

Chapter One

The weather was perfect.

Brynn Norcross stepped out the door and tipped her face up to the sunshine. The bright Italian sunshine. More precisely, the bright Sicilian sunshine.

Breathing deeply, she slowly circled the sparkling pool and headed for the carved stone railing. She leaned against the warm stone. Down below, the Ionian Sea sparkled like a blue jewel, with the town of Taormina a perfect, elegant backdrop.

Taormina was a historic town perched on a hilltop on the east coast of the island. She'd been charmed by its restored medieval buildings, ruins of an ancient Greco-Roman theatre, and the winding streets littered with restaurants, shops, and cafes. Everywhere she looked, there were spectacular views, not to mention Mount Etna in the distance.

Leaning on the railing, she enjoyed the warmth on her skin. Even though it was the fall and the nights were cooler, the days were warm. She was wearing a small black bikini that her husband would appreciate. The gorgeous villa they'd rented oozed charm and history, all while being modern on the inside. All the ingredients for a perfect vacation.

Brynn let out a long, calming breath. She needed this vacation.

They both did.

Her husband didn't relax very easily. Her nose wrinkled. That was the understatement of the century. Vander was focused, intense, and dangerous. She'd never change anything about the man she loved.

But lately, he was wound tighter than usual.

He ran the most successful private security company in San Francisco, but that wasn't what was worrying him. He thrived on the stress and risk of his work. He was doing what he'd been born to do.

No, what was worrying him was *her*.

She'd always thought nothing would scare Vander Norcross. She pressed a palm to her still-flat stomach. Apparently, getting pregnant was the one thing that struck fear into him.

She sighed. It wasn't just the baby; it was her job, as well. Vander lived to protect. It was in his DNA. Having a homicide detective for a wife wasn't easy for him. He'd managed it well enough after they'd first gotten together and she'd proven to him that she could take care of herself.

But her pregnancy, and the most recent incident, had shaken him. Her fingers moved across her belly to the scar on her side. It was newly healed and still pink.

Getting stabbed was not fun. Hell, it had shaken her. Tangling with a career criminal high on meth was challenging on a good day, but add in a very large knife, and the situation had gone south quickly. Another officer had been stabbed, and she'd leaped in to save the man's life and gotten slashed for her trouble.

She'd been hurt and bleeding, and terrified for the new life growing inside her. When she'd woken up in the hospital with fifteen stitches in her side, she'd had to watch her husband struggle

with his rage and anger. After he'd learned that she was okay, he'd kept it contained and bottled up, but she knew it was there.

He'd refused to talk about it and insisted he was fine.

Brynn ground her teeth together. He wasn't fine. Getting Vander to open up was never easy. He'd come a long way from the man she'd first met when she was going undercover with a motorcycle club, but there were times when he held a lot in. And every day since she'd been hurt, she'd felt a distance between them.

Then she'd had the idea for them to get away. When she'd suggested this vacation, he'd jumped at the chance. This from the man who rarely took a vacation.

It was what they needed. The added bonus was that this trip had a connection with his heritage. His mother, Clara Norcross, was Italian-American and one side of her family was from Sicily. Plus, Vander's brother Rhys, and his wife Haven, had come along, too. They'd rented the villa next door.

Since Brynn loved them both, she was thrilled. They'd already spent two spectacular days wandering the beautiful streets of Taormina.

She leaned her elbows on the railing and gazed at the azure-blue sea. She wanted Vander to relax, to stop obsessing over the fact that she'd been hurt, and to process the scary thought of bringing a child into the world. A tiny human who they'd be responsible for.

So far, she still felt that distance between them and it ate at her. It wasn't overt. He still kissed her, still loved her fiercely at nighttime, but there was just something she couldn't put her finger on.

She wanted it gone.

Vander Norcross was *hers*. Every inch of his battered soul.

She'd fight for him. *Always*.

Strong arms closed around her from behind.

She didn't jolt. She would know him anywhere—his strength, his warmth, his scent. Plus, the man moved silently all the time, so she was used to him sneaking up on her.

Hard muscle pressed against her back and warm lips brushed her bare shoulder. "Good morning."

She felt that deep voice right to her core. "Morning." She turned in his arms, went up on her toes, and kissed him.

"You slept well?"

"I did." She pressed a kiss to his muscled chest, very happy that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Her husband was incredibly gorgeous. Thankfully, most people didn't realize how attractive he was since the first impression they got of him was *dangerous*. Vander radiated "don't fuck with me" vibes. Looking at him always set off some instinct in the hindbrain that warned you he was a man who could incapacitate everyone in the room before you even moved.

She smoothed her hands up his chest. "Thankfully, my husband did his best to wear me out last night, so I slept very deeply."

His lips quirked. "My pleasure."

Love flooded her. She loved when he was playful, but she loved his darkness, as well. God, and that face. The Italian was evident in his strong jaw, bronze skin, and long line of his nose. He had just the right amount of stubble.

