

Point of Origin

A Legacy Novella

By Rebecca Yarros

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*To my Flygirls.
Because you said firefighters,
and Legacy was born.
I adore each and every one of you.*

Chapter One

Emerson

“Just another month?” Agnes asked as she handed the coffees across the bar in to-go cups. Her nail polish was bright pink, matching the one rebellious streak in her silver hair.

“Yep, one more,” I confirmed when she sighed.

“You sure you need to go all the way to London? We’re going to miss you around here.”

I slid my debit card into my wallet and tucked it into my purse. “I’ll be back before you even realize I’ve gone,” I promised, taking both of the coffees. Maybe I’d be lucky and get back before I’d even realized I’d gone. Not that I wasn’t grateful for the opportunity, but the whole purpose of the internship was political and I’d never been politically minded.

“Emerson Renee Kendrick, I’ve known you since you were a twinkle in your daddy’s eye. You’ve been coming to my diner just about as long, and getting coffee every morning since you turned eighteen. I’ll realize you’re gone the moment you walk out of those doors.”

I couldn’t hide my grin as I shook my head. She was right, of course. I’d basically grown up in this diner, doing my homework until Mom finished work across the street in her florist shop. “Yes, Ma’am. Well, I’d better get these to Mayor Davis.”

She leaned over the counter. “Ooh, is that hearing this morning? Everyone’s been dying to hear who’s been building up on the old Parson land.”

One of my eyebrows rose. “Are you telling me you haven’t driven up there a dozen times already and peeked?” Of course, she had. *Everyone* had. Except me. It wasn’t the new construction that bothered me, but rather what laid along the ridgeline behind it.

Her eyes widened in false innocence as she took a rag to the impeccably clean counter top. “Well, I mean...everyone’s seen the signs. Legacy, LLC. It’s odd, right?”

“About as odd as anyone naming a company after the town we live in, I suppose,” I said, slowly backing away from the counter. Agnes would talk all day if I didn’t get out of here. “It’s got to be someone local with all the money they’ve funneled into the rebuild. Just about every business owes them a debt of gratitude.” The money had started showing up just as the rebuild was in full swing a few years ago, a few thousand here, tens of thousands there.

“Right? And it’s a rather large complex. Don’t you think? Was it even permitted?”

“It’s just outside the Legacy town limits, Agnes, so it falls under the county.” Another few feet and I’d be home free.

“Well, you could ask that boy you’re seeing over there on the zoning board for the county. What’s his name?” She looked up from the counter, her blue eyes locking onto my brown ones with the accuracy of a guided missile.

“You know darn well it’s Greg Roberts. You’ve been serving him coffee just as long, and Agnes, we’re not seeing each other. We’re just friends, so you can stop hinting.” My butt hit the glass of the door, and the bells jingled as I bumped it open.

She waved her rag at me. “Twenty-four years old and you still won’t lock down a man. Don’t you want your name carved into my wall?” She gestured back to the soft pine wall at the south end of the diner, etched with the names of the town’s lovers. “I’m telling you, if I had your figure, or that hair, I’d have...”

“Love you, too, Agnes!” I slid out the door of the Chatterbox Diner and into the crisp August air. Summer was still in full swing in the mountains of Colorado, but the mornings brought with them the little bite of fall’s foreshadowing. The door glided shut behind me, and I winced, missing the squeaking hinge I’d grown up with, already mentally chastising myself. Of course, the damn door didn’t squeak. It was new.

Everything was new.

More or less.

That’s what happens when an entire town burns down. Everything gets replaced. I glanced over at the fire hall, its garage doors bright red against the stone of the building. *Hell, everyone gets replaced.*

My heels clicked on the smooth concrete as I walked two blocks through our tiny town’s heart, greeting everyone by name as they passed me. Greg’s Explorer was parallel parked just before the town office, proving once again how punctual he was...how dependable.

It would be so easy to fall into a relationship with him, to finally take him up on that date he kept asking for. But what good was that going to do? He was an attractive guy, sure, only a few years older than me and probably even a decent kisser. But there was no chemistry, no sizzle when he touched my hand, no longing within me. I felt just as frigid next to him as I did with every other guy, which honestly annoyed the shit out of

me. It would be comfortable, safe, just like every relationship I'd had in college, but there was a reason I'd quit trying to date over a year ago.

No one was...*him*.

My eyes slid shut, and my grip tightened on the cups. *Don't go there*. I caught myself just in time, stopping the onslaught of memories with an indrawn breath and mentally going through my schedule as I blinked. *Focus on now*.

The door to the Town Hall opened, and Greg stepped into the sunlight as it caught in his blond hair, his suit impeccable as his timing. "Good morning, Ms. Kendrick," he said with a very cute grin.

"Mr. Roberts," I nodded with a smile of my own as I walked through the door he held open for me. "Nice to see you," I said over my shoulder as I walked up the flight of stairs to the mayor's office.

He was totally checking out my ass.

