out of his SUV and took a deep, bracing breath before heading into the shop. He had played this scene out in his head dozens of times since Monday night, sometimes they ended with a steamy make-up, sometimes they ended with him being thrown out of Lauren's life forever. He was certain he'd covered every possible scenario in his head, however. He pulled open the door, stepped inside, and blinked several times as the brunette behind the counter registered. Emma had not figured into any of his plans.

“What do you want?” she demanded, her voice sharp and cold.

Tyler hesitated a moment. “Is Lauren here?”

“No,” Emma snapped back. “Thank you very much, she isn't. Goodbye.” She turned abruptly and headed toward the back of the shop.

“I really need to talk to her,” Tyler said, covering the small shop in a few short strides. “I wanted -”

Emma whirled around. “What, exactly? Are you upset because you missed actually seeing her cry on Sunday? Or are you going to try to charm your way to her father again?”

“Charm my way . . . What?” Tyler stared at Emma in confusion.

She advanced on him, fire in her eyes and venom in her voice. “Or did your girlfriend find out about you kissing her, and now you need her to explain that she means nothing to you?”

“My girlfriend?” Tyler fell back a step. “What girlfriend?”

“Oh, so it's not just Lauren that you use, it's Rachel too.” Emma gestured at the door. “Lauren doesn't need someone like you in her life. There's the door, don't let it hit you on the way out.”

“Rachel,” Tyler said quietly. Suddenly things began to make sense. “Rachel isn't my girlfriend, not any -”

“What, she wasn't supposed to show up on Sunday so you dumped her for ruining your plans?” Emma planted her hands on her hips, her voice mocking.

“No! No she wasn't supposed to be there on Sunday beca -”

“Because you were planning to seduce Lauren into talking her father into taking your horse?”

“No! And I don't know what Lauren's father has to -”

“Right,” Emma drew the word out, looking daggers at Tyler. “Look, I really don't care. Lauren is crushed, and I want -”

“I want you to shut your mouth and listen to me!” Tyler exploded. His anger propelled him forward, but Emma stood her ground. “You have no idea what happened Sunday night, I don't think Lauren does either, and I'm beginning to think I only have half the story myself!”

“Fine,” Emma hissed through gritted teeth. “Talk. I'm listening.”

Tyler covered his face with his hands and took a deep breath. Emma was protecting Lauren, that was all. A Lauren who evidently felt she had been very, very wronged.

“Rachel is my ex-girlfriend,” Tyler began, putting his hands down and meeting the fury still smoldering in Emma's eyes. “We've had a rocky relationship since college, but she followed me out here just the same. It's been an on and off thing, largely at Rachel's whim, for the last two years. She broke with me again on Thursday. Honestly, I probably would have called her up again just so I would have had a date on Sunday if I hadn't met Lauren.” Emma's eyes hardened. She crossed her arms and continued to glare, but she didn't interrupt. “But I did meet Lauren. And from the minute she spoke to me . . .” Tyler threw up his hands. “I don't believe in that whole love-at-first-sight thing. Or I didn't, I might now. There's something special about Lauren, something different from any girl I've ever met. I can't get her out of my head, I want to be around her every second of every day for the rest of my life. I barely know her, but I think I'm in love with her, Emma, I really do.”

Emma's foot started tapping. “That's all very touching, but I'm still waiting for you to explain your side of Sunday night.” There was no give in her voice, but maybe, just maybe her eyes were starting to soften.

Tyler nodded. “Sunday. We got to the benefit, Lauren and I, and I thought I was going to impress her. Introduce her to all these trainers and jockeys, I thought she'd be thrilled to learn that I own a stable. I had no idea she was John Macon's daughter until we got in there, and all her old friends started coming up and talking with her. I got jealous. I felt like they were monopolizing all her time, and it was supposed to be me impressing her with all the people I knew, not the other way around. As soon as the music started, I dragged her out onto the dance floor, and I kept her there. We did kiss. And it was the most amazing kiss I've ever had. Then she went to the bathroom to freshen up, and that was the last I saw of her.” He shrugged. “Rachel did show up, but it was after Lauren left, or as she was leaving, I'm not sure. She'd bought a ticket and was angry at me for not inviting her, but I reminded her that she had broken up with me, told her I wasn't interested in getting back together, and she left. I don't know when or how she would have run into Lauren, and I still don't know where all these accusations about Lauren's father are coming from.”