His hand shifted and hovered over her belly for a second. Her breath caught in her lungs. Then warm fingers pressed against her skin.

He was still adjusting to the idea of being a father. Hell, it had only been a month since she'd

found out, so they were both acclimatizing to impending parenthood.

“I like this bikini.” He toyed with the tie on the side of her bottoms.

“I thought you might.”

“Feel okay?” he asked.

“I feel fine, Vander. It’s still early.” Her nose wrinkled. “No doubt morning sickness will rear its head sooner or later.”

His dark-blue eyes flashed. He hated anything that hurt her, especially when it was something he couldn’t control.

She wasn’t showing yet, but she liked to imagine her waist was a little thicker. She couldn’t wait until she had a baby bump.

Then his fingers shifted again, and touched her healing injury.

His face shut down.

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “Hey, I’m okay.”

“That asshole could’ve killed you. Both of you.”

“He didn’t.”

“Your job is dangerous.”

Conflicting emotions washed through her. They’d had this argument so many times over the last two weeks. “And I could walk out on the street and get hit by a bus. Life is full of risk. I’m careful and I’m good. You know this.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“Vander—”

He nodded and stepped back. “We should have some breakfast. We’re meeting Rhys and Haven so we can tour the Greek theatre ruins.”

Frustration filled her chest—an ugly mix she hated. *This*. He kept shutting her out like this.

“We need to talk about this, Vander. I want—”

“Later. Right now, let’s have breakfast.” He swiveled and strode back into the villa.

She closed her eyes. It would be fine. They were a team. He’d get over this crazy overprotectiveness.

Her hand clenched and she pushed away from the railing, tamping down her worry, and followed him inside.

“Oh my gosh, I don’t think I’ll need to eat for a week. That pasta was *divine*.”

Vander held the door open for his sister-in-law. Haven was a slim, pretty brunette who adored his brother. She smiled her thanks at Vander, her cheeks flushed from wine and laughter.

Rhys followed, a hand on his wife’s lower back. He was always touching her.

Of all of the Norcross siblings, Rhys was the first to fall in love. He’d always been more of a risk taker than his two older brothers, or at least more willing to leap into new situations.

Then Brynn stepped up beside Vander. He took a long moment to take in every inch of his beautiful wife. She was wearing a gorgeous, red dress that hugged her lean, fit body, and showed off her killer cleavage. He’d enjoy taking it off her later. Her brown hair spilled around her shoulders. Brown was such a plain word for it. It was streaked with so many shades—caramel, mahogany, chocolate. He’d given up trying to identify all the colors.

She shot him a hesitant smile, her light-blue gaze on his face. Watchful. Cautious.

She was worried.

He cupped her jaw, and she pressed into his palm. Her skin was smooth and her nose sprinkled with freckles he loved, such a contrast to her inner toughness. There was nothing he

wouldn't do for her. No line he wouldn't cross to keep her safe and happy.

He'd find a way to force himself to relax on this vacation and wipe that worry off her face, if it was the last thing he did.

He followed her inside the villa.

From the outside, the villa oozed Italian charm, with ivy growing over the stone walls. Inside, it had been modernized, with a nod at keeping the historical feel. White-washed walls, high ceilings, and refinished wooden floors spoke of an ageless richness. All the arched windows highlighted lush gardens or the blue sea. The furniture was wooden, heavy, and no doubt expensive, while the kitchen and bathroom were updated and elegant.

"Vander, drink?" Rhys called out from the built-in bar.

"Sure. I'll have the Eagle Rare." He'd brought a bottle of his favorite bourbon with him.

His brother moved with his usual agile grace. He wore his dark hair longer than Vander, dark curls falling over his forehead. He was quicker to smile and had an easy-going charm Vander could never claim.

"Not for me." Brynn sat on the elegant cream couch.

They hadn't told the family about the pregnancy, yet. It was still early, and she wanted to wait until she hit the three-month mark. Tonight, she'd had a couple of cocktails that were actually mocktails. He'd slipped the bartender some cash to ensure they were alcohol-free. So far, Rhys and Haven were none the wiser, but his brother was a hell of an investigator. It wouldn't take him long to work it out.

"Nothing for me, either." Haven dropped into an armchair. "I can't fit another thing."

Vander watched Brynn cross her legs. It hit him again that she was pregnant. His muscles tensed. She didn't look any different.

But there was a child, *their* child, growing inside her.

An ugly taste filled his mouth. He'd seen the worst the world had to offer. He'd spent more time in some of the worst places, seeing the cruel things people did to each other, than he liked to admit. He knew the dangers that lurked around every corner.

A part of him was terrified to bring an innocent child into that. He'd worked hard to accept the overprotectiveness he felt for Brynn. The overwhelming love. She was his heart, his everything.

