

Promise You're Mine

Chapter One

Sol

Her body is soft and warm. The sweet brush of her breath in my ear stirs me from sleep. The scent of cherries draws me further from slumber and a smile tugs at my lips.

“Sol,” she whispers, voice husky with need as her hand trails down my chest. Lower, sliding into my boxers to stroke my cock.

“Mmm.” The tug of arousal sends streaks of fire through my body, lighting me up. I blink, and the fuzzy hotel room comes into focus. Cool air kisses my skin and the warmth from her body is gone. I reach for her, to pull her under me and finish what she started, but the sheets are cold. The bed is empty.

I scrub my hands down my face and sit up. It's always the same. Every fucking morning for two years. There's a stone lodged in my chest where my heart used to be, and I swear it grows heavier by the day.

Why can't I forget her?

I've asked myself that a hundred thousand times or more since the morning I woke to find she'd gone. I spent one night with Emma. *One*. And ever since, she's haunted me like a ghost.

I've searched for her, dreamed of her... hell, I even rebuilt Belle Grove because she'd toured a plantation and wished she could live in one. All for a woman who felt like fate. Like *home* to a weary soldier who'd just returned stateside after months of deployment.

Shoving out of bed, I stomp to the shower, strip down, and stand under the hot spray, letting it fall on my shoulders and relax the muscles. I'm still half hard from the dream and it pisses me off.

It wasn't supposed to be more than sex. In the chaos of Mardi Gras, she became separated from her friends. I rescued her from some unwanted attention, sobered her up, and planned to take her back to her hotel. Instead, we talked for hours. Then I took her to my bed. The sex was

mind-blowing, but there was also something more. Emma was funny and sweet, and so damn sexy in her little kitty costume.

It should have been a pleasant memory of a great one-night stand. I didn't know, not until days later, that she had become more than that to me.

My alarm goes off in the other room, reminding me I've got shit to do. I wash up and shut the shower off. I'm just reaching for the towel when my phone rings. Only one person calls me this early. Wrapping the towel around my hips, I march toward the bedroom and grab my phone, water dripping everywhere.

"Don't you fucking sleep?" I growl in greeting.

"About as much as you do," Derek replies with an annoying chuckle.

The man's probably on his third cup of coffee. He's also not wrong. Neither one of us sleep much these days, haunted by things that we can't control. "Yeah, I know. What's up?"

Derek's been one of my business partners at Citadel Securities for over two years. We served together in the same covert unit, developing a brotherhood deeper than blood. I would do anything for him. When he suggested we retire early and start our own security business, I was in. So was the rest of our team. We only had a few more missions left in us. The brutal demand on our bodies was taking its toll. Who knew when the next mission would unintentionally be our last?

Citadel was literally a lifesaver. It gave us focus, a way to transition back into the civilian world and still use our skills to help people. Plus, we choose our own jobs, whether it's hostage rescue, guarding the wealthy, or in my case, finding people.

"Have any leads on Knight?" Derek asks.

Tristan Knight was a member of our unit for just under a year. He was injured in a sniper attack and transferred back stateside. No one has heard from him since. One day, he was just gone.

Like Emma.

I squeeze my eyes closed and focus on our conversation. "Not yet. I'm going to see Wallace in a few hours. He should know where to start."

Derek is silent for a moment. "You got this or do I need to send Linc?"

Lincoln Wolf is another member of our old unit and now Citadel. "I'm good." I can find anyone. Anyone but *her*.

“Let me know what Wallace says and give him my regards. I haven’t seen him since he retired to get married.”

James Wallace was our commanding officer for years. He remarried a little over four years ago after receiving a full retirement from the service. We were on a mission at the time and never had a chance to meet his new wife. I hope to today when I visit. Wallace was like a father to me, and I want to meet the woman he gave up his career for. She must be something special.

“I’ll tell him.”

Derek sighs and it’s heavy. “You dreamed of her again.”

It’s not a question. He knows me better than most. “Yeah. But don’t worry—”

“Do me a favor while you’re out,” Derek cuts in.

“What?”

“Get laid. Use that rockstar face of yours, find a woman, and fuck her brains out. Get Emma out of your system once and for all.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?” I’ve gone out with gorgeous women who were all too happy to spend time with me. Except a single kiss was all it took to break the mood. I couldn’t help but compare them to Emma. Sealing the deal became impossible.

“No. I don’t think you’ve *tried*. The Sol Steele I knew from our unit never let anything stop him from what he intended to do. Stop punishing yourself and move on.”