"Greg? Up here."

His eyes shot up to my face as his reddened. "Sorry."

I laughed. "At least I know the skirt is effective."

"Very," he admitted as he raced ahead of me to open the second set of doors that brought us into Mayor Davis's office. "Do you know who this Legacy manager is?"

I shook my head. "I figured you did since you sit on the zoning board."

"No, I only dealt with the attorney," he finished as we made it to the office.

"Good morning, Emerson," Mayor Davis said, taking one of the coffees from me.

"Thank you very much. I appreciate you doing that for me."

I almost mouthed along as he spoke, knowing his routine by heart. It was as predictable as he was, as he liked everything to be. “I’ll make sure Jenn knows how you like it.”

He paused over his desk as he was reaching for his files. “Oh, right. I keep forgetting that you’re leaving us.”

“It’s only six months,” I reminded him.

“Legacy will definitely benefit from you going,” Greg answered. “An internship with the mayor of London is huge.”

“And I couldn’t have done it without your recommendation and urging,” I said to Mayor Davis.

He waved me off with a small shake of his head. “That was all you, Emerson. You’ve been instrumental in getting Legacy back on her feet. You’ll make a fine mayor one day.”

Nope, not going there. “Our nine o’clock should be here,” I said, trying to change the subject. Anyone in my position would have gotten that internship. We were the miracle town—the phoenix that had risen from the ashes.

“Why do you do that?” Greg whispered as we walked behind Mayor Davis, following him down the stairs.

“Do what?” I asked, juggling the files for this morning’s business.

“Act you don’t deserve the internship?”

“I don’t like the idea of profiting from the town’s history.” *From his death. All the death.*

He blocked me from entering the town hall. “You deserve it. You stayed when a lot of us left. You were on the front lines as a teenager, demanding they rebuild our high school. You commuted to college, volunteered your time here, worked on getting Legacy solvent. And what do you plan on doing with all this new-found city-running knowledge?”

“I’m coming home, of course. I’ll use it here.” There was no other place in the world I wanted to be. Legacy, even with its tortured past, was my home and always would be. I blew the loose, brown strand of my almost-grown-out bangs out of my face, cursing my hurried French twist, and tried not to freeze when Greg tucked it behind my ear.

Why couldn’t I want him?

He gave me a sad smile and moved his hand away slowly, as if I’d spoken out loud. “Then see? Think of it more as Legacy investing in you.”

After an awkward side-to-side motion, I gave him a tense nod and slipped by him. Mayor Davis pulled my chair out, and I took my seat, placing the files in front of me as he took the seat next to me. The other council members slipped in, taking their seats with quiet chatter and louder speculation about the morning’s events.

It was a good thing these proceedings were closed-doors, or half our three-thousand-person town would have been in here to find out who Legacy, LLC was.

The first matters of business were easily handled. I made notes to talk to Mrs. Greevy about her hatred of the proposed stop sign at Plum St. and Aspen Ave. It would go over a lot easier at the next meeting if she piped down about it. I glanced up at the clock. Five minutes until the ten-thirty.

I circled the name Legacy, LLC on my agenda like I was back in high school, doodling on my notes. My elbow slipped on the desk's surface, and I knocked the file to the ground, papers scattering.

"Damn it," I muttered under my breath, despite Mrs. Anderson's disapproving stare from the seat next to me. I dropped to my hands and knees, cursing my skirt and picking up the papers to shove them back into the file. The door to the room opened and shut. Our ten-thirty was here. Thank God there was a wooden partition in front of the desk that hid me, and my ass, which was no doubt peeking out from my skirt.

"Holy shit, you're Legacy, LLC?" Greg asked from a few chairs down.

"I'm one of the partners," a deep voice answered. "How's it going, Greg?"

I froze, awareness racing down my spine, through my limbs, and tingling my fingers. *No fucking way. It's not possible.* But I knew that voice anywhere. It was the sound of laughter in my childhood, the lectures about my clothes when my curves came in, the deep, whispered pleas not to get too close when he'd realized he was the reason I'd worn my skirts shorter, my necklines lower. It was the quiet timbre and soothing, muttered promises that we'd be okay on that day our fathers had died. It was the silence that came after. Always the damned silence.

"Well it's good to see you," Mayor Davis said. "How long has it been?"

I somehow willed my limbs to move in jerky motions, closing the file and using my left hand to grip the desktop as I slowly rose, thankful my ass managed to land in my rolling chair and not the floor. I placed the file back on the laminate desktop and then slowly let my eyes lift, taking in the tailored, black suit, the starched white shirt under the jacket that stretched across impossibly broad shoulders, and pale blue tie against the tan

skin of his throat. When I got to his face, I lost the ability breathe, the air stilling in my lungs as the second hand ceased to move.

Our eyes met, his as shocked as mine must have looked for a second before he carefully masked his expression. Cool. Aloof. In perfect control.