He'd even accepted her work, especially when he'd seen her in action.

Then she'd told him that she was pregnant, and before he could process that, she'd been stabbed on the job.

He took the glass of bourbon from Rhys and nodded. He lifted the crystal snifter and drank most of it in one long swallow.

Rhys raised a dark eyebrow. "You're on vacation, big bro. In Italy. You're supposed to be relaxed."

"Does Vander ever relax?" Haven asked.

His wife stared at him, worry back in her eyes.

"I'm relaxed."

Rhys snorted. "Sure. You keep telling yourself that."

Vander's phone beeped.

His brother frowned. "That better not be work."

"Saxon is holding down the fort." Vander sat beside Brynn. "Everything should be fine."

Brynn grinned at Haven and Rhys. "It won't be Saxon. It'll be Easton and Harlow." She paused. "With dog pics."

Vander's oldest brother, Easton, and his wife had agreed to dog sit.

"Oh, they're taking care of Shadow?" Haven asked.

Brynn nodded.

Shadow was a growing Belgian Malinois pup she and Vander had rescued from an illegal dog-fighting ring. Hell, two years ago, if someone had told him that he'd be married, have a dog, and a baby on the way, he would have thought they'd lost their mind.

Brynn elbowed Vander. "Someone here needs constant reassurance that his dog, one that he hadn't wanted, is okay without him."

Haven laughed and Rhys grinned.

Vander just glared at them.

"Let's see the photos." Haven leaned forward.

Vander held out his phone. His phone's wallpaper was an image of Brynn and Shadow at the dog park. He pulled up the new images that Easton had sent.

Shadow was front and center, tongue lolling, looking like he was smiling. He had a black face and ears, while his strong, solid body was tan. Another photo showed him zooming through the dog park. In the final one, he was snuggled up with Easton's wife, Harlow, on a couch.

"See, he's fine," Brynn said.

"I knew he'd be fine," Vander grumbled. He rose. "I think I need a refill."

"Top me up, too," Rhys said.

The conversation ebbed and flowed as Vander and Rhys finished their drinks.

"We'd better head back to our villa." Rhys pulled Haven to her feet and into his arms.

She nodded. "Yes, we need to get a good night's sleep. We have more exploring to do tomorrow."

Rhys lowered his head and nibbled her ear. “Oh, I’m not planning on letting you sleep, angel.”

She blushed prettily.

Brynn grinned at the pair.

“I’m going to see an old military buddy tomorrow,” Vander said. “Justin Clarke. Remember him, Rhys?”

“I do.” He slung an arm across Haven’s shoulders. “We crossed paths but didn’t serve together. Good guy.”

Justin and Vander had been in Ghost Ops together. The secret government program that pulled together the toughest, hardest, most skilled soldiers in the military into a single team. A team that did the toughest, hardest missions. Vander had been the team’s commander.

“After he retired, Justin married an Italian woman, and lives here. Want to come with me?”

Rhys tilted his head. “Sounds good. I’d like to see him.”

“That means we have a girls’ day.” Haven looked at Brynn. “Shopping?”

Brynn grinned. “There’s room for a few more pairs of shoes in my suitcase.”

The women hugged.

“Night.” Rhys slapped Vander on the shoulder, then led Haven outside. It was a short walk back to their villa and the path was lit by lights.

Vander headed to the bar and poured another drink. The edgy feeling he hadn’t been able to shake lately was riding him. He didn’t like it.

“You okay?” Brynn asked softly.

“Fine.”

She sighed, then rose with a rustle of fabric. “Vander, please talk to me. We’re a team. I get

that having a baby will change so many things. We have a lot to learn, but we've got this."

He turned. "And when some criminal stabs you, or shoots you? What about when you're lying in a hospital bed, connected to machines?" His voice turned harsh. "When you leave me alone with a baby?" The thought of not having Brynn shook him to the core. His fingers clenched on the glass.

She pressed into him. "I have *no* plans for that to happen. Your job is dangerous, too."

"I'm trained."

"So am I." Her gaze narrowed and she set her hands on her hips. "You've trained me as well and taught me even more than my law enforcement training. I hope you're not going to give me some BS about men being able to do dangerous jobs but women can't. It's not like having a penis can stop bullets."

He growled. Frustration and fear were choking him, and she was making jokes. "All I know is that I don't want you hurt. And—" Fuck, the baby would come and then there'd be a baby who looked like Brynn. Another small person that he would love unconditionally. And he'd drown in the urge to protect them.

"And what?" she asked.

He set the glass down on the coffee table with a click and shook his head. "I'm going for a walk."

A stricken look crossed her face. "Don't shut me out, Vander."

"I just... Need a few minutes."

So he didn't say or do something he regretted while he was all fucked up about this. "You go to bed. You're tired."

She was silent as he walked out. He knew he'd hurt her.

Fuck.

He needed to get a handle on this, one way or another.