“You left out the part where you kissed Rachel,” Emma said.

“I didn't kiss . . . Oh. I think I see. No, I didn't kiss Rachel,” Tyler said. Emma raised an eyebrow and the beat of her foot on the floor increased. “Rachel kissed me. She was trying to convince me that we weren't over, and using every trick she'd used before, including that. She grabbed my head, and I pushed her off. What did Lauren say?” Tyler was afraid to hear the answer.

Emma was quiet for a long while. Her foot stilled, and she stared off into some middle distance beyond Tyler's shoulder. Finally, she met Tyler's eyes again. The inferno of her anger seemed to have calmed some. “I guess I can see how her version and yours meet. After you and she kissed, Lauren said she went into the bathroom to clean up her make-up. This other woman came in, introduced herself as your girlfriend, and went on to talk about how nice it was of Lauren to set you up with her father to train your horse. Then she left. She must have gone right out to find you. Lauren said she spent a while longer in the bathroom, trying to figure out what was going on. She said you hadn't given any indication that you were interested in her father at all, that you had seemed genuinely surprised when you learned who she was. She had made up her mind to go confront you about it, but when she opened the door, she saw you and Rachel kissing. She decided there had been no mistake after all and just fled.”

Tyler's mouth dropped open in shock. “Talk about timing. I swear, it was less than a second between when Rachel kissed me and when I pushed her away, and she left right after. I had never even considered the possibility that Rachel had sought out Lauren before she found me. She didn't even say anything that hinted she even knew about Lauren.” He shook his head. “Emma, I swear, I never had any desire to hurt Lauren, and I didn't and still don't have any intention of using her to get to her father.”

Emma's hands were on her hips, and she scrutinized Tyler before she spoke. “Lauren said that kiss between you and Rachel looked awfully passionate. And what about this horse?”

“Passionate? No. Emotional, maybe. I was furious with her, but there was no passion. And as for the horse . . . Can't Win For Losing is his name. He's two years old, and we're trying to get him broken and ready to race next spring, but he just refuses to be. Yes, after seeing how successful he was with Frankie and Anybody's Guess, I did ask around about John Macon, and got told to stop dreaming. Joe, my stable manager, said he only trains as favors to friends anymore. Well, I'm not his friend, I've never even met the man, and I'm not about to use his daughter to manipulate him into doing me a favor. That's not my style.”

The silence dragged out again while Emma carefully considered everything he had said. “Lauren's still angry and hurt about what happened on Sunday. She's spent most of the last few days in bed. I'll try to talk to her, but I'm not making any promises.”

Tyler nodded, hope flooding through him. “Thank you Emma. I can't ask for any more than that.” He turned to go.

Just as he pulled open the door, Emma's voice cut through the shop. “Tyler, you had better not be playing me.” The threat in her voice stopped him dead. He turned to reassure her, but Emma had already disappeared into the back of the shop.

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Lauren hung up the phone with her mother and leaned back against the couch, thinking hard. For most of Lauren's life, her mother had been nothing more than another card at Christmas and birthdays. Occasionally, if her mother happened to be in the area for something else, they would have lunch or dinner together, but Lauren could count the number of times that had happened in the last twenty years on one hand. There was usually a phone call every year. Maybe two, if something important happened. Lauren and her mother weren't close, and neither of them had ever been bothered by it.