I was anything but, lost in absorbing every detail of the stranger who stood before me. He wasn't handsome or cute like he'd been during the short time we'd allowed ourselves to be together. No, he was gorgeous now, the sharp, angular lines of his face one-hundred-percent man, where I'd loved the boy. God, how I'd loved him.

And he'd broken my heart, shattered it into so many parts that I was still finding small pieces here and there six years later.

That stitched-up heart pounded in my chest, heavy and light all within the same moment, as if it acknowledged both the glory of our heights and the pain of our fall. He was here. After all this time, he was fifteen feet in front of me...and a world away. My bangs fell across my eye, and I blew them back, not wanting to miss a second of actually being able to see him. To breathe the same air.

"Emmy," he said quietly, a ghost of a smile passing his sculpted lips. How did they feel now? Harder like the rest of him?

"Bash," I answered, barely getting the sound past my lips. So much for the years I'd diligently kept myself from thinking—let alone saying—his name.

"How long has it been, Sebastian?" Mayor Davis repeated after a few of the council members cleared their throats.

"Six years," I answered, my voice nearly breaking. Six years without a returned phone call, an email, any social media, or an explanation. I willed my anger to the

surface, to overpower the shock of seeing him, or the way my body immediately warmed in his presence like he'd flicked some switch. *He left you. Cashed your V-card on graduation night and was gone before you woke up.*

“Six years,” he agreed, those hazel eyes still locked on mine. They looked almost gray from here, the color they leaned towards when he was conflicted, upset. My stomach tightened when I thought of the last time I'd seen them burning green, his hands on my body, his mouth against my skin.

Holy shit. I needed oxygen. I needed space. I needed my six years back.

“And what can we do for you?” Greg answered, his voice as tense as the air between where I sat and Bash stood.

Bash looked away, and I sucked in a lungful of air. Mrs. Anderson passed me her unopened bottle of water, more than aware of the history between us. Hell, everyone in this room knew our history. *Small towns have the memory of an elephant.* My hands shook, but I got it open and took two long pulls.

“I'd like you to incorporate both the land I own and my building into the town of Legacy.”

His building. He is Legacy, LLC.

I willed my sluggish brain to catch up, and my eyes to stay the fuck away from him, but they kept going back to the strong line of his jaw, the black, untamable hair that still stood in near-spikes, the curve of his lips, the power in his stance. He'd been formidable in high school, intimidating in college, but now he was just...massive.

“Mr. Vargas, you're prepared for the tax implications, the zoning requirements?” Mayor Davis asked.

“I am. The building has the strictest fire protection and is built to Legacy standards.” He stood tall, his arms at his sides, the only tell of his nervousness besides his eyes being the small rubbing motion he made with his thumb.

I hated that I knew that. Hated that he’d left me. Hated that after six years, I still couldn’t seem to stop my heart from crying out for an explanation.

Long distance relationships never work, he’d told me before we’d gotten together. *I’m in college, and you’re a senior in high school, Emmy.*

We can make it work. We have always been the exception to never.

Except we weren’t.

“The land borders the boundary as it is, and we have a history of accepting these kinds of petitions.” His voice was strong, deep and sure.

Mayor Davis nodded. “We do. I have no problem with proceeding with that paperwork. Anyone else?” His eyes swept up and down the arch of council-members, and everyone seemed to nod their assent.

Bash kept his eyes on Mayor Davis as they took a vote, never once wavering to mine. I wish I could have said the same, but I didn’t have the strength to look away.

Because you’re a moron.

The council voted a unanimous, “aye,” and the motion was accepted. I scrawled some notes on my to-do list, thankful that I was no longer secretary, just Mayor Davis’s assistant.

“I’m glad you’re back, Sebastian. We’ve missed you. Appropriate timing, the anniversary being in a few weeks and all.”

Bash's expression hardened, and he swallowed, then faked a smile that looked so genuine he fooled everyone but me. "I'm not here permanently, just to get things rolling. If there's nothing else?"

He wasn't staying. I didn't know if I should be relieved or devastated. The emotions ripped at me in equal strength.

"We'll start the paperwork. You're good to go on this end."

"Thank you."

I could almost feel his muscles relax, my fingers flexing with the need to touch him, to assure myself that he was real.

"One thing," Mrs. Anderson called out as Bash prepared to leave.

He tensed, but turned. "Yes?"

"What is the building for? Just out of curiosity."

He looked her straight in the eye. "It's for the hotshot crew. I plan to rebuild and reinstate it."

My breath left in a rush, my stomach plummeting to the floor beneath me as the room exploded into a cacophony of protests. There was no way the town council would approve. No way they'd reopen the wound that had nearly bled our hearts dry ten years ago.

The second hand on the wall clock behind Bash ticked eighteen times before I could draw a real breath.

Eighteen seconds. Eighteen elite hotshot firefighters. Eighteen deaths.

Twelve widows. Sixteen fatherless children.

Including me...and Bash.

