



# RECLAIMING

BLACKGUARD  SECURITY: PHANTOM

# WHAT'S MINE

ELIZABELLA BAKER

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*This one is for all the strong women out there kicking ass. Keep it up!*

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# CHAPTER ONE

---



Ah, what the fuck was that?

A rational part of him knew it was a baby crying, but the irrational part couldn't comprehend how that was possible.

They were in a basement. In a locked dirty basement with a shitty mattress was the woman he spent so many months looking for, and now he was hearing a baby cry.

"Karlie?"

Her name slipped from his lips again. It was all he could manage to say.

"Please help me." Desperation laced her tone. "She needs to eat, but we've been left to starve. I can't produce what she needs."

Steel watched her shift on the pathetic excuse for a mattress until she was holding a tiny bundle. The baby chose that moment to let out another wail. And what a set of lungs she had.

"Here, let me take her."

Gage attempted to reach for the little baby, but Karlie pulled her tighter to her chest.

"He's not taking her for long. Just until we can get you both upstairs." Steel tried to rationalize with Karlie, but she only continued to shake her head with intense vigor.

"Not him," she begged. "Only you. Please, Steel. Only you."

He wasn't sure if it was the desperation he heard or something else. He grabbed the baby and cradled her to his chest. She couldn't be very comfortable against his tactical vest, but she calmed down immediately.

"Okay, I've got her." He tried his best to placate Karlie before hysterics kicked in.

He didn't know the first thing about babies or how to soothe them. His movements were jerky and awkward. Steel was damn sure he was screwing it up, but if it meant Karlie was calm and willingly walked out with them, then he would make it work.

"Thank you."

Karlie tried to stand but swayed on her feet, so Gage swooped in and picked her up. It took everything in him not to bite his teammate's head off for having his arms around her. It was irrational. He hadn't seen Karlie in nearly a year. He had no idea what she had been through or how she felt about things. Just because he'd been looking for her didn't mean she still wanted him.

He and Gage moved in unison up the stairs to where the rest of his team waited.

Chance, Emma, Daniel, Liam, and Blayd turned around simultaneously, but stopped in their tracks when their eyes locked with him.

"We need to get out of here and to a hospital. We can explain more later."

Daniel took the lead. "I'll call Black and make sure we have doctors we can trust. Get them into the truck. Chance, burn the place to the ground."

He pulled out his phone and walked away. It was a good thing Daniel didn't push. Steel didn't have any information yet, and he really didn't want Karlie to have to explain things in front of a bunch of strangers.

"Did you need me to take the baby?"

"No!" Karlie yelled before Steel could thank Emma for the offer but graciously decline it.

"I got her," he answered.

His team filed out of the house, except for Chance, who was quickly taking care to hide the evidence of what they'd done.

It wasn't until he was settled into the back seat of the SUV that Steel finally allowed himself to glance down at the baby in his arms. She couldn't be more than a few weeks old, but she was absolutely beautiful. A spitting image of Karlie. Her cute little face was scrunched up, and she looked almost peaceful, considering all that she endured.

Then her eyes popped open, and it was like someone reached inside his chest and grabbed his heart.

He'd seen those eyes before. Every time he looked in the mirror. Every time he looked at his own mother. A color so gray he had never seen anything like it before. Steel couldn't look away, but he needed to know.

He fought to rip his gaze away from the baby, who he was beginning to think was his daughter, and question the woman sitting next to him.

"Karlie?"

It was pathetic how many times since finding her that the only word he could get out was her name. All other words seemed to be stuck in his throat.

Steel found her watching the exchange with tears in her eyes. Unlike him, who couldn't seem to find the courage to voice the question, Karlie answered.

"Yes. From our weekend together."

That grip on his heart tightened to a point that he thought for sure someone was ripping it out of his chest. Karlie answered his one question, but it only produced so many more.

How?

They used protection.

Where had she been this whole time?

He prayed not in that sorry excuse for a room with a lock on the door. And if so, why?

Why the hell did Vito Accardo want her?

The operator in him wanted to question her now, to get the answers he sought. The side that searched the world looking for her just wanted to pull her in and hold her close. Gather their little family and never let go.

Before he could make any decisions, they were pulling up to a small hospital.

"Black assures me it's safe. He has a doctor who will help. We just need to enter through the back," his team leader explained.

"Steel." Karlie's delicate hand burned hot on his bicep. "No matter what, don't let her out of your sight. I don't trust anyone with her but you."

"I won't." It was an easy enough promise. He had no intention of ever letting his daughter away from his watchful eye ever again.

Gage slipped out of the SUV with Karlie in his arms.

"Karlie, wait." His teammate paused while he worked through the lump in his throat to ask. "Her name."

He needed to think of her as something other than the little baby in his arms. His daughter deserved to be called by her name.



"Anna." It was so low that at first, he wasn't sure he heard her correctly. "Her name is Anna."

Once again, Karlie managed to tear at his heart. His daughter was named after his grandmother. The woman he most looked up to in this world. He remembered telling Karlie all about it on their weekend together. How even though he had great parents, it was his grandmother who showed him the most love. She was his biggest cheerleader. It was his grandmother's death and sequential funeral that brought Steel and Karlie together, the reason he was in town that day and drinking at the very bar where Karlie was supposed to have a blind date.

Steel slipped out next and carried his daughter through the back entrance, where he was met by a nurse.

"I'm Sarah, the neonatal nurse who will be taking care of the baby. What's her name and how old is she?" The nurse walked and talked. For such a short woman, she sure moved fast. He was surprised that not only was she able to keep up with his long strides, but making him hustle his ass.

Steel's mind went blank. He never thought to ask Karlie how old their daughter was. He tried to do some quick math in his head based on what he knew about pregnancy and the last time he was with Karlie.

"Her name's Anna and less than a month, I would assume. She's barely eaten the last few days. Her mother was held captive and without food. She mentioned being unable to provide what she needs."

"Lack of nutrition would cause the mother's milk to dry up. We'll get her some formula while we have her checked out. I was told you would be staying with the baby throughout the examination."

"Yes, she's not to be out of my sight."

"Would you prefer to feed her or have one of the other nurses do it while I check her over?"

Steel didn't know the first thing about how to feed a baby, but he would learn quickly if it meant his daughter could stay in his arms. Regret that he hadn't searched harder or found them sooner was gnawing at his insides. How much had Karlie been forced to endure while he was busy finishing out his Army contract and setting up his new employment?

"I don't want to let her go if it can be helped."

"I'll try my best. She looks comfortable in your arms, so I'd like to keep her that way. Her coloring looks good. Everything else I'll have to gauge once I give her a thorough exam. You mentioned the mother was held captive. Do

we know for how long? Did she receive any prenatal care?"

"I honestly don't know, but I can find out."

He wanted to believe Karlie had been taken captive right after their weekend together, and that's why he never heard from her. Because the alternative was she ghosted him. Neither scenario sat well with him and he felt guilty that he even considered hoping her reason for staying away was due to captivity. What kind of monster did that make him, that he didn't want to admit maybe she just wasn't as interested as he had been?

"I'll have the nurse taking care of her find out."

They finally entered an exam room on the labor and delivery floor. Instead of a hospital bed, there was a tall crib with one side dropped down. The nurse directed him to lay Anna down in the center before dropping the other side of the railing.

Steel got his first full look at his daughter. The cloth she was wrapped in was stained and filthy, but clean at the same time. It would appear that whatever water Karlie was provided was used to make sure their daughter wasn't wrapped in anything disgusting.

Nurse Sarah dug through a drawer before handing him a pre-made bottle.

"Let's start with two ounces and see how she takes it. Try to keep her from chugging it down. Just like with adults who haven't eaten in a few days, too much can make her sick."

"Okay . . ."

The nurse must've heard the uncertainty in his voice because before she started the exam, she took a moment to show him how to properly feed his daughter. Even though she was lying down, he still cradled her head. It was surreal to see this fragile baby nested in his large palm.

"She's lost her umbilical cord, so I would say at minimum a week old. Based on her size, I wouldn't guess much older than a couple of weeks, but the small size could be due to the lack of nutrition. I would agree with your assessment no older than a month, but we will ask the mother to be sure."

The nurse continued to speak through each step of the examination, something Steel was extremely grateful for.

Before he knew it, Anna was wailing. She had sucked down the whole two ounces and clearly was not satisfied with the small amount.

"Don't worry, we'll give her more. I just want you to burp her first. Get rid of any gas bubbles."

Again, the panic filled his expression and Nurse Sarah chuckled.

"I'll help you, no worries. But you might want to start by removing at least some of that gear. It's not ideal to hold a baby."

Steel bristled for only a moment before he did as suggested. Protocol meant he wasn't to remove his tactical vest, but he had to admit, trying to hold Anna with it on felt weird. Removing only enough to make the situation more comfortable, he trusted that his team would have his back.

The nurse was patient throughout the entire procedure. By the time Anna let out a belch that could rival any of his teammates, he felt more comfortable and like he had a handle on what he was doing.

This time, he was shown how to prepare the bottle, although it didn't take a genius to peel off a seal and attach a nipple. He knew there had to be more to it once they left the hospital, but he would worry about that later.

Once Anna was comfortably eating again, Nurse Sarah continued her examination.

"Heart rate is good. Pulse ox is good. Flexibility and mobility are good."

He was about to slap the nurse's hand. The way she was moving Anna's limbs could not be natural. His poor daughter was being squished and rotated like she was a fucking doll.

The nurse stopped when a growl escaped. "I promise you I'm not hurting her. I'm just testing to make sure she has all ranges of motion. Which she does. See, all done."

The nurse held her hands up in front of her, and he had to admit, Anna didn't seem upset by what was happening.

"Fine," he snapped. "Just be gentle with her."

"I am. The doctor will be coming in soon, and I want to warn you, he'll do similar tests. It's standard. Overall, she's healthy. A little dehydrated, so there is a good chance the doctor will want to keep her overnight for observation. She has a bit of a rash. Probably from the living conditions she was in but it's treatable and will go away in a few days. I recommend feeding her every two hours to start. Small dosages so her stomach can get used to the change. There's no telling how much milk she was getting from the mother, so it's important we document it now. Just to make sure she's getting enough."

Each word was another stab to the heart. The things his daughter and Karlie were forced to endure. It made him homicidal. He wanted to go back to the villa and murder the son of a bitch all over again, even if it wasn't rational. Even if he wasn't the one to actually hurt her. Vito was his true target. Armando had told them as such before he died. The mob boss was the

one who kept Karlie from him. He just needed to find out why.

Until then, he was going to enjoy the feel of his daughter in his arms. One look into her eyes and he knew everything in his world just shifted. He loved her so much already and would kill anyone who tried to hurt her again.

## CHAPTER TWO

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She needed to see her daughter, to know she was okay. Leaving Anna with Steel had sounded like a good idea at the time, but the longer she was away from her, the more anxious she felt.

Since the day Vito learned she was pregnant, he had threatened to harm her daughter in some way. His initial reaction was to force her to have an abortion, but Karlie had begged him to let her keep her baby, had pleaded for her poor daughter's life. He'd agreed, but then tormented her by telling her that, since she wanted the baby so badly, she could watch as it grew up to be either a killer like himself, or a slave sold on the black market. But she had to remember that she wasn't in that basement anymore. Vito wasn't threatening her anymore.

"When can I see my baby?" Karlie snapped.

She didn't allow the new nurse the chance to introduce herself before she was jumping down the poor woman's throat.

"Your sweet baby girl is only a few doors down. The doctor is in with her now, but once she's done with her assessment, I'll have the nurse bring her to you. In the meantime, I want to make sure you have everything you need."

What she wanted was her daughter. Twenty-six days and not once was her little girl out of her sight. Not even Vito had the balls to try and take Anna from her, despite his threats. For days she had lain awake just watching her daughter sleep, waiting for Vito to swoop in and take her, but it never happened. She finally figured out why; he would rather her watch her daughter die than do the actual killing. He was a man who enjoyed the

psychological torture of others.

"I just need my daughter," she said more gently.

"I empathize with you. Believe me, I do. But one cannot drink from an empty well and you, my dear, are nearly bone dry. I read your history from the nurse who did your intake. You weren't provided prenatal care. You delivered your baby in deplorable conditions. The two of you are lucky to be alive." Karlie tensed at the accusation. The nurse noticed and hurried on. "I didn't mean that in a bad way. I'm in awe of you. You and your baby are amazing, but now it's time to let someone help you. Even for a short while, so you can fully recover."

"I trained with a midwife."

Karlie wasn't sure why she felt the need to let that little tidbit slip out. She didn't know this woman or if she could even trust her.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"My best friend insisted on home birth. I wanted to be as prepared as possible, so I trained with a midwife. I'm not certified, but I learned everything I could just in case." Her mouth seemed to have a mind of its own.

"Well, you need to thank your friend when you return home, because her insistence is probably the reason you're alive right now. You did a good job."

The praise felt good. There had been so many times during Anna's birth that she had worried she would make a mistake that would kill her daughter. The conditions were far from sanitary but thankfully it had gone textbook smooth, though Vito had complained about the blood and smell. Fortunately, he sent the person who brought her meals to clean it up. Otherwise, who knows what kind of infection they could've gotten.

The nurse didn't say much more as she continued her assessment. Karlie was hooked up to an IV for not only fluids but antibiotics as well. The doctor explained it was just a precaution while they waited for the results of some of the tests they ran. She refused to complain. She wanted to be healthy for her daughter, and she knew her daughter was getting the same treatment.

If only they would just bring her Anna, she would finally be able to relax.

Her prayers were answered when the next knock on her door had Steel peeking his head in.

"You okay if we come in?"

"Yes!" Karlie screeched. She sat up taller on the bed and threw her arms

out. She didn't care if she sounded like a lunatic, practically screaming her excitement and relief.

Steel pushed the door open further and navigated the portable crib into her room. Her not-quite-one-month-old daughter looked so peaceful sleeping.

"I was afraid I would wake her if I picked her up to bring her here, so the nurse said I could bring her over in her crib."

She didn't bother to tell him their daughter could sleep through anything. The only thing that would wake Anna up was hunger. He would soon learn all of their daughter's behaviors.

"How was she while they were looking her over?"

"Perfect." Was that pride in his voice? "She's such a trooper and eats like a champ. She didn't whimper when they hooked her up or poked her so they could run tests. She didn't seem to care when the nurse or doctor rotated her like a damn rag doll. I, on the other hand, almost ripped the nurse's head off. She's lucky I didn't rotate her arms like that. See how she felt afterward."

Karlie smiled at the protectiveness in his tone. She always knew, if given the chance, he would be a great father.

"I know what test you mean. I've seen doctors do it before and always thought it looked uncomfortable."

"Yeah, well, if Anna would've whimpered even a little while it was happening, that would've been the end of that. They're lucky she didn't."

Anna slept peacefully between them, none the wiser that her parents were talking about her. Or of the uncomfortableness that hung in the air. It was so different from the last time they were together.

"You can sit down, you know. No reason to hover just inside the door. Unless you have to get back to your team."

She couldn't be sure, but she thought she remembered one of the nurses mentioning a very large man keeping guard outside her door. She had no idea what was going to happen now, but she figured Steel needed to get back to whatever job he was on. She couldn't expect him to stop everything just because he learned less than twelve hours ago that he had a daughter.

"My team and I are staying." Steel folded into the chair next to her bed. His large frame barely fit inside the small piece of furniture. It was clear the chairs weren't designed for men of his size. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

"I wasn't trying to get rid of you," Karlie replied hesitantly.

The statement wasn't louder than a whisper. So much had changed since she last saw Steel. The night she left him, Karlie had been confident in herself. Confident in the future they discussed. Months locked in a basement changed that.

"Good, because I'm staying." His tone was almost as fierce as his expression. It was contradictory to the man she first met. That Steel had also worn his emotions so openly, but at the time they were nothing but love and adoration. Now there was a harshness that she wasn't used to.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said.

Karlie hadn't even realized she had flinched or shown any outward distress at his tone. She wasn't scared of him. Deep down, she didn't believe he would hurt her. It was how she knew she could leave their daughter with him. But the past eleven months had her body constantly on guard.

"You didn't. At least, not the way you think. It's not you I'm afraid of. It was the intensity of the tone you used."

Steel moved the chair closer, but still, he didn't touch her.

"Will you tell me about it? It doesn't need to be everything right now, but can you at least tell me what happened that weekend? You left my place with the plan to stay in touch and then I never heard from you again."

There was no mistaking the pain in his voice. So many times during her captivity she had wondered if Steel was looking for her or if he had forgotten all about her after she disappeared. She wouldn't have blamed him. They'd made promises. Ones she had been forced to break. There had been a time that she convinced herself he had moved on. Those were some of her darkest days. Ironically, Anna had chosen that time to make herself really known, to kick and move around so much in her belly that Karlie had convinced herself that their baby was trying to reassure her things would be okay.

"I had planned to keep my promise to you." She took a deep breath. "I was so happy when I got home that day that I thought nothing could burst the little bubble I was living in. I was wrong."

It was like she was having an out-of-body experience. She could see that Steel had reached for her hand and was cradling it gently, but she was too numb to actually feel it. Which sucked. She really wanted to be able to feel the warmth of his rough hands. But she needed to continue.

"My doorbell rang and for a minute I thought it was you, which was silly because you were already back on base. I didn't bother to look to see who it was, I just threw the door open. Stupid, I know, and believe me, I paid for



that mistake dearly when I saw who was on the other side."

She stopped and gathered her thoughts. The betrayal hurt so badly. How could she have thought she was safe? Too many weeks were spent going over that fateful day and how one small decision changed the trajectory of her life. She swore she would put it behind her.

"You don't have to continue if it's too much for you."

"No, I want to. I just needed a moment." She took one more deep breath before continuing. "When I opened the door and found *Il Diavolo* standing on the stoop, I tried to slam the door, but it was too late. He hit me over the head and the next thing I remember is waking up in that basement."

"*Il Diavolo*? As in, The Devil? Vito Accardo's enforcer?"

This was the part she knew would be hard to explain. La Cosa Nostra was abstract to most, something people whispered about but never really witnessed firsthand. She wasn't so lucky and neither was her family, or the people of her neighborhood. They lived in fear of what Vito and his men would do at any given time.

"Yes," she finally managed to answer. "Vito and his men control the neighborhood I grew up in. I thought when I moved, I would finally be free, but it obviously wasn't far enough because he found me."

Karlie looked away. She found it difficult to talk about after all that time. It was her family's darkest secret. A small part of her thought her parents were wrong, but she had been naïve.

"Did he say what he wanted you for?"

She saw his barely contained rage lurking below the surface. She should be scared after everything she went through. Growing up seeing violence on every corner had her never wanting to be with someone who harnessed the same anger. Steel was different. She knew, felt it in her soul, that he would never harm an innocent person.

"As his mistress. He couldn't marry me because I'm not pure, his word not mine, but he still wanted me. His plan was to break me until I willingly gave myself over to him. I wanted to buy myself time, so I told him there was a chance I was pregnant. It was only supposed to be an empty threat while I found a way to escape, but a few weeks later I realized how true it was."

Karlie remembered the day well.

*The sound of the door creaking open had Karlie backing farther onto the dirty mattress. Nothing good ever came from someone visiting her. She knew today would be even worse when she saw Vito's large frame come into view.*

*"Here, take this." He threw a brown bag at her. "It's time to know for sure."*

*She looked at the bag like it was a bomb. It couldn't be what she thought it was. With shaky hands, she reached for the offending object. She learned quickly enough not to make Vito wait. The force of his punch to her head still hurt from time to time.*

*She pulled the box out, and her heart sank. It was exactly what she hoped it wouldn't be. A pregnancy test. The jig was up. As soon as she peed on the stick, Vito would know she was lying and things would get so much worse for her. He would rape her. Claim her. Turn her into his whore.*

*"I don't have time for this," he snapped. "Take the damn test already. Once we confirm you're not pregnant, I can finally make you mine."*

*Karlie tried to think of a way to put it off, but one look at Vito's fiery expression and she knew nothing she did would work. It was clear Vito was at the end of his patience with her. With one last deep breath and a prayer for some miracle, she scooted over to where the bucket sat. It was embarrassing to think that her only privacy was to put her back to Vito as she peed.*

*Her hands shook so much, she was sure she missed the little white stick altogether. No such luck it would seem.*

*The two minutes dragged on and yet flew by, all at the same time. But it was the little screen that suddenly made the room spin around her.*

*Positive.*

*She was actually pregnant. How could that be?*

*"Well? Let me see it."*

*Karlie wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not. The only way to find out was to show Vito and see how he reacted to the truth.*

*Karlie snapped out of the memory. The truth hadn't saved her. Vito had been so angry at the results that he had beaten her bloody. She had feared she had lost the baby that day, but her Anna proved just how much of a fighter she really was.*

*"What was his plan for Anna when he found out you were pregnant?"*

*She didn't want to tell him, but she could tell by the stubborn set of his jaw that he wouldn't let it go.*

*"At first he wanted me to get rid of her, but I begged him otherwise. I couldn't get rid of the only thing that connected me to you. But his next choice wasn't much better."*

*"Tell me."*

"He told me he planned to sell her."

## CHAPTER THREE

---



Steel was going to kill him. He would find Vito and make him wish he had never laid eyes on Karlie or Anna. The asshole was a dead man.

"You never need to worry about that happening."

He needed to speak with his team. This changed everything. Their original mission was to locate and capture Daniel's wife, Emma, who they thought had turned dirty and started working for Armando Ruis, the man who killed Daniel's daughter, Kali. It wasn't until they were in the middle of the mission that they learned the true nature of their assignment.

Emma was undercover for David Black, the owner of Blackguard Security and their boss, trying to learn who Armando worked for. The decision was made to pull her out when her cover was almost blown. Hence the creation of his team, Phantom. They were mercenaries. Paid to kill people. They took contracts in the hope of catching more ruthless criminals.

Armando was just a small sample of what his team would do. They were hired to kill Emma, but her information led to Armando, and now Vito, the Don of the Italian Mafia and apparently someone who specialized in the human trafficking of children.

Steel was so lost in his head and the thoughts of revenge that he didn't realize Karlie was staring at him with a concerned expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" His entire body went on high alert. Was there something wrong with Anna that he didn't notice?

"You're different from the last time I saw you," Karlie replied.

Now he was on alert for a whole new reason. Sure, he was different.

Karlie remembered the man she met while he was on leave. At the time, he'd been coping with the loss of his grandmother and looking for a night out to just relax. What he had found was so much more.

He was still that man. Just not when he was working.

"You're just seeing two different sides of the same man."

"The first time I saw you, I thought you had a dangerous side, but by the end of the weekend, I chalked it up to my imagination. Now I see my instinct wasn't far off."

Steel had known that weekend he would eventually have to show her all of him if they wanted to make things work. His plan had been to talk to her about it over the months, let her get to know the man he was outside of his job. Vito took that opportunity away and now he was forced to rip the Band-Aid off and show Karlie both sides of himself.

"No, your instinct was correct. The Army trained me to be a very dangerous man and the security company I work for now still utilizes those skills. Doesn't mean I'm not also the man who spent the weekend with you."

He watched Karlie play with the thin hospital blanket. He made a mental note to have something softer and heavier brought in. After seeing the conditions to which she was subjected, it was the least he could do.

"But does it bleed into your personal life?"

What she was asking hit him like a ton of bricks.

"I don't abuse women or children. That's not something you ever need to worry about. But I can't promise my job won't cross with my personal life. It already did. The moment I found you in that decrepit basement and found out about my daughter, they meshed. I won't stop until Vito pays for what he did, and I will use every ounce of my training to protect the two of you."

Steel really hoped she could accept that part of him. He wanted to be a part of his daughter's life and not just as some part-time dad or spectator. He wanted to be actively involved, not just with Anna, but with Karlie as well.

"Did you look for me?"

He finally moved away from the door and dragged the chair closer to the bed.

"I did. Every chance I got. It was one of the major reasons I took the job I have now. David Black has the best resources, and I wanted to use them. It killed me to think I might find you one day, only to learn you weren't who you said you were, and it was all a big joke."

"I didn't lie, and I never would've just vanished without a trace. That

weekend was one of the happiest in my life."

"Mine too."

There were dark days when he forced himself to remember how good they were together. That the feelings weren't one-sided or only in his head. Steel looked over to where his daughter was sleeping just a foot away from Karlie's bed. So many questions bombarded him.

"The nurse asked me how old she was and I didn't have an answer."

"Twenty-six days old. I know it's weird to count it that way, but it was the only thing that helped. Before that, I was counting down the days until she arrived."

"It's not weird at all," he told her honestly. And it wasn't. As someone who was captured once while deployed, he knew that a person had to do whatever they could to survive. He wouldn't judge anything Karlie did to protect herself and their daughter. "I guessed less than a month, but that was just me trying to do some quick math."

"I was several days past my due date. I was afraid something was wrong or there would be complications with her being so late, but I got lucky. It was an easy delivery."

"Please tell me there was someone there to help you."

Since he'd had some time to come to terms with the situation, the guilt ate at him. All the things Karlie was forced to experience alone made his heart hurt.

He knew the answer before she opened her mouth. It was written all over her face. "No." She rushed on, "But I knew what I was doing. I trained with a midwife because my best friend wanted to have a home birth and insisted I was going to be the one helping her with it. So there was nothing to worry about, and like I said, it was an easy delivery."

Steel had to fight down the nausea, guilt, and anger. The emotions were fighting for dominance. How could she even say there was nothing to worry about? She was forced to deliver a baby on her own, with no help. Both of them could've died and he would never have known what happened to her.

"I don't care that it was an easy delivery. You were on your own. I've never witnessed a baby being born, but I imagine it's messy."

"Vito sent someone in to clean the place up. I admit, without that small mercy, things could've gone a lot worse."

*Small mercy, my ass. Common decency was more like it.*

Karlie didn't realize, but with each new development, it only further

added to the pain and torture he would inflict on Vito when he finally found him. Vito wasn't a good man, and Steel was damn good at his job. Normally, he didn't torture for fun, but he would make an exception.

Steel was about to tell her as much, but Daniel, his team leader, chose that moment to pop his head into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, but do you have a minute?"

He stood up and brushed his lips across Karlie's forehead. "I'll be right outside the door if you need anything. I won't be long."

It was better that his team leader interrupted them. There was no way Steel would've walked away from them on his own. He couldn't even walk past his daughter without stopping just to admire her and place a featherlight kiss on her head.

"Daddy loves you," he whispered into the soft fuzz that could barely be considered hair.

Steel followed Daniel out into the hallway and found his entire team, including Jaxson.

"When did you get here?"

"I asked Kendra to fly me out the moment Gage called me. I just got in."

Jaxson, Gage, and Steel were once part of the same team in the Army. At the time, they thought they were doing good, only to learn that their boss was using them as their own personal kill squad. When Daniel approached Jaxson about a job opportunity, it included the three of them. David Black wanted them as a unit. There was no one he was closer with than Jaxson and Gage.

"Thank you, brother."

"Has Karlie told you anything?" Daniel got straight down to business, exactly as he should've.

"Vito Accardo sent his enforcer to kidnap her the night she went back to her place after our weekend together."

"*Il Diavolo*?" Liam asked in disbelief.

"I thought he was a myth," Chance chimed in.

"Clearly not, since Karlie knew who he was."

His heart stopped again just knowing that bastard got his hands on her. The most ruthless killer in the world had his hands on the woman he loved. Steel would find immense joy in ending the man's life.

"Has she said how she knows his identity?"

"No," he confessed. "I didn't even think to ask."

He had been too focused on Karlie's and Anna's well-being that he wasn't

thinking like an operator. He was missing things that should've been obvious to ask.

"We can circle back to it." Daniel looked to be deep in thought. "What did Vito want with her?"

"He wanted her as his mistress."

His stomach rolled at the thought. A man like Vito Accardo was ruthless and heartless. Women weren't to be cherished and loved, they were an object to be owned. Karlie would've been forced into a life of servitude, no better than the women and children Vito trafficked.

"So much doesn't make sense," Emma commented. "We have more questions than answers."

"I'm not going to ask her right now," he ground out. "Not after everything she's endured. Eleven months locked in that damn basement. Forced to deliver a baby on her own. Our baby. My daughter," he growled.

Steel wouldn't let anyone force Karlie to do something before she was ready. Not even his team. He wanted answers as much as they did, but it could wait until Karlie had the chance to heal. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well.

"No one is saying it needs to be today," Emma tried to placate him. "I'm just saying there are a lot of questions and only Karlie can answer them when she's ready."

He tried to calm the storm brewing inside him. Every moment away from Karlie and Anna was torture. Realistically he knew they were safe, his entire team was outside her room. No one would get through him. No one would touch his family again.

"I need to get back in there. I know we need answers, and I'll get them when she's ready."

He didn't wait for anyone to say anything in return. The relief and gratitude he first felt when he saw his teammates, especially Jaxson, dissipated. All he wanted now was to set his eyes on his girls.

When he stepped back into the room, he found Karlie curled up on her side, sleeping. Anna's crib was bumped up next to the bed and Karlie had one hand firmly attached to their daughter's leg. Even in sleep, Karlie was protecting her.

Steel picked up the chair silently and brought it to the other side of the bed. He sat down and simply watched the two most important people in his life sleep peacefully. And at that moment, he vowed he would do whatever it



took to show them that he was worthy of their love in return.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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*Someone was coming.*

*Karlie tried to push herself farther back onto the dirty mattress, but it did no good. She was exhausted from pushing her baby out of her body.*

*A little girl.*

*Her sweet little girl lay on her chest in a bloody and white creamy mess. She had started to clean them both up, but exhaustion threatened to take over. She had planned to rest her eyes for just a minute to regain some of her strength.*

*But now someone was coming, and she needed to protect her daughter. Mustering up every last ounce of energy from her reserve, Karlie used her one arm to push herself up a little more and away from the blood-soaked mattress.*

*She couldn't go too far. Her daughter was still connected to her placenta, that was lying next to her quivering legs. There was no way she expected Vito to leave a pair of scissors or anything within her reach. She had barely convinced him for the extra water and towels.*

*Karlie was working on cleaning up her daughter better when the door creaked open with a bang.*

*"Did you finally push out that little spawn?"*

*She didn't have the energy to answer him, nor did she want to. There was no hiding the tiny baby in her arms. He would see soon enough.*

*"I see you did. Now tell me is it a boy that I can beat into an image of me or a girl to sell off?"*

*Karlie started to scream as a pair of hands were suddenly shaking her.*

"Karlie, baby. Karlie, please wake up."