This phone call had been to let Lauren know that her mother was getting married in a few months. Her mother said she was welcome to come if she wanted, an invitation was in the mail, but not to feel obligated. Lauren said she might, a change of scenery might do her some good. Her mother said that would be nice, to just RSVP, and she'd make the reservation. They talked for a few more minutes about wedding colors and flower choices, and then they said goodbye.

Maybe a change of scene was exactly what she needed. She'd been in Charlotte her entire life. It was true there were a lot of happy memories here, but there was a lot of heartache, too. Maybe she'd go to California for her mother's wedding, and just stay.

Lauren stared down at the phone in her hands. It had rung, and she had jumped to answer it, disappointment washing over her when she saw it wasn't Tyler calling. She told herself that was silly, he hadn't called since Monday. He had probably moved on already, he and Rachel, looking for some other way to cozy up to her father. Well whatever they came up with, wouldn't work. She'd told her father all about it on Monday, and there was no way he would take on any of Tyler's horses, ever.

“Hey, you're up. That's good,” Emma said, shutting the door and startling Lauren out of her thoughts.

“Yeah,” Lauren held up the phone. “My mom called. I guess she's getting married at the end of the summer.”

“Oh, that's good. You're invited?” Emma came and sat in a chair across from Lauren.

Lauren watched her suspiciously. Stillness was not something that came naturally to Emma. “Yeah. She mailed the invitations today. She called to tell me not to feel obligated to go.”

Emma laughed. “That was nice of her. Tyler came into the shop today.”

Lauren stood up abruptly, emotions warring within her. Joy, sadness, anger, hope. Anger won out. “I hope you threw him out,” she snapped.

“I did,” Emma nodded. “Sort of. He wanted to talk to you.”

“Why didn't he call me then?” Lauren waved the phone, then flung it onto the couch. “I know he's got my number.”

“I think because you haven't returned his calls, so he was trying to see you in person.” Emma stood, too, slowly. “He told me his side of what happened on Sunday.”

Emma's words worked their way through Lauren's brain, and she stared at her friend. “And you believe him? Over me?”

“Not over you, no,” Emma answered. “I think you should talk to him, though. He says -”

“I don't care what he says! I can't believe you do, either!”

“Lauren! You've been moping over him for three days now,” Emma's eyes flashed as she fought to keep her voice level.

“I'm not moping,” Lauren folded her arms in front of her. Her voice oozed with sarcasm. “I'm sorry that you've never had your heart broken, Emma. It's not exactly wonderful.”

“That's why you should talk to him! Your stories aren't mutually exclusive, you know,” Emma shot back, planting her hands on her hips.

“No I don't know! And I don't want to!” Lauren stormed around the couch and toward her bedroom. She turned at the hallway. “I'm moving to California. I'll stay through the summer. That'll give me time to find an apartment and a job out there, and time to find someone to work with you in the shop here. I'll fly out for my mother's wedding, and just stay.”

Emma sunk back into the chair, and Lauren disappeared into her room.

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Tyler's heart jumped when his phone rang and he saw Lauren's number on the screen, and sank when it was Emma's voice that greeted him.

“She won't listen, and she's moving to California,” Emma informed him flatly.

“What? California? Why California?” Tyler sat down hard on his sofa.

“Her mother lives out there.” There was silence for a minute, then Emma's voice exploded over the line. “Damn you Tyler! I'm losing my best friend because you can't break up with a girl properly!”

“No, we can work this out,” Tyler scrambled. “We have to work this out. I won't lose her to a stupid misunderstanding.”

“What would you suggest, exactly? She won't even stand for your name being mentioned, she's not going to listen to you explaining matters.”

“I don't know, let me think,” Tyler scrubbed at his face with one hand. He wished the guys were here to bounce ideas off of. He couldn't think of anything, Emma seemed to be out of ideas, but maybe if they all got together . . . “Listen, can you come to my place Saturday night? Around seven? I've got some friends, and maybe we can come up with something together.”

Emma sighed. “It's worth a shot, I guess. Yeah, I'll be there.”