He didn't answer their outcry, didn't fight back. He simply said, "Thank you for your time," to Mayor Davis, turned and walked out of the room without so much as a look back. Even for me.

At least this time I'd seen him leave.

And unlike six years ago, now I knew exactly where to find him.

Chapter Two

Sebastian

Fuck. Me.

I slammed the door to my Range Rover unnecessarily hard and wrenched my tie loose as I walked into my building. It was nothing like the original, where my father's hotshot team had operated. That building had been smaller, a little dirtier, ill-equipped, and a hell of a lot better—not because of the facilities, but who ran them.

I passed the large living room, the glass-walled gym, and finally came to my office, where my pain-in-the-ass best friend lounged.

“Bad day at work, dear?” Ryker asked, cocking an eyebrow at me from my chair.

“Get your damned feet off my desk.”

My tie hit the newly vacated space. “Who's got your panties in a wad?”

“No one,” I barked. “Did you get ahold of Knox?” I asked, walking into the state-of-the-art kitchen I'd paid way too much money for. It was capable of accommodating the needs of two dozen people without straining, just like the rest of the building I'd spent a year designing with architects and another year having built. I grabbed a bottle of water from one of the refrigerators, cracked the top and drained the whole thing, wishing it was something a little stronger. Like tequila. Or a horse tranquilizer. Oh, who the fuck was I kidding? Nothing was strong enough to wipe out what just happened.

God, the look on her face... Those huge brown eyes had flown wide, her lips had parted, and it had taken every single ounce of self-control I had to look away.

“Yeah, he’s finishing up a job in California, and then he’ll fly in,” Ryker answered from the doorway.

“Good. We need him. Is he bringing anyone else?” It was going to take a hell of a lot more than just Ryker and me to convince the council that it was time for another team.

“The Maldonado brothers.”

“No shit?” That was almost a reason to celebrate. Almost.

“No shit. What did the council say?”

“It’s going to be a battle for the team. I have no idea how we’ll get them to agree to that part, but they agreed to the annexation,” I said, throwing the bottle into the trashcan with a satisfying *thunk*.

“Well, then you should be happy, right?”

“She was there.”

His forehead puckered. “Who? Mrs. Anderson? She’s been on the council for years. I think it will take her dying or an act of congress to get her out of there.”

“No, asshole. I don’t give a shit about Mrs. Anderson.” I raked my hands through my hair and left the kitchen, walking over to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the wide-open training area. Legacy lay in the valley below, and if not for the clearly marked scars on the mountainsides, there would be no hint at the tragedy that had annihilated the town ten years ago.

“Okay,” Ryker said in his I’m-sick-of-your-shit voice, “well I can run through every woman’s name in town—God knows we’ve both fucked our fair share of them—or you can just tell me.”

“Emerson.” Just saying her name ripped a scab off my soul that was all-too-eager to bleed.

He whistled low. “Oh, shit. Look, Harper told me she was leaving on the first.”

“Yeah, well your sister was wrong.” I should have double-checked, but the minute I’d started asking about Emmy, Harper would have told her.

“No, she wasn’t.”

The sultry, feminine voice behind me raised the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. I hardened every defense I could against her and turned to see Emmy standing just in front of the pool table, her arms folded under her incredible breasts, inadvertently lifting them to the neckline of her button-up blouse. Tucked into that pencil skirt, she looked like a schoolteacher. Well, the kind that boys fantasized about during sex ed. And the way those soft globes crested at that last button...

Don’t look. Do. Not. Look.

Too late.

She raised a single eyebrow at me. *Caught.* “I’m leaving on the first of September, not August, and yes, Harper told me you were asking,” she addressed the last comment to Ryker, who rubbed the back of his neck.

“I think I’ll give you guys a...uh...I’m going to leave.” Ryker didn’t wish me luck, or so much as give me his condolences—not that I even looked his way—just pulled a baseball hat over his blond hair and ran.

Leaving me alone with Emmy.

Emerson. I reminded myself. Emmy was the girl I’d grown up with, the one who tagged along at every crew barbecue, begged me to take her hiking with us. This wasn’t

her. This wasn't even the teenager that drove me crazy, the one I jerked off to for years when her curves showed up, the one I couldn't forget about at college, the one I fell in love with.

The one I destroyed.

She was a woman now, and from the look in those deep brown eyes, a pretty pissed off one at that. "Are you going to say anything?" she asked.

"You're the one that came here."

She scoffed. "You're the one who built a huge..." she gestured to the great room, her eyes catching on the open second story and the exposed beams. "Clubhouse for boys," she finished.

"Clubhouse?" A smile tilted my lips. "What are we? Ten?"

"Oh no, you don't get to be charming, Bash. Not to me. Never again."

The space between us charged with an electricity that could either power this whole house or burn us both to the ground. Years had passed, and that hadn't changed. No matter how much I wish it had. "What would you like me to be?"

"Nothing. Just like you have been for the last six years."

