



Boone

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: Last time he chose her over his mission. Now she's the only mission that matters.

Boone Daniels had made a choice. He could've either taken out the target of his mission, Nico Midnight or rescued the Little prisoner he'd stumbled across. The prisoner whose lavender eyes had claimed his heart.

Tildi Lewis recognized Boone's sacrifice. And that one day, he'd realize he'd made the wrong choice. But if she could stay out of trouble, maybe she wouldn't lose her new home, new friends and family, and most of all, the new Daddy of her dreams.

But when Midnight follows them to Wild River Ranch, Tildi's future depends on Boone's ability to defeat the man bent on destroying them both.

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CHAPTER 1

What had she been thinking? This was a complete disaster. Tildi blamed it on the fact she'd been at sea for three weeks on a freaking yacht with no land in sight. How was her brain supposed to work in these conditions?

"Come on, little girl. Unless you're conceding defeat, it's your turn." Grif grinned from the helm of the *Midnight's Mistress*. To enemies around the country, he might be Griffen Turner, super deadly commando dude, but to her, he was the super deadly steersman dude. He took the helm of the *Midnight's Mistress* more than anyone else.

Grif cleared his throat.

"Stop rushing me!" Frowning, she tried to concentrate. It was doubly hard since her table sat right next to the galley where Dutch was frying bacon. This was so unfair!

She could never think of things at the spur of the moment. Why had she challenged Grif in the first place? She blamed the early morning wakeup call her Daddy had given her that morning... well, every morning. Not that she was complaining. Especially since her princess parts still quivered at the thought of everything Boone had done to her.

"Oh! I've got one. Are you ready?"

"Go ahead, hit me with your best shot." Grif crossed his arms and waited.

"Okay. How did the hamburger bun introduce his girlfriend to his family?"

Grif shook his head. "I give up." Grif stared down at his seat, appearing to brace.

"Meet Patty," Boone called as he came up from the hatch.

"Daddy! You're stealing my punchlines." Tildi tried to sound angry, but she must have done it wrong because he laughed as he sat down beside her at the table.

Grif and Dutch groaned. "That's awful, Tildi-Lou. Even for a dad joke," Dutch said, but she saw his lips twitch.

"Doesn't matter. I still got a point. That puts me ahead seven to two." She grinned at them.

"Only because you study them while I'm working. That's cheating if you ask me." Grif never lost his grin.

Tildi couldn't hold back an affronted gasp. She was not a cheater. "Is not! You take that back."

"Aren't you supposed to be navigating or something?" Boone scowled at Grif. "We should be close to the coast. How long until we hit the waterway in Portland?"

Grif glanced at the control panel. "I'd say about two hours."

Two hours gave her barely enough time to get packed and ready to go. She was meeting the mysterious Sevin Midnight. If the yacht he'd let them use was anything to go by, she needed time to dress and get decked out in the appropriate clothes.

What did you wear when meeting a bajillionaire? She tried to remember the way women dressed at the parties she'd once served hors d'oeuvres at before Nico Midnight had kidnapped her from one of them.

Come to think of it, since it was Sevin's father who had kidnapped her, she didn't care if he was impressed or not. She did, however, care if Boone was impressed. She wanted him to be proud of her. He'd done so much for her. The least she could do was not embarrass him.

Hopping up, she headed for the master cabin. At least, she tried. Boone caught her by the wrist before she made it three steps.

"Where do you think you're going, bluebell?"

"I need to pick out something to wear for when we meet Sevin. It has to be perfect, and that will take time since I've never met a decent mafia guy before."

He had to be a decent mafia guy. Her Daddy wouldn't have anything to do with Sevin if he was like his father, Nico. Please don't let him be like his father.

With a tug on her wrist, Boone pulled her into his lap. "You've got plenty of time to do that. Right now, you need to eat your breakfast."

She shook her head. Daddies didn't know what it took for a girl to get ready for something as important as meeting a mafia guy. All they had to do was take a shower and remember not to show up naked. She'd witnessed more than one man at some of those parties who had forgotten that second part. She shuddered at the memory.

"But Daddy, I don't have enough time. Not when it's this important."

He leveled her with one of those Daddy looks he was so good at. "What is important right now is you eating something for breakfast. Dutch pulled out all the stops this morning. Look at the spread. You need to eat to build back your strength. A year of eating the crap they fed you is bad for your health. Do we need to have a reminder talk about eating nutritious food at every meal?"

It hadn't taken her long to realize that talk was one of those Daddy code words for something else. The last thing she needed today was to wind up over her Daddy's knee getting her butt smacked.

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“What if I’m not hungry?” As soon as the words left her mouth, her stomach growled so loud they probably heard it in Washington State.

Boone didn’t miss it, either. “Luckily, that doesn’t appear to be the problem. Now, how easy do you want it to be to sit down and eat some breakfast?”

Grr. “Fine. But after I finish, can I go get ready?”

“Yes, bluebell. Once you’ve eaten you can try on clothes to your heart’s content.” When she attempted to wiggle off his lap, he placed his hand on her thigh. “You stay where I put you, little girl. You can eat while you’re sitting on my lap. That way, I can make sure none of the food makes it into your napkin.”

Yeah, she’d gotten her bottom roasted for that. He didn’t need to worry, once was enough. With a sigh, she sat in his lap as he fed her breakfast.

It really was good. The fruit was perfect, and Dutch had a way of getting bacon the crispiest ever without burning it. Before she’d been kidnapped, she’d bought pre-cooked bacon she only had to warm up in the microwave after her landlord threatened to kick her out if she started one more fire in her kitchen.

Four rings of pineapple, three rashers of bacon, two scrambled eggs, and a partridge in a pear tree later, Boone finally decided she’d had enough.

“What do you say to Dutch?” Boone asked as she hopped off his lap.

“Thank you, Dutch,” she yelled as she raced out of the room.

“Matilda Jayne Lewis, what’s the rule about running?”

Geez, her Daddy had a thing about running. “Don’t,” she called back, slowing down to a race-walking pace. “Sorry, Daddy!”

He might have said something about being sorry soon, but she was already headed downstairs. Thank goodness.

After trying on every outfit in the closet Sevin kept stocked, Tildi had narrowed it down to three choices. She had no idea which one would be best. Without a girlfriend to ask, she had no choice but to ask the guys. She wanted to wear the one Boone liked best.

The first outfit was a strapless cranberry red dress with a white lace overlay of tiny flowers. She couldn’t reach the zipper, so she’d have to get her Daddy to do her up. She headed up top, looking everywhere before she found him scanning the horizon with binoculars. She jumped in front of him, blocking his view.

Boone didn’t move. “Now who could be blocking my line of sight?” Then, lowering the binoculars, he ran his gaze over her. “Now that is quite the outfit. Come here and let me help.”

Turning her back to him, she waited for him to do up the zipper before turning back to face him. The look on his face warmed her chest and made her lady bits pulse. “You like it?” She caught her bottom lip in her teeth and waited for his answer.

“What’s not to like, bluebell? Turn around so I can see all of it.”

Pretending she was a ballerina, she spun around. Only her ballerina was on steroids, so her skirt flared out. Boone grabbed her around the waist to steady her, but he gripped too tight at the bottom of her ribs.

““No!” Squealing, she automatically grabbed his hands. “Stop, Daddy. Stop! I’m really, really ticklish, Daddy. And I probably shouldn’t have told you that. But seriously, I’ll knock us both out of the boat. I’ll be good. I promise.”

His fingers relaxed. Thank God.

“I could have hurt you, Daddy. You have to be careful.”

“I didn’t realize how ticklish you are, babygirl. I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Was he joking? He didn’t sound like it. She was the most ticklish person on the planet. When someone grabbed her, she had no control over how her body reacted.

She’d almost given a boy a concussion once when he jumped out and grabbed her ribs as she walked through a doorway with a solid wooden door. Before she could stop herself, she’d grabbed the door and slammed it into his head, sending him to the ground. It had served him right, but she wouldn’t want to do anything to hurt her new Daddy.

“Seriously, Daddy. I can be lethal. I could have knocked you overboard. Then I would have had to jump in and save you, which would be problematic since I still can’t swim.”

Boone kept a straight face, but she didn’t miss the twinkle in his eye. “I’ll be more careful next time. And as soon as we get to the ranch, I’ll teach you how to swim. I love your dress. Is that for the family Christmas?”

“No. Well, I guess I could wear it there, too. But mainly this dress is for dinner tonight at Sevin’s house.”

The twinkle disappeared from his eye. As a matter of fact, it changed all the way to a scowl. “Absolutely not.” His voice sounded like a gunshot.

Daddies could be very confusing. “But I thought you liked it.”

“I do. When you’re just with me. I was stretching it to say you could wear it around the family, but come to think of it, my brothers don’t need to see those gorgeous legs, either. And you’re damn sure not wearing it around Sev and his men. Find something else.”

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Forget confusing. Daddies could be plain weird. “But, Daddy?—”

“Go. Change.” His scowl grew darker.

He was worried other people would see her. If he liked it, why did that matter? Was he ashamed of her? It had never occurred to her that, though these past few weeks had been idyllic, that might change when they left the ship. “I thought you liked it. If you like it, why do you want me to change?”

After a moment of silence, the kind that made her bottom clench, Boone seemed to come to a decision. Catching the promise of consequences in the set of his firm jaw, Tildi decided questions could come later. Much later.

She held up her hands in surrender. “Fine. This was only one of the three I’m trying to choose between. I’ll be right back.” She left Boone muttering to himself about going straight home and calling Sev later. Returning to the stateroom, she tried on the next outfit.

She didn’t even get to say anything when she showed him the off-the-shoulder little black dress. As soon as she got to the top of the stairs, he yelled out, “Next.”

Sheesh! The only outfit left was a white, eyelet, lace dress with capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. If he didn’t like that one, she would have to wear either her jeans with a cable knit sweater or her bathrobe.

CHAPTER 2

Boone shook his head as Tildi flounced back toward the stairs. The thought of her wearing one of those first two dresses to a mafia dinner party hosted by Sev and his men made him want to punch something. He'd be punching someone before the night was over if anyone looked at her twice. That wouldn't be good. He had too much bad news to deliver to start his visit with a fight.

Come to think of it, he should probably have a talk with his brothers. They'd never make a play for his girl, so long as they understood she was his and would be forever.

He should probably include the men at Wilder Security in that, too. They weren't related to him by blood, but they were still his brothers. Their bond had been forged in fire, but it was just as strong. He'd hate to have to beat the shit out of one of them.

Hell, he might as well put posters up all over the town of Wilder making sure all the men knew she'd been claimed. Yeah, overprotective possessive asshole much? He couldn't help but wince at the reaction his bluebell would have if she caught sight of a poster like that.

Did he even have the right to keep her from dating other men? The very thought gutted him. She was his. But she was so young. She'd never really dated. Her life had been completely controlled by her father. Dating like a normal teenager hadn't fit into her plans. She'd hated that man so much she'd run away at eighteen, and that only made her life worse.

He loved her with all his heart. Yes, it was fast. But that didn't mean it wasn't real. He knew because he'd been through many relationships that weren't. Tildi never had that chance. Would she resent him one day if he didn't give her the chance to explore her feelings?

Not to mention she'd just been through a year of torture and pure hell. To be kidnapped by a man old enough to be her father—hell, Nico Midnight could be her

grandfather—and held prisoner for a year? Never knowing when he'd show up to force her into his bed? At least that had never happened. She'd been through enough abuse as it was, but at least she was spared that.

“Um, Boone?” Tildi's timid voice pulled him from his thoughts.

She stood in the hatch of the stairs leading to the cabins below, shading her eyes with her hand. His teeth clenched as the wind caught her skirt and exposed light pink panties with red hearts. Instead of going below as he'd instructed, she stared into the vast blue sky.

What the hell was she looking at when she ought to be hightailing it below to change out of that dress before he gave into his cock and bent her over the closest bench seat to fuck her senseless? She had no idea how beautiful and sexy she was.

He was about to tell her to get below before he turned her ass the color of those adorable hearts when she twisted around to look at him. She raised a pointed finger to the area she'd been watching. “What's that? It doesn't look like a bird.”

Boone's gaze followed the direction of her finger, and his body went on full alert. That was no bird. Was it a plane? No, the way it bobbed, it flew more like a helicopter.

Oh, fuck!

“What is it?” she asked again.

Boone was already on the move. “Tildi, get below right now and stay there until I come and get you.” Lifting a seat cushion, he pulled out the first weapon he could reach. “Dutch! Grif! Get out here!”

“But—”

He didn't have time for questions. He needed her safe so he could focus on the threat.

“I said get below! Now!”

Eyes wide, she nodded and raced down the stairs.

The next thing Boone knew, bullets from the helicopter riddled the side of the yacht. The extremely expensive, borrowed from the Cosa Nostra, yacht. Pings and thuds riddled the air with every puncture as he returned fire. Within seconds, Grif and Dutch joined in the firefight from the flybridge and the swim platform.

Even though he hadn't seen the man yet, there was no doubt the helicopter belonged to Nico Midnight. It wasn't enough Midnight had murdered a member of the elite Pararescue Jumpers team Boone had led. No, now the man wanted to kill his babygirl. That or kidnap her again and make her wish she was dead. Yeah, that wasn't going to happen while Boone still had breath in his body.

Was Midnight on that chopper, or had he just sent some of his soldiers? Boone prayed he'd come to see to the job personally. Nothing would be better than downing this chopper and sending Nico and his men straight to hell.

Boone caught movement to his left and turned just in time to see Tildi's head pop back up from the stairwell holding the pistol he'd been teaching her to use for the past few weeks. Cold dread wrapped an icy fist around his heart.

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She was nowhere near ready to take part in a gunfight. Not that it would matter if she were. Doing his best to keep his head down, he ran to the stairwell and put his body between her and the helicopter.

“Matilda Jayne. Get your ass back down those stairs right now.”

“I can help!” she said, aiming her Glock in the vague direction of the chopper now headed back toward them.

She got off one shot, lowering her gun when Dutch cried out in pain.

She threw her gun down. “I shot him! Oh my god, I shot Dutch!”

Dutch dropped to his ass, back to the wall. Blood ran through his fingers as he tried to cover the wound on his arm. For a second, Boone thought Tildi was right about shooting him, but that was all the time he got because Tildi tried to scramble past him to get to Dutch.

Pinning her as gently as he could to the wall, he held her in place and twisted to call, “Dutch, you all right?”

Dutch pulled his bloody hand away from his arm and inspected the wound. “Yes, it’s just a graze. That asshole with the scope got off a lucky shot.” He picked his rifle back up and resumed firing at the chopper.

Tildi still fought to get away from Boone’s hold. “I need to help him. I shot him. Will he live? Is he still breathing?”

“You didn’t shoot him, babygirl. He’s okay. Now you need to get?—”

He broke off and covered her as bullets flew again, this time hitting the yacht not five feet in front of them. Tildi screamed, covering her head and dropping to the floor. The helicopter buzzed the ship but swung back around for another pass.

This time, the door on the side of the helicopter slid open as they flew past. Nico stood in the open doorway, staring straight at Boone and Tildi as they passed. Damn it! Boone had his hands on Tildi instead of his rifle, so he missed the chance to shoot.

As the copter arced around for another pass, Dutch and Grif continued to fire while Tildi continued to scream. He had to get her to safety so he could kill her later himself. What the hell had she been thinking?

“Bluebell!” Boone lifted her to her feet. He yelled over the gunfire and her screams, shaking her shoulders to break through her hysteria. “I’m gonna need you to stop screaming. I got this.”

She was scared. He got that. Getting shot at wasn’t his favorite part of the job, either. But he needed to be able to communicate with his men. He couldn’t do that with Tildi going all banshee in his ear.

Before the copter could complete the return pass, Boone grabbed Tildi’s arm, spun her around, and swatted her ass. Then he marched her down the stairs all the way to the marble tub in their bathroom. “Get in the bathtub and wait for me to come down when this is over. You do not want me to see you before that, do you understand?”

Tears streaming down her face, she nodded. “Y-yes, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, you’re not, but you will be.” He glared down at her. Then, planting a hard kiss on her lips, he headed back up to help Dutch and Grif.

Dutch and Grif were doing their part to take the chopper down, but it wasn't going to be enough. Their submachine guns didn't have the power to penetrate the hull of the cockpit. They needed to shift their target.

"Target the shooters, not the chopper," Boone yelled.

"This ain't our first rodeo, Bossman," someone called back from the ship.

"Shut up and shoot, Dutch," Boone yelled again.

"On it," Dutch answered.

True to his word, Dutch opened fire. A second later, one of the men leaning from the open door of the chopper jerked before plummeting to the icy water below. Boone spared the time to look up at Dutch and give him a chin lift.

Grifter leaned on the seating stretched across the back of the flybridge up top, shooting at Midnight's men as well. They all wanted to be the one who fired the kill shot that sent Midnight back to hell.

If he'd known how the mission to take the mafia boss out would go, he'd have included Ryker. He was their best marksman.

"Dutch, I need heavier cover fire," he shouted.

"You got it," Dutch said.

Rapid bursts of gunfire ripped through the early morning skies. Thankfully, Dutch's aim was true, causing the helicopter to swing out in evasive maneuvers.

Boone fought back the need to go check on his Little girl and make sure she was safe.

He'd always been overprotective of those in his care, but somehow, in a matter of weeks, he'd grown incredibly possessive as well. That hadn't happened in a long time.

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Yet this Little girl, with her pink hair, spunk, and sass, had reached a place in his heart he'd thought was damaged beyond repair. Hard times revealed true friends, or so the saying went. Maybe that was it. Whatever the reason, as a Daddy, he'd never felt drawn to a Little so fast.

The helicopter pulled back, but not before Boone spotted Midnight again, still standing in the open sliding door, staring down at him. He stepped back, and seconds later, his voice came over the helicopter's loudspeaker. "That makes the second thing you've stolen from me, Boone. The woman I could forgive, women are a dime a dozen. The same with my men. If they can't keep themselves alive, I don't need them. But then you stole my ship. That was a serious mistake."

Boone cursed under his breath. He'd gotten lax with their security. It never crossed his mind that Nico would attack them this close to United States waters. He should have had someone watching. Now Dutch was injured, and they were lucky he was the only one.

He wanted to let loose his rage and empty his magazine into the helicopter. But that would be a waste of ammunition. And there was no way Boone was letting Nico know he'd gotten to him. He'd wait. Nico's death would come soon, and it would be at his hands.

Taking advantage of their attention, Midnight continued his rant. "Tell that bastard son of mine I'll be having words with him about this latest betrayal soon. And when I get the woman back, I'm going to fuck her until she bleeds. Then I'll pass her around to my men. If she isn't dead when they finish with her, I'll put a bullet in her head. It's what I should have done to your last woman." Finished with his threats,

Midnight's copter backed away.

The only one getting a bullet to the head would be Nico Midnight. Even though he knew he couldn't make the shot, Boone raised his rifle and fired. The shot went wide, but he kept firing until he emptied the chamber.

Midnight ducked back inside the chopper amid the hail of bullets before stepping back into the doorway wearing a smirk. Still, one look at the man's face as the copter turned back for land told Boone he hadn't seen the last of the man.

"Until we meet again, my friend," Midnight yelled over the roar of the blades. After he disappeared back inside his helicopter, it turned back toward wherever they'd come from.

After he checked on Dutch and Grif, Boone headed below deck to check on Tildi. He found her curled up on the floor of the tub, her knees tucked into her chest.

He had to give it to Sev. The man did nothing by half measures. It had shocked the shit out of him when Sev had offered to let him use the Midnight's Mistress, even after learning Nico was Boone's target.

It shouldn't have. There was no love lost between Sev and Nico. There hadn't been for a long time. Nico hated Sev's mother. Sev had never shared why, but as the oldest of Nico's four sons, Sev would inherit the Midnight throne whether the old man liked Sev's mother or not.

That was good news for everyone. Nico used his organization to traffic everything possible, including guns, drugs, and women. He had connections throughout the Northwest, making him a powerful threat. Though he was no boy scout, Sev wanted to take the family in a different direction. It might not be exactly legitimate or even legal, but it would be a far cry from the shit his father was doing. Sev realized his

father was a threat to everyone, including the Cosa Nostra itself.

That was between the two of them, though. Boone knew better than to get mixed up in Cosa Nostra business. But with that look on the senior Midnight's face as his chopper had turned back, Boone might not have a choice. He'd have to warn Sev that his father knew about the yacht. He'd need to be prepared for whatever retribution his father threw his way.

But that was a worry for tomorrow. Right now, he needed to have a discussion with one naughty little girl. She'd turned her body so her back was to him. "We need to have a chat, don't we, Little girl?"

CHAPTER 3

Boone gave her time to respond to his question, not that he needed to hear it. Her body language said it all. His Little girl was miserable, and he needed to help her get rid of all the destructive emotions she had bottled up inside.

When she chose to ignore him, he removed her without a word, lifting Tildi from the tub and setting her on her feet. She shivered as she stood before him. Whether from cold, shock, or fear, he didn't know. It didn't matter.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked back and forth as tears spilled over her cheeks. "Is Dutch okay? I'm so sorry. I'd never hurt him on purpose. Not ever."

"Everyone knows you'd never hurt anyone on purpose, bluebell." Well, except maybe herself. They needed to work on that. He made a mental note to have Maggie Maguire, a counselor specializing in PTSD and childhood trauma, come out to the ranch once they were settled.

His poor, sweet babygirl. How she still had such a tender heart after everything she'd been through the past year, he didn't know. He just thanked God she did. She was soft and tender and so damn generous. She was everything he wasn't. But she had to learn to control her impulses. If she was going to be with him, and that wasn't up for debate, she had to be able to exercise some self control.

Today, her actions had terrified him. Stray bullets killed goodhearted little girls just as easily as meanspirited ones. He could have lost her so easily. He had to make sure she understood that.

But he could relieve her guilt about Dutch. "You didn't shoot Dutch, bluebell. He was grazed by a shot fired from the helicopter."

She stared up at him, studying his face to see if he'd told the truth. "Do you promise?" Her voice shook with emotion.

"Yes, I promise." Had his girl ever been around anyone who loved and respected her enough to be honest with her? He put another mark beside the General's name on his mental scorecard. Many more, and her father wouldn't survive the conversation he planned to have with the man. "I will never lie to you, Tildi. In my line of work, there may be things I can't tell you. When it happens, that's what I'll say. I will answer whenever I can. And I will never, ever lie."

She continued to search his face but finally nodded. "Thank you. I understand now why you didn't want me to help. I spent all that time practicing, but when the time came to use what I learned, you made me hide inside. It didn't seem fair. Now I can see that you were right. I'm sorry I didn't mind you, Daddy. I could have gotten you hurt or even killed. Or Grif. Or Dutch. I understand if you can't forgive me. I was really, really bad. You've been so wonderful, and I keep ruining everything."

She blinked in a furious battle to control her tears but lost. Hiding her face in her

hands, she leaned forward and sobbed.

“Baby, no.” He pulled her up to face him, but she closed her eyes. With her face cupped in his hands, he wiped away her tears with the pads of his thumbs. “You could never ruin anything. Everyone is fine. We aren’t talking about what happened. We’re talking about what could have happened.” Her eyes remained closed. “Look at me, Tildi.”

She shook her head.

This girl. What kind of harsh judgment had she endured growing up? From what he’d learned, there were very few allowances made for failure. Now all he wanted to do was carry her to the bed and make her forget about everything that had happened. But that’s not what she needed. She said she understood, but Boone wasn’t convinced.

He lowered his tone and made his request a command. “Matilda Jayne. Look at Daddy.” Her gaze shot to his, lips parted in a silent gasp. “You’ve apologized, and I have forgiven you already. Do you understand?”

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Her chin still quivered as she answered. “My head does, but my heart is having a hard time believing it. That’s not how it works.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “How what works, babygirl?”

“Getting past a mistake. Saying you’re sorry isn’t all it takes. That’s not enough.”

“Why isn’t that enough?”

Her brows scrunched as she considered his question. “I don’t know. It just isn’t. Anyone can say words. Words are meaningless.”

Those didn’t sound like her words. That sounded more like words her father had thrown at her when she didn’t live up to his expectations. Words that had bruised her. “If I hurt you in some way and told you I was sorry. And you believed I meant it. That wouldn’t be enough for you?”

She frowned. “Of course, it would.”

“I believe you meant what you said. Was I wrong?”

She shook her head. “No, Daddy. You weren’t wrong at all. I did mean it. I feel horrible.”

“Then why shouldn’t I believe you and forgive you?”

Her frown morphed into confusion. “I... I mean, I don’t know. I guess maybe you

should. But if I'm forgiven, why don't I feel better?"

Now they were getting somewhere. "That is a good question, little one. One we'll talk about in a few minutes. First, I want to make sure you aren't hurt. Turn around."

When she hesitated, he dropped his hands to her shoulders and turned her to face the bathtub. Drawing down the zipper, he admired the smooth skin of her back. He slid her dress down, running his fingers down her thighs as he went.

Goosebumps pebbled her skin. She shivered and pressed her thighs together.

"Step out of the dress, bluebell."

Once her dress was off, he ran his hands over every inch of her body to make sure she hadn't been harmed. When he found no cuts or bruises, he sat down on the side of the tub and pulled her between his legs. "Now, let's talk about those feelings."

Tildi's eyes softened with relief. "Um, when you say talk, do you mean talk or talk?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answer to, little girl. Did I or did I not tell you to go below and stay there until I came and got you?"

"You needed help, Daddy. I just wanted to help."

"That wasn't the question. Did I tell you to stay below until I came and got you or not?"

She snagged her bottom lip with her teeth and dropped her gaze to his thighs. He could see her trying to come up with an answer that would get her out of trouble, but she might as well give up. Nothing was keeping him from blistering her butt.

He tilted his head to one side and then the other trying to ease the tension in his neck and stem his rising tide of anger. “Do I need to get my belt?”

Her startled lavender gaze shot back to his face. “No, Daddy. You did say that, but I wanted to help.”

“I get that, Tildi. But the way you help the most is by doing what I tell you to do. Instead, you put yourself in danger, as well as everyone else on this ship.”

Her chin quivered, and he steeled his heart. “I thought I could help.”

“I understand what you thought. What you need to understand is the best way for you to help is to obey me when I tell you something. But you didn’t do that, did you?”

Tildi shifted back and forth on her feet and reluctantly shook her head.

Good. He was getting somewhere. “Grif, Dutch, and I had semi-automatic weapons, and we’ve been in situations like that gunfight more times than I can count. We needed to be able to concentrate on taking out the threat. When you disobeyed Daddy and marched yourself back up those stairs, we couldn’t do that. We had to focus on keeping you safe. So, not only did you put yourself in danger, you endangered everyone else, too.”

She wasn’t able to hold back her tears. And damn if it didn’t break his heart to see them, but she had to learn a lesson from this. Life on a ranch had all sorts of dangers, not counting the ones that were probably going to follow them there.

She swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I wouldn’t ever want you or the guys to get hurt.”

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There was his tenderhearted girl. “I know you wouldn’t, babygirl. But you didn’t mind Daddy, did you?”

She shook her head again. “No, Daddy. I said I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, but being sorry isn’t a good enough consequence for disobeying me and putting yourself in danger. Is it?”

She shot her hands behind her to cover her backside. “No, Daddy,” she repeated.

“No. You were a very naughty girl. And what happens to naughty girls who break two of their rules?”

“They get a spanking.”

“Yes, they do. And by the time that spanking is over, they are very sorry little girls.”

“But I’m already sorry, Daddy.”

She only thought she was sorry now. When he got finished with her, she’d know what sorry really was. If she’d caught a bullet... his gut clenched, and he couldn’t finish the thought.

“Not as sorry as you’re going to be.”

Tildi stared down at his hands. He knew exactly what she was thinking. His hands were large and bore the callouses of a man used to working on a ranch.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.” Her voice wobbled, but firmed up when she added, “But I don’t love spankings.”

“Me either.” And that was the god’s honest truth.

He pulled her over his knees.

He didn’t pull her panties down. Not yet. That would come later. He wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her tight so she wouldn’t fall if she squirmed once he got started. And she was going to squirm.

Not making her wait, Boone spanked first one cheek then the other. He didn’t hold back. Not for this. Not when she could have died or gotten one of his men killed. He couldn’t bear the thought of her having to live with that kind of regret, so he put his whole arm into the effort of delivering that message.

“Ow. Oh. Oh! OW!” She strained against his hold. Her toes dug into the plush mat in front of the tub. “I’m sorry. Oh... owie... Daddy! Oh! I’m so sorry!”

He’d been right. She began to wiggle and squirm by the fifth swat of his hand. She was fighting by the tenth. By the fifteenth slap of his palm to her bottom her wiggles were growing frantic.

When he paused to pull her panties down to just below the curve of her cheeks, the bright, rosy pink of her normally pale ass filled him with satisfaction. “Let’s talk about obedience, naughty girl. Were you obeying Daddy when you came back up those stairs?”

“N-no!” she wailed.

“No.”Smack.“You.”Smack.“Were.”Smack.“Not.”Smack.

Boone punctuated each word with a hard swat. His Little girl would be feeling this for a day or two at least. She began to cry then, and not just a little. Loud, gasping sobs wrenched her whole body.

Boone paused again, flexing his hand. “And what are you going to do the next time I tell you to stay below deck?”

Her breathing was hitched, but she managed to get out an answer. “I-I-I’m g-going to st-stay be-below deck. P-p-promise. Ow, oh, OW!” she cried out as he gave her four more smacks, two to each cheek.

“I take obedience very seriously, little girl. Have I made that clear?”

Through her sniffing and hitched breaths, she nodded at the floor. “Y-yes, Daddy.”

“Good. Now let’s talk about you putting yourself in harm’s way.”

“C-can’t we be d-done, Daddy? Please?”

“I’m afraid not, babygirl.” He ran a finger under the elastic at the top of her panties and drew them all the way off. They would only be in the way at this point. “We’ve talked about this before, haven’t we?”

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“Yes, Daddy.”

He picked up the short bath brush on the side of the tub.

There was no need to waste time with words this go around. She knew what she'd done, so he focused on making sure she didn't want to do it again. She howled with the first smack to her already tender cheeks.

He never swatted the same place twice as he peppered every inch of her bottom. Once he had turned her ass a bright cherry red, he shifted his attention to the tops of her thighs. She kicked and thrashed, but he allowed her that. He finished up with ten smacks to the sensitive sit spots at the bottom curve of her ass.

At that point, she finally collapsed over his thighs and stopped fighting. He tossed the brush to the mat and helped her up to straddle his lap, rubbing her back and letting her cry it out.

“That's my good girl,” he said. “I don't ever want to have to do that again. But you are too precious to put yourself at risk like that. We have too much left to do. You're going to love the ranch, babygirl. The mountains, the Wild River, the endless plains of grass. Buffalo and Mustangs. You're going to love it. And my family is going to love you.”

He held her, talking softly and cuddling her until she fell asleep. Carrying her to their bed, he put her down for a nap. He lay down beside her and held her, thinking through his upcoming conversation with Sevin.

When he'd told Sev they needed to discuss Nico, Sev had insisted they have that conversation once they got to his house. Something in his friend's voice had been off. It would be good to see him again, but their conversation was not going to be pleasant. Something was happening in the Cosa Nostra and for the sake of his bluebell, Boone needed to know what it was.

Tildi pulled him from his thoughts as she rolled over so her back was to him, Puff clutched to her chest even in sleep. Snuggling back, she pressed her backside against his dick and used his arm as her pillow. His cock responded immediately, growing painfully hard.

With a groan, he resigned himself to a long night. She sighed and nestled in tighter against him. It took some time but eventually fatigue won out and he joined her in sleep.