He’s right. I can’t go on like this, waking up every morning to the ghost of a woman that I barely knew. I can’t be in love with her. Even if I find her again, she can’t possibly live up to the woman I’ve made her out to be in my mind.

“Loud and clear,” I reply. I’ll find someone else. I have to.

Three hours later, I park my truck in the driveway of a two-story brick house in a quiet neighborhood in Olney, Maryland. It’s a nice place. Exactly what I pictured for Commander Wallace when I heard he was settling down. He deserves it, and any other happiness he can carve out of this life.

At my knock, a woman in her mid-fifties answers the door. Her russet hair brushes her shoulders, and a kind smile lights her eyes.

“You must be Mr. Steele. Come in. James has told me so much about you,” she says, holding the door open.

“Thank you, ma’am. I hope you know to only believe about half of that.” I step inside a warm foyer that smells like cookies and remove my hat.

The woman laughs. “Half is generous. I only believe about a third, but that’s what makes it entertaining.” She holds out her hand. “I’m Janice, James’s wife. He’s on the phone but should be finished in a few minutes. Let me take your coat. Want some coffee?”

“Please.” I shrug out of my coat. Janice hangs it on an antique coat rack, and I follow her down the short hallway. She chats amiably as she leads me to the living room, telling me about the house and the updates they’re making on it.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable while I get your coffee. I’ll let James know you’re here. He was so excited when you called. He was like a boy at Christmas.” Her smile is soft when she touches my arm. “I’m glad you came. You mean an awful lot to him, Mr. Steele.”

“He’s special to me too, ma’am. And you can call me Sol, or Solomon.”

“Call me Janice. It feels like we’re family already.”

She leaves then, giving me a few minutes to myself.

The living room is comfortable, with a couple of plush couches and several full bookshelves. There’s a fire burning in the hearth, taking the chill of early spring out of the air, and I wander closer, noting the picture frames on the mantle. Most are of Wallace’s wedding, though there’s one of our old unit that catches my eye. It was taken in Kandahar a lifetime ago. Damn, we look young. I’ll have to remember to give Derek shit for that crappy beard he tried to grow.

Next to it is a photo of James and Janice at a winery on their wedding day. His smile says all I need to know. Janice is good for him.

I skim the other pictures of the wedding party while thinking through the questions I want to ask Wallace about Knight. He’s almost my last hope of finding the man. Maybe he will—

My heart stutters, then slams in my chest when I realize that I’m looking at a picture of Janice in her wedding gown, arm in arm with a young woman with familiar honey blonde hair and amber eyes that make her skin glow.

It’s an effort to draw a full breath.

There, smiling back at the camera, is the woman I’ve sought for over two years. Emma. *My Emma.*

I don’t know how long I stand there, staring at that picture before Janice returns.

“Here you go, Sol. I brought some cookies fresh from the oven as well. James will just be a few more minutes.”

When I don't respond, she joins me. “Is everything okay? You look pale.”

Words clog my throat, along with a well of emotion that puts my fondness for Wallace to shame.

“I see you found the wedding pictures. I know James wished you and the other guys had attended.”

“We were out of the country.” My throat feels scraped raw, and still I can't look away from that photo. The universe is fucking with me. That's the only explanation. How is it that the woman I've craved for years is someone Wallace knows?

“Do you know my daughter?” Janice asks, obviously noting my fixation on the photo.

“Your daughter.” My eyes slide closed as the realization hits me. Janice's daughter. Now James's step-daughter.

“Emma Foster?” Janice says.

I open my eyes because I can't tear them away from the sight of her, even for a few seconds. She's as gorgeous as I remember. Younger. This picture must have been taken a couple of years before I met her. Oh fuck. I slept with Wallace's step-daughter. No, it's worse than that. I had a *one-night stand* with her. I scrub my hand down my face, still trying to drag in a full breath while battling both shock and the terrible realization that my heart doesn't give a damn. She could be his flesh and blood, and I'd still want her with every fiber of my being.

Janice sucks in an audible breath. “Sol, not Saul.”

“What?” I'm barely listening. Wallace will know where Emma is, but how can I ask him without revealing our history? Or that I'd take her to my bed for a month the second I got the chance?

She grips my arm and turns me, something like wonder in her expression. “She had the spelling wrong. It's S-O-L, not S-A-U-L. You're him, aren't you?”

What is she talking about? “Him?”

“You know my daughter. You're Emma's Sol.”



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