"Ouch. You're bringing out the claws pretty early in the argument, don't you think?" I tucked my thumbs in my pants pockets to keep my hands busy, to keep them from reaching for her. That ever-present need I had for her hadn't changed either. Fuck.

"We're not arguing."

I took a step towards her. "Oh, we're not? What are we?"

She retreated, keeping our distance equal. "We, are nothing. You made that pretty damn clear."

“Emerson. What happened between us—”

“No.” She threw out her hands and shook her head. “We’re not discussing that. Ever. Like it never happened. Any of it. That’s not why I’m here.”

Never happened? The hell with that. I could reenact every single second if I needed to jog her memory. Every time I took her mouth, from when she’d been sixteen, and I’d been too possessive to let anyone else have her first kiss, to the night I spent tangled in her arms, worshipping her until the sun came up and I had to go. Every moment was branded on my soul like a tattoo, and she wanted to act like it never happened?

Fuck. That.

I closed the distance between us, and she scurried back on her heels until her ass met the pool table. One arm on each side of her delectable little body, I leaned in, catching her perfume as she closed her eyes. Bergamot, lemon, vanilla...Emerson. “We happened.”

Her eyes fluttered open, focused on the buttons of my shirt.

“Emerson.”

Slowly, she drew her gaze to meet mine, and I fucking fell in. Those brown depths had always been fathomless, capable of stealing every one of my thoughts. My blood ran hot, surging through my veins, pulsing with the rhythm of my heartbeat and lodging in my dick. Of course, I got a raging hard-on. I was within inches of Emerson Kendrick.

Some things never changed.

“Don’t,” she whispered, the sweetness of her spearmint-tinged breath triggering another dozen memories of her Tic Tac addiction.

“Say it,” I ordered, needing to hear the words more than anything. More than reestablishing the crew, more than making our fathers’ memories mean anything.

“Don’t,” she pled, her voice slightly breaking.

“Don’t what?” I leaned in enough that she bent back over the pool table slightly. Another few inches and I’d have her pressed against me.

Where she belongs, a neglected part of my soul called out.

“Don’t come back here reopening wounds.” She shook her head and her bangs fell into her eyes.

Before I thought better of it, I had her hair between my fingers, the heavy brown mass streaked with strands of fire and autumn throughout. Before I did something even more stupid, I tucked it back behind her ear.

She took the opening and slid away, damn near running to put the pool table between us. “I’m serious. It’s taken this town a lot to heal—”

“This town?” My mouth dropped. “What the hell are you talking about, Emmy?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You and the hotshot crew, you moron.”

“We’re talking about us,” I reminded her.

“No, we’re not. Because there isn’t an *us*. We will never discuss what was *us*, and if you want any possibility of making this insane idea of yours happen, you’d better never bring it up again.”

“There’s no ignoring the fact that I know you better than almost anyone on this planet, Emerson. That I know exactly how it feels to have you under me, so deep inside

your body that I'm pretty sure I left a piece of my soul there. There's no ignoring what we had, or how badly I fucked it up."

She swallowed, blinking back the sheen of tears I saw sparkle there before she turned and started walking out of my building. *Fuck*. That was why I wanted her gone before I came here. I'd never wanted this confrontation, or to see even a hint of the mess I'd left behind. And just like I knew I couldn't stay when I was twenty-one, I knew it in my bones—if I let her walk out now without opening a line of dialogue, I'd never get her back here.

You don't want her here, remember? You don't do complicated, the devil on my shoulder argued.

No, but you do Emerson, the angel reminded me. Or maybe they were switched, what-the-fuck ever.

"Emerson," I called out, but she didn't pause. "Emerson!" I raised my voice as I raced to catch up with her, barely skimming the soft skin of her wrist before she spun on me.

"What?" she damn-near screamed, the anguish in her eyes unbearable before she threw up that mask she loved so well.

"Why is it insane?" I asked.

"The hotshot crew?"

"Yes," I lied. I'd done everything in my power to avoid Emerson. To avoid thinking about her, calling her, visiting, begging her to forgive me for needing the life she wouldn't understand. I wanted to know why she refused to even acknowledge that we happened, but I'd fucking settle for her opinion on the team.

“It’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible. Not to me.” Her eyes widened, and I almost pounced just to prove my point. *Jesus Christ. You’ve been in town less than twelve hours, and she’s already got your self-control down to that of a fucking eighteen-year-old.*

“Look, the town can’t handle it. We’re barely back in the black after the payouts from the policies. Legacy just can’t afford to support another hotshot crew.”

“If the town doesn’t have to pay for it?”

Now it was her mouth dropping. “What?”

“If Legacy isn’t responsible for salaries or the insurance policies, will the town agree?”

She blinked a few times, and I could almost see the gears turning in her too-efficient mind. “The town has always covered the cost of the team. It’s been a matter of pride. Are you thinking of going Federal? To the Forestry Service?”