Her entire body felt heavy. When did she fall asleep? And who was calling her "baby"? Vito never called her anything other than a slut after he found out she was pregnant.

She tried to shake off the veil of sleepiness, but something was off. The mattress under her body was too soft, and she was warm. The basement was never warm. And where was Anna? Her hand was always firmly attached to her daughter when she slept.

Karlie pushed the last remnants of sleep away and shot up in bed.

"Anna?"

"She's right here." Steel stepped into her line of sight, and sure enough, their daughter rested in the crook of his large arms. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. She started to fuss, and I wanted to get her fed before her screams woke you up."

Her entire body sagged with relief as she slowly shook off the dream and remembered where she was.

They were no longer in that dirty basement. Steel and his team had rescued her. Vito wasn't going to come through the door and take her daughter as he threatened repeatedly.

"I've always slept with my hand on her leg. When I was able to sleep, that is."

She'd rarely slept more than a few hours at a time since Anna was born. Vito's threats kept her up most of the time. It wasn't until exhaustion finally won out that she would close her eyes, but never for very long. The dreams would always find her. Taunt her until she woke up in a cold sweat and the only thing that could calm her down was the feel of her daughter's body against her own.

"Can I have her, please?"

Her tone was harsher than she meant for it to be. Steel must've read the desperation in her eyes because he wasted no time gently transferring their daughter into her waiting arms.

"I gave her two ounces already and burped her. I was going to give her some more."

He handed over the pre-made bottle. She was tempted to push it away and latch her daughter to her nipple when it hit her. Her milk supply had dried up, even with the IV drip and food she had been given since being admitted to

the hospital. Nothing had helped.

There was no ache from too-full boobs. Her gown wasn't wet from them leaking as they normally would be at even the slightest whimper from her daughter. It was like a storm suddenly consumed her. Tears rolled down her face and she couldn't stop them. Every emotion she was forced to lock down since her daughter's birth suddenly consumed her.

"What's wrong?" Not even the panic in Steel's voice could slow her hysteria.

"I can't feed her," she answered between sobs.

She knew what she was saying didn't make sense. She was, in fact, feeding Anna the bottle he handed her, and her daughter was eating it like a champ. But the overwhelming knowledge that she wasn't the one actually giving Anna what she fundamentally needed crashed into her.

"Do you want me to take her so I can help you?" Steel tried.

Karlie squeezed her daughter tighter and shook her head violently.

"No!" The word was ripped out of her throat with a loud sob.

"I don't understand," Steel pleaded. "I'm trying to, but I have to be honest. I don't know how to help."

Of course he didn't, because what she was feeling was hormonal. It lacked all rational thought.

"I can't give her what she needs anymore," Karlie sobbed.

Before she knew what was happening, Steel was beside her on the small bed and wrapping his large arms around both her and their daughter.

"That's not true at all. You are the reason our daughter is alive right now. You gave her life. You protected her when no one else could. You are the reason our daughter is healthy despite the horrors you both endured."

Karlie sniffled. "But my boobs have dried up. I can't feed her that way anymore."

Realization of what she was saying crossed Steel's face.

"I'm not going to pretend to understand the significance of that because I'm not a mother. Nor am I going to tell you it's okay because, based on the way you just broke down, I can see how important that was to you. What I will say is, you can't beat yourself up over it. It's not your fault. The only person to blame is Vito. He starved you so that your body was forced into survival mode and stopped producing milk. He turned your life upside down. Blame Vito, not yourself."

Her body sagged against him. Instead of trying to placate her as most

people would have, Steel actually listened to her concerns and validated her feelings. He didn't try to justify that formula was fine. She already knew it was and had nothing against feeding her daughter that way. It just wasn't how she envisioned caring for her child.

"Thank you," she whimpered.

She was no longer sobbing. Tears still pricked her eyes, but they weren't free-flowing as they had been moments earlier.

"No need to thank me. You should always feel free to tell me what's bothering you."

"It just hit me all at once," she felt the need to explain further. "When I was working with the midwife, we discussed breastfeeding a lot. I know some people can't do it or choose not to, but I had wanted to as long as I could. I liked knowing that one day I would be giving my child the nutrients they needed to grow strong. So, to have it ripped away just hit me really hard."

Steel gave her a reassuring squeeze. "You don't need to justify your feelings to me. I know what it is like to have a choice taken away from you and I'm sorry that happened to you. I don't mean to change the subject, but you were upset before I moved Anna. Were you having a bad dream?"

There was no pause as Steel took Anna from her to burp. She easily could have done it herself, but was thankful for the small reprieve. As much as she wanted her daughter in her arms, she had to admit her body ached. Her limbs felt heavy and even her small daughter was too much for her to handle.

Karlie sucked in a big lungful of air and held it for a few seconds to gather her thoughts. Talking about her time in captivity wasn't at the top of the list of the things she wanted to do, but Steel deserved to know what Anna faced. She was his daughter as much as hers.

"I was dreaming about the day Anna was born. For most mothers, it's a joyous time, but Vito ruined that. He came in barely an hour after our daughter was born and threatened her life. I haven't slept well since then because of that."

"I wish you were never forced to deal with that. I would take the pain from you if I could."

It helped that Steel didn't try to placate her. He didn't offer false apologies. There was nothing false about the sincerity in his words. She would bet on her life that he meant every word he said to her.

"It sucked," she whispered. "Some days I questioned if all the hope I had

was misplaced, but then I would feel Anna kick or whimper after she was born and I knew I couldn't give up hope that we would finally make it out. The last two days were the worst. I knew I was in trouble when no one brought me food after several days. I tried to make it last as long as I could, but it wasn't enough."

For the last eleven months, she had lived her life on a four-day cycle. Every four days she was brought food and Vito's lackey would empty her bucket. She would be given the chance to clean herself up, if that's what she wanted to call wiping herself down with a semi-clean rag. She learned quickly how to conserve the water she was given.

"You survived. That's what you need to remember, and Anna is safe now. The rest we can deal with together. I will be with you every step of the way."

Heat flooded her entire body.

But it wasn't the warm sensation from hearing something so profoundly soothing. She was hot. So very hot all over.

"Steel . . ."

She could hear the panic in her own voice, so she was sure he could as well.

"Karlie, what is it?"

Breathing was becoming harder, and it was like something heavy was compressing her chest.

"Something's not right," was all she managed to say before her vision began to blur and the room grew darker.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Someone tried to kill her.

After promising Karlie that she and their daughter would be safe, someone had the nerve to come in under his and his team's nose, and try to prove him wrong.

If he thought he was pissed before, it was nothing compared to the anger pulsating through his veins.

"You need to calm down, man. For your daughter's sake." Jaxson stepped in front of where he was pacing back and forth with Anna tucked into his chest.

"No, I need to find the bitch who posed as a nurse to get closer to Karlie and slipped a drug into her IV to take her away from us," he seethed.

The operator in him had taken over when Karlie said something was wrong. His first instinct was to rip the IV out of her arm. He hadn't known at the time if that was the culprit, but it was the first thing he tried while he waited for the doctor and nurses to come in.

"And I promise you we are doing everything we can to find her but right now Anna needs you. I'm no expert, but I doubt radiating anger is good for her. I'm guessing a baby can feel that or some shit."

"Jaxson's right." Emma stepped next to their teammate as a sign of solidarity. "A baby is going to sense your mood and feed off of it. If you can't calm down for yourself, then do it for her."

"Her mother almost died. Could *still* die," he choked out.

The doctors put Karlie into a medically induced coma. While they were

optimistic they caught it in time due to Karlie waking up from a bad dream, there was no guarantee. And that was what worried him.

"You need to have hope. Again, for Anna's sake. Karlie didn't survive childbirth on her own, just to be taken out by some rogue nurse."

Emma was right. If Karlie could put Anna first, then so could he. Steel needed to trust that his team could handle finding the nurse.

"What has Black said? He assured us this hospital was safe."

"I'm working with another one of his analysts to vet the rest of the staff. There's no reason the nurse should've slipped through the cracks, but my honest opinion is she was approached and either threatened or bribed."

"No one gets close to Karlie again unless they are fully checked out," Steel instructed.

He knew better than most how easy it was to be bought. Hell, his previous boss was one of the worst out there. That didn't mean he wasn't pissed off that their intel on the hospital was wrong. Black had some of the best resources in the world. That someone managed to get through the security check he put in place was very difficult, almost impossible.

"Only the doctor and one nurse who he has personally vouched for are allowed anywhere near Karlie. Dr. Roberts understands his life is on the line if anything more happens to her," Emma explained.

From what he'd learned, Dr. Roberts served with Black. His boss trusted the man with his life. If the doctor was vouching for the one nurse, then he had to believe that Black knew what he was doing. Otherwise, there would be hell to pay and not even Black would be safe from his wrath.

Anna chose that moment to stir and let out one very loud wail. Steel looked at his watch. It was time for another feeding. His little lady was doing so well and made sure every two hours to remind him what time it was. The original nurse said he could start increasing her amount of food each time so she could go longer between feedings, but not even that stopped her from wailing every two hours for more. It was going to make for a lot of sleepless nights ahead. It was weird that he actually looked forward to that.

"Take the time to feed your daughter and let us, you know, your team, handle things for now. You have a lot on your plate." Jaxson slapped him on the back and slipped out of the waiting room.

Steel needed to get back into Karlie's room. He only stepped out because he wanted to talk to his team and he didn't want to do it in front of the nurse. Dr. Roberts insisted she was trustworthy, but that didn't mean it was safe to



talk freely.

But before he could go back, he needed to make a bottle. Never did he think that would be his thought process while on an assignment. Or really ever, for that matter. Before his weekend with Karlie, marriage and kids weren't something he saw for his future. Career military was his love. Then he met Karlie, and for just a weekend, he dared to allow himself to dream.

The dream hadn't lasted long. While he never gave up hope of finding the woman who changed his life, he also never thought when he found her, he would also learn he had a child. They used protection. He insisted on it. Now everything was different and he couldn't imagine both Karlie and Anna not in his life.

"Here you go, little miss. It's a good thing Aunt Emma knows what she's doing because outside of those pre-made bottles, Daddy's lost."

In the heat of the moment, he was ashamed to admit he panicked. When Emma thrust several bottles and a formula container at him, he looked at his teammate like she was handing over a grenade. He didn't know the first thing about making a bottle. Fortunately, for once, instead of her usual smartass comments, Emma had sat with him and showed him exactly what he needed to do. The same went for the first diaper he had to change. Having a baby wasn't for the faint of heart.

"How's the little princess?" Liam asked, as Steel walked back into Karlie's room with Anna in his arms. "Eating again, I see."

"She would put most grown men to shame the way she eats." He smiled down at his daughter, but it disappeared when he looked up and found Karlie still in the same position in the hospital bed. Tubes and wires were everywhere.

"Nothing has changed," Liam informed him, "and I made sure to watch every move the nurse made. Not a single thing was administered that I didn't verify first."

Only those closest to Liam knew that he served as a medic for a time. After Liam left the Marines, he moved down to Mexico to live off the grid and help those escaping traffickers. There were times that it wasn't practical to call for a doctor, so Liam made sure he got the training needed. His teammate was the only person he trusted to stay with Karlie and make sure they didn't have a repeat performance of another nurse trying to kill her.

"I appreciate it. Have they said anymore about how long they plan to keep her in the coma?"

"A day or two max. Just enough time to make sure the drugs cleared her system and her organs have time to heal so they can function on their own. But I'm going to warn you." Liam looked him dead in the eye. "After all the trauma she suffered, don't be surprised if it takes a little longer for her to wake up. There's a lot of healing her body needs to do and rest is the best thing for it."

Steel knew that. It didn't mean he liked it. He wanted out of this damn country and back into the States. Back to New Mexico where he knew the doctors and staff, and could trust the care Karlie was receiving.

"Go grab a coffee or something. I got this now."

"I'll send Chance in. That way, you aren't having to split your attention between Karlie and your daughter."

He appreciated everything his team was willing to do. He had only known Liam, Chance, Blayd, and Daniel for a few weeks before they were sent on their first assignment. An assignment that brought Emma into the fold. And still, every one of them had proven that they had his back, no matter what he needed.

"I appreciate it."

Steel was burping Anna when Chance strode in. The guy was all business, all the time, but one look at the baby in his arms and his teammate smirked.

"Hungry again, I see. Looks like she takes after her father in that respect."

"You saying I eat a lot?"

Steel did. It was no secret.

"I mean, if the shoe fits." Chance shook his head. "Besides, this little cupcake has a lot to make up for. I can't imagine it was easy to eat when her mother was being starved."

Just thinking about the conditions Karlie was left in made him want to smash everything in the room. The curves he was used to seeing on her had drastically reduced. He wanted them back.

He was a big man. At nearly six and a half feet tall, and over two hundred and fifty pounds of solid muscle, the last thing he needed was some dainty woman that he would be scared of crushing. Karlie was anything but fragile. She had curves he loved to run his hands all over and meat on her bones.

But right now, he could tell she'd lost some weight while she was held captive. Her normally full face was sunken in and her skin hung loosely in some areas. He vowed to cater to her every whim when she woke up.

"The first nurse who checked her out said it was important we logged how much Anna ate now for that reason. She's on the small side for her age, but I was assured she'd make that up within a few weeks."

"Good." Chance smiled down at Steel's daughter. "Everyone knows chunky babies are the cutest."

"Some baby fever I didn't know about?" He popped his eyebrow at his teammate.

"I wouldn't say baby fever, but I have several nieces and nephews. Let's just say babysitting them when I'm visiting isn't a hardship and hasn't deterred me from wanting my own."

Steel took the moment, while he was burping Anna, to look at Chance. Really look at the man. In the weeks before their first assignment, he hadn't had the opportunity to get to know his new teammate, so what he was learning surprised him. Chance was the nicely dressed one. Oftentimes, seen in suits or slacks when they weren't training. Never would he have guessed that same man was one who spent time rolling around with kids.

"You are a mysterious man."

Chance tossed his head back and laughed. "You are, surprisingly, not the first person to tell me that. One should never judge a book by its cover."

"I'll say. What other surprises are you hiding?"

"Now what fun would that be if I spilled everything so soon? It's better to spread out the mystery."

"Is that the line you give women?"

Chance wasn't a playboy exactly, but he wasn't a saint either. The man liked to flirt. That was just one of the reasons that the talk of children surprised him. Steel thought for sure Chance would be the eternal bachelor of the team.

"Of course. Every woman loves to solve a mystery. Helps me weed out the ones too eager or too boring."

He would take his teammate's word for it.

With a full belly, Anna was once again fast asleep in his arms. He contemplated putting her down in the portable crib, but immediately tossed out the idea. He needed the feel of his daughter in his arms while he waited for Karlie to wake up. It grounded him when all he wanted to do was chase down whoever was responsible for Karlie's current state.

## CHAPTER SIX

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The next morning, they brought Karlie out of the medically induced coma, but she still hadn't woken up.

"Why isn't she waking up?"

"Her body needs to heal," Liam reminded Steel for the third time.

Logically, he knew that was the case, but some unrealistic part of his mind thought the moment they pulled her out, Karlie would immediately wake up.

"Her tests were fine," he argued.

"Physically, yes," Emma added. "But she suffered more than just the physical trauma. Her mind needs to heal as well, and that's likely what's happening now. The doctor warned you about this."

Dr. Roberts had told him multiple times over the two days Karlie was unconscious that there was a chance it would take some time for her to wake up after. Steel had listened. He had even heard what the doctor was saying, but it didn't change that small hope that everyone was wrong.

Anna whimpered in his arms.

He wasn't the only one struggling with the physical absence of Karlie. His daughter demanded physical touch. Most of the time, he found he couldn't put Anna down without her screaming to be picked back up. The nurse reassured him it was normal, that his daughter was coping with her own trauma the only way she knew how, but it didn't stop him from wondering if he was doing something wrong. Karlie knew Anna best. He was winging it and hoping he didn't mess things up so badly that they couldn't be fixed.

"Why don't I hold her while you take a break?" Emma offered. "You've been sitting in the same spot all day."

"No." He shook his head at Emma's suggestion. There was no way he was going to move when there was a chance Karlie would wake up. He wanted to be the first face she saw when she opened her beautiful eyes.

"Steel, you need to rest as well. You've hardly left this room in two days," Daniel countered.

"No," he snapped. "If it were Emma in this bed, you wouldn't be leaving either."

It wasn't fair for him to yell at his boss, but Steel knew it was true. Emma and Daniel might have had their problems, and up until recently, Daniel thought Emma had betrayed him, but there was no way his team leader would leave his wife.

"You might be right," Emma said, "but if I were the one lying in that bed, I would want him to take a break. I would want him taking care of himself so he didn't end up in a bed next to me possibly in the same condition."

Maybe she was right, but it didn't change the fact that he couldn't do it. There were so many times while Karlie was missing that he hadn't been there for her. That wouldn't be the case now. He knew where she was and he would be right by her side through it all. So when she woke up, his and Anna's faces would be the first thing she saw.

"PLEASE, baby, wake up. It's been two days. Please come back to us."

It was the same plea over and over again. He still had yet to leave her side, but he had started to let his team help with Anna.

He had almost come to physical blows the first time Chance even suggested he take her out of the room for a walk. Steel wanted his daughter with him at all times, but then Dr. Roberts sat him down and explained the negative benefits of Anna not doing anything other than eating and sleeping in his arms. His little girl needed some outside stimulation. The doctor even had the nerve to remind him that for those first few weeks, Karlie couldn't provide their daughter that courtesy, and now he was inflicting the same pain. It was the only reason he caved.

So now Anna was out exploring the hospital with Chance. His teammate

was gracious enough to send him a picture every five minutes. It was overboard and completely irrational, but it was Steel's one stipulation if his daughter was going to be out of his sight.

"Why don't you shower while Chance has Anna? You can use the one here in the room and I promise, if Karlie so much as flutters, I will grab you," Liam encouraged.

Steel wanted to protest, but a slight odor caught his attention. He realized it was more than likely coming from him. Not once in the two days since they took Karlie out of the coma had he taken more than one minute away to piss. He was running off deodorant and the occasional splash of water each time he used the toilet.

"Maybe you're right."

"I know I'm right. No offense, but if Karlie woke up right now and smelled you, she would probably yell at us for allowing you to let yourself go so bad."

If he had been himself, he would've thrown his teammate the finger on the way to the bathroom, but he wasn't himself. He was operating on barely any sleep and copious amounts of caffeine. He knew when the time finally came, he was going to sleep like the dead for a solid twenty-four hours. It happened before, when his missions required him to stay awake.

Steel rushed through his shower, but made sure to scrub every inch of his body twice. Now that he was aware of his smell, he couldn't get it out of his head. Once he was convinced he no longer smelled like a homeless person, he jumped out of the warm water only to realize he didn't have any clean clothes.

"Hey, Liam!" he hollered.

At first, his teammate didn't answer, and his entire body went on alert. Not caring who was in the room or what state he was in, Steel rushed out to find Liam standing next to Karlie's bed and Anna between his teammate and his woman.

"I called for you," he accused.

"Sorry, man. Chance brought Anna back because she was getting fussy and he figured if he sent you a picture with her like that, you would freak out. I thought maybe the little lady just needed her mama, and it turns out I was right."

With the small towel wrapped around his waist, Steel moved over and stood next to Liam. Sure enough, his daughter was snuggled up to her

mother, fast asleep.

"I didn't even think to do that."

How stupid. All of the times he thought about how much Anna must be missing her mother, and not once did he consider just setting their daughter down to snuggle up next to Karlie.

"That's because you're running on fumes. You can't make rational decisions when you aren't getting any sleep."

"I'm getting a little," he argued.

"An hour here or there while Anna naps don't count. The nurse offered to put Anna in the nursery, but you refused."

Of course, he refused. There was no way he was leaving his daughter out of his sight or out of his team's sight. Not when the nurse who tried to kill Karlie was still out there.

"I'll sleep when Karlie wakes up."

Liam shook his head but didn't argue further. It would be wasted breath and his teammate had to know that. Nothing would change his mind.

"DANIEL HAS SOME NEWS," Gage poked his head into the room and told him.

One week with no change and Steel was moments away from losing it. As much as he hated to do it, he needed to step out of the room. Even if it was just for a few minutes while his team leader filled him in.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, baby. Maybe when I get back, you can open those beautiful eyes for me."

Steel waited for some response, but just like every other time he spoke to her, Karlie didn't move.

He'd spent seven full days begging Karlie to wake up. Dr. Roberts assured him she was fine, that all of her tests were normal, and this wasn't uncommon for patients who suffered the type of trauma Karlie did. But it was still disheartening. He wanted more than anything to see any sign that she was coming back to him.

With one last glance to ensure Anna was still sound asleep in her crib, Steel slid out of the room.

"What do you got?"

"Jaxson and Blayd found the nurse who administered the drug."

He immediately stood straighter, like someone had shot him up with some adrenaline. Suddenly he was ready to dole out a punishment for the woman who dared hurt Karlie.

"Where is she?"

"That's the thing," Daniel sighed. "She's dead."

"What do you mean she's dead?" he growled. "You promised I would get the first shot at her!"

"Calm down. Jaxson and Blayd didn't take that from you. She was found dead this morning. A neighbor called it in when the smell of decay got too strong. The neighbor said she went to peek into the window and found a swarm of flies. Black had one of the carabinieri keeping an eye out for any information. He got the call a few minutes ago that they confirmed the body was, in fact, the nurse."

"I thought we checked her apartment."

Jaxson and Blayd had been in charge of finding the nurse for the last nine days. From what he remembered, they checked the apartment and spoke to the neighbors several times.

"She wasn't at her apartment but an ex-boyfriend's. The guy claims she left him a month ago, and he was out of town on business for the past two weeks. He had no idea she was staying there."

How convenient. Unless it wasn't, and the ex-boyfriend was covering for her. But then why would he kill her in his own place? That made zero sense. His lack of sleep was starting to mess with his head.

"How long has she been dead?"

"Best guess a week, but we won't be sure until the autopsy is complete. Black said he would let us know as soon as he received word."

More waiting. God, how much he hated the waiting game. Before all this, he had thought he was a patient man, but he was quickly learning that wasn't the case when it involved someone he loved.

"Keep me posted. I need to get back in. I've been away from Karlie too long."

He started to turn around and leave when Daniel's arm shot out to stop him.

"You can't keep going like this. I know you want to be with Karlie when she wakes up, and trust me, I would probably be the same with Emma, but I'm concerned. And that's saying a lot."



Steel wanted to brush his team leader off and tell him there was nothing to worry about, or to mind his own business, but, as Daniel stated, it really was saying a lot. Daniel didn't get mushy. He didn't do feelings.

"I know, but I can't seem to turn it off. Just the thought of not being next to her when she wakes up physically hurts. I've failed so many times already, I can't do it again."

It was the first time he admitted out loud that he felt like a failure when it came to Karlie.

"Listen to me carefully," Daniel started, looking Steel directly in the eyes. "You didn't fail her. Not when Vito had her, or when the nurse tried to kill her. You did everything right despite the two of you being dealt shitty hands. There was no way to know Vito showed interest in her. There was no way to know he was holding her. You were actively looking for her. I know that's the reason you joined our team, and the moment we took care of our first assignment, I was prepared to help you in any way I could. It also wasn't your fault the nurse got the drop on us. We were told this hospital was secure. Again, not on you. If anything, I should've made sure Liam or someone watched the interactions more carefully instead of just standing guard at the door, but that was on me, not you. You had enough on your plate, so stop thinking you failed and start thinking what you plan to do when Karlie wakes up."

It was the most his team leader had ever spoken, and it was clear Daniel didn't have anything more to add because he turned around and left, leaving Steel to process it all and make a decision. He could continue to wallow or he could go back in and be there for Karlie without blaming himself. He had a hard enough road ahead without adding baggage to the trip.

He slipped back into the room and found Anna still sleeping peacefully in her crib. It was an exhausted sleep, one brought on by hours of fussiness. His daughter was desperately missing her mother, and it was more evident each time she cried for hours.

*Me too, sweetheart. Me too.*

"Hey, baby. I'm sorry, I had to step out for a minute. Daniel had some news to share with me, but I'm back now." He sat down in the same chair he had been occupying for a week. The damn thing probably had permanent markings of his ass. "I need you to wake up now. Anna misses you and so do I. We aren't the same without you."

He didn't add that he loved her. That would wait until he was able to look

her in the eyes and she would know he meant it. His gaze roamed over her body and eventually settled on her face. He was about to drop his head in disappointment when the tiniest of flickers caught his attention.

"Karlie," he choked out. "Baby."

And just like that, her beautiful eyes opened and his heart soared. But came crashing down the next moment when she spoke.

"Who"—her voice cracked—"are you?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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A male voice flitted through her head. Who was it, and why did they sound so desperate? Confusion racked her brain and there was this nagging feeling that she was forgetting something important. Maybe it had to do with the names the man was telling her about.

Karlie struggled to open her eyes, and when she did, she didn't expect to find the most intriguing eyes staring back at her. They were the color of steel, freshly polished and glimmering.

"Who are you?"

Her voice cracked, and she was forced to clear it. The man's entire face shattered at her question, and for a second, she felt bad. Was this the important thing that was bothering her?

"You don't remember me?"

She wanted to. The disbelief in his tone only made her feel worse. Karlie tried desperately to search her memories for any recognition, but it was like she was looking at a bunch of blank pages in a book. An occasional picture or memory popped up, but that was all. Almost everything else was blank, or so blurry she couldn't understand what she was remembering.

Maybe high school or college. She kept seeing the same face only more mature, so she had to assume it was a reflection.

"I'm sorry." She tried to shake her head, but it felt so heavy.

"What's the last thing you *do* remember?"

Again, she tried to pull up some memories, but everything was jumbled and out of order. Or at least she thought that was the case. She would get

flashes of what she assumed was her childhood and then again in her teens and twenties and back to her childhood.

"I'm not sure. Everything's so fuzzy."

"Let me grab the doctor," the man told her as he stood up.

The thought of waking up with this strange man in her room didn't scare her as much as she would've expected it to. Somehow she knew with him around, she was safe. Karlie couldn't pinpoint how she knew, just that her instincts didn't have her ready to scream for help. That had to be good. He must've been someone important in her life.

A few moments later, an older-looking man in a white coat stepped in. He also didn't look familiar, but reminded her of a doctor.

"It's nice to see you awake again. You were beginning to worry everyone with how long you were taking to come out of your coma."

Coma? She was in a coma? Why couldn't she remember what put her in the coma? Did it have to do with the man who was in her room when she woke up? Surely not if the doctor was allowing the man to stay in there. Now she was even more confused. And how long had she been unconscious? The doctor mentioned worrying everyone.

"Steel here tells me you are having some difficulties with your memory. Is that true?"

Steel. That was the man's name. It was fitting, considering the color of his eyes. But hearing the name did nothing to jog her memories.

"Yes," she finally managed to force the word out of her throat.

"That's not uncommon, considering the trauma you sustained, and the induced coma. Sometimes memories can take a few days or weeks to fully come back, but let's have a look, shall we?"

The doctor shined a bright light in her eyes that immediately had her wishing she stayed asleep.

"Your reactions are normal and all the tests have come back fine, but we can run a few more now that you're awake. There's no reason the rest of your memories shouldn't come back within a few weeks. In the meantime, as long as everything continues to look good. I don't see why you can't return to the States in a day or so."

Return to the States? What was the doctor talking about? Why wasn't she in the States to begin with? She never traveled. Wasn't particularly fond of the idea, so there was no reason she should've been out of the country.

Karlie was about to question what the doctor meant when a baby began to

cry. Loudly. He slipped out before she got a chance to ask the million questions floating through her mind.

Steel moved quickly to a crib not far from her hospital bed. She hadn't even seen the thing when she first looked around the room. How did she miss that there was a baby in her room?

"Shh. Shh. Shh."

Karlie watched as Steel attempted to soothe the baby, but nothing he did was working. She felt bad for the man but was still confused.

"Whose baby is that?"

Steel stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned to her. "You don't remember her either?"

Well, that was a stupid question. Obviously, she didn't, if she was asking. She was tempted to tell him such, but he cut her off.

"It's our daughter, Anna."

Her mind immediately short-circuited.

She had a daughter. One she had no memory of with a man who she also could not remember. Karlie looked down at her hand for some indication she was married. There was no ring nor a tan line. In fact, her skin was the palest she had ever seen it and that was saying something considering she was half Italian.

"Are we married?"

"Ah, no," Steel coughed. "I'll explain just as soon as I get her calmed down. I'll try to see if I can get her to eat, but she's been getting fussier the longer you've been out."

She still didn't know how long she'd been unconscious, but if the baby's reaction was any indication, it was a long time. Nothing Steel did seemed to be working.

"I can hold her while you get a bottle ready, if that would help."

"Are you sure?"

No, she wasn't, but it somehow seemed like the right thing to do. If she really was, in fact, the baby's mother, then there was no way she would want the little thing to be upset.

"Yes, I'll take her."

Anna calmed down as soon as Steel placed the baby in her arms. One look at the beautiful little girl and there was no denying the child was Steel's. She had his exact same eyes. And right now, they were hyper-focused on her. He also wasn't lying about the baby being hers. The little girl looked just like

the images that popped into her head, the ones she assumed were of herself.

"I think it's safe to say she missed you."

Yeah, she had to agree. How could she not remember such a beautiful face?

"Why can't I remember her? A mother should remember her child."

"You two didn't exactly have the easiest of times. I'm not sure how much you want me to tell you or if you would rather wait until your memory returns on its own."

It was crazy how comfortable she felt talking to this complete stranger. It was as if her body knew him and wanted to pull him in, but her mind was fighting it, hesitant to put too much stock into believing every word that came out of his mouth.

"You said we weren't married, but I was always big on marriage before kids, so how did this happen?"

"A fantastic weekend together and a broken condom. At least, I assume. We used protection, but we never really got the chance to talk about it in detail. I only just got back into your life and learned I was a father."

That made no sense at all. The baby she was holding was at least a few weeks old and keeping a secret like that from the father of her baby wasn't something she would do. Everything she was learning was only making her head spin more.

"None of what you're saying is making any sense. I never would've kept something like that from you."

A dark expression clouded Steel's face. It should've scared her, but for some strange reason, it only made her trust him more. He wasn't guarding her from anything.

"You didn't have a choice. You were kept against your will up until a week and a half ago."

Her entire body started to shake. It couldn't be true. Was that the reason her mind was blocking so many memories because she lived through some traumatic experience? She'd heard of people who blocked out horrific things. Was that what her mind was doing?