CHAPTER 4

Tildi shifted in the well cushioned back seat of the luxurious Lexus LX600 that had been waiting for them at the port. Every bump and shift reminded her of the spanking she'd gotten earlier that day. She had really messed up.

Why had she thought she could help fend off a helicopter filled with men shooting at them? All she'd done was put everyone else in more danger. That was on top of the fact she was the cause of the danger in the first place.

If Boone hadn't had to rescue her from Nico Midnight's island compound, the man wouldn't be able to shoot at anyone ever again. Instead, her Daddy had chosen her. Now Nico wanted her back, though she had no idea why. All she knew was everything that happened earlier was because of her.

She'd almost tried to sneak away while the men were getting the yacht taken care of

once they docked. She should have. Then everyone's lives would be easier. That seemed the one thing she was good at. Running away. But she'd been too scared of being alone to even try. She'd allowed the snowcapped mountains along the horizon to distract her, wondering if any of them were close to Boone's ranch.

Selfish. She was so selfish. Now everyone was having to adjust their plans, their whole lives, all because of her. Tears stung her eyes as the cityscape thinned and the concrete of highways and buildings was replaced with lush green landscapes of neighborhoods and subdivisions. She couldn't hold back a snuffle.

Always paying her more attention than she deserved, Boone didn't miss it. "Are you all right, sweet girl?"

She nodded automatically. There was no need for him to worry about her with everything else he was dealing with. Especially since it was all her fault. "Me? I'm fine." She flashed him her brightest smile. The concern in his gaze told her she couldn't even smile right. "Really, Daddy. I'm fine. Well, my bottom still hurts a little bit, but I'm fine."

He studied her before his face relaxed into a grin. He bopped the tip of her nose with his finger, and her stomach fluttered. She loved when he did stuff like that. "That's what happens to Little girls who don't mind their Daddy. But if you remember all the rules we went over for how you are to behave at Sevin's house, I'll bet I can find a way to show you how daddies reward their good girls later tonight."

And just like that, the fluttering in her stomach sank straight to her core. Now she squirmed for a completely different and much more pleasant reason.

"Do we need to go over them again?" Boone asked, the playfulness now absent from his face.

“No, Daddy. I remember. I have to mind you and Grif and Dutch. I can’t go anywhere alone. And I’m not supposed to talk to anyone.”

“You can talk to anyone when I’m with you, Tildi. Just not when I’m not there. Are you sure you’re okay? I can change the plans if you aren’t comfortable.”

What had she ever done to deserve a man like Boone? She wasn’t about to cause more trouble than she already had. Everyone had a limit of how much they would take. She didn’t want to get any closer to his than she already was.

“No, Daddy. I’m good. I promise.”

“If you change your mind at any time, you just let me know and we’ll leave. Understand?”

She nodded and turned back to the window before he read something on her face she didn’t want him to see.

She tried to keep a handle on her feelings, telling herself how stupid it was to be scared when she had two super commando dudes and her Daddy with her, but it didn’t help. The closer they got to Sevin’s house, the tighter the knots in her stomach grew.

She pushed the button to crack the window, thinking the cold air might help settle her stomach. But the air was frigid, and Boone told her to close it with a, “You’re going to make yourself sick, babygirl.”

It probably wouldn’t have worked anyway. Outside solutions usually didn’t fix inside problems. At least, that’s what she’d read somewhere once.

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She needed to cowgirl up and get it together. No one liked a whiner. And the last thing she wanted to be was more of a burden. Sure, the man who'd kidnapped her a year ago was Sevin's father. But Sevin had been nothing but nice to her. Well, to Boone. Did he even know about her? Had her Daddy even mentioned her?

And how was it that a rancher commando Daddy like Boone knew people in the Cosa Nostra well enough to stop by their house anyway? Did they meet by accident one day at the movies? Or in a bar? One halfway between Wilder, Wyoming and Vancouver, Washington. She didn't think so.

And Boone was trying to kill Sevin's father. How could she trust someone who helped a person kill his own father? Not that she wasn't grateful. Ugh! It was so confusing.

"Holy fu... dge. Fudgesicles." She glanced at Boone, who stared at her with that single brow raised expression. Not good.

Arriving at Sevin's house hadn't helped her feel better at all. It wasn't a house at all. It was a compound. Just like all the ones she'd been held in for the past year.

Sure, it was nicer. A medieval compound with a castle like the last place she'd been held. This looked like a ritzy gated subdivision. But she'd had the same sick feeling in her stomach every time Nico had her moved.

The stone fence surrounding the property barred anyone from seeing anything. It was too high to climb without drawing attention. Plenty of gated communities had solid fences around them. That wasn't what made it stand out. As they'd driven down the

road leading to the main entrance, the manned gates along the fence made it different. She didn't know a lot, but she'd learned to spot someone carrying a gun under their suit jacket. Men with guns carried themselves differently.

The closer they got, the more she struggled to breathe. She needed to get a grip. This was part of Boone's world. That meant she needed to stop being such an idiot. No one else was panicking, and they had dealt with much worse things than she had.

Closing her eyes, she tried to picture fuzzy bunnies and unicorns. Only, within a few seconds, the bunny had a gun like the one those men on the chopper had used to shoot at them and the unicorn was sharpening his horn with a rasp until the point was extra sharp. So much for imaginary friends helping.

When they stopped at the main entrance and two scary looking men approached their SUV, she fought the urge to cower on the floor of the backseat. She buried her face in Boone's chest and did her best not to whimper.

One arm wrapped around her as he put a thick, calloused finger under her chin, tipping her gaze to meet his. Concern furrowed his brows as he took in her expression. "Hey. What's this? What's wrong, baby?"

She wanted to tell him, but the whir of the window lowering caught her attention.

"Can I help you?" the gorilla in the expensive suit asked.

Grif grinned, and when he spoke his voice had a country twang he'd never used before. "I sure hope so. I'm Griffen Turner, and this here is Dutch Holloway. We work for the big guy in the back, Boone Daniels. I think your boss is expectin' us."

"You got any weapons with you?"

Grif's grin disappeared, and his expression darkened. "What do you think?"

It was phrased like a question, but Grif's tone made it clear it was not.

The man in the suit didn't react at all. "You'll need to leave them here."

"That ain't going to happen, hoss."

The man's eyes were cold. "You can leave them by choice, or I can take them."

"You can try." Grif's grin returned, but no humor lit his words.

Silence fell like lead as Grif held the man's glare without blinking. The other goon's phone rang. Answering it, the man listened then nodded. He crossed to the man still having a stare down with Grif and mumbled something in his ear.

Without speaking or dropping his gaze, the man stepped back from the gate as it swung open.

"You have a good day," Grif said before pulling through the wrought iron gate.

She wiped her trembling hands on her thighs. Her heart raced, and her stomach dropped a notch with each tree they passed. The cedar-lined drive stretched on for what seemed an eternity, ending at a stark white mansion.

Oh, and the entire driveway was painted white. Who painted their driveway white? They probably had to hire someone full time just to paint it every day. They should have just painted the bricks yellow because it felt like they were headed toward a nasty version of Oz.

Panic rattled the thin bars of the cage she kept it locked in. This whole place was

nothing more than a sanitized version of the compounds she'd endured for the past year. As the pristine white prison—not prison, house—at the end of the drive, drew closer, her panic broke free and dread filled her lungs.

Breathing grew difficult as her throat tightened. Her chest burned, and spots floated before her eyes. She almost screamed when a large familiar hand landed on her arm and tugged.

“Tildi, are you breathing?”

The words came from far away.

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“Look at me, babygirl.”

She wanted to obey the voice. It was so insistent. But she couldn't take her eyes off the mansion drawing closer. Cold and imposing, it reminded her of all the magisterial buildings the General had dragged her to as a child. Their massive size and cold formality had terrified her, not that she could say that.

Fear equaled weakness to her father, or the General as he'd insisted his family call him. The General did not tolerate weakness.

“Fuck!” Worry laced the faraway voice.

She should offer it comfort. But that would mean letting her guard down, and she needed her guard up to face the great and ominous Midnight.

“Dutch, lower all the windows.”

Frosty wind smacked her face, causing her lungs to draw in sweet, clean air. It blew apart the vision of encroaching doom. The emotion sweeping through her threatened to overwhelm her control.

She sat in the back of the car, now cradled on her Daddy lap. He cupped her face so gently it shredded her control, and she burst into sobs.

“Talk to me, Tildi. What's wrong? What is going on in that incredible mind of yours? Tell me so I can fix it.” Boone ran his thumbs over her cheeks, wiping away her tears.

He was too far away. She threw herself against his chest. He smelled of salt and sandalwood and strength.

Tildi leaned against him and allowed his steady heartbeat to calm her. This was her Daddy. She could overcome any fear as long as he was with her. Especially silly, imaginary fears. Who couldn't overcome things like that?

“Are you ready to tell me what has you so upset you had a panic attack? Is it being near Sevin? I'd never put you in danger, Tildi. If I thought Sevin was anything like his father, we wouldn't come within a hundred miles of this place.”

She planted her forehead against his chest and nodded. He would. She had no idea why, but he was always there for her. And how was she repaying him? By acting like a total idiot.

She needed to be better. To be worthy of his love and attention. She needed to do whatever it took to earn her place by his side. That included not embarrassing him in front of his friend, Sevin.

“Nothing, Daddy. I just got in my own head for a minute, but I'm better now. I'm sorry to make a scene.”

His arms held her tighter. “You didn't make a scene, little one. You had a panic attack. And we are not leaving this car until you tell me what caused it.”

She had him so worried. See? Selfish.

Daddies like Boone didn't deserve selfish Littles. They deserved perfect Littles. She could be perfect if she tried hard enough. “It was nothing, Daddy. Promise. I was being silly, but now I stopped.”

He sat her up straight on his lap, leaving a vacuum where the warmth of his chest had been. She swallowed hard and tried not to see it as rejection.

“That isn’t how this works, little girl. I asked you a question, and we will sit in the car until you give me an answer. I don’t care if it takes all night.”

Stubborn Daddy.

Huffing out an aggrieved sigh, she attempted to come up with a reason that would satisfy him without giving too much away. “I just... I didn’t think about exactly what Sevin’s house and everything would look like. That’s all. See, it was stupid to panic just because of a tall thick fence and armed guards. Sheesh! What did I think it was going to be like, right? I mean, it’s not like I haven’t seen the same thing a dozen times in the past year. I shouldn’t have let it bother me. I won’t cause a scene again. I promise.”

Boone's hands gripped her hips so hard she feared she might have bruises. She must have really screwed up. Even more than she thought.

A muffled, “Fuck me,” came from the front seat. Looking up, she watched Dutch rub a hand across his face.

She’d forgotten Grif and Dutch were there.

Way to go, Tildi. She should have known she’d give too much away. She wasn’t very good at secrets.

“I’m sorry, bluebell. I should have realized Sev’s place would remind you of all the compounds you’ve been held at for the past year. We don’t have to stay here. I’ll phone him and tell him we’ll meet over the phone. Grif, let’s get out of here.”

“No!” She couldn’t let him change all his plans just for her. He needed to explain what had happened on their trip. “I’m okay now. Promise. I don’t want to cause any trouble. We can go in, and I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not putting you through staying somewhere that gives you flashbacks of everything you’ve dealt with, babygirl. You aren’t causing trouble. This is on me.”

Grif pulled underneath the porte cochere and slowed to a stop just as a tall man in a suit stepped out of the front door with several equally large men following behind. They prowled down the steps like a coalition of male lions. Every single one of them reminded her of the men who had held her captive.

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She'd always felt bad for the wounded gazelles at the watering holes on all those documentaries she'd had to watch as a child. Now she knew exactly how they felt. Unable to stop herself, she moved closer to Boone. If she could disappear behind him, she would.

Grif turned to look at Boone, a worried frown darkening his face when he saw her. "What do you want me to do, chief?"

Guilt and self-loathing swept through her. She might be Little, but that didn't mean she had to be weak. Littles were strong and brave. They wouldn't have stopped by Sevin's estate if her Daddy didn't need to talk to him.

She needed to pull up her big girl panties, at least for the next few minutes. She could do this. After all Boone had done for her, she could do this for him "Please, Daddy. I'll be fine. I promise."

Boone studied her before nodding his head. He turned his attention to Grif. "Grif, you're with Tildi. Keep the car running, and if she shows any signs of distress, tap the horn. We'll hop back in the car and head to the ranch. That would suit me just fine."

"He won't have to do that. You don't have to worry about me." She would be big and strong and brave. Even if it killed her.

He turned to her. "If you mean that, we're all heading out right now. I am not stepping one foot out of this car unless I have your promise that you'll tell Grif if we need to leave."

“But, Daddy?—”

“Don’t ‘but Daddy’ me, little girl. You are more important to me than Sevin Midnight. I want to talk to him in person so I can get a feel for what he’s thinking. But that is not a necessity. You are the only necessity in my life. Do you understand?”

It took all she could do not to stare at him, slack jawed.

This man.

Even in her best dreams no one said things like that to her. But if there was one thing she’d learned about Boone in the last three weeks, it was he was like Popeye the Sailor Man. He said what he meant and meant what he said.

“I understand, Daddy. Thank you.”

His answer was to pull her in for a quick, hard kiss that had her breath quickening for a much better reason.

“Dutch, you’re with me.”

“You got it, chief.”

The two of them joined Sev and his men at the bottom of the steps. Boone stood facing the SUV, and though he and Dutch talked to Sev and the muscular blonde man standing next to him, her Daddy kept his eyes on her the entire time with a smile on his face.

Grif tried to keep the conversation going but eventually gave up. Tildi couldn’t think about anything but Boone.

He stood beside men in bespoke suits, each costing as much as her last car, yet Boone was still the finest looking man she'd ever seen. He didn't need custom made clothes and Italian leather shoes.

He was the most remarkable man she'd ever met. It would be so easy to picture a life with him, but it was too soon for that. That wouldn't be smart. They were headed to his ranch, but there was no guarantee he'd want her to stay.

She needed to soak up all the memories she could, just in case it didn't last. It would be so easy to fall into thinking of him as her forever Daddy. She needed to slow her heart down.

Boone and Sev didn't talk long before they were slapping each other on the back and shaking hands. Her Daddy headed back to her, his long strides eating up the short distance.

His eyes burned, but not with anger. No, they burned with need. For her.

Her heart thumped harder, and arousal dampened her panties. How could he do that with just his eyes?

He climbed in beside her and leaned over to give her a peck on the cheek. At least that was what she expected. But that isn't what he gave her at all. With a hand behind her neck, he tilted her head where he wanted it and pressed demanding lips to hers. Her lips parted, and his tongue invaded her mouth.

The kiss didn't last nearly long enough. Too soon, he pulled back, leaving her reeling and wanting more.

Pressing his forehead against hers, he grinned. "Miss me?"

“Every second,” she teased back with perfect honesty.

He reconnected her seatbelt but pulled her leg to rest on his. “All right then, let’s go home.”

They headed out for Wild River Ranch. It was Boone’s home now, but if she did everything she could to be helpful and stay out of trouble, it just might become her home, too.

CHAPTER 5

Boone's ranch was only a few miles away. Tildi kept what she hoped was a look of rapt excitement on her face as she fought hard not to throw up. She was trying her best to hold onto the belief that her Daddy wasn't disappointed in her because she hadn't been able to stay at Sevin's compound.

Sev could call it an estate all he wanted, but it was a compound.

Even if that was true, she should have better control over her emotions. She'd let her Daddy down whether he knew it or not. The General would have been disappointed in her. A cold shiver traced the length of her spine as visions of her father's cold black eyes drifted through her memories.

You're an embarrassment to the family, Seraphina. Do you have any idea how much money I've spent, no, wasted, in trying to turn you into a successful student? If you can't do any better than that I'll have them transfer you to that special school in Knoxville where all the other drains on society attend.

She'd been seven years old in the third grade the first time she'd gotten that speech. She'd misspelled the word *chiaroscuro* in the semi-finals of the state spelling bee. Second place meant failure as far as the General was concerned.

Boone wasn't like the General. He didn't care about things like winning spelling bees when you were terrified of being in front of people. He cared about her being happy. At least he said he did. She was doing her best to believe him. Even though it was really, really hard.

The closer they got to Wild River Ranch, the tighter her chest grew. It was getting hard to breathe. What if she didn't fit in? She had no idea how to be a good cowgirl, much less the best. What if she did it wrong? If she wound up being a burden, Boone's family wouldn't want her to stick around.

Puff, Tildi's tie-dyed dragon, had worried about leaving the yacht at first, but Tildi had held her extra tight, and she'd been all right. Then, when Tildi had seen that huge museum of a house Sevin called a home, Puff had returned the favor.

Now they had to comfort each other again. It had been a long time since dragons had been around bison after all. Puff had calmed down when Tildi assured her they weren't over eight feet tall or weighed two tons.

She and Puff had both gotten excited when they reached the mountain crossing in Wyoming. Tildi proved to be a very tenacious, dedicated backseat driver until Boone threatened to make her rear end hot enough to melt the snow. It was just as well she'd already helped Grif all she could to navigate the snowy road with its sharp curves.

She'd thought the mountains in Tennessee were hard to drive on in the winter. The Rockies were the Appalachian Mountains on steroids. Lost in thought, she didn't realize Grif was slowing down until the Jeep stopped in the middle of the road.

"What are we stopping for?" Tildi plastered her face to the icy window, trying to see through the frosted glass.

Even though they were in the middle of nowhere, Grif tapped the horn and flashed the lights. What in the world?

She turned to ask Boone what was happening, but as she did, her coat sleeve caught the door handle. When she tugged it loose, her door flew open. She'd have fallen out if her Daddy hadn't caught the tail of her shirt.

“Tildi, what happened to your seatbelt?” Boone reached across her to grab her belt and click it back in place, muttering something about car seats. He glared at her as he spoke to Grif. “What happened to the damn child safety locks being engaged?”

“Sorry, chief. They’re on now,” Grif said. “Hopefully, this guy will mosey on across the road in just a second. The heat won’t work as well if we’re stopped for long.”

Tildi tried to push up in her seat, but her seatbelt was locked in place. “What guy? Why is there a guy in the middle of the road?” Was he crazy? “Let me see.”

She grabbed the seatbelt latch, finger on the button, to release her belt and see what Grif was talking about.

Boone's stern, “I wouldn’t advise it,” froze her in place. “If you want to see, ask Daddy.”

“Daddy, can I see what’s going on?”

“That’s better.” He signaled his permission by calling, “Grif?”

“On it.”

Grif released the safety lock as Boone unhooked her seatbelt and patted his lap. Once she settled there, he let down his window and helped her lean out.

A shiver shot from her knee to the apex of her thighs, not from the cold but from the way he gripped her legs. His thumb was pressed high on her inner thigh. If only they were alone so he could move it a bit higher.

Boone didn’t miss her shiver or the reason for it. She knew this because he ran his thumb along the lower crack of her bottom and chuckled.

Naughty Daddy. Did he know how wet that simple move had made her? It may be cold outside, but now her body was on fire.

The frosty afternoon air bit her other cheeks. The scent of spruce, fir, and pine trees filled the Jeep. Without pause, she leaned as far out of the window as she could. She couldn't see anything except snow. It blanketed the floor of the forest and whitened the deep green trees.

It was beautiful, but Grif wouldn't have stopped for that. "What am I looking for?"

Dutch laughed. "Look at the road in front of the Jeep, darlin'." His amusement died when Boone growled. Dutch adjusted his cap. "Sorry, boss."

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Ignoring them, Tildi twisted to look in front of the jeep. “Holy mother of Bullwinkle!” A dark brown shaggy beast with gigantic, flat antlers stood in the center of the road.

“Actually, that would be Father of Bullwinkle,” Grif corrected. “Females don’t have antlers and beards.”

“Yes, but holy father of Bullwinkle sounds weird.” She would have explained why, somehow, if movement among the trees hadn’t caught her attention. “Oh, look! It’s a Mommy moose.”

A moose cow and calf waited in the tree line until the bull looked over its shoulder, calling out to them. They ambled from the cover of the trees and slowly crossed the road.

Tildi pushed off Boone’s thigh, wincing at his grunt. “Sorry. I want to see what they do.”

The bull stood guard as the cow and her calf stepped over the guardrail and moved into the trees on the other side. With one more look at the Jeep, the bull followed and was soon swallowed by the forest.

“Come on back inside before we all freeze to death,” Boone said as he tugged her legs and helped her back inside the Jeep.

“That was amazing! I’ve never seen a moose before. They are enormous.”

“They are indeed.” Dutch turned to smile. “You’ll have plenty of opportunity to see all the moose you want on the ranch. There are all kinds of wildlife around there.”

Wow. She hadn’t thought about all the wildlife that would be on the ranch. “What do they eat? If I can get close enough, maybe I can pet it.”

Tildi jerked back as all three men shouted, “No!”

“Jeez, all right, all right. It was just an idea. I wouldn’t really do it.” Probably.

Boone didn’t seem to agree. “I don’t take anything for granted with you.”

It would have been really cool though. She could have asked Kenzie to take a picture of her standing next to a giant moose to send to Breezy.

She side-eyed Boone to get a measure of how upset he was, but only affection shown in his eyes. Affection and desire. She loved that look. It sent a thrill to her heart every time.

It thrilled places further south, too.

But then Boone’s face grew serious. “We need to talk about a few things before we get to the ranch.”

Well, that wasn’t scary at all. “What kind of things?”

“We’ll be staying in the main lodge for now. There should be plenty there to keep you occupied, so until I know you’ll be safe, you don’t go anywhere alone.”

Yep, she was right after all. Scary. But she wasn’t a child. Not really. She needed everyone to know she’d be able to carry her own weight. If they had to babysit her all

the time, well, she didn't want to think about what would happen then. But she couldn't be a burden. No one wanted to keep a burden around.

CHAPTER 6

"Tildi." Boone called her name, and his tone made her think it wasn't the first time."

"If I need to keep your attention by having this conversation with you across my knee, I can."

Yep. Not the first time he'd called her name.

Boone studied her through narrowed eyes. She gave her best impersonation of earnest attentiveness. "What if I need something that isn't in the house?"

His eyes narrowed even more. "Like what?"

Like what? Good question. "I don't know. I'm just trying to be prepared." She needed to be less earnest and more attentive.

"If there's something you need, tell me and I'll get it for you. You want to go outside? We'll go outside together. If I'm not there, you can ask one of my brothers. If you can't find one of them, you call Grif, Dutch, or one of the other Wild Men."

"You have wild men on the ranch?"

"No, not actual wild men. That's just what the people around town started calling them years ago, and it stuck."

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“Huh. Do they act like wild men?”

“Only when they—never mind. We’re getting off track.”

Dutch tried to hide a snort of laughter in a cough.

Boone glared at him, then continued. “The point is under no circumstances are you to leave the lodge without an escort. Understand?”

She didn’t, but she nodded anyway. It was a wide open space with horses... well, wild Mustangs... and cows... okay, bison... but it wasn’t like she’d go running out there and try to ride one of them.

Grif turned left and all thoughts of over-protective Daddies flew from her mind. They were here. Her heart kicked up a notch or ten. She’d been half looking forward, half dreading this moment. What if Boone’s family didn’t like her?

It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened. Even her own family didn’t like her. Except for her sister, that was. Breezy had always loved her. Everyone else wanted to change her into who they wanted her to be.

The Daniels family was important, and not just to Boone. They were important people to the whole area. According to Dutch, the ranch sent a lot of business to the town and hired many people to work on the ranch. The road they’d turned onto was named Wild River Ranch Road. You didn’t get a road named after you if you weren’t important.

Fluster bunnies thumped their feet against the walls of her stomach. They always attacked at the worst time, like ninja warrior bunnies. Their only goal was to keep her so flustered she made an idiot of herself. That couldn't happen with Boone's family.

Half a mile down the road, she forgot about calming the fluster bunnies hopping around in her stomach. One more turn and they were pulling up to a gated entrance. Four short stone columns bracketed the road supporting a wooden beam structure and roof. A solid wood gate slowly opened when Boone hit a button on his phone.

Less than a minute after passing through the gate, they crossed the Wild River. The whitecaps of the rapids on each side of the bridge were beautiful. Scary but beautiful.

The long, straight road led to what Boone called the main house. She sat as close to the edge of her seat as her seatbelt would allow and stared as the house grew closer. It was a massive two-story structure of log and stone. Large windows filled the front of the house. There was a covered overhang gracing the front door.

The fluster bunnies in Tildi's stomach shifted from dancing to practicing their spinning kicks. She was about to meet Boone's family and throw up right in front of them.

"Babygirl, look at me." Boone's voice was tender.

Nope. If she looked at him, she'd cry. She couldn't do tender right now.

She could barely breathe for fear they weren't going to like her. Traveling six hours without anything longer than bathroom breaks meant their first impression of her would be of a girl with pink hair wearing wrinkled clothes.

Did cowboys like girls with pink hair? Boone liked it, but he was a super commando soldier cowboy. That might make him different. She should have dyed her hair back

to some normal color at the hotel last night.

The only thing that could make meeting Boone's family worse would be meeting everyone with a red, puffy face. So, no, she didn't need her Daddy being tender.

Boone grasped her chin in his hand, taking away her choice. “Babygirl, you’ve talked with my family almost every day for the past three weeks. They already know you. They already love you. If you’re worried about anything, be worried about the trouble Kenzie will find for you two to get into.”

She couldn’t hold back a crooked smile because he was not wrong. Boone's sister, Kenzie, was a pistol. She was crazy, and Tildi loved her already.

“Grif, stop the Jeep.” Boone unlatched her seatbelt. “Come with me,” he said as he opened his door.

She started to open her door to get out, but he stopped her. “Not that side. Crawl across the seat and get out over here.”

Why should it matter what side of the Jeep she got out of? Argh!

She crawled to his side, where he made her wait while he helped her put on the new beanie with ears on the top, along with matching new mittens that looked like paws and a bright red parka he’d bought her the day before on the way to Sev’s estate. She felt like a princess.

Teasing her, he pulled her beanie down over her eyes and left it there while he bundled her up in her mittens and coat. Without shifting the beanie, he lifted her from the Jeep. He shut the door then slapped the side of the jeep twice. With a quick wave, Grif drove off toward the house.

She had not been expecting that. “Daddy, why did he leave without us? It’s too cold to walk all the way to the lodge.”

Boone chuckled. “If you think it’s cold today, bluebell, you’re in for a long winter.” He zipped up her coat. “Besides, you seemed to be getting upset and I wanted you to have more time.” He guided her in front of him and put his hands on her shoulders. “And I wanted you to see this.”

With that, he pulled the beanie from over her eyes. Before her, stretching out to the horizon in both directions, were the Grand Teton mountains. Snow covered the entire range, with peaks of the rocky terrain scattered throughout the range. It was a more than perfect backdrop to the white expanse of pastureland overlaid with untouched snow.

Thank goodness he didn’t ask her anything. There was no way she could speak. She’d seen the mountains at a distance from the Jeep before the windows were covered with snow and sludge. That didn’t come close to preparing her for this. There were no words for this.

Boone wrapped his arms around her from behind and pulled her to rest against him as she continued to take in the vista.

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“Tennessee was beautiful, but my hometown of Darling never had anything like this.” Even though they were alone, she spoke just above a whisper.

“Not many places do. It never gets old.” He turned them toward the grand house at the end of the long drive. “Let me introduce you to my family.”

She didn’t know why the mountains settled her, but they did. Her Daddy was right. She’d been talking with all his brothers and his sister for weeks. Now, finally, she would get to meet them in person. “I’m excited to meet your family.”

He held her hand and led her down the drive to his home. “They’re excited, too. I’ll introduce you to everyone and then we’ll go upstairs and settle in.” When her stomach grumbled, he added, “Then we’ll come back down and find something to eat.”

She laughed. “That might be a good idea. Oh. My. Gosh. Are those buffalo?” There was a hulking dark animal nuzzling snow out in the pasture.

“They’re bison. I’ll go ahead and tell you right now that I don’t want you going near them. We have people who think they are tame, but they aren’t. They are wild animals. They won’t go out of their way to attack you, but they are unpredictable. I don’t want you anywhere near them. Are we clear?”

Crystal. It was the easiest “Yes, Daddy” she’d ever given. Her desire to pet a bison was only a nanometer above petting a rattlesnake.

“We need to hurry as much as you can, Tildi. The sun will set in about forty-five

minutes, and the temperature will drop fast once it does.”

Wow, it was already freezing. “I can jog if that will help.” Well, for a few yards anyway. She hadn’t gotten much exercise the past year, locked in all those rooms by Nico Midnight. She would never be able to say she was glad she’d been kidnapped the night she helped cater his birthday party, but she could certainly count Boone as her reward.

Not that she felt that way at the second, since she could tell he was doing his best not to laugh. Well, she was going to start exercising. One day in the future. The distant future. Probably.

Though it had seemed like the main lodge was a long way off, it took them almost no time to make it to the house. Everyone had already gone inside, not that she blamed them. Boone had been right. The sun hadn’t set, yet the temperature had already dropped.

As he led her to the front door, she noticed the lighting and stopped.

His eyes were wary. “What’s wrong, Tildi? You aren’t still nervous, are you? I’ll be right beside you, babygirl. I would never let anyone be rude to you.”

She shook her head. “I’m not nervous. Or at least I wasn’t until I saw that you have three chandeliers lighting the overhang.” Outside their house, well, their mansion. A log cabin could be considered a mansion if it was the size of a small apartment building and had chandeliers, right? “Who lights their porte cochere with chandeliers?”

Gazing at the ceiling, Boone shrugged. “I don’t know. And I’m not sure you can call it a chandelier when it’s made from wrought iron.”

“You can it if has all those cut metal decorations of wolves and pine trees and stuff.”

He frowned at the wagon wheel shaped lighting, shrugged, and took another step toward the two story double door entry. She jumped when he shouted, “Isn’t anyone going to get out here and greet my girl?”

Tildi gasped. What would his family think of him bellowing out a demand like that?

Boone grinned at her expression and took up their earlier conversation. “For what it’s worth, my parents didn’t build it, either.”

Before she could ask just how old those chandeliers were, the massive wooden front doors swung open, and a woman with long chestnut brown hair came racing toward them, hands outstretched and wide open for a hug. “Tildi!!!!!!”

Tildi stiffened. She recognized Boone’s only sister, Kenzie, immediately, but she wasn’t sure her enthusiasm wouldn’t send them both to the ground. Without missing a beat, Boone stepped in front of her. Grabbing Kenzie around the waist, he swung her off her feet and spun around three times before setting her down.

Boone grinned down at his sister. “I said greet her, Tiger, not tackle her or scare the bejeezus out of her.”

She slapped his chest and laughed. “I’m excited.” At his raised brows, she added, “But I’ll be careful.”

Tildi watched the exchange in silence. So, that was what a real family interaction looked like. Her heart hurt for all she had missed growing up. Giving herself a mental shake, she shut the thought down. That was then, this was now.

She stuck out her hand toward Kenzie. “It’s so good to finally meet you face to face.”

Kenzie stared down at her extended hand. Looking up with a grin, she said, “I’m not going to be that careful!”

The next thing Tildi knew, Kenzie enveloped her in a tight hug. She froze. What was she supposed to do? The only person to hug her like that was Boone. Nothing so uncivilized ever happened in her family. When they were forced to show affection for the cameras, the most she got were stiff arms, fake hugs followed by lukewarm pats on the back.

No way was she giving Kenzie one of those. Warmth flooded her entire body. Before she knew what she was doing, she hugged Kenzie just as tight.

With one more squeeze, Kenzie stepped back. “I’m so glad you’re finally here. I have so many things planned.”

Boone groaned. “Don’t get her in too much trouble right out of the gate, darlin’.”