“No. We’ll still fall under their guidelines, but we’d be privately funded.”

Her eyes narrowed. “By whom?”

Now it was my turn to pause. “Me.”

A single, perfect eyebrow arched. “Really.”

“Really.”

“Bash, the average hotshot earns at least sixty thousand a year, and that’s not talking about team leaders, supervisors, any of it. You have to maintain an eighteen-to-twenty-person team, which means you’d be out at least a million a year, and that’s before your overhead.”

My grin was instantaneous. “Nice to see you using that MBA. You’ve been out of school what? Two months?”

“Keeping tabs on me, Bash?” she fired back.

“Always. And I’m well aware of the cost. I’m good for it.” I looked her straight in the eye so she’d know I wasn’t bluffing.

She absorbed the knowledge of my wealth like she did everything else, with a simple nod, moving on to the next issue. Emmy had never cared about money, not when they had it, and especially when they didn’t. “The money isn’t the only problem.”

“The council,” I agreed.

“The whole town. Bash, you built this compound on Parson’s old land—”

“It’s my land now. Has been for about three years.” Since I’d sold the first app. Half the money had gone to the land purchase and the other half had gone to my broker for investments. Four apps later, I wasn’t doing too badly.

“Not the point. We’re what—maybe half a mile away from the ridgeline?” Her voice dropped, and her shoulders sagged. “Why here?”

“Because if I didn’t buy it, developers were going to. Did you want condos up here? Tourists trying to get closer to the slopes? Better us, men just like them, than a bunch of college kids on spring break fucking around on the land our fathers died on.” She wavered, her eyes doing the side-to-side shuffle they did when she was making a decision. God, it needed to be the right one the first time. Getting Emerson to change her mind on anything was impossible. “Help me, Emerson. You know the town, you can help this through.”

Her eyes met mine. “You’re asking this town to bleed again when there’s almost nothing left to give.”

“I’m asking this town to breathe, to live again.”

She turned slowly, taking in every detail of the facility. The huge great room used for everything from meetings to training, to watching football, the offices, the kitchen, the long dining tables, even the stairs that led downstairs to the living quarters for anyone who didn’t want to bunk in town. “I’ll think about it.”

I let out the breath I’d held. That was a maybe. Maybe was good. I could muscle the council, the business owners, anything money could grease, I could handle it. But where emotions were involved, to the town, I was an outsider. I’d left, abandoned Legacy just as she was getting on her feet.

I’d abandoned Emerson.

She wandered to the door, pausing where the pictures of the crew ten years ago hung. Eighteen heroes. Eighteen deployed shelters. Eighteen caskets.

Her fingers brushed the smiling photo of her dad, whose arm was looped around my dad. They’d been inseparable, best of friends since grade school. Even their bodies had been found next to each other.

“This is their crew, Emmy. Our dads’, our friends. They loved this team. I’ve never asked you for anything, and I’m asking...” My jaw flexed. “I’m begging you to help me bring their crew back.”

She looked up at me, those eyes seeing through every layer of bullshit I’d used as armor since I left Legacy. “What do you know about running a hotshot team, Bash? It’s not something you throw money at and walk away from.”

Shit. Fuck. Damn it.

I took a breath. “I’m working on hiring someone to run the team. Someone I worked with in California.”

“California?” she asked, demanding the truth.

“I’ve been on a hotshot crew for a while now. I know what I’m doing.”

“How long?” She asked, putting it together faster than I’d hoped she would.

“Six years,” I said quietly.

“You left m...” She cut herself off with a shake of her head and an ironic smile. “I eventually figured out you were on a crew. Ryker told me a few years ago, but I never realized when it started. Are you with them? Ryker? Knox?”

“Ryker. Knox is further north,” I replied. “It’s in my blood. It always has been.” I reached for her, needing to keep her close enough to touch, to keep from bolting.

She stepped away, and I didn’t pursue. “You don’t owe me an explanation, Bash. You never have.”

Bite the bullet. Do it. “There’s something else you need to know.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not staying. Once we have the team in place I’m going back to California.”

As if someone had frozen her features, her face became an unreadable mask.

“You’re really leaving. You waited until you thought I’d be in London...you purposely planned this visit so you didn’t have to see me.”

“Yes.” There was no lying to her. She knew me far too well for that shit. There had never been lies between us. Ugly truths maybe, but never lies, and I wasn’t about to start now.

She nodded twice, then spun on her heel and walked for the door. *Fuck*. This wasn't supposed to be so hard. Clean, easy, all of it—that had been the plan. But then she'd sat up in her chair at the council meeting, and I knew I was royally screwed. And not in the good way. “Emerson, please. This is their legacy.”

She paused, her hand on the door. Her shoulders rose and fell twice before she turned back to me. “No, Sebastian. We are their legacy. This is you reconstructing the very thing that killed them.”

Without another word she walked out of the front door, closing it softly and taking my only chance of success with her.