"How long?"

A tear slipped down her cheek.

"Eleven months."

Nearly a year of her life in captivity. No wonder her mind wanted to forget what happened to her. But just the thought of not remembering the

child she gave birth to hurt so much. She looked down at Anna. Memorizing every feature and trying desperately for some flicker of recognition.

Nothing came, but she also couldn't find it in her heart to push away the sweet child. Something about the weight of her supposed daughter in her arms comforted her.

"Is she healthy?"

Her heart lurched at the thought that something could be wrong. Steel had said she was held against her will until recently. Which meant the baby was likely born wherever she had been held.

"She's perfect."

There was nothing but awe and love in his voice. For a man who didn't know until recently that he was a father, Karlie could clearly see that he loved the little girl. She wished more than anything she could get her memories back just so she could remember that first time he saw her.

Karlie would bet her life it was magical.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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"What do you mean I'm going to New Mexico with you? Why can't I go see my family in New York?"

The doctor finally cleared Karlie to travel that morning. After two days of observation, his team could finally move her to a place they would feel more comfortable guarding her. The longer they stayed in Italy, the more his uneasiness grew.

"You were abducted from your apartment in New York. Before the nurse attempted to kill you, you mentioned knowing Vito Accardo's enforcer. Not many people can say that, so until we know what connection you had to the Italian Mafia, it's better you're far away from them. My team is based in New Mexico. We can keep you safe there."

The entire situation worried him. Emma had yet to figure out how Karlie was connected to the Mafia. From what he learned, she came from a good family, but her childhood home had been dead center in Vito Accardo's territory. That explained how Vito knew her, but not how Karlie knew *Il Diavolo*. Vito's personal enforcer didn't allow his victims to remain alive. He was a myth. A legend. He moved in the shadows and kept his identity a secret. The only way Karlie would've recognized him was if she knew the man personally.

There was something in Karlie's expression when he mentioned The Devil that he couldn't quite identify. He wanted to ask her about it, but his team chose that moment to come into her room.

"You ready to blow this popsicle joint?" Blayd smirked.



Yesterday he introduced Karlie to everyone on his team, but she still looked unsure any time any of them spoke to her.

"I suppose."

"I guess if I was leaving with a bunch of strangers, I would be hesitant as well," Blayd joked.

That seemed to do the trick. A ghost of a smile crossed her lips.

"I swear I'm not purposely trying to be difficult."

"We know that," Liam reassured her. "Just like we know this can't be easy for you. Keeping you and Anna safe is our number one priority. We can do that better in New Mexico."

Steel could physically see the moment Karlie resigned herself to what was going to happen. Guilt ate at him all over again. He was well aware that what he was demanding of her wasn't fair. But he truly felt it was in her best interest. She would need his support taking care of a child she didn't remember, and he could do that best in an environment that he controlled.

The flight back to the States was uneventful. There were perks to having a private jet. They were able to sit back and relax in comfort as Liam flew everyone, except Jaxson who opted to leave the day earlier with his wife, Kendra. Blue, as her team liked to call her, was also a pilot and belonged to a team that conveniently had its own plane.

Karlie didn't talk until they were pulling up to where his team both worked and lived.

"This place is in the middle of nowhere."

Blayd chuckled from his position in the front passenger seat.

"Welcome to Daniel's logic on setting up a location for our team. The man doesn't like others, so he figured the rest of us weren't allowed to either. You learn to get used to it. Or at least, that's what he keeps telling me when I bitch about it."

"So, there wasn't a team vote or anything?"

Now it was his turn to laugh.

"We weren't exactly asked," he started to explain. "Black—the owner of Blackguard Security—asked Daniel to lead a new team. Gave him free rein to pick the location and members. Our office and houses were built before he picked who he wanted on his team. It was pretty much an 'accept it or don't join' kind of thing."

He hadn't thought twice about where he would be working when Daniel approached him about joining the team. All he had cared about was the

resources that would be made available to him to find Karlie. What would happen after that never even crossed his mind.

"Well, he sure chose a remote location. I don't think anyone will find us out in the middle of the desert."

"That's the plan." Blayd turned around and winked at Karlie.

Steel had the sudden urge to punch his teammate in the face. Like Chance, Blayd was a natural flirt. There wasn't a woman he came across who didn't get the same charm. Daniel had nearly killed him when he pulled the same shit on Emma. His teammate was looking at a repeat performance. Except this time from him.

He barely waited for Chance to put the SUV in park before he was throwing the door open.

"Come on, I'll show you around." He needed away from his flirty teammates before he did something that would scare Karlie.

Blayd's not-so-subtle laugh had him grinding his teeth. He was not in the mood for his teammate's antics. Once Karlie was out of the vehicle, he reached back in and grabbed the car seat. It was the first of many baby purchases he was going to need to get ASAP. The second one was the crib and, according to the tracking number, was delivered to the main building yesterday.

Slamming the door shut, Steel didn't bother to say goodbye. It wasn't until he got a glance at Karlie's nervous gaze that he realized what a dick he was being.

"Sorry." He blew out a loud huff. "I'm just anxious to be back in my own house."

That was only partially true. He really wanted to have Karlie and Anna under his roof so he could take the time to show Karlie what they could have together. While she wasn't avoiding him, she didn't exactly seem comfortable in his presence. Or maybe unsure was a better description. Either way, the only person he could blame for that was himself.

"This place is big."

He looked at the house from Karlie's point of view. It was big, meant more for a family than just the individuals hired by Black. It made him wonder what the owner of the company was thinking. It never occurred to him to question it before; when he took the job, he was looking just for that. A family. He knew when he picked the house, it was with the intention of finding Karlie so they could follow through on their original plans.

"A perk of the job, I guess. When Black had our headquarters built, he also had houses done. They're pretty much all the same."

Karlie still didn't look keen on the situation. Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all.

"If you would prefer to stay in one of the individual rooms in the main building, I can make that happen."

He held his breath and hoped she didn't pick that option, but he needed to look at things from her perspective; living with a complete stranger was probably hard. If he expected to gain her trust, then Steel needed to stop thinking things would magically go back to the way they were. Karlie didn't know him from Adam, and he needed to adjust accordingly.

"No, it's okay," Karlie finally answered. "It's probably what's best for Anna and I'm not sure I'm ready to take care of her on my own."

He reached for Karlie's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You were great before and I'm sure will continue to be great."

"I thought we didn't get much time together before I was in the coma."

Steel sighed. "We didn't, but considering you kept our baby girl alive while in a personal hell for twenty-six days tells me all I need to know about what kind of mother you are."

The small smile she gave him was all he needed to ease his fears for the time being. The road ahead wouldn't be easy, but the best things never were.

He forced himself to let go of her hand so he could grab the car seat and open the front door. Steel waved for Karlie to enter before him, carefully watching every expression and movement she made. Her response to the house he picked just for them mattered to him.

"Wow, it's beautiful. How long have you lived here?"

"Not long." Steel placed the car seat on the floor and knelt down to unbuckle and pull their sleeping daughter out. Anna had been in the seat for longer than he preferred at this point. "Most of the stuff was delivered just before I left on our first assignment, so I haven't had the chance to get settled in."

Plus, he was waiting for Karlie. He didn't want to make any big decisions while he was still hoping to find her.

"The person who designed it did a great job."

Steel watched as Karlie moved around the first floor, touching the cabinets and marble countertops, looking around at the different rooms. The floor plan was pretty basic. A living room, dining room, bathroom, kitchen,

and guest bedroom made up the first floor. Upstairs contained two more bedrooms plus a bathroom on one side and the master suite on the other.

"Feel free to look around. I have more furniture being delivered later today, including another bed for you, and the crib for Anna should be at the main building already."

The apple of her cheeks turned the sexist shade of pink at the mention of a bed. He was grateful now more than ever for Emma's forethinking. It never occurred to him to get another bed after Karlie woke up with amnesia. In his mind, he always pictured them sleeping together.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm going to get Anna settled. Black assured me a few necessary items were delivered and should already be put together, but I want to make sure."

Steel left Karlie to explore the house on her own and get comfortable in what would be their new situation while he went in search of the baby items Black had delivered.

Sure to his boss's word, there was formula and bottles already waiting for him in the kitchen along with a highchair and some strange chair that looked like Anna would nap in. He was going to need to do some research. Each room he entered contained at least one or more pieces of baby furniture that hadn't been there before he left for Italy, but at the same time looked like they belonged. He owed his boss big-time.

At least now he could focus on helping Karlie regain her memories and connecting as a family. And if she didn't get her memories back, then it was on to plan B. Getting her to fall in love with him all over again. The only catch? They never admitted to love the first time.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Karlie looked around the empty bedroom and tried to push down the panic that wanted to take over. Since waking up, she hadn't had a moment alone to come to terms with everything she learned. Now standing in the bare bedroom, it was all coming down on her at once.

Captured for eleven months.

A baby she couldn't remember.

The father of said baby so sexy that she couldn't understand how she could forget him or why he would even be interested in her.

None of it made sense.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She tried to yank out the last memory she could, but everything after college didn't seem to exist in anything other than flashes. She would get random glimpses of the apartment she lived in, the friends she had, and the times she had with her family. None of that helped her to understand how she was captured, or why when Steel mentioned *Il Diavolo*, a tickling of a memory tried to surface but vanished before she could hold on to it.

It was infuriating and only made the tears fall that much harder.

She was still crying and her eyes were blurry when the faint sound of footsteps outside her new room caught her attention. Karlie barely had the chance to completely turn around before she was wrapped up in strong arms.

"Shh . . ."

How was it possible not to remember those arms when it felt so right to be in them? She couldn't explain it, but being in Steel's arms felt like home.

"I hate that I can't remember," she choked out. Karlie wasn't even sure Steel heard her because her face was buried into his chest.

"I know it can't be easy." Steel rubbed his hand up and down her back to comfort her. "But we'll get through this and I will be by your side every step of the way."

That only made her want to cry harder.

"What if I never get my memories back?"

As much as being in Steel's arms felt right, she still didn't know the man or anything about him. She couldn't trust any of her feelings. Were they a manifestation of what he told her? Was it only gratitude because he offered to take care of her when everything else was so fuzzy? She used to consider herself a confident person, but now her whole life felt off. A complete mess. She needed her parents, but was afraid to put them in danger.

The doctor back in Italy confirmed she had indeed been captured. The nurse explained what condition she was in when she and Anna first arrived. She had no reason to think the doctor was lying to her. So if her life was still in danger, then there was no way she could go back to New York and bring that danger with her.

"Then we make new ones."

He made it sound so simple. And maybe it was. She needed to be grateful she was alive and given the chance to have this life. Even if she didn't know how it got started.

Karlie stepped back out of Steel's arms and wiped the remaining tearstains from her cheek.

"You're right." She smiled. "Where's Anna?"

"Sleeping." He returned her smile. "In some strange seat that Black had in the living room. Who knew babies came with so many things? Big things, actually. The amount of new toys and equipment in the house is mind-blowing."

A quick flash of her holding someone else's baby rolled through her mind like a movie reel. The room she was holding the baby in also had a lot of very large toys and baby equipment.

"Actually, I think I can," she whispered.

"Karlie, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. I just remembered something, or at least I think it was a memory."

She was confused more than anything. Why would she remember

someone else's baby and not her own?

"A memory of your time in captivity or from before? Actually, I think we should go back some. What's the last thing you do remember?"

That was a very good question.

"College." She lifted her shoulder in frustration. "Maybe some things after that, but not much. I get a random glimpse here and there, but nothing that I can piece together other than some faces. A place I think was where I lived, but that's questionable without actually going there."

"That's good. It's a starting point. Emma could find out the missing pieces if you want, or you can wait to see if the memories come back."

"Were you this sweet the weekend we were together?"

If he was, then she could see why they spent the entire weekend together. Steel was everything her mother wanted her to find in a man.

"I would like to think so. Although, I can assure you, not everything about that weekend was sweet."

The heat in his gaze set her body aflame. She wasn't used to men looking at her with such hunger in their eyes. Karlie was sure her entire body was beet red. There was no denying that they had chemistry. If this was even a quarter of how he made her feel that weekend, she couldn't believe her memory would block him out.

"You have the sexiest blush when you're aroused."

The tips of his fingers grazed her cheek. She wanted to lean into him, to regain some type of control over the fact that she couldn't remember who he was or what had happened in her life recently. Before she could change her mind, she was snaking her hand around his neck and pulling him down to her.

The first brush against his lips was addicting, but she could sense Steel's hesitation. She didn't let it deter her in the least. Running her tongue along the seam of his lips, she coaxed him to open his mouth. And that was all it took for a switch to flip. The dam to break open. Gone was the control she thought she had. And the hesitation in him.

Steel took the kiss over. His fingers slipped into her hair and he yanked her head back. He consumed her. Kissed her like a man starved. Their tongues dueled for control, but she couldn't hold a candle to Steel. He was a man who knew how to kiss, how to make her knees weak and her body sag against him until the only thing she could do was let him take over.

Everything about his kiss was mind-blowing. Every one of her senses

blocked the world out except for Steel. His lips and the way they made her feel were all that mattered. She was still drowning in the emotions he evoked when he slowly pulled away from her.

"I wasn't expecting that." His breath fanned across her ear. Each light dust of his lips along her jaw sent another shiver throughout her body.

Guilt consumed her.

"My intentions weren't entirely pure," she panted. "I wanted to be able to remember our time together, and I hoped if I kissed you, it would spark something inside me."

Steel chuckled, but he didn't stop peppering her with kisses. Her breath hitched.

"You expected me to be upset that you used a kiss with me to try and regain your memories."

It wasn't a question, but she felt obligated to answer anyway.

"Yeah, a little."

"I've spent nearly a year thinking about you every single day. I would've moved heaven and earth to find you. If you want to kiss me every day to see if it brings back some memories, then have at it. I'm more than willing to try. And if you want more, just say the word. There isn't a thing I wouldn't give you if it meant making you happy."

Oh, wow. Now she could see why she fell for this man. Everything about him screamed book boyfriend. Her friends used to laugh that she preferred books over the men who tormented her but this was why. She hoped one day she would find someone who was half as good as the books described.

She knew exactly what he meant when he said "more." His large erection couldn't be mistaken as it pushed against her soft belly.

"Sexiest blush ever." Steel kissed her forehead and stepped back. "But I'll stop torturing you for now. I think I've shown my hand enough for one day. Besides"—his lips turned up in the most endearing smile—"we have a delivery."

Karlie watched him walk away. She didn't understand how he managed to know what was going on around them when she could barely think straight after that kiss. At the rate she was going, she would be a puddle of goo every time he placed his hands on her. Not the worst way to go, but she would prefer to get her memories back. She would prefer to know that everything she was feeling wasn't just based on what others told her.



## CHAPTER TEN

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After the delivery guys showed up and all of the furniture was put together, Steel called Daniel and asked that his team met at his house. Anna was sleeping again after her last feeding and Karlie was busy putting together a list of all the things she needed. They would have to go shopping soon. The few items she picked up on their way to his house wouldn't last her long.

"Knock, knock."

He was in the backyard with the baby monitor when Emma's voice traveled over the fence seconds before she walked through the unlocked gate.

"You might be the only polite one who actually gives the courtesy of a knock."

"Why knock when you're the one who told us what time to come over?"

Steel looked at Emma, who simply shook her head at her husband's irrational logic. Daniel was in no way a people person. The man simply did what he wanted and when; to hell with what others thought. It was no wonder that until he formed this team, he was a loner, constantly adrift.

"Sometimes it's not even worth the time to argue with you," he replied. "Come in!" he tossed out when he heard another knock on his gate.

Gage, Chance, Blayd, and Liam joined them in the backyard.

"You did a good job back here. Didn't realize you had the time." Gage looked around. "Daniel barely has furniture and you have a fully finished backyard."

Karlie didn't remember it yet, but the entire backyard was designed based

on a conversation they had the weekend they spent together. It was one of the few things he wanted ready for whenever he found her. It was probably a little presumptuous of him, but oh well. If she got her memory back, then she would appreciate the little things he did.

"Didn't exactly need to be here to have it done," he responded. "And it's the only part of the house that is done. The inside isn't much better than Daniel's."

"Bullshit," Emma scoffed. "You probably at least purchased some furniture. Maybe you didn't decorate, but I doubt it took Liam's harassment for you to buy utensils for your kitchen."

Okay, so maybe he was doing better than his team leader, but only because he knew eventually Karlie would join him. That was the line of thinking that got him through those very long months.

Daniel hadn't held the same expectation when he joined Blackguard Security. Steel joined to find Karlie so they could be together. Daniel joined so he could find Emma and kill her. They weren't the same.

"I doubt Steel asked us here to discuss home and garden tips. Can we get down to the real reason we're here?"

"How do you deal with his unpleasantness?" Blayd inquired. "Just so you know, my offer still stands. I'm here with open arms once you're ready to ditch grumpy pants."

"Shut the fuck up, Blayd," Daniel snapped. "She's not leaving me."

Everyone on the team laughed, except Daniel. Even Emma who, despite Daniel's grumpiness, was currently saddled up at his side.

"Oh, stop." She rubbed Daniel's chest. "You know damn well he just says things like that to get under your skin. Blayd would stop if you didn't give him such a reaction."

"You wound me." Blayd clutched his chest just above where his heart was. "I confess my feelings for you over and over again, but still you reject me." Then he turned to their team leader and smirked. "But in all seriousness. You should listen to your wife. She's correct more often than you give her credit for." Blayd winked.

"Or we can get back to the real reason we are here," Daniel grumbled.

"Yes, about that." Emma stepped out of her husband's embrace. "I've been digging into Karlie's past, trying to figure out how she and Vito crossed paths before he captured her. I keep coming up empty. Nothing about her parents sticks out. Both have good jobs. They lost their son when Karlie was young,

but otherwise, everything's normal, so I wanted to talk to you about bringing in some help."

"What kind of help?"

"A better hacker," Emma answered Chance's question. "There's one I worked with when I was doing jobs for Armando. Got me out of a few tight spots over the years."

"Do you trust this hacker?"

He didn't want to bring anyone around Karlie and his daughter that he couldn't explicitly trust.

"Maddox hasn't given me any reason not to trust him."

"Of course, it would be another man. What, no females when you worked for Armando?" Daniel huffed.

"Not unless you count the ones being trafficked," Emma answered with enough sarcasm that Daniel actually looked properly put in his place.

"Back to the topic at hand. Do you think this Maddox can help get the answers we need?"

One of the things he thought might help Karlie was if they could figure out how Vito knew her and why the guy was so obsessed with her. They needed to find answers, and right now, Karlie's amnesia was of no help to them. He needed to keep her safe, and to do that, he needed answers.

"I think it's worth a try. I'd like to bring him here. I think with enough incentive from Black, we could make it happen."

"Somebody needs to be assigned to him," Liam spoke up. "He can stay in one of the apartments, but I think one of us needs to monitor him. You might trust him, but I don't."

"I agree." Chance nodded.

"That leaves you, Chance, and Blayd. Take whatever rotation you want."

Besides Steel and Daniel, the only other team member to take a house was Gage. His friend never said why he refused one of the apartments and opted for a large house. Gage was quiet and rarely socialized. Actually, now that he thought about it, not even he had been inside his friend's house and Gage was closest to him. When the whole Karlie issue was resolved, he needed to rectify that and make sure everything was good with him.

"Oh, great." Blayd threw his hands up. "I get stuck on babysitting duty instead of spending time with the ladies."

Blayd was going to get himself killed if he kept the nonsense up. Daniel was red-faced and looked like a bull about to charge. Steel couldn't tell for

sure, but Emma was likely forcefully holding him back.

"Blayd, stop. I'm not in the mood to clean up blood off Steel's patio because you pushed him too far."

Oh, Emma. Ever the peacemaker of the group. She helped break up the endless amount of testosterone that flowed just a little too freely.

"Always taking the fun out of everything." Blayd smirked. "Fine, I'll leave Daniel alone for now. Reach out to this Maddox fellow so we can get this show on the road."

"Where is Karlie anyway?" Chance asked.

"Inside trying to wrap her head around everything that's happened and figuring out what she needs."

"Does she remember anything yet?"

Steel thought about their kiss earlier, how alive Karlie became when she was in his arms. He wanted her to remember him as much as she wanted it. Maybe it was still too early, but he had hoped that she would regain her memories sooner rather than later.

"Not yet."

"She'll remember." Gage slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't you worry about that."

It meant a lot coming from his friend. Other than Jaxson, the only person who really knew in the beginning why he took the job with Blackguard Security was Gage. It bothered him that while dealing with his own problems, he hadn't taken the time to see how his friend was doing.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Maybe when we learn more about her past, it will help."

They spent the next hour making plans. Emma would reach out to Maddox that evening, and with any luck, he would be on a plane to New Mexico within the next few days. Chance offered to pick him up from the airport if needed. In the meantime, Emma would continue to look into Karlie's family. His team wouldn't be taking any more assignments until they had a location on Vito. The Don of the Italian Mafia was their only priority.

When Steel finally went back inside, he found Karlie in Anna's room.

"She looks so peaceful sleeping," Karlie whispered.

"Yes, she does."

He walked over to the crib and stared down at his beautiful daughter. Anna was an exact replica of Karlie, except for her eyes.

"Every time I look at her, it's like a jolt. I still can't believe it's real. Then I

get a look at my stretch marks and I know it was my body that grew such a perfect little baby."

Steel tried so hard not to let his eyes drift to Karlie's body, but it was like a magnet. He couldn't resist no matter how hard he tried. Every curve was perfect. He remembered her lack of confidence that first night they were together, after her date stood her up. But by the end of the weekend, she had blossomed under his touches.

"Those stretch marks only make you more beautiful in my eyes."

Karlie let out a soft chuckle. "You haven't even seen them."

He turned so that she was forced to look him in the eyes.

"I don't need to see them to know. Those stretch marks were *earned* growing our daughter. That makes them perfect to me."

Steel loved the way her eyes softened. It was the same look she gave him multiple times that weekend. The look that had him falling head over heels and ready to settle down.

"I really hope I get my memories back, because something tells me we had one hell of an epic love story before it was ripped away from us."

Epic wasn't even the word for it.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Karlie followed Emma through the facility where Steel worked.

"This place is nice. Not what I expected from a team that basically works off the grid. I was thinking it would be sterile and bare, given what I know about Daniel."

"Black vetoed several of Daniel's requests from what I heard," Emma replied. "If it were up to my husband, the place would probably be nothing more than a large room with a fold-out table."

That sounded more like it.

"How long have you and Daniel been married?"

She was curious about the couple of the group. No one else had a significant other, and she wondered how they were able to work together.

"I guess that depends. Technically, almost fifteen years, but half of that time was spent with him thinking I was a traitorous bitch that he wanted to murder."

Emma chuckled. "You should see your face."

Karlie could only imagine the shock that she was unable to hide.

"I guess I didn't expect such honesty. I was wondering how the two of you managed to work together. In my mind, I expected some crazy love story, not a murder mystery."

"Oh, it's crazy all right. But the working-together part is new and who knows how it's going to pan out. I love Daniel dearly, but he's also the most infuriating man I have ever met. It should be entertaining for all. Especially if Blayd continues to stir up trouble."

She wasn't sure what Blayd had to do with things, and she really didn't want to ask, but she was looking forward to watching it unfold. Wait! When did she start thinking she would stay here forever with Steel?

"Now," Emma continued, "how about we discuss why you're here today?"

Yes, that was precisely what she needed to do. Focus on the reason she came in, not what her future held.

"Steel mentioned you wanted to talk about my past and family with me."

"That's correct. There's nothing I can find so far that would connect you to Vito Accardo, so I was hoping you could shed some light on that while I wait for my hacker to show. Hopefully, he can help me dig more up. I know your memories still haven't returned, not the recent ones anyway, but it's worth a shot to maybe talk it out."

They had been back in New Mexico for two days, and while she had tried multiple times to jog her memories by talking to Steel and even stealing touches and kisses, nothing she did brought her close to the last few years. She did remember more about her earlier years; the first time she looked at her apartment and the excitement she had felt knowing it would be a place of her own. Her college graduation and landing a mediocre job that she hated more often than not. If she still had that job when she was kidnapped, she probably didn't anymore, and wasn't sad to see it gone.

"Tell me what you learned and I can see if I can help fill anything in."

"Okay. You grew up in a middle-class family with parents who were still married and, from everything I can find, were good people. The Italian neighborhood of your childhood was controlled by Vito Accardo, but he rarely showed his face. You had a brother who was twelve years older than you and died just after his seventeenth birthday."

It was the mention of her brother that had her heart racing for reasons she couldn't understand. They weren't close; she had only been five when he died. But what she could remember about him was that he had no use for a sister, at least not one so young. She couldn't remember a time when he ever played with her or even acknowledged her existence. Most of the time, he just gave her dirty looks.

"I don't remember much about him and my parents barely spoke about him. It was almost like after his death they just erased all evidence of him out of our lives."

Karlie remembered thinking how weird that was growing up. It wasn't just her family who erased him, but her neighbors and family friends as well.

She couldn't remember anyone talking to her about her older brother. That wasn't normal, was it?

"I can focus on him. Maybe there is something there."

There was that weird nagging again. Something was trying to break through, but her brain wasn't cooperating.

"What do you remember about Vito Accardo?"

That name sent shivers through her body, and not the good kind either.

"Not much. I know he was a man to be feared. Everyone in my neighborhood would whisper his name, but no one wanted to outright discuss him. He was like the boogeyman. Stories were told to keep kids in line."

"Did you ever cross paths with him?"

Karlie took the time to think about it. She dragged through her memories, and for the life of her, she couldn't picture what Vito looked like.

"Not that I remember. Now that I think about it, I couldn't even tell you what he looked like."

"I'm not surprised, most people don't. Let me show you a picture and see if it jogs your memory."

She mentally prepared herself to look at the man who took everything from her, but nothing could prepare her for the picture Emma showed her.

"He looks so ordinary. I could've passed him on the street a million times and not thought twice about it. Except for his eyes. Something about them just looks evil."

Seeing the man who had her kidnapped did nothing to help her memories. Karlie thought for sure she would have at least one flashback after Steel told her about some of the things she described, but there was nothing.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember him. Not even from when I was younger."

"That's okay." Emma didn't sound disappointed. "The doctor said it could take a few weeks. It was worth a shot."

"I really wanted to help, though."

Emma's gaze softened toward her. "You *are* helping. The memories are going to take some time and forcing it won't help. Let's get back to your family. Why don't you talk to me about your life? The stuff you do remember."

So that's what she did. Karlie spent the next couple of hours talking about her childhood and college, and even a brief time after. Occasionally, Emma asked a question, but mostly the woman just let her talk. It felt good to talk about the things she did remember rather than focus on the things she



couldn't. Relaxing her mind that way helped unlock a few things. She wasn't to the point where she remembered her weekend with Steel or her time in captivity, but she was closer.

"You did great."

Karlie preened at Emma's praise. It felt good to know she wasn't completely useless without her memories of the incident.

"You made it easy. I know this is going to sound crazy since I can't remember anything, but I think I was lonely. Even before being kidnapped and locked in a basement for close to eleven months. I feel like my time before wasn't very filling. It's strange considering, in college, I was so outgoing."

She couldn't exactly describe it other than that everything she felt was a gut feeling. The little she remembered about her career proved she wasn't happy with it, but she couldn't make sense of how she lost most of her good friends.

"Friendships drift apart the older people get," Emma offered. "Especially when those friends are on different paths. People get married and have children, and before you know it, they don't have time for the people they did before. Especially the ones who aren't at the same stage as them."

"You sound like you know from experience."

Emma laughed, but it wasn't a joyful one. It was sadder more than anything.

"You could say that. When Daniel and I married, we were both working for the CIA, so keeping friends was already difficult. It only got worse when our daughter was born."

"Daughter?"

Her memory was shot, but she was sure she would've noticed a teenage girl running around at some point. She had seen more of Emma and Daniel in the past two days not to have noticed. Not to mention the amount of time they were in Italy with her.

"Remember when I said Daniel thought I was a traitorous bitch?"

Karlie nodded her head.

"Yes, well, our daughter was the reason. After she was murdered, I went to work for the man who killed her. I knew he was only a hired gun, so I went undercover to figure out who was behind it. Spent a lot of years doing so only to find out in the end that it was Vito Accardo."

"Is that how you found me?"

Now more than ever, she wanted to remember what happened.

"Yeah. We were interrogating Armando when he confessed that Vito sent him to the house to watch his investment. After we shot him, the team searched the place again. That's when they found the hidden door. You and Anna were locked in a basement."

The shock every time someone mentioned how she was found and what she had endured had yet to wear off. She couldn't fathom how someone could do that to another human being.

"Is that what your team does? Kill those who hurt others?"

"It's not that simple. How much has Steel told you about us?"

Karlie let a humorless laugh escape. "Not much. He's been great, but sharing what he does for a living seems to be off the table."

"I'm sure he doesn't want to scare you."

That was the thing. Even Emma confessing that they shot a man didn't scare her. Karlie had never lived in a black-and-white world. She understood some things needed to exist in the gray areas. She believed in the death penalty. She didn't think vigilantes who went after those who raped children was a bad thing. Sometimes the justice system failed and matters needed to be handled differently.

"I just want the truth."

Emma blew out a breath. "And you deserve it." The woman looked indecisive, but in the end, opened her mouth and started spilling secrets. At first, Karlie was shocked at how open Emma was, but maybe she shouldn't have been. Karlie said she wanted honesty.

"So the team is a bunch of hired hitmen. Assassins."

"I mean, there are better ways to put that, but yeah . . . basically."

Well, that was certainly a little grayer than she expected. She saw the point if they were taking out people like Vito and other human traffickers or even murderers.

"I see."

"Steel is going to hate me if telling you means you're now scared of him."

Was she scared of Steel now that she knew what he did for a living? She could honestly say no, she wasn't. Karlie didn't know what that said about her as a person.

"I'm not scared of him and I needed to know. I have enough things working against me. The omission of details wouldn't help, so thank you for your honesty."

"That's why I told you. The jobs they take aren't safe. Their lives will always be on the line. I wanted you to know what you were getting yourself into."

Karlie needed to think about it. Was that what she wanted for her life? She didn't know, and she refused to make any major decisions while her memory was missing.

She was still deciding how to answer Emma when the door banged open and a very frustrated Chance stormed in.

"Where's Maddox?" Emma questioned. "You were supposed to be picking him up from the airport."

"Yeah," Chance huffed. "About that."

"Surprise." A new voice chuckled.