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The front door opened again, and three of the most gorgeous, intimidating men she'd ever seen filed out. Well, not counting her Daddy, of course. She knew what the rest of the Daniels men looked like from video chatting with them on the phone. But seeing them on a teeny, tiny, static-filled screen was one thing. Seeing all that alpha maleness in person, walking toward you, was totally different.

Tanner reached her first. He gave her a side hug because he had one arm in a sling. Concerned, she demanded, "Tanner, are you okay? What happened to your arm?"

He had the most adorable grin. Normally she'd return his infectious smile, but she didn't feel like smiling when he was hurt.

"Aw, it's nothin', chickabiddy. I got tossed off by Dozier last week down in Texas. Don't worry, my shoulder broke my fall."

He laughed, but Tildi didn't think it was funny. "Who is this Dozier? Do I need to find him and kick his butt for tossing you like that? Then again, with a name like Dozier, no wonder he's mean.. Didn't his parents like him?"

Chance stepped forward to hug her. "That would be the 1900 pound bucking bull this idiot insists on riding at whatever rodeo he's at. Maybe you'll be the one to talk him out of riding them. Lord knows the rest of us have tried and failed."

Hugging Chance was like hugging a warm slab of marble. He was just like Boone, all muscle. But it still felt nice to be welcomed by his hug. Was this how normal families greeted one another? In her experience, hugs were saved for photo ops. She could get used to long, warm hugs that lasted more than a few seconds.

Without moving, Chance whispered, “Wait for it.”

“You want to get your arms off my girl, brother? If you need that long of a hug, you need to find a girl of your own.”

Chance grinned down at her and winked. Turning to Boone, he said, “I’m pretty sure from how she was smiling at you when you walked up, you got no worries about her getting a few brotherly hugs from me.”

He crossed to Boone and gave him one of those slap-on-the-back hugs that men give.

“Welcome to Wild River Ranch, sweetheart,” Trace said as he stepped closer. “I’m glad Kenzie finally has a friend.” He winked at her. “That way, maybe she’ll stop pestering people when they’re trying to work.”

Kenzie faked a frown. “I’m sure I’ll still find time for plenty of pestering. As a matter of fact, now you’ll all get twice as much pestering because now there are two of us, right, Tildi?” She hooked her arm around Tildi like they’d been besties forever.

Tildi’s heart almost stopped. The last thing she wanted to do was get on everyone’s nerves. Of course, she didn’t want to disappoint Kenzie. “Oh, um, I’m not... that is?—”

“Stop teasing my girl, brat,” Boone said with a smile. “I’m sure going along with your antics will keep her in trouble, but can we at least wait until she gets settled in?”

“Hmm.” Kenzie pretended to think. “I’ll have to figure out the best ways to not get caught. That way we can have fun and not get in trouble at all. Oh! That reminds me!”

Kenzie dug her hands into the pockets of her jeans. It took her a minute to get her

hands around whatever it was she held there. Turning to Tildi, she grinned. “I wanted to have a parade for your arrival, but there wasn’t time. But there’s always time for this.”

With that, she pulled her hands from her pockets, each filled with fistfuls of sparkling confetti.

“Kenzie, no! Wait!” Chance shouted, but it was too late to stop his sister.

Kenzie shouted, “Welcome to Wild River Ranch!” Tossing both handfuls of confetti into the air, she kept her hands in the air and began to dance as the confetti drifted to the stone-paved ground.

Tildi couldn’t keep back her laughter. It was all so exciting and fun that before she realized it, she was dancing beside Kenzie in the confetti rain.

Her new bestie pulled her close and grinned. “We’re in big trouble now.”

Everything inside Tildi froze. They were in trouble? Already? She just got there, and she was in trouble already. Heart racing, she ran through her damage control options. She’d clean up all the mess, of course. That was a given, but it wasn’t enough. She needed to do something big to show them she wouldn’t make any more messes if they let her stay.

She didn’t dare check to see how upset Boone was. She’d probably embarrassed him in front of his family. Stupid. She was so stupid. The world around her faded, and she must have an elephant on her chest because she couldn’t breathe.

Kenzie’s face showed concern. “Tildi? Boone, what’s wrong with her? Tildi?”

And then she was in her Daddy’s arms. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“Breathe with me, Tildi. No one is upset. And even if they were, they wouldn’t be upset with you. You didn’t do anything wrong. Kenzie shot off the confetti bomb, not you.”

The warmth and strength of his arms broke through her panic. “I couldn’t let Kenzie be in trouble by herself. We’re sisters.”

Another set of arms wrapped around her waist. Kenzie pressed against her back. “I’m sorry, Tildi. I didn’t mean to scare you. We’d never be in trouble for being happy and excited. I’ve never had a sister, but I’m glad I have one now. We are going to have so many adventures!”

Sighs echoed off the stones around them. With Boone beside her, Tildi was brave enough to look around. Everyone stared at her, but with concern, not anger. Actually, they weren’t upset at all.

She grinned back at her new friend. “That sounds like fun. I want to learn to ride a horse.”

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“Well, so much for Tildi calming our Tiger down,” Chance said, clapping Boone on the back. “Good luck, brother. And may God have mercy on us all.”

Tildi and Kenzie burst out laughing as Kenzie pulled her inside the house, leaving a trail of sparkling confetti in their wake.

Tildi didn’t make it three steps inside before her legs stopped working. “Holy cannoli! Your house is bigger than the queen’s palace in England.”

Kenzie replied, “Well, it isn’t just our house. It’s the main lodge.”

Tildi’s confusion must have been obvious because Kenzie kept explaining. “You know... for the ranch. In the summer? When all the guests come?”

There would be guests besides her? “Is bringing home strays something this family does often?”

Tildi yelped when a hard hand delivered a swat to her behind. Her face was on fire when Boone turned her to face him. “You’re not a stray, bluebell. And if I ever hear you use those words to describe yourself again, you will be one sorry Little girl. Do you get me?”

She nodded, knowing that wouldn’t satisfy him.

“Words, Tildi. Do you get me?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Ice cold dread sheeted through her body. What had she just said? Had she called Boone Daddy in front of his entire family? She needed to say something to fix her mistake, but her throat would not allow any words to flow. All she could do was stare up at him and pray he wouldn't be upset.

Boone held his arms open to her. "Come here, little one."

She launched herself at him and burrowed her face into his chest. What would everyone think? Sure, he'd told her that all his brothers were Daddies, but that didn't mean they talked about it out in the open.

"Boone!" Kenzie called from behind Tildi. "You had three whole weeks to tell her about the ranch and you just let her come in here blind? Didn't you tell her anything?"

"I had a few other things on my mind, Tiger. You try taking a tiny ship across an ocean."

He sounded more amused than angry, so he couldn't be too upset. She peeked up at him to find his gaze already fixed on her. He smiled and everything in her settled.

Boone was not the General. He didn't care what other people thought, even his family. And if they were all Daddies, they wouldn't be upset anyway. How long would it be before she stopped reacting to everything based on the way her messed up family had operated?

"We've had a long two days. I think the grand tour will have to wait for a while."

Kenzie frowned. "But I wanted to show Tildi around. She needs to see the craft room and the playroom. Oh! And I got the latest Disney movie cued up in the home theatre. Ruby said she'd help us make caramel popcorn balls with chocolate chips."

Tildi pulled her face away from Boone's chest. That sounded like fun. Although she wasn't sure she could stay awake for the movie. Still, she'd try if it meant not disappointing Kenzie.

Boone was already shaking his head. "We need to get unpacked first and Tildi needs to rest before dinner. But it sounds like fun for after dinner."

Evidently, Kenzie wasn't convinced. "But?—"

"Tiger," Chance warned. "Boone said after dinner. Do you remember what we talked about?"

Kenzie sighed. "Yes," she drawled out. In what sounded like a speech her friend had practiced, Kenzie added, "Boone and Tildi will need time to themselves. And Boone has the last word."

"Right." Chance crossed thick arms over his broad chest.

Tildi was disappointed and grateful at the same time. Kenzie's plans sounded amazing, but she was exhausted. She hadn't slept well the night before. Her brain wouldn't stop telling her what a failure she was for disappointing Boone. Maybe Boone could spank her brain without getting her bottom involved.

On second thought, that didn't sound like very much fun.

Boone reached for Kenzie and pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you for making plans to show Tildi around, Tiger. I'll turn the night over to you right after dinner. If you both eat your vegetables, that is."

Kenzie stomped her foot.

Stomped. Her. Foot.

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At Boone. And he didn't get angry or anything. He just grinned and threw a glance at Trace. It was a glance Kenzie didn't miss, either.

"Did you tell him Ruby was serving asparagus tonight? You know I hate that stuff. It's slimy."

Trace held his hands up in surrender, but Tanner laughed. "Ruby has never served slimy asparagus in her life, and you know it. I've a good mind to tell her you said that. Matter of fact, I think I'll go find her right now."

With a wink at Tildi, Tanner strode from the room, a protesting Kenzie hot on his heels. Tildi wasn't sure what all the fuss was about. Asparagus was awesome. Especially if it was roasted. Now, if they'd been having squash, well, that was a whole different matter. Everyone knew squash was gross.

Boone took her hand. "Come on, Tildi. Let's get settled in."

Tildi walked by his side, still reeling at the welcome they'd received. Everyone was so nice and accepting. She hadn't known a family could be that way. She was beginning to wonder if she knew what being a family meant.

CHAPTER 7

Boone watched his Little girl as she slept. She was so damn beautiful. Inside and out. And everyone could see it but her.

Now that he was back home, they were going to work on that. He didn't think it

would be easy, but he'd never been afraid of working hard.

The only thing that scared him to death was losing her. She better have been paying attention when he went over her rules. She'd never been to a place like Wild River Ranch. It was the safest place in the world when it came to the men and women who lived and worked here.

But as long as Nico Midnight walked the face of the earth, his Little girl wasn't safe. He and his men knew that. Tildi didn't. and he didn't want her to have to think that way. Even after everything she'd been through, she managed to keep this special innocence and joy. She was a miracle as far as he was concerned.

How could she think she was weak for reacting the way she did? When he got her settled, when she was stronger in her belief in herself again, he'd be paying a visit to Darling, Tennessee and that living piece of shit she called the General. That man had never met someone he could kowtow, but he'd be meeting one soon.

But right now, he needed to focus on his girl. She'd been sleeping for almost an hour. If he let her keep sleeping, she'd never sleep that night. He wouldn't be doing his duty as a Daddy if he let that happen. It'd be a downright shame.

With a smile that he was pretty sure his bluebell would describe as wicked, he gently pulled down the blanket that kept her warm. He'd be providing all the heat she needed soon enough.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, he pressed gentle kisses on her forehead and worked his way slowly to her soft lips. She slept with them slightly parted, which was damn convenient. He could think of several ways to thank her.

She returned his kisses before she opened her eyes. Having become addicted to her bedroom eyes when she first woke, Boone pulled back to reward himself for his

patience. After all, he'd wanted to make love to her as soon as they'd gotten to his bedroom. As far as he was concerned, he should be nominated for sainthood.

Then again, who wanted to live as a saint with a delicious Little girl in their arms?

Bit by bit her eyes blinked open. He held his breath. As soon as she found his eyes, pure love shone from her lavender eyes and everything in his world centered. On her, right where it should be.

Her eyes were his favorite feature. He could lose himself in those mountain bluebell eyes. And then she gave him a sleepy, shy smile and he forgot all about her eyes. He followed the tip of her tongue as it meandered across her bottom lip, and he was done with looking.

Desire graveled his voice as he pulled her closer. "Feel better?"

She breathed a silent laugh. "I always feel better when you're holding me, Daddy." Her gaze traveled past him and scanned his bedroom.

He followed her gaze, taking in the room he'd claimed three years earlier when he'd left the military and trying to picture it through her eyes.

It was definitely a man's room. He'd always loved it. It had been his parents' room when he was younger, and it had seemed natural to make it his.

But what if Tildi didn't like it? More than anything, he wanted her to be comfortable in their private space. She could decorate it any way she wanted. He didn't care what the bedspread was made of or what color the walls were.

She snuggled closer and he decided he'd find out her thoughts on the decorating later. She shifted again, this time away from him. He wasn't about to let her do that.

Reaching out, he pulled her back to him. Just to make sure she got what he had in mind for her foreseeable future, he made sure her ass lined up with his swollen cock. “What’s on your mind, Tildi?” Stone wasn’t as rigid as she became at his question. “Tell Daddy the problem so I can make it better.”

It couldn’t be that bad a problem. The only thing she’d done since they arrived was take a nap. He knew better than to press. She’d open up when she had the words.

“I want to know more about everyone.”

He tensed. “Why?” Discussing his siblings was not how he pictured spending their first private moment in days.

She gave a deep sigh. “I want them to like me. They know a lot about me. I need to know more about them so I’ll know how to act and what to say.”

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“You don’t have to perform for anyone here, baby. I promise. They already like you. They’re going to love you as much as I do when they get to know you. They aren’t interviewing you for the position, and you have nothing to prove. Not to them, not to anyone. Just be you.”

“What about Ruby? I haven’t talked to her at all yet. I know she’s like a mother to all of you. I’ll bet she has all sorts of standards and expectations. She’s so important to all of you.”

“Not as important as you. And when you get to know Ruby, you’ll see that she is the last person who would ever judge anyone. Now kiss me.”

She relaxed in his arms and desire pulsed through him. He knew one thing that would take her mind off everyone else, and it was something they’d both enjoy.

He pulled her on top of him, situating her so she straddled his hips. His dick pulsed against his zipper.

Her mouth ringed into a perfect oh. She tilted forward to put her hands on his chest, rocking her hot pussy against his cock. Her lids dropped and she moaned. That was all the incentive he needed.

Threading his fingers through her hair, Boone pulled her mouth to his. Nothing in the world was more important in that moment than those luscious lips. She gasped at his sudden tug, opening for him.

Carefully so as not to hurt her, he tightened his fingers in her hair, putting just enough

pressure to gain another moaned “Daddy.” She relaxed into him, giving over all control.

He nipped at her lips, teasing and tantalizing. Her hands left his chest, but only long enough to slide underneath his shirt. Her nail scraped as she slipped her hands back up his chest to grip his shoulders, sending tendrils of erotic pain straight to his cock.

He slid one hand from her hair to grip her jaw with just enough pressure that she opened wider for him. He took his kiss deeper, claiming her mouth. Nothing mattered in this moment except her. She accepted his claiming, but after three weeks of making love to her, he knew she was holding herself back. That was unacceptable.

She was still fighting the voices in her head, but that was all right. He knew how to deal with them. He captured her bottom lip between his teeth, biting a bit harder, before sucking her lip into his mouth.

Something in her shifted and she lost her handle on her control. She moaned into his mouth, and he swallowed the sound. Pulling her lip back, she nipped his in return and followed with her tongue making darting ventures into his mouth.

She was going to kill him. So soft, so fierce. So on fire, and all for him.

The zipper of his pants pressed painfully against his dick. They needed to go. He made to lift her off him to take care of that, but she tightened her grip on his hips. Her thumbs dropped to his nipples. When she brushed across them with her nails, he damn near came.

He could smell her arousal. The heat from her pussy passed through both their clothes and sank into his crotch.

Yep. His Little girl was going to kill him, but he’d die one happy Daddy. It was all he

could do to keep from rolling on top of her and taking her hard.

Slow... he needed to slow down. He wanted her so frantic with need she couldn't think of anything except him and what he was doing to her.

Once he had gained a little control, he rolled on top of her. Lining his cock up with her core, he rocked his hips and took in all the gloriousness that was his girl.

Her eyes had darkened to a deep violet. The rosy flush of arousal colored her cheeks. His kisses had left her lips swollen and a deep raspberry. Her need was glorious. She'd never been more beautiful.

"You are so fucking hot, babygirl."

She gave a slight shake to her head and her eyes cleared. Nope. Not happening. She wasn't listening to those damn voices right now.

He kissed her hard, deep, and wet. He didn't stop until she was moaning her need and kissing him back with the same passion. Reaching beneath her, he gripped her ass and squeezed. She answered by wrapping her legs around his hips.

When he pulled his lips back, she tried to follow him, but he held her down with a hand to her shoulder. Her eyes were glazed with passion. Oh yeah, she wanted this just as badly as he did.

"Lift your arms." He put every ounce of command he'd ever learned in his voice. Her eyes widened and she obeyed immediately. Running his hands along her supple skin underneath, he removed her shirt.

God she was beautiful. In the weeks since he'd rescued her, she had filled out and her skin was soft and smooth. She left her hands above her head. Darting her tongue out

to wet her lips, she offered a tremulous smile. It was all he could do to fight back a primal growl.

“You wouldn’t be teasing Daddy, would you, babygirl? I’d think twice, if I were you.”

She sucked in a breath and closed her eyes when he cupped her breasts. Her nipples tickled his palms, even through the thin lacy fabric of her bra. “N-no, Daddy. I wouldn’t do that.” The breathiness of her voice was going to kill him.

“Hmm. Telling fibs is worse than teasing, little girl. That kind of behavior will get you punished.”

Releasing the clasp on the front of her bra, he drew it up her arms and used it to bind her wrists together. Her whispered gasp had his dick fighting the constraints of his zipper. If he didn’t get inside her soon, he was going to embarrass himself.

Lowering his mouth to nuzzle behind her ear, he murmured, “Let me show you what happens to naughty girls who tempt their Daddies.”

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He traced the tip of his tongue along the vein pulsing in her neck. She cried out, using her thighs to grind her mound against the bulge of his shaft. “Oh! Daddy. Oh, god. Please.”

The natural taste of her skin drove him higher as his cock screamed with need. But his cock was going to have to wait. He raked his teeth across her neck and bit softly. She yelped in surprise.

He soothed the bite with his tongue. “Please, what, babygirl?”

A shiver danced across her body. “I... I don’t... I can’t think when you do that.”

He chuckled against her neck, causing another shiver to skitter across her skin to pebble her nipples harder. He should do something about that.

Taking his time, he ran his eyes across her gorgeous breasts. They were his favorite size, perfect for his hands with rosy pink nipples and the taste of sugar and sin. Nothing was more important in that moment than tasting them. He pressed his lips to one tight bud and almost lost the smattering of control he had left when she moaned and arched to press further into his mouth.

His babygirl was needy. Well, he was nothing if not a giving Daddy. He tightened his lips and sucked her nipple deeper into his mouth, teasing it with swirls of his tongue.

He wanted his hand on her pussy to feel how excited she was, but her pants were blocking his access. That would not do.

Since her hands were still bound above her head, he made quick work of stripping her of the rest of her clothes. Kneeling beside her, he shucked off his shirt as well.

When he bent to press a line of kisses down the center of her abdomen, she stopped him. “No, Daddy. That’s not fair. You have to take your pants off, too.” She pouted as her dark gaze raked his body.

He felt like the Grinch, only it wasn’t his heart that grew three sizes at the carnal expression on Tildi’s face.

“You know I say yes as often as I can.” He made quick work of unbuckling his belt and kicking his pants across the room. After removing his socks, he stroked her inner thigh, relishing the whimper his light touch evoked.

“Daddy, I want... I... I need...”

His poor babygirl. If he were a softer man, he’d take pity on her and give her what she so obviously desired. But there was nothing soft about him. Especially right now.

“Daddy! You’re being mean. I said please.”

“I am? That doesn’t sound like me.” That grumpy face was adorable. She wasn’t wrong. He was being mean, but he’d make it up to her soon.

She did her best to stomp her foot on the mattress. “Boone, I?—”

Um, that wasn’t going to fly. “Who am I?”

She pressed her thighs together to try and solve her dilemma on her own. Boone moved to lay between her legs. “Daddy!”

“That’s better. Now what can I do for you?” His face was close to her mound, so he lowered his chin so his breath would brush her swollen clit. He really was a sadistic bastard.

She tried to press her slick pussy to his mouth, but her hands kept her in place. “Daddy,” she whined. “If you don’t do something soon, I’m gonna die.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

Without warning her, he drew his tongue along her glistening slit from her core to her clit. She screamed her pleasure, and he smiled. He’d take that as an acceptable response. “What do you want me to do to you, babygirl?”

Tildi froze. Uncertainty painted her face. “I don’t... I mean... I want whatever you want, Daddy.”

“That’s good. What I want is for you to tell me what you want me to do to you.”

Her every uncontrolled gyration and needy whimper told him exactly what she wanted, but that wasn’t the issue. This part of their lives couldn’t be all about him and what he wanted. She wouldn’t be satisfied with that for any length of time. Neither would he.

Her breathing changed. It was headed in a direction he didn’t want to take, but he could fix that. Before she could react, he landed a sharp smack to her inner thigh. She squealed and tried to force her legs together.

Lifting her head, she glared at him. “Daddy! That hurt.”

A pale pink handprint bloomed on her pale skin. “That isn’t what you wanted?”

“No, it’s not what I wanted. Why would I want that?”

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He landed an equally sharp smack to her other thigh. “Is that how you talk to me?”

“No. Ow!” She screeched as another slap cracked across her thigh. “Sorry, Daddy.”

He tempered the force of each swat but continued to pepper her inner thighs. She grew wetter with each spank. “Thank you, babygirl. But if this isn’t what you wanted, tell me what you want instead. Now.”

She lasted five more smacks before she broke. “Your mouth on me, Daddy. I want you to please put your mouth on me.”

They’d work on making more specific requests later. Right now, his girl deserved a reward. “I thought you’d never ask.” Thank heavens she gave in when she did. Watching her slit grow slicker was torture. He’d been on the verge of caving.

He ran his tongue along her slit, gathering up all her juices. She tasted so damn good he could do this all day. Sweet and tangy. And all his. He hummed his appreciation when he sucked her clit into his mouth.

She writhed against him, doing everything she could to grind against his face.

“See how good it feels when you tell Daddy what you want?” She agreed by gripping his head with her warm thighs. She was so damn responsive.

As she tugged at the binding around her wrists, her whimpering turned to begging. That was his cue to slide his finger into her channel and stroke the spot that drove her wild.

She bucked her hips and when he slid another finger inside her, her eyes fluttered shut. He moved back to her clit and circled it with his tongue, giving just enough pressure to push her over the edge.

Her back arched, and she screamed as her orgasm washed over her. He did everything he could to increase her pleasure and make the waves rippling around his fingers last.

When she stilled, panting and gasping for breath, he slid his fingers out of her. They glistened with her juices. With her watching, he sucked them into his mouth and licked them clean.

He released her arms, and she immediately grabbed his ass and squeezed. Fire licked over his balls and up his spine. He needed to be inside her. Now.

Fisting the sheet on the sides of her head, he stared down at her. "I don't have it in me to be gentle, babygirl."

She circled his hips with her leg and pulled him closer. "I don't remember asking for gentle."

That was all he needed to hear. He surged forward and embedded himself in her. She crossed her ankles behind his butt and rocked her hips up to meet him.

She was so tight he almost forgot how to breathe. Her heat enveloped his dick like a glove. "You're perfect."

He felt her jolt of surprise. She wasn't used to hearing the truth about who she was, but he'd fix that over time. Right now he couldn't think of anything but burying himself in her. He gripped one of her thighs, pulling it wider and higher. Pulling back, he plunged back in even deeper than before.

She cried out in pleasure, meeting him thrust for thrust. He pounded into her harder and faster, until all that existed was the two of them. Her thighs tightened around him, and she sucked in a breath. Shifting the angle of his hips, he ground against her clit and watched her explode. Her pussy walls gripped his dick so tight he saw stars.

That was all it took to push him over the edge. Wave after wave of white hot pleasure crashed through him as he bellowed his release.

It took him some time to recover, but once he had, he led his girl to the shower. Taking his time, he washed her hair and cleaned every inch of her body. Twice. Then he took care of himself.

Once he'd gotten her out and dried them both off, Boone helped Tildi dress. The third time she changed her outfit, he grabbed the brown fleece romper and matching shirt Kenzie had bought for her as a welcome to the family present. It had a giant turkey face on the front and tail feathers arcing across her backside. She was the cutest damn thing he'd ever seen.

Once he was dressed, he showed his girl around their suite. Each of the siblings had what amounted to their own apartment in the main lodge. It made it easy to stay connected and to tend to guests during tourist season.

Tildi followed him through his space without a word. Did she like it? Did she hate it? As long as he was sharing it with her, she could make any changes she wanted. When he'd shown her everything and she still hadn't uttered a sound, he gave up. "So? What do you think about our suite?"

"Are you kidding? I think it's amazing. I can't believe the view of the mountains from the window. And I've always wanted a bedroom with a fireplace. Of course, I didn't know you could get them so big they could burn a whole tree at a time."

It was true. The Lodge wasn't your typical cabin in the woods. Then again, Wild River Ranch wasn't your typical ranch, either.

“Yep. We have everything we need to stay holed up here for as long as we want. One thing we've got here in Wyoming is plenty of space. But, apart from the size, what do you think?”

He hadn't realized how much he wanted her to love his home until she walked through the front door. It was where he'd grown up and where he wanted his kids to grow up one day.

She grinned. “I love it! I just got here, but it feels more like home than the house I grew up in already. Do you think we could—um, never mind.”

“Do I think we could what, bluebell?” Knowing his girl, it could be anything from building a fire to scaling the highest peak in the Rockies.

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She snagged her bottom lip with her teeth. “Well, after I’ve figured out what I can do to help and everyone knows me better, do you think maybe we could contact my sister and see if she might want to come visit?”

It was the first time she’d mentioned her sister, but he didn’t like the way she phrased her question. “No, Tildi. You?—”

“That’s okay. I get it.” Jesus. She’d flinched as if he’d struck her. “I don’t want to put anyone out. I shouldn’t ask for anything after all you’ve already done. I totally understand. Really, I—mph!”

He cut her off with a hand over her mouth and did his best to control his temper by reminding himself she’d never experienced a real family. “You interrupted me, little girl. That will earn you a hot bottom next time.”

Eyes wide, she nodded. He didn’t move his hand. “The reason I said no wasn’t because your sister can’t come visit. I’d love to meet her whenever you’re ready. You don’t have to earn the privilege of having her visit. You don’t ~~earn~~ family, babygirl. You ~~are~~ family. This is your home now. That means you can invite anyone you want to visit. I take that back. Not sure I want the General here. At least, not until he and I have had a conversation.” One in which his fists would be doing most of the talking.

She placed her hand on his and pulled it away from her mouth, all the while shaking her head. “You don’t have to have a conversation with him for me, Daddy. I don’t want him to come here.”

“No, Daddy. If this is going to be my home, I don’t ever want the General here. Not

ever.”

That sounded good to Boone. “I’m glad we’re on the same page, babygirl. Now let’s go eat, then Kenzie can give us that grand tour.”

CHAPTER 8

Tildi woke up the next morning with Boone spooning her back. She had never slept better in her life. Even in her sleep he kept her safe, warm, and loved. His arm draped across her waist and his calves cradled her ankles.

It was a good thing she didn’t have a preferred side of the bed, too. Boone took whichever side was closest to the door. Stuff like that only happened in romance novels.

So, if she was safe, warm, and loved, then why was she awake? It was still dark outside. Seconds later a strangled scream shattered the night.

She shot straight up in bed, and with no other method of defense, she echoed the scream as loud as she could. Flipping over, she intended to shake Boone awake. Somehow, he’d managed to sleep through all the murder and mayhem. Unfortunately, she flipped a bit too enthusiastically and elbowed him in the eye.

Boone jerked awake, eyes wide and scanning the room for the threat. When he didn’t see one, he looked back at her. “What the hell, Tildi? Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Did you have a bad dream? I’m sorry, babygirl. Here, come cuddle with Daddy.”

He reached for her with one hand. The other rubbed the eye she socked. It was all she could do not to slap his hand away.

Well, that wasn't true. She kind of liked his hands. Especially when they were doing naughty, wicked things to her. Right now, she had questions. Like how he could sleep through all the screaming.

"I don't need anything, Daddy, but someone else does. Someone is being attacked or something." She whispered just in case whoever was strangling people outside had an accomplice inside. Had she brought this to the ranch? Sev's father had to know where Boone lived.

Boone came alert. "Who was attacked, babygirl?"

"I don't know, but someone is screaming. I can't believe you didn't hear it. Daddy, you have to go help them. They may be dying."

Before he could ask any more questions, another scream pierced the air. It took all she could do not to scream again, too. It must be something terrible because Boone started shaking.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders to comfort him, she did her best to bolster his courage. What could make a tough commando rancher shake like that?

A muffled snort broke the silence.

Laughter. Suppressed laughter could make him shake like that.

She was going to smack him with a brick. How much time would she spend in jail for perpetrating perfectly justifiable rude commando Daddy assault?

Tildi tapped Boone's shoulder to get his attention. With the palm of her hand. Okay, slapped. She slapped his shoulder. "What is so funny? Someone out there is dying."

Losing the battle to stifle his amusement, Boone's laughter erupted. She covered his mouth with her hand. The last thing she needed was to have the family come bursting through the door and witness her beating up her super buff but very rude commando Daddy.

When he didn't stop, she bumped him with her shoulder. "Daddy!"

He held up a hand as if he were on an important phone call and needed her to wait. He'd lost his mind. What he didn't lose was the laughter. "It's not funny! You're supposed to save people, not laugh at them."

His laughter disappeared in an instant. With tenderness in his eyes, he lifted her to straddle his middle. "I love that your first thought is to help others, babygirl. It's hard to remember how new this is to you. That wasn't a person, bluebell. It was a rooster crowing. Sometimes they sound like the ones you hear in the movies, but a lot of the time they sound like, well, like someone is being murdered. Don't worry. He'll stop soon."

Was he kidding her right now? A chicken? She'd almost peed herself over a man chicken?

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She wasn't some Cinderella City Girl, for cripes sake. Roosters didn't sound like that in the movies. If that was how they sounded, Foghorn Leghorn had let her down.

Now she looked like an idiot. Her cheeks burned along with the backs of her eyes, but she wasn't shedding a single tear. That would make her Daddy think she wasn't just an idiot, but that she was a weak idiot. He was never going to believe she could carry her weight on the ranch if she didn't even know what a rooster sounded like.

Who couldn't tell the difference between roosters and murder victims? Besides her. Her chest battled to keep her from breathing until the burn in her lungs outweighed that in her cheeks and eyes. What must Boone think of her?

You're a constant source of disappointment. He regrets bringing you here.

Ugh! She needed the voice in her head to shut up... the one that sounded like the General.

She jumped when Boone reached over her to tuck the blanket tightly around her. When he snuggled close and weighted her down with his arm and leg draped over her, her taut muscled slowly relaxed.

"I wasn't laughing at you, you know. I'd never do that. Your innocence sparked a joy in me I wasn't expecting. Those voices in your head are shouting so loud even I can hear them. Those voices might be talking, but they're talking trash, not truth. They don't know you. So, I'm making a new rule. Don't talk to strangers. Especially not the ones in your head."

Tildi bit her lip and nodded. He pulled her into his chest and hugged her so tight it squeezed out all the bad voices. He was one wise Daddy.

“Since it’s not quite 5:30 in the morning, we need to get some more shut eye. We’ll be getting up soon enough and I want you to be rested. Okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll try.” She wouldn’t have believed it possible, but she fell right back to sleep.

Boone eased out of the bed later that morning around 7:00. He’d told her she wasn’t to get out of bed until she’d slept in, which meant she didn’t get up until 8:30. Apparently on a ranch, that was sleeping in because when she entered the kitchen, Boone was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, Kenzie bustled around, her hair knotted atop her head. She wore an apron that read, Don’t Make Me Poison You. The door to one of the two ovens creaked in protest when Kenzie opened it to pull out something that filled the kitchen with the delicious aroma of cinnamon sugary goodness.

An older woman stood before a large farmhouse sink scrubbing dishes and humming a tune Tildi didn’t recognize.