Three

Emerson

“This is such bullshit,” Harper agreed over the thrum of conversation in the bar. *Wicked* was the most popular bar in town, mostly because it was the *only* bar in Legacy. We’d been lucky to snag a couple of stools for a Friday night.

Then again with Harper’s looks, she could have talked any of the guys out of their seats. I’d seen that blonde hair and those blue eyes work their magic more than once.

“It is what it is,” I said with a shrug, popping a spearmint Tic Tac.

“He hasn’t said anything else? Talked to you? Anything?”

I spun my empty shot glass and caught it. “Nope. Just asked me to help him and I haven’t seen him since. I still haven’t made up my mind about what to do.”

“I can’t believe he’s actually here. Ryker didn’t say anything, I swear.”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “You’ve been my best friend for over twenty years, Harper. I know you would have told me.”

Her shoulders drooped. “I feel like shit that I didn’t notice. Ry isn’t home often, and I was honestly just trying to enjoy having the asshat around.” She leaned over the bar, “Mike! We need two more!” she shouted, lifting her shot glass for him to see.

“Probably more than that,” I muttered as he nodded.

“Looking good, Harper,” one of the local guys shouted directly behind us, where he had a front-row seat to the show her ass was putting on.

I hooked my fingers in Harper's belt and yanked her back down to her seat. She immediately pivoted, her finger already wagging. "Knock your shit off, Alex. I'm your kid's preschool teacher for fuck's sake."

"Hey, I was just paying you a compliment. Not that you don't look great too, Emerson," Alex said with a deceptively sweet smile.

"Uh huh," Harper replied with more than a little venom.

"Thank you, Alex," I replied at the same time, tugging the edges of my asymmetrical sweater over my red tank top.

"So Vargas is home, huh?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

Life in a small town. "He's just visiting."

"That's right, trying to restart your daddy's team, isn't he? Like that's going to happen."

My fingers tightened on the glass, but I couldn't tell if it was the cavalier mention of the team, or his stupid assumption that Bash couldn't do it. *Maybe it's something that needs to be done.*

"Greg, get your boy under control," Harper ordered as he appeared from down the bar.

"Yeah, and then I'll fix global warming," he answered. "But for what it's worth, I think Bash has the right idea." He gave me a wink before joining his friends at their table.

I plopped my head in my hands, more than ready for another shot. "Why can't I just be attracted to him?" I asked Harper quietly. She leaned in, more than

aware that ears were everywhere in a tiny town. "He'd be good for me, right? He's funny, kind, stable. Good looking, even!"

"Greg's a good guy," she admitted. "You could always try a date or two, just to see what develops..."

"But?" I asked, knowing there was more.

"But if you guys don't have that I-need-to-fuck-you-against-the-wall kind of chemistry, it's going to be hard for you." She quieted when Mike delivered two more lemon drop shots. He departed with a head-nod.

"Why? A lot of people are happy without raging hormones getting involved. Maybe it's the whole slow-and-steady-wins-the-race philosophy."

She rolled her eyes. "Look at Greg again," she challenged.

I turned in my seat and saw Carrie Cook perched at Greg's shoulder, her thumb absently stroking the seam of his shirt. "Okay?" I asked Harper.

"Are you pissed? Really think about it."

I took full stock of my feelings, noting the way the slightly older girl flirted with him and the sound of his laugh. "Nope," I answered. "I'm curious, kind of wondering where they'll take that, but I'm not angry at all. I really like Carrie. She's ridiculously nice."

"Yeah, that's not going to work for you," she scoffed, spinning her seat again to face our drinks.

I spun too, catching myself on the bar. "Hey, it could. I've dated guys that I'm not insanely lustful over before."

This time, she flat-out laughed. "Right. And none of them worked out. Why? Because you've had that lust-filled want, that scratching, clawing, biting need to rip someone's clothes off, and not just because they're fine as hell, but because you've loved that man. You're not going to be happy with anything less than that connection." She saluted me with her shot.

Just the thought of Bash nearly pressed up against me on the pool table the other day sent a shot of heat down my limbs. The way his lips had parted, his gaze had dropped to mine. *We. Happened.*

"He ruined me," I said with an ironic smile, lifting my shot.

"He gave you higher standards; that's all. Now, let's...oh, shit." She sighed.

I followed her line of sight in the mirror above the bar. "Oh shit," I repeated in a whisper.

We both turned in our seats, our shots held midair. Carrie wasn't touching Greg anymore. Oh no, she had her perfectly painted pink nails toying with a button on a light blue shirt stretched across a body I knew all too well. The sleeves were rolled, revealing the band of tattoos on his right arm that I knew stretched up his shoulder and across his back. Bash.

He looked up as if I'd called his name, and our eyes locked across the twenty feet or so that separated us. *I-need-to-fuck-you-against-the-wall chemistry, indeed.* God help me, I did. I wanted to test the strength of his bigger muscles. I needed to feel his mouth on mine. I craved that sweet loss of control that only Bash had ever given me. In fact, there was a neat little outcropping on the wall right there that he could brace my ass on while sliding these jeans off. My body had forgotten the last

six years and time-warped back to when I was eighteen, immediately recognizing that its master was in the room.