Surprise indeed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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His entire team was sitting around the large conference table. Chance had called an emergency meeting after picking up Maddox from the airport and now he could see why.

"Wait, *you're* Maddox?" Daniel sounded as disbelieving as the rest of them. Emma had been so sure Maddox was a man.

"But you're a *woman*," Gage unhelpfully added.

"Bravo." Maddox slowly clapped. "Excellent observation skills. What gave it away? Was it the boobs? It was definitely the boobs. I have a pretty decent rack, if I do say so myself."

Everyone, except the women and Blayd, discreetly looked away. The women seemed to be appreciating her confidence, while Blayd was simply being a creeper.

"Is Maddox your real name?" Gage asked.

"Ha! No. It's my alias, and I chose it because it means 'fortunate' or 'giving' and I'm all about giving information that helps scumbags meet their untimely demise."

"But you helped Emma when she was working for a killer." Daniel raised his brow.

"Ah, no. I mean yes, I helped her, but not to do shady shit for that creep. The stuff I helped with was finding dirt on equally shady assholes."

For the first time since he entered the room, Steel took a good look at the woman Emma requested to join them. She was younger, maybe late twenties, with an edgy side. Her wardrobe likely consisted of black and band tees

based on what he could see, and she had more piercings in her face than anyone he had ever met. Her brown hair ended with purple on the tips and she reminded him of a little bold fairy. Small and pixielike but with an edge to her. Quite the contradiction, actually.

"I thought you hated everything you had to do for Armando," Daniel accused Emma.

"I hated almost all of it, but there were a few things that I couldn't just turn a blind eye to."

"Jesus Christ," Daniel snapped. "You were going behind Armando's back? No wonder he put a fucking hit out on you. Did Black know?"

Emma actually looked contrite.

"No," she admitted with a wince.

"Well, now I guess we know why he sent us in to rescue you. You had the nerve to question what this team's vision was when you were walking a fucking tightrope with a killer."

Steel had never seen his team leader so pissed. The vein in Daniel's neck was so prominent, he was sure it would burst at any moment.

"I did it so I wouldn't lose my humanity," Emma snapped. "I knew I needed to do something before I became this empty shell of a person. If you can't see that, then go screw yourself, Daniel."

"You tell him, girl." Maddox punched the air in solidarity. It was rather comical considering the room was full of pissed-off men.

"No one asked your opinion," Daniel grumbled.

"And no one said I would be working with a bunch of misogynist assholes, either. So I guess we both got screwed in this deal."

Steel couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Steel. The reason Emma reached out was because of me. I'm not going to lie and say I wasn't shocked to learn you were a female, but only because Emma seemed convinced you were a guy. I don't really give a shit if you're a purple bunny, as long as you can get us the information we need."

"Well, hello, Steel. Cool name. It matches your eyes. You can call me Maddox, or Bree, as that's my given name. Doesn't bother me either way. I like the purple bunny reference." Maddox grabbed her hair and showed off the tips. "Matches my hair and my personality. The bunny and I have similar sexual appetites."

Almost everyone in the room choked on the blunt statement. Except for

Blayd who looked all too happy with the information, and Chance who looked like he was ready to throttle their new guest. Steel wondered what that was all about. He would have to ask his teammate what happened on the ride from the airport.

"Ah, good to know, I guess." He cleared his throat. This conversation was a damn roller coaster and getting more bizarre by the minute. "Can we get back to the reason you're here?"

"Sure thing. As long as Mr. Grumpy Pants can keep his yap shut for a little while."

"He'll keep it shut."

Steel ignored the death stare his team leader was giving him. He could feel it and just barely see it from the corner of his eye. It could be dealt with later. Right now, he had more important matters. Ones he would like to discuss, preferably before his daughter woke up from her nap. She was sleeping in a pack-and-play in his office. After a quick glance at the video on his phone, he continued.

"We need you to find out everything you can about Karlie Holmes and how she's connected to Vito Accardo."

"Who's Karlie?"

"I am." Karlie raised her hand just above her shoulder before dropping it back into her lap and playing with a piece of string. It would appear his woman had a nervous tic. He liked finding out little things about her.

"And why can't you provide that information?"

"I was put into a medically induced coma after someone tried to kill me in a hospital in Italy. That's after I was kidnapped and apparently held for eleven months. Oh, did I mention I had a baby somewhere during all that? Anyway." She waved her hand like she was trying to get herself back on track. "When I woke up, I'd lost some of my memories. I know I grew up in a neighborhood that Vito controlled, but as far as I can remember, I've never met him. But I can't say for sure since I don't remember the last few years of my life."

Maddox looked to be deep in thought for a solid minute before she slapped the table.

"Well, I'm in. I like you and you." Maddox pointed to Emma and Karlie. "The men are debatable at this point except for Steel. He seems cool for now."

Steel bristled at the *for now*. What had he done to earn the woman's caution so early on?

"Show me where I can set up. Emma mentioned an apartment, but considering this place is in the middle of nowhere, I'm not sure what she meant by that."

"The third floor of this building has several individual one-floor apartments. Only slightly bigger than a hotel room, but at least you have your own kitchen and living area," Liam explained.

Maddox shrugged. "Works for me. I don't need a lot of space to sleep as I do very little of that. My bed is used for other fun activities."

Steel groaned. This was going to be a challenge. Blayd was already lurking like a sex-deprived teenager. They didn't need the added complication of the two of them screwing around. Daniel seemed to be of the same mindset.

"Keep it in your pants, Blayd. Maddox is here to work, not screw you."

"What a spoilsport." Their teammate cackled like a man with an evil plan.

"So who's going to show me to my room so I can drop this stuff off and then to my new workspace?"

"I will." Chance pushed away from the table and stood up before Blayd could say anything. Something was off with his teammate.

"Sure thing, stud. Lead the way."

"I'm not so sure this was a good idea," Daniel grumbled when the door closed.

"I think it's a fantastic idea," Blayd chirped.

Of course he would. Maddox was the female version of his teammate. It was bad enough listening to Blayd talk about his conquests and vulgar language. It would be ten times worse with two of them.

"You don't get a say since you're only thinking with your dick."

"Ah, come on, Daniel. We need to liven up this place a bit. You dropped us all out in the middle of no-man's-land with nothing to do unless we want to drive an hour away."

Blayd wasn't wrong, and for someone who thrived on interaction and outside stimulation, it was probably a difficult adjustment. For people like him, who preferred solitude, their location was a perfect fit.

"You agreed to join the team," Daniel fired back. "I never gave you some grand allusion about this place."

"That's true, but you don't need to be a stick in the mud all the time. It's harmless fun. As long as no one is getting hurt, what do you care?"

"Okay, enough of that for now," Emma cut off the argument. "We have work to do and a Don of the Italian Mafia to find. Let's focus on that."

Both Blayd and Daniel grumbled, but neither argued with Emma. Steel wanted to go find Chance and see what was wrong with him, but Anna chose that moment to stir.

"Is she waking up?" Karlie pressed herself against his arm to get a good look at his phone. The feel of her tits had his cock jumping to attention. He was finding that happened a lot these days. She only had to come within a few feet of him for his body to stand up and take notice. Forget when she rubbed against him or gave him an innocent touch. It was all he could do not to shoot his load off right then.

"Ah." He cleared his throat. "Yeah, she is. Do you want me to go get her?"

"Nope, I got her."

Steel shamelessly watched Karlie strut out the door. The past two days had been good to her. She was eating more and putting back on some of the weight being in captivity took off her. She seemed more confident every time she took care of their daughter. He jokingly told her that morning what a natural she was at it, and instead of looking terrified, Karlie had smiled at him and said just how easy it came to her.

She was still struggling to remember things, especially closer to her kidnapping, but several times a day she would run to tell him about another memory. He was enjoying the connection it was giving them. Steel was learning things about her that would've taken weeks otherwise.

"How's she holding up?" Liam slid into the chair next to him.

"Better, I think. She seems more upbeat than she was. She still has nightmares, though. I hear her thrashing around at night."

"It's probably going to take a bit for those to go away. Does she remember anything when they happen?"

"No, that's the thing. She says they're vague. A shadow she can't make out and just the feeling of fear."

The only time Karlie got frustrated was when she woke up from her dreams. She hated that she couldn't place why she was afraid. They talked a lot about it the first night, how she couldn't tell if it was her subconscious trying to remember, or her mind's way of reacting to the things people were telling her.

"I think with more time, her memories will slowly come back," Liam



replied. "How's Anna and being a father?"

Steel couldn't contain his smile. He looked down at his phone and watched as Karlie picked up their daughter and snuggled her close.

"So much better than I ever thought. Kids weren't supposed to be in my future. Not after my first farce of a marriage. Then I met Karlie, and it took me only one weekend to realize I was willing to give love another chance. I had hoped kids would be in our future. I just didn't expect it to be so soon, but I wouldn't change it. Anna's perfect."

Liam clapped him on the back. "I'm happy for you. I didn't know you were married before, but I'm happy to know it didn't turn you into some cynical man."

Most didn't know he was married because it happened so long ago and it barely lasted more than a month. He was young and stupid. Marrying his high school girlfriend because he figured that would keep her loyal while he was deployed. One month. That was how long he was deployed before he learned she was sleeping around on him. And not just once, but several times with several different men. She said it was because she was young and didn't know what she wanted in life. Maybe she had been right because, looking back now, Steel knew he was never in love with Trish.

Steel continued to watch Karlie and Anna through the monitor app on his phone. Seeing the two of them was all he needed to know that he had never experienced love before them, and he would do whatever it took to make sure they stayed in his life.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Karlie looked out at the beautiful backyard. She had thought when Steel first showed her the house, that living in a cul-de-sac would mean very little privacy, but somehow he managed to make the place feel intimate. The entire backyard was a dream come true. Exactly something she would've done if given the opportunity.

Steel was out for a run, and she was sitting outside, enjoying the sun, with the baby monitor on the table, when another memory popped into her head. This one was full of disappointment, as she'd spent an hour getting ready for a date that didn't show. Most of the details, like how the night ended, were still fuzzy, but she could remember how much she was loathing her body that night.

One of her co-workers had convinced her to try a new dating app, LoversUnite. A stupid name, now that she thought about it, but her friend was convinced she could find her soulmate. For weeks leading up to the date, she'd been talking to what she thought was a great guy. They had exchanged information. She used a real picture, and he had told her how beautiful she was, only to stand her up. She had been so desperate that, while waiting for him at the bar, she sent him a message. The app allowed her to see when he read it, and he chose to ignore her.

That feeling of disappointment flooded through her all over again. Not for that specific guy, but for her dating life in general. Her twenties were full of similar moments, and the beginning of her thirties wasn't looking much better. She wished now more than ever that she could just remember how she

met Steel.

She was still thinking about him when she entered the house a few moments later. Anna was starting to stir, and she'd learned after a few days that she had about two minutes before her daughter went full-blown nuclear for her bottle.

With the bottle in hand, Karlie started for the stairs, but just as she was turning the corner, her body crashed into solid muscle.

"Oh, shit!" Steel grabbed her arms and kept her from falling back on her ass. "I thought you heard me come in."

Karlie couldn't tear her eyes away from Steel's chest. His very sweaty and muscular chest. She'd seen glimpses when he wore his everyday shirts, but that was nothing compared to the way his current cutoff was plastered over every dip and curve. It was a sin how sexy he looked after working out. If it had been her running, her face would be beet red and blotchy. There was nothing attractive about that.

"I . . . um."

Get yourself together, she chided herself. With more effort than it should've taken, Karlie slowly peeled her gaze away from the very muscular chest and met Steel's amused gaze.

"Grabbing Anna a bottle, I take it . . ."

It wasn't a question, and that was probably a good thing. Her voice appeared to have left her, and all she could do was nod in response.

"I heard her starting to wake up when I walked into my bedroom, so I came down to make her a bottle. I see you beat me to it. Do you want me to feed her? I don't want to interrupt whatever you were doing."

She hadn't been doing anything, but now she wanted to. She wanted to climb the man in front of her like a damn tree and demand that he have his wicked way with her. Who knew sweat could be so sexy? It was like a damn aphrodisiac and all she wanted to do was throw herself at him.

"You . . . you can do it."

Karlie practically shoved the bottle into his awaiting hand and dashed past him, and didn't stop until she was safely tucked inside her bedroom. Every part of her body was suddenly alive, and there was an aching between her legs. Never had she had such a visceral response to the opposite sex.

Sure, she found men attractive. Sex was no hardship and the few lovers she'd taken over the years satisfied her, but they didn't rock her world. Not like she expected Steel did during the one weekend they were together. If this

was how her body responded to him, then maybe she needed to take him up on that offer he gave her a few days ago.

No.

No.

No.

She couldn't let her libido control her. Even if that sounded like the perfect plan. She was a mother now, unable to remember parts of her life. She needed to be smart, to get some answers before she jumped with both feet into a relationship that could end in disaster. Not because she felt Steel wasn't a good man, but because her life was messed up. She had nightmares she needed to sort out. If there was one lesson her mother taught her, it was that a person needed to work on themselves before they could ever be with someone else.

Karlie was still trying to convince her body to slow down when Steel yelped. It was such a strange sound coming from a strong man that she didn't think twice before storming out of her bedroom and heading toward Anna's room. He was supposed to be feeding their daughter, so whatever happened must've had to do with her.

The situation she walked into caught her off guard. Steel was standing in the middle of the room and now mixed with his sweat was baby vomit. And boy, did formula vomit smell awful.

"Oh, gross!" She tried not to gag as she took Anna from Steel.

"I think I finally found one thing about this parenting gig that I don't like."

Anna didn't look the least bit upset by her father's words. Despite just puking up her entire bottle, she had the biggest smile on her face.

"I take it she drank it too fast."

The nurse had warned them to keep taking it slow, even though it had been almost two weeks since they were found. It was getting increasingly harder to force Anna to stop every two ounces so they could burp her.

"Yup." Steel popped the word. "I was trying to take the bottle out of her mouth, but she wasn't having it. Then, before I knew it, she was spewing the whole thing at me."

Karlie tried to concentrate on what Steel was telling her, but everything faded away when he pulled the soaking wet shirt over his head. She had been so sure that her imagination did a good job of conjuring up what he looked like under his clothes, but it was nothing compared to the real thing.

The word muscular didn't do him justice. The man was ripped. She knew if she ran her hands over his stomach, she would be able to feel every dip and valley. And holy jeez, was she tempted to. Her fingers itched to be closer to all that sexiness.

"I'm going to go shower so I can get rid of this stench. Somehow, our little lady managed to keep herself clean."

Karlie scolded herself. She had been so fixated on Steel's naked chest, she hadn't even thought to look her daughter over. Sure enough, there wasn't an ounce of spit-up on her.

"I'm not sure if we should be worried, or impressed by that feat," she laughed.

"Impressed for sure. Our little girl has some real talent."

She smiled down at her daughter. "Go ahead and clean up. I got this from here."

Moving over to the small rocking chair, Karlie got comfortable and started feeding Anna again. This time, her daughter took it slow. She wanted to think Anna had learned her lesson, but she knew better. The next feeding would be the *Hunger Games* all over again.

Karlie stared into Anna's eyes and thought about the man whose eyes she shared. It was going to be hard resisting him. Everything she'd seen so far proved he was a good man. And a sexy one. She didn't know if it was the post-baby hormones or just her attraction to him, but she could barely be in the same room with him without her panties getting wet. One kiss and she was pining for him. None of her recovered memories ever showed her being like this before.

"You had to go and spit up on Daddy, didn't you?" she cooed. "Made him strip out of his shirt and everything. How's Mommy supposed to resist that?"

This probably wasn't the kind of conversation she should be having with her one-month-old daughter, but she didn't have anyone else to talk to. It wasn't like she could remember any close girlfriends she had before being kidnapped as those years were still spotty. It wasn't safe for her to call her mother. So that left Emma or Maddox, neither of which she felt comfortable sharing that much information with.

TMI.

"It's probably a good thing you can't understand what I'm saying. That way, my secrets are safe with me."

Steel didn't need to know how hard of a time she was having resisting

him.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Steel needed to get out of Anna's room before he did something stupid, like pushing Karlie up against a wall and ravishing her. There was no missing the heated stare. First when she crashed into him on the stairs after his run, and now when he was forced to peel his shirt off.

Grabbing a cold shower, he tried to will his dick into submission, but it was no use. The damn thing knew that what he wanted was only a few feet down the hall. Fisting his cock, he set out to rub one off when a voice filtered through the baby monitor. Steel pulled the curtain back so he could listen a little better.

"You had to go and spit up on Daddy, didn't you? Made him strip out of his shirt and everything. How's Mommy supposed to resist that?"

Ah, fuck. Hearing Karlie's sweet voice did nothing to help his current situation. He gripped the base of his cock and tugged. It had been so long since his dick got any action, it wouldn't take much to finish.

Thoughts of their time together flitted through his mind. The way her confidence grew the longer they were together. In no time, he felt his balls tighten just before he shot his release all over the shower floor. He watched as his cum slowly washed away. Such a waste. It was meant to coat Karlie's walls.

"It's probably a good thing you can't understand what I'm saying. That way, my secrets are safe with me."

The sound of her voice brought him back to his current situation.

Oh, Karlie. If only she knew. He probably should've warned her that a

second baby monitor was mounted in his room at all times. One close to the bathroom just in case Anna woke up while he was getting ready.

Now Karlie's secret was also his. He was glad to know he wasn't the only one affected by their chemistry. He figured as much when he witnessed the attraction in her eyes, but he felt better having it confirmed. It probably wouldn't take much to push her over the edge and give them both what they needed.

Turning off the shower, he rushed through drying off and getting dressed. He had the sudden urge to be closer to her.

When he walked into Anna's room, Karlie was sitting on the rocking chair with a peaceful Anna in her arms.

Karlie didn't know it, but she was terrible at hiding her feelings. Even if he hadn't overheard her confession, he would've known something was up based on the flush on her cheeks, and the fact that she couldn't look him in the eye. She was embarrassed of her own feelings and it was the sexiest thing to see.

"Did she eat slower for you?"

A better person would've let the two most important people in his life continue to enjoy their moment without interrupting. A better man would've allowed Karlie the time to compose herself. He found he didn't want to be either of those.

"Yes."

There was that blush. It ran all the way down her neck and he would bet his next paycheck that if she were to remove her shirt, it would also spread across the tips of her breasts.

Steel was desperate to walk over and peek, to stretch the fabric ever so slightly to see if he was indeed correct.

Jacking himself off in the shower did nothing to relieve the ache. He wanted her just as much now as he had before he rushed out of the room.

Her boobs were bigger than he last remembered. Not much, but where previously they had fit perfectly in his large palms, they would now spill out some. He wondered if they would stay that size now that she was no longer able to produce milk.

"What's that look?"

He hadn't realized he had a look on his face until Karlie said something.

"What look are you referring to, baby?"

"I don't know," she huffed. "The kind where you look like you want to eat



me up. I'm not used to that look from men. And," she quickly rushed on, "that's not a way to garner pity, it's just me being honest."

Oh, he knew she was being honest. They'd had the exact same conversation the night they met. This woman had no idea the appeal she had.

"I really wish you could remember our weekend."

He walked farther into the room and knelt in front of her. Steel watched as her throat bobbed with the physical gulp she took.

"Why's that?" she whispered.

He was about to be as honest with her as he could. He had no idea if she was ready for it or not, but that's what she was going to get.

"Because I spent the entire weekend tearing down every insecurity you had just so you could build yourself back up and know what a sexy woman you really are. It was amazing to see the transformation and I wish more than anything that asshole hadn't swooped in and ruined it."

"You're not taking credit for building me back up?"

The innocence in her voice was refreshing. There were so many women he met after he left his wife who only wanted him for his status or to compliment them every chance he got. He was raised properly and complimenting a woman came naturally, but there was a difference between doing it because he believed it, and doing it because it was demanded of him.

"Nope." He shook his head. "Only you can truly do that. Another person can give you the tools and I was happy to do that for you, but confidence has to come from within."

"I wish I could remember that part." Karlie dropped her gaze to their daughter whose little fist was tugging at her mother's hair. "It sounds like I turned out to be an amazing person."

*More than you know.*

"You'll start to remember." He put as much conviction in his voice as he could.

"I've started to remember a little more. None of them are great memories, though."

"They don't have to be great and you don't have to share them with me if you don't want to."

"So you don't want to hear them?" Karlie's lips turned up into a shy smile.

That smile did crazy things to his body and his heart. He struggled between keeping his distance and wanting to pull her into his arms. It was a

good thing their daughter was providing a small barrier. An easily removed one if needed, but a barrier nonetheless.

"Oh no, I absolutely do."

"Well." Karlie cleared her throat. "I let one of my co-workers convince me to sign up for a dating app."

Excitement coursed through his veins. He knew this story and the fact that it was so close to when they met gave him hope.

"It was called LoversUnite." Karlie rolled her eyes in response to his smirk. "Yeah, I know, a stupid name, but I was at a low point in my life and figured it couldn't hurt. And really, it wasn't as bad as I thought. I met someone nice, or so I thought. Then he stood me up. I guess it's a good thing I don't remember the rest of the evening. It was probably a night filled with gallons of ice cream and some sappy movie."

"What if I told you it wasn't?"

Karlie sat up straighter in the rocking chair. Anna was still tucked into her arm, but now instead of tugging at her hair, their daughter was yanking on Karlie's shirt.

"You know about that night?"

"I know it didn't end with ice cream and a movie," Steel teased.

"Do you plan to keep me on my toes?"

He doubted she would appreciate it if he said yes to that. Steel was tempted just so he could see the fire in her eyes that he missed. The Karlie in front of him wasn't the same spirited one he had said goodbye to all those months ago.

"I guess not." He shrugged. "I know because that was the night we met. After your date stood you up, we got to talking. Actually, we talked for hours before I got up the nerve to ask you to get some ice cream with me. After that, we went back to my place and spent the entire weekend together."

"So my night did end with ice cream." Karlie laughed, and so did he.

"Touché."

It felt good to laugh. It felt even better to watch Karlie laugh with such abandon. Her entire face lit up. He was going to murder the fucker who took that away from them for so long.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Karlie was back outside and thinking about what Steel said. She couldn't wrap her head around the fact that her memory would show her the start of an evening, but not how it ended. It made for one hell of a mind fuck.

"Anyone home?"

Karlie jumped in her chair and looked around the backyard.

"Yes?"

The female voice had to be someone they knew. The location for Steel's team was in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't like some random stranger could just show up. At least she hoped not. Karlie was second-guessing her answer when Emma strode through the gate.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," she said. "You didn't sound very confident in your reply."

Now she felt silly that she hadn't recognized Emma's voice. It wasn't the first time they were talking.

"Sorry, I guess I was just lost in thought and it took me a bit to place who the voice belonged to."

"Ah." Emma took the seat next to her with a nod. "That makes sense."

Daniel's wife didn't elaborate further and Karlie didn't know how to respond, making for some really heavy, awkward silence to hang between them. When it finally became too much, Karlie blurted out, "Did you need me to go get Steel?"

"No, I actually came to see you."

"Oh?"

Other than asking her about her life so they could look into her past more, Emma never expressed an interest in hanging out. Then it dawned on her. "You have more questions for me?"

"Nope, that's not why I'm here."

Now she was really confused, and the situation was bringing back flashes of high school. Awkward conversations with the popular girls and jocks. She was never part of the *in crowd*, and those same insecurities she felt as a teenager were starting to rear their heads.

"I really suck at guessing games and awkward silences give me hives," she blurted out before she could stop herself. With a quick slap of a hand to cover her mouth, Karlie tried to force the words back in, but it was too late. Emma was going to realize how weird she was.

Karlie knew she was right when Emma tipped her head back and let out a belly laugh.

"Your honesty is so refreshing," Emma finally said once she controlled her laughter. "For so long, I was forced to spend my time with fake people. It was exhausting. I didn't realize how much I missed someone just being honest."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. Very few people outside of her parents ever appreciated her honesty. Most thought she was weird, or lacked social skills.

"I can tell by your confused expression you don't believe me. It's okay. It will take time, but just know I would much rather you speak what's on your mind rather than only say what you think I want to hear."

"Most people don't really mean that," Karlie whispered.

She wished some memories could be forgotten. The ones from high school, for example. Karlie would gladly trade the ones she was missing of her time together with Steel for certain instances during her teenage years.

"I'm not like most people and I'm old enough to know I prefer hardcore honesty over fake pleasantries. Believe me, I've had my fair share of the latter."

"That doesn't sound fun."

"Not really, but being undercover will do that to you. I had to be someone I didn't particularly like in order to get what I needed, so it wasn't much of a stretch to think the people I was forced to spend my time with would also be people I didn't like," Emma explained.

"So, does that mean you're happy to be out? Sorry, that was stupid. You

just said you had to spend time with people you didn't like. Of course, you would be happy to be out."

Emma cut her off with a wave of her hand. "No, don't apologize. It's a legit question with a very complicated answer. Am I happy to no longer be pretending to be someone else? Absolutely. Do I wish I was still undercover so I could've gotten Vito and put this whole mess behind us? Also, yes."

She wished she could be more like Emma. It took a real badass woman to go undercover and try to stop someone as evil as Vito Accardo.

"That took a lot of courage."

"Or stupidity. The team was sent in to save me because I screwed up somewhere and had a hit out on me. I think sometimes it was a little too close to home for me and I wasn't seeing things objectively. As much as it pissed me off that the team came in when they did, it was the smart move. Don't tell any of them I said that, though. Their egos are big enough the way it is."

"Your secret is safe with me."

The uneasiness she initially felt melted away. Emma was easy to talk to.

"I knew we'd get along great. So I won't feel bad when I ask my next question."

Uh-oh. That sounded ominous and put Karlie back on edge. So much for the comfort she was starting to feel.

"How are things with you and Steel going?"

Karlie let out a sigh of relief. That was a conversation she could have. And much better than some of the scenarios her mind was starting to cook up.

"Strange, but not in a bad way, I guess. He remembers our time together and I can't. It's frustrating but what makes it worse is how attracted to him I am. It's like my body didn't get the memo that I don't remember and wants to jump his bones every chance I get."

"So do it." Emma shrugged. "Steel won't care. I might not know him that well, but I get the feeling he would be understanding. Daniel mentioned the reason he even joined the team was because he wanted to look for you."

He had told her that as well, and she was inclined to believe him. Emma wasn't wrong. Every vibe he gave off was both caring and nurturing. It was strange to know that the same man could be so deadly in his job. If what Emma had said was true, she didn't have the courage yet to ask him.

"I kissed him the other day because I wanted to see if it would help me remember him," she confessed. "I don't want him to think I'm doing the same

if we end up in bed together."

"Did he know that's why you kissed him?"

"Yes." Her face had to resemble a tomato at this point. Karlie couldn't believe she was admitting all this. "I have a tendency to blurt out the truth when I'm nervous."

"Was he upset about it?"

Karlie thought back to what Steel said and how it made her feel. The blush she was sure covered her face had a whole new reason to be there.

"No, he wasn't upset. The opposite, actually. He pretty much encouraged us to do more."

"Then I don't think you have anything to worry about. Steel doesn't seem like the type of man who says something he doesn't mean. He wants to help you in any way he can. Even if that just means relieving the pent-up sexual frustration you have going on."

Even though she didn't know Emma that well, it felt nice just to talk through what she was feeling. Emma was someone she could see herself forming a friendship with, which was a much better alternative than telling her frustrations to her infant daughter.

"You're right."

"Don't tell the guys, but I usually am." Emma winked. "Now I'm going to get out of your hair and let you enjoy your evening. I think there is someone who wants to spend some time with you."

Karlie looked over her shoulder where Emma had pointed. Sure enough, Steel was standing on the other side of the sliding glass door.

"How long has he been standing there?"

"The first time was ten minutes ago. But he's been decreasing the time between visits. This last time he started to give me the stink eye."

Emma didn't look the least bit concerned that an over six-and-a-half-foot-tall man made of solid muscle was attempting to stare her down.

"Thanks for taking the time to come check on me."

"That's what friends are for."

She watched as Emma walked off. Friends. She liked the sound of that.

"I was starting to wonder if she was ever going to leave," Steel said as soon as the sliding door opened.

"If you were really staring her down as she said, I'm surprised Emma stayed as long as she did."

"She's married to Daniel," Steel huffed. "A stare-down probably doesn't

even faze her. In fact, she probably laughs at them."

True. From the little interaction she's had with the man, grumpiness didn't even begin to describe Daniel's personality.

"So, what did Emma have to say?"

Dammit. Why did her face have to heat up every time she got embarrassed? It was insane how easily the people around her could read every emotion she had.

"Well, now I really want to know. I didn't think anyone could make you blush the same way I do."

Her hands flew up to cover her cheeks. It was a pointless gesture considering he already knew they were beet red.

"I told her about the kiss and what you said afterward."

There went her mouth again. Always blurting shit out before she could stop it. One day it was going to get her in trouble. Or maybe it already did and she couldn't remember. That would suck.

"And what was Emma's advice?"

She was going to die of mortification. Right there on the beautiful patio while Steel moved like a panther stalking its prey.

"She pretty much agrees with you," she finally admitted when the silence got to be too much for her.

"See? I knew I was going to like Emma." Steel was now right in front of her. Karlie had to lean her head back, so she was looking him in the eye rather than his impressive chest. "She's very blunt and to the point. There's no dancing around the issue with that one."

Nope, unfortunately, she wasn't going to be getting away with that. Not around these people, it would appear.

"How are you so nonchalant about all this?" She crossed her arms and let out a huff.

"Nonchalant about what, baby?"

"The fact that I can't remember our time together." Now she was talking with her arms and hands. Crossed, uncrossed. Rinse and repeat. When her arms weren't crossed, they were flying everywhere as she tried to make her point. "It doesn't seem to faze you one bit."

"No, it doesn't, because I'm confident in what we had together and will continue to have. Feelings like that don't just disappear. I spent almost eleven months thinking about you and looking everywhere for you. You spent that same time living in hell, but always hoping I would come find you. Lo . . . A

relationship like that doesn't just fizzle out."

He was going to say love. Karlie was sure of it. Had they confessed love in the past? She didn't think so. If they had, she was sure Steel would've mentioned it. What stopped him from saying it now?

"Don't overthink this, baby. Let yourself just feel."

She didn't know what to say. Fortunately, Anna chose that moment to let out a wail. Her daughter had impeccable timing or horrible timing. It depended on the situation.

The next two hours were spent feeding their daughter and getting her ready for bed. By the time they finally had Anna down for the night, Karlie had made up her mind.