Tildi remained quiet, content to watch until her stomach growled loud enough to catch the attention of the older woman. She turned to Tildi and smiled. “Well, good morning. You got here just in time to be our taste tester for these butter pecan sticky buns.”

Tildi’s mouth watered. “If they taste half as good as they smell, I might have to test more than one.”

Towelings her hands dry as she crossed the room, the woman beamed a smile at Tildi

that warmed her soul. Tildi loved her on sight. As soon as she drew close enough, she pulled Tildi into her ample chest and hugged her. “It's good to meet you, poppet. My name is Ruby Watson. Now, you sit down right here at the table, and I'll bring you a cup of coffee to have with your sweet roll.”

She led Tildi to the russet marble countertop that bracketed the kitchen and separated it from what looked like a huge family room. Hopping up on a comfortable bar chair, Tildi focused on not drooling while waiting for Ruby to serve her breakfast.

Everything in her itched to help rather than be waited on. Ruby had been in the middle of doing something, and having to serve Tildi must be an annoying interruption. It wasn't Ruby's fault Tildi had missed breakfast. Not that she knew exactly when that had been. “What time is breakfast? I don't want to miss it again and cause all this extra work.”

Setting down a plate with a sweet roll big enough to feed three people, Ruby smiled. “This isn't work, poppet, extra or otherwise. Actually, you're doing us a favor. We've been itching for a new taste tester, haven't we, Kenz?”

Kenzie sat down next to Tildi and handed her a cup of coffee. “We sure have. I wasn't sure how you take your coffee, but I hope you're a fellow creamer aficionado. This is caramel apple crisp.”

Tildi hadn't had creamer in her coffee in years. She couldn't afford it when she'd been living on her own. She certainly hadn't had any for the past year, being dragged from one compound to the next by Nico Midnight's men.

Lifting the cup to her lips, she closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of apples and cinnamon. Taking heed of the steam rising from the mug, she sipped carefully. Sweet apple and cinnamon goodness overwhelmed her taste buds. She couldn't hold back a groan of pure pleasure. “Oh my god, Kenzie. This is amazing. I'm going to stock my

refrigerator with this one day when I have a kitchen of my own. Where did you get it?"

It tasted fresh, so Tildi wouldn't be surprised if it were local.

Kenzie grinned. "Thanks. We make it ourselves here at the ranch."

No wonder it tasted so fresh. "Wow! Then I'm sure you've gotten all kinds of feedback from your brothers."

"Well, you'd be wrong." Kenzie's voice had a musical quality that set Tildi at ease. "Those goof heads only take their coffee black as smut and strong enough to choke a horse."

Tildi gasped, as if that were a crime against humanity itself. "That's awful."

Ruby placed a sweet roll in front of Kenzie then pulled up a chair. "If you ask me, it's the only way they can stand to drink that slop they make when they're on their own."

Oh wow. "That bad, huh?"

"That bad," Kenzie confirmed.

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“Don’t get me wrong, it has its uses. Just not drinking it.” Ruby grinned at Kenzie. “Remember when we used the pot they brewed last winter to patch that leak in the henhouse roof?”

Kenzie burst out laughing. “I do! I always said the stuff they made was thick as pitch and tasted worse. I never expected they’d prove me right.”

Their laughter was so infectious Tildi joined in.

If the homemade creamer tasted this good, she couldn’t wait to dig into the sweet roll. Taking an embarrassingly large bite of the gooey goodness, a moan of pleasure escaped her. As predicted, it was just as delicious as the coffee.

Scanning the kitchen, she took in all the delicious treats on cooling racks around the kitchen. They had made every kind of fudge and other Christmas candies she could imagine, as well as several she couldn’t name.

“You two are serious about your desserts! I know the guys are hardy eaters, but I’ve seen full New York City bakeries who didn’t have that many treats. Who are all the confections for?”

Kenzie followed Tildi’s gaze across the kitchen and shrugged. “Well, it is the holiday season. When we get everything baked and bagged, it’s going into all those boxes.” She pointed to a large table off to the side stacked with pretty gift boxes waiting to be assembled. “Once we have them packed, we’re delivering them all over town. We need to hand them out this weekend, but for now we’re storing them so they’re out of the way until tomorrow. We sure could use your help. Do you mind?”

Did she mind? Did she mind being treated like one of the family, even though she'd done nothing to earn the right to be? Her mother hadn't been the baking type. Or the cooking type, except for soup kitchen photo ops set up to benefit her father's political ambitions. No, her mother was more of the scheduling fund raising events with all the "right" clubs and civic organizations. The ones her father had insisted she be a part of to uphold his image.

Tildi had been embarrassed every year at Christmas when their friends all brought wonderful homemade gifts for the teachers. She'd never once had a gift to give a teacher, much less to the neighbors and friends.

Tears stung Tildi's eyes. Was this part of being in a real family? She had nothing to compare it to, but it sure felt like it.

Kenzie noticed Tildi's tears and misunderstood. "Hey, no pressure. Boone told us you would need to rest a lot when you first got here. Just forget I asked. It's all right."

Tildi wasn't tired at all. She wanted to put together those gift boxes as much as she wanted to take her next breath. "No, I want to help. Ignore the tears, they seem to appear all the time these days for no reason. It doesn't mean anything. Please, let me join in the fun."

Kenzie smiled, hopping off her bar chair and giving Tildi a hug. "Not sure how much fun storing all this candy will be, but awesome, I'm glad you want to help. We have a ton of stuff to do yet. We'll get started as soon as you finish your breakfast."

Tildi pushed off her chair. "Oh, I don't have to eat this. We can start now."

"Are you kidding? Ruby will smack me with the wooden spoon she always keeps in the pocket of her apron if I stop you from eating one of her famous sweet rolls. But, in the spirit of sisterhood, and so you won't feel pressured to rush, I'll have another

one, too. That way you don't have to eat alone."

The joy growing inside Tildi bubbled out in laughter. "Your noble sacrifice is deeply appreciated."

Kenzie grinned. "What can I say, I was born to be a martyr."

Twenty minutes and two sweet rolls—each—later Ruby set up a Christmas candy storage assembly line.

"You're making me look bad. You're fast," Kenzie said once the candies were all put away. "I guess Ruby's been right all these years. Many hands do make light work. Being the only girl, I've always wanted a sister. I'm sure glad you're finally here."

Tildi had to work at not crying. Again. Seriously, when were the waterworks going to calm down? She'd cried more in the past three weeks than she had the entire year she'd been Nico's prisoner. What the heck?

But that wasn't what had her eyes stinging this time. Kenzie's words reminded Tildi she did have a sister. The only bright spot in her life until Boone. Everything in her wanted to reach out to her sister, Breezy, but she hadn't done it yet. She was the worst sister in the world. Why was it so much easier to build a relationship with Kenzie than it was to rebuild one with her actual sister?

She packed that away to think about later and turned to Kenzie with a smile. "Assembly lines and packing away food is my specialty. After working for a catering service for years, it's the one thing I can do."

Ruby walked in from the small storage room off the back of the kitchen. "I got almost everything in the cold pantry. We're going to have to ask one of the boys to get the Escalade ready for this weekend. It's a tank to drive, but it's the only thing that will

hold all the boxes we'll be delivering. I swear, in another year or two we won't be able to call Wilder a small town. Where are all these people coming from?"

"You know you love it, Ruby. This time next week, everyone in town will be calling to ask for all your recipes."

"Oh, Lord. That's just what I need. At least we'll be past getting the Friendsgiving celebration together and on the table." Ruby tried to sound aggravated, but the excitement twinkling in her eye told a different story.

Kenzie winked at Tildi and grinned. "This year you've got two accomplished sous chefs in the kitchen with you. This is going to be the best Friendsgiving ever. Besides, you know you love it."

"I thought we missed the Friendsgiving get together. Boone was so disappointed."

Kenzie clapped her hands, hopping in excitement. "I know! It was a surprise for him. I told him this morning and he was excited, though I think it was as much for you as for himself. He's so totally in love with you."

Tildi's heart swelled. "You think so?"

Kenzie rolled her eyes, the official brat confirmation. Of course, Tildi felt Boone's love every day. But the fact that Kenzie could see it put the icing on the cake.

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She knew how much it meant to Boone that his family and friends had put off the Friendsgiving celebration until he got home. It was thoughtful and generous. She loved that he had that in his family.

If things went the way she hoped, they both would.

Kenzie squealed. The next thing Tildi knew, she was in Kenzie's arms. "Thank you. I'm so glad Boone found you. He's like a different person. It's a miracle, and it's all because of you."

Tildi wasn't sure about that, but she hoped her new friend was right.

CHAPTER 9

As soon as Tildi and Kenzie got the Christmas gifts put to the side, Ruby had them busy preparing lunch. It was hot and hard and hurried. And Tildi had the time of her life. She loved every second.

Ruby never got angry or raised her voice when Tildi didn't know how to do something. She just explained what to do with a smile, and usually a hug. Ruby was a hugger. It turned out Tildi was, too.

It was still hard not to be embarrassed by the things she didn't know how to do. What good had it done her to graduate from high school and community college by the age of fourteen when she didn't know the best way to peel potatoes or how long it would take to boil an egg?

This was what she'd missed growing up. This was normal. Normal was glorious.

Tildi tried not to let it get to her. That was then and this was now.

She should have figured out earlier that morning she had nothing to worry about. As soon as Kenzie saw Tildi getting frustrated or downhearted—and Kenzie saw it a lot—Kenzie was by her side encouraging her and making her laugh.

On one hand it made Tildi feel accepted and included, but on the other it made her miss her own sister. That was it. She had put it off long enough. Too long if she were being honest. Tonight she would call Breezy.

If Boone thought no one would mind, she'd even invite her sister to come visit.

She made up her mind to talk to Boone that night about reaching out to Breezy. Maybe she could even come visit. Tildi sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and raked it back and forth.

What if Breezy didn't want to talk to her? What if she wouldn't answer her phone? Or worse, what if she hung up when she realized who it was? Could she take it if Breezy had written her off? Maybe she'd wait a few more days and call when things had settled into a routine. Yeah, that sounded like a better, safer plan.

Ruby inspected the dining table and its spread of food. "Well, I guess that's as good as it's going to get. Tildi, would you like to ring the dinner bell for me?"

"The dinner bell?"

"Yes, poppet. Did you not get to ring the dinner bell when you were younger?"

"Um, no, ma'am." She looked to Kenzie for a clue, but she wasn't paying attention.

“At least, I don’t think so. But if you’ll show me where it is, I’d love to ring it for you.”

Ruby had returned her gaze to the table. “Land sakes, I forgot to put out the pickles. Kenzie, can you show Tildi where the dinner bell is?”

“Sure, Ruby. Come on, Tildi. Follow me.”

Tildi followed Kenzie to the front porch. They walked down the porch to the second column and there, attached to the column by a black iron hook, was a large black bell.

“Here you are,” Kenzie said and swept out her arm in the direction of the bell, as if she’d conducted Tildi to her seat at the opera. When Tildi didn’t move, she added, “It’s not hard. All you have to do is grab that string hanging down from the clapper and clang it side to side. You’d be surprised what a ruckus it makes. Go ahead. Try it.”

Tildi grabbed the cord, but she didn’t want to break anything. She tapped the side, and it clanged. Okay, clanged might be an overstatement. Pinged might be more accurate.

“Hell’s bells, girlfriend. You got to whale the tar out of it. Let me help.”

Before Tildi could guess her intention, Kenzie had grabbed the string, covering Tildi’s hand in the process. Kenzie proceeded to whale away on the bell, and Tildi tried not to land on her backside on the porch.

She was just getting into the swing of things when someone grabbed her from behind. She opened her mouth to shriek, but the air was freezing and her throat locked down, so instead she peeped like a baby chick.

The hands on her loosened, only to be replaced with powerful arms that pulled her into a hard, warm chest. The scent of pine and leather surrounded her, and something else. Mmm. The dangerous, masculine scent that was pure Boone.

“Miss me, darlin’?” His voice was a delicious rumble that vibrated through her curling her toes.

“Always.” Turning in his arms, she plowed her hands underneath his shirt. “You’re warm, Daddy.”

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It was Boone's turn to yelp. "I won't be for long with hands like that under my shirt."

He pretended to struggle to get away from her and she couldn't hold back her laughter. When Boone was around, he always made her feel. Sometimes joy. Sometimes heat. Sometimes stressed, or sad, or confused. But she'd been numb for so long, she wanted to feel everything. He gave her that.

"We need to get you inside, babygirl. Want a ride?"

"A ride on what, Daddy? There's no one here but you."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to ride Daddy."

As if she weighed nothing at all, he lifted her off the ground and somehow swung her around to his back.

"Wrap your legs around me and hold on tight."

That was the only warning he gave her before he started galloping like a horse. She threw her arms around his neck and held on for dear life. After shoving open the massive front doors, he galloped her across the great room, past the kitchen, and all the way to the dining room table.

Everyone had already started serving their plates and with everyone seated, there was only one chair left. Boone didn't even pause. He walked them to the chair. She should have expected what happened next, but she never dreamed he would swing her around and sit down with her in his lap. Not in front of all the people gathered at the

table.

But there she was, sitting in his lap like a baby. Her face flamed. What would everyone think? She struggled to move off him, but he held her in place. “Patience, little girl. I’ll fix us a plate.”

She’d heard people talk about being embarrassed to death, and she’d thought they were exaggerating. But no. She could feel death by mortification creeping up on her.

Yes, they sat this way on the yacht. And sure, she’d loved it. Especially when he fed her from his plate. It made her feel all warm and squishy inside.

But they hadn’t been sitting at a table with, she scanned the room and got a headcount, ten other people. People she didn’t know. People who might think she was crazy. Or worse, think Boone was.

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “Relax, bluebell. You don’t need to worry about anyone else at this table. First, what they think doesn’t matter. Their thoughts are not our problems unless we let them be. Second, when I said everyone here was in the lifestyle, I wasn’t just talking about my brothers. There is no one at this table that is going to judge you. Everyone means everyone. So, if they feel anything, it’s jealousy that I have such a beautiful, smart, Little girl sitting in my lap.”

Each dish was passed around the table and people took what they wanted. Boone did the same. She wrinkled her nose when he added roasted cauliflower to his plate, but as long as it wasn’t the dreaded artichoke heart she’d at least taste it. The large helping of mac and cheese he plopped on a minute later had her stomach growling.

When she reached for the utensils, Boone smacked her hand. “Mine. Someone has to make sure you eat some of everything on this plate, and I don’t think that would be you, little girl.”

Tildi huffed, but that was all she could do when he was, in fact, right.

Kenzie laughed. "I've missed you brother, giant neanderthal that you are."

Tildi bristled at Kenzie's words. They were meant to help, she was sure, but she didn't appreciate anyone calling her Daddy a neanderthal. "I had a great time this morning, Daddy. You wouldn't believe everything I got to do. Ruby and Kenzie do more in one morning than the people I used to work with did in a week. And I get to go with Ruby and Kenzie this weekend to deliver Christmas presents. How cool is that?"

"Pretty cool, bluebell. I don't know if I can top that this afternoon, but I'll give it my best shot."

She grinned. "It might be hard. So far today I've boxed up 800 million pieces of candy and I grated enough cheese to feed mac and cheese to the whole army of Switzerland and Sweden combined."

Boone grinned down at her. "Well, I'm glad you had a few things to occupy your time this morning. I hated I couldn't be here when you woke up, but I needed to ride the fences."

"I was fine, Daddy. I'm always fine." He frowned at that. Had she hurt his feelings? "I had plenty to do but I did miss you. Are you going to be busy all afternoon?"

After a nerve wracking few seconds of him staring at her, he shook his head and smiled and her heart tripped a little. "I am. I have a very important job this afternoon. First, I have to finish riding the fence that runs by the river's edge. But after that I'm showing the prettiest little girl in the county around the ranch."

"That would be awesome. What does it mean to ride the fence?"

“Well, it’s pretty complicated. Not sure how to describe it. I guess you'll just have to wait and see, little one. But I think you'll like it.”

If it meant spending time with him, she knew she’d like it. If they were the only ones on the fence, she’d love it. She didn’t have to know what it was. Anything that involved spending time with Boone was her favorite thing to do.

He was going to spend the rest of the afternoon with her. Hopefully, that didn't mean he would not be able to get his important work done. Because even though he said she was his very important job, she knew she'd have to get used to him being away from her.

She’d gotten spoiled those three weeks on the yacht. Being together every second of every day might get on some people’s nerves, but not hers. She loved it.

But now they were back in the real world. Now things were different. Boone had lots of responsibilities that didn’t have anything to do with her. So, now she needed to get busy trying to figure out what her responsibilities were supposed to be.

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“As long as I won't be in the way.” He didn't sound bothered by the prospect of showing her around.

Boone stopped in his tracks. “Look at me, bluebell. You are never in the way. Not ever.”

And there he went, filling her chest with warmth.

CHAPTER 10

Boone sauntered behind Tildi as she skipped toward the barn, scattering snow in her wake. As soon as she realized they'd be riding horses, she bolted for the door. He thought he was going to have to toast her ass to get one of Kenzie's coats on her. She'd still managed to get out the door before he got her earmuffs on her.

How she could jump around like that after eating one of Ruby's famous cowboy chipwiches was beyond him. He'd only taken two bites, but since she'd insisted on filling the center of her ice cream sandwich with rocky road ice cream instead of vanilla, he'd let her eat it all by herself.

Besides, he'd just thawed all the way out from patching fencing in the cold morning air. It was the coldest November he could remember in decades. He was going to have to watch her closely until she understood the dangers of going out in the cold.

He hoped that cast iron stomach of hers lasted because they had a lot of ground to cover before they'd reach the spot he wanted to share with her. He'd taken care of most of the fence patching required that morning so he could introduce his girl to his

favorite spot on the ranch.

Up ahead, she tugged on the door to the barn, not paying enough attention to what she was doing. “You need to wait for me, Tildi.”

Without turning to look at him, she called out, “I got it.”

Shaking his head, he slowed his pace. Sometimes things were easier when he let her learn the hard way. Turned out that was most things with his girl. She wasn’t a brat. Far from it. But she was a tad on the headstrong side.

By the time he caught up with her, she’d planted one tennis shoe covered foot on the left hand door and was grunting from her efforts to pull open the door.

“You sure you don’t want my help?”

“Is it stuck or something? What if there was an emergency and the horses needed to get out fast?” She turned to face him, face red from her efforts and hands fisted on her hips.

He grabbed her under her arms and hoisted her out of the way. It probably said something about him with how much he loved moving her where he wanted her.

Reaching for the handle on the door, he slid it open. “After you, babygirl.”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him, but he met it head on with a grin. She tried to hold onto her mad, but she couldn’t, laughing as she passed by him. “You could have told me it was a sliding door.”

After all she’d been through, she could still find humor in things. Most people couldn’t laugh at themselves, but his Tildi could. He loved that about her.

Warmth welcomed them into the stable. It had cost a shit ton of money to build, especially with the medical bay Trace had wanted. Now he could properly tend to the stock where they were stabled. Days like today made him appreciate the decision they'd made. It had been worth every penny.

Tildi's laughter dried up as soon as she stepped inside the stable. She stared at the horses in their stalls for a full minute before glancing at him. When she spoke, she did it as if she were confessing some terrible flaw in her character. "I love horses, but I've never ridden one."

Her words and the look that accompanied them pissed him off. Not at her, he was pissed at the people in her life who'd taught her she had to be the best at something coming out of the gate.

She stared at the scuffed wooden floor, waiting for... what? What was she used to when she couldn't do something no reasonable person would expect of her in the first place? Fuck that.

He turned her to face him and pulled her close. "Tildi, I didn't expect you'd know how to ride a horse. I've been looking forward to teaching you how for weeks. But, darlin', even if I'd thought you did know how to ride, I wouldn't be upset if you didn't. We all have to learn new things. Look at me, bluebell. You are already as close to perfect as you'll ever have to be for me. I wouldn't want you learning in this weather anyway, for your sake and the sake of your mount."

He took her hand and led her to Dollar's stall. "This is Dollar. When I was growing up, other than my brothers, Dollar was my best friend. I promised to teach you how to ride, and if you still want to learn, that's what I'm going to do. Once it's warmer and you're settled."

He wasn't sure she'd heard anything he said. Her eyes were trained on Dollar. And

they were huge. He got it. At sixteen hands tall, Dollar was a lot to take in. Tildi didn't even come to Dollar's shoulder.

When he thought back on it, he couldn't believe his pop had let him have Dollar. He'd just turned seventeen at the time. Dollar was so full of piss and vinegar his dad was about to geld him. Boone had volunteered to try and break him in and to his shock, his dad had let him try.

He didn't know how he'd managed it, but he had. And Dollar had been the only horse he'd ridden since.

Tildi stared into Dollar's eyes, and Boone wasn't sure who was going to break eye contact first. They were both stubborn enough for them to be there a long time. He knew what his girl was going to do before she moved. She wasn't about to back down, even when she was obviously terrified by his horse.

Sure enough, she extended a trembling hand toward Dollar's muzzle. He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "That's my brave girl. Let me make a proper introduction."

Weaving his fingers between hers, he curled his other arm around her shoulder and edged her closer to the stall. After he pulled back the upper half of the stall door, he extended both their hands, making sure his knuckles touched Dollar first.

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A gasp escaped Tildi's lips when the back of her knuckle stroked the horse's muzzle. "He's so soft."

Boone wanted to laugh when Dollar snorted at Tildi's words. "Here, babygirl. I'll show you how to saddle him, and then we'll ride him together. You're going to love it. There's nothing else like it in the world. And with me doing the steering, all you'll have to do is enjoy. If you don't like it, that's okay, too. Remember our rules?" At her nod, he continued. "Do you remember the one about riding horses?"

She continued to nod but snapped her gaze to him when she realized what he'd said. "Daddy! We don't have a rule about horses at all."

"Huh. I guess you're right. So, if you don't like it, you won't be in trouble."

That earned him a real smile. "I get you. But I hope I like it."

He did, too. He had plans for secret places they could go if they were on horseback that would be more difficult on an ATV.

Once they saddled the horse and mounted, they headed out at a gentle trot. God, she felt good in his arms. He wasn't sure how long he was going to last with his arm nestled under her firm breasts and her tight ass rocking against his cock. It might kill him, but he'd die the happiest Daddy on the planet.

Not for the first time that day, her phone vibrated. He knew this because it was in her back pocket. "Who keeps calling you, bluebell?" She'd only been here a day. It sure as hell wasn't any of her family in Tennessee.

“Oh, um, it’s no one. Not anyone I know anyway. It’s a wrong number.”

Seemed awfully persistent for a wrong number. “Did you tell them they had the wrong number?”

“I tried. I, um, I guess they don’t believe me.” She pointed to the left. “Are those mountain bluebells?”

Following the line of her arm, he spotted the clusters of bluebells scattered around the field they crossed. “That they are, darlin’. That they are.”

As obvious distractions went, it was a perfect example. She might think she’d gotten away with dodging his question. They might not have a rule about horses, but they did have a rule about honesty. And his sweet babygirl had just lied her ass off. What he needed to do was find out why.

Tildi

Tildi had thought sunsets on the ocean were the most beautiful she’d ever seen, and they had been. Right up until she watched the sun disappear behind the crests and ridges of the Wyoming Rocky Mountains. Of course, sitting on a waterproof thermal blanket, wrapped up with Boone in a thick woolen blanket helped since the snow hadn’t melted. He even managed a campfire.

“It’s beautiful.” She kept her voice at a whisper. To do anything else would break the spell.

Boone didn’t whisper, but he kept his voice low. “It’s always been my favorite place to watch the sunset. I found it when my folks were killed.”

She took his hand and pressed it to her chest, right above her heart. “I’m so sorry.

How long ago was that?”

He squeezed her hand, but she couldn't tell if it was intentional or a reflex at her question. “Seven years. Sometimes it feels like a lifetime. And sometimes it feels like yesterday.”

Tildi hadn't lost anyone close to her, but she knew the feeling well. Time was a funny thing. “What happened?”

“They were hit by a drunk driver on their way home from a weekend getaway. I came home to see to the funeral and the ranch. I'd have told you there wasn't an inch of this land that I hadn't seen, but one day when I needed some time alone, I took Dollar out and wound up here at sunset. I sat here taking in the view and feeling more alone than I'd ever felt in my life. Then, damndest thing I ever saw, a great horned owl and a little pygmy owl flew in and settled on a branch of that poplar tree right over there.”

Tildi leaned forward to take in the giant tree, blue-green boughs blanketed with snow. “Is that normal? Two different kinds of owl like that?”

Boone shook his head. “Never seen it before or since. I figure the big brown one was male, and the tiny gray puffball was female. He towered over her, staring at me like he'd rip me into pieces if I messed with his girl. Just like dad used to be with mom. He could give her a hard time, but none of us kids better give her any lip. And god help anyone outside the family who upset her.”

He smiled at the memory and Tildi was so glad he had them.

Boone took back up the story. “Anyway, they just sat there and stared at me. After a few minutes, they flew off together. It may not make any sense, but I felt like it was my dad, taking care of my mom like always, saying goodbye.”

Silence fell after his words, but it wasn't awkward. At least not the silence stretching between Tildi and Boone. She rested her head against his shoulder, trying to remain relaxed. Her hand itched to take the phone from her pocket. She'd turned the ringer off when her Daddy had noticed the last text she'd gotten.

She hadn't lied... exactly. It might be a wrong number. It was a brand new phone Boone had gotten for her as soon as they'd docked. No one could be targeting her, not this soon. Whoever was texting was trying to scare the last owner of the phone number she was now using. Right?

Somehow, she wasn't sure Boone would see it that way. Pretty sure he wouldn't, actually. One hundred percent pretty sure.

If she told him now, he'd worry when there probably was no need. She wasn't trying to stay out of trouble by not telling him about the texts. Not at all. She was just looking out for him.

She wasn't lying by omission. The texts would stop coming in a day. Two at the most. A few dozen texts never hurt anyone. But even though they absolutely were probably not meant for her, they were still really scary.

CHAPTER 11

Tildi blinked hard and tried to bring the onion on the cutting board into focus. She hadn't slept well last night. The texts pinging her phone hadn't stopped. They hadn't even slowed down. Her phone had lit up all night long and her stomach hurt more with each alert. At least it hadn't woken Boone up.

"Ouch!" Tildi stuck her thumb in her mouth and sucked like some kind of baby vampire. That was the second time she'd cut herself trying to chop up onions for the stuffing. If she kept this up, she wouldn't have any unbandaged fingers left. Then she wouldn't be able to help get ready for tomorrow's Friendsgiving Feast.

"Don't do that, poppet. Let's put some antibiotic ointment and a bandage on it." Ruby guided her to the sink and ran cold water over Tildi's thumb. Just like she'd done thirty minutes earlier when Tildi cut her middle finger.

And just like the last time, Ruby put on the ointment, then blew on it gently in case the medicine burned before wrapping a cowgirl Jessie bandage around her thumb. Had her mother ever stopped what she was doing to take care of Tildi for anything? Not that she could remember.

Once her bandage was in place, Kenzie hugged her and handed her a cup of hot chocolate. "I really need your help deciding which toppings should go on the hot chocolate bar tomorrow. Can you look at what I have and tell me what I'm missing?"

Great. Now they didn't trust her with a knife. She didn't blame them. She felt like she was back in middle school and didn't make the track team, so the coaches asked her

if she'd do something even more important than sprinting and be the water girl.

Here she was, twenty-four and still unable to make the team. Trying to smile, she sat at the bar and studied the different hot chocolate toppings. All the standards were there – marshmallows, whipped cream, crushed peppermint. “I think you have everything covered. Sometimes I like to add Red Hots candy for the cinnamon.”

“Oh, I love that! With your help, we're ahead of schedule. Would you like to run into town with me and get some?”

Tildi had been wondering about the town of Wilder. She'd heard Grif and Dutch mention it several times on the yacht and it sounded amazing. Then there was the hope she'd be able to keep from hurting herself again walking around the small town.

She gave Kenzie a nod. “I'd love to. Let me grab my coat.”

It turned out Wilder wasn't, at least on the surface, much different from any other sleepy country town across America.

The town centered around a large domed courthouse of brick, cornered with white mortar. The multiple police cars parked behind the courthouse showed it doubled as the police department. Two large flags flew from the flagpole centered on the top of the dome. The red, white and blue of old glory billowed just above the Wyoming state flag with its large, white bison and state seal.

It was a pretty town, and it would be prettier in the spring and summer. Large stone planters made to look like hollowed out logs lined both sides of the street. They were filled with snow right now but come spring she bet they'd be brimming over with colorful flowers of all kinds.

Across from the courthouse, a small city park had clean swept, paved paths with

plenty of benches for people to sit and chat or have lunch outside. Several towering lodgepole pines provided shade. Giant iron bison statues guarded both the entrances to the park. They were probably mortified by the huge Christmas wreath collars and jaunty Santa caps they wore, but they were adorable.

Christmas garlands dusted with snow wound every streetlamp pole and strings of colorful light adorned the face of every building along main street. Flyers on every flat surface advertised the upcoming town Christmas parade.

A shrieked, “Shit!” from Kenzie was the only warning Tildi had before the car skidded to a stop, barely missing a girl and then a man who had stepped onto the street.

The seatbelt bit into Tildi’s shoulder when the sudden stop flung her toward the dash. Luckily neither girl was hurt. Out of the corner of her eye, movement caught Tildi’s attention.

A curvy woman stared up at a tall, strong jawed man who was obviously upset with her. He spoke to her. And when she shook her head, the man grasped her arm, spun her to face away from him, and brought his hand down on her bottom with a firm smack.

Wait. Was that man spanking the woman? On the street? Out in the open where everyone could see? Holy guacamole.

In the time it took Tildi to decide if she should try to intervene, the man had turned her back toward him and now held her in his arms. The woman’s response to the episode calmed Tildi’s frayed nerves.

Not only was the woman hugging him back, but she did it with a smile on her face. Her cheeks glowed, and though Tildi didn’t think the rosy color had anything to do

with the cold weather, she didn't think it came from anger at the man's reaction, either. Embarrassment maybe, but not anger.

Tildi turned to ask Kenzie if what she had seen was a normal occurrence, but a rapid tapping on her window had her facing the sidewalk again. The spanking man and his spankee stood next to her window.

Unsure if she should, Tildi lowered the window. The man leaned over to look at them. "You girls all right? Were either of you hurt slamming on the brakes? Sorry we stepped out in front of you like that."

She liked the way he'd said we instead of she. "Um, thanks, but I think we're fine." Wanting to be sure she'd read the situation correctly, Tildi asked the woman, "Are you all right?"

With a bright smile, the woman curled into the man's side, tucking her arm around his waist. "I'm fine," she answered with a smile. "Sorry I made you almost wreck. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No harm, no foul, Maddie," Kenzie said with a grin. "Although it looks like Derrick here might disagree. I'm just glad we didn't hit you."

"That we can agree on," the man said. Holding his hand out to Tildi, he added, "I'm Derrick Hughes, and this is my wife, Maddie. We were on our way to The Fudge Factorium for a treat, but now we're going home to discuss when we do and do not listen to music on our phone, aren't we, princess?"

Maddie's gaze dropped to her feet. "Yes, Dadd—I mean, um, yes."

"You have a Daddy, too?" Yep. That's what came out of Tildi's mouth.

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She just blurted it out, as if they were talking about the phone Maddie held rather than her calling her husband Daddy.

Daddies weren't like phones. Everyone didn't have one. Well, most places anyway. Had she wound up finding the one town on earth, other than the one she'd grown up in, where everyone had a Daddy? Or at least wished they did.

"I do. I'm so glad you understand. I didn't mean to just blurt that out."

Kenzie laughed. "Oh, she understands all right. Tildi is with Boone."

"That's wonderful. So, you do understand then. I guess we'll be seeing a lot of you."