Master? What the hell. No way. I promptly ordered my panties to remain safely at hip-level and tried to shut off my sex-drive. Of course, it had chosen this exact week to reappear.

His eyes heated the longer he stared at me, and I wet my lips out of pure instinct. He moved toward me, but Carried tugged on his shirt and gave him a cute grin. *Bitch.*

“Have you mentally fucked him, yet? Because holy eye-sex going on over there.” Harper noted, the shot waiting patiently in her hand.

“Oh, probably twice,” I admitted with a grimace.

We tapped our glasses together in commiseration, and I met Bash’s gaze when I threw back the lemon-drop, then licked the sugar from the rim. His fingers flexed against the bottle in his hand. *At least you still get to him.* I spun on my stool and slammed the glass down.

“Stop looking at me like that, Emmy.” Bash growled in my left ear, his voice unmistakable and low. “I’m trying my best to give you space, but if I see that little pink tongue one more time, I’m sucking it into my mouth.” I hated the chill that slid down my spine almost as much as I loved the streak of fire that followed it.

“You worry about your own tongue,” I quipped back, my voice a hell of a lot stronger than I felt.

“How’s going, Harpy?” He teased Harper like we were back in high school. Like he hadn’t skipped out to go fight wildfires and left me naked in his bed. Like I

hadn't had to sneak out before his mom found me...like I was just another girl on his rotating calendar.

"Pretty good until you got here, Bash-hole," she answered in kind.

There was not enough alcohol in the world for this flashback. "Mike?" I asked, lifting my shot glass.

"How many have you had?" Bash asked, sliding in next to me and leaning against the bar. The bottle he put down in front of me was still full.

"That was my second."

"And your last," he said, throwing Mike a throat-cut hand signal.

"You've missed out on a few things." I glared up at him. "I grew up while you were gone, and that comes with the ability to drink as much as I damn well please. You're not my master." *Fuck my brain. Fuckity fuck.*

His eyebrows lifted. "Master, huh? We can play that game."

"The hell we can," I snapped, sliding off my barstool. My breath sucked in reflexively when he tugged my waistband, pulling my back to his very big, very warm front. "Bash," I warned.

His stubble-roughened cheeks grazed my ear. "First, believe me, I'm well aware that you are a grown woman. Second, I need you sober, because I need to talk to you."

I battled my eyelids not to slide shut, not to give in and relax into the security of his body. Did he have to smell so damn good? All cedar and forest? "And third?" There was always a third with him.

His lips skimmed the shell of my ear, and my lips parted on their own. "I can't kiss you if you don't stop. You make bad choices after three shots."

Stay put! I ordered my panties, which were begging to be relieved of their position. "Well, you're always a bad choice, so I'm not sure what another shot would have to do with it. Second, if you think I'm putting out any kind of 'kiss me' signal, you're mistaken," I said quietly, not that we could be heard above the random grunge-rock that spewed from the jukebox.

"Your pulse is elevated," he said, his fingers lightly pressing my wrist. "Your breathing is heavy, and you're shifting your weight, none of which happened until you noticed I was here. You need to be kissed, badly."

I broke away before my traitorous body could give out any more signals. "Well, if that's the case, I know someone a hell of a lot safer to take care of it." I made it within about three feet of Greg before I found myself spun and lifted over Bash's shoulder. "Sebastian!" I squeaked.

The small crowd clapped, and even Harper gave me a thumbs up as Bash carried me out of the bar, gesturing with her hand and mouthing, "against the wall!"

Oh. My. God. Maybe if I woke up now, I could avoid the part of the nightmare where I showed up naked to work. "Put me down!" I shouted.

A brand new Chevy pulled into the parking lot, Ryker behind the wheel.

"Now, damn it!" This was absolutely unacceptable.

"Uhh, Emerson, are you okay?" Ryker asked as he unfolded his tall frame from the pickup, flickering his attention to Bash.

"She's fine," Bash answered for me.

“I sure as hell am not!” I answered. “Are you going to stand there while this caveman carries me off?” Bash’s hand tightened across my ass in response.

Ryker tilted his head and sighed. “Fuck my life, you two. You’re not in the same town for a week and you’re already at each other. Bash, are you going to hurt her? Rape her? Lock her away in a cave?”

“Don’t be a pain in my ass, Ryker. Of course not.”

“Emerson, are you honestly scared of Bash?”

“What? No. He’s just an asshole! Put me down!” I kicked my foot and Bash grunted. Good.

“Okay, well you two kids have a nice night and work your shit out. Emmy, give him hell.” He waved us off and went into the bar where his sister waited.

“Looks like it’s just us, Emmy.”

“You have to be kidding me,” I groaned.

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