She was going to go for it. They couldn't have sex. Her appointment with her doctor was still a few days away, and while she knew she had healed nicely after birthing Anna, she didn't want to do anything that would set her back.

So sex was off the table, but maybe they could fool around. Truthfully, she would be happy just kissing the man. He was hands down the best kisser she'd ever had, and she was overdue for another round of the feelings he evoked last time.

She moved to the other side of the house on shaky legs. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her hand to knock. But just before her knuckles could hit the wood, the door flew open and a little yelp fell from her lips.

"Karlie!"

She could tell he was surprised to see her, but she didn't know if it was the good kind or bad.

"Hey!" Her voice was an octave too high. Coupled with the awkward wave she gave him, it was no wonder she had trouble with men in the past.

"Everything okay?"

Their whole encounter was steadily going downhill. The need to bolt back to her room was more than she could handle.

"Yes," she rushed out. "I'm just going to go back to my room."

Karlie was turning on her heel, and ready to dash back down the hall, but Steel was faster. Tugging her arm, he spun her back around so she was crashing into his impressive chest.

"Not so fast, baby. You came knocking on my door for a reason and I would like to know what it was."

She couldn't tell if she was hot because their bodies were so close, or



from the embarrassment of being caught. Although she had every intention of following through with her plan, that was before he opened his mouth and her nerves took over.

"It was nothing."

Karlie sucked at lying. She knew it. Steel knew it. It was a waste of her breath. The only good explanation she could come up with as to why she did it was because his body was affecting her brain. The stupid organ short-circuited whenever he was around.

"We both know that's not true."

Somehow, while they were talking, he managed to shift her so they were farther inside his room. She had no idea how it came to be. There was no conscious effort on her part, and her body was clearly doing its own thing.

"Fine, you're right," she muttered.

"That wasn't so hard to admit. Now, if only I could get you to tell me the real reason you came," he teased.

He wasn't going to drop it. Karlie was better off confessing and letting the shame take its course.

"I considered what you said and decided I agree."

"I don't want to pretend to know what you mean by that and then be wrong, so how about you lay it out for me."

Since he was still holding her, she could feel that his entire body had stiffened up.

"I want to see if being with you can help bring my memories back or make new ones," she blurted out. "But not sex," she quickly clarified. "I have to wait for clearance from the doctor but . . ."

Karlie didn't get to finish her rambling because Steel was effectively cutting her off with his lips. There was no gentle buildup, no allowing her to get acclimated. Steel was a man on a mission, and she was his current target.

"Are . . . you . . . sure?" he asked between kisses.

She was never more sure of anything else in her life. The second his lips touched hers, all of her fears flew out the window and a rightness settled in her belly. The only other time she ever got that feeling was when Anna was in her arms.

"Yes," she finally answered when she was forced to catch her breath. Steel had stolen it, along with any inhibitions she had. Karlie was nothing but putty in his hands.

"Good, because I've waited too long to taste you again. Now strip and get

your sexy ass over to the bed."

Damn, that growl of his had heat pooling between her legs. She was more than happy to strip off her panties because they were soaked.

There was nothing graceful about the way she stripped out of her oversized nightshirt or shorts. If the look in Steel's eyes was any indication, he didn't care how she got naked. Just that she was doing as he commanded.

Karlie started to climb onto the bed and looked over her shoulder at Steel.

"Aren't you going to get undressed as well?"

"It's safer if I leave my clothes on." He gave her that dazzling smile. "Besides, tonight is all about you."

Doubt started to creep in, especially when a fully clothed Steel climbed into the bed with her. She watched with trepidation and curiosity as he settled his head back onto the pillow.

"Sit on my face, baby."

She blanched. Bug-eyed and mouth wide open, she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"I can't do that. I'll suffocate you!"

She wasn't a small woman. And over the years, she had come to terms with the fact that she would never be that sexy woman on top.

"Oh, baby." Steel smirked. "If only you could remember our weekend together. But since you don't, I'm going to repeat what I told you then. First off no, you won't. We've done this and I'm still alive. Second, I would gladly die with a smile on my face if it meant you were squeezing my head with those sexy thighs and that delicious pussy on my tongue."

Karlie couldn't wrap her head around the first thing he said.

"Wait, when we were together, I was on top?"

Steel leaned up on his elbows and nodded his head. "Several times, in fact. That was just one of the insecurities we worked through. By the end of our weekend, I didn't even have to beg you to get on top of me. You were confidently doing it on your own."

Wowzers. She really liked this person she turned into when she was with him. That woman sounded awesome.

"Now get that sweet pussy up here so I can eat it."

She scrambled so fast it was any wonder she didn't accidentally knee Steel in the head in her haste to throw her legs over his head. Still feeling slightly self-conscious, Karlie tried to hover just over his face, but Steel was

having none of that. There would be fingerprints on her ass; he dug in and pulled her down so that she was in fact sitting on his face and riding his mouth.

One swipe across her sensitive center and she was done for. Insecurity flew out the window. By the time he was tongue-fucking her folds, she was too busy riding with such abandon to care how hard she was squeezing him. Sensation after sensation flooded her system until the only thing she could do to keep herself upright was slap the wall with one hand and lean back on the other. Never had she felt so sexy as she did at that moment.

By the time her orgasm crashed through her body, she was a quivering mess. Her thighs hurt from clenching them so hard, and still, he didn't stop. He lapped up her juices. His tongue continued to tease her sensitive lips. Karlie hadn't even known she was on the verge of a second orgasm until it rocked her body. She saw stars, or maybe she was dead and that was what heaven looked like. Either way, she was too damn happy to care that she was completely naked on top of a man.

"Fuck, baby, I missed the taste of you."

The deep rumble of Steel's voice against her overly sensitized core broke through her haze. She needed to get off him, but was pretty sure her jelly legs wouldn't cooperate. The thought was still floating around her mind when it dawned on her that she was no longer on top of him. Somehow, during her contemplation, he had lifted her up and off him. A not so easy feat.

Steel was smiling down at her without a single regard for the fact that his beard glistened with her juices. It was the sexiest thing.

"I don't think I can move," she confessed. "Actually, I'm pretty sure my legs no longer have bones and they're just Jell-O at this point."

"Then I did it right." He winked.

Karlie watched as Steel climbed out of bed and stripped out of his shorts and shirt before slipping back onto the bed.

*I guess we're doing this.*

It would appear they were all in and there was no going back. Karlie wasn't sure how she felt about that. Her guard shot back up as she reached for a blanket to cover herself.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Steel watched the array of emotions flitter across Karlie's face. He knew making the assumption that she would now stay in his bed was a gamble but it was one he was willing to take. What he didn't like was the way she moved to cover herself as soon as the orgasmic haze wore off. It was something he would need to work more on. He wanted her naked, and comfortable, in his bed.

"Don't overthink it." He ran his thumb over her creased brow.

"I'm not," she immediately replied, but then looked guilty. "Okay, maybe I was a little bit."

"There's that honesty I prefer. Sugarcoating is for strangers. We're not strangers."

He realized his mistake too late.

"To me we are."

"I know." He did his best to fix his blunder. "And most of the time I remember that, but with the taste of you still on my tongue, I forgot."

The tension in her shoulders appeared to ease a bit, and he let out a silent breath. That was a close one. He almost screwed things up before he even had a second chance with her.

But her brows were still scrunched up. Which told him she was still thinking about something.

"You can ask me," he encouraged.

Steel wanted her to be comfortable enough to speak her mind. It was one of the many qualities that drew him to her that first time.

"Where were you headed when I came knocking? You'd already said good night not long before that."

Time to own up.

"I was coming to convince you to spend the night with me and to give in to your desires."

"Because I told you what Emma and I discussed?"

He could've said "yes" and avoided the whole awkward conversation about what he did but if he wanted honesty from her, he needed to give it in return.

"Not exactly, but that was part of it." He cringed. "The other reason is more devious."

Her one eyebrow rose as she waited for him to continue.

"I overheard you talking to Anna after she spit up all over me. I guess now would be a good time to mention that I have a second baby monitor in my room."

Karlie sat up and looked around. He knew the moment she saw the small monitor because her chest and neck went from simply flushed to crimson red.

"You heard me admit how badly seeing you without a shirt affects me?"

He nodded.

"Since I'm confessing. I should also mention that I jerked off to the sound of your voice. Oh, and the heat in your eyes before I left. And maybe a few memories of our weekend together."

Karlie's gaze dropped to where his erection was doing its best to escape his boxers. He hadn't thought the damn thing could get any harder, but he was wrong. His cock knew he had her attention, and it wanted more. Like maybe her mouth.

"Have you had anyone since our weekend?"

While Steel understood it was a legitimate question, it pissed him off. He thought he had done a good job expressing how every moment of their time apart was spent thinking about her, but apparently, a reminder was needed.

"The only thing my dick has seen since you left is my hand. I could barely work, let alone care enough to have a social life. The thought of another woman anywhere near me was absurd. You have been everything to me since I walked into the bar and set my sights on you."

"I never would've wanted you to be that lonely."

"It's a good thing you didn't get a say in what I felt, then. We made

promises that weekend and there was no way I was going back on them. Not until I found you and you told me to get lost. Otherwise, I would've spent my entire life looking for you."

This was not how he envisioned their night going, but maybe it was good. Karlie needed to know just how much she meant to him.

"That's a long time," she whispered.

"And you are worth that time." He gathered her hand and put it over his heart. "I know what it means to give myself over to the wrong person. I swore I would never marry again and then you came along and suddenly tying myself down never felt more right."

Karlie's body froze.

"You were married before?"

Son of a bitch. Amnesia was going to be the death of him.

"Yes, and before you get angry with me, I told you the night we met. Actually, it was one of the first stupid things I said because you made me so nervous."

He needed to remember that, while these conversations felt like déjà vu to him, they were happening for the first time for her. So he needed to stop taking it to heart when she reacted like she did the first time. The bright side, however, was that her reactions were genuine.

"Why did you get divorced?"

"Because we never should've married in the first place. We were high school sweethearts, and I thought by getting married I was guaranteeing she would stay loyal when I deployed. I quickly learned that wasn't the case. A couple of weeks in and I found out she was cheating on me."

Just like the first time, there was no pity, only fire in her eyes. He already knew what she would say before it came out of her mouth.

"Well, she was an idiot, and I'm glad she showed her true colors early on."

Bingo.

"Are you sure you don't remember our weekend together?" he laughed.

"No, why?"

"Just the way you responded. It's exactly what you said that night."

"Maybe my subconscious remembers." Steel wanted to rub away the little lines between her brows. "And if that's the case, I wish it would share with the rest of the class. Kinda annoying if it's holding out on me."

Steel was almost positive that was the case. There were just too many

similarities for it to not be true, but something was holding her memories back. Whatever it was, he would find a way to break through it, for her sake.

They talked for a little longer about nothing important. She asked him simple questions, and he told her everything he already knew about her. It was a comfortable conversation, full of getting reacquainted with one another until Karlie was snoring in his arms. For the first time in months, he fell asleep quickly with a smile on his face. This was what he was waiting for and made all the hurt along the way worth it.

STEEL WOKE up the next morning and patted the bed next to him, jumping up when he realized the spot next to him was cold and empty. Hopping out of bed, he was about to rush out of the room to find Karlie when he heard her sweet voice travel through the baby monitor.

"Good morning, my sweet little girl. I dreamt about you last night. I think maybe they were memories, but Mommy isn't sure."

He was tempted to stay and listen to her conversation, but thought better of it. He'd already done that once. Besides, he wanted to see her expression when she spoke about those memories.

Grabbing a pair of gym shorts, Steel quickly pulled them on and headed for Anna's bedroom. He found the mother-daughter duo rocking in the chair.

"I thought maybe you snuck away from me," he told her when she looked up.

"I did ... kinda," she confessed. "I woke up early and couldn't fall back to sleep, so I came in to watch her."

"I heard you say you had a dream about her."

He wished more than anything it meant she was starting to get some of her memories back. As far as he knew, she remembered everything except the last eleven months, but he needed to ask her to be sure.

"It seemed more real. Almost like a memory."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"I don't know the location because the only thing I could focus on was Anna, but I think she was only a few days old and I was holding her in my arms. Then, all of a sudden, she opened her eyes and all I could think was how happy I was that her eyes were a rare gray."

He smiled. His family eyes. That was what she was remembering. Or at least associating the moment with. Steel was never so happy to know his daughter got that from him.

"Anna took my breath away the first time she looked at me as well. It was an instant connection."

"It's crazy how identical your eyes are. Is it a family trait?"

His eye color was a topic of discussion that first night they were together. At one point, Karlie had thought he wore colored contacts. It wasn't until he brought out a picture of both his mother and grandmother as proof that he was finally able to convince her.

"Yes, on my mother's side. Although, I'm the first male to have them. Before me, it was always the females in the family."

"I'm glad she got your eyes. They're a much better color than my boring old brown."

Steel didn't think there was anything boring about the whiskey color of Karlie's eyes. He would've loved looking into their daughter's eyes and knowing he was seeing a spitting image of the woman he loved.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" Karlie looked genuinely confused by the anger in his voice.

"Don't put yourself down like that. Our daughter would've been lucky to have your eyes. I hope the next one does."

There he went, opening his mouth before he fully thought through what he was going to say. At the rate he was going, Karlie was going to be running for the hills. He was moving fast, and she was still learning to crawl.

"You want more kids with me?"

"Oh, baby ... You're going to realize I want everything with you. Marriage, kids, the whole package. I want to spend every day showing you just how much I fell in love with you in one weekend."

He could tell he freaked her out and that she wouldn't be saying it back to him today, but that was okay. Nothing she did would change how he felt about her.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Finally! Karlie walked out of the doctor's office with Anna in her carrier and a huge smile on her face. She was medically cleared to resume all sexual activities. Yes, she specifically asked. No, she wasn't ashamed.

The past three days were torture with the amount of sexual tension floating between her and Steel. Sure, in the evenings they slept in the same bed and, okay, maybe he woke her up every morning with his tongue between her legs, but it wasn't the same. She wanted to feel him. Actually feel him. Not just in her hand or mouth, both of which got plenty of action in such a short amount of time. It was like a damn broke between them and now Steel couldn't keep his hands off her. And vice versa.

"So, what did the doctor say?" Steel asked as he opened the truck door for her.

It was insane how giddy she got from simple things like Steel opening her door or taking the carrier from her arm so he could buckle Anna in. Her father did it all the time for her mother, so why didn't she think she would ever find the same?

*Oh, that's right, because from what I remember, guys never did things like that for me.*

"Zero restrictions. Everything looks great and everyone in the office gushed over our daughter."

"Of course they did, she's beautiful like her mama."

That right there was why she was weak in the knees for him. Karlie wondered if she would ever get used to the sweet way he spoke to her. She

did know one thing; she would never take it for granted. A man like Steel was not someone a woman took for granted.

"Thank you." She blushed. "What's the plan for the rest of the day?"

Karlie knew what she wanted to do. It involved the two of them naked, but first, they needed Anna to take a nap.

"Going into work," Steel sighed. "Maddox called and said she had something important she wanted to discuss with you."

Well, that was not how she wanted to spend the day. Steel's friends were great, and Maddox was turning out to be a hoot, but that didn't mean she wanted them to interrupt her alone time. Maybe if she was lucky, whatever they had to discuss would be quick and their daughter would be cooperative.

"Don't look so disappointed. I can promise you we will get time together tonight. The green light from the doctor means big plans for us."

Now she liked the sound of that.

"What kinda big plans?"

"The kind that means very little sleep for you," he teased. "I hope you got enough last night."

She didn't, and he knew it. They were both insatiable despite the restrictions they had. It just meant Steel got creative with how he pleased her. Karlie was learning there was a whole hell of a lot that could be done to make her orgasm. And holy hell, who knew there were so many body parts that were sensitive?

The drive to the compound, as she liked to call it, took about forty-five minutes. The place Daniel chose for the team was legit out in the middle of nowhere. She meant to ask Emma if it even had an address or if they were just using the middle of the desert when asked about the location. She wouldn't be surprised. Daniel didn't seem like the type who cared about technicalities such as a physical address.

Emma was waiting for them when they pulled up.

"I call dibs on baby snuggles!" Her new friend had the door open and the car seat in her hand before Karlie could protest.

"She's going to be hungry soon," she called out even though Emma was already halfway back to the building.

"I don't think she particularly cares."

"At least we know we have babysitting options if we ever want a few hours to ourselves. Your teammates sure know how to just swoop in and take over."

The whole reason Emma was likely calling dibs was because of Chance. That man really liked baby snuggles as well. The two were constantly stopping in and competing over who Anna liked better. The joke was on them because her daughter was playing them for a fool. Steel was her favorite.

Steel guided her into the sleek building where Maddox and the rest of Phantom team waited for her.

"It's about damn time. Emma was starting to lose her shit. Baby withdrawal is fucking real," Daniel grumbled.

"I told you on the phone it would take time. The doctor's office isn't close."

"That's because *someone* decided to build out in the middle of bumfuck Egypt where the closest thing to civilization is the herd of prairie dogs that are slowly becoming my new best friends," Maddox said sarcastically, twisted in her chair, and threw Karlie a wink.

"You don't have to stay. In fact, no one invited you onto the team."

Karlie wanted Maddox to stay. She was starting to like the crazy woman. Maddox was quirky and fun, not to mention confident, and spoke her mind.

"Actually, your wife invited me to stay, and I took her up on the offer. Oh, and Black thought it was a good idea as well, so it looks to me like you were outvoted."

Daniel threw his hands in the air. "I guess I don't get a say. Last time I checked, it was my team."

Maddox didn't bother to answer that, but instead barreled into the next topic.

"So, the reason I called and asked you to come in. How much do you remember about your brother?"

Every warning bell in her mind started to go off. That same nagging feeling she had before was back, but louder. Her mind wanted her to remember something, but she couldn't figure out what it was. It happened both times her brother was mentioned, and now she wanted to know why.

"Not much. He was much older than me and died when I was really young. My family never spoke about him as I grew up. Kinda like they just wanted to forget he existed."

"What if I told you that's exactly what they tried to do?" Maddox replied.

She wasn't following. She always thought it was strange her parents never mentioned her brother, but she chalked it up to grief. Now, as a mother herself, she couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose a child. Anna was her

everything, even if she didn't remember the actual birth.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"I mean, I don't think your brother is dead. There's nothing I've found that proves he is, and a whole lot of what I've found that makes me think he's still alive. The evidence is pretty damning actually once I went down the rabbit hole."

"That can't be. My parents wouldn't lie to me about that," Karlie insisted.

But would they? Honesty was always so important to her parents that she couldn't see them lying about something so significant. However, everything about her brother was bizarre. She wished she could remember more about him, but she was only five and the years after took precedence in her mind.

"They would if what he became was something terrible."

Karlie didn't like the ominous tone.

"What could be so terrible that Karlie's parents would want to erase their son from their existence?" Chance asked.

A memory flashed through her mind from a time in college when her mother had come to visit her in the dorms.

*"What has you so spooked, my dear?"*

*Her mother visited every weekend. The university she chose to attend wasn't that far from her house, and even though most of her friends chose to live at home, she wanted to explore the freedom of living somewhere else.*

*"A man said hi to me on the street today. He looked familiar. Plus, he knew my name, and that I was your daughter. He mentioned how much I looked like you and told me to tell you that love is forever if only you wish and believe it to be. How did he know your favorite line?"*

*Her mother's face had gone pale the second she started quoting the line her mother and father would tell her every night. It was their favorite thing to remind her.*

*"There's something I need to tell you, and you're not going to be happy about it. It's the only thing your father and I ever lied to you about. It's our family's darkest and deepest secret. We thought we were protecting you, but now I see by keeping the truth from you, we've put you in grave danger."*

Her entire world shifted with the story her mother told her next.

*"Il Diavolo is my brother. My own brother kidnapped me and turned me over to Vito Accardo,"* she choked out and then ran. Karlie ran as far as she could, despite the tears rolling down her cheeks. She ran until her eyes were so blurry that she tripped and landed hard on her elbow. Tucking the bruised

appendage into her side, she curled up on the dirt ground and thought about all she was about to lose. Memory after memory bombarded her brain. The dam had finally broken. Karlie remembered everything and now it was all going to be lost to her.

She made a mistake. She should've told Steel she loved him when she had the chance. Now it was too late. There was no way he would love her anymore with what they just learned.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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He wanted to race after her, but Liam's hand stopped him.

"Give her a minute. That was more than just one memory returning."

That wasn't a memory. That was an atomic fucking bomb that just dropped into everyone's lap. Not in a million years did he expect this.

"How sure are you?" he asked Maddox.

"It was only an educated guess based on a fuck ton of misinformation, but considering her reaction, I'm pretty sure we know it's true. Karlie seemed pretty confident."

Why didn't she tell him when they first found her? This wasn't the first time the name had come up. It had been Karlie who told them who it was that kidnapped her, so why didn't she admit it was her brother?

Steel thought back to the look on her face when she first told him about her abduction. He remembered thinking something was off, but instead of questioning her, he let it slide. Was that what she was hiding from him?

"I need to go make sure she's alright."

This time, he didn't let anyone stop him. He knew Karlie well enough to know there were a million things floating through her mind and none of them were good. His suspicions were correct when he found her huddled in a ball on the ground. Dirt covered her face and body except where the tears were still free-flowing. Scooping her up, he settled her on his lap.

"Talk to me." He rubbed her back. "That had to be some memory if it had you running out on me like that." He didn't want to make assumptions about what was going through her head.

"How can you still be here after what you learned?"

The whole sentence was a jumbled mess. Karlie was sobbing through most of it. She hiccupped every three words or so, but he understood what she was asking.

"Because I love you, and that didn't change when I learned who your brother was."

"But I didn't tell you when you first found me."

She was making this so much easier on him. He didn't even have to ask. As usual, she was spilling her guts.

"Yes, and that's something I would like to talk about when you're ready. I don't want secrets between us and that happens to be a pretty big one."

"My parents kept it from me until I was in college. I don't think they would've ever told me if he hadn't made a comment to me one day on the street. It freaked me out and my mother happened to be visiting. She confessed immediately."

"What did he say to you?"

So many other questions ran through his mind that he didn't even know where to begin.

"Love is forever if only you wish and believe it to be. My parents would say it to me every night before bed. I didn't understand how this complete stranger could know that. Then when my mother told me about him, it all made sense why the guy looked so familiar. He was practically a clone of my father except meaner and with a scar on his face."

Steel wanted to continue to sit with her in his arms, but they needed to get out of the heat and go back in to check on Anna.

"Let's get back inside to my team. I'm sure there is a lot more we need to discuss, and it would be helpful if you gave them a description."

"Are they going to hate me?"

Karlie didn't realize it yet, but his team would rather die for her than hate her for something that wasn't her fault.

"No, they won't. They just want answers as well."

They walked back inside, and before he could even say a word, Maddox was storming over to them. "You better not have been mean to her."

Steel merely raised his brow at Karlie as if to say *Excuse me?*

"I wasn't mean. You've got a lot to learn about me if you think I would ever say a harsh word to Karlie."

"Yes, well, you look like you could bench the two of us without breaking

a sweat. How am I supposed to know you have a gooey center under all that muscle?"

Steel frowned at the analogy. He was often told he was too kind for his own good, but never had anyone referred to him as "gooey." He wasn't sure he liked it either.

"Gooey center?"

"Cinnamon roll," Maddox said like that was supposed to explain everything. "Never mind, it's not important now."

"So, how about we get back to what *is* important?" Daniel snapped.

He glared at his team leader. He wasn't going to allow anyone to make Karlie feel like shit. He would walk away from his team before that would ever happen.

"What my husband is trying to say is, we don't care that he's your brother. You can't pick family, but we do need to find out what you know. Did Maddox's revelation bring back some of your memories?"

"All of them," Karlie muffled into his chest.

It was about fucking time. It sucked that they weren't home where he could show her just how happy he was to hear that bit of news. Now he was really going to make good on that promise to keep her up all night.

"That's awesome, baby." He continued to rub her back and to be the anchor she needed.

"You said *Il Diavolo* is your brother. Care to elaborate?" Daniel was all about getting right to the point.

"I didn't find out until I was in college. I was under the impression he died before he was eighteen in a tragic accident. But when I was walking back to my dorm one day, a man approached me. The entire encounter was bizarre because he used a phrase only my parents ever said to me."

Steel could feel her tremble in his arms. With each detail she provided, the tremors intensified.

"My mother was visiting me that day, so I asked her about it. She confessed that they'd lied to me all my life and went on to explain why she and my father felt it was necessary. Apparently, my brother was ... *disturbed* as a kid. He was constantly getting into trouble and showed psychopathic tendencies. You know the kind, no remorse, killing animals. Those kinds of things. They tried to get him help, but it only got worse. Then, when he was seventeen, he killed someone."

"They didn't turn him in?" Maddox sounded bewildered.



"No. They said once he told them he did it to prove his loyalty to Vito Accardo, they knew he was lost to them. Everyone in our neighborhood was afraid of Vito, so the thought of turning him in didn't even occur to them. Their first priority was keeping me safe, and they couldn't do that if they went to the cops."

Now that he was a father, he could understand where her parents were coming from. He didn't like it or agree with it, but he understood. He would've done anything to protect Anna.

"Okay, so he wanted to be loyal to Vito, but how did he become *Il Diavolo*? I mean, this guy is rumored to be the most ruthless enforcer known to man. How did your parents know it was Bernard?"

Bernard? That was her brother's name? Not exactly the name he would've associated with a ruthless killer.

"According to my mother, my father saw him shortly after his nineteenth birthday and begged my brother to come home. They said they would forget everything and accept him rather than try to change him. From the way my mother put it, not only did Bernard laugh at him, but he bragged that Vito embraced that side of him and was teaching him to be the devil everyone feared. When rumors started to fly about *Il Diavolo* a few years later, they just knew it was their son. That's when they made the decision to wipe him from the family."

"Do you know why your brother kidnapped you?"

"The only thing he told me was what Vito wants Vito gets, and at the time I was what he wanted. I was nothing more than another acquisition for him, and Bernard didn't bother to show any remorse for his help in it."

Steel's blood boiled at the careless excuse her brother used. Big brothers were supposed to protect their little sisters. Not turn them over to monsters to be locked in dirty basements.

"Did Vito ever say anymore?" Emma asked.

"No." Karlie shook her head with vigor. "I made the mistake once of saying how I couldn't believe my own flesh and blood would do something so terrible and he laughed. He actually had the nerve to brag that my brother didn't care about me or my family. We were nothing to him, so I never brought it up again, but Vito did give me one thing. He confirmed my brother was *Il Diavolo*."

"If I made a few renditions based on aging software, would you be able to describe what your brother looks like now?"

Maddox looked ready to throw down for Karlie just as much as he did. Actually, all of his team did. He was honored to be a part of such a great group.

"Sure, but it won't take much. He looks exactly like my father only a bit younger and with a large scar on his face. Oh, and meaner. So much meaner. I swear when I looked him in the eyes, all I saw was blackness. Not the usual warmth of my father's brown eyes."

Steel made a mental note to get her parents out for a visit once he was sure they had nothing to do with Karlie's kidnapping. He wanted to meet them and have them meet their granddaughter. He also needed to contact his own parents. In all the craziness over the past few weeks, he hadn't reached out to let them know he was back in the States. He wasn't great about keeping in touch. While they were good parents to him, it often slipped his mind to speak to them. It was usually his mother who called to make sure he was still alive. His father always said he understood, but his mother would lay on the guilt a bit.

For an hour, he watched as Karlie and Maddox worked together to make a computer-generated sketch of Karlie's brother. As far as he knew, no police agency had an accurate description of *Il Diavolo*. Until now. All because of Karlie.

STEEL WAITED in bed as Karlie went through her nighttime routine in their en suite bathroom. He nearly swallowed his tongue when she finally emerged in nothing but panties and an unbelted robe.

"Wow, baby. Have I told you today how sexy you are?"

She rolled her eyes up like she was actually thinking about it.

"A time or two. Not today, though."

He looped his arm around her waist as soon as she was within distance of him and dragged her onto the bed with a squeal, and loomed over her.

"I guess I have some making up to do, then."

Steel separated the edges of her robe and took in her magnificent breasts—the softness of her stomach and the flare of her hips. Everything about Karlie was perfect.

He started at her neck and worked his way down her body, placing a trail

of kisses along his way and murmuring how sexy she was every time his lips graced her body, until she was a panting mess.

"Steel?"

His name on her lips was the sweetest of sounds.

"Yes, baby?"

"Stop teasing me."

He chuckled against her stomach and ran his finger along the seam of her panties. He was just getting started. If she thought this was teasing, she was going to want to strangle him by the time he was done with her.

"I can't do that. I promised you big plans and I'm not exactly one who likes to break my promises."

Karlie thrust her hips up from the bed into his hand, trying to get him to dip his fingers just a little lower.

"Patience, baby." He rubbed his thumb back and forth, never going much lower than the top of her panties. "I'm going to take care of you, but we have all night."

And he planned to use every bit of that time making her scream his name as he buried himself deep inside her sweet pussy.

"Can I make you come just by sucking on your tits?"

He didn't give her time to answer before he was latching on to one and squeezing the other. He knew it wouldn't take long when Karlie arched her back and thrust herself farther into his mouth. He nibbled and sucked, lapped, and blew on her overly sensitized nipple until it pebbled under his touch. He continued rotating between the two, making sure not to give one more attention than the other.

Steel knew she was close when he could feel the hitch in her breath just seconds before she groaned out his name.

"Holy fuck."

He couldn't keep the smile out of his voice.

"I guess I can."

Her soft chuckle tickled his neck as she buried her face in the crook of his shoulder.

"I'm just getting started, though. It's been a long time, and I want to make sure you're ready for me."

"Oh, I'm ready."

He slipped his hand back down her body, but this time instead of teasing her, he slipped one finger inside her wet heat and then another. He fucked her

like he wanted to with his cock, making sure she was good and ready for when he finally slipped inside her.

"Don't stop ..."

Karlie was shamelessly riding his hand, grinding against his palm as he curled his fingers and hit the spot that he knew would send her over the edge.

"Give me another one, baby, so I can peel these off you and finally sink my cock into your tight pussy."

He didn't know if it was his fingers or his words, but seconds later she was detonating under his touch. With her head thrown back and her chest thrust forward, he watched with fascination as her mouth formed a perfect O and she let out a silent scream.

"I prefer to hear you scream for me. Never hold back."

Sliding his fingers out of her, he locked eyes with her as he slowly brought them to his mouth and licked her juices clean off his digits. The taste of her exploded on his tongue.