Derrick made a show of clearing his throat. "I'm sure Kenzie and Tildi came into town for a reason. You can talk more tomorrow at the Friendsgiving Feast. We need to get home and have that discussion."

Maddie scrunched her nose. "I guess I have to go. I may be feasting while standing up, but I'll see you tomorrow. Nice to meet you, Tildi. I think you're going to fit in here in Wilder just fine."

Derrick led Maddie back in the direction they'd come from.

Kenzie headed back down the street, but Tildi had questions. "Okay, spill, Kenzie. I knew most of the men on the Ranch were Daddies, but does that extend to the town of Wilder, too?"

Kenzie shrugged. “Sure. The men that settled here originally were Daddies, and the town just kind of drew people who lived the same lifestyle.”

They pulled into the parking lot of a quaint grocery store called The Mountain Market. On the outside, it looked like a huge mountain cabin. It had to be owned by someone local. Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t seen a single chain store on the drive into town. “Do you have any big box stores around here?”

“Oh, sure. We shop there sometimes, but I like to buy local when I can. I love the people here, so I want to do my part to help them stay in business. Now, let’s go grab those Red Hots to spice up our hot chocolate.”

As they put the groceries they’d bought in the back of the SUV—because no one ever left a grocery store with only what they went in for—a woman in a bright red coat called out to them. Looking up, Kenzie smiled and waved. “Hi, Maggie. You’re going to be at the house tomorrow, right?”

Maggie smiled back. “I wouldn’t miss the Daniels’ Friendsgiving. You know that.”

Kenzie grinned. “Outstanding! Maggie, this is my new sister, Tildi. Tildi, this is Maggie O’Byrne.”

Tildi did her best not to jump and squeal at Kenzie introducing her as a sister. Smiling at Maggie, Tildi wondered not for the first time just how big the Daniels’ annual Friendsgiving was.

If hearing Kenzie describe Tildi as her sister surprised Maggie, she didn’t show it. She just reached into the shopping cart and started helping them load the bags. “It’s nice to meet you, Tildi. I didn’t know Kenzie had a sister. Just a butt ton of brothers.”

Kenzie didn’t hesitate to explain. “She’s Boone’s girl. He rescued her on his latest

mission. It was love at first sight, so he saved her life. It's all very romantic, don't you think?"

Tildi braced and waited for the questions to start, but Maggie just laughed. "I don't know if it sounds romantic, but it does sound very interesting."

Kenzie nodded. "Hey, I know you're coming tomorrow, but would you like to come out today, too? We're finishing up the baking and looking for expert taste testers. Say you'll come."

Maggie grinned and patted her own rounded bottom. "I think you can tell I never turn down the opportunity to taste test yours and Ruby's baking. Let me grab my car and I'll meet you at the ranch. It's nice to meet you, Tildi. I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

Kenzie led the way back to the ranch with Maggie following in her car. The next few hours were filled with laughter, good coffee, and fantastic tastes of what had to be every dessert known to man. Maggie was fun and easy to talk to. She fit right in.

If only Tildi's phone would stop blowing up with texts, life would be perfect. The messages were growing more and more threatening as the day progressed. They were still general threats and insults. There was nothing particular to Tildi and her past. No reason to assume they were sent by Nico Midnight or one of his men.

But what if they were? What would it mean? Was he trying to scare her, or would he be escalating from words to actions?

She didn't want to think like that. Didn't want the answer to that question.

If she knew Nico was coming for her, she'd have to leave. She couldn't draw danger here when everyone had been so nice to her. She'd never be able to live with it.

Even if he were coming after her to get to Boone, Nico would probably follow her rather than take on the men of Wild River Ranch. It just made sense. She'd be alone and on the run, maybe for the rest of her life.

Tildi jumped when Maggie put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right? You look like something is bothering you."

No way was Tildi drawing anyone else into her crazy drama. "Sorry. No, just tired, I guess. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

Maggie grinned. "I'll bet. You are still in the honeymoon stage, right?"

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Yeah, but that had nothing to do with it.

“Do you mind if I ask why you were in a position to be rescued while Boone was on a mission?”

And there it was. She’d known the questions would come as soon as Kenzie had told Maggie how she and Boone had met.

“Boone came to the island where I was being held to kill Nico Midnight, a Cosa Nostra boss. When he found me, he ditched his mission and got me to safety.”

Maggie nodded. When Tildi didn’t offer any more information, Maggie asked, “How long were you held captive before he found you?”

“Not that long, relatively speaking. Nico is a sex trafficker. I’m one of the lucky ones. Boone rescued me after just a year. Most women are never heard from again.”

Maggie showed a reaction to Tildi’s words for the first time. “Maybe. I mean, you were abducted by the Cosa Nostra and kept prisoner for a year? That must have been terrifying. How are you coping now that it’s over?”

That was the million dollar question, now wasn’t it. Not how she was coping, of course. She was coping fine, right? She had made it out of hell and found the love of her life and the Daddy of her dreams. It would be selfish to feel anything but grateful.

The real question, the one that kept her awake at night worrying about stupid texts, was the fear that it wasn’t over at all. She’d give anything she had to know the answer

to that.

Before she'd started getting those texts, she'd have said yes. But now? Now, she wasn't so sure. Now she needed to put the wonderful people here first and at least come up with a plan for leaving if Nico turned out to be behind the threats.

Luckily, she didn't have to answer Maggie's question because Boone and his brothers entered the kitchen, stomping their feet on the rug in front of the door to knock the snow off their boots.

Boone scanned the room until he saw her. Fire lit his gaze, and he headed straight for her. Scooping her up, he tossed her over his shoulder and kept right on going.

"Daddy!" she shrieked. "Where are we going?" Thankfully, since Mother Nature was in her frigid biatch stage, Tildi had opted for leggings today instead of a skirt.

He answered without breaking his stride. "Some place private so I can give you a proper greeting."

Ducking into the laundry room, he lifted her to sit on the large oak table in the middle of the room. Before she knew what he was about, he'd pulled her toward him until his hips spread her legs wide.

His normally sage green eyes darkened to a deeper emerald. Catching her hands in his own, he pinned them to her hips, rendering her immobile.

Her lungs decided breathing wasn't important as everything in her stilled in anticipation of what he would do next. Desire tickled her abdomen before sliding lower to tickle much more reactive parts of her body. The rest of the world went silent as she narrowed her focus to the man standing before her, invading her space.

Leaning into her, he feathered kisses along the soft curve of her cheek. When he reached her ear, he whispered, "Close your eyes for Daddy, babygirl." The caress of his breath on her sensitive ear pebbled her nipples as she obeyed.

As soon as she did, his lips glided across hers. The moan that drew from her parted her lips, and without hesitation he deepened the kiss. More than that, he took control of her mouth and possessed it without mercy. He dominated her without her offering a single protest.

A current of need traversed from her breast to her core at the speed of hummingbird's wings. She relaxed her fingers so her nails didn't carve grooves in the tabletop. Her clit pulsed to life, throbbing with such intensity it bordered on pain.

He took the kiss deeper still.

She forgot where she was. She forgot who she was. Her mind became nothing more than a whirlwind of sensations and emotions.

And just when she thought she would burst into flames that would consume them both, he gentled his kiss and released her mouth.

He stared at her, his need still apparent as it pressed against her pussy. She was so wet her panties had probably soaked through to her leggings. If he didn't move, she was going to leave a wet spot on the fly of his jeans, too. The thought of that both thrilled and mortified her.

He ran his thumb along her swollen lips and grinned. "Now that's a welcome home kiss."

For a moment, it was all she could do to try and normalize her breathing. He'd promised her a riding lesson this afternoon, but she was ready to skip that and ride

him instead.

Before she could suggest doing just that, his phone rang. She wanted to growl and throw it into the trash. Whoever it was, they could call back later.

Releasing her hands, he pulled out his phone and frowned. “It’s Sev.”

She untucked his shirt so she could run her fingers along the ridges of his chiseled abs. Catching her hands before she could touch his warm skin, he shook his head and frowned, though his eyes still twinkled.

“Hold on a second, babygirl. I need to find out what he wants. He wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important.”

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She didn't care what Sev thought he needed to tell her Daddy. She had needs, too. And she'd be willing to bet hers were a lot more fun.

Ignoring her efforts at distracting him, he took the call while she tried to tug her hands from his hold. The least he could do was let her play while he talked boring business stuff.

"This better be good, Midnight," he growled. Sev said something she couldn't catch, and Boone stilled. "Why?"

Argh! This was going to take forever.

Boone's already rock hard abdominals went rigid. "Hold on. You found what?" He paused for Sev's reply then his eyes focused on her. His very angry eyes. "For how long?" he demanded, his glare unwavering. "Two and a half days? And how many texts?"

Uh oh.

Boone's lips narrowed to a thin line. His jaw clenched so hard a vein pulsed up the center of his forehead. "Thanks for letting me know. We need to make a plan, but I'm gonna have to call you back. Right now, I need to have a chat with a naughty Little secret keeper."

Glaring straight into Tildi's soul, Boone ended the call.

How could such a tiny woman cause so much trouble? She sat there, wringing her hands and nibbling that bottom lip. The one still swollen from his kisses. She was gorgeous from the top of her cotton candy hair to the tips of her delectable toes. The ones he happened to know now matched the color of her hair.

He loved everything about her. Her mind. Her heart. Her courage. Not to mention her perfect, apple-shaped ass, firm enough to smack and soft enough to jiggle when he did. Speaking of which, that ass was going to be doing a lot of jiggling in the near future.

What she'd done made no sense. She knew Nico was a threat. Why in the hell would she keep something like this from him? Did she not trust him to keep her safe? He'd be willing to bet his left nut when he got to the bottom of it the General would be the root cause. He really hated that guy.

The truth of the matter was it didn't matter why. That wasn't going to solve the problem. It wasn't going to keep him from tanning her hide, either.

But something about this was off. He was missing something. Something important.

He'd have to figure that out later, though. Right now, he had to find out exactly what those texts said and deliver some consequences for her bad choices. Ninety-three of them apparently.

Ninety-three opportunities to be honest with him.

He'd deal with all of that, then give her lots of hugs so she wouldn't forget how much more important she was to him than anything else in his world.

He crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance, keeping his expression stern. His Little girl needed to know her Daddy was not pleased.

She stared up at him, nervous and vulnerable, and that pissed him off even more. He could also see the relief in her eyes. She was glad he'd found out.

Was that because she knew he'd keep her safe, or because she hated lying to him? Hopefully, both. Whatever her reason, it was unacceptable. How dare she not tell him she'd been getting those messages.

"Let me get this straight. You've been getting threatening texts from an unknown number since you first got your phone, and you didn't tell me?" It took all he had to keep his voice down to a dull roar.

She looked up at him, a plea for understanding in her eyes. Well, he couldn't give her what he didn't have, and right now he didn't understand anything.

Sniffling, she tried to explain. "I didn't think the texts were sent to me, just to my phone."

He was drowning in Little logic. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he tried again. "How could the texts be for your phone but not for you, Tildi. I'm not following you."

She scrunched her face in frustration. "It's like you said a minute ago, Daddy. I just got this phone when we got off the yacht. No one even knew my number. I didn't get it, then I remembered my friend in New York."

She was losing him. "You think a friend of yours is the one texting you?"

Frustration clouded her face. "No, no, no, Daddy. I had a friend in New York who got a new number on her phone. Only when she did, she kept getting calls from debt collectors asking for money she didn't owe. She finally figured out she had a used number. The last person who had her phone number must have skipped out on paying

their bills and the debt collectors thought it was her. See?”

He saw where she was going, but it wasn't going to lead her anywhere but over his knee. “Tildi, are you honestly telling me you thought you were getting threats because you had a used number?”

“Exactly!” She beamed at him like he'd finally stopped trying to put the square peg in the round hole. “See, it didn't matter how many times she told them they had the wrong number, they still kept calling. I thought it was something like that and if I ignored it, they would get the message and stop texting.”

He held out his hand. “Give me your phone, Matilda Jayne.” She did as she was told. He scrolled through the multitude of messages that had been left.

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The texts had started, one per hour, roughly an hour and a half after they had stopped at Sev's house. Yesterday they'd come every thirty minutes. Now someone was texting her every fifteen minutes. From the same number in under forty-eight hours.

How could he have missed her getting that many texts? They'd been together for most of that time. One look at her settings told him all he needed to know. She'd turned her phone to silent and turned down the brightness so he wouldn't notice. She'd been hiding them from him, keeping them secret.

Secrets got people killed. He evidently needed to make a stronger point than he'd made before. "Even if you thought these texts weren't important, you should have told me about them. What is our rule about lying?"

Tildi stared at the floor. "We never lie. Not by saying something untrue or by not saying a truth that needs to be told."

Remorse rang in her every word, but that wasn't going to get her out of sitting on a sore ass for a day or two. "So tell me, little girl, if you know the rule by heart, why would you keep these texts from Daddy?"

Her breath hitched. She didn't look up when she answered his question. "I don't know. I just hoped they were for someone else."

"Hope won't keep you safe, babygirl. You know better than anyone what Nico is capable of."

To be fair, he could understand why she hoped the texts weren't meant for her. She'd

been through hell the past year and wanted it to be behind her. The texter had never mentioned her name or any specific details of what she'd endured. With all that, he could see her trying to convince herself they were from some random debt collector. It was a very Little thing to do.

But it wasn't as if debt collectors who harassed a person by blowing up their phone with texts weren't dangerous. That wasn't their typical MO anyway. More likely it would have been some low life, scum sucking loan shark. And picturing what that kind of man could do to his Little girl scared the shit out of him. That pissed him off even more.

"Tell me something, bluebell. What would you have done if whoever is texting you showed up in person? Today's technological advances make that more than possible."

"I didn't know that, Daddy. I guess I thought they couldn't get onto the ranch."

He needed to dial it down. He wanted her to be careful, not terrified. "I just need you to be safe, babygirl. The truth is, you have no idea who this is, do you?"

Still fixing her gaze on the floor, she shook her head. "N-no, Daddy."

He couldn't stand not touching her. Stepping closer, he lifted her to sit on the table again and held her close. "You don't need to worry about anyone getting to you on the ranch. I'm glad you feel safe here because you are. And now that I know about the texts, I'll take care of whoever is making them. What you need to focus on is how you received threatening messages and didn't come to me. I can't keep you safe from threats I don't know exist. That has to be as important to you as it is to me, so we're on the same page when it comes to your safety. It is never okay to keep things from Daddy. Not ever. Got me?"

This time he got a slow nod. "Yes, Daddy." She said she understood, but evidence

suggested she didn't.

"Good, let's go then." He took her hand to lead her from the laundry room, but she resisted. Little girl, the last thing you need to do right now is give me more reasons to punish you by defying me."

"Um, where are we going?"

The high pitch of her voice told him she already knew the answer to that question. "We're going to our room now, little girl. When we get there, I'm going to put you over my knee, pull down your panties, and spank your naughty little backside until it's as red and glowing as Rudolph's shiny nose."

She shivered at his words, but she also pressed her thighs together. That was exactly where he wanted her, anxious and excited. "But I said I'm sorry Daddy. I won't keep anything from you again."

"I believe you. But that doesn't mean there aren't consequences to your actions. Before I'm finished, you'll know beyond a shadow of a doubt what my position is on keeping secrets from Daddy, especially where threats to your safety are concerned. The only question is where that lesson is going to take place. I was going to take you to our room so we could have some privacy. But if you would rather get your spanking in the laundry room here, where everyone will know you're getting your bottom roasted, you just keep resisting Daddy."

Eyes wide, she shook her head. "I don't want to get a spanking here, Daddy."

"That's good, babygirl. Now let's go."

Once they were back in the bedroom he shut and locked the door. No one would interrupt them, but she didn't know that. He didn't want her to worry about someone

coming in.

Crossing to the desk by the wall, He pulled out the sturdy wooden chair and placed it in the center of the bedroom. There was nothing to get a naughty Little girl into the proper frame of mind for a punishment like a wooden chair.

Tildi stood with her back to the fireplace, watching him with wide eyes. He wasn't sure warming her ass by the fire was a good idea, her ass would soon be more than warm enough. Crooking his finger, he then pointed to the floor in front of him.

She dragged her feet, inspecting the floor intently as she inched her way to him. He wasn't going to complain because that was the only thing that kept her from seeing his lips twitching. After all, teaching her a lesson regarding her safety was serious business.

With the Cosa Nostra after them, she had to keep her guard up. But still, if there was anything that spoke to his Daddy side, it was watching his Little putting off a punishment as long as possible.

She planted her feet in front of him, hands clasped behind her bottom, and twisted side to side. Still inspecting her shoes, she mumbled, "I know I should have told you about the texts. It's just, everything here is so new and so wonderful... I didn't want anything to spoil it. I know you don't like secrets, but do you really think those texts were meant for me?"

"You're right, I don't like secrets. And yes, bluebell, I don't just think the texts are for you. I know they are."

That got him her eyes, but she took a small step back. "How do you know?"

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He couldn't tell her while she held herself away from him. He needed the connection, and so would she when she heard what he had to tell her.

He pulled her to sit on his lap and rested a hand on her thigh. "I know because Sev told me. That's why he called. His housekeeper found a burner phone that someone had tried to throw away. Sev called because the phone had been used to send texts to a number with a Wyoming area code. He knew it wasn't mine, but he figured I might know whose it was. And whose number was it, Tildi?"

"Mine." She spoke in a whisper, as if saying it made it worse.

He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her and tell her he'd take care of everything. He could tell she regretted her decision. She hated disappointing him, but that wasn't enough. Not this time.

Hardening his heart, he kept pushing his point. "Yeah. Yours."

Boone had damn near lost his mind when Sev told him the number, Tildi's number. Sev, too, was as pissed as Boone had ever heard him.

Sev had a spy. Even worse, he had a spy interested in Tildi.

And that was why it was vital his girl was open and honest with him.

"Now you're going to spend some time thinking about what you could've done instead of hiding those texts from Daddy. I don't think you've had a chance to check out your naughty corner."

Her jaw dropped. “N-naughty corner? What naughty corner?”

Boone pointed to a corner near the big window. “That naughty corner, little girl. I have a feeling you'll be spendin' a fair amount of time there. Go ahead. Get a closer look.”

Tildi stared at the corner across the room. Oh, she pretended to be upset, but the dark pink flush creeping up her chest and cheeks told a different story. As did the scent of her arousal. Ah, the love-hate relationship Littles had with punishment. It was the bane of their existence, yet they craved the security it gave them.

She obviously needed a stronger incentive to overcome her inertia. “Now is not the time you want to make me repeat myself, babygirl.”

Cute as a button, she squirmed around, thinking he wouldn't know she was doing everything she could to relieve the need growing between the tops of her thighs.

His girl liked her naughty corner. Good to know.

When she reached the corner, for some reason, she thought sassy was the best behavior card she had in her deck. “Well, the stool is cute and all, but I don't get the height. It's too high to step up on, but too short to sit on.”

He could play along. Until his hand got too itchy to ignore, anyway. “I see your point. You should know that it isn't intended to be used for sitting, and if I ever catch you standing on it, you'll get a quick lesson in what it is intended for.”

She tried to hold back the shiver of excitement. Instead of folding her hand, she raised the stakes and kept playing. “The shelf is pretty, but it's too small to hold much.”

It was all he could do to bite back his laugh. She was hell bent on writing checks her ass wasn't going to enjoy paying for. "Just how many more things do you want to add to that shelf, darlin'? Cause there are a few things in the barn I think would look real nice hanging on that empty peg next to Daddy's belt."

She glanced at the hairbrush laying on the shelf and the paddle he'd carved years ago hanging from the third peg below, right next to his belt. "Um, no, that's okay. They say in decorating, less is more. And I think this shelf can already use less than what it has on it."

He'd just bet she did. "What about the sign above the shelf? What does it say?"

When she turned to read it, he moved to his bedside table and took out two of the items he'd put there the day before. It was a good thing he'd stocked it while Tildi showered. Never let it be said he was a Daddy who wasn't prepared.

"The font is a bit hard to read, but I think it says 'Tildi Is A Good Girl'."

"That's exactly what it says. But it shouldn't say that right now, should it? You need to flip it over so the other side shows."

"What's on the other side?" She tipped it up and her sharp intake of breath made him smile. She turned it over, her lip poking out in an adorable pout. "Tell Daddy what it says now, naughty girl."

"It says 'Tildi's Time Out Corner'. We don't need this, Daddy. Or any of that stuff on the shelf, either. I don't like them."

"I hate to tell you, but you're gonna like them even less in a few minutes." He placed a hand on her lower back and guided her to the stool. "You didn't say anything about your pretty rug."

Her brow scrunched as she studied the long, narrow rug. “The shapes on it resemble paisley, but—wait, are those footprints?”

Yes. Yes, they were. He’d had that rug custom made. “Those are to tell you where to put your feet. You see how each one has a number? What’s on the two closest to the center?”

“Ones?” she questioned. Confusion looked good on her, but then, everything looked good on his babygirl.

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“That’s right. As you work your way to the outer edge, the numbers go up to three.”

“Why?”

“Have you ever read a scene in one of those romance books where the Daddy starts counting because his Little girl is being naughty?” He waited for her to nod. “I count, too. But if I start counting, you’re already in trouble. When I count, I’m telling you how far apart your feet will be when you’re in your naughty corner. You see, babygirl, different things happen for each number. I didn’t count today because you wouldn’t have understood, but if you’re wondering, you’re on three.”

“Three! How did I make it to three?”

“We’ll talk about that in a minute. Right now, we need to get you ready for your punishment.”

After setting the items from his bedside table on the stool, Boone stepped to the side to help Tildi take off her shoes and leggings.

He knew the second she realized what he had placed on the stool. Every muscle in her body locked in place. He’d have worried if removing her bottoms hadn’t put him so close to her sweet mound. The scent of her arousal was impossible to miss.

Well, well, well. His Little girl was turned on by the thought of butt plugs. His cock pulsed.

When Tildi was naked from the waist down, he picked up the smallest plug. Made of

metal, it reflected the firelight. Her gaze never left the plug as he took the bottle from her naughty girl shelf. “Do you know what this is, Tildi?”

Still staring at the plug, she answered him in a hoarse whisper. “I don’t suppose it’s a tiny silver Christmas tree decoration, is it? I mean, it has its own stand with a jewel on it.”

His girl had a vivid imagination. Not much by way of self-preservation, though. “No, bluebell. Try again, and if I don’t think you are taking this seriously, I will get one of the larger ones by the bed.”

Now he had her attention. The tip of her tongue slid along her lip before disappearing back into her mouth. He wanted to grab her hair, tilt her head back to gain access, and chase after it. Wanted to but didn’t.

Later. There’d be time for that later. Once his point had been made.

“It’s a b-butt plug,” she managed to say before snagging her lip between her teeth. “Um, y-you weren’t thinking of using that, were you?”

“As a matter of fact, I was.”

“On me?” Her question ended in a squeak.

“Yes, babygirl. You see, you hid ninety-three texts from me. But just because you hid them didn’t mean they went away. Things we hide can still have an impact on what we think and feel, babygirl. I have something I think will help you remember that.”

Her lavender eyes widened and darkened to a deep shade of indigo.

He tucked the hair tickling her eyelashes behind her ear. “Good girl. I want you to

bend over and place your hands on the stool. Then move your feet apart until you have one foot on each of the number threes.”

She stared at the stool as if it might bite her before doing as he said. Bent over with her legs spread wide, her sex was on full display. It almost sent him to his knees. God, she was beautiful. Her trembling legs. Her weeping pussy. All of her.

It took everything he could do not to toss the plug to the ground, drop to his knees, and fuck her senseless with his mouth.

Her words interrupted his thoughts. “I’m scared, Daddy. I don’t want it to hurt. I might accidentally say my safeword. I’d be a disappointment, and I couldn’t take that. I don’t want to do that. I... I’d rather have a spanking.”

He placed a calming hand on the small of her back and ran it over her ass and down her thigh. “There is nothing you could do or not do that would make you a disappointment to me, babygirl. You are so brave. You try so hard to keep everyone happy. And if you need to say your safeword, for any reason, at any time, you say it. If you don’t, then it’s not a safeword, it’s just a word. We can stop this right now and I won’t be disappointed.”

“You’d have to be! I would have failed. You’re supposed to be disappointed in someone when they fail you.”

Fuck. That.

He pulled the rag he put in his pocket free and placed the plug on the shelf. Gathering his Little girl in his arms, he carried her to the rocking recliner in front of the fireplace. After lowering himself to the seat, he covered them with a blanket and held her close.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice clogged with tears.

“There is no reason for you to apologize, babygirl. Not one. The only people who should feel shame are the ones who taught you that being human is a weakness. There is no truth in that. None.”

She didn’t say anything, but he had her attention. “Babygirl, being human is messy. We make mistakes. We fall down. We make bad choices. That’s how life works. No one is perfect, least of all that son of a bitch who donated sperm to your conception.”

That earned him a gasp and a giggle. “General Sperm Donor. I like that.”

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Nothing had ever sounded as good as that giggle. “Here’s the truth, bluebell. We make mistakes because we’re pushing ourselves to grow. We fall down because we’re being brave. We make bad choices because the future is invisible until it becomes the past. Those are all very good things. The only way we fail is when we let assholes like the General bully us into never trying to succeed. You are so much better than that man. He knew it, and that’s why he tried to control and manipulate you. You were something he could never be. Brave enough to love.”

He glanced down half expecting her to have fallen asleep. Instead, she stared up at him, her eyes filled with more love than he’d ever deserve. “Will they hurt?”

“What, life? Sometimes.”

She shook her head, smiling. “No, not life. Butt plugs.”

The shift in subjects threw him. “We don’t have to do that tonight.”

The joy in her face fizzled right in front of him. “Oh. Okay.”

Fuck. He’d just told her it was all right, even admirable, to try and fail. Then the first time she tried to follow his advice, he shot her down. Now who was the asshole?

He caught her chin and tilted her face back to him. “That wasn’t what I meant to say. What I meant to say was, butt plugs can hurt but this one won’t. Now, the spanking you’ve got coming after that is a completely different thing. You earned one hell of a butt blistering, and you’d better believe it is going to hurt.”

Only a Little in love would respond to that statement with a smile. It warmed his heart and ramped his need to drive his cock deep into her tight, wet pussy and fuck her until she screamed his name.

She shrugged one shoulder as her smile grew shy. “Okay,” she said. “I’m ready now.”

CHAPTER 13

Had she just told her Daddy she was ready to have him stick something up her butt? Because she was pretty sure she had. What had she been thinking?

“Alright, babygirl. Let’s get you ready.” Boone carried her back to her naughty corner and set her down in front of the stool. “Do you remember where I told you to put your feet?”

The footprint pattern stretched across the earth tone rug seemed much wider than it had before. Heart ticking up a notch, she nodded. “You said three, Daddy.” Her lady bits clenched standing with her legs spread so far apart.

“That’s right. You were a very naughty little girl, weren’t you.”

He was right. She’d known, deep down, that she should tell him about the texts. It might not be nice, but she was beginning to hate Nico Midnight. She hadn’t allowed herself any emotions about him for the year he’d held her. She couldn’t afford to.

She’d built a giant block of ice around her emotions and frozen them inside. She could tell they were in there, but she couldn’t touch them. And they couldn’t get out. If she’d let her emotions run rampant, she’d have gone crazy.

That had lasted until Boone had rescued her. Something about having a Daddy slowly

chipped away at the ice encasing all those feelings. Her block had almost cracked once or twice while they were on the yacht, but with Daddy's help she managed to keep it from shattering.

Only now, it wasn't only the emotions from her captivity she'd frozen in her ice block. When the cracks had started, she shoved the memories of everything that happened to her that year inside, too.

Now she didn't remember the details of that time, either. She only allowed herself the vaguest recollections. And she only did that so she wouldn't look stupid when people asked her about the kidnapping.

She hated when people did that. It made her feel weak. And stupid. And so very afraid. That's why she hadn't told anyone about the texts. If the texts were real, they threatened to crack her ice block wide open.

And that could not happen. That was then, and this was now. Now she focused on making new memories. That way her iced over feelings and memories could never escape.

"Bluebell, are you ignoring Daddy?" The serious tone of Boone's voice snapped her back into the present.

"No, Daddy. I'm sorry, I got distracted by the footprints. Is this the same rug that was here before? Cause those footprints are farther apart."

"It's the same rug. And you wouldn't have to worry about how far apart they are if you hadn't been so naughty, would you?"

"No, Daddy. I didn't mean to be naughty. Being naughty makes me feel yucky on the inside."

He pressed his body against her back. Comforting heat radiated from him, only to have an uncomfortable need flare to life as his cock grew hard against the top curve of her backside.

“That’s one of the good things about having a Daddy. It’s my job to help you get rid of those yucky feelings. Now, since Daddy has already taken your bottoms off. We can skip that step. You still won’t be needing them anytime soon.”

His words shot desire pulsing from her belly to thrum her clit before settling deep inside her core. Wetness coated her pussy, readying her for whatever was to come.

He reached around her from the back and gripped her inner thighs so close to her pussy he had to feel how wet she was.

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His lips touched the shell of her ear. “Bend over, naughty girl. Put your hands flat on the stool.” The deep, husky timbre of his voice pebbled her nipples. “Good girl, now slide your feet apart for Daddy. I’ll tell you when you reach the right spot.”

She edged her feet apart, torn between wanting him to tell her that was far enough and hoping he didn’t. Her thighs trembled, but not because she was afraid. He’d said this wasn’t part of her punishment and she trusted him.

Those threes must have been a mile apart. By the time he gave her permission to stop, her thighs were parted so wide cool air brushed the lips of her pussy leaving her feeling more vulnerable than she’d ever felt in her life.

Could Daddy see the slickness that coated her spasming, exposed opening? What must he think of her? It couldn’t be normal to be this turned on just from bending over.

He let her know exactly what he thought a second later when he ran his finger up her slit and circled her opening. “Is all of this for me, naughty girl? There's no way I can look at a pussy this pretty and not have a taste.”

He knelt behind her, and the next thing she knew, his tongue traced the path of his finger with amazing accuracy. She squealed and would have straightened if not for the firm hand he kept planted on the small of her back.

How could she be so embarrassed and so excited at the same time? Was this normal?

But then he pulled away from her. She opened her mouth to protest, but he stood back

up before she could utter a sound, leaving her quivering with need.

No!

It was all she could do to hold the word back. Focusing on steadying her breathing, she waited to see what came next.

As if he read her mind, he stepped to her side and placed one calloused hand on the small of her back, resting the pad of a thick finger at the end of her spine. “This is your first time doing anything like this, and I want this time to be something you enjoy.”

As he spoke, he curled his finger, putting slight pressure on her tailbone. It pulled at her labia and sent the most erotic sensation coursing from her anus to her clit. Oh god! Her breath escaped her in a gasp, and she had to fight to get it back.

How could something that seemed so, so wrong feel so, so right. “I... we shouldn’t?—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there, bluebell.” He continued what he was doing. “Outside of these walls, there may be times we have to take into account what other people think. But inside these walls, the only people who matter are you and me. And I don’t give one rat’s ass what anyone else thinks. This is our space to do whatever makes us feel good.” He slid his finger up and back down the crack of her bottom. “So tell me, babygirl. If we were the only two people on the planet, would you like the way my finger is making you feel?”

That was easy. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good. Me, too. So, let’s make a deal. From now on, if I do something that harms your heart, your mind, or your body, you tell me. I’ll stop and I’ll never do it again. I

promise. But otherthan that, we get to choose our own shoulds and shouldn'ts. Deal?"

Pleasure rippled through her body as he slid his finger down to her most intimate hole. His finger rested there as he waited for her answer. "Deal, Daddy. Deal."

When had her voice gotten so breathy and desperate? Oh yeah, the second he'd touched her.