"Still the sweetest fucking pussy."

"Oh, fuck. How did I forget how dirty you liked to talk to me?"

Steel merely chuckled while sliding her panties down her leg. He watched with rapt attention as her pussy glistened from the two orgasms he had already given her. He wanted so badly to have those same juices coating his cock.

"I'm only just getting started," he reminded her. "I have yet to remind you how pretty your pussy is as it drips for me. Just waiting for my cock to fill it up."

With a soft brush of his lips across her mound, on his way up to her mouth, he teased just the tip of his cock against her entrance. It had been so long since she took him. He struggled not to pound into her. To claim her. To remind her just how great they were together.

"Please, Steel."

"Please what, baby?" He continued to just feed her the very tip of him. "Tell me what you want."

Her nails dug into his ass. "Please fuck me already," she growled.

Steel smirked. "I do love it when you say please." His eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head as he slammed into her, and Karlie took him perfectly. The way her pussy walls hugged his cock had him ready to shoot off his load after just one pump.

It took everything in him not to do so.

"Grab the headboard, baby. You're going to want to hang on."

She did so immediately. With her head thrown back and her body arched up to take his cock, she looked like a fucking goddess.

"That's my girl. Don't hold back. Scream for me."

Reaching for a pillow, he shoved it under her ass so he could get a better view as he sank inside her over and over again.

But still, it wasn't enough. He wanted to mark her. To make sure she felt him for days. To give her the same lasting memory he had that first weekend together.

Hooking his arms under her legs, he tossed them over his shoulder until she hooked her ankles. Thrusting deep into her tight channel, he knew she was close. The fluttering of her inner walls and moaning of his name set his own release off.

Steel coated her walls with his cum and smiled when their combined juices leaked out of where they were still connected. There was something primal about their scents mixed together.

Dropping her legs, Steel collapsed onto his forearms. Hovering just enough that he didn't crush her.

"I think if I didn't get my memories back earlier, that would've done it."

He laughed at Karlie's breathy confession. Goal achieved.

"Well, if that *hadn't* done it, then I had a few more tricks up my sleeve."

"Oh yeah." She ran her finger up his side. "What kind of tricks?"

It only took that one stroke for his semi-stiff erection to harden once again. He hadn't even left her and already he wanted another round.

They were in for a long night.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Karlie was deliciously sore as she snuck out of bed and moved down the hallway. She was making a bad habit of sneaking out of Steel's bed without him waking up, but she needed to see her daughter. Now that she had all her memories back, she couldn't understand how her mind could forget the one thing that meant the world to her.

She found it funny that despite losing her memories, deep down her instinct was still to be near her daughter every moment. That pull was always present.

"Good morning, my little love."

Anna was wide awake and chewing on her fist. Everything the two of them had gone through together flashed through her mind once again. Holding her daughter for the first time. Hearing her first cry. The tiny smile Anna always gave her, even though the first few weeks of life were horrible.

"Mommy is so happy to have her memories back finally. I was getting worried there that I wouldn't remember labor with you. It might not have been fun, but I still want to cherish that moment."

Karlie reached down and scooped up her daughter to quickly change her diaper. Anna would be screaming for her bottle soon, so she wanted to sneak in some cuddles before that happened.

The two of them were rocking in the chair when Steel popped his head in a few minutes later.

"I knew this was where I would find you."

The smile he bestowed upon their daughter, every time he was close, lit

up the room. It was the kind of smile that made women jealous they weren't on the receiving end of. Fortunately for her, he always gave her the same one. The man was a true heartbreaker.

"I needed the extra snuggles now that I remember everything. I was drawn to holding her even when I couldn't remember she was mine, but it's even more intense now. It's going to take some time for me to realize I don't need to be holding her every minute of every day."

Steel had done an excellent job distracting her last night. As promised, he spent hours worshipping her until she was so tired she passed out. But the second she woke back up, Anna was her first thought.

"I don't mind sharing my time with our little cutie. Anna deserves all the time with you she can get."

Damn, he always knew the right thing to say. It was why she fell in love so quickly the first weekend together and how she knew she still loved him. It was on the tip of her tongue to blurt it out, but she stopped herself. She wanted the first time she said it to be more magical. It was silly. Love didn't need to be confessed like some fairy-tale story. Karlie was talking herself into saying it when Anna took the decision away from her and screamed out her hunger.

"Uh-oh." Steel laughed. "We waited too long to get the little princess her bottle. I better run down and grab it before she yells her head off."

She cursed her inner turmoil and lack of self-confidence to tell him how she felt. If being kidnapped had taught her anything, it should've been that she needed to seize the moment more often. All her life she allowed her overthinking to stop her from doing or saying anything too deep. She could blurt out the most stupid shit without a thought, but something serious like love? She clammed up. It was both frustrating and annoying.

Before Steel came back, she was going to make herself a promise. No more overthinking when it came to feelings about him. Probably easier said than done, but she was going to try.

"Here you go." The man himself walked back in and handed her the bottle, then cleared his throat while she got Anna situated. "So, I know you just said you wanted to spend as much time with our daughter as possible, but I wanted to run something by you."

Karlie tried hard not to let her body tense up at his tone, but it was no use. One look at Steel's concerned expression and she knew she failed.

"Never mind," he waved off the suggestion before it even came out of his

mouth.

"No, I want to hear it," she urged. "It's a work in progress, but I can't work on it if I don't have opportunities to try."

He didn't look convinced. Karlie couldn't blame him. She wasn't sure she was convinced herself. Her mouth was saying one thing while her body screamed another.

"I want to take you out on a date."

"A date?"

Why did that sound exciting and scary all at the same time? Normal people dated. Even people who had kids together still went on dates. And yet ...

"Yes, a date. Just the two of us. I'm only asking for dinner. I know you won't want to be away long. Especially since Chance or Emma would be watching Anna. Actually, it will probably be both, if not my entire team, but again, only dinner. A few hours max."

Steel wanted to take her on an actual date where it was just the two of them and someone else watched their daughter. Maybe her brain was short-circuiting because there was no other reason why she couldn't grasp the concept.

"We don't have to. It was just an idea. Our first time together was spent locked away, and I promised you the next time we were together I would take you on a proper date. But it's no rush."

That snapped her out of whatever spiral she was in. Here Steel was trying to make good on a promise, and instead of jumping for joy that he not only remembered but actually wanted to follow through on it, she was being an ass.

She took a deep breath and pushed away all the overthinking. "I would love that."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to feel pressured into it."

Maybe what she needed was a little push. "I'm sure. I think a date would be nice. I can't promise I won't worry about Anna and possibly ruin our time together, but I would like to try and go on a date."

"You won't ruin it. I can assure you I will be annoying the shit out of whoever is watching our daughter. I trust my team, but she's our whole world."

Karlie looked down at Anna. Their daughter was her whole world. Never again would she let anyone use her the way Vito did. Too much time was



spent living in fear that one day Anna would be taken away from her. Those days were past.

SHE HADN'T REALIZED when Steel said he wanted to take her on a date, he meant that evening. A small part of her wondered if he planned it that way, knowing she might try to find an excuse to get out of it. She still could.

"I have absolutely nothing to wear." She flopped back onto the bed that was no longer hers. She was now permanently in Steel's bed. Correction, *their* bed. He didn't like her calling it his, but the little clothes she had were still in the spare bedroom.

"That's not true," Emma argued as she pulled something out of the closet Karlie had never seen before.

"Where did that come from?" she asked as she sat up to get a closer look at the dress Emma was holding. "I know for a fact I never picked it out." She didn't have much, so it wasn't a far stretch to know what she had and didn't have.

She would've picked it out, though. It was exactly something she would love to wear but never had the courage. It was bright and floral. A dress that would call attention to the woman wearing it. The exact opposite of how she lived her life.

"Maddox and I might've been tasked to go pick this up for you. We were given very explicit instructions on what we should get."

Karlie didn't even need to ask who Emma was talking about. The whole thing had Steel's name written all over it. It was very similar to the dress she described for their imaginary date the second night they were together. She had seen something like it the week she was stood up; she'd contemplated buying it for the blind date but decided against it at the last minute. Probably because deep down she had known the mystery man wouldn't have appreciated her in it. Clearly, she had been right, since he never bothered to show.

"It's beautiful."

The soft material slid through her fingers. It felt as soft as the one she first fell in love with.

"I'm glad you think so. Steel would've flipped his lid if we got it wrong."

Karlie laughed. "No, he wouldn't have. He's not that mean."

There was no way his team didn't see the gentle guy Steel really was.

"You're right. He's ruthless as an operator, but has a heart of gold. He would've looked disappointed, which I think is worse than getting mad."

Emma wasn't wrong. She didn't want a disappointed Steel. Seeing him happy made her happy.

"Now let's get you in this dress and ready for your date."

It took almost an hour, but by the time Emma was done, Karlie felt like a queen. Even she had to admit her body looked good in the vibrant dress. Her long dirty-blonde locks had the slightest wave and the makeup Emma did was subtle, but made her eyes pop.

"Wow." She looked herself over in the mirror once again.

"Wow is right. Steel won't want to keep his hands off you. The two of you might not make it to the restaurant, but a hotel instead."

Karlie smirked. Steel already couldn't keep his hands off her. It was great to know the man she loved found her irresistible. That was all she ever wanted when she thought about her future and the man she would spend her life with.

"Then I guess I shouldn't keep him waiting."

She wasn't the only one who cleaned up nicely. Downstairs, she found Steel in a nice pair of jeans and a button-down shirt. He looked good enough to eat. Karlie thought back to what Emma said. Steel wouldn't be the only one who would want to skip dinner and find a room to spend some time in.

"You look beautiful, baby." Steel stepped up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"You don't look so bad yourself." She snuggled into his side and let his warmth soothe her. The nerves of being away from their daughter were starting to settle.

"Are you sure you're still okay with this? I won't be upset if you decide it's too soon."

Was she really that easy to read? Most likely. Steel seemed to be in tune with her body better than she was.

"I want to do this." She was proud that she sounded more confident than she felt.

But her resolve wavered as she kissed Anna, and even more so the farther away they drove. She was bordering on panic when Steel finally pulled the truck over some ten minutes away from the house.

"Baby, I know you said you want to do this, but the anxiety radiating off you screams the opposite."

Karlie was ruining their night before it even got started. She hated herself for that.

"I'm fine. I swear." She was lying, and Steel knew it. "Okay, I'm not fine," she finally caved when it was clear he wasn't going to accept her original answer.

"We're going back home."

She put her hand out to stop him. "No, wait." She took a deep breath. And then two more to be sure. "I'm not fine, but I want to do this. I can't let fear rule my life, and Anna is safe with Emma and Chance."

Both had agreed to babysit, but Steel's whole team would rotate stopping in. There would never be less than two people with eyes on her daughter at any given time. Steel even made Chance promise that he would sit in the nursery after they put Anna down for bed.

"She is. I would never have left her if I didn't one hundred percent believe that."

Then she could do this. She gave Steel a more convincing nod. When he didn't immediately put the truck in drive, she worried she didn't do a good enough job expressing how much she wanted to try. Karlie realized that wasn't the case at all when he leaned over and brushed his lips across hers. It wasn't a hurried kiss, nor was it all-consuming. It was a comforting kiss. One that explained without any words that he was on her side no matter what decisions she made.

It was perfect.

As a matter of fact, their whole evening was perfect. After the kiss, the butterflies in her belly switched from nerves over leaving Anna to flutters of having their first date. The restaurant Steel took her to wasn't anything fancy. It was actually a hole-in-the-wall, family-run Mediterranean place, but the food ended up being delicious. They only called Chance twice, but Emma sent numerous pictures, for which she was thankful. By the time they left the restaurant, Karlie was more relaxed and willing to take a walk instead of rushing home.

"This town is beautiful. Who would think that just under an hour away is a deserted town where only someone as crazy as Daniel would think to build your base of operations."

"He was less of a people person before Emma came back into his life. I

expected when he asked me to join his team that the location would be somewhere away from civilization, but even I was surprised he was able to find a place so secluded. I'm not even sure you can call it a town since there's nothing but our work there.

Karlie thought back to her conversation with Emma about what Steel and his team did for a living.

"How did you meet Daniel?"

They'd talked about a lot of things, but that was something Steel never mentioned.

"I didn't. Not directly, anyway. Jaxson's wife, Kendra, knew him from a few assignments they worked on together. When it came time for him to put together a team, Daniel wanted Jaxson, Gage, and me. Daniel was the reason we found out what our old boss was up to."

"I know when we first met you said you were ready to leave the Army, but it would be another few years. How did you get out early?"

She knew she struck a nerve when his jaw tightened. Karlie was ready to take back the question, but Steel was quick to answer instead.

"Our superiors needed fall guys for all of the crimes our boss committed. The three of us were given dishonorable discharges and told to leave quietly."

That was unfair on so many levels. There was nothing dishonorable about Steel. Gage had even joked that out of the three of them, Steel had the best moral compass.

"That's not right."

Steel shrugged. "No, it wasn't, but I already had the offer from Daniel, and our boss, Black, didn't give a shit what my papers said. He knew what happened and wanted us anyway. Fighting it would've been a long, drawn-out process and would've kept me from finding you. That was my only priority."

He made the decision because of her. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. He deserved to have been recognized for all of his years of service. The stubborn set of his jaw told her to drop it. She had almost ruined their evening at the start, she didn't want to go down a similar path now.

They walked hand in hand through the larger town and took in some of the shops along the way. The small talk from dinner continued to flow between them. It was such a great evening that they didn't notice the dark shadow lurking in the alley.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Steel tried to let himself get lost in his run, like he did most mornings, but something was bugging him. He'd had this nagging feeling ever since they left the restaurant last night. He tried to be subtle as he checked their surroundings, but he couldn't figure out what the cause was. Fortunately, Karlie was more than ready to drive back and see Anna by the time the feelings got to be too much for him.

Just as he came around the last corner, a figure stepped out in front of him, causing him to nearly run her down.

"Fucking Christ, Maddox!" Steel pulled the earbud out of his ear. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Trying to get your attention."

"Well, you have it." He tried to slow his heart rate down by pacing a little with his hands on his hips. "Maybe next time try calling out my name so you don't get run over. I'm a big guy. We don't exactly stop on a dime."

"Seems to me you did." Maddox shrugged. "Besides, you probably wouldn't have heard me with those things in your ears."

"*Those things*, as you call them, are never on that loud. I need to be aware of my surroundings. Even if we're the only people in the area."

Which brought him back to last night. He needed to take extra precautions and who better to ask for help with that other than the resident hacker of the group?

"Actually, it's a good thing I ran into you."

"Me first," Maddox cut him off, and like the good gentleman he was, he

let her. "I looked into things like you asked and I don't see any reason we can't bring them out for a visit. As far as I can tell, they haven't had contact with their son since his supposed death."

It took Steel a moment to realize what Maddox was saying, but then it clicked; the first favor he had asked of her.

"Good. I'll speak with Karlie about it, then."

"Wait, you didn't tell her?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't want to get her hopes up if it couldn't happen. I know you initially told me they were good people, but I had to know Vito didn't get to them recently and that they weren't behind her kidnapping." He was no longer making any decisions unless things were looked into multiple times.

"Vito is still MIA and I can't see anything that shows any strange behavior change. They're still contacting the local police department weekly to ask about their missing daughter."

Guilt ate at him a little more. It was another reason he was glad Maddox was able to clear Karlie's parents. He hated that they didn't know she was safe. Hiding their daughter from them wasn't exactly the best first impression.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Now what's this other favor you need? There's no way you actually meant it when you said it's a good thing you ran into me."

This woman was going to be a handful. She didn't pull any punches. God help the man who fell in love with her.

"I need a piece of jewelry or two that can have a tracking device put onto them. I figure you would know how to do such a thing."

"I might. Do you plan on giving Karlie the option to wear it or going all caveman and doing it sneakily?"

Yup, definitely trouble, but at least he knew she had Karlie's back.

"I'm going to tell her and ask nicely that she wear it."

"Then yes, I can do that. I already have mini devices I designed, so I just need to get the jewelry for it."

He had a better idea.

"I'll worry about the jewelry. Just show me the size so I know what I'm working with."

"Think nano. It could easily fit on an earring."

He could work with that. There was a jewelry set he had in mind from

their stroll last night. Karlie probably didn't even notice, but her eyes lit up as soon as she saw it. He could send one of his teammates to pick it up after he called the jeweler.

Steel thanked Maddox again and jogged the rest of the way to his house. He found Karlie and Anna on the living room floor, a plethora of toys all around them.

"I think we could put a toy store to shame at this point."

"I was thinking the same. I swear every time one of your teammates shows up, they come with a toy in hand. I don't even know how that's possible, considering there isn't a toy store close and there are rarely any deliveries."

Karlie wasn't lying. Even Daniel, the perpetual grump, showed up with toys. He liked to claim it was Emma, and he was just the delivery guy, but Steel didn't believe a word of it. His team leader had a soft spot for kids. And if only Karlie knew how many times he was sending one of his teammates to one of the nearby cities for things. This was probably their revenge.

"So, I was thinking," he started. "I know it's not safe for you to go back to New York, but what if we brought your parents here?"

"Wait, really?"

The excitement in her voice was enough for him. He should've told her sooner or at least realized how much she was missing them.

"Yeah, and I'm sorry I didn't say something before this. I wanted to make sure you both were safe."

"Do they know I'm alive?"

Here was the part that would suck; admitting that he allowed her parents to believe she was missing this whole time.

"It was my decision not to tell them yet. I needed to make sure Vito didn't reach out to them after you told us that first day that he controlled your old neighborhood."

Karlie didn't say anything. He watched as a million expressions crossed her face while he waited to see what she would say or if she would blow up on him.

"I get it. I don't like it but I get it. Especially since my brother was involved."

He'd never been more grateful for her understanding than at that moment. He hadn't wanted to admit it to himself, but for the briefest second, he thought she would be so angry she'd leave him.

"I guess it's a good time to admit that I had Maddox look into them more."

"I figured that's what you meant when you said you needed to make sure we were safe. I would expect nothing less from you. Again, I don't like it, but I get it."

That brought a smile to his face. "That predictable, huh?"

Karlie held up her thumb and index finger close to each other. "Just a bit. But it's not a bad thing."

He got on the floor with both his girls and repositioned Karlie so she was sitting between his outstretched legs with her back on his chest.

"It's crazy how normal this feels."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't really know how to explain it, but he would try.

"A month ago, I was looking for you. A week ago, you couldn't remember who I was. Now today, I come home and we have what I consider a normal morning for a couple. A normal conversation. It's just crazy how easily we click."

He had known she was the one for him after one weekend together, but for some reason he expected to have a harder time finding that same connection after he found her. He was glad that wasn't the case.

"You're right. Although, I'm not sure normal couples talk about safety the way you do."

She had him there.

"Speaking of safety." Now was as good a time as any to run his newest idea by her.

"Oh, boy." Karlie shook her head. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"It's not *bad*, per se."

Karlie shifted slightly, so she was looking at him as she lifted her brow like she didn't believe him. Maybe she was right not to. He was essentially asking her to wear a tracking device like a criminal. Or a dog.

"I asked Maddox if she had a tracking device small enough that it could be embedded in jewelry."

"For me to wear."

It wasn't a question. Karlie knew exactly what he was thinking, but she didn't look upset. She was constantly surprising him.

"If you could, I would appreciate it." His arms were still wrapped around her. "Just while Vito and your brother are roaming around. I trust my team,



but we can't stay locked up in this house forever. Last night's date was hopefully just the first of many. We just talked about being normal and that's what I want. But to be normal, I need to know when you aren't within my line of sight, you are safe. This will help me with that."

"I'll wear it."

Steel was prepared for an argument, or at least to have to grovel a bit. It was slightly disappointing how quickly she agreed.

"Just like that?"

"Don't look so upset." She laughed. "I was kidnapped once and locked away. I have no intention of ever repeating that again. But I also know what my brother and Vito are capable of. I have no grand illusion that Vito will suddenly forget about me now that I got away. I would rather know I'm wearing something that could help you find me sooner if they ever got their hands on me again."

He squeezed Karlie a little tighter. "And *I* have no intention of anyone ever getting their hands on you again. This is just a precaution."

Karlie ran her finger along his beard. "I know it is, and that's why I'm okay with it. I just have one request."

Steel merely waited. Already knowing whatever it was, he would give it to her if it was within his power.

"Please don't make me wear some God-awful costume jewelry from the seventies. Oh, and no more secrets. My parents did that and look how it ended up. Just tell me what you're doing to keep me safe. I think I've been reasonable so far."

They both laughed. Even Anna, who was leaning back in her baby seat and gumming one of her toys, let out a bubbled laugh.

"I promise it won't be costume jewelry, and you're right. No more secrets. You've been more than reasonable about all this, and you don't deserve me keeping things from you just because I want to keep you safe."

Steel was happy Karlie agreed, but the nagging feeling wouldn't go away. He had to remind himself again it was just a safeguard. Karlie was safe and there was no way he was letting Vito near her again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Karlie walked over the same ten feet of pavers for what felt like the millionth time.

"It's going to be fine," Steel tried to reassure her. "Gage said they left the airport thirty minutes ago, so they should be here soon."

That was the problem. Having her parents visit sounded like a great idea initially, but now that they were almost in front of her, she was panicking. For nearly a year she hadn't seen them, and sure, she missed them during that time, but so much had changed. Would they even understand why, for weeks, no one contacted them to say she was alive?

"What if they're mad?" She stopped in front of Steel and grabbed Anna from him. She needed her lifeline.

"Then they can be mad at me. It was my decision."

She turned around and looked out at the beautiful backyard. Up until now, she hadn't taken the time just to enjoy the beauty of it.

"You designed this space with me in mind, didn't you?"

Steel chuckled. "I was wondering how long it would take you to notice after you got your memories back."

If she hadn't been so distracted, she would've realized it sooner.

"You got every detail right."

The color stone, the path. Even the little pond. Everything was exactly as they discussed.

"I tried. I had to go fake with some of the plants and flowers because of the climate here, but everything else was how you described it."

"When we talked about a future together, we never picked a location."

In between rounds and rounds of sex, they had talked more than she ever had with anyone before. The plans they made in such a short amount of time would've scared anyone else. But not them. They had been so excited for the future.

"You'd said you wanted something outside of the city. More land, but still close enough to your parents."

"And you didn't care where we lived as long as we were together." She smiled.

Those were such simpler times. She had her whole life ahead of her. A job she didn't care if she stayed in or not. Karlie hadn't said it at the time, but she would've followed Steel anywhere. Even out in the middle of the desert.

"Then I chose to take a job that has me far away from your parents."

The hint of uncertainty in Steel's voice had her turning to look at him. They were doing a shit job of talking about their future together. Since the moment Steel and his team found her, they had been living in the present or trying to figure out the past. It was time to change that.

"I didn't tell you this then, but I would've followed you anywhere. Sure, living close to my family would be great, but I would've gladly moved across the country if it meant we were together."

Steel palmed the back of her neck and dragged her closer until their foreheads were touching. The only thing separating their bodies was a sleeping Anna whose head was now cradled in her father's other hand.

"I love you both." His gravelly tone sent a shiver through her body. "When we pictured our lives together, I never thought it would take such a bad turn, but I'm glad we're here now. I want to give you both the world. However you want it, I want to give it to you."

"I love you too." Karlie didn't overthink it. She let her heart take the lead and blurted the words out. She meant it and he deserved to finally hear them. "And I want to be here. I want our fresh start to be here, in the home you started based on the things we talked about."

It was hard to admit, but she never wanted to return to New York again. Karlie wasn't even sure she could work up the courage to visit her parents now that all her memories returned. She was glad that choice was taken away from her when they first returned to the States. Steel bringing her here was the best decision he could have made.

"I'm . . . "

Talk about sucky timing. Gage and her parents' voices floated over the fence and cut off whatever Steel was about to say.

"We can finish this discussion later," he said, before stepping back and allowing her to turn and face her mother and father.

David and Kathy Holmes were everything a daughter could want in a set of parents. They loved her fiercely and supported every decision she ever made. Growing up, Karlie never had to worry about disappointing them; as long as she was honest with them about why she could no longer do something, they backed her decision. Like the time she quit softball because running wasn't her strong suit. They never tried to make her feel bad or insist she get in better shape. Instead, they found a sport she liked and excelled at.

"Oh my God." Her mother charged at her. "Karlie! My dear!" Seconds later she was engulfed in her mother's arms in some weird side hug so they didn't squish Anna. "I can't believe it's really you! I know the gentleman who picked us up tried to tell us, but I refused to believe him!"

"It's really me, Mom."

Karlie looked around for that gentleman, but Gage must've slipped off. She didn't find him next to Steel, as she expected.

Her father had now joined them and the two were crying. Her father had never been shy to show emotions. But for some reason, despite the overwhelming joy and relief she felt, no amount of tears would fall. Karlie didn't understand it. She expected herself to be as much of a blubbering mess as they were.

"No one will tell us what happened." Her mother pulled away and swiped the tears off her cheek. "We asked, but all they kept saying was you would tell us when we saw you."

Steel had given her the choice. He could explain things when he called to have them come out, or they could wait until she was ready to tell her story. She had wanted to take the coward's way out and have him deal with it, but in the end, decided against it. It would be better coming from her.

"Let's go inside and I can explain."

It was coming up on midday and the temperature outside was rising to an uncomfortable level. Karlie was going to have to get used to the heat if she had any hope of surviving New Mexico.

They had just gotten settled on the couch when her mother blurted out, "Who is this little baby?"

Karlie looked at Steel before answering.

"Our daughter, Anna." She rushed on when her mother gasped. "Please let me tell you what happened before you ask any more questions or make any comments. I promise you, Steel is not the villain in this story."

She could tell her mother wanted to argue. It looked bad. Here she was sitting with a man her parents had never met, in a beautiful home, and a baby in her lap. Kathy Holmes was probably thinking her daughter had gotten mixed up in some strange cult that took her away to the middle of the desert and brainwashed her. If only they knew the true horrors their daughter had endured.

For the next twenty minutes or so, Karlie went into painstaking detail about her weekend with Steel and how it had ended with her being kidnapped. She talked about her time in captivity and rehashed every scary moment. Some of the details she hadn't even told Steel yet. Several times she had been tempted to stop when she felt him tense or when the anger radiating off him got so bad that she knew if it weren't for her parents being there, he would be pacing the room. Yet Steel sat by her throughout it all. He held her hand when she described delivering Anna, and how scared she had been that she would lose their daughter if she made a mistake.

By the time she finished spilling her guts, her mother was crying again, but her father looked ready to commit murder.

"Your brother turned you over to Vito Accardo?"

It was hard to believe, but her father actually looked like he was ready to take out his own son. The reaction was the complete opposite of what she knew about the man who raised her. He was always so kind and loving. Anger was not an emotion she saw from him very often.

"He did, and Vito confirmed your suspicions. Bernard is *Il Diavolo*."

"We should've protected you better," her mother cried out.

"There was nothing more you could've done," Karlie argued. "Going to the police would've brought Vito down on us sooner, and I wasn't going to live with you, not as an adult. Independence was something I'd always wanted. *Il Diavolo* isn't my brother, really. He wouldn't have shown any remorse for murdering you just to get to me. Bernard said it best when he kidnapped me. Vito gets what Vito wants. He wanted me and *Il Diavolo* wouldn't have let you stop him."

"So he's still after you?"

"Yes, we believe so," Steel answered for her. "From everything Karlie has told us about Vito and *Il Diavolo*, there is no doubt in our mind they will

be coming for her again. It's why my team and I made the decision to bring Karlie and Anna here. We can protect them."

"You waited *weeks* to tell us she's alive," her mother accused.

"I did," Steel didn't back down. "That was for their protection. When we first found her in Italy, it was a race to get them medical attention. Then someone tried to kill her in the hospital, and she lost all her memories. Taking her back to New York wasn't an option, not while we didn't know who else was involved. When she finally regained her memories and realized her brother was behind her initial kidnapping, I felt it was best to have my team look into you more."

Karlie watched the exchange between Steel and her parents. The sadness and anger at being kept in the dark were evident on both her mother's and father's faces. She empathized with them, but she wouldn't go back and change the way things were handled. Not if it meant keeping Anna safe.

"You thought we might have something to do with it?"

It was a bold statement from her father and one her mother must not have put together because she gasped at his words.

"That was a possibility, and I needed to be sure. I love your daughter very much and no one will get near her or Anna again, if I can help it."

The room fell silent with the heaviness of Steel's declaration. Even Anna didn't make a peep as she looked around the room curiously. Karlie waited as everything sunk in. She refused to be the one who spoke first. Her parents needed to understand that this was her life now.

"All a father ever wants for their daughter is to know that the man who takes his place will love her as much as he does. I believe you are that man for Karlie. And while I don't necessarily like that we weren't told when she was found, I do believe you have her best interests at heart."

Karlie let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She didn't need her father's acceptance of her current situation, but it was nice knowing she had it.

"I really do."

"Can I hold my granddaughter now?" Her mother looked so hopeful. It was the only reason that, despite the need to have Anna in her arms to help comfort herself, she reluctantly handed her over.

"She's beautiful just like you, my dear. But oh my!" her mother gasped. "She has her father's stunning eyes."

Everyone in the room laughed at her mother's whimsical tone at the

mention of Steel and Anna's unique eye color. It was hard to miss the intensity of such a color.

"Yes, she was lucky to take after her daddy in that way." Karlie smiled.

"Does this mean that if I want to see this little cutie more often, I need to find a place out this way?"

Steel looked at her. He probably wondered if now that her parents were sitting in front of her, she would change her mind about living so far from them.

"That's up to you, but my new home is here with Steel. Just like it would've been before my kidnapping."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Steel hung back and let Karlie spend time with her parents. Her father had surprised him when they first showed up by giving his blessing to them. He honestly expected more of a fight for keeping Karlie's rescue from them.

"I figured you'd want to be spending some alone time with Karlie's family." Gage stepped up beside him.

His friend had slipped out as soon as he delivered Kathy and David. Steel had no idea where he went or when he decided to return. Gage was the literal definition of their team—a phantom.

"I'm giving them some space to catch up."

Gage didn't respond. His friend had been quieter than usual, and it was time to figure out why.

"Are you regretting joining Jaxson and me on this team?"

It was the only explanation he could come up with as to why Gage wasn't acting like himself since they left the Army.

"Jaxson's only half here. He spends all his time in Texas, except when we're on assignment."

Steel turned to his friend. "We knew that when we agreed to join. He made it perfectly clear he would follow Kendra, and she has her own team in Texas."

That really couldn't be what this was all about, could it? Even when the three of them were in the Army, they never really spent time together. Sure, sometimes when they were on base, but they worked independently. The assignments Pritchler gave them were solo jobs. It was rare that a target



required more than one of them.

"I know. It's just an adjustment for me. Civilian life isn't what I expected it to be."

Steel winced. "I'm sorry, man. I didn't realize."

"How could you? Your priority was to find Karlie. Just like Daniel's mission was to get revenge on Emma. This entire team was put together for only one reason."

"Maybe that's how it started, but it's not our sole focus anymore. We're still going to be taking jobs that eliminate targets and gathering information on the ones who put out the hit."

It was a fancy way of saying they were mercenaries, just like in the Army. Except now he truly believed that the people they were after deserved to die. Or at least, he would make sure of it. Never again would he take an assignment without being provided adequate proof. He'd learned that lesson the hard way and would have to live with those prior sins.

"As long as it stays that way," Gage replied cryptically.

"Whoa. Where did that come from? You really think Black is going to be anything like Pritcher?"

"I think I have too much alone time to think and don't know enough about our new boss yet to make that determination."

Steel was glad his friend decided to come back over. It was evident they had a lot to work through.

"I didn't realize you felt that way, man. But just know that I would never put Karlie or Anna in harm's way. If I truly felt that Black wasn't one of the good guys, I would never have taken this job. Nor would I still be here."

Gage looked to be thinking about what he said.

"Maybe you're right, and this job is exactly what we thought it would be. For all of our sake, I hope so. I didn't take a dishonorable just so I could be the same killer I was in the Army. I need to know this time I'm doing something better."

With that, Gage walked out of the room. A few moments later, Steel heard the front door close quietly. Doubts he never expected started to creep in. He was often teased that he trusted too easily and maybe that was how Pritcher got his teeth in him. It wasn't the same for Jaxson. His other teammate openly admitted that he had a dark side that called to him when it came time to kill. Jaxson wasn't a murderer; he didn't take pleasure in killing people. But it also didn't bother him the same way it did Steel and Gage.

Steel reached for his phone and dialed Jaxson. His friend answered after only one ring.

"Hey, man. Everything okay?"

Regardless of what Jaxson said about himself, when push came to shove, the man always had his back.

"With my family, yeah. Karlie's parents are here and she's spending time with them."

"Yeah, Emma texted Kendra to let her know they were coming out."

He hadn't realized Kendra and Emma had become such close friends. He shouldn't be all that surprised. Kendra was just as badass as Emma. It would make sense that the two would have a lot in common.

"So, if it doesn't have to do with your family, then what's wrong? I can hear it in your voice."

"It's Gage. He's been acting strange since we started and I just spoke to him. It didn't go that great."

Jaxson sighed. "I was really hoping I was wrong after I saw him in Italy. I thought something was off, but I chalked it up to the situation you found Karlie in."

"It's more than that. He's not adjusting well to being out and flat out told me he doesn't trust Black or his intentions."

"Give him time to come around. I told Daniel I would be out in a week or so anyway, once Kendra wraps up her current job. I'll talk to him while I'm there."

He thanked his friend and hung up. Steel would give Gage time, but would also keep a close eye on him. He didn't doubt his friend would have his back, and Karlie's. It was the rest of his team he had to watch him with. It would be dangerous to have someone on the team who didn't trust the rest of them.

"ARE YOUR PARENTS ALL SETTLED?"

Karlie walked over to the bed in his shirt. It gave him immense satisfaction that she had taken to stealing his to sleep in some nights. Even if most of the time he ripped them off of her.

"They are. They love the in-law suite downstairs. They think it's perfect

for when they visit."

Steel was glad he had enough forethought to purchase a bedroom set for that room. The last thing he wanted was to have her parents on the same floor as them. Especially when he fully planned to continue enjoying Karlie each morning and making her moan his name.

"As long as those visits don't turn into a permanent residence," he joked.

"Oh, don't worry. I don't want them living here any more than you do. I moved away to college for a reason, even if it was only fifteen minutes from my house."

Now this was a story he had yet to hear.

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

Karlie snuggled in next to him and threw her arm over his stomach, with her head into the crook of his shoulder and her legs intertwined with his. It was the same position they took up every time they talked in bed.

"Because I love them, but they suffocated me. I guess I can understand why, after learning the truth about my brother, but as a teenager it was annoying. All I wanted was the same freedom as some of my friends, and what I got was impossible curfews and sleepovers that could only take place at my house."

Vito and her brother had taken more from her than he initially realized. It had to have been tough growing up and not understanding why her parents were making such impossible rules.

Bernard would pay for that. People might call him The Devil, but he messed with the wrong person when he harmed the woman who would become Steel's wife one day.

"Are you going to be the type of father who doesn't allow his daughter to do anything?"

Steel choked out a laugh.

"I'm afraid I might be. It's hard when you know the type of evil that's out in the world. It makes me want to lock Anna up and never let her out. But I'm also smart enough to know I can't do that without serious repercussions."

"Like a wife who would revolt and a daughter who would turn out to be wild, like Maddox?"

He wasn't sure Karlie realized what she said. Flipping them both so he was caging her in, he looked down into her beautiful whiskey eyes.

"So you're going to agree to marry me someday?"

Karlie blanched. He could even see her trying to backpedal, but he was

having none of that.

"Oh no, you already said it. There's no going back on it now."

"I wasn't going back on it." Karlie's entire face turned crimson. "I just didn't think we were ready to have such a serious discussion."

"Why not? I already told you I wanted it all with you."

He wanted everything. The sooner the better. There was no need for him to wait. The only thing holding him back was knowing Karlie wasn't ready. She was still coming to terms with their life.

"Yes, but I have trouble sometimes realizing you *actually* mean it."

"I always mean what I say."

He shifted, so he was leaning on one arm and snaked his other hand so it was under her shirt. He wanted to feel her warm skin against him.

"I'm a work in progress," she explained. "I remember everything you did for me that weekend, but some of the things from captivity keep me from fully blocking out all the negative thoughts."

He nibbled on her collarbone. "I guess I'll just have to work harder to keep those thoughts away for good."

Steel loved the way her body responded to him. The way her back arched to get closer to his hand. And the little moans that slipped past her lips when he did something he knew she liked.

"You sure know how to convince a lady," she whimpered against his skin.

"I only lay the groundwork." His lips trailed along her neck. "The rest is all you."

He wanted her to feel empowered all on her own, wanted to know that when she looked at herself, she knew she was beautiful and worthy of being loved. He would be damned if Vito or her brother took that power away from her.

"I want you," she whispered.

There was no denying that. Her shirt was pushed up past the apex of her thighs and he could feel her wet heat as she ground her pelvis against his leg. Karlie was attempting to get herself off.

"You know I prefer when you tell me how you want it."

Uncertainty crept into her beautiful eyes.

"Say it," he whispered into her ear and then nibbled on the lobe. Karlie broke out into a fit of laughter just like he knew she would. It was one of her many tickle spots.

"I want to be on top."

The words had barely left her lips before he flipped them around once again. If his baby wanted on top, then who was he to say no?

"Ride me, baby. Show me how fucking sexy you are when you take my cock."

The hesitation he first saw slowly slipped away as he gripped her hips. With only a slight tremor, Karlie slid her fingers into his boxers and slipped them down to free his erection. The sight of his throbbing cock seemed to be the encouragement Karlie needed to let her true vixen side show.

"I want you inside me so bad, but I also just want a quick taste."

It was as if his cock understood exactly what she had said. Just a bit of pre-cum slipped out of the tip as it rested against his stomach.

"So do it. Suck my cock so it's good and wet before you ride me."

Steel knew without even looking or touching that Karlie's panties were soaked. He wanted to reach down just to prove he was right, but she had other ideas. Mainly ones that involved him inside her mouth. Grabbing his shaft, he watched as her tongue flicked out to catch the pre-cum. The soft groan she made when it hit her tongue made him want to flip them over and fuck her senseless, but this was her show. He would be content to be a passenger just to see the smile on her face.

He gasped when she took him all the way to the back of her throat on the first suck. There was no lead-up, no chance for him to get accustomed to her hot mouth.

"Fuck, baby."

Before he could think better of it, Steel was fisting her hair and pumping his hips. The need to fuck her face was all-consuming. He figured she didn't mind when she continued to moan and hum around him. Each vibration of her throat had him closer and closer to a release.

"Unless you want me to finish down your throat, I suggest you get your sweet pussy up here."

It was the only warning he was going to give her, and to his dismay, she hopped off with a noisy pop and shimmied her way back up his body. Not having the patience to relieve her of her panties, Steel tore them in half.

"I actually liked that pair," she whined playfully.

Her words said one thing, but her voice said another as she lined him up with her core and took all of him in one shot.

"That's it."

Karlie rode him with wild abandon. She bounced and grinded. She used his body to get herself off, hitting all the areas that she knew would make her orgasm. And he let it happen. Steel turned over control and let her take what she needed until she was screaming his name and convulsing around him.

Her moans and self-confidence had him shooting off far earlier than he would've liked, but the sheer happiness on her face was worth it.

Steel rubbed her back when she collapsed on top of him, holding in his deflating cock.

"I've never felt more alive than I do when we're together." Her soft breath floated across his chest.

"That's all I've ever wanted for you."

They lay like that until they both fell asleep, he with a smile on his lips. Because now that Karlie agreed to marry him, he was going ring shopping.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Karlie needed to get away from her parents, even if it was only a few hundred feet. They were on day four of their visit, and while she loved that they were excited to be spending time with Anna, they needed to go.

"Emma?" Karlie rounded her friend's house and found the door wide open. Her instincts went on high alert. Emma wasn't the type who left doors open even if they lived in the middle of nowhere.

"Come in!" her friend hollered.

Karlie stepped over the threshold and immediately relaxed. The wide-open door suddenly made sense.

"Trying to burn the house down?"

"Ha. Aren't you the funny one, and no, I wasn't trying. I thought it would be a great idea to quickly make myself some minute rice, but I forgot to add water."

Karlie tried, but there was no containing the bubble of laughter that burst from her mouth.

"Yeah, I know," Emma shot back. "Laugh it up."

"Water is pretty much the only step needed to make that meal and you *forgot* it?"

The smell inside the house was horrendous. Burnt plastic wasn't the type of smell that went away easily. It would be a few days before Emma would stop catching a random whiff of it.

"Yeah, I know, but I got distracted."

Daniel chose that moment to join them. A very bare-chested and

extremely ripped Daniel. The man looked good for someone in his late forties.

"I can see why." She smirked. "Did you need me to come back later?"

"Nope," Daniel grumbled. "The pungent smell of blackened plastic killed the mood anyway. I'm going for a run." He slapped a kiss on Emma's lips and was out the door before she could apologize for interrupting.

"So, what brings you to my humble abode?"

Humble was right. She thought Steel was joking when he said Daniel lived like a minimalist. She wasn't sure if Daniel just hated furniture or company.

"I'm not a snob by any means, but this is pretty bare, even by most people's standards."

Karlie looked around the house. To say furniture was sparse was an understatement. She wasn't even sure where guests were supposed to sit when the only thing was a single recliner.

"Yes, well, that's Daniel's fault. It was like this before I got here and we've argued over everything. I pick out a piece of furniture and he says no. The only time we seem to agree is when we're fucking." Emma paused. "Actually, now that I think about it, he's doing it on purpose. Picking fights every chance he gets. That fucker."

"Why would he do that?"

She was no expert at relationships, but that didn't seem particularly healthy or productive. It had to be exhausting fighting with someone all the time. Thankfully, she and Steel seemed to agree on most things.

"Because my dear husband is complicated, but it all stems from us being separated. He knows I thrive on adventure and having a challenge. He probably assumes if he makes things too easy, I'm going to pick up and leave. Son of a bitch. If we hadn't been so busy fucking like rabbits, I would've seen it sooner."

That was a whole lot of information she didn't need to know.

"But that's not what brings you here," Emma continued. "Is everything okay? I figured you'd be spending time with your family."

Karlie let out a sigh. That's what she should want to be doing. That's what a normal person who hadn't seen their family in nearly a year would want to be doing. So either she wasn't normal, or Vito left her more fucked up than she realized. At this point, she wasn't really sure.

"They're smothering me," she rushed out. "I know that sounds awful, but



they are. I was sitting there having lunch with them and the urge to get away took over. Before I knew it, I was making excuses and coming here."

The look on Emma's face wasn't judgmental at all. In fact, there was nothing but understanding in her features.

"That doesn't sound awful, nor does it make you a bad person. You spent months alone. It's okay that human interaction becomes too much for you sometimes. It's normal."

It didn't feel normal and maybe that's why she sought out Emma. She needed someone else to make her feel better about the emotions she was having. Someone who wasn't Steel and wouldn't only say something to make her feel better. Emma gave things straight.

"How do I tell them that while I appreciate the fact that they came to visit and I love that they want to spend time with Anna, I need them gone?"

"Have you told Steel how you feel?"

She sighed. This would be a great time to plop her ass onto a couch, but that wasn't an option. Karlie had no idea how Emma wasn't feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

"No, I haven't. He wanted to bring them out for me, and at first, I agreed. It was a very thoughtful gesture, and yes, I wanted them to know I was alive but . . ."

"But now it's too much."

Karlie nodded her head.

"Tell him. He won't get mad. In fact, he's probably ready for them to leave as much as you are. In-laws are tricky and I can't fathom he forged this amazing connection that would garner him wanting them around all the time."

And this was why, when she felt the need to escape, it was Emma she found herself seeking out. Her friend should add therapy to the list of things she has helped Karlie with.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. That's what friends are for. Don't be afraid to express how you're feeling. I can assure you, every one of us here has something going on. We aren't perfect and we don't want you to feel like you need to be."

Karlie thanked Emma again and gave her a hug. She felt much lighter knowing what she felt was normal. When Steel met her outside on the small front porch of their house, she didn't feel the least bit bad when she said, "I'm

ready for my parents to leave."

True to Emma's word, Steel didn't judge her. He didn't look at her like she had ten heads or suddenly sprouted horns.

"I figured that was the case when you scurried off. Who did you go find to help you see it was okay to admit it?"

"Emma. I didn't realize that's where I was headed when I left, I sorta just ended up there."

"She's a great listener," Steel admitted.

"Yes, she is, and she gave it to me straight. Said I needed to come back and talk to you about it."

"She's my favorite teammate."

Karlie just rolled her eyes. Of course, Emma was his favorite at the moment. Anyone who helped her with a problem would be Steel's favorite. It was no wonder she could never be mad at him when he went and said things like that.

"Yeah, yeah. Now, how do I go about telling them that it's starting to be too much for me?"

"Leave it to me. Besides, my parents are coming tomorrow."

Karlie's face fell. She had forgotten all about Steel's parents coming. She was going to trade one set of houseguests for another.

"You don't need to worry. They'll only be here for one day, and if you want, you can head into town tomorrow while I go pick them up. Give you some time to do something for yourself before meeting them."

As great as that sounded, it made her feel like a jerk for wanting that escape.

"Not exactly a great first impression."

Steel pulled her into an embrace. His strong arms made her feel safe as she snuggled into him.

"My parents don't give a shit about first impressions. They knew I was looking for you, and when I called to tell them about Anna and your rescue, the first thing my mother insisted on when I asked them to come was that they didn't get in the way. It's why they're only coming for one night. My mother helps shelters when she can and has seen her fair share of victims of abuse. She understands you're going to be overwhelmed, and she doesn't want to add to it."

"I promise to be back for dinner tomorrow. I just need a couple of hours. Just to walk in a park or sit by a lake."

She needed quiet and for people to stop asking if she was okay. Sure, she got some silence when Steel was busy and Anna was sleeping, but her reserve was on empty, and had been for a very long time. One of the things she used to do before she was kidnapped was find solitary places. It helped with the hustle and bustle of life. At first, when she was being held in the basement, she thought she would never want peace and quiet again. Now she realized how much she still needed it. That part of her life hadn't changed.

"Gage will take you. The man doesn't like to talk anyway, so he will be happy to sit quietly and I think it will do him some good. He's also pretty antsy lately. I just ask one favor."

She pulled away and looked him in the eye.

"Please wear the jewelry I bought you. I need to know that if anything happens to you, there is a way for me to find you."

That was no hardship. The jewelry Steel picked out was the same set she had seen on their date in one of the shop windows. She realized he had noticed her looking at it. It shouldn't have surprised her, though; Steel was observant. Something small, like a lingering look at an object wouldn't go unnoticed by him.

"I promise I'll wear it, the whole set, since I know both the necklace and the earrings have trackers on them."

Maddox had let that little part slip when she showed up with the pieces. Actually, it wasn't exactly an accident. Maddox had demanded she be the one to show her since her friend didn't believe Steel had been honest. It was good to have made such close friends while she was here.

Back home, she only had one, and after her friend had her baby, they drifted apart. They were no longer into the same things. It was ironic because now she and Becky had a common interest again but the same desire to reconnect wasn't there. Too many things had changed and those old relationships weren't what she wanted anymore.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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"Tell me again why it was so important I came with you," Chance huffed from his spot in the SUV passenger seat.

Because apparently, Steel moonlighted as a therapist when he wasn't kicking in doors or killing people. First Gage, and now Chance. He needed to start charging these fuckers. He had a daughter to take care of these days and babies were expensive.

"I just wanted the company, and besides, I think you need to get out of the office. Seems things are a little tense with you and our new hacker."

From the corner of his eye, he could see Chance's jaw move. The grinding of his friend's molars made it hard not to smirk. Score one for him and reading the situation correctly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

His teammate was worse off than he thought. Denial. That was okay. Getting information out of people was one of his specialties.

"Maybe I was just imagining the scowls you threw her every time she walked into the room or the smirk she gave in return. The two of you could have your own soap opera the way you circle around each other."

That jaw was working overtime. Steel was no dentist, but he was pretty sure at the rate Chance was going, he would be rubbing the enamel off his teeth.

"She's a fucking menace, and that's all I'm going to say on the matter."

That was better than nothing. He could see why his friend would think as much. Maddox was everything Chance wasn't. Where Chance preferred suits

and structure, Maddox was carefree and looked more like a Gothic chic with an affinity for rock music. She was a conundrum for sure, and Chance didn't tolerate those. Not from the little he saw so far, anyway.

"She's a great asset to the team, though."

Chance snorted.

"What, you don't agree?"

At first, his teammate didn't answer. Chance continued to stew and mumble under his breath, so Steel left him alone. If badgering wouldn't work, maybe silence would.

It took almost twenty minutes, but finally Chance caved.

"I'm not saying she isn't good at her job, but does she have to be so annoying while she does it?"

"I think if you asked Karlie and Emma, they would say that's just part of her charm."

He kept to himself that he agreed with the two women. Maddox had a way about her that brought life to a rather serious group. Excluding Blayd, that is. Plus, she was good at her job. Really good, in fact. Exactly what they needed to take down men like Vito Accardo.

"Yes, well, Emma's judgment is seriously debatable considering who she is married to."

Steel burst out laughing at Chance's disgruntled tone.

"I guess the same goes for all of us, since we are the ones who chose to work with him."

His teammate didn't have a response to that. Not that there was one. None of them were forced to take the job, but it made him wonder what Chance's story was. He knew why Gage and Jaxson took the job. Liam was a longtime friend, from what he gathered, but Steel knew nothing about Chance and Blayd, except they both served and were Special Forces.

Steel wouldn't get the opportunity to ask as he pulled up to the airport where incoming passengers exited. He managed to time his arrival perfectly. His parents were just walking out of the sliding glass doors.

Climbing out of the SUV, his mother bounded his way and threw her arms around his waist. Mary Jameson was a tiny thing, barely hitting his pecs. By the time he was ten years old, Steel was already taller than his mother. He always liked to tease that she was a ball of fire in a little body.

"I'm so glad we finally get to visit!"

Guilt wormed its way in. It had been so long since he last visited his

parents, and even when he took the job with Blackguard Security and they begged to come see where he worked, Steel had refused. His whole focus had been finding Karlie, and once she was found, it switched to taking care of her and Anna.

"I'm sorry it took so long."

His parents had flown out the moment he gave them the go-ahead after telling them about his daughter. The sheer excitement at meeting their first grandchild was amazing.

"No need to apologize. After you explained what Karlie went through, it's understandable that you needed time. I'm just glad we could be here now," his mother gushed.

"It's good to see you, son."

Steel was a spitting image of his father, Charles. All except for the color of his eyes. Build, height, it was all the same. He didn't need to wonder how he would look in twenty years. One look at his father at any given point, and he knew.

With one arm wrapped around his mother, he gave his father a pat on the back. Not much had changed in the past year. Charles was still as fit as he had been the day he left the Marines. He knew his father still went out every morning for a run and kept himself in peak shape by doing work around the house and yard.

"Hey, Dad. Glad you could make it out here."

"Anything for you, son. You know that."

It was the truth. As an only child, there wasn't anything his parents hadn't given him as long as he understood the value of it. His father would always say he refused to raise a spoiled brat, so the moment he stopped showing gratitude was the moment they stopped giving to him. Fortunately, they never had to go that far. He was always grateful growing up. They didn't have much. His father was career military and his mother stayed home except for the occasional part-time job or charity work while he was in school. It taught him early on to appreciate everything he had in life and to give back when he could.

Back at the truck, Chance was standing off to the side with his hands in his pockets and looking uncomfortable.

"Oh, sorry. Mom, Dad. I'd like you to meet one of my teammates Chance Williams. Chance, this is Mary and Charles. My parents."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Jameson."

"No need to be so formal, son." His father shook Chance's hand. "Charles and Mary will do just fine. Now, what do you say we get on the road so I can meet these lovely new women in your life?"

They were piled in and on the road before his mother finally asked the question he knew would come up.

"Did Karlie stay home with Anna?"

It was the question he expected, but wasn't quite sure how to answer. He had already invited his parents to come visit before Karlie expressed she was feeling suffocated. As much as he wanted her there when they arrived, he understood her need to take a step back and catch her breath.

"Actually, she needed to run into the city to grab a few things. Gage took her. She'll be back in a few hours, though."

"How's she holding up now that there are so many people around?"

Leave it to his father to understand what he was trying to say without actually saying it.

"Yesterday was hard. Her parents are also visiting and I think it was getting to be a lot for her, so she took a few hours to step away."

"You don't need to explain anything to us, son," his father said. "If she's the one for you, then we have a lifetime to spend with her. There's nothing wrong with her knowing her limits and communicating that with you. I'm just glad you found someone who understands the importance of talking things through."

"Plus, it will give us time to cuddle our little grandbaby," his mother tossed in.

Steel let out a sigh of relief. He hadn't realized how nervous he had been until now. On the drive down, he had distracted himself by focusing on Chance's issues. Now that it was time to face the music, he was glad to know his parents were so understanding. He needed to be a better son and stay in touch with them more. He doubted that would be an issue now. They weren't going to miss out on Anna growing up.

A call came across his dashboard. As soon as Steel saw the name flashing, he looked over to find Chance's tight jaw. His teammate had it bad. With nothing to do but answer it, he accepted the call.

"Hey, Maddox."

Their new hacker's tight voice filtered through the SUV's speakers, and with just one sentence, his entire world flipped upside down.

"Karlie's been taken."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Karlie tried not to wring her hands in her lap. There was no reason to be nervous. Sure, Steel had left earlier that day to pick up his parents. And it wasn't like her own parents hadn't watched Anna numerous times since coming to visit. Besides, Emma was there. And Daniel. And Liam. Hell, even Blayd agreed to stop in and check up on her daughter. Not to mention Maddox. There were literally half a dozen people protecting her daughter, but she still couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"I thought you wanted this trip."

Gage's deep tone had her practically jumping out of her skin.

"I did want it," she said defensively.

"But . . ."

But she was being ridiculous, that's what. Maybe this was normal. It was only the second time she had willingly separated from her daughter and the last time she had been with Steel, who knew how to distract her. Nothing against Gage, but his broodiness didn't exactly make her feel warm and fuzzy. Steel had told her Gage would be quiet, thinking that would help, but now she realized it only made things worse. She was a contradictory mess.

"But I guess I'm not handling it as well as I thought. I wanted this time away because my parents were starting to suffocate me. I know that sounds horrible of me to say. They love me and I was gone for so long, they're just trying to make up time." The sentence drifted off because really there was nothing more she could add. She sounded horrible the more she tried to explain it.



"Only they're making you want to climb the walls instead."

"Yes! Exactly."

For some bizarre reason, she expected Gage to think she was off her rocker and just being whiny. The sincerity in his tone said otherwise. It allowed her to feel more relaxed.

"You shouldn't feel bad about thinking that. It doesn't sound horrible at all. Anyone who has ever been captured and held against their will would understand where you're coming from."

It made her wonder. "Did that happen to you?"

It wasn't any of her business, and she half expected Gage to tell her as much. He was the only one of Steel's teammates that she hadn't had the opportunity to really talk to. The rest of the team was pretty outgoing or came around to spend time with Anna, which gave her a chance to talk with them. Gage kept to himself. He lived alone in one of the other houses and she couldn't remember seeing anyone go visit him.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "A few months before I was dishonorably discharged in fact. It was when I first suspected that my old boss wasn't the man we all thought him to be. I hadn't spoken up at the time and I wish I had. Maybe it would've saved us from the hand we were dealt."

Steel didn't talk a lot about those last few months in the Army, but what he did say upset her. She doubted anything Gage said would have made a difference. From what she knew, their old boss was highly respected.

She was just about to tell Gage as much, but something about his change of behavior put her on edge.

"What's wrong?" she asked instead.

"We have a tail. Hang on, I need to lose him."

That was the last thing she heard before her body was rocked and slammed against the center console. She screamed out in pain from the sudden impact. Glass rained down around her and sliced up her skin. Airbags crashed into her, knocking what little breath she had away. She was taking hits from all sides; she couldn't make heads or tails of what was happening.

Karlie could've sworn she heard Gage call out her name, but she couldn't be sure with the ringing in her ears. All of a sudden, it felt like someone was sitting on her chest, holding her underwater as she struggled to fill her lungs with air.

She started to regret her choice to leave the house. At home, she had been safe. Suffocated with love, but safe from car accidents and people tailing

them. Karlie had a brief moment to wonder if the two were connected before the sound of metal crunching had her trying to scream for help. She knew that sound. Someone was trying to rip open the damaged door.

Karlie knew she was in trouble when rough hands yanked her from the seat. There was no way Gage would manhandle her, not without letting her know it was him. Using every ounce of energy she possessed, Karlie kicked and clawed, but it was no use. Whoever had her was much stronger and didn't care if they hurt her.

The sound of a gun going off froze her in place. She waited for the inevitable pain to register in her body, but it never did. At least not the kind she expected with being shot. Her relief was short-lived when something hard connected with her head and sent her sprawling to the ground. Her last thought, just as she lost consciousness, was she prayed she didn't forget those she loved again.

KARLIE SPUTTERED AWAKE as water cascaded over her face, up her nose and in her mouth. She tried to wipe the offending liquid away, but her arms refused to cooperate.

Wait. No. It wasn't that they refused to cooperate. They couldn't. Something was holding them down, and based on the way the material cut into her skin, she would assume a rope. She tried to look down to see, but her vision was blurry and her head hurt so badly it was hard to concentrate.

There was one positive to it all. She still had her memories. Karlie knew exactly how she ended up tied down.

Blinking away the water and grit, Karlie tried to get a handle on where she was. Nothing about the rotting room looked familiar, but there was no mistaking the shadow that walked into her line of sight.

"Bernard."

Her entire body locked up. Karlie couldn't move if she tried. That's what staring at her brother did to her. Not an ounce of remorse reflected in his features as he stared her down. His face was devoid of all emotions actually; completely dead and hollow.

"No one calls me that anymore."

Of course, they didn't. A man as feared as her brother wouldn't want any

reminder of the person he used to be.

"*Il Diavolo*." The name escaped her lips before she could think about it. The smile it elicited from her brother only made her body tense up that much more. It was worse than him showing no emotion. That smile was sadistic and made her skin crawl.

"Much better. You know it never gets old hearing people whisper my name just before I end their miserable life."

"Is that what you plan to do with me? Kill me?"

Karlie thought about the necklace lying heavy on her chest and the earring adorning her right ear. Both contained tracking devices that would lead Steel and his team right to her. She just needed to hold off her brother until they got there.

"Of course not." He cackled. "Vito wasn't done with you, and now that you pushed that brat out of you, he can finally claim you like he wanted."

There was no stopping the revulsion, or the puke that came along with it. Karlie barely got her head turned to the side, but it didn't help. She still managed to puke down the side of her face. It was all too much. The pain and thought of being around Vito once again, her stomach couldn't handle it.

"Fucking pathetic," her brother snapped. "Why the fuck Vito wants such a weak, fat woman is beyond me."

Karlie needed to stop thinking of *Il Diavolo* as her brother. Just because they shared DNA did not make him family. A true brother would never kidnap and turn his sister over to a madman. She needed to remember that he was exactly as his new name described. The Devil.

"Maybe you should pass that question along to your boss," she sarcastically huffed.

She was tired of being put down about her body. Her head hurt from being smashed in the temple and then probably falling onto the pavement. Every part of her body ached from the crash, and all she wanted to do was curl up in a ball. That wasn't possible because her stupid captor who she couldn't fight off if she wanted to, insisted she needed to be tied up.

"You have a smart mouth for someone about to become Vito's whore."

There was no way she was going to make it until Steel and his team arrived. Her mouth was going to get the better of her and he was going to kill her before anyone had the chance to rescue her. She could feel it. Her mouth was going rogue.

"Fuck you! I would rather die than become that man's whore!"

Sure enough, he was on her within seconds, wrapping his hands around her throat and squeezing tightly. She closed her eyes and let the idea of dying consume her.

She thought about Steel. He would be pissed when he showed up and realized she was already gone. She wished she had told him more often just how much she loved him. A man like that deserved to know how loved he was.

Then she thought about Anna. Her poor sweet daughter would have to grow up without her. It wasn't fair, and if she were stronger, she would try and fight. But then the thought of anyone other than Steel touching her was just too much. She considered death a better option to serving Vito. She would do anything to avoid that vile man's touch.

"No."

The pressure on her throat lifted and her body fought like hell to regain the oxygen it so desperately needed to survive.

"You're not taking the easy way out," The Devil growled in her face. "I saw you try to accept your fate. The same as hundreds have before you, but it won't work. Killing you isn't worth the wrath that Vito would rain down on me."