He showed his approval of her answer by gently tapping his finger on her bottom hole. "That's my good girl."

Each pat of his finger notched something inside her tighter. If he kept this up, she was going to explode. But maybe that was the idea. Her pussy was throbbing with the need to be filled with his cock. She was so wet he'd slide in with no effort at all.

When she tried to give him a hint by angling her hips up, he smacked her bottom. "You are not in control, naughty girl. We are doing things on my timetable, not yours."

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted him inside her. Now.

Instead, he stepped away to retrieve the butt plug and bottle from the shelf. Tildi stared straight at the corner and tried to breathe.

"This is the smallest plug in the set I bought. It may feel a little strange at first, maybe uncomfortable because you've never done this before, but it shouldn't hurt. As long as you listen to Daddy and mind him."

She didn't think her words would work, so she nodded instead.

"All right, babygirl. I'm going to get you ready. I want you to bend your arms and

touch your forehead to the stool.”

From the corner of her eye, she watched him unscrew the cap from the pretty bottle. His, “Now, babygirl,” had her bending over even further. At least she now had her answer to why the stool had a cushion.

“I didn’t have a chance to warm this.”

That was all the warning she got before the drizzle of cool liquid trickled between the well spread cheeks of her bottom. The faint scent of almonds filled the air, then she had his finger back, spreading what she realized must be oil over her puckered hole.

She clenched her bottom, but instead of putting something in her bottom, he put his palms together and pressed the edge of his hands between her cheeks. He rocked them slowly over her rosebud and it felt amazing.

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Moving his hands in a gentle sawing motion, he gradually increased the speed and pressure. Before she realized what she was doing, she pressed back against his hands to increase the exquisite pleasure even more.

He rocked his hand further, stroking her perineum. Her pussy spasmed with need. Heart pounding, her breathing sped. What had made her think this was something she wouldn't like? God, she wanted more.

He fisted his hands, continuing the pressure but spreading her cheeks even wider. She sucked in a breath when he began to circle her bottom hole with his thumbs, once again gradually increasing his speed and pressure.

“Daddy, I... I can't... you...”

He answered her, deep and calm. And did she detect a smile there? “What is it, babygirl? Do you need Daddy to stop?”

“No!” she almost screamed. She would have if she could catch her breath. “I mean, no, Daddy. But I might need you to. It's making me, um, I don't think I can keep from coming if you don't stop.”

“I see.” Yes, there was definitely a smile in his voice. Darn him. “You don't have permission to come, little girl. Not until Daddy says you can.”

She lost his hands when he reached for more oil, and she almost stomped her foot. He couldn't make her feel this good and then just stop.

She couldn't concentrate with all the endorphins floating around in her body. She hadn't been this turned on since, well, since the last time he'd made love to her.

When he dripped more oil onto her stimulated hole, she barely held back that scream. But he rendered her speechless when his thumb found the sensitive area of her taint and started massaging again in that circular motion that brought her teetering to the edge of losing control.

Her entire body was on fire, need flaring to a blaze, trying to consume her whole. If only she could only move her feet closer together, she could use her thighs to relieve the pressure her Daddy was building.

Instead, she tightened her thighs and arched her back, panting like a woman in labor. A sheen of sweat coated her skin. She had never wanted to come so bad in her life.

It was too much. If this was him preparing her for what was coming, it was going to kill her when it got there.

She was about to tell him as much when he placed his other hand on her bottom and pressed the tip of his finger inside her dark channel. Instead of the words she'd intended, a moaning string of babble came from her lips.

This time he couldn't hold back a dark chuckle. "My baby likes having her ass played with."

All she could do was emit a guttural, "Ngugh."

"Daddy's finger is in your pretty bottom, naughty girl. And your pussy is creaming all over my hand. I wonder what will happen when I do this."

He bent his finger toward her pussy and rubbed a spot that made her see stars. She

couldn't concentrate on the sensation because someone wouldn't stop moaning. Then she realized the moans were coming from her.

"Please, Daddy. Please can I come?"

"You have such a cute little hole, bluebell. And you're such a good girl. Daddy will let you come soon, but not yet. First, I want to do this."

At the word this, he kept rubbing her perineum but pushed a finger into her pussy and crooked it toward her bottom.

He stroked the same spot inside her from both sides and her mind sheeted white. The screams fighting for release finally broke free as an orgasm unlike anything she'd ever experienced tore through her.

She hadn't known orgasms like that existed. It was all consuming. She came so hard her legs gave out. She would have hit the floor if her Daddy had not held her up. Tears streamed down her face as she cried out, "Daddy," over and over.

"That's it, baby. I've got you. Show Daddy how good he made you feel."

When she tried to cover her mouth with her hand so the entire house wouldn't hear her, Boone captured it and held it to her chest. "Don't you dare hide anything from me. You are mine, babygirl. I want it all. Every sound. Every tear. Everything."

Her face burned at his words, but her heart felt freer than it had in...ever. She had never been freer to be herself than she was with Boone. He accepted her unconditionally.

She moaned again as his hand caressed the rounded swell of her bottom, growing louder as he once again brushed a finger over her dark rosette. Somehow, her pussy

still had the energy to quiver.

But this time he didn't linger there. This time he gripped her cheek with his large hand and squeezed. And that made her moan, too.

Lowering his mouth to kiss her neck just below her ear, he gave her bottom a pat. "I'm glad you enjoyed that, bluebell. But now we have something else to do, don't we?"

"What, Daddy?"

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“There’s still the matter of your punishment for lying to Daddy.”

Wait, what?

“I didn’t lie, Daddy. Not really.” Only she sort of did. They had talked about lies of omission. “Well, I didn’t mean to. I was going to tell you. Only you found out before I had a chance.”

“Tildi, you and I both know you could have told me, and you should have. Yet you didn’t. And now I’m going to put a plug in your bottom and give you the spanking you so richly deserve.”

CHAPTER 14

Tildi glared down at the pillow on her naughty stool again. It was the perfect example of adding insult to injury. The stool was bad enough. Did she really have to stare down at a pillow that readshe believed she could, so she did... and now she’s in time out?

The injury was coming any second. She wanted to turn her head so she could see what Daddy was doing, but he said look at the pillow. Now didn’t seem a prudent time to press her luck. She believed him when he said there were bigger butt plugs than the one he was using.

Way before she was ready, he stood beside her again. “Taking this butt plug is still not going to be easy, babygirl. The playing we did just now stretched the muscles of your anus, so as long as you don’t tense, you’ll be fine.”

Her face flamed. “Daddy!”

“What, babygirl?”

“Don’t say that word. It’s embarrassing!”

“What word? Oh, you mean anus?”

“Daddy! Stop,” she wailed.

“Sorry, babygirl. I didn’t realize it would upset you. Would you rather I say bottom hole?”

This didn’t seem like the wisest time to say, “Duh?” so she settled for nodding instead.

“Daddy’s going to hold your cheeks apart this time, but in the future that will be your job.”

Oh. Good. Lord.

She tried to tell him, no, she would not be reaching back and holding her bottom cheeks apart, but her words got lost between her mind and her mouth and it came out more like, “Eep!”

“Okay, deep breath in, then blow it out like you’re blowing up a balloon.”

Something smooth, slick, and cold pressed against her bottom hole. She did what Daddy told her to do, and it turned out he was right. He worked the plug into her bottom with no pain.

The plug felt heavy and thick when it settled. It held her pucker hole open wider than she was used to. But that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was when the widest part of the plug, the part inside her, pressed against that same spot her Daddy's finger had. Which stirred tingles, just like her Daddy's finger had.

Her bottom clenched around the metal, giving her momentary relief, but then he started playing with the plug. He pulled on the base, increasing the pressure inside her, and turning her tingles into sparks of need. Again.

He twirled the plug in a circle. "We've had our talk about the texts you got and what a bad idea it was to keep things from Daddy. Do you want to tell me what you learned?"

Her stomach jumped into her chest, bumping into her heart and speeding up her heartbeat. "I should have told you, Daddy. I'm very sorry I kept them a secret."

"Not half as sorry as you're about to be," he said, and a warning prickle of dread crawled up the backs of her thighs and over her exposed bottom. She clenched her cheeks, or tried to, but the base of the plug was in the way. "Do you have any idea what could have happened if whoever sent those texts had showed up while you were in town with Kenzie?"

It was hard to focus on his words with all the sensations firing inside her. This should not be turning her on. She decided to blame it on the butt plug. It was the plug causing the tightening in her nipples. And the pulsing throb in her clit.

"But no one showed up, Daddy. We were fine."

He brought his hand down in a smack, right on top of the plug. "You were lucky."

It wasn't the hardest swat he'd ever given her. Not by a long shot. But the placement was spot on. It drove the plug in deeper. And tightened her nipples to hard points.

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“Give me one good reason not to wear you out, little girl. I’m trying...”

Swat.

“And failing...”

Swat.

“To understand what was going on in that beautiful, brilliant head of yours.”

Swat. Swat. Swat!

He spoke in the same tone of voice he used when talking about the weather. But that last swat lifted her up on her toes and pushed the plug against her pussy and that special spot inside her bottom.

She shot up from her position on the stool and spun to face him, hands covering her plugged backside. His voice might have been mild, but his face looked like a thundercloud about to storm.

“I won’t keep anything like that from you again. I promise. I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry.”

The fact he was answering his own questions probably wasn’t a good sign. This was the point in every scary show where people waved their arms in the air trying to prevent the heroine from doing something stupid, yelling, Stop! Don’t do it!

Pressing her lips together, she fought to hold back the words. But there was no way she could stop herself from answering. She'd been expected to know the right answer to every question her whole life. His glower seemed to indicate he didn't want her to say yes, so she chose the only other option.

"No, I meant no."

Great. Now his jaw was clenched and that vein on his forehead was pulsing again.

"So, you're not sorry?"

Well, that didn't sound right. Not for her bottom's sake anyway. Then her mouth pulled one of those "hold my beer" moves and snatched the control of her tongue away from her brain. "Darn it, Daddy! If it isn't yes, and it isn't no, then what am I supposed to say? What do you want?"

"The truth, Tildi. I want the truth."

Dear lord in heaven. Maybe if she jumped out of the window and lassoed one of those Mustangs he'd told her about, she could escape into the mountains and live the rest of her days as a miner panning for gold and scaring the tourists.

He wanted the truth? Fine.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want to worry you. People get tired of being worried all the time and I didn't want to risk you getting tired of me. So, I ignored the texts and pretended they weren't real. I didn't mean to lie and hide something bad from you, Daddy, but if I told you then it would be real. And if I brought real trouble to the ranch, you wouldn't want me to stay."

He stared at her then. For a really long time. Like, she was beginning to feel like a bug under a magnifying glass. Then he dropped his gaze to the floor and sighed.

Had she ruined everything? She'd tried to give him what he wanted.

"I'm going to ask you something, Tildi, and I want you to think before you answer me. Who is it in this room that you think will ask you to leave? Is it the soldier who gave up a chance to take down the man he'd been after for three years to save you? Or is it the rancher who brought you almost halfway around the world to meet his family because he wants to make a home with you? Maybe it's the Daddy who loves you too much to allow you to put your safety at risk and is going to spank your naughty, plugged bottom until he thinks you've learned how precious you are? Because all those men are me. And none of them is ever going to let you go."

"I... I..." For the first time in her life, Tildi didn't know what to say.

"We have a chance for something most people only dream of, babygirl. But you have to trust?—"

"But I do, Daddy." She had to stop him from thinking she didn't. "You're the most wonderful person in the world. I do trust you. I just don't know why you want to put up with me."

She was ruining everything. Just like she'd known she would. She hadn't been on the ranch a week, and she'd already ruined everything.

He ran a hand down her hair and cupped her cheek. "You interrupted me, babygirl. I know you trust me. The person you don't trust is you."

"What?" What did that even mean?

"You think in order to be mine you have to be perfect. And you don't see that you already are. You're the perfect Tildi. My perfectly scrumptious bluebell. Grif and Dutch adore you. Kenzie sang your praises all day to anyone who would listen. The

only one who doesn't believe in you, baby, is you."

"Because I'm not!" She couldn't let him go on like that. He was just proving her point. She could never be the person he deserved. And eventually he'd realize it and be done with her.

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“Baby no one is perfect. And honest to god, perfect would be boring. I love your enthusiasm. I love your sass. I love how smart you are and how much you care about people. I know it’s hard for you to believe right now, but I just need you to trust me and believe that I don’t care that you aren’t perfect because all that matters is you’re perfect for me.”

She stared at him, unable to speak. Barely able to breathe.

Was he right? Was it her lack of trust in herself that was getting in her way, rather than her lack of trust in him? Their relationship had gone from zero to a million in one month. And she’d never been good enough for anyone to love her for who she was inside.

Breezy loved you.

At that thought, some of the weight fell off her chest and she found it easier to take a breath. Her sister had loved her. Tildi hadn’t even been nice to Breezy half the time, and Breezy had loved her anyway.

And if Breezy could love her, then Boone could love her. She needed to stop worrying about who she was supposed to be and what she was supposed to do and just be herself. The people who wanted her in their lives—people like her Daddy—would accept her. She could have friends and family and just be herself.

She put her hand over Boone’s and held it as she kissed his palm. God, she loved him. And he loved her.

“You’re perfect for me, too, Daddy.” She threw herself into his arms and they wrapped around her, holding her tight. “So, you’re not mad at me?”

“I didn’t say that. I’m still gonna light a fire under your ass for putting yourself at risk and keeping all those texts from me. But I’m doing that because I love you, not because I’m disappointed in you. I might be disappointed in your actions sometimes, but I could never be disappointed in you.”

Goosebumps crawled up the backs of her legs and over her bottom. Now wasn’t the time to figure out why the idea of going over his knee for a spanking turned her on as much as it did. It was going to hurt. The added humiliation of him spanking her while her bottom was plugged got her even hotter.

“I believe you, Daddy. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the texts. And I’m sorry I went with Kenzie into town and could have put us both in danger.” She took a deep breath and steeled her resolve to face the consequences of her actions. “So, I guess I’m ready for my spanking.”

“I’m proud of you, babygirl. I know we just had a serious talk, but I’m not going to go easy on you. Keeping secrets and putting yourself in danger are your two biggest rules. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She didn’t resist as he led her back to her naughty girl stool. Nor did she resist when his hand pressed between her shoulder blades and bent her over until her palms were once again flat against the pillow topping that stool.

“Where are your feet supposed to be, naughty girl?” The rasp in his deep, stern voice hinted she wasn’t the only one who was turned on.

“Three, Daddy.” She widened her feet until they were in the correct position. The cool air licked the lips of her pussy. The plug made its presence known stronger than ever as her bottom hole clenched and relaxed around it. And every time she did, her pussy got wetter.

He gave her bottom a pat and walked away. The scrape of the wooden chair he’d pulled from the desk earlier scuffed against the dark wooden floor as he moved it closer. Cords of writhing nerves filled her tummy and knotted themselves tighter with every breath she drew. Picturing him sitting in that chair, staring at her bent over with all her most private parts exposed, had her nipples tightening to the point of desperation.

“Tell me something, bluebell. Do Daddies in Tennessee have their Little girls go outside to cut a switch to use on their naughty bottoms?”

All the air whooshed out of her lungs. What kind of question was that? Did people really do that? “N-no, Daddy. Breezy and I didn’t get punished growing up.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that point, little one. You’re lucky you didn’t pull this stunt in the spring. We have a peachleaf willow tree out back that is perfect for collecting switches sturdy enough to make a very thorough point on a naughty girl’s bottom. You might want to keep that in mind.”

She shivered at the image he planted in her mind. Be extra good in the spring. Message received. Yikes!

“Hm, you like that, bluebell? Does the thought of it make you wet?”

“N-no,” she said automatically. No normal person would get wet, well, wetter, thinking about switches.

“Seems like lying while you’re already bent over with a plugged bottom is just asking for extra spanks. You wouldn’t be fibbing to Daddy, now would you, darlin’?”

“No!” Her fierce declaration of her innocence came out like a squeak instead of the roar she’d intended.

“No?” The chair scraped the floor, and thudding footsteps told her he was headed her way. “Should Daddy stick his finger deep in your kitty to make sure?”

“You don’t have to do that, Daddy.” She didn’t add all he’d have to do was run his finger across the outer rim of her core.

“All right, I think it’s about time to get down to business, but before I do is there anything else you want to say?”

“No, Daddy.” What was there to say? Even if there had been, she was pretty sure she couldn’t have said it.

She tensed, readying for the first swat, but instead, Daddy reached for the bottle of oil again. Taking his time, he pulled the small plug out of her bottom before drizzling more oil down her crack. “We are going to start over with your punishment. And since you’ve done so well with this one, I’m going to put in the next larger size in its place.”

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She mentally groaned but was smart enough to keep it in her head rather than someplace he could hear.

“Blow out again, little girl. That’s right, push out while Daddy puts this plug in place.”

She did her best to do what he said. It was definitely harder this time, stretching her hole as the plug got wider. Just when it bordered on uncomfortable, it slid inside her and settled.

He twisted and tugged, and just like before it sent unbidden ribbons of pleasure through her core.

“Let Daddy know if this starts to hurt.” He tapped the base of the plug, and of its own volition her back arched and her bottom lifted.

Then his hand was rubbing her cheeks, warming the skin. “This is the only warm up you’re getting. Naughty girls who keep important information from their Daddies don’t get warm up spansks.”

That was all the warning he gave her. True to his word he withdrew his hand bringing it back down with a heavy smack.

“Ow!” she yelped, more out of surprise.

He quickly fell into a painfully steady rhythm. He made even more work of covering her entire backside, including the center where the plug was nestled. After the first

five swats, it lost its arousing allure. When he spanked the butt plug, he also spanked her pussy, which hurt on a whole different level.

Why in the world it also made her wetter, she had no idea. But it did.

Soon, she stopped trying to predict where his palm would land. All she could think about was how she wouldn't be in this position if she'd just told him about those stupid texts. It was her own fault she was clinging to the edge of her stool for dear life, having her butt busted like a child.

His hard hand caught the undercurve of her cheek and it was all she could do not to reach back and cover her sit spots with her hands before he smacked them again. Without being told, she knew that was a bad idea.

Owie. She sucked in air through gritted teeth and tried not to yell. She tried bouncing on her toes, but when she did, he focused all his attention on the tops of her thighs.

Top right cheek to bottom left, then top left to bottom right. He didn't miss an inch of her rear end. Just what she'd always wanted, an equal opportunity spanker.

He smacked back and forth, up and down with the steadiness of a marching band. The stinging of her skinned backside—for surely there was not much left—had her blinking back tears.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. She panted trying to hold in her emotions. She'd earned this. She should take it like a trooper. Stiff upper lip and all that. Part of her was afraid if she made too much noise he would stop.

His swats grew harder and faster, and the stinging grew hotter and more painful. No wonder they called it a hiding. She must not have any hide left on her bottom by now.

“Ow!” The cry escaped her lips after a particularly hard smack to her thigh.

Forget sting. This freakin hurt. Like, a lot. After that first cry escaped, it was as if the flood gates were opened.

“Owie, ouch! Oh, oh! Not so hard, Daddy! No, wait! Not there, Daddy. Please, not there!”

He didn’t slow down or soften his spanks. When she tried to stand up, he placed his left hand on the small of her back and held her in place.

Another minute and she forgot all about being a trooper with a stiff upper lip. Swinging back with the opposite arm from where he stood, she reached back. Not to cover her bottom, but to try to catch his spanking hand.

In seconds he had her palm stretched out flat, giving it three hard smacks before securing it to the side of her hip with his other hand. Hugging her against him, he focused all his attention on her sit spots.

“No, Daddy! Please. Ow. Please! Not there, Daddy. It hurts there.”

He snorted at that. “Well goodness, bluebell. We wouldn’t want that.”

But he evidently did because he kept right on smacking that tender strip of flesh.

“I’m sorry, Daddy!” she shrieked. “I won’t ever keep secrets again. Not ever!”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said.

Taking that as a hint, she tried everything. She promised to be good. She said she was sorry. She begged. It did no good. He was a Daddy on a mission. Relentless.

Finally, something inside her snapped. Tears poured down her face. And not very gentle, demure tears. These were wracking sobs, very gut wrenching, very snot inducing tears. Something that had been dammed up inside her for years, maybe decades, broke free and was washed away by her cathartic, cleansing weeping.

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It took time, but she cried out all her pain and heartache. Boone's hand rubbed tender circles on her back and softly stoked her inflamed, aching bottom.

"I love you, Daddy." With everything she had. With everything she was. She loved him.

"I love you, too, babygirl. With all my soul. I don't know what the future has in store, but I know I'll be spending it with you. I had to read a poem once in school and I never understood it. Not until you came into my life. I can't remember the exact words, but the gist was this. My mind might forget, and my heart might stop, but my soul will love you forever."

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard, Daddy."

How had this man made his world in her life? She'd giving him her heart, battered and bruised though it might be. And she there was one more thing she wanted to give him.

"Daddy, I want to do one more thing."

His lip quirked. "And what is that?"

"I want to make you feel as good as you made me feel earlier."

Shaking his head, he ran his thumb along the crest of her cheekbone. "You've had a long day, babygirl. I think you need to sleep."

“But I don’t, Daddy. I don’t. I want to be with you one more time only this time I want you to take me... back there.”

Heat flared in his eyes, but he didn’t move. “Back where, little girl?”

Darn her fair complexion. Her blush was going to make him think she didn’t mean what she was saying. But she did.

“In my bottom, Daddy. I want to feel you in my bottom.”

“You don’t have to do that, bluebell. Not tonight.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. I want to know what it feels like. And I want to make you feel as good as you made me feel. Unless you don’t think it would feel good to you.”

His bark of laughter startled her. “I have no doubt your tight back channel would make Daddy feel more than good, babygirl. But are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’m sure, Daddy. I’m very sure.”

Heat recentered itself in her core at the predatory look in his eyes. “If you change your mind, we can stop anytime. But if that’s what you want, I would love to take your ass.”

With that, his lips crashed down on hers. It was as if her words had opened a secret door. The kiss was heated, dominant. He devoured her.

Carrying her across the room, he lowered her gently to stand at the foot of the bed. He pressed his firm lips along her ear. The back of her neck. Her shoulder. And every kiss and lick and nip of his teeth drove her own desire to a fevered pitch.

Using his body, he pressed her forward until she leaned over the bed with his body covering her. The weave of the comforter teased her nipples and hardened them to tight points of throbbing need. Bracing his weight with his muscular forearms, the pressure of his body against hers stimulated places she didn't even know she had. He rocked his hips against the tender lower curve of her bottom, and the blend of pain and pleasure drew moans from somewhere deep inside her.

In the most guttural, carnal voice she'd ever heard, he growled low, and his lips brushed her ear as he spoke. "I won't last long, babygirl. I've been close to coming since I watched your fine ass sashayin' into the bedroom. I'm too close, but before I blow, I'm going to make you come hard. Are you ready for that?"

"Oh, god, yes!"

She screamed in pleasure as he shoved his thick, hard cock into her pussy. He had not lied. He didn't hold back.

Reaching around her, he raked his teeth down her neck and sank them into the tender flesh at the top of her shoulder as he fingered her clit.

At the first ripple of her inner core, she threw her head back and screamed his name. Without slowing the magic his fingers were working on her clit, he made gentle work of removing the plug and slowly, steadily burying his cock deep in her ass.

That was all it took to tip her over the edge. She screamed over and over as wave after wave of the most intense pleasure she'd ever known carried her away.

He pulled almost all the way out, leaving the head of his penis inside before sliding back in deep. Slowly he picked up the pace, and as he did, another orgasm began to grow inside her.

She could tell he was holding back. “Let go, Daddy. You aren’t hurting me. I need you to come.”

With a groan, he began pounding in her ass. She met him, pushing back and squeezing. Once again, he drew her higher and higher until she broke, and her world sheeted a blistering white.

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His must have done the same. He smashed his against the hot cheeks of her ass and erupted inside her.

Once they came down, he brushed her hair from her face. “Are you all right?”

“No,” she answered, and he stiffened.

“What’s wrong. Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she repeated. “I’m not good. I’m freakin’ amazing.”

Chuckling, he pulled out of her. “Stay still. I’ll be right back.” He returned with a warm rag and, after cleaning her up, settled them both in bed.

“Your soul with mine for eternity, babygirl. Our love will outlast the universe itself.” And she knew in her soul he was right.

He’d scolded her. He’d spanked her. He’d healed her.

She wasn’t naive enough to think all her problems would disappear. She’d had a tough life, but she was a tough girl. Boone spooned behind her, still naked and holding her, watching over her as she drifted off to sleep.

And hours later, he was still there, watching over her when she woke.

CHAPTER 15

As far as ways to be woken up before the sun went, having sexy lips from an even sexier cowboy was a pretty good one. And when that cowboy was your Daddy made it even better. “Today’s the big day, babygirl. Time to rise and shine.”

After one more kiss, Boone pulled back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. Tildi squealed and tried to yank the covers back up, then realized the room was already warm. The aroma of warm apple cinnamon rolls filled the room, and she spied a steaming cup of coffee milk waiting for her.

“How long have you been up, Daddy? It’s still dark outside.” Not that anyone on a ranch went by that. By the time the sun made an appearance, breakfast was cooked, the animals fed and watered, the stall’s hay freshened, and who knew what else.

“Not too long.” He ruffled her hair and smiled. “Let’s get you dressed. Then we’ll eat and watch the snow coming down.”

Tildi sat up and looked at the window, shooting to her feet with a wince when her bottom pressed against the mattress. Man, her rear end was sore.

She sent a glare to her Daddy that said, “My bottom is sore and it’s all your fault.”

He raised her glare with one of his own that said, “The only one to blame for your sore rear is you. And if you don’t want a repeat of last night, you’d better check your attitude.”

Geez! Daddies sure could say a lot with their eyes. It seemed prudent to change the topic of unspoken conversation. Besides, there was snow to be watched and copious amounts of coffee milk to drink. Not to mention warm sweet rolls to consume. She grinned and darted toward her closet.

“Don’t run in the house,” Boone yelled.

Daddies were also overprotective. This was justified running because it was snowing. Sure, she'd seen it snow before, but that was Tennessee snow and Northeastern snow. This was Wyoming snow.

She pulled on a brown shirt that said Little Miss Gobble till you Wobble on the front and matching cream leggings with ruffles at the bottom. Eight hundred thousand centuries later, she sat in the lounge next to the kitchen. It was her favorite place so far, other than her bedroom. The lounge had a huge picture window, perfect for watching fat flakes of snow cascading down to play with all their friends already blanketing the ground. It was so peaceful and beautiful.

Before long Boone brought them both one of those huge cinnamon rolls to eat. They talked about the day to come and all the people who would be there. Knowing Ruby and Kenzie were already hard at work, Tildi ate as fast as she could, intent on helping in the kitchen.

After telling her to slow down twice, Boone took her plate and fed her himself.

He told her all the things he'd already done that morning. Honestly, Boone and his brothers did more before breakfast than most people did all day. She got tired just listening to him.

As soon as the holidays were over, she was going to ask Daddy to show her how to do some of those chores. He might not expect her to pitch in, but this was going to be her home, too. That meant she wanted to do whatever she could to help him. She was a fantastic helper.

As soon as she swallowed her last bite, they headed to the kitchen to put their plates in the sink. But before they reached the kitchen, they heard raised voices. What in the world?

Boone held her back when she tried to dash to see what all the commotion was about. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he lifted her off the floor. “Hold your horses, bluebell. We’ll find out what’s goin’ on soon enough.”

Chance’s voice, loud and laced with anger, echoed through the kitchen. “What the hell are you and your thugs doing here?”

Oh dear, that didn’t sound good at all.

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“And how the fuck did you make it past the locked gate?” Tildi didn’t recognize that voice. But she didn’t have to wonder for long.

Ruby, obviously used to dealing with cowboys, ventured into the fray. “Grant Spicer! You watch that mouth. I know your mama’s number and don’t think I won’t call her.”

“Um, sorry, Miss Ruby. But you do know I am thirty two years old now. That threat don’t have the same weight it did when I was a kid.”

“Oh, really?” Ruby snapped. “Well, let me get my phone and we’ll just see about that.”

Boone took Tildi’s hand and stepped in front of her, leading her into the warm, if somewhat tension filled kitchen. She tried to step around him so she could see what was happening but had to settle for peeking around his arm when he stepped over to block her.

A tall, muscular man sighed as he gazed down at his feet, hat in one hand and the other rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s all right, Miss Ruby. I apologize for my phraseology.” Then lifting his gaze to glare at one of three men wearing suits. Grant singled out the one who sat at the table, calmly eating a cinnamon roll. “That don’t mean you ain’t got to answer my question.”

Grant’s words seemed to trigger everyone’s questions. And they all wanted them answered at the same time. Tildi was tempted to cover her ears.

Boone spoke up, his voice booming over the other conversation taking place. “Quiet down! That’s on me, Grant. This is Sev Midnight. He’s a friend of mine from Vancouver. I gave Sev the code to the front gate.” It was Boone’s turn to glare at Sevin. “I didn’t realize he was bringing anyone with him.”

Sev smirked at Boone and shrugged. “I thought I might get lonely.” His gaze slid to Kenzie. “I can see I didn’t need to bother.”

Tanner snapped to attention. “Oh, hell, no.”

He stomped toward Sev. Sev’s two men closed ranks and blocked Tanner’s approach. They stood wide with their jackets open. Bored but alert expressions graced their faces, standing there with their hands clasped in front. They looked like every mafia soldier she’d ever seen. And she’d seen plenty over the past year.

With friends like Sev, she could see why her Daddy had been upset with her last night.

She almost jumped out of her skin when the kitchen door burst open so hard it slammed into the wall. It would have bounced back closed if Grif, Dutch, and another man she didn’t know hadn’t run through the doorway, guns drawn and pointed at the men in suits.

The men had their guns drawn before Tildi even saw them move.

Chance made it to Kenzie and Ruby in two long strides, pulling the women behind him. “Put those damn guns away. Now. What in the hell is the matter with you. Boone, I’m getting the women out of here. I’d be obliged if you’d sort this shit before I get back.”

Chance disappeared through the door on the opposite side of the room, keeping Ruby

and a furiously protesting Kenzie in front of him.

Sev appeared amused. “Lovely vacation getaway you’ve got here. I may have to book a longer stay this summer.”

Sidestepping again, Tildi tried to stand beside her Daddy. He had a big mess to clean up and might need her help. She had experience with mafia soldiers. Even better, with Midnight mafia soldiers. Well, Nico Midnight soldiers anyway.

Boone immediately tried to tug her back behind him. “Don’t worry, Daddy. I’ve got this. I won’t let them hurt you.”

The response in the room was less than encouraging. Boone growled. Tanner and Trace hit her with a look she’d only seen them use with Kenzie up until that point. Grif and Dutch were annoyed. And Sev’s men glared at her like she’d insulted their manhood.

The only one who looked impressed was Sev. He was also the only one smiling. “That’s all right, *piccola*, I admire your bravery. Of course, if you were my Little girl, that would be another matter. I suspect that’s why your Daddy is frowning so hard.”

“Damn straight.” Boone scowled, first at her then at Sev. “I told you to call me when you got here. Not drive all the way to my house and make yourself at home.”

“You did.” Sev held his smile. “We drove all this way. The last thing we want to do is hurt anyone. Vinnie, Tino, put your guns away. We’re among friends.” His gaze dared Boone to follow suit.

“Grif, Dutch, Kai, stand down.” Boone’s men obeyed his command without hesitation. Looking down at Tildi, eyes blazing, he spoke in a voice only she could hear. “And if you ever want to sit comfortably again, you will get your pretty little ass

behind me.”