"And what about the hell that Steel will dish out once he finds me?" she croaked. Her throat was now just as sore as the rest of her body.

"You think I'm scared of him? I'll leave him to die the same way I left his teammate."

Karlie was ashamed that she hadn't thought about Gage since she woke up. If what Bernard said was true, Steel's teammate sacrificed his life for her. That deserved more than an afterthought. If she managed to make it out of her current situation, she owed Steel an apology. Gage was a good friend to the man she loved. He didn't deserve to die because she had been stupid enough to want to leave their little safe haven.

"He'll kill you for this." She put as much venom into her tone as she could muster.

It didn't matter if Vito whisked her away again. Steel would stop at nothing to find her and he would kill anyone who got in his way. That included her brother. Infamous or not. *Il Diavolo* would die for kidnapping her twice. She just hoped she was strong enough to survive, since she wasn't going to be lucky enough to die.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Thank fuck for modern technology. Maddox was able to pinpoint a location for Karlie just as soon as whoever kidnapped her stopped moving.

"How's Gage?" Steel barked at Emma, then immediately felt bad. It wasn't her fault his best friend had been shot trying to protect his woman. Steel had been the one to suggest Gage take her into town. If anyone was at fault, it was him.

"In surgery. It's touch and go, but they're confident he'll make it out okay. We're lucky both his car and phone alerted us to the accident so quickly. First responders got to him before he could bleed out."

"And Jaxson's there with him?"

He needed the rest of his team to go rescue Karlie, but the thought of leaving Gage all alone didn't sit right. Someone had crashed into them, shot Gage, and kidnapped Karlie. Whoever it was could have more people looking to finish the job once they learned Gage wasn't dead. He would not be the reason his friend died.

"Yes. Kendra landed fifteen minutes ago, and both she and Jaxson headed straight for the hospital. Black is also en route. He'll take a little longer to get there since he's coming from the East Coast, but he's also bringing a few guys from one of his other teams."

Good. He could work better knowing his friend was in good hands. His team trusted the doctors at the hospital; Daniel had vetted them himself, and his team leader didn't trust anyone.

"Let's move!" Daniel snapped when he walked back into the gear room.

"We have a location and an asshole to send to hell."

Steel grabbed his rifle from his industrial-sized locker and swung it over his shoulder. Everyone on his team was kitted up, including Emma. Daniel hadn't even bothered to argue when she strolled in covered in her tactical gear. Maddox would stay back and communicate with them via comms. She had drones and other high-tech equipment that would be ready at a moment's notice if needed.

As they piled into the van, Daniel reviewed how things would go as Blayd drove them to the abandoned shack just outside one of the smaller suburbs, not far from their headquarters. Whoever took Karlie probably thought his team wouldn't be looking so close. That or the plan was to move her soon. What they didn't realize was Karlie still wore the jewelry he gave her. Both pieces were pinging in the same location, and Steel tried not to think that meant both pieces were discovered and ripped off her. Instead, he was leading with the hope that her kidnapper was none the wiser and that the location Maddox gave them would lead them straight to the love of his life.

"Two clicks out. Scout the area and then move in as necessary. We find out what we can about Vito, but take no prisoners. No one involved in hurting one of our own walks out alive."

That was exactly what he wanted to hear. Whoever took Karlie from him and Anna didn't deserve to walk the earth any longer. He would gladly be the one to end the miserable person's life.

Steel secretly hoped it was her fucking brother who took her. He wanted nothing more than to end that man's reign over her old neighborhood and make sure her family never had to worry again. It would be fitting to send The Devil back to hell where he belonged.

He realized he got his wish a few minutes later when recon on the small structure showed *Il Diavolo* standing over a furious Karlie. She was tied down to a broken table that was slightly tilted, enough to prop her head up. Her current uncomfortable position didn't stop her from spitting fire at her brother.

"I have visual confirmation of the target and *Il Diavolo*." Blayd's voice filtered over his comm.

All joking aside, Blayd was the best to have in tight situations. The man showed no mercy, and he looked ready to tear someone apart.

Steel was about to respond, but something Karlie said pissed her brother off enough that his fist connected with her head. Steel saw red.

"I'm moving in," he growled before anyone could stop him.

Dropping his rifle and letting the sling catch it, he took the knife out of his vest and moved toward the door. There was no way the asshole deserved a bullet to the head. Not after that blow. Steel was going to enjoy the close-contact kill.

He barely heard the rest of his team acknowledge before he kicked in the old wooden door. The bastard had the nerve to slide behind Karlie and put a knife to her throat.

"She said you would find her. I figured the bitch was lying."

"Instead of name-calling, why don't you step away from her and fight me like a man? Prove you earned the name *Il Diavolo*?"

Karlie was now unconscious from the blow, completely unaware that her life hung in the balance of a madman whose DNA she shared.

"Or I could slit her throat and then kill you," he mocked.

Steel listened as his team moved into position. As much as he wanted to kill Bernard himself, he wouldn't risk Karlie's life. If one of his teammates had the shot, he wanted them to take it if her brother so much as twitched. He needed to get Bernard away from her.

"I doubt Vito would be too happy if you did that. He's the whole reason you kidnapped her again, right? He wants her and you killing Karlie will only piss him off."

"He'll find another whore to lust after. There are plenty of them, and this one isn't even that fucking good-looking."

The knife was out of his hand and flying through the air before Steel made the conscious effort. Luckily, his subconscious had the foresight not to kill but only maim.

"You'll pay for that," The Devil hissed.

Steel watched with satisfaction as he stepped away from Karlie, ripping the knife out of his shoulder without so much as a flinch and tossing it to the ground.

Bernard responded just as Steel expected he would, and charged. The man was skilled, but clearly fought with his emotions. Anger ruled every swing and step.

Steel managed to avoid the first blow, but miscalculated *Il Diavolo's* reach and took a slice to the side just below his vest. He barely felt it with the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He didn't need to hear or see that his teammates had swooped in to get Karlie out of the room. She was their

primary target. That left just the two of them to fight to the death.

"I'm going to enjoy killing you, and as you take your last breath, you can do so knowing that Vito will have her eventually. Even your daughter isn't fucking safe. He'll take her just out of spite."

Bernard didn't realize it, but he sealed his fate the second he spoke about Anna. With Karlie out of the room and safe with his team, Steel let himself go.

He dished out just as many punches as he took. Blow for blow, he had to give the man credit, he was a worthy adversary. Another cut to the side had him stumbling back. He could feel the blood oozing out and running down his body. Steel refused to let that stop him.

"Let's see how much blood you can lose. A dead man can't protect them or the rest of the women on your team. Did you really think Vito would let this go? They are all targets now."

"For Karlie and our daughter, I'll lose whatever is necessary to end your life."

He charged like a bull and managed to lift the asshole off his feet and slam him onto the floor. The sound of cartilage smashing against the old floor was music to his ears. Taking advantage of Bernard's disorientation, Steel knocked the knife out of his hand and sent it skittering across the floor. He pinned both arms under his powerful legs.

With one hand around his neck and the other pushing into the stab wound on his shoulder, Steel leaned down to whisper in his ear.

"I hope you enjoy your trip to hell. That's exactly where I plan to send you after you tell me where we can find Vito."

*Il Diavolo* had the nerve to laugh despite the pressure Steel was putting on his throat.

"Vito's a snake," Bernard croaked around the grip on his throat. "He always comes back and you'll never find him. You won't get anything out of me, so you might as well just kill me now."

He was right. A man like *Il Diavolo* was too loyal to assholes like Vito. He gave up his entire life and family to join the Mafia. It made it easier to snap his neck, to watch the life drain out of him.

Steel pushed off the now-dead body and stared down at the man who would no longer be a problem for Karlie. Even in death, *Il Diavolo* had a sadistic smile on his face.

"Did he tell you anything?" Daniel came up next to him and asked.



"No. He pretty much told me to fuck off. Even with death on the horizon, he was loyal to Vito."

"Good riddance." Blayd joined them and shook his head.

"Where's Karlie?"

He needed to find her and make sure she was okay. The last he knew, his team was carrying her out while she was still unconscious.

"Out in the van." Emma was the first to speak up. "She's just starting to come around, but she seems a bit confused."

That slowed him down some. Amnesia again? He sure as hell hoped not. Steel could love her through anything, but he prayed she remembered him this time. Shaking off the fear, he ran out of the house.

Steel saw Karlie sitting on the bumper of the van as Chance hovered over her.

"You can't go in there," his teammate was urging.

Neither Chance nor Karlie had yet to see that Steel was on his way to them.

"I need to know Steel is okay," Karlie insisted, trying to stand up.

His knees threaten to give out and he thanked God that she remembered him, as he stumbled the rest of the way to her side.

"I'm okay, baby." He pulled her into his arms. "I'm right here."

He held her as she sobbed and blubbered about Gage. Steel couldn't understand what she meant.

"Baby, slow down. You aren't making any sense," he soothed. Running his hand over her head, he tried to check for any tender spots, but Karlie refused to sit still.

"Gage sacrificed himself for me and I was too selfish to think about him when I first woke up!"

Karlie was the most selfless person he had ever met. Just the fact that she was worried about what he would think of her when her life had been in danger proved that.

"Gage didn't sacrifice himself." He looked at Chance for confirmation, since he was ashamed that he, too, had been preoccupied in the last few minutes and didn't have the latest update.

"He's out of surgery and recovering."

"See? Chance says Gage is fine."

The relief on Karlie's face was evident. "Oh, thank God. I heard the gunshot and then was knocked out. When I woke up and realized it was my

brother holding me hostage, I was too angry to even think, let alone ask."

"Baby, it's fine. You've been through a lot."

"Is he dead? My brother, that is."

He wanted to scream fuck yeah, but it didn't seem appropriate, considering Karlie was still calling him her brother.

"Yes, *Il Diavolo* is dead."

Steel waited for tears or some form of reaction to the news. It surprised him a bit to find Karlie simply nodded. He wondered if she was in shock, or if she truly didn't care after all he had done.

"We'll need to tell my parents. They deserve to know."

"We can tell them when we get back, but first we need to get you checked out. You've taken a few too many blows to the head lately."

And at least one of the cuts he received would probably need a few stitches. The blood seeping out of him had slowed a bit, but it was still more than he was comfortable losing.

"I need to confess something first," Karlie interrupted his thoughts. "It's kinda important." He gave her a nod to continue. Whatever was on her mind was something that greatly bothered her, if the deep frown was any indication.

"At one point he had his hands around my neck and I gave up. He kept telling me that he was going to turn me over to Vito to become his whore. I couldn't live that way, so when his hands were around my neck, I just gave up."

Steel pulled her back into his arms so he could be as close to her as possible when he finally found his voice again.

"There's no shame in preferring death to that horrible life. Any person who has ever been tortured has most likely thought the same thing. It doesn't make you a bad person, nor am I mad at you for it. I'm just happy you're alive. Anna and I wouldn't know what to do without you."

Because she was so close, he could feel the tension leave her body. Steel thanked his lucky stars that she was alive right now. It sucked that she had been ready to give up, but he would never judge her. She was the one to spend almost a year at Vito's hands. Maybe death was preferable.

"Oh my God, you're bleeding!"

Steel tried not to hiss when Karlie's hand brushed along the stab wound on his side. It wasn't the worst of the two.

"It's just a scratch. I'll have one of the guys look it over after we get you

to the hospital and checked out for a concussion."

Karlie wasn't listening to him as she pulled his shirt up to get a better look at the wound.

"That's not a scratch, Steel. That's a fucking gash and needs stitches."

He looked down to where Karlie was gently probing the cut. She was probably right. He hadn't thought at the time that it was very deep, but now he wasn't so sure. There was a good possibility glue wouldn't fix it.

Grabbing a towel from Chance, he put pressure on the area while they loaded into the van. It didn't take long for them to arrive at the hospital. He did need stitches for both stab wounds, but only a few. Both cuts were deeper than he expected. Thirty minutes tops, and he was good as new. The same couldn't be said for Karlie. The doctor wanted to keep her overnight for observation based on her medical history and the fact that she took not one but two blows to the head within such a short period of time.

After calling his parents to check up on Anna, Steel made himself comfortable in Karlie's room. He wasn't going to leave her side all night. Actually, never again for the rest of their lives. The woman was a danger magnet without him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Karlie couldn't stop drumming her fingers on her legs. She had just been officially released and Steel had agreed to allow her to visit Gage before going home to their daughter.

He was out of the ICU and in his own room, just one floor up from where she had stayed the night. After being woken up every half hour to make sure she hadn't suddenly slipped into a coma, Karlie was more than ready to ditch the hospital. But not until she saw Gage for herself and apologized. Steel told her it wasn't necessary, but that didn't change the fact that she felt he deserved it.

By the time she was wheeled into Gage's room, Karlie was ready to ditch the wheelchair. She had insisted it wasn't needed, but neither the nurse nor Steel would listen to what she had to say. The man she loved was beyond stubborn.

"Oh, God." Her hand flew to her mouth.

For some insane reason, Karlie had it in her head that Gage would be pale and sickly as he lay in the hospital bed. What she didn't expect to find was him sitting up with a scowl on his face.

"I'll kill the fucker who put that bruise on your face."

Aw. It would seem they had formed a bond even more than she realized during their drive. It put a stupid smile on her face.

"Don't worry." Steel wheeled her in farther. "I already took care of it."

"It better have been a slow and painful death," Gage grumbled.

Karlie wasn't sure she wanted those gory details. She was happy her

brother was dead, but she could skip knowing how it took place. Her imagination had done a good job putting its own scenario together based on how Steel looked afterward. She never got the chance to say that, so apparently she was getting the details whether she wanted them or not.

"It was. No quick bullet to the head. We fought, and in the end, I snapped his neck," Steel explained, with slightly too much glee.

That was a tidbit of information she was going to keep from her parents. It was bad enough that she knew. There was no reason anyone else needed to hear it, or the happiness with which Steel shared the information.

"Good. Now let's get the hell out of here."

"Wait!" She held up her hand like it would actually stop either of the men from actually doing what they wanted. "You can't leave. You just had surgery, and a complicated one from what I heard from Emma."

"Emma needs to learn to keep her mouth shut. I'm fine. The doctor recommended I rest. I can do that just as easily at my house."

"Something tells me you won't actually do it at home. You could always stay with us," Karlie urged.

She looked over at Steel. Technically, it was his house she just invited Gage to stay at, but she didn't really think he would mind. Gage was his best friend, after all.

"While I appreciate the offer, I think you have enough people staying with you and I much prefer my solitude."

Karlie thought about what they discussed before they were run off the road and decided it was best not to push. Gage didn't judge her when she felt the need to escape, so she would do the same for him.

"Fair, but the offer stands. Now can we leave?" Now she was the one sounding impatient. "I have a daughter I need to see."

Both men chuckled at her sudden change of tune. If she were being honest with herself, and some days that was tough, Karlie didn't want to be in the hospital any more than Gage did. Yesterday she wanted away from her family, but today she would've done anything to see them again so she could tell them how sorry she was.

Nearly an hour later, they were pulling into the cul-de-sac. Karlie took the time to really look at her new life. She was one of the lucky ones. Despite being kidnapped twice, she was able to come back to her family and a man who loved her.

The place Daniel had built for his team was gorgeous. She suspected that

had more to do with Black's decision than Daniel himself, but the location was great. There was nothing around them for miles and the backdrop, off in the distance, was beautiful mountains. Karlie could see herself waking up every morning and enjoying the view.

"You're looking awfully hard at the house." Steel walked up and wrapped his arms around her middle. "See something you want to change?"

She settled back into his embrace and smiled. There was nothing this man wouldn't do for her.

"Nope. Just thinking how I could spend the rest of my life here."

Steel didn't get the opportunity to respond before both of their families, plus his team, rushed out of the house, but she thought she heard him mumble something about *that's the plan*.

Even if she hadn't known Steel's parents were visiting, she would've been able to pick them out in a crowded room. Steel was a spitting image of his father and there was no mistaking those impressive gray eyes their daughter got from her grandmother.

"Oh, sweetheart!" Her mother stopped short of crashing into her. "We were worried sick!"

She hugged her mother tightly and reassured her she was fine. Karlie did the same with her father. She pulled away to find her daughter, but as usual, Steel was way ahead of her. He was thrusting their daughter into her arms just as soon as they were free.

Like a creeper, Karlie sniffed Anna's head. There was something magical and instantly calming about a baby's scent. To think that, just yesterday, Karlie had thought death would be preferable to becoming Vito's whore. Now that Anna was in her arms once again, she realized nothing would ever be too much if it meant there was even the slimmest chance she could get back to this.

Karlie finally looked up. She expected everyone to be giving her a funny look, but she only saw love. Even Steel's parents, whom she had yet to formally meet, beamed with love.

"Sorry." She shifted Anna so she could put her arm out. "I'm Karlie."

Steel's mother pulled her in for a hug. "No need for formalities, dear. I'm Mary and this is my husband, Charles."

She expected to feel overwhelmed, but there was something about Mary's hug that instantly calmed her. It was one of those warm hugs that reminded her of grandmothers.

"How about we go inside? It's been a long twenty-four hours." Steel shuffled them all in, but stopped Karlie when she went to follow.

"If it becomes too much, just say the word and I'll kick everyone out."

How did she get so lucky? He knew her better than she knew herself some days.

"I'll be okay. I need to tell my parents what happened and your parents deserve to spend some time with us."

"Not at your expense."

Karlie rolled up onto her toes and placed a soft kiss along his jaw. "I'll be fine, but I promise to tell you if that changes."

This time, he accepted what she said and let her join everyone in the house. There was barely enough seating for all the bodies that were currently packed in. One of the first things she needed to do was pick out more furniture.

She curled herself, and Anna, into a recliner and cleared her throat. She wanted to get this off her chest now.

"Mom, Dad. There's something I need to tell you."

Karlie could tell even before she opened her mouth that both her parents already knew. Everyone on the team agreed the information should come from her, so that meant they put the pieces together on their own.

"It was him again, wasn't it?"

They didn't need to clarify who the *him* was that they were speaking of.

"Yes."

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't force the rest of the words out of her mouth. Fortunately, her father didn't seem to have the same problem.

"He's dead, right? Steel killed him."

The only thing she was capable of doing was nodding. One look at her mother's tear-filled eyes and she knew why she couldn't say the words. Despite how horrible of a man Bernard turned out to be, he was still their son.

"I'm glad."

Her father's response surprised her. It was so much different from the tears her mother was fighting.

"I know it has to be hard for you," Karlie said to her mother.

"You mistake my tears, sweetheart. I mourned the loss of your brother years ago. These tears are for you. For all the things he put you through and all the ways we didn't stop it."

"There was nothing you could have done."

"Maybe not," her father coughed. "But now we will never know. I'm glad he can never hurt you again. And I'm sorry if we overstayed our welcome. We didn't realize until you rushed out the other day that maybe having so many people around was too much."

She wanted to groan. She had really hoped with everything that had happened, they'd forgotten about her need for space. She started to apologize.

"It was nothing against you guys. It just felt like I couldn't get a moment to myself and everything piled up until it got to be too much."

"Sweetheart, you don't need to explain. Your father and I get it. We also talked to Steel's parents. We forgot for a moment all that you went through. We were just so happy to see you, we didn't think about what you needed."

"Is it bad that some days I don't know what I need?"

She hated to admit that, but since her rescue, her emotions were all over the place. She didn't know if they would settle back down or if this was her new normal. Outside of having Steel and Anna in her life, everything else was a mystery. And that she wanted to stay in New Mexico. So maybe she did have some things figured out.

"It's not bad at all," Steel's mother reassured her. "It will come with time. Hopefully, now things will be less exciting and you can look at it without the constant adrenaline surge."

That was doubtful. Vito wouldn't just stop because he lost *Il Diavolo*. He had dozens of men to do his bidding. It was only a matter of time.

The rest of the afternoon was spent entertaining. They went out into the backyard and enjoyed the sun. True to her word, when it became too much, she allowed Steel to whisk her away. Both of their parents would leave the next day with the promise to return soon.

Karlie went to bed that night with a smile on her face. Being kidnapped twice had taught her an important lesson. She could handle just about anything.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Steel wasn't thrilled to be called in for a team meeting so soon after Karlie had come home. He just wanted time alone with her. His parents were leaving later that day, and hers shortly after, but instead of spending time with them, he was here.

"Why did you bring us here, Daniel?" Gage seemed to be of the same mindset.

"Not my idea. Black said he needed to meet with us."

"And for good reason."

The man himself strolled in and dropped a set of files on the table.

"What are those?"

Maddox scooped her chair closer and grabbed the first one on the pile. Emma was second. The rest of the team just waited to see what bomb Black was about to drop in their lap.

"Those are the hits put out on the members of this team. Congratulations, you are now the hunted rather than the hunter."

Shit. They all knew the possibility of this happening, but never did they think it would happen so soon. Ironic, considering what they did for a living.

"Even Jaxson." Emma lifted a concerned eyebrow.

"Yes, even Jaxson, which is why I've placed a call to Kendra's boss and requested that they come here. I'm officially putting your team on lockdown while you deal with the threat. You won't be taking any other assignments until Vito is dead."

He needed to call his friend and see how he felt about that. Jaxson had

been very clear from the beginning that he wanted to stay in Texas, so Kendra could be close to her team. Her boss was great about letting her leave when needed, but to stay out here for the foreseeable future couldn't be beneficial to her own team.

"Does Kendra also have a bounty on her head?"

Steel moved over to grab one of the files, but Black answered him before he got it open.

"Yes. I believe because she's been seen shuttling him around. So far, no other family members have popped up. That could change. I'm reassigning some of my other teams to cover your loved ones just as a precaution. It's your choice to tell them, but my men are discreet."

He would keep his father in the loop and leave it up to Karlie as to what she wanted to do regarding her parents. He assumed she would want them to know, considering how much she hated being left in the dark, but that was her call. It was her family.

Black didn't keep them much longer. He explained some of the security measures he wanted in place and that he would also be staying for the duration. Things were about to get a whole lot busier now that they would have extra people in their little community.

# EPILOGUE ONE

A month later

Karlie was woken up by something sliding on her finger. A very particular finger.

"I know you're awake, baby." Steel kissed her shoulder blade and worked his way down along her spine.

"Was there something you were trying to ask me?"

She could feel Steel's deep rumble along her lower back. "Nope."

"No?" Twisting her head, Karlie caught a glimpse of the princess-cut solitary diamond currently taking up residence on her finger. "So, this isn't an engagement ring?"

It was absolutely gorgeous. She wasn't like most women who dreamed about what their rings would look like, or had their wedding planned out since they were ten. But if she had been that type of woman, this was the ring she would've picked. It was both simple and elegant.

"No, it is."

He sounded so matter-of-fact that Karlie shimmied out from under him and turned herself over.

"Isn't it customary to ask someone before putting the ring on their finger?" she teased.

"It is, but you already agreed to marry me, so putting a ring on your finger was just the icing on the cake."

"Is that so?" She smirked.

Of course, she already agreed to marry him. They had talked about it multiple times since they met so long ago. A day hadn't gone by that they didn't discuss their future together, the ways they would decorate their house and how many more kids they would have. They even discussed when a wedding would take place. But never did he officially *ask*.

"Did you want me to ask? To get down on one knee and confess my undying love for you?" She couldn't tell if he was serious or joking.

"Maybe." She giggled at the dramatic way he said "undying love."

"Ask and you shall receive."

Steel was off the bed and dragging her to the edge before she could catch her breath. Dropping down onto one knee, he took her hand.

"Karlie Marie Holmes, the love of my life. The mother of our beautiful daughter and whatever children we may have in the future. The woman I

want to spend the rest of my life with and grow old with. The only person I can see driving me insane for the rest of our days. Even though I'm pretty sure you already agreed but to make it official. Will you do me the honor and marry me?"

How could she possibly turn down a proposal like that? Oh, who was she kidding? She wasn't going to be turning him down. He was everything she ever wanted.

"Yes, of course, I'll marry you."

She squealed when he jumped up and tackled her onto the bed. This was exactly what she wanted for the rest of her life. Someone who not only made her happy but whom she had fun with as well. Everything was made better when the person she spent most of her waking time with knew how to make her laugh.

Steel was kissing along her neck as Anna's sweet gurgle slipped through the baby monitor.

"I'll get her." He planted another searing kiss on her lips. "You relax and I'll bring her to you as soon as I get her changed and fed."

Karlie watched Steel strut his fine ass out the door and then glanced down at her ring. This was exactly how she saw her future, and she couldn't wait to spend every day with the man she loved.

## EPILOGUE TWO

Weeks earlier

Chance stood outside the small airport and checked his watch for the tenth time. Maddox's plane had landed thirty minutes ago, and despite the dozens of passengers who pushed past him, none of them was the hacker he was looking for. Not that he knew who he was looking for.

Emma obviously didn't have a description since they had only met online and it went against their hacker code to actually look up each other. Black probably knew who the person was, but his boss preferred to keep things close to the vest. It was his least favorite quality about him. He didn't have time for the shadow games that were required to work the dark web.

He tugged on his crisp shirt sleeve and contemplated chucking the stupid sign Emma handed him before he left. Chance hated that he was reduced to a chauffeur. He was Delta Force, for fuck's sake. Sure, he liked to wear suits when he wasn't geared up for a mission, but that didn't change the fact that he knew twenty different ways to kill a man with his bare hands. Standing outside an airport with a stupid sign was beneath him. Beneath the person he had become, forced to become, in order to survive.

"Fuck this." He cracked the sign in half and was about to call Black for a description when a soft chuckle caught his attention.

"Now, is that any way to greet a new co-worker?"

Chance turned around to find the source of the absurd comment. That sweet voice couldn't possibly belong to the person he was looking for.

"Excuse me?"

There was no way the eccentric woman with her purple hair and sexy body wrapped in black could possibly be talking to him. She must be one of those women who got off on verbally torturing innocent bystanders.

"I'm assuming you're my ride." She nodded to the sign in his hand.

"You're not a man," he blurted out before he could think better of it.

"Surprisingly, you're not the first person to say that to me and likely won't be the last. Now let's go, it's too fucking hot to stand out here." The feisty woman bumped his shoulder as she passed. "No idea how you aren't dying in that damn chokehold you call a shirt."

Chance reached for her elbow and stopped her in her tracks.

"I'm sorry. Who are you?" One of his teammates had to be punking him.

The damn woman had the nerve to let out a huge exhale like he was the

one being annoying in their exchange. "Name's Maddox. Emma reached out to me about a job and gave me Black's information. I spoke to him and agreed to help out." She shrugged off his hold and glared at him.

Fucking Black. Of course, his boss knew Maddox was a woman but didn't bother to pass that information along to the rest of them.

Chance took a moment to look over the person he was so sure would be a man. She looked nothing like the hacker he imagined he would be picking up. Yes, at first, he thought she would be a guy, but he still pictured greasy hair, a pot belly, and probably acne. The kind of man who was forty years old and still lived in his basement and his only interaction with the human world was through technology.

Maddox was so far from that it was ridiculous. Her hair wasn't actually purple. It was a soft brown, but with purple tips. Her face was devoid of acne and makeup because she didn't need any. If not for the scowl, she was fucking gorgeous. But it was the clothing she wore to cover up the sexy body that was really throwing him off. Tight black pants that looked like they had been sprayed on hugged the most delicious curves. And no amount of bagginess in the band T-shirt she wore could conceal the ginormous tits that perfected her hourglass frame. She was sex on a stick and it was fucking with his head.

"If you're done checking me out, I'd really like to get out of this heat."

Her words snapped him out of the hold her body had on him.

"I wasn't checking you out," he replied with a scowl. "Emma said you were a guy, so excuse me for not expecting ... this." He gestured to her body.

"Do you have a problem working with women?" Maddox's entire body expressed her displeasure. From the hand on her popped hip to the raised eyebrow.

"No, of course not, obviously. I work with Emma."

Yes, he got along with Emma and Karlie just fine. But he did have a problem with expecting one person and getting someone else. Especially one who caused him to have such a visceral reaction. He wasn't like his teammate Blayd. He didn't think with his dick, but that's what Maddox had reduced him to and it was irritating.

"If you say so," Maddox brushed him off. "Which way to the vehicle?"

Chance pointed to the SUV a few feet away and tried not to watch as Maddox sauntered off. There shouldn't have been a damn thing about her walk that sucked him in. There was absolutely nothing about the mouthy



female that should have interested him, and yet he found himself unable to look away.

"You coming, or do you plan on staring at my ass all day?"

*Son of a bitch.*

There was nothing more embarrassing than being called out on his behavior. Chance took a minute to take a few deep breaths before striding over to the driver's side. If he wanted to survive the commute back to their headquarters, he needed to get his head on correctly.

They were barely out of the parking lot before Maddox started in on him.

"So, is everyone on the team as stuffy as you? I expected guys in tactical gear, not fancy suits."

He tried not to take her comment personally. He did belong to a covert operations team, and most of his teammates did dress exactly as she described.

"Personal decision," he ground out.

"At first I would've guessed they sent one of the bosses or even hired out a chauffeur, but there's no way all those muscles I see you trying to hide are just for show. But it was the calluses on your hands that gave you away. Hands are my kryptonite. It's the first thing I look at when I meet a man and your hands would feel great against my body."

He almost crashed the SUV as he craned his neck at her to see if she was serious. She was, apparently. That or she had one hell of a poker face.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Those same hands gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, showing her just how much her words affected him. His pants were starting to get a little too tight, but there was no way he would give her the satisfaction of watching him adjust himself.

"You've got great hands," she continued casually, "and something tells me that under all those dress clothes is a man who knows how to be dirty. The stuffy ones always are. A man on the streets, but a freak in the sheets."

Was she for real? How did they even get on this topic and how did he get *off* it? The images she was putting into his head were the last thing he needed when he looked at his new co-worker.

"I'm just saying we can definitely fuck. I'm always down for a good time and you look like you could use a little stress relief. But only on one condition. No catching feelings. Marriage and babies aren't in my future. I'm strictly a 'let's have a good time but never get serious' kind of gal."

Chance tried not to choke when he answered.

"You don't have to worry about that."

Unlike his other teammates, he didn't screw around. He *dated* women, not fucked and ran. Plus, Maddox was not his type, no matter how good-looking she was. He knew exactly what he was looking for in a wife and the future mother of his children.

So why did his pants suddenly get so tight he thought his cock would bust out of his pants when Maddox asked her next question.

"What do you say? Are we gonna fuck or not?"

I BET you can't wait to see what kind of trouble Maddox has in store for Chance. Check out their story in [Flirting with Temptation](#).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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