Such a bossy Daddy. If he was never going to let her protect him, he shouldn’t have taught her to shoot a pistol. But when her Daddy’s hand twitched, she decided to take her cue from his men and do as she was told.

Once she was safely behind the wall that was Fort Boone, he turned his attention to his friend. “When we talked last night, he said you’d head this way, but I didn’t think you meant overnight. What did you find that has you here so soon? Without so much as a call.”

Sev rose to his feet. Stepping in front of his men, Sev had a quiet word with his men then approached Boone. There was something in Sev’s eyes she couldn’t identify, but it unnerved.

Sev turned his attention back to Boone. “I’m not sure now is the ideal time to go into details. Suffice it to say after our phone conversation, I dug deeper into who could have sent the texts and how. Based on what I found, I decided we needed to speak sooner than later. In the current circumstances, I didn’t feel comfortable talking over the phone. So, I grabbed the men I knew I could trust and came to talk with you in person.”

Boone rubbed his hands over his face. “Fuck. Okay, do you have a place for you and your men to stay?”

Sev nodded. “We do.”

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“And how long do you think our discussions will take?”

“It’s hard to say. There are more players than I realized at first. And the players are more dangerous.”

“Fuck! Okay, so we need to talk. We have a big event going on today, so unless something is imminent, we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Hold on a minute. Just how many men are we talking about,” Ruby called from the same doorway Chance had escorted her out of a few minutes before. Kenzie stood behind her, peeking out in much the same way Tildi was.

“Eight. But?”

Ruby cut him off. “Eight big, strapping boys like the three of you? Land sakes alive. Well, there’s nothing for it. You’re here to help our family.”

“I’m here to help Boone,” Sev clarified.

Ruby turned to Boone. “Does he not know you’re family?”

Tildi had scooted to the side enough to see her Daddy’s lips twitch. Without looking at her, he stuck out his arm and swiped her back behind him. Darn it.

“As I was saying,” Ruby continued. “You’re here for us, so we’ll keep you fed. But I’m up to my elbow getting things ready for the Friendsgiving celebration, so you’re going to have to make a run to Wilder for more supplies.”

Sev jerked in surprise. “That’s not necessary. We don’t want to impose on your plans. We’ll just?—”

Again, Ruby interrupted him. “I don’t take kindly to people talkin’ back. We’re not very well going to have visitors in town and not take care of them while they’re here.”

“The Friendsgiving celeb?—”

“Yes, that’s what I said. And every other meal.” Turning to Boone, she said, “Honestly son, where do you find these people?” Returning her gaze to Sev, Ruby kept going. “And you, Boone evidently hasn’t warned you about my wooden spoon. That’s what happens to people who try to argue with me.” She took her weapon from her apron pocket and smacked her hand as evidence of her veracity.

Tildi put her hand over her mouth so Ruby wouldn’t see her smile. Sev and his men didn’t seem to know what to make of this aggressive, spoon wielding woman. The last thing she needed today was to have Ruby smacking her aching bottom with a wooden spoon. Much better if she concentrated all her wooden spoon wielding on Sev and his men.

Sev gave Boone a look of sheer panic. Boone grinned. “The woman does swing a wicked wooden spoon.”

Shaking his head, Sev forced a smile. “Then I suppose I must thank you for your hospitality. We’ll be happy to gather whatever you need. Boone, this is obviously not the time or place for a business discussion. Maybe we can talk on our shopping trip.”

Ruby moved from the doorway toward the kitchen, motioning for Kenzie to join her. She picked up the knife she’d been using before and went back to work chopping something for yet another casserole they’d be serving.

Boone pulled Tildi to stand beside him. She lifted his arm and cuddled in closer. She loved it when his arms were around her. Without thinking, she slid her arms around his waist. She could still catch the faint scent of smoke and a spice that was just Boone. And she loved it.

Instead of joining Ruby, Kenzie stood in front of Boone with her hand resting on her cocked hip. “Tildi can’t be the only girl shopping for groceries with a bunch of guys, so I’m coming, too. That way, you can’t all gang up on her and come home with six-packs of Fat Tire instead of the bottles of Moscato and Reisling I know are on her list.”

“If you’re going to buy those you might as well save your money and buy grape juice.” Boone shrugged. “But if it gets us in and out of the store faster so we can get back to the ranch, I’m all for it.”

“Yay!” Kenzie clapped and hopped.

Laughing, Boone put a hand on the top of his sister’s head and pretended to be unable to hold her down. “Calm yourself, Tiger.”

“Tiger?” Sev’s deep, confident voice broke into their conversation. “Looks more like a Tigger than a tiger to me.”

Kenzie whirled to face him, cheeks flushed and eyes shooting sparks. “My friends call me Tiger. You can call me Kenzie.”

“I see we’re on the same page. I definitely don’t see us as friends, either.”

That seemed to bring Kenzie up short. Tildi didn’t know her new friend well enough to be sure, but she thought she saw a flash of hurt in Kenzie’s eyes. “Good. Same page. Fine.”

She'd never seen Kenzie so out of sorts. Grabbing her hand, Tildi tugged her toward the mudroom. "Come on, Kenzie. Let's go get our coats."

Kenzie grabbed Tildi's hand like it was a lifeline. "Let's do that. Boone, we'll meet you out front."

The next thing Tildi knew, Kenzie was hauling her across the kitchen to grab their coats and they were on their way out the door.

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On the way to the SUV Kenzie pulled Tildi closer. “Will you sit in the backseat with me? I don’t want to be trapped back there with that man.”

“You mean Sevin?”

Kenzie rolled her eyes. “It figures he’d be named after an odd number. It suits him.”

Tildi giggled. “You two seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“Didn’t you hear him call me Tigger? What other foot is there after that? Tigger bounces around everywhere and people don’t want him around. You can’t get on more of a wrong foot than that.”

“Um, if you say so.” Tildi wasn’t sure that was what Sev had meant, but the way Kenzie was scuffing her feet and kicking clods of snow as if they were Sevin’s head made Tildi think it wasn’t the time to say that to her friend. “I’m glad you’re going. I’m sure Daddy, I mean, Boone, wouldn’t mind.”

Kenzie snorted. “You can call him Daddy. But I don’t want any details about... things... cause, he’s my brother, and that’s just gross.”

“I won’t,” Tildi promised.

It turned out she didn’t have to ask about sitting in the backseat. Boone was waiting and had the back door open when they reached the car. Sev had the backdoor open on the other side, too. Kenzie climbed in Tildi’s side and scooted over.

Tildi hopped in and then winced again as her bottom contacted the seat.

Boone's lips twitched, that meanie. As he buckled her seatbelt, he whispered, "Remember that if you think about misbehaving in town."

He didn't need to tell her. After last night, she was never misbehaving again. Although, parts of the evening were incredible. A delicious shiver wiggled from her pussy to the nipples. A shiver her Daddy didn't miss if his knowing grin was anything to go by. Gah!

"I can do it myself!" Tildi's gaze shot to Kenzie, who was fighting to take the buckle of her seatbelt away from Sevin.

"I'm aware," Sev said, his voice deep and smooth as velvet. "And yet good manners dictate you allow me."

With an aggrieved sigh, Kenzie released the buckle and flung herself against the back of her seat. "Fine!"

"Thank you, Mackenzie." Sev grinned as he locked her belt in place. After closing the door, he climbed in the front with Boone.

They made it into town without any trouble. No, trouble didn't find them until they were in the produce section of The Mountain Market.

Tildi and Kenzie were giggling over how much a double cranberry Kenzie found looked like someone's backside. Across from them were two women, who by the looks of their skintight clothing, didn't mind the cold at all. If Tildi had to guess, she'd say they were at least twice her age.

Because she was a nice person, she smiled at them. Even as they looked past her and

ogled someone walking up behind her.

“Jeez, blatant, much?” Kenzie muttered.

“Hey there, Boone. It’s good to see you.” The bleached blonde spoke first, shamelessly raking her eyes up and down Boone’s body, pausing at his crotch for a longer look. “Real nice to see you.”

Tildi’s smile evaporated like snow in the midday sun. Pardon her Greek, but who in the Hades did this floozy thing she was?

“Cindy,” Boone said pleasantly.

He knew this woman? A burn that could not be jealousy, she didn’t get jealous, sizzled through her chest.

He must have noticed her stiffen and clench her fists because he stopped beside her, tucking his hand behind her and gently tapping her bottom.

She appreciated his reminder, but this was war. And this two bit tart had fired the first shot. She took one giant step forward, which was as far as she could go before Boone snagged the back of her coat.

“Um, excuse me, ah... ladies. But he’s taken.”

Both women turned their gazes back to her. They took her in, then turned to each other and smiled. But it wasn’t a friendly smile. Well, if a barracuda’s smile could be called friendly, then maybe. Tildi notched up her chin, refusing to feel uncomfortable about her wardrobe choices.

“You’re not from these parts, are you sweetie,” Lucinda said. “That’s a Wild Man,”

she said, pointing to Boone. “A Wild Man needs a real woman, not one who wants to pretend she’s a Little girl.”

The other woman, who’d applied her lipstick like a two year old with their first crayon, laughed until her amusement triggered her smoker’s cough.

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Tildi saw red. She'd been through a lot to finally find the Daddy of her dreams. She wasn't about to have him lured away by this bottom feeding catfish.

"And what would you know about being a real woman? You've got more fake parts than a 3-D printed kewpie doll, Lucretia Morehead," Kenzie said to Ms. Lipstick.

"It's Lucinda," the woman snapped.

Kenzie shrugged. "Whatever. You and your pathetic, wannabe cougar friend need to turn around and get gone. The meter ran out on your walker as I came in."

"Why you twisted little freak! Do you think I don't know what happens out there at that ranch? Everyone knows the sick—eeeeek!"

Tildi stared in shock as a screaming Kenzie launched herself at Lucinda. She grabbed and yanked, but instead of twisting the woman's hair, her wig came off in her hand.

The woman covered her head with her hands as best she could and dropped to the floor, hiding behind the ripe bananas display.

Kenzie stared in horror at the wig in her hand then tossed it at Tildi. Boone reached out and caught the hair before Tildi could touch it.

"Sev!" Boone roared.

"I've got her," Sev answered. Catching Kenzie by the waist, he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” she yelled.

“No,” Sevin growled back. “I’m not taking a chance on where you’d bounce next, Little Tigger. You need a keeper.”

Tildi lost their conversation when Boone grabbed her wrist. “We’ll have to make do with what we have at home.” Crossing to the still crouching Cindy, he handed her hair to her and said, “It was good to see you again, Cindy. Sorry about the hair.”

Then he pulled Tildi toward the door. “Sorry about the ruckus, Henry. Put the cost of any damages on my tab. I’ll be in to pay it off next week.”

“Are you kidding? That was the best show I’ve seen since Tatum’s bull got loose in the heifer pen at the cattle auction.”

Boone didn’t slow down until they got back to the car. Loading everyone up, Boone headed home.

Silence reigned until Sev burst out laughing. “I can see why you were so eager to get back to the ranch. It’s quite the adventure you’re living here.”

Tildi couldn’t be sure, but she was almost positive her Daddy’s lips bore the ghost of a smile. “Sev?”

Controlling his amusement, Sev managed to say, “Yes, Boone?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

CHAPTER 16

On the ride back to the ranch, Boone tuned the radio to a local station, and Tildi

danced and sang along with Gavin Adcock's Run Your Mouth. It seemed fitting. Kenzie's knee bopped up and down double time to the music.

"That Cindy Morehead has some nerve!" Kenzie burst out as the song ended. "She's such a bitch!"

Boone scowled in the rearview mirror at his sister. "Language, Tiger. I think you more than made your point."

Kenzie crossed her arms and stared out the window.

"I thought she was very brave," Tildi said, doing her best to sound blasé.

Sev nodded. "I thought so, too. While we have a limited audience, I need to bring you up to speed as much as I can."

Boone glanced in the rearview mirror again, this time at Tildi. She smiled at him and pushed down the anxiety those words caused.

Her Daddy was protective. If he thought what Sev said would upset her, he'd make his friend wait until the two of them could speak alone. She loved that side of him normally. But right now, she wanted to know what was going on.

Last night, she had grabbed hold of a forever future with Boone. No more secrets. No more holding back for fear of being rejected. He deserved better than that, and so did she.

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She'd dreamed of their future together. Of being part of his family. Of the family they'd have one day. Growing old together.

He'd always be her Daddy. She'd always be his babygirl. But that didn't mean she needed to be kept in the dark about the bad things and scary days. How could she be there for him if she didn't know what was going on?

He must have read that on her face, too, because he turned back to the road. He nodded to Sev. "Go ahead. But nothing too deep."

The men talked in murmurs, and the radio kept her from hearing much. Sev said something about narrowing the list of suspects down.

Wait. Sev was gathering a list of suspects? She didn't understand why Sev was even involved.

Then it hit her. After Boone had bought her new phone, the only place they'd stopped, except random gas stations and the hotel, was Sevin's house. They'd only stayed for a few minutes. Boone and Dutch had talked with Sev and a few of his men. How could anyone have gotten her number?

She watched the snow fall until her breath fogged up the window. Playing the scene from the market over in her head, she drew pictures on the fogged up window.

It had shocked her when Kenzie stood up to that horrible Cindy woman. It wasn't as if Cindy had been talking about Kenzie. No, Kenzie had done that for her.

Her heart warmed at that thought. Kenzie must care about her to do something like that. As always, thinking about people looking out for her turned her mind to Breezy.

Tildi was such a coward. She wanted to talk to her sister so much, but if Breezy wouldn't take her call, it would kill her. But wouldn't Breezy be just as hurt by Tildi not calling?

Enough was enough. If Kenzie could be brave, so could she. When she got back to the ranch, she was calling her sister. A weight she'd carried for six years lifted from her chest. She wanted to share her decision.

"Daddy, when we get back?—"

Screeching tires and blinding headlights splintered her efforts as a huge black truck lost control and skidded sideways across the road.

"Fuck!" Boone roared as he tried to control the SUV.

Once he came to a stop, he tried to back up to turn around, but another truck sped up and angled across the road behind them.

Boone tried to change directions again, but the ice and snow made it impossible. He lost control and the Lexus slid off the narrow road into a ditch that had been covered in banked snow.

The seatbelt cut into Tildi's chest, and her head butted the window. Kenzie screamed her brother's name and grabbed Tildi's hand.

Already unfastening his seatbelt, Boone growled, "Tildi, Kenzie, everyone all right?"

Tildi's head throbbed, but it wasn't bleeding. Blinking her eyes, she tried to clear her

blurry vision. “Y-yes, Daddy.”

“I’m okay, too,” Kenzie said, but she held her wrist in her other hand. “Who drives around in blacked out windows that dark?”

Sev was already on his phone. The hum of his voice was terse and clipped. Tension spiraled from Tildi’s heart down to her belly. The warning bells going off inside her had nothing to do with her aching head.

Boone had his phone out, too. “Grif, some of Nico Midnight’s men ran us off Wild River Road just past the Hughes place and now they have us boxed in. I need you here ASAP. Do you copy?” Pause. “Good, now get your ass here.”

Boone disconnected the call before leaning over and pulling a bag from under his seat. After retrieving his pistol, he turned to Sev. “Did you get your people?”

Sev nodded, focusing while checking the ammo in his own gun.

The door on the far side of each truck opened and two men jumped out of each, making four in all. They ducked behind the front of the trucks.

Boone’s face darkened. “That who you expected?”

Sev didn’t take his eyes off the truck. “Unfortunately. My source said they planned to hit the ranch tomorrow once my father was in town. So, either the plans changed, or my source has been compromised.” He cut his eyes toward Boone, then returned it to the truck. “I never would have allowed the women off the ranch if I’d known.”

Boone lifted his chin. “Your men on their way?”

“Yes. They aren’t far, so it shouldn’t take long.”

“Does the traitor know about the other men you brought?”

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“He shouldn’t. Do you plan on waiting for your men?”

“The windows are reinforced, but they aren’t military grade.”

“So, I take it that’s a no.”

“You got that right.” Boone turned to Tildi. “You and Kenzie get down on the floorboard and stay there until I come and get you. I need the two of you safe. So stay in the car and stay down.”

Tildi’s heart was thundering in her chest so hard she could barely breathe as terror replaced the blood running through her veins. Tears stung her eyes. “B-but, Daddy. If help is coming and those men aren’t attacking, don’t you think we should all stay in here? I need you safe, too.”

“I’ll be okay, bluebell. Now do what I said.” Turning to Sev, he snarled, “I said I wouldn’t kill your father. I never said I wouldn’t kill your men. And if my Little girl is hurt, I just may kill you, too. You really think those men won’t shoot you?”

“I’m Nico Midnight’s heir. If they shoot me, they sign their own death warrant, even if they do it on my sick fuck of a father’s orders.”

“Well, we need to stall for time. You up for having a chat with your boy out there?”

“And leave the girls in the car by themselves?” Sev glanced over his shoulder. “Especially these Little girls?”

“Most of the windows are iced over, all but the front windshield. So no one’s going to be able to see them if they’re on the floorboard. Not to mention they’d have to get through us to get to the vehicle.”

Sev held up his hands in concession. “You know them better than me. My only experience was the grocery store, so you can see where I’d be concerned.”

“I don’t like it either, but you got a better idea? Cause the only other option I see is to sit here until they start shooting at us.”

“Daddy, no!” Tildi put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“Listen to me, babygirl. The best thing you can do right now is mind me. Get down on the floorboard. Everything is going to be fine.”

With that, he opened his door and stepped out. Without turning back to the car, he repeated his instructions with a rumble. “Stay. Down.”

Tildi nodded out of sheer reflex. She’d never heard Boone’s voice sound so lethal. “Daddy?—”

“Down, babygirl. And stay quiet.”

Whatever she had been about to say remained unspoken because Boone turned to the men standing behind the truck. The ones who’d had guns pointed toward them.

He tipped his hat back and shoved his hands in his pockets. As if anyone could mistake her Daddy for some local yokel. “You boys might not realize it, but your truck is blocking the road.”

A short, soft whir whispered through the backseat of the SUV, pulling Tildi’s gaze to

Kenzie's window. Her friend had tapped the button to lower the window enough for them both to be able to hear. She squeezed Kenzie's hand as a thank you.

"Shut up," a voice yelled. From the sound of it, it was one of the men hiding behind the truck. "This doesn't have to go down hard. All we want is the girl."

Ice that had nothing to do with the weather frosted Tildi's entire body at the man's words.

"They aren't with us," Boone answered, his voice deadly calm. "And even if she was, you aren't getting anywhere near her."

The other man spoke, and his was a voice Tildi recognized. Her eyes darted to Kenzie. She knew immediately her friend recognized the voice, too. "I was there, dumbass. I saw you leave, and I know you took both the girls. We only want Nico's girl. You're not going to be able to keep her from us. So, you can either hand her over, or we can step over your corpses and we'll get her ourselves."

"You're going to die, Vinnie. The only question is how long and painful that death is going to be." Sevin spoke as if he was talking about sending the man on a vacation, not killing him. "Boone here wants to just shoot you between the eyes. But me? I take betrayal more personally than that. You will beg for that bullet before I'm done with you."

"Oh yeah? That's rich coming from you. You helped the man trying to take out your own father. I'd say if we're measuring betrayal, yours weighs a hell of a lot more than mine."

Kenzie's hand tightened around Tildi's as Tildi tried to think of something she could do. She should never have come here. She'd been right about bringing trouble to the ranch. Sure, Nico thought he had a score to settle with her Daddy, but Tildi was the

means.

If they all lived through this—no, when they all lived through this—she would figure out what to do. Right now, she should call and see if Boone's brothers were on their way.

She pulled out her phone, but realized she didn't have anyone's number. She could dial 911. They would send the police, but would they send them in time?

A tear dropped on her screen. When had she started crying?

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Sev was yelling now. “What happens in my family is none of your fucking concern.”

This was not going well. Bullets were going to start flying any minute, just like on the yacht. Was that only a few days before? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Shit, Sev,” Vinnie sneered. “You were helping an outsider against the head of the family. You weren’t just disloyal to your father. You betrayed us all. You swore a blood oath to the Cosa Nostra. You deserve to burn. The only reason I don’t shoot you where you stand is that Nico claimed the right to kill you himself. But he wants the girl you stole from him, too.”

Someone fired a shot into the windshield of the Lexus. The bulletproof glass spiderwebbed but didn’t shatter. But how long would that last?

Shots started flying all around them. The noise was deafening. Tildi released Kenzie’s hand to cover her ears, but not before a thud and a cry of pain from right outside the SUV filtered through the noise.

What had just happened? Had Boone been shot? No. No, she wasn’t going to think like that. That wasn’t a possibility.

She could not lose him. Had she already lost him? Tears stung the backs of her eyes, but she ignored it. The thunder of her heart challenged the sound of guns firing in her ears. Had he been injured? Or worse?

She had to know what had happened. Pushing up from the floorboard just enough to look over the backs of the seats, she tried to see something, anything through the

frozen windows.

Then the gunshots slowed. Was that a good sign? She had no idea, but she was grateful for the reprieve. She shook her head, trying to relieve the horrible ringing in her ears. When that didn't help, she ignored it as best she could and scanned the area.

Boot prints and bullet holes marred the once pristine snow. A man lay crumpled on the ground by the truck behind them. Was that the man she'd heard cry out in pain?

Her heart seized until she focused on the man lying so still in the snow. He had red hair, so it couldn't be her Daddy or Sev. Even though she searched the entire area twice, Boone and Sev were nowhere to be seen.

Maybe they had taken cover next to the SUV. But if that was the case, why hadn't they gotten back in? She'd promised to stay on the floorboard, but he'd just have to spank her later. There was no way she couldn't watch. That was her Daddy out there.

Hoping her Daddy would forgive her, she pushed higher off the floorboard, standing as tall as the cabin would allow. Nothing bad would happen if she just took a quick peek.

As soon as she stood high enough to be visible, men from both sides opened fire on the SUV. Bullets glanced off the side and splintered more of the window.

She dropped back to the floorboard, covering her head with her arms after she saw Kenzie doing the same.

What was happening to her Daddy? He and Sev were out there somewhere, pinned down by gunfire. They were going to die, and it would all be her fault.

She couldn't let that happen. She wouldn't let it happen. If giving herself back to

Nico Midnight would save Boone's life, she'd do it. He'd saved her once. He could do it again.

She reached for the door handle, but Kenzie grabbed her arm. "What are you doing?" she hissed. "You can't go out there! They'll kill you."

"No they won't. Nico wants me alive. No one out there would dare shoot me. I'm the only one who can stop this before Boone or Sev get killed. Tell Daddy I have my phone."

She wasn't a total idiot. And she wasn't ready to become another number in some statistic about trafficked women. But just in case, there was something she needed to say.

She hugged her new friend as tight as their cumbersome coats would allow. "Thank you for welcoming me into your family and treating me like a sister. And if something bad happens, tell Boone I love him."

"You'll have to tell him that yourself." Kenzie tried to grab hold of Tildi's arm, but Tildi's thick winter coat was too slippery. She jerked away from Kenzie. "Tildi, wait!"

Tildi had never wanted to do as she was told more than that moment. Nausea threatened to overcome her. She despised the thought of seeing Nico Midnight face to face. It terrified her.

But there was no time for waiting. Before she could change her mind, Tildi opened the door and stepped out onto the snow packed ground. She raised her hands in surrender, stepping away from the protection of the vehicle.

"Stop shooting!" she screamed. "I'm here! I'll go with you. Just stop shooting!"

“Tildi!” Boone roared her name, but she couldn’t turn to face him. If she did, she’d try to run to him. That would just get them both killed.

Boone wasn’t done. “Matilda Jayne Lewis. You get your ass back in the vehicle right now!”

A sob almost broke free at the rage and fear she heard in his words. She’d never even told him her real name. He wouldn’t know how to get in touch with her sister if something happened. Suddenly, nothing was more important than her Daddy knowing her name.

“Daddy,” she yelled back. “My name is?—”

A huge hand covering her mouth cut her off. She struggled to get away until the ice cold muzzle of a gun pressed into her neck. Maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe these men weren’t afraid of killing her at all.

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She struggled, but he wrapped his other arm around her waist and pulled her against his chest. Without a word, he backed toward the black truck blocking the road back toward Wilder.

Was this it? Was this how her life ended? Her legs refused to hold her up at that thought and she lost her footing. Terror blocked her speech as the man kept backing up, dragging her with him.

Her Daddy's voice echoed across the frozen ground. "If you hurt her, I will kill you in ways you cannot imagine."

They may not have intimidated her captor, but they gave her the courage she needed to struggle to her feet. Tildi had no intention of dying. She would go with these men to give her Daddy time to gather his brothers and Sev's men.

She didn't know how her Daddy would save her. She just knew he would.

CHAPTER 17

Boone and Sev ran in separate directions when the asshole standing next to Vinnie started firing. Vinnie had knocked the man's hand, so the bullet hit the windshield instead of the tire he'd been aiming for, but the gunshot triggered the men who came with Vinnie, and they fired again.

Then all hell had broken loose. How in the hell had these morons made it to such a high position in Nico's organization? Then it hit him. They weren't important. They were expendable. They were keeping Boone busy and Sev out in the open.

With Sev to the right of the SUV and Boone to the left, they were able to keep the men firing in their direction instead of targeting the Lexus. Whatever it took to keep his Little girl and his sister safe.

One of the men from the back truck had tried to make a run for the SUV, but Boone shot him in the leg as soon as he cleared the end of the truck. Stupid shit.

He was about to tell Sev to make his way back to the SUV when the back door of the Lexus swung open. The hair stood up on the back of Boone's neck.

Why in the hell was the back door swinging open? The one on Tildi's side. Had one of Nico's goons made it all the way to his SUV? How in the fuck had he let that happen? And where the fuck were his brothers?

But that wasn't it. He had a sixth sense about these things, and he knew this had nothing to do with Sev's situation. Whatever this was, it was way worse than that.

Tildi stepped out of the back, and Boone's world went cold. Cold and dark. He called her name. She'd heard him. He knew because she'd flinched. But she hadn't looked at him. His Little bluebell had ignored him. A fact they would be discussing at great length when he got her back to the ranch.

When she finally had turned to him, that suited gorilla Nico had sent grabbed her. The man had put his hands on Boone's Little girl. Boone had not lied to that man. There was nothing that man could do that would keep Boone from taking him out, mafia connections or not.

His brothers would be there any minute, but he couldn't wait for them. He had to get to his babygirl.

"Sev, let's go!" He raced toward his car as both trucks sped back toward Wilder. One

of the departing vehicles screeched to a stop. Shots rang out again and Boone ducked, but this time they weren't shooting at him. They took out both back tires, rocking the SUV as the air escaped.

Muffled screams filled the air. Fuck! With all his attention on Tildi, Boone had forgotten his sister was still in the car. How could he have forgotten about Kenzie, even for a second? Before he could force his limbs to function, Sev was throwing open Kenzie's door and pulling her into his arms.

Boone raced to Kenzie's side, pulling her away from Sev and into his arms. He thought for the briefest second Sev wasn't going to let her go, but before he could process the feeling she was sobbing in his arms.

Nico's men shooting at the Lexus was a distraction. All they wanted was time to get away. Even knowing that, he ran toward his sister. Boone had only taken two steps in Kenzie's direction when the shooting stopped. Snow and loose stone pelted the backs of Boones calves and thighs as the shooter's car sped away.

In that moment everything went silent in his mind. He had no use for hot headed rage that would only get someone killed. He needed the skills and knowledge his experience as a commando had given him to rescue Tildi. In order to bring his babygirl back unharmed, he needed that.

He forced himself back into the mindset he'd left behind three years ago. Right now, he needed the ice cold mind of a warrior. Emotions would get in the way. Emotions would send him to his knees. But the combat soldier, the one they sent in when no one else could get the job done? That man would save Tildi.

Was that a car door slamming? Grif, Dutch, and Chance reached him first, with Kai, Tanner, Trace, and Grant following at their heels. Grif opened a laptop and set it on the hood of the SUV. "Status?"

Boone had to fight to keep his fury locked down. “The status is four of Sev’s men took off with my Little girl. And I couldn’t go after her because they shot out the tires of my vehicle with Kenzie inside.”

Dutch was on a tablet looking at their location program. “The signal on her tracker says she’s here.” He snapped his tablet closed.

“Th-th-they took T-Tildi.” Kenzie voice tremble, but she kept speaking. “She got out of the car. Why would she do that? Sh-she just got out of the car and they gr-grabbed her.”

“Those fuckers!” Tanner looked like he was ready to punch someone. His gaze landed on Sev. Stalking over to him, Tanner got in his face. “Is that why you came here today? So you could kidnap Tildi for your old man?”

Boone didn’t have time for this shit. He needed to be headed out after his girl, not putting out playground squabbles. “Back off, Tanner. We’re all upset, but it wasn’t Sev’s men who took Tildi. Nico has been setting this up for days.

Chance pulled his weeping sister from Boone’s arms. Holding her close, he led her to Tanner and Trace. “Okay, tiger. You’re okay. It’s going to be fine.”

Trace wiped the tears from Kenzie’s cheeks. “We’ll find her, Kenz. We’ll find her and get her back.”

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They damn sure would. But the snow, which had stopped falling about an hour before, was threatening to start back up, covering any tracks they might be able to spot. He had a tracker on the Lexus. But it sat parked in the snow beside him. He had a tracker in her purse, but evidently, she'd left it in the car.

When he got her back home, he was going to put one on her body so she couldn't leave it behind.

"Oh!" Kenzie gasped and stared at Boone. "Her phone. She said to tell you she had her phone."

Dutch responded, "Fuck. Hold on." Opening his tablet, he checked again but shook his head. "Someone turned the location setting off."

Desperation clawed his chest for freedom. He owned a fucking private security company, and they couldn't even track Tildi's phone?

"They can't turn off mine." All eyes turned to Sev as he held up his phone. "I know where she's headed. At least, I know where she is."

"Then tell me!" Boone roared.

Sev held up his phone as he took the three steps necessary for him to stand by Dutch at the car. The software on this screen was clearly marked for FBI use only under penalty of law. How Sev came to have it, he didn't know and he didn't care. The only thing he cared about was the little dot moving across the map of the local area displayed on the screen.

Moving away from him. Damn it! She slipped further and further away from him with every blink of that little dot.

Reaching across the car, Boone snatched the phone from Sev's hand. He pinpointed his own location and then looked at the point representing his Tildi.

His babygirl.

His.

As soon as he saw the road Nico's men had turned onto, he tossed the phone back to Sev. "Trace, I need you to take Kenzie home then get your office set up in case we have anyone hurt. The rest of you, load up. I know where they're taking her."

CHAPTER 18

Varied shades of white carpeted everything outside the windows of the truck Nico's man had forced her into. It all blurred together as they sped and skidded down the narrow road. Did these men even know anything about driving in the snow?

An itch she did her best to ignore stabbed the arch of her foot so hard it made her eye twitch. What she wanted to do was snatch off her boot and claw at the incessant twinge.

She would have, too, except she didn't want to attract any more attention to herself. Though really, with two thugs staring at her through unblinking eyes while pointing their guns at her, how much more attention could she have?

Looking for anything to distract her from her current situation, she focused on figuring out something she could say or do to get them to stop the car. Or at the very least, get them to slow down.

She'd already tried telling them she was thirsty, carsick, and in need of the Little girls' room. All those requests had been ignored. Which was really a shame since she kind of did need to pee.

If she couldn't delay the men escorting her to her doom, maybe she could at least disarm one of them. They'd never suspect her of having the nerve to do that.

Did she have the nerve to do that? Of course she did. Probably.

Subtly, she studied the men bracketing her in the back seat of the truck. It had looked wider than a regular truck from the outside, but it wasn't wide enough. They pressed against her, keeping her movements no less restricted than if they had bound her. And they smelled awful.

The man to her left had bloodshot eyes and an unshaven face. The man to her right appeared to be in about the same condition, either exhausted or hung over.

Could that mean their reflexes would be slow? If she could surprise one of them and get his gun, she could force them to let her out of the truck. And if she had Superman's cape, she could body slam them and fly out the window. Who was she kidding?

What if she grabbed one of the guns? Would she be able to shoot one of them? Memories of Dutch shot and bleeding on the deck of the yacht assaulted her. Thinking she'd hurt him was one of the worst moments of her life.

When she thought of how these men had tried to harm her Daddy, she was pretty sure she could shoot them all and it would be no problem. Who was she kidding, they would either shoot her back or throw her out in the snow to die, or both.

When she'd grabbed her phone, she should have also grabbed her heavier coat. But

hey, freezing or even getting shot was better than whatever awaited her when they got to the cabin she'd heard that Vinnie guy talking about.

What should she do? Blinking her eyes, she tried not to cry. She just had to hold on until Boone got to her. Then he'd take care of these men. Blinking her eyes, she forced back her terror and tears. She wanted her Daddy. Had he figured out where the men were taking her?

The Vinnie man's phone rang. "Yeah, boss?" Pause. "We'll be at the cabin soon." Pause. "How long?" Pause. "Fuckin' weather. We'll take care of her until you get there." He disconnected the call.

"What did he say?" the man to her left demanded.

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“His chopper can’t take off right now because of the snow. He wants us to hold the girl at the cabin until he gets here.”

Tildi lost the battle with her tears. She’d thought she would be okay, but she was wrong. Flashbacks of her year in Nico’s captivity cascaded through her mind. She had promised herself she’d never be in that position again.

The fact that she was facing this now was all her fault. She’d left the SUV to protect her Daddy, but now she was wondering if she should have stayed on the floorboard with Kenzie and trusted her Daddy to get them out. Her body locked down, tensing into a fight or flight loop playing over and over in her head. Then something small, hard, and circular pressed into her ribs.

“I wouldn’t try anything if I were you,” the man to her left said.

His rancid breath almost had her heaving. Did they still need their mothers to pack for them? Sheesh! “When you’re spending the night away from home, you should take a toothbrush.”

The man on her right growled and pushed his gun into her side even harder than his friend.

Apparently, her camel had a weak back, and that was the straw that broke it. All sense of self-preservation deserted her. With a loud huff, she crossed her arms over her chest. “You know, I have enough hard things going on in my life right now. It’s bad enough that I’m trying to fit in with my new Daddy and his family. Worse yet, I’m having to deal with Nico Midnight and talking him out of killing me, or worse,

selling me to the highest bidder. But the worst is being squished between you two, with your less than socially acceptable body odor and your deplorable dental hygiene. I didn't ask to be kidnapped again. The least you could do is let me make the trip without your guns bruising my sides."

The men in the front seat laughed, but the man on her left snarled, "You want my gun out of your side? Here you go."

He shifted his gun from her side to her temple.

"Listen, you little bitch. We've been stuck in a cabin in the woods for three days. No heat. No food. No internet. And no plumbing. All because of you and your psycho boyfriend. We have to get you to that cabin and make sure you stay there until the boss arrives. What we do not have to do is listen to your lip or get you there without shooting you first. So if I were you, I'd shut the fuck up."

The men in the front seat laughed harder. The man on her right shook his head. What no one did was contradict the man on her left. Or demand he lower his gun from her head.

The panic she'd been fighting back finally dealt her a knockout punch to the gut. Her lungs stopped working properly and a gray fog coated her brain. She was alone with four Cosa Nostra soldiers. She'd been held by men like them for over a year.

What had she been thinking? Being with her Daddy had made her forget. She forgot that not all men were stern when they ought to be, strong when they needed to be, and kind every second of every day.

Thanks to her Daddy, she'd almost forgotten men like that Vinnie guy, and the General, and Nico Midnight existed. For her, they didn't anymore, present situation excluded, of course.

But the present couldn't be excluded. Fear slithered down her spine like a rattlesnake returning to its den. She'd made a mistake. A huge one.

Her Daddy would rescue her. But how many bad things would she have to endure before he got to her? He shouldn't have to rescue her at all. Just like the first time Nico had kidnapped her, it was all her fault. She never learned.

But she'd been so scared her Daddy would get shot. She would've done anything to keep that from happening. Anything.

What if Kenzie forgot to tell them Tildi had her phone? If bad men could do bad things through a phone, then her Daddy and his Wild Men could find her. As long as Kenzie remembered to tell them. What if she didn't?

She had to get out of this truck. The man on her right still had his gun pointed at her, but he was looking at something on his watch. This was her chance.

Scrambling over him, she reached for the door handle. Her fingers brushed the metal hinge. Fire lanced through her scalp as the man on her left caught her hair and snatched her backward. She landed on her knees on the floorboard.

He lifted her by her hair, forcing her back onto the seat where he shoved the gun against her cheek. "You need to sit down and stay very, very still because the next time I have to deal with you will be the last time. I'll face the boss if I have to, but I'm not putting up with any more shit from you."

He stared at her as if he expected something, but she couldn't respond. Terror held her prisoner in her own body. It didn't matter. With the grip he had on her hair, he nodded her head for her.

"Good. Oh, and you might as well not try to open the doors or windows. We learned

a few things about this town and the kind of people who live here. The child safety locks are active on the doors and windows. Now you sit here and don't move."

With silent tears streaming down her face, she sat still and prayed her Daddy would hurry.

CHAPTER 19

Kai drove Boone's truck with Sev riding shotgun so Dutch and Grif could stay online checking maps and making plans. Chance, Tanner, and Grant followed right behind. But Boone? Right then, Boone was reliving the past.

Physically Boone was riding beside Dutch on their way to where Tildi almost certainly was being taken. Mentally, he was far away in front of his old house a few miles from the base where he had been stationed.

He'd left the members of his team watching the Seahawk's game inside. Except for one. This time, the Little girl who'd followed him out of the house to tease him wasn't mission specialist Cara Bradshaw, who Nico had killed three years ago. It was Tildi.

He knew what was about to happen, even though he hadn't had the nightmare since he'd met Tildi. This time, the one who would die would be his bluebell. And he wouldn't be able to stop it now any more than he had then.

"Chief, you gonna get that?" Dutch's sharp tone pulled Boone into the here and now. Boone had no idea what his friend was talking about. "Your phone, chief. You gonna answer it?"

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Boone glanced at the phone in his hand. Grant was calling and Boone had almost missed it. "Talk to me."

"I just got off the phone with the sheriff. He said the complaint about the damaged cabin was lodged by Judson Clark. He has those older cabins that butt up to the quarry. There ain't that many, so we should be able to spot the one Nico's men are using."

Boone figured he was right about that. "When did Judson lodge the complaint?"

"Yesterday after he drove by them, but they were fine last week when he checked on them. So they could have been broken into any time after that."

"We'll head toward the cabins from the east. That way if they run, they can't make it any further than the quarry. GPS is showing her phone at Cabin 44. That's the next to last cabin on the left. We'll park the trucks behind Cabin 37. That will give us plenty of room to maneuver. I'll give you more specifics when we get there."

"You got it. We'll follow your lead. If you come up with a solid plan in the seven minutes it'll take us to get there, let us know. If we don't hear different, we'll go in quiet but armed and prepared for a fight."

"Roger that." Boone disconnected the call. No one spoke. What was there to say?

Leave it to Grif to think of something. "I don't get why she thought she had to go with them. She's seen what we can do. What was she thinking?"

Wasn't that the question of the day? It was one Boone would be putting to Tildi personally as soon as he had her back in his arms. If there was one thing he'd learned as a Daddy, it was you never got to a point where you understood Little logic.

The only thing he did know, because he knew his girl, was that in her head, she was doing it for them. His girl would do anything for the people she loved.

At least she'd been smart enough to take her phone. She knew they'd be able to track her. If they let her keep it.

They could get to Cabin 44 and find it empty except for her cell phone. It's what he would have done. He was praying these men weren't that smart.

He was more worried about what they might be doing to her. Was Nico's "me first" policy still in play? He had to know Tildi was his. Would he have told his men they could have her? Hurt her?

He dropped his chin to his chest and stared at his Glock, thinking about the night before. She was finally starting to trust him. Even more, she was starting to trust herself. He couldn't lose her now.

This was not the same as three years ago. It was not going to end the same way. He checked his gun and made sure it was loaded, then shoved it into the waistband of his pants, putting two extra mags in his side pocket. Then he dug through his bag.

He had this same type of bag almost a month ago when he found Tildi. He pulled out two knives, one tactical and one stiletto. He buckled the leather sheaths they were in to his belt. He almost put the bag down but then spotted a hank of paracord and grabbed that, too.

Mission. He needed to think. Right now, all he could see was that thug manhandling

his Little girl. The pain she'd felt when that miscreant grabbed her, the fear in her eyes when she entered the back seat of the vehicle.

"Boone," Sev called, interrupting his concentration.

Fuck. If he was going to be of any use to his babygirl, he had to get a grip.

Sev shook his head. "Not to be crass, but my father needs her alive. She's bait. He knows, if you ask for proof of life, he must be able to provide it. We'll get her back. And when we do, he'll never bother her again."

"You can't guarantee that."

Sev's eyes hardened. "I can. And I am. He won't bother anyone again. Ever."

That was what he needed to hear. He knew Sev better than most people realized. This was not the first time one of them had helped the other. If Sevin said his father would be contained, then it was as good as done.

A plan fell into place in his head. It wasn't fancy. Then again, they weren't going up against a Tier One squad of soldiers. He shared it with his men.

Grif shrugged. "Sounds good. Shoot the bad guys. Save the girl. Make the mafia Godfather disappear. I don't even think we need a backup plan."

Boone nodded. By the end of the day, he'd have his Little girl back in his arms. She had faith in him. Now he needed to have faith in himself and his men.

Right now, he felt like a failure but tonight he needed to be the hero Tildi told him he was.

For her sake he had to be.

CHAPTER 20

Tildi was a fairly patient person. An ideal prisoner, if she did say so herself.

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As a captive, she'd learned how to play the game. She'd been denied food before. She'd had to wear outfits a sex worker would turn her nose up at, sleep on floors, and made to pee in buckets left in the corner of her room. And she'd survived, traumatized, but with her dignity intact.

Why she let her current situation get to her, she wasn't sure. But it did. Maggie O'Byrne would probably say she was displacing her anger and fear. But Maggie had not seen the conditions of her confinement.

The cabin the men had taken her to was basically one big room. Someone had propped a broken wooden framed bed standing on its last leg, literally, in one corner. There were sheets, but they were covered in stains and spots, a few of which she was pretty sure had crawled from one end of the bed to the other.

In the second corner stood a square 1950s Formica card table that at one time was probably red but had been left next to the window so long it was now a bubbled, dull maroon with rustedout legs. There was a plastic box underneath the table that passed for a sink, and a cooler with a sprung lid.

Corner three had a stack of World Book Encyclopedias dated 1985 topped with a small bucket and a mirror hung above it that she could only assume passed for the lavatory.

And the fourth corner was filled with recently emptied takeout containers, chip bags, and giant boxes of beer refilled with empty cans. It had once held the only chair in the cabin. Vinnie had since dragged the chair to the middle of the room.

Which was where she sat now, zip tied at her ankles and wrists much too tightly. The skin underneath her restraints was already turning red on its way to being raw.

Smoke burned her eyes because the men had tried to get warm by filling a heavy metal bowl with some of their trash and setting it on fire. Which, best she could tell, produced copious amounts of smoke and no heat whatsoever.

Vinnie refused to look at her. He had a wicked looking knife he kept flinging at the wall like he was a knife thrower in a circus.

Holding the knife by the blade, he threw it at the wall where it stuck, vibrating, he retrieved it only to return to his spot and throw it again. “There is no discussion here, Lando. Nico said nothing is to happen to the girl and he put me in charge of making sure his wishes were obeyed. So, we do what I say we do.” He paused long enough to glare at the man who’d sat on her left in the truck.

“I don’t have to touch her to get information out of her,” Lando said.

She wanted her Daddy. He might not wear eight thousand dollar suits, but he looked better in a pair of faded jeans and a henley shirt than any of these men ever would. Staring at the door, she willed him to burst through and take her away from this awful place.

Her heart raced. They didn’t have to interrogate her. All they had to do was ask and she’d tell them whatever they wanted to know. She’d even make up something they wanted to hear. But what could she possibly know that would interest them?

She had a sick feeling this was only a temporary stop. There was no way Nico Midnight, who owned his own helicopter and ran one of the largest families in the Cosa Nostra, would stay in a dump like this. If Boone didn’t come before Nico arrived, she might never see him again.

She bit her bottom lip so the men wouldn't see it tremble. There was one thing she'd learned from the General, and that was never to show fear. If Vinnie was in charge, maybe she could be nice to him and he would let her go.

Vinnie tossed the knife again, only this time he spun and threw it straight at Lando. It came so close to his face it cut his ear as it zinged past and thunked into the wall.

Tildi screamed, her heart thundering. Lando's hand clutched his bleeding ear. Vinnie stared at Lando, his dark eyes the color of coal. "I said, no. Do you get me?"

Lando's face lost what little color it had left. He nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Sure, Vinnie. Whatever you say."

Vinnie held his gaze a bit longer, then smiled. "Good. Bring me my knife."

Lando did as he was told, crossing to the knife stuck in the wall. He pulled the knife free. She caught his gaze as he turned back to the room and for half a second, she thought he might throw the knife at her.

Then his gaze turned to Vinnie, and she knew. As Lando pulled back his arm to throw the blade, sheer instinct had her scream a warning. If Lando killed Vinnie, she would surely be next, orders to the contrary or not.

Vinnie rushed at Lando, which was fortunate. The distraction was all the eight, large angry men streaming through the door needed.

Relief flooded her entire body. Her Daddy was here at last. The world had shifted back into place.

CHAPTER 21

Sev's men met them at Cabin 37. Once they explained the plan, they made their way to Cabin 44 without speaking. The time for words was over. Boone was never one for talking, anyway. He was a man of action and now was the time to act.

He kept his body low to the ground as he and the others approached the dilapidated cabin. He looked at Sev one more time, just to confirm they had the right one. Sev gave him a chin lift and kept heading toward the ramshackled structure, so Boone did, too.

Judson had cabins in much better shape. This one still had a roof, which must be the only reason they had for choosing one this far into the woods surrounding the quarry. It was in such bad shape it was a miracle Judson had realized someone was there at all.

They'd strategized different plans on the way there. Sev suggested half of them go in the front and the rest come in the back. Boone wasn't interested in setting up another situation where Tildi could get caught in the crossfire, so they were all going in the front.

As soon as he heard the shouting from inside, he knew they had the right place. His plan had been to go in as a wall of invaders to overwhelm the men before they had a chance to do anything to Tildi.

Then he heard her scream. Thoughts of anything but getting to his Little girl flew out the window. He lowered his shoulder and tackled the door like a high school linebacker.

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The door flew off one of its hinges and Boone shoved it aside as he entered, gun drawn, ready to shoot whoever had made his babygirl scream.

Tildi sat tied to a chair directly in front of him. She glanced to his left and her eyes grew even wider. She screamed again, so he followed her gaze.

Their entrance had broken up a fight between Vinnie the man who'd put his hands on Tildi. The timing sucked for Vinnie since he had a gun, and the other guy only had a knife.

As the common threat, both men turned on Boone, but the Wild Men were there to even the odds. Dutch grabbed the guy with the knife and slung him across the room. Vinnie came at Boone, gun leveled at Boone's chest.

Boone didn't hesitate. He fired, catching Vinnie's right shoulder. Vinnie jerked backward, but all Boone cared about was that he'd dropped his weapon. Grif and Kai jumped Vinnie.

They could have him. Boone needed to get to Tildi. He turned to get her out of that damn chair and his heart froze.

The man with the knife stood behind Tildi, his weapon pressed to her throat. The blade indented her skin, but he hadn't cut her. Yet.

From the unhinged look in his eyes, Boone knew he had to act fast. The man had snapped. Boone had seconds to decide how to save her.

She stared at him, eyes the size of saucers. Yet mingled with her fear, her eyes held trust and love.

His girl.

He'd lost someone he cared about three years before because he hadn't listened to that sixth sense. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Boone fired. The man's head snapped back, a tiny hole in the middle of his forehead. The man's eyes registered shock for a millisecond before they went blank, and he crumpled to the floor.

Boone paid no attention to the man. His attention was riveted to the thin strip of red across Tildi's throat. He ran to her, terrified he'd killed her as well.

It took a second to realize there was no blood and the line was no more than an indication of how firmly the blade had been pressed against his Little girl's throat.

His legs turned to jelly, and he dropped to his knees before her. Her lips were moving, but he couldn't hear what she said over the roaring in his ears. He'd come so close to losing her.

When he got her home, he was locking her in their room forever. She'd told him once on the yacht that Tangled was one of her favorite movies. Well, she was going to be his Rapunzel, locked away so he knew she was safe.

When the roar receded, her words penetrated. "Daddy? Daddy? Can you get these things off me? They're hurting me."

Why was he sitting there like a knot on a log? His girl still needed him. His men needed him. He needed to get his girl home.

“Hold on, babygirl. Daddy’s got you. I’ll fix it.” Grabbing one of the knives strapped to his belt, he sliced the zip ties. They dropped to the floor.

His muscles went rigid as he ran his thumbs over the red markings on her wrists and ankles, and he tried to control his rage. How dare that son of a bitch mark his woman?

“Did they hurt you?”

She shook her head, but he needed to hear her say it. “Use your words, babygirl. Did they hurt you?”

“N-no, Daddy. I’m okay now that you’re here. I’m sorry I got out of the?”

“We’ll talk about that later, bluebell. Right now, I want to get you out of here.”

Kai walked up to Boone as he helped Tildi stand. “She okay?”

Not trusting himself to speak, Boone settled for a nod.

“That’s good. Um, we’ve got the rest of them contained. What do you want us to do with them?”

As hard as it was for him to say, he forced out the words he’d agreed to say. “Turn them over to Sev. They’re Cosa Nostra. That puts them under his authority, or it will be once Nico gets here, and we put that sick fuck down once and for all.”

“Roger that.”

Kai moved to carry out Boone’s orders, but Boone called him back. “Bind them with zip ties. Make sure they’re good and tight.”

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Kai gave a grin that had no humor. “You got it, Chief.”

Boone gave his attention back to his babygirl. “Ready to go home?”

He couldn’t hear her reply over the sound of helicopter rotors that suddenly filled the cabin. Nico Midnight had arrived.

The hardest thing Boone had ever done was turn his babygirl over to Grif while he finished dealing with Midnight. There was no way in hell she was going outside with him where he had no control over her safety.

He couldn’t believe he’d be struggling to hold back a smile right now, but he could hear her shouts and threats from inside the cabin. If she could carry out half of them, they were all in trouble. He was going to owe Grif a bottle of Wyoming’s best whiskey when this was all done.

He stalked to Sev’s side. On his knee with his hands tied behind him, Vinnie glared at Boone. The man was supposed to be something to lure Nico off his chopper, but Boone might shoot him right through those hate-filled eyes if he didn’t point them somewhere else.

The helicopter blew snow everywhere, making it hard to see. He tried to keep his anger shut down, but his control was at its snapping point.

The door of the chopper slid open. Nico didn’t appear. Instead, Nico’s voice boomed out over the helicopter’s speaker.

“This isn’t quite the greeting I expected,” Nico said. “You didn’t have to come all this way to make an appearance, Sevin. I’ll be coming to visit you soon enough. I wouldn’t be so eager for that day if I were you.”

Sev ignored his father. He stared at the doorway to the helicopter, face blank and eyes cold.

Nico wasn’t done. “Vinnie, I thought I could count on you to carry out my plans. I’m disappointed, and I’m never one to handle disappointment well. You, of all people, should know that.”

Boone had had it with all Nico’s posturing and stalling. Enough was enough. He might not have a megaphone, but his rage would work just as well. “You wanna talk? It looks to me like you want to hide like a coward.”

Nico laughed. “Somehow, I don’t think talking is what you and my son have in mind. I’ll be going, but first, a warning. I’d like to say this final act of betrayal surprises me, Sevin. But as always, your plans show inadequate planning and poor execution. Know that you are now my top priority. Not to deal with such blatant disrespect would invite trouble with the other families. Here’s a preview of what is in your near future.”

A shot rang out from inside the helicopter. Vinnie jerked and fell to his side. A bright red stain spread over his chest, spilling onto the snow.

The helicopter door closed, and the blades began to spin. Boone, Dutch, and Kai, along with all Sev’s men opened fire, but it bounced off the skin of the chopper.

Seven moved toward the chopper, firing as he went. But it was no use. The armor plating was too strong. Boone watched in helpless fury as, once again, Nico Midnight got away.

CHAPTER 22

Boone held Tildi in his lap, running his palm down the length of her hair. Life had a funny way of twisting and turning. Things that were once the most important in a person's world could become worthless, and dreams you never dared to dream could come true.

He knew this for a fact because he didn't give the first fuck about dealing with Nico Midnight. The Little girl in his arms—loving her, caring for her needs and wants, and keeping her safe—was the only thing that mattered.

She was his world, his everything.

“So, we're agreed?” Sev kept his voice low.

“We are,” Boone answered without hesitation. “Wait. I have one condition.” Pulling his wallet from his pocket, he pulled out the picture he'd had for over three years. Unfolding it, he smoothed the creases and handed it to Sevin. “I promised my men she'd be the last face he saw before he died. If I'm going to turn over taking Nico out to you, you have to swear to me she's the last person he sees.”

Sev took the photo from him and studied the only picture Boone had of Cara Bradshaw. Nodding, he refolded her picture and put it in his wallet. “I swear, he'll die with her face in his mind.”

That was that. The weight of retribution disappeared. No, not disappeared. Transferred to the man who could carry it out without endangering the people Boone loved.

Sev turned to Tino, his new second in command. “Get rid of Vinnie's body and the rest of Nico's men.”

At the end of it all, things weren't going to work out well for Nico. But once Sev put an end to him, the Cosa Nostra would be run by someone who at least had a moral compass. It might be a bit off tilt, but the Midnight family would be out of the human trafficking business.

Tino nodded and signaled for the rest of Sev's men to take the others away. After Tino cleared the room, Sev turned to Boone. "I'm going to have my hands full for a while, but once things settle down, I may come visit you again in the future. There are aspects of the ranch I'd love to explore."

Boone stared his friend right in the eye. "Anytime," he said.

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. Boone had a sneaking suspicion he knew exactly what aspects of the ranch Sev wanted to explore. And that would happen over his dead body.

It was time for them to leave. Sev could handle his family matters on his own. When he stood, he kept Tildi in his arms.

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“Daddy. Put me down. I can walk.”

“Never said you couldn’t, babygirl. But I want to carry you.”

Sighing, she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her cheek on his chest. That was more like it.

“Come on, bluebell. Let’s go home.”

He carried her straight to her room when they got back to the ranch. The neighbors and ranch hands had all understood, and no one objected to celebrating Friendsgiving the next day. Even the one special guest no one knew about.

His girl was exhausted after her ordeal. She needed a bath, a meal, and an early bedtime. And he was just the Daddy to make that happen.

Once he had everything set, he led Tildi into the bathroom. She was tense. Part of it was because of the day, but part of it was nervousness about how bad of a spanking she was going to get.

To be honest, he was having a hard time deciding what to do. What she’d been through was punishment enough as far as he was concerned. He’d have to pay close attention and make sure she didn’t feel guilty. He wouldn’t do anything tonight, anyway. Her bottom had to still be sore from the night before.

She wasn’t smiling. She wasn’t even looking at him. That meant she’d pulled into her own head. It was the last place she needed to be. He needed her focused on him and

the life they had to look forward to together.

Luckily, what he had planned should do the trick.

“Hold Daddy’s hand, babygirl. I have a surprise for you.”

Curiosity lit her lavender eyes. Thank god. Taking out his phone, he pulled up the app he’d installed. “Are you ready, little one?”

“What are you going to do, Daddy?”

He winked. “Just this, babygirl.” He turned off the bathroom lights, plunging the room into darkness.

Tildi squealed and grabbed his arm. Before she could climb him like a tree, he pushed the button on his phone. The shades of purple lit the room, and twinkling stars decorated every surface.

The breath she drew in was adorable, as was the breathy, “Oh!” she whispered. Releasing her hold on his arm, she turned in a slow circle, taking in all the constellations projected around the room. “It’s... it’s...” Turning her gaze to him, she finished with a whispered, “Beautiful.”

Damn if he didn’t feel like the king of the world. And he’d just gotten started. He brought up a romantic playlist on his phone and connected it to the speaker system. When the music started, he held out his hand. “May I have this dance?”

She stared at his hand, then up at him. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She nodded and he took her into his arms. They swayed to the music, and he sang along, meaning every sappy, heartfelt word of every song. As they danced under the stars.

When she seemed to tire, he moved to his next surprise. Turning both taps in the bathtub to their highest pressure, he added lavender bubble bath.

As the tub filled with bubbles, he slowly undressed her. He made sure to caress every inch of her body. After helping her into the bath, he got her settled.

Adorable was the closest word he could come up with to describe how she looked, sitting in the tub with bubbles all the way up to her chin. They were going to be taller than that shortly.

When he turned to lift the picnic basket he'd asked Ruby to put together, she thought he was leaving. "Can't you get in, too, Daddy?"

Setting the basket on the counter extending from the tub, he grinned. "Not this time, babygirl. Tonight is all about relaxing and having Little girl fun. We'll have big girl fun another time."

Reaching into the basket, he pulled out three balls. Tildi watched as he pushed a button on each. The balls glowed in everchanging neon colors, and when he put them in the water, they lit the bubbles.

Tildi laughed. After the day they'd had, that was a more beautiful sound than anything on the playlist he'd made. She played with the balls, giggling and singing along with the music. And sinking further into Little space with every note. Perfect.

His final surprise, his piece de resistance, was the charcuterie board of cheeses, chocolates, and fruit. He'd found a board long enough to stretch all the way across the massive jacuzzi tub.

They nibbled and sipped sparkling grape juice until their stomachs were almost as full as his heart. When his Little girl's eyes started to droop, he pulled the drain plug,

dried her off, and got her into her pajamas. They lay in bed together, and he read her stories while she cuddled with Puff and colored a picture.

“Time for sleep, babygirl. Tomorrow is a big day with an even bigger surprise.” Hopefully one she would like, because he’d gone to a lot of trouble to make it happen at the Friendsgiving celebration.

“Bigger than all this? What is it? Tell me. Tell me. Tell me!”

He forced his face into a stern frown, even though he thought her antics were as cute as all get out. “Unless you want to end our date with a hot bottom, I suggest you change that attitude.”

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She sighed and looked so pitiful it was all he could do not to laugh. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

He ruffled her hair. “That’s all right, bluebell. Just be careful.”

And just like that, Little Tildi was gone and adult Tildi gazed at him. “I mean it, Daddy. I’m sorry about today. I know you’ve told me about putting my safety at risk a million times. I thought you were being over-protective. Well, I mean, you are being overprotective. But now I understand why. It was so scary today. Nico could have taken me away forever. And I really, really needed to tell you I loved you one more time.”

Something inside him settled. He didn’t realize how much he needed her to understand why he was so protective. He had always thought it was enough that she just obeyed him. But this, this was so much more.

“You are my everything, Tildi. I’ve lost people before. It was hard, but I survived. Losing you would end me. I’d never get over it. Thank you for giving that to me.”

“Well, you know I might forget in the small things. But I won’t forget when it’s important. Not ever again. And I have a secret to share with you. I’ve never told anyone before.”

Okay. She had his attention. “I told you once I changed my name, but I never told you what it was. My name was Seraphina Michelle Boucher. I went by Sera. I’ve never told anyone because I didn’t trust they wouldn’t contact my family... well, the General... and tell him where I was. I’m telling you because I do trust you. Can you

help me contact my sister, Breezy. Seeing her would be the best present I could ever get.”

Her willingness to trust him almost sent him to his knees. And that she told him was going to make tomorrow go a lot easier.

“Thank you for telling me, Tildi. Your trust is the greatest gift you could ever give me. I’ll work every day to be worthy of that trust.” Now for the tricky part. “I don’t know if we’ve ever talked about everything Wilder Security is capable of. We have very sophisticated equipment, and my men are some of the best in the world at what they do.”

“Okay, why would that upset me?”

“When you told me the stories of your past, I was worried that when we got home the General might be a problem for you. I needed to be able to protect you from him. I used your fingerprints to find out who you were. I didn’t look into anything personal about your past. I wanted that to come from you. Even the Wild Men don’t know your previous name. But I needed your father’s name to keep you safe.”

The color drained from her face. Her gut clenched. Had he fucked everything up? God, he couldn’t lose her. He’d have to find a way to make it right.

“Are you all right, bluebell? It’s okay if you’re angry with me. You have a right. I should have told you what I was planning. If you need time to mmph?—”

Tildi cut him off, pressing her hand over his lips. “I’m not upset with you, Daddy. Someone very wise told me that you don’t have to be perfect to be loved. That goes for Daddies, too. It was just a shock.”

Thank god he was already sitting down. Relief had him lightheaded. How was it possible for someone to become more important than life to him in a matter of

weeks? She said she wasn't upset, but he had to be sure.

"You turned white as a sheet, babygirl. I should have thought of a better way to tell you. Are you sure you can forgive me?"

"I'm sure, Daddy. I'm sure because I already have." She threw her arms around him and pressed kisses all over his face. "If I lost color in my face, it was because what you did was give me back my sister. Will you help me call her? I know it will be busy tomorrow. I'm just glad everyone said they could have the Friendsgiving celebration then. But after that, I want to, I mean, when you can, and if you have time, I'd love to see if Breezy even wants to see me. If you can't, I mmph?—"

"She does want to see you, babygirl. Very much."

Tears filled her beautiful eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "She does?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Yes, sweet girl. She wants to see you so much that I paid for her to come."

"Oh! She's coming? Here?" Her voice was little more than a squeak.

He couldn't take it anymore. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he cradled her in his lap, holding her as she cried. She fit perfectly.

Nuzzling deeper into his hold, into his heart, she asked, "Do you know when she might want to visit? I'm not rushing you. I know it takes time to make plans."

"Bluebell, Breezy is going to be here tomorrow for Friendsgiving."

She shoved out of his arms and stared up at him, mouth opened to a perfect O that did wicked things to his dick. "Tomorrow? She's coming tomorrow? Tomorrow! Daddy! She can't come tomorrow. I'm not ready. What will I say? What will I wear? She

doesn't know me anymore. She doesn't even know I have pink hair! I...I need... I need Kenzie."

Spinning on her sock-clad feet, she raced out the door. Her voice echoed down the hall. "Kenzie! Kenzie, you'll never believe it. Can you dye my hair brown?"

He stared at the empty, open doorway and then broke into a run himself. At the door, he roared, "Matilda Jayne, do not change the color of your hair!" He started back into the bedroom, then turned back and added, "And don't run in the house, little girl!"

Then he entered the bedroom and pushed the door almost closed.

The bedroom door crashed open before he'd made it five steps. Tildi hit him at a full out sprint. He had to plant a foot so they didn't both wind up on the floor. She scaled him like he was a rock climbing wall, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

He held her in place easily, but before he could speak, she kissed him. "I love you, Boone Daniels. With all my heart as long as I live."

She released him, dropped to the floor, and was out the door like a shot. Again.

What had just happened?

A slow grin spread across his face. Matilda Jayne Seraphina Michelle Boucher Lewis. That was what just happened.

And he was the lucky man who got to have it happen to him every day. His heart swelled because that was all he'd ever